

There Is No Place Like Home – Illustrating Heritage, Race and  
Class Through the Personal Story of International Adoption

The Companion

Cecilia Hei Mee Flumé

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Through the Personal Story of International Adoption

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race  
representation  
home

## Abstract

This is part of the artistic research project “There Is No Place Like Home”, which consists of this text component and a graphic novel of the same name. This part, called “the Companion”, is a guide that aims to show how the graphic novel was designed as a research project and that formulates the background, theory, method, intention, design and sources of the work. It is a part that actively reflects on position, readability, communication, transparency and accessibility.

The graphic novel is the materialisation of research through artistic practice, which is responsible for being in dialogue with the questions I have asked through artistic production. It focuses on style, narration, visual craft and visual narratives through a critical narrative of adoption, race, class and betweenship. It explores intersectional illustration methods and allows the image to take the primary role in the narrative. The illustrations in this work challenge norms, expectations and systems by embracing dynamic storytelling that works through layered narratives which reference image hierarchies, status and taste. These endeavor to work outside the aesthetic value systems of modernism with craftsmanship, time-consuming detail, colour and ornament as core visual values.

The graphic novel and its companion work together to present this artistic research project in an accessible way to an audience beyond academia by reflecting on and adapting language, sources and references.

Through the combination of text and images, the work tells the story of a personal journey while embodying political agency, calling for change and doing things differently by using a more commercial format that is educational, inviting and accessible.



## Introduction

Welcome friend.

This is a companion. A support. A travel guide. This text is dependent on the graphic novel but the graphic novel is not dependent on it.

The Companion will have different voices and appeals. There is something for everyone. If a section doesn't catch your interest, keep on browsing. Maybe you'll find something written just for you.

The Companion starts with different types of text sections that describe the background, intention and theoretical scaffolding of the project. In the middle of it comes a block called "What's in the Page". This explains and unpacks some selected illustrations from the graphic novel. It then follows a more concrete description of the working process, methods, tools and materials. Finally, you will find a closing section with formalities such as ethical statements and reference lists.

I added the Companion to offer it as a map and a guide to an academic and artistic endeavour that aims to be open and accessible. It takes you behind the scenes and tells you how the work was done, what is embedded, and what materials and tools were used to create it.

The graphic novel has an independent voice and a narrative that does not need the validation of an additional work to be artistically autonomous. But in academic research, there are formalities and frameworks that aim to provide transparency and credibility. Some of these come from tradition and can seem more performative than adaptive. Rigid, impenetrable language and rigid, unmodifiable formats. But there are also formalities that open up, unfold and make visible the building blocks of work. This is vital. How can I offer a document that makes the construction work as generous and accessible as possible without, like a guardianship, placing it above the graphic novel?

A companion is someone who listens with devotion and love. It is in dialogue with the graphic novel. It unfolds, asks questions, and is there where needed. It has its own purpose, its own form, and does not intend to do what the graphic novel already does.

We are back from a journey. Shall we talk about it?

## What is a PhD student?

A mythical animal.

What does a PhD student do?

Avoids talking about what they're doing.

I don't take for granted that everyone knows what a PhD student is or does. I had no idea what a doctoral student was until I submitted my application to the doctoral programme. Most doctoral students learn what a doctoral student is as they go along with their project. However, even without being able to paint a complete and comprehensive image of this rare creature, we can at least go over the fundamentals.

In Sweden, applying for a doctoral position is as confusing as applying for a job and an education programme at the same time. You work as a researcher, while learning to do research. Universities advertise PhD positions usually with the eligibility criteria that the applicant must have completed at least an MA, or be able to demonstrate a professional artistic practice equivalent to an artistic MA.

MA refers to a master's degree obtained after two years of study at advanced level.

A doctoral programme is usually four years full-time with salary, but it is common for students to extend their studies. Doctoral positions are usually financed by the universities' direct grants or through externally funded research projects. According to the salary statistics of SULF, The Swedish Association of University Teachers and Researchers, the average salary for a doctoral student studying "Humanities and religious studies specialisation and artistic development work" is SEK 31,242.<sup>1</sup>

Outside the artistic subjects, it is common to apply for an already formulated project, which you are employed to research and drive forward. Within the artistic fields, it is most common for candidates to apply with a project that they have developed themselves. The application contains and formulates questions, objectives and an overall timetable, and the project should be sufficiently within the subject framework of the department to which you are applying.

The purpose of the research is to contribute further knowledge to the field. Here, most people like to say that the knowledge they contribute should be "new". But then they stop themselves, to avoid spending time in the pitfall of what is meant by completely "new" knowledge and whether it is even possible.

Regardless, I think I can get away with saying that the person needs to have identified that there are holes, gaps or needs for reformulations or additional perspectives within their own subject field. It also means that the person who

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<sup>1</sup> SULF. *SULF:s lönestatistik mars 2023*. Stockholm. [https://sulf.se/app/uploads/2023/09/SULFs-lonestatistik-2023\\_mars.pdf](https://sulf.se/app/uploads/2023/09/SULFs-lonestatistik-2023_mars.pdf) [accessed 2024-05-03].

wants to do research does so with the idea that the “results” or “findings” are something that they will share with others, not that they are working on a project that is for themselves.

Frameworks and structures can be different depending on the subject and the institution you work in. My programme has been supportive and has allowed me to shape it as it progresses. One of the most permissive but also most challenging aspects of the programme, which most doctoral students probably recognise, is the high degree of personal responsibility, which on some days contributes to a feeling of loneliness and being lost.

Finalising this project is the most challenging and exhausting thing I have done. But it is also a privileged position, an extremely valuable opportunity that I do not take for granted anywhere.

A doctoral position is a common goal for those who want to climb the academic career ladder. Most professorships require a doctoral degree, although artistic professorships are currently excluded because there are so few people who possess an artistic doctorate.

For most people, it is not obvious to know what a doctorate is. I am addressing you, hoping to spark curiosity and encouragement. I want to do a lot. But the least I can do is to take a little time to start by telling you what a doctoral animal is.

## Research inquiries

It is 8.23 pm at a small party in the near-city suburb of Stockholm. A friend invited me here, but ran off as soon as we entered the door.

I am shyly approached by a person wanting to chit chat. Chit chat is an art already mastered by the middle class, and something I learned at a very late age. Both of us chat, clearly not trained at this art from the age of five, but we make it happen anyway. The person asks me “What do you do?” I reply: “I am a doctoral student in illustration.” They reply: “Oh really? How interesting!” but their eyes tell me they don’t know what the next question should be. I remind myself that most people have no idea what a doctoral student is. I didn’t know until I graduated my MA.

I continue:

“It is very exciting! I am very lucky. I get to do research on illustration.”

A bit hesitant, they grab the opening I provided and reply: “What is your research about?”

I pause for some seconds, I search through my head for a two-sentence package that can explain what it is that I do, or will do, over a period of four years. I am quite confident though. I get to practice this little challenge regularly.

“My research is about formulating intersectional illustration methods and showcasing the specificities of sequential storytelling through visual communication, by making a graphic novel as my thesis.”

The person looks back at me quite curious. They continue to ask me questions about my research. All important and relevant. Then we of course talk about them. Chit chat.

## Artistic research

The arts have been practised, taught and researched in the academy for a long time. There has been an image of polarisation, with the practitioner creating art on the one hand, and the theorist describing it on the other. The art scholar has art as their subject and object, investigating, formulating and disseminating their knowledge through, for example, teaching and scholarly writing. But what is the role of the artist in the academy? Is it merely to be trained to create art? No, most people who study artistic subjects would probably object to this, because the artist – the musician, the sculptor, the illustrator, the graphic designer and so on – very much uses theory to contribute knowledge to the field by analysing, expanding, innovating and questioning it. The artist’s practice and theory are not separate elements, but just as often one and the same. We can argue that this is the case for the scientific researcher too. The chemist in front of their lab with glass tubes, whose tactile knowledge obviously also includes theory. Rarely would it work to describe theory as something that exists only in the air, and practice as what happens through the hands.

What has started to change, however, is the importance of talking about and understanding artistic work as research. Traditional scientific methods and ways of communicating research are not always applicable to artistic subjects. This means that we need to update and adapt the tools, frameworks and approaches that are available so that they can promote artistic research rather than hold it back. Artistic research (AR) has emerged as an alternative discipline for conducting research at a formal, academic level, focusing on practice without minimising its importance, contribution, weight or influence. It allows us to understand how artistic practices work in their social context, methodically, independently and with knowledge to the same extent as scientific research, but not with the same approaches.

What then are these other approaches?

Artistic research does not have the same need to be in the relationship between hypothesis and result. An artistic process can be driven by the need to search, find and discover; where experimentation can be the goal rather than a conclusion or an answer. Practitioners often draw from sources beyond traditional text formats and text-based discourses.

The practitioner’s role is not to describe or interpret art, but to comment on,

Discourse according to Merriam-Webster dictionary:  
1. verbal interchange of ideas,  
2a, : formal and orderly and usually extended expression of thought on a subject.

Ephemeral in the Swedish Academy's dictionary: eg.: living for only one day; in extended and transferred use: of short duration, short-lived, transient, temporary, fleeting, without lasting value.

fill in and be in dialogue with their subject and field through their artistic practice. The researching practitioner must therefore choose a thesis format that is adapted to the practice and the traditional text-based monograph may not be the obvious format. Research can be realised and disseminated through an artistic work, anchored and embedded in the language of practice. Materialised, tactile or perhaps completely without materiality, a performance or a song? The format of the thesis, whether tactile, permanent or more ephemeral does not prevent the research from being permanent.

We can justifiably speak of artistic research ('research in the arts') when that artistic practice is not only the result of the research, but also its methodological vehicle, when the research unfolds in and through the acts of creating and performing.<sup>2</sup> – Henk Borgdorff

As an illustrator and storyteller, I don't want to describe all my research in text. I want my research to show and tell the reader what it is and what it does itself, instead of me retelling the work through a textual report. In the graphic novel you get to experience my research. You read, interpret, take in my artistic work that is communicated through what I research, illustration.

I understand if the question quickly becomes, "So what am I reading right now?"

The Companion is not a report. It is voluntary and did not arise because the artistic work depends on it. Nor will you find the answers to my research inquiries in the Companion. However, there is mapping, building blocks, background and intention in the Companion.

I didn't want the project to run the risk of being split up into a textual part that was considered academic in order to make the graphic novel the artistic part. For me, the graphic novel was so obviously the research. But at the same time, I wanted there to be guidance that could help the reader access the visual material. I wanted there to be a support for the reader.

I started to write as I had learnt in art history, where my own person sits just far enough away from the "pen". Claims and reasoning must constantly be tested against existing discourses and all concepts must be anchored in deep contexts. My text had to be divided into theory, method and field. This is what I thought.

This practice did not serve my project and the doubt was reflected in the text. The writing was slow and felt like a constant struggle. The struggle became visible in the text, which became more and more argumentative.

I eventually returned to being myself. To a person who possesses both knowledge and ignorance and allows the reader to partake of both. I did not sift out

the ambiguities or the mundane. Even all of the pitiful and all of the doubts were allowed to remain in the text. The Companion began to take on life and its own as a soft authority. Serving, testing and questioning, but at the same time a guide to lean on.

To return to the metaphor of a journey, the graphic novel is our journey. During the journey we move around. We discover, see and experience both new and old. Experiences that lend themselves well to being written about. Some experiences that do not. A journey is both a process and a destination at the same time.

The Companion is our travel guide. It is important before, during and after the journey. It may help us remember or understand something we experienced, it may point out where we started and where the journey ended. A travel guide can reflect what happens in a journey, but would be meaningless if we never experienced the journey itself.

Artistic research has prepared a place, a space where I can put all my focus and time into being in illustration. I account through my making. I don't need to translate my research and practice into a format that will fit into a textual monograph. You will learn about my research on illustration through illustration. Not through academic writing. Illustration is my subject, my method and my result.

I knew when I was accepted as a PhD student that my thesis would be a graphic novel. The graphic novel works with text, typography, design and illustrated images. The graphic novel tells a story. The graphic novel is a book, it can be printed, shared and carried. It is both visual and tactile.

The next question came naturally; "What do I talk about, how and to whom?"

## You, Me and ICA

Translated to english:

...And you were with me in journalism class, the time when all the pieces fell into place. I had fumbled for crispy phrases. Difficult, beautiful words and sentences. Long as pouring rain, all to find my unique voice. I felt at home, the words didn't crunch. But in that class, my teacher from Skåne, Anders Dalbäck, lectured on journalism in general. He said, "Think of mother." Nobody understood what he meant. A few laughed. He repeated, "Think of mother" He continued, "You should write so that your mothers understand what you want to say"

– Patrik Lundberg, *Sommar i P1*, 2020.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Henk Borgdorff, *The Production of Knowledge in Artistic Research*, chapter of *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts*, Routledge, 2010, pg. 46.

<sup>3</sup> Patrik, Lundberg, "Patrik Lundberg", *Sommar i P1*, Sveriges Radio, 6 August 2020, <https://sverigesradio.se/avsnitt/1518807> [accessed 2025-03-23].

*Sommar i P1* is a popular radio programme produced by the Swedish Radio with a tradition dating back to the 1960s. A number of invited guest summer hosts talk freely about themselves and their lives.

In the summer of 2020, Patrik Lundberg had a “summer talk” on the radio channel P1. In the same year, his autobiographical book *Fjärilsvägen* was published, which describes his childhood but, perhaps most importantly, it is a declaration of love for his mother.

As usual, I’m on a summer visit to my parents’ home in Umeå. I ask my mother if she wants to listen to Patrik’s summer talk while we sit at the kitchen table and “potter around”. My mother, who is a frequent radio listener, knows about the programme, of course, but she also knows who Patrik is: a Korean adoptee and an author.

We listen together to Patrik’s heartbreaking story of his hard-working mother who turned over every penny to make ends meet for her family. Patrik’s mother was a single parent with no one to lean on. My parents had each other, but even so, I recognise a lot in this. Parents who never gave themselves anything, who never complained, who were always in pain, who worked so terribly hard, who scraped together every penny so that we children could get Christmas presents under the tree or go on school trips. Parents who couldn’t help us with schoolwork or homework, and later in life definitely no down payments for apartments. But they were always there, offering their blood, sweat and tears.

One didn’t understand all that when one was a child.

That’s why I’m holding back tears as I sit at the dining table. I look at my mother. She does the same, noticeably affected. She understands and knows women like Patrik’s mother. She knows the lives they have lived.

*Arvingarna* is a Swedish “dance-band”, a music genre often in a 4/4 beat, with influences from pop, country, rock and swing but with a distinct Scandinavian sound. Mainly popular in the countryside and with an older audience.

In the *sommarprat*, the host gets to include music that he has chosen himself. My mother and I wiggle our feet to the tunes of Elvis Presley, *Arvingarna* and *Siw Malmkvist*. We know the songs by heart.

When the programme is over, we don’t talk about it any more than mother saying she “recognised herself in a lot of things”. That it was “a sad story”. I go and order the book *Fjärilsvägen* for her.

Making a class transition is also about leaving something behind. There is a big gap between me and my parents. I can go to them, but they can’t just walk into my world. Sometimes it makes me sad. That I have had to leave something behind to get to the place where I am. A place where you have to assert and prove yourself, where you burn yourself out emotionally instead of your body, a place with access to financial security and maybe even power. A place where you don’t listen to *Arvingarna*.

In the artistic, there is a chance to open up a discussion about what knowledge and experience are. How it is valued and understood. Let what is taken for granted be scrutinised. Break up the familiar. Invite the unfamiliar. Show, don’t tell. Walk the talk. Let the doing do instead of talking about doing.

When a doctoral thesis is approved and published, I wonder how many people read it. Who reads it? How accessible is it?

A nightmare scenario was painted in my head. I do research for four years, publish a thesis that collects dust on a shelf in Konstfack. Maybe downloaded from a research catalogue 10 times. You think I underestimate myself? Maybe I am. I also think doctoral theses have a low direct spread, which are read mainly by educated people in the same subject field. There was something there that nagged at me.

What if my thesis could be available in a regular bookshop? As a graphic novel, it would not be impossible. My story about adoption is important. It concerns the whole of Sweden. A relative or even an acquaintance from the village might walk past it and want to pick it up. It would be available as a commercial product and distributed on a completely different scale.

But neither my relative nor my mother would get the idea to go and browse through the adult comic books in the bookshop. So I started talking about ICA.

Now people at the university were starting to wrinkle their foreheads. “You mean the book should be sold at ICA? Figuratively speaking, right?”

ICA (or Coop, or Hemköp) sells magazines and maybe the occasional paperback. But it represents a place of consumption where we, pretty much everyone, regardless of economy, education and background, come to buy what we need. The most mundane and unassuming of shops. There I fantasised that my book would be available. To be brought home with someone, to be read, not to gather dust.

ICA, from 1939, is Sweden’s biggest grocery store chain.

I will not have control over what will happen to my book once it is published. It probably won’t be sold at ICA, but the fact that I dream of ICA and want to be at ICA plays a role in my work. It affects my appeal. It makes me imagine my reader and it puts the book in a real world instead of a research catalogue in a virtual cloud. In illustration, we are interested in, pay a lot of attention to and take into account this whole life cycle. From idea to material to finished work to recipient. We create our works with the reader in mind. We think about different levels of accessibility, distribution and the place of the product.

I’m thinking of you and ICA as I write this. While I’m making all the images. I dedicate.



## Meeting books

During my childhood, I don't remember there being novels in my home. I have no memory of seeing either of my parents reading to themselves, either in the evenings or on holiday. As an adult, I understand that it was not very strange. There was no time to sit down and read a book that required quiet, space and concentration. There was always work. Wage labour, wage labour's evening shifts and work at home.

But there were picture books for us children. Books that had been handed down and were worn out. Books we borrowed from the library bus and the library. Before my brother and I could read for ourselves, my older sister, my mother and my father used to read at least one book aloud to us every evening. They took turns, it was important: "You should read to children".

Before I was five, I read aloud to my brother myself, and I was free to make my own selection of what to discover. Actually, it was probably not the story told through the text that excited me so completely. It was the illustrations. Elsa Beskow, Sven Nordqvist and Lena Anderson created pictures with endless details that could be discovered again and again. But they also depicted nature, landscapes and animals carefully, colourfully, faithfully and beautifully. I chose to read picture books only if they were beautiful. Only if there was colour. Only if there were animals and nature. I read the pictures. The other things were a bonus. It was the pictures that placed me in another world.

Hallowed be the libraries. Give us this day our daily book. Forgive me, as an adult I've been bad at reading novels and rarely visit the local library anymore. I got hooked on non-fiction, which is of course also available in libraries, but which I often accessed in other ways. But as a child, the library was an indispensable place with its free access to all kinds of children's books. My mother took me into town and let me loose in the children's section of the library. There, I could browse through books and build book towers to take home with me. Lots of them.

It was when I started primary school that the library bus began coming to the village to make books available to children outside of town. It parked at the school and during the break we could go into the bus, which instead of its usual seats was furnished with shelves of children's books. There, I continued picking stories with images that were technical, time-consuming, detailed and elaborate. It was such a relief to get lost in these images that made me visit the world and dream about it at the same time. Who would I have been if I hadn't had access to these books?

My parents had a summer cottage, a "lantställe" in Stockholm speech, built by my grandfather a long time ago. In it, there was a chest filled with my uncle's old comic books. They smelled like old, forgotten things. A safe scent. Of course I was in there, digging, reading and fascinated by the contrast with

my little brother's light-hearted *Donald Duck* magazines. The chest contained a mix of teenage and adult comics, mainly aimed at men and boys, from the 1970s. *Tarzan*, *MAD*, *Skräckmagasinet*, *The Phantom*, *91:an*, *Dracula*, *Batman*, *Silverpilen* (*Zilverpijl*) etc. They depicted violence, eroticism, action, weapons, "races", satire and adult humour that was beyond me.

The images were in action and the people and worlds depicted were more realistic than those I had seen in the Bamse magazines. But there was something that I saw as a limitation. About half of all the comic books in the chest were without colour! I tried to read them many times, because the covers were in colour even though the inside could be without. But Tarzan without colour was very different from Tarzan in colour (yellow, orange, ochre, red, green) and Dracula was so much more mysterious in shades of grey-blue contrasted with the underside of the red cape than he was in shades of grey. I needed colour to read. For me, colour breathed life into the framed scenes. For me, colour was central.

Adult comics were something that belonged to the brown, heavy chest and they never left the summer house. When I was 11, the cottage was sold and the comics disappeared. At home, I read my big sister's *Min Häst* and then only Lena Furberg's comics because I felt that the other illustrators in the magazine were not of the same quality. I read them over and over and over again.

Her illustrations were magical. Her horses made me dream, long for, and fall even more in love with all things horse culture. They filled my chest with tingles and joy. Her beautiful horses were a big reason why I sat day in and day out drawing horses.

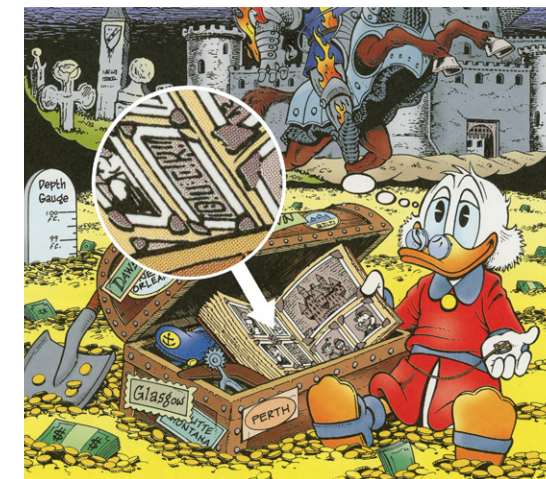


Image 1. Don, Rosa, *Fabror Joakims Liv*, Egmont, 2017, pg. 8

My younger brother had a huge collection of *Donald Duck* magazines in single issues and pocket. I only borrowed these if the illustrations were by Carl Barks or Don Rosa. Don Rosa is known for his attention to detail and play-

The library bus is a mobile library in a bus.

fulness. He usually starts the first comic strip with a well-hidden signature “D.U.C.K.” Dedicated to Unca Carl from Keno, a tribute to Carl Barks but also a way of signing his comics, which Disney previously did not allow. An invitation to play but also an encouragement: Look carefully!

As a child I had developed a kind of preference for those images that contained colour and detail. I also recognised that there were differences in the determination of the lines, that there were illustrations that seemed more confident, experienced and reliable.

Quite sometime after that, in high school, I was introduced to contemporary American commercial adult comics published by publishers such as Top Cow, Image and Dark Horse Comics, probably because they were translated into Swedish and available in fairly well-stocked stores. This was also during a time when kids were learning to seek information through the “new” revolutionary internet.

But *Tomb Raider*, *The Darkness* and *Witchblade*, despite their exaggerated and sexist depictions of women and men, showed illustrative technical skills that I had never seen in comics before.



Image 2. *The Darkness, Family Ties*, Part 3, Top Cow Productions, 1997



Image 3. David Mack, *Kabuki: The Alchemy*, Marvel Publishing, 2009

Digital colouring could create complex gradients and shadows, and the scenes were shown in advanced, difficult perspectives. I realised that these comics, with their dated images of women and pubertal narratives, didn't represent the height of artistic achievement, but it was hard to ignore the time and craftsmanship that went into the images. Once the rabbit hole opened up, I just had to dive in, because of course I had a whole world of artistic and political comics to discover, and internet forums and specialised

online stores made information and works available.

At some point, I must have stumbled across American cartoonist David Mack's unique, sensitive and poetic images. I was floored. There was materiality, artistry, craftsmanship, romanticism and colour in his collage of different media. It appealed to me on so many levels, not least because David Mack's main character *Kabuki* represented an East Asian woman, another version of a heroine portrayed with respect and tenderness in a way I had never seen before. I remember sighing and thinking: “If I could make comics at this level, I would want them to look just like this.” It was as if this American white man possessed the illustration style of my dreams. I also felt impatient. If this was the tip of the iceberg, what else could be unveiled to show the creative and artistic capacity of comics and graphic novels in terms of image, text and design?

But I was not met with a potpourri of styles, modes, expressions and methods. I found that the closer I got to themes that engaged me as a young adult – autobiographies, politics, and feminism, for example – the more stylistically uniform and restrained the images became. I turned to the Swedish comics scene, which was known for its feminist stories and anti-neoliberal views. There was a very strong tradition of black ink and rhythmic frames with text framed in containers such as text boxes or speech bubbles. The images lacked depth and the lines were thick, etching meaning alongside text that was allowed to take up a lot of space. I read but did not feel at home.

Although the narratives were powerful, intense, humorous, touching, upsetting and fantastic in many ways, I did not recognise myself in the illustrations. It became a barrier that I was often ashamed of. Sometimes, I got the feeling that the image was secondary. Sometimes, I found slogans that said: “You don't have to be able to draw to make comics!” I do not oppose this. Comics and graphic novels are such versatile formats that there is room for all kinds of ways of working with narratives. The approach says nothing about quality. Perhaps that's why I felt particularly strongly that Swedish comics lacked the colour and style associated with the pretty or cute.

But where did the feeling of shame come from? Why did I feel such a longing for colour in styles that the intellectual left was so comfortable with?

Thoughts that at the time seemed secondary in the quest to become an adult and be able to create art.

## Meeting academia

When I was 21 years old, I started studying Korean language and Korean history at Stockholm University. At that time, it was the only college that offered Korean at university level. I recognised the methods, there was a lot of “sausage stuffing”. It felt like elementary school cramming. “Sausage stuffing” is mechanical and straightforward. Systems, languages, events, rules and years to be scanned, put into the body and then hopefully they should stay there. My body is a pretty poor container. After a while, many details, mainly dates, tend to slip out. Information that is not handled and gets dusty disappears quite quickly.

Korean language was an important tool for me to approach my Korean roots, but I missed being close to images. Limited as my knowledge was then, I thought that all learning about images fell under Fine Art with a capital “A”.

I wanted to be a fine artist. Wasn't that the only profession that existed if you wanted to put paint on canvas or paper? Art is that thing we avoid defining but should know what it is anyway. And visual art, what is that? “The Arts”, even more confusing! There was a lot I didn't understand. But I had understood that textile crafts, illustrations for comics, wood carvings and manga were not Art.

Today I look back at my young and naïve self, who had no idea what artistic fields there were to both practice and read about. It is not strange. When we don't know, we have to feel or guess. The Swedish language does not distinguish between “fine art” and “visual arts” but masks everything under the word “konst”. I came from an ignorance where art was synonymous with “fine art” and where “fine art” was synonymous with the highest quality. These values were floating in the air and until then no one had said otherwise in my opinion.

However, there was a big problem. I was not accepted to the artistic programmes. Neither in fine art nor in graphic design, illustration. At this time I was a confident drawer and painter. In many ways more than I am now. And understanding what it was that was missing was an eternal enigma. Then, as well as now, it was known that it was unusual to get into art programmes at the first attempt. There was comfort in the fact that at least I was not alone. I received advice, tips and feedback on my portfolio but the recurring conclusion was: “It looks great, you just have to crack the code.”

THE CODE. What code!?! And where can I find it? No one. Not a single person could explain it to me. The code was also something floating in the air. The initiated went there and got it.

That's why I ended up at the Department of Art History at Södertörn University. It must be possible to learn to decode the invisible code there!

This was my first real encounter with the humanities. This knowledge had to

be put into my body, but it was not enough for someone to select it, present it and then feed it to me. This knowledge only became knowledge after I had analysed it, but in order to pass the courses, I had to express my own opinions and thoughts, and then present them in speech or writing. It was something completely different, and it was extremely difficult.

I was afraid of being wrong. I was afraid of failing, of looking stupid. I looked at those who tried their hand at it with vigour. Fumbling, sometimes succeeding, sometimes failing. Where did they get that confidence? Stand up straight. They were so confident in the room, asserting themselves, claiming space. I was hungry too and could see myself growing, at the back of the room, slowly but surely.

But not only was there a lack of confidence, there was also a lack of language. A language that dealt with concepts and terms related to art, architecture and aesthetics. A whole new vocabulary so I could tackle basic and technical building blocks such as cornice, iconoclasm and frescoes. Then there was the language of the academy. Again, words and concepts that rarely appear outside the university world. But above all, it was a combination of precision and formality that was new. A statement in academic language was standing. It was delivered without questioning itself, without looking for confirmation or reconstruction. It stood stately and steady on delivery. A work in itself.

In my own language at that time, there were no elegant words. The sentences were short and timid. They did not parade anywhere. But just because something isn't elegant doesn't mean it's stupid. I have never been stupid. My parents were never stupid.

Simple, stripped-down language holds for a lot. It is often honest, clear and concise. But the course literature that dealt with art was far from this. It was extensive and elaborate. You had to be persistent. I am not questioning that. Perhaps art requires such depth and complexity in order to be framed. Along with other ways. Other approaches. Many approaches.

Last but not least, there was also academic English. Perhaps I can simply describe it as a new language with challenges in combination with those I just mentioned.

Did I need to learn and adapt to all this to understand what art was? I think I did. Because the more I read, the better I got at expressing myself, at navigating, at questioning, at searching, at making mistakes. I began to understand what art was, not because I accepted the image of art that was described to me, but because I began to see how the image was constructed, by whom and in what context. Using the same academic language, I could dismantle the parts I didn't want, in order to see if other languages or methods worked.

I must add that I have a great deal of respect for the institutions and teachers I met during my long educational journey. All of them were great, many were odd, none were perfect. I often disagreed with them, I didn't always under-



stand them but they always allowed me to do just that. Search, question, make mistakes. Be right. Be wrong. Grow. Become a critically thinking adult.

The library bus changed lives. We know that university changes lives. Though it's easy to forget what an opportunity it is, and how valuable it is that students from economically disadvantaged homes can go to university. It's incredible, and it was incredibly difficult. I hope we cherish and protect that opportunity with everything we can.

### Where are you from?

I think about language and our different conditions.

We come from different backgrounds, with different conditions.

Statistics show that arts programmes have an exceptionally high proportion of students with well-educated parents. This puts arts programmes on a similar level to students studying engineering and medical programmes, which are considered prestigious and highly competitive. The comparison is interesting, given that Swedish arts programmes admit students based on assignments and portfolios, not grades. So how come students from working-class backgrounds are so underrepresented in art schools?

“Highly educated parents” refers to at least one parent having completed at least three years of high school education.

In 2017/2018, 59% of those enrolling in higher education programmes in the arts had highly educated parents, compared with 39% enrolment in higher education in general in the same year. For comparison, in 2019, 25% of Sweden’s general population aged 20-39 had highly educated parents<sup>4</sup>.

In 2019/2020, 62% of new entrants to artistic Master's programmes had at least one highly educated parent. In the 2018/19 academic year, 56% of new doctoral students had highly educated parents.

Image 4 shows that universities specialising in the arts are among Sweden's top 10 higher education institutions in terms of the proportion of students with highly educated parents.

According to Statistics Sweden, foreign background refers to people born outside of Sweden and people born in Sweden with two foreign-born parents. Arts programmes have the lowest proportion of students with foreign background, 18%, compared to general programmes at 28%. However, students with a foreign background who are admitted to art schools come from equally well-educated families as students with a non-foreign background.<sup>5</sup>

4 SCB, Statistics Sweden, *Educational and social background of enrolments in arts and culture programmes*, 2020 pg. 19.

5 SCB, *Swedish and foreign background among students and doctoral students in higher education*, 2020/21, 2022, pg. 12.

Figur 5: Nybörjare vid viss högskola exklusive inresande studenter läsåret 2019/20 efter föräldrarnas utbildningsnivå. Procent

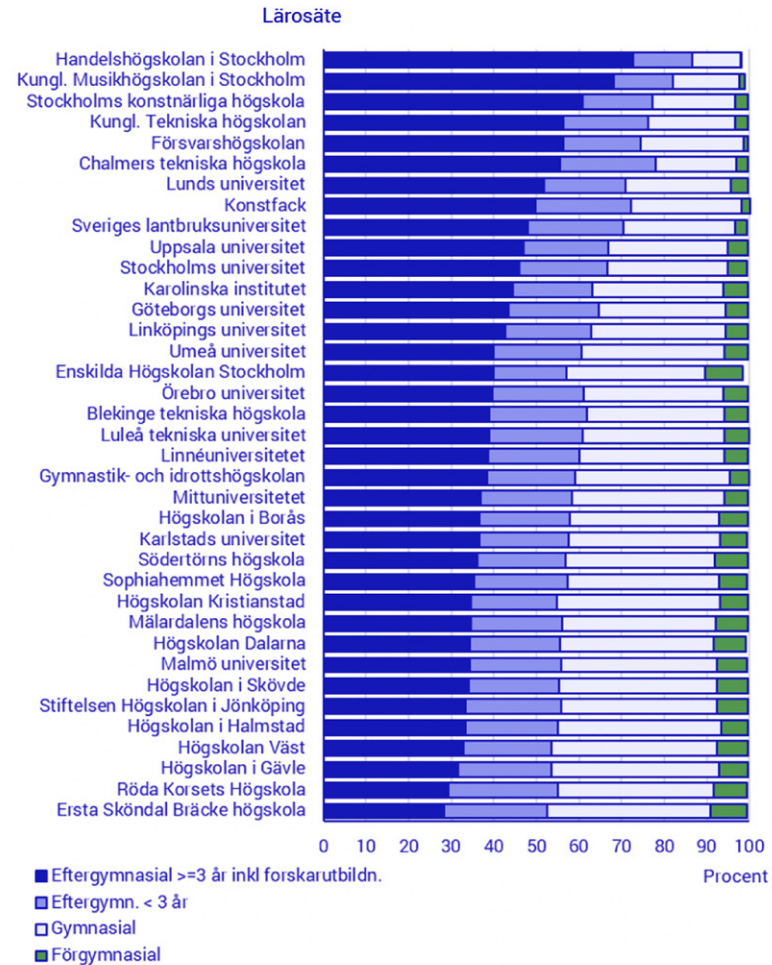


Image 4. Figure 5 from SCB, *University and higher education institutions Higher education entrants 2019/20 and doctoral entrants 2018/19 by parental education level, 2020*

We already know about this. Nobody is shocked but we should be disappointed. There is a skewed recruitment, and we need to talk about class, background and conditions.

Besides asking ourselves how we can get underrepresented students to choose art programmes, I think we (those of us already inside these walls) need to talk about the language we communicate in, the types of images we refer to, what is embedded, expected in the spaces, white walls and cubes.

As illustrators, we mediate and translate, we analyse the dialogue and we think about our audience and reception. Often our work is about making something more accessible by layering and providing visual aids and deeper context.

This project aims to have a strong focus on craft and readability and to be



aware of position and context by insisting on pedagogical, accessible and transparent communication. The place(s) I come from play an important role in my work. Many theoretical references and names that are common in academia are not common outside it. Do we take the time to bridge knowledge and introduce canonical theory or do we leave the responsibility on the reader? By referencing popular and visual culture and treating them as equally valuable sources, I invite readers without academic experience to be part of an academic project. I also believe that visual culture that comes from a common place is often visible, shared and commercial and reflects the kind of contexts in which illustrators tend to operate, rather than exclusive and closed spaces.

I am constantly thinking about who will be able to understand my work, my research and how this thesis will be shared.

In my graphic novel, I have chosen to work with colour, detail and ornament and to work outside of grids and bubble systems in order to use formats that are less conditioned by Western and modernist aesthetic value systems. I work with image registers that are related to the romantic, the local, the feminine coded, the folk, the worker and the countryside. Images that I grew up with and loved, images that exhibit a high level of detail, craftsmanship and time-consuming qualities.

The graphic novel is a format that is accessible and portable. The power of illustration is mediation, translation and communication. The challenge of a doctorate is to contribute knowledge and break systems that we do not believe in. I believe this can be done by reconstructing the idea of the thesis into a format that offers a diversity of languages, types of references and methods. A format that tells a story, is sympathetic, takes you on a journey, makes you emotional and can be understood by someone who has not travelled through the academic world.

Therefore, this is a story about class journeys, educational journeys and heritage journeys. About home and finding home. A narrative that is carried by visual communication to make stories about social structures accessible.

## Illustration in relation

I started an MA programme in visual communication in 2014, not fine art studies, even though I thought that was my greatest dream. The MA programme had requested students interested in norm critique, the power and influence of images, communication through images, with a focus on practice. It was made for me.

Somewhere along the way I cracked that impossible code. If someone were to ask me today what it takes to get into art programmes to study art, I would answer: “You have to know art.” Art as a cultural, historical and socially specific expression and phenomenon that is constructed and conditioned. Art

that is formulated in elitism and bourgeoisie culture, as much as in innovation and revolt. The code is not about quality, tools, style or motives. Nor about freedom or ambition. So why do we love art? Because art, and artists, so often try to go against the terms, elitism and classism. Full of contradictions as it is. Full of explosive power and resistance.

But what does it take to study visual communication and illustration? An artistic sensibility and an interest in visual communication. A desire to communicate, to tell, to show. An ability to reflect on how communication is read, or received. A concern for both giving and receiving. Something that art can do, but which is not required of art.

When I began to understand the scope, capacity and function of the different fields, I realised that illustration was what I had always really wanted to do. I often encountered views of illustration as the images that could not become fine art. That illustration is some kind of shortcoming. Maybe that was one reason why it took so long to find illustration, if the image of illustration is that of just running and chasing, imitating art, but not living up to it. Illustration was often considered a hobby form of fine art and something the foundation art schools rarely encouraged to approach. Illustration was a common but invisible subject field. That one could and needed to study fine art was obvious, but does one need to train to become an illustrator? And if so, where does one do it?

Compared to graphic design and fine art, illustration is both a new and small field of study at universities. Sweden got its first professorship in illustration in 1998 at Konstfack. This decision was pushed through by Tom Hedqvist, then professor of graphic design. Andreas Berg was appointed professor of illustration within the framework of visual communication, the youngest professor in the school's history.<sup>6</sup> When Professor Sara Teleman was appointed to Konstfack in 2018, she was, and still is, Sweden's only professor of illustration. However, Gunnar Krantz holds a professorship at Malmö University in visual communication/drawing. There are still no pure illustration programmes at art universities in Sweden. Illustration takes place under the umbrellas of design or visual communication.

When we look at the limited academic space given to illustration, but also the limited use of illustrator as a title, we can see a label of lower status.

The importance and contribution of illustration to Western society was not questioned when illustrations were used to clarify, show or visualise educational and scientific material such as anatomy, botanical studies or zoology. Before photography could capture snapshots of the world, we relied on illustrations in the form of drawings, etchings and prints to help us share knowledge and discover the world.

I work and draw from a Western context and especially a European context and history. In other parts of the world, the connotations and value of illustration have been articulated in ways I have limited knowledge of.

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6 Sara Teleman, Andreas Berg, *Svensk illustration en visuell historia 1900-2000*, Malmö: Arena, 2013, pg. 297.

From the 18th century onwards, it became increasingly common for illustrations to be distributed and printed not only to visualise what was assumed to be correct or true according to a scientific and religious tradition. They could be used to express the narrative and political position or satirical voice of an individual or a collective group through cartoons, social commentary and criticism in political newspapers. Professional engravers/printers had been trained and in demand during the Enlightenment, but during the Romantic period they began to explore new ways of working with illustration and experimented with content and form, such as the expressive illustrated poetry books of the print-maker William Blake (1757-1827). Because they were exclusive and limited in number, his books came to be seen as artist's books for collectors, and he was often referred to as an artist rather than an illustrator.

During the 19th century, printing became industrialised, faster, cheaper and more efficient. Images were produced and distributed as never before and illustration became even more associated with short-lived and commercial ephemeral products. Businesses needed illustrations to promote themselves on flyers and in adverts and the increased use of photography began to eliminate scientifically oriented jobs for illustrators, forcing many to turn to advertising. Marxist ideas and values, which rejected capitalism and the market economy, meant that illustration was often overlooked as an art form. Despite the Arts & Crafts movement, which together with William Morris (England, 1834-1896) advocated craftsmanship, ornament and design, Morris did not believe that ornament was illustration or that the illustrated image was particularly necessary for a good book.<sup>7</sup>

The increased demand for illustrations and the availability of jobs led many painters to enter the field of illustration in the 19th century, combining the aesthetics and motifs of fine art painting with commercial illustrations, printing methods and graphics. For example, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (France, 1864-1901) or Alphonse Mucha (Czech, 1860-1939) further popularised ephemeral prints such as posters.

In Sweden, Carl Larsson (1853-1919) was a painter who found himself at the border between art and illustration. Carl Larsson's greatness and true artistry is often described as taking place after his move to Grez-sur-Loing, France, when he found inspiration and fine art painting but also abandoned his illustration practice. But even as a fine artist, it is clear that his time as an illustrator influenced the way he created his motifs. His depictions of the romantic home are illustrative, detailed and full of vivid scenes and narratives.

Brian M. Kane has written about the tension between writers and illustrations. He argues that the prejudice against illustrations was fuelled by the English poet Charles Lamb (1775-1834) and Lamb's strong criticism of his fellow writers' choice to have their poetry collections illustrated with pictures. Lamb opposed the poet Samuel Rogers' illustrated edition of his *Pleasures of*

<sup>7</sup> Susan Doyle, Jaleen Grove, Whitney Sherman, *History of Illustration*, New York: Fairchild Books, 2019, pg. 236.



Image 5. Carl Larsson, *Syende flicka / Anna S.*, 1911. Watercolor, 66 x 99 cm.

*Memory* (1833), even though it was illustrated by highly skilled painters, and wrote that this type of “sister arts”, i.e. “feminine arts of illustration”, should never be intertwined with the “manly art” of writing.

John Murray (1778-1843) was a British editor. The *Quarterly Review* posthumously published his article in 1844 titled *Illustrated Books* in which he complained that the illustrations – which he saw as frivolous ornaments – did not live up to the literary content of the books, that the pictures made them less vivid, more superficial and dulled the reader.

Murray's dislike of “Annuals”, gift books and compendiums marketed to women and girls written and illustrated by women, probably influenced his distaste for illustrations. He commented that illustrated books were a “partial return to baby literature, to a second childhood of learning”, linking illustration to the idea that it is naïve and childish, pejorative characteristics still attached to illustration today.

#### Illustrated Books and Newspapers.

Discourse was deemed Man's noblest attribute,  
And written words the glory of his hand;  
Then followed Printing with enlarged command  
For thought—dominion vast and absolute  
For spreading truth, and making love expand.  
Now prose and verse sunk into disrepute  
Must lacquey a dumb Art that best can suit  
The taste of this once-intellectual Land.  
A backward movement surely have we here,  
From manhood, —back to childhood; for the age—  
Back towards caverned life's first rude career.  
Avaunt this vile abuse of pictured page!  
Must eyes be all in all, the tongue and ear  
Nothing? Heaven keep us from a lower stage!

Brian M. Kane analyses the dense sonnet by William Wordsworth (1770-1850) written a year after the Quarterly Review article;

In his sonnet, Wordsworth bemoans the written word's fall from grace ("sunk into disrepute") to become the servant ("lacquey"/lackey) of the mindless public's increased "taste" for illustration ("dumb" meaning both silent and inane). He not only reiterates Murray's "juvenile" pejorative ("back to childhood"), but claims that the popularity of illustrations is a degenerative return to a time when cavemen painted on walls ("caverned life's first rude career."). Wordsworth seeks to further debase illustration by associating it with the "lower stage," which exposes his fear of feminine subversion on the "masculine" art of writing.<sup>8</sup>

Stigmatising practices by accusing them of being feminine and childish was far from unique during this time. Writing was considered masculine, powerful and intelligent, a legacy of ancient geniuses. The visual arts were carefully divided into high and low genres, formalised largely by the British painter and first president of the Royal Academy of Arts, Sir Joshua Reynolds and his *Discourses on Art*, 1769.<sup>9</sup>

One respected genre was history painting. He advocated what he would call the "grand painting style", which would reflect the atmosphere of historical painting. This could be achieved by carefully studying the old (male) painting masters, poets and writers, in order to immerse oneself in the imperfect, poetic, free, intellectual, daring, courageous and greatness that characterises "grand painting".

A low genre could be still life painting, associated with women and the domestic space. The opposite of the free, roaming flaneur's images. Reynolds would have considered it small, anxious and too polished. He writes: "A mere copier of nature can never produce anything great; can never raise and enlarge the conceptions, or warm the heart of the spectator." He links this way of painting to ornament, which is already gendered here: "However the mechanic and ornamental arts may sacrifice to fashion, she must be entirely excluded from the art of painting." "to which neither genius nor taste are required." Although he recognises that ornamental painting has a certain "own peculiar merit" and value in itself, he warns of the consequences of the unnatural mixture of the minor and major styles of painting. "But as the grave and majestic style would suffer by union with the florid and gay, so also has the Venetian ornament in some respect been injured by attempting an alliance with simplicity."

Even before modernism, there were thoughts of ornaments as unnecessary and superfluous, with the idea of embellishment as misleading and false.

8 Brian M. Kane, 12-part dissertation blog, *Graphic Textbooks*, <http://graphictextbooks.blogspot.com/2012/10/blog-10-origins-of-prejudice-towards.html>, [accessed 2025-03-06].

9 Joshua Reynolds, *Seven Discourses on Art*, Book Jungle, 1769.

Illustration was considered by many to be no more than ornamentation and was disconnected from its social role and as a historically significant medium. Its communicative and educational capacity and its important role as a carrier of information in society through satire and journalism were not recognised in the discussion of illustration during this time. Illustrated ephemera, advertisements, newspapers, posters and yearbooks were able to deliver art and images to groups of people who might not be able to read, who were not educated or who were limited to the confines of their homes. Illustrations that show and tell the story of everyday life, reflect a wider diversity of communities and capture people or scenes that would otherwise have remained anonymous. Instead, illustration was framed as decorative and therefore superfluous, and as a less valuable practice compared to fine art or writing.

So what is illustration, if not fine art? It may seem confusing. Drawings, paintings, large and small that could just as easily be works created for galleries.

The essence of illustration is to illuminate meaning. To expand. This requires relationships. One between what is illustrated and the illustration, the image. The other relationship is between the illustration and the reader. Illustration is therefore about communication, and although communication can take place through different types of media, for example through sound and images, where sound could illustrate the image, the most common is visual communication. An interaction between image, language and meaning.<sup>10</sup>

Fine art is usually autonomous work that can meet its audience without the need for communication or for the work to be understood; it can exist in its own logic. These works do not need to formulate their agenda or function, but the artist decides how concrete or abstract they want to work. The artist is relieved of the responsibility for the viewer to understand or interpret the artwork. The viewer is required to find their own way. Fine art is created without being driven by commercial interests or commissioners to a greater extent than illustration and usually meets its audience by being exhibited in specific spaces dedicated to art, such as museums, galleries or biennials.

Illustration, on the other hand, is generally not autonomous, nor does it strive to be, because illustration works in dialogue with someone or something. Illustration is dependent on its context but at the same time, decisive and guiding. Illustration has a mission. To nuance, colour, open up, describe, help or make visible. Most often it is about conveying an idea, criticism, comment or a concept presented through a narrative. To do this requires knowledge, pedagogy and information.<sup>11</sup>

Illustrations are often created with their audience or reader in mind and tend to appear in commercial settings; in magazines, on packaging or posters. The places where we encounter illustration can thus be virtually anywhere where people live.

10 Alan Male, *A Companion to Illustration*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2019, pg. 1.

11 Male. 2019, pg. 2



There are many instances where both illustration and art move across these boundaries, or exist in the spaces in between. Both practices strive for artistry, freedom of expression, and to explore and challenge frameworks and traditions. Therefore art and illustration are siblings that often meet and interact. However, it is more common for illustration to be patronised by art history than the other way around. The history of illustration may be squeezed in as a sideline in the history of art but, because art is so often mistakenly associated with quality and value, illustration, which is not the same as fine art, but is very close to fine art, is left without the epithet of quality and value. Illustrators sell their original works at a fraction of what fine artists sell their works for, and research funding dedicated to and directed exclusively at illustration is scarce.

In his book *Comics versus Art*, Bart Beaty argues that comics were reduced to a low art form and status thanks to the embedded attitudes of “artistic purity” advocated by art critics such as Clement Greenberg (USA, 1909-1994) and other modernists. Art and design had to be honest, pure and self-sustaining, which gave little consideration to hybrid expressions such as comics, but validated fine art, especially abstract art, because of its autonomous being.<sup>12</sup> Although Beaty bases his argument on the medium of comics specifically, comics belong to illustration and Greenberg had the same dismissal of hybridity for illustration. Beaty recalls how pop art, an entire art movement, both celebrated and mocked pop culture in a potpourri of illustrations and comics that were used to represent the superficial and commercial.

Neither art nor illustration benefits from this kind of value-laden polemic, but illustration has had to assert its right to exist as a field of study, as a profession and as a practice in its own right in a way that neither fine art nor literature has had to do. More than ever, we need expertise on how images interact with text and where images come from, how they are constructed, in what ways they are charged and how they possess power. We need expertise in illustration to talk about how illustration has constructed and reinforced “realities” such as racial stereotypes and gender. We need expertise and illustration as a separate field within the academy to train illustrators as responsible, conscious image makers.

Defining illustration as a doing, an act, and defining illustration as an artistic practice are two different things. Rachel Gannon and Mireille Fauchon's book *Illustration Research Methods* argues the importance of talking about illustration as a separate academic field, but where it has been difficult to establish the subject due to illustration's dispersed and fragmentary epistemology. As they put it; “A discipline-specific critical discourse in its infancy”<sup>13</sup> An ancient practice but an academic field in its infancy. They argue that we need to describe illustration through methods specific to illustration,

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12 Bart Beaty, *Comics versus Art*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press Incorporated, 2012, pg. 20.

13 Rachel Gannon and Mireille Fauchon, *Illustration Research Methods*, London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2021, pg.14.

avoiding the tendency to resort to terminology and concepts that risk marginalising illustration. In the book they have listed what is central to illustration practice:<sup>14</sup>

**Principles:** Illustration is a social practice that engages with people, society and public space. It is not bound to a specific material but can take two-dimensional, sculptural or virtual formats. The communicative aspect is central and involves reflection on reception and the recipient. The illustrator approaches the perspective of the audience, reader and spectator with a conscious, informed intention.

**Strategies:** Creative and artistic storytelling, narrative is a method of conveying content in an engaging and relatable way. The illustrator interprets reality or fiction and tailors it to their project. They can adapt their work to the response, environment or situation.

**Behaviours:** The illustrator often works from subjective and personal perspectives, conveying empathy through the expression of emotions such as humour, melancholy or anger, etc. They may also adopt a more assertive approach through persuasion, provocation or encouragement. Illustrations appear in works that are often portable and transferable, for example in books, on the internet or as printed material. This mobility is closely linked to accessibility. Illustration is often inclined to reach a wide and varied audience.

**Tools and instruments:** In addition to art materials and art-making processes, tools here can be instances, places and contexts that mediate and promote illustration. For example, organisations, retailers, platforms and individuals that the illustrator collaborates with or works for. The illustrator is a creator in constant dialogue. Gannon and Fauchon write:

Illustrators have a heightened sensitivity to context. As a visual communication art form that is often applied and mediated, context is more readily understood as the situating and placement of the work. Illustrators are always urged to consider to whom it is that they intend to speak to and what information they intend to convey. They are innately audience and context aware; anticipating variability of reception and response, and thus tailoring their methods of interpretation accordingly.<sup>15</sup>

Illustration is an important part of visual communication where fundamental concepts are about conveying, interpreting, reading, translating and narrating. This is knowledge that we often take for granted, but which it has become clear that young and old alike need to keep up with as our societies become more and more visual. The challenge of reading images with knowledge, criticism and context is becoming ever greater and more difficult in an

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14 Gannon, Fauchon, 2021, pg.16.

15 Gannon, Fauchon, 2021, pg. 19.

age of technological innovations such as AI, globalisation and a faster spread of images than ever.

After many years of theoretical and practical training, I have become better at articulating what defines fine art and illustration. I think it is important to clarify what the practices are about, but also to try to concretise and demystify all those things that are “floating around in the air” or that lie as “code”, invisible. I realise that this may seem overly explicit, but my experience both as a beginner student and where I am now, is that I often encounter confusion about what separates and unites fine art and illustration. But above all, I want to emphasise the importance of illustration being seen as a separate subject field, which has its own characteristics and specific methods. As a field of knowledge creation, independent from fine art, with its own attraction and strengths.

To encounter illustration was to encounter a practice that was widespread and democratic. I saw how illustration thrived outside institutions, gates and elitism, while being formalised, developed and elevated within academic contexts by innovative and curious students. I saw how illustration was versatile, allowing a multitude of mediums, styles and approaches that elsewhere had low status. I saw how influential and powerful it can be. Satirical images. Murals. Political messages. Representation. It was then that I realised my love of images had a perfect place in illustration.

## Norm-critique

The feeling of shame and the longing for colour and ornament. These thoughts were in the background when I applied for Konstfack's Master's programme, which was led by Professor of Illustration Joanna Rubin Dranger and Professor of Graphic Design Johanna Lewengard. It was a new and explicitly norm-critical programme, that is, according to Konstfack's own description:

Norm criticism is about focusing on power. This means, for instance, recognising and questioning the norms that construct and maintain discriminatory power structures. Norm creativity summarises the actions that aim to put norm-critical analysis into practice.<sup>16</sup>

Norms often contribute to power relations and structures where what is outside the norm is discriminated against, devalued or excluded. Making visible and examining norms and power structures is nowadays a given in Visual Communication programmes. It focuses on context and history and emphasises the social context and responsibility of the creator. It aims to raise awareness of patterns, hierarchies and repetitions such as stereotypes and trends and to find out where these come from, or how and why they have emerged.

<sup>16</sup> The MA program in visual communication. *Konstfack*. 2018. <https://www.konstfack.se/sv/Utbildning/Masterprogram/Visuell-kommunikation/> [accessed 2024-06-07].

Those interested in norm-critical analysis are interested in tracing and understanding established approaches, epistemologies (knowledge constructions) and the power relations exercised within the subject field. Within the framework of such analyses, there are surely a number of norms that are considered unproblematic. Identifying norms is not automatically valuing them. But valuing must of course take place where we consider that there are outdated, distorted, unequal or harmful values embedded. Where norms put an end to enquiry, curiosity, development, diversity and acceptance.

In the Swedish comics scene, I thought there was a clear stylistic direction. I thought I had identified a trend, a word less loaded than “norm”, perhaps because of its suggestion that change is expected while norms are established and far more unwavering. Trends may seem more innocent in their limited life cycle. But both norms and trends are based on agreements and implied consensus with embedded power structures, thus I found the norm-critical method of analysis to be useful.

Firstly, I asked myself what is it that I recognise in the visual imagery of Swedish comics? A lack of colour and depth, with a manner of sharpness that follows in the footsteps of satirical cartoons. What am I not seeing? Artistic explorations of colour, a play of dynamic approaches in terms of technique, medium, depth of image and more playful relationships with style(s) and mannerisms. A reflective positioning to various visual image cultures.

Secondly, I asked myself, is this something that more people than me recognise? At Konstfack, the answers from classmates and teachers were ambivalent. Some agreed. Many disagreed and gave examples of Swedish comics that fulfilled exactly what I was missing. The “problem” I found with these examples was that they were rare exceptions. They were unpublished Konstfack students or self-published or unpublished cartoonists. They did not constitute the majority of commercially available comics. The question was not “are there comics in colour?” but “Is it possible to identify a stylistic homogeneity in Swedish comics? What does it consist of and what is missing?” I had neglected intention, limitation and clarity in my formulation.

The norm-breaking comics of Konstfack students are of full importance in shaping and changing comics in Sweden, and they will do so. But Konstfack as a publishing platform is too inaccessible and geographically local to be able to talk about the impact and importance of comics with a larger, overarching (image) power perspective. Limiting the focus to publisher-issued comics is about distribution and accessibility. Is the book available in libraries and bookshops? If not, then the audience is already significantly limited and probably already very experienced with comics. I am interested in the general reader, who does not necessarily have to be an avid comics fan already. After all, what is on offer on bookshelves in shops reflects both a curated selection and commercial demand. Exposure, consumption and popularity are easy to follow in the economics of the book market, which in turn says

something about influence and impact.

It is not new to ask “What are the stories we learn from the books we consume?” I ask “What are the images, how are they told and what do they look like, in the books we consume?”

## Pretty and cute

“Pretty” or “cute” are descriptions that are easy to associate with the everyday and harmless. Not to be confused with “beauty”, associated with the sublime, independent and timeless and which forms an essential part of the ideals of art history and philosophy. The cute tends to be dismissed as passive, childish, ridiculous and submissive. In her book *Our Aesthetic Categories*, Sianne Ngai describes how cuteness can be seen as a new aesthetic category alongside established, old categories such as “the beautiful” or “the magnificent”. She argues that cuteness is neither passive, innocent nor negligible when we understand how cuteness can manifest power relations, dependency and is often used as a disguise for consumption and capitalism.<sup>17</sup>

Cuteness can be an appearance, a way of being seen, but also an aesthetic judgement that evokes a reaction or a response. Something happens to us when we see something really cute. Our voice may go up in falsetto or our body may curl up. But the cuteness can go into excess and become disgusting instead. Just like when we eat something too sweet, the cuteness can become too much and the pleasant feeling is replaced by disgust. Cuteness contains contradictions and has the ability to move between attraction, repulsion, tenderness, aggression, compassion and contempt. This is perhaps one reason why the cute is often found satirically or ironically placed where we do not expect it to convey agency or greater depth.

In Japanese culture, cuteness is not used as a juxtaposition and ironic to the same extent. The cute, *kawaii* in Japanese, has an established place in both children's and adults' culture and is more of a movement and cultural phenomenon than just an aesthetic ideal. A classic example is Japanese anime and manga, with a stylisation and aesthetic of exaggerated, simplified and cute expressions that we in the West associate with children's culture, but which in Japan have a huge adult audience. In Japan, cuteness is part of being human, a natural need and expression that is recognised as important and necessary. Japanese anime has had a major influence on American animation, perhaps a reason why many American animated series are now aimed at adult audiences. Series such as *Rick and Morty*, *The Simpsons* and *BoJack Horseman* are examples of this. It is notable that there have also been American animated series that use a distinctly cutesy aesthetic, but at the same time deal with themes that are more complex and suitable for both older children and adults. Examples of such series include *Adventure Time* and *Bee and PuppyCat*, where the visual style is cute, playful and colourful, but the

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<sup>17</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015.

content often touches on deeper and more mature themes such as gender roles and depression.

Japanese artist Takashi Murakami is known for his animelike, colourful figures and monsters that are part of the style he calls *superflat*. His two-dimensional, often huge images are screen-printed, creating a textured surface but often without the sense of three-dimensional depth. His plastic-like sculptures that look like enlarged action figures have led many art writers to suggest that his art is a critique of consumerism, kitsch and commercialism in the spirit of pop art. But in the Japanese documentary about Murakami's art, *Takashi Murakami: The Dreaming Demon*<sup>18</sup>, I think it becomes clear that Murakami's anime characters and fictional cartoons are not ironic or satirical in their cuteness. The artist himself says he loves anime. Instead, art historian Nobuo Tsuji shows how Murakami's art is rooted in traditional Japanese art, as much as it reflects contemporary Japan. Perhaps it is the West's infantilisation of cuteness and unwillingness to see its potential for depth that contributes to this interpretation.

Ngai suggests that cuteness can be used as a strategy and a lure. In my graphic novel I use it as a strategy for sympathy. Feel with the cute. Care for the cute. The pretty and that which borders on the cute, especially at the beginning of the graphic novel, is an appeal, direct and honest but gentle and not demanding. Disarming.

Towards the end of the book, the cuteness wanes, but the pretty is still there, as a sense of care, thoughtfulness, carefulness, but also as a reference to the tone of the images I grew up with. Soft, human, longing and humble.

## Chromophobia

The white surface can be the absence of colour. Opting out of colour is a removal of a whole dimension of symbolism, meaning, language and emotion.

The white surface can also be white. That is, a surface filled with a colour that consists of light, that is clear and open. That means something. White as a colour, not the opposite of colour.

Both statements show how we can usually encounter and see the white colour. But the statement that contrasts white with other colours creates hierarchies and constructs white as a starting point. White as a resistance and rejection of other colours, white as neutral, uncharged and balanced is a well-established and contradictory project in Western modern art and culture.

The social and political significance of the colour white is as widespread as it is complex. A white lie, the white wedding dress, white skin, whiteness.

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<sup>18</sup> Tomoo Ueno and Tadayoshi Miura, *Takashi Murakami :The dreaming demon* [documentary film], NHK, 2024.



In these contexts, “white” is symbolically loaded and at the same time made visible. But white has also been made the symbol of neutrality, purity, clarity and “default”, the standard, where all other colours are additions that must be justified. There, white is not visible. White is already part of the surface we are working with, the starting point, pure and untainted.

Artist David Batchelor (b. 1955, Scotland) calls the aversion to colour “Chromophobia”.

Chromophobia manifests itself in the many and varied attempts to purge colour from culture, to devalue colour, to diminish its significance, to deny its complexity.<sup>19</sup>

He argues that colour has been ascribed characteristics such as the feminine, the “oriental”, the primitive, the childish, the vulgar, the queer, the pathological, the superficial and the cosmetic. While the adult, professional, serious and profound are rendered in black and white or shades of grey. The colourful is secondary. An excess, erotic and frivolous.

Influential modernists such as Le Corbusier (Switzerland, 1887-1965) and Adolf Loos (Austria-Hungary, 1870-1933) were instrumental in shaping modernist manifestos that rejected colour and ornament. For Loos, colour, ornament and “busy” expressions were signs of degeneration and ignorance. For Le Corbusier, the problem was rather that industrialised form used ornament and embellishment in the name of capitalist incentives, making their form dishonest, dirty and confused. For many modernists, truth, purity, rationalism, clarity, order and precision were synonymous with “white” and the reduction of other colours.

Long before the modernists, the art historian and “founder of art history” Johann Joachim Winckelmann (Prussia, 1717-1768) wrote about his views on the importance of colour in art.

Color contributes to beauty, but it is not beauty. Color should have a minor part in the consideration of beauty, because it is not color but the structure that constitutes its essence.<sup>20</sup>  
– Johann Joachim Winckelmann

Winckelmann's classification and idealisation of Greek and Roman art and especially sculptures laid the foundation for neoclassicism's romanticisation of antiquity. White bodies and marble-white sculptures became the visual ideal, although it is now well known that statues unearthed in Pompeii and Herculaneum in the 18th century had traces of colour and were painted in strong, opaque shades.<sup>21</sup> The resistance to understanding the statues as

coloured or even colourful shows that the ideal of whiteness could be translated from the flat canvas to the human body. Winckelmann claimed: “the whiter the body is, the more beautiful it is.” and that there was an absolute beauty and form that was independent of cultural differences. The white man was ascribed moral, political and beauty superiority.



Image 6. From the touring exhibition *Gods in Colour*, a reconstruction and colour study of the Treu head, Liebieghaus

“Colour is not beauty”. What a lie. The seasons change in colour. Your emotions have colour. Your relationships have colour. Your person is in colour. Your life. Colour is part of our reality and definitely influential when we talk about norms and values in art history. I cannot live without colour. And that includes the colour white. Bright, clear and irreplaceable. But the white colour is never neutral. Removing colour is never a neutral act.

There are many colours in my book. Even the white colour and the uncoloured surface. Together they form a story in colour. About colour. Together they show that I have chosen colour, even though I could not or did not want to fill all the fields with a vibrant spectrum. To choose colour is not to eliminate white. It is an interplay in which white is included.

## The image of the political

In “*Svensk Illustration en visuell historia 1900-2000*”, Swedish Illustration a visual history, Swedish comics are described as uninterested in the cinematic visual narrative techniques that were common in southern Europe. Black and white dominates, along with clean lines and graphic style. The images in Swedish comics are described as stripped down, focusing on “reality rather than film and glamour”,<sup>22</sup> with no desire for pretension or escapism.

Monica Hellström's essay for the magazine *Tecknaren*, *Svenska seriers särdrag*, (Swedish comics characteristics), summarises a similar picture of

19 David Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2000, pg. 22.

20 Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *History of the Art of Antiquity*, 1764, ed. Alex Potts, trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave, Texts & Documents, Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2006.

21 Margaret Talbot “The Myth of Whiteness in Classical Sculpture”, *The New Yorker*, 22 October 2018.

22 Sara Teleman and Andreas Berg, *Svensk illustration - en visuell historia 1900-2000*, Malmö: Arena, 2013, pg. 259.

Svenska Tecknare is a trade union that organises and represents visual artists. Tecknaren is published four times a year by Svenska Tecknare.

Swedish comics, but also points out that there is a lack of analysis of visual storytelling in Swedish comics, that the focus has been on content, message and texts, but that there is less discussion of the use, appearance, function and visual storytelling techniques of the illustrations.<sup>23</sup>

Her observations, which are not meant as a criticism but a description and framing, have noted the absence of comics that rely entirely on the image. Comics without text are very rare. She believes that Swedish comics often steer the reader, directing the images instead of allowing the reader to navigate freely through and between them, leaving less room for personal interpretation. Hellström sees the links between political satire of the 1980s and Swedish manners in comics where the images are often rough and even deliberately “ugly” but equally expressive and strong in their simplifications, sometimes even naive in their style. Black and white dominates, not least for printing costs reasons.

When I read Monica Hellström's essay, I understand it as an offered theory that the characteristics of Swedish comics come from the desire to work with themes such as the contemporary, politics and realism rather than the fictional. Therefore, Swedish comics creators tend to aim to comment on and influence the present, rather than to offer through the painterly, a world or narrative to disappear into.

Urhunden is one of Sweden's largest prizes for comics, awarded annually by Seriefrämjandet since 1987. In 2022 and 2023, no prize was awarded as the jury revised the rules for selection and awarding, among other things after criticism that “the same type of comics always wins”<sup>24</sup> Urhunden has been awarded in three categories: Swedish albums, translated albums and Ung-hunden, a prize awarded to people who have made significant contributions in the field of books aimed primarily at children and young people (a category that was removed in 2018).

Among the winners between the years 1987 and 2024, 37 years, I find only four illustrators who worked consistently in colour and where colour was used to a greater extent than to highlight contrast or shadows. Anders Westerberg, Karl Johnsson, Anneli Furmark and Ulla Donner. None of the winners since 1987 are visibly racialised, but this does not mean that there may be winners who are racialised in other ways

Researchers collect, sort and try to formulate their claims at the same time as society is constantly changing. It is an unpredictable dance. When I started the MA programme in 2014, there was an ongoing discussion about the importance of ornament in visual culture but also its resistance. Those who defended ornaments were working to highlight their important qualities and to look at how ornaments had long been rejected, ridiculed and devalued

during the long grip of modernism. Ten years later, attitudes to ornaments have changed. Not in the sense of saying that ornaments “are the new norm” but in the sense of saying that discourse around ornaments, both within artistic programmes and outside, has changed and that we see the presence of ornaments to a greater extent in images.

It may be a relief that discourses, opinions, ways of thinking and attitudes actually change. But it also makes life challenging for a researcher, to keep up to date, and to have to shift, nuance questions and formulations as time goes by. Similarly, I cannot possibly say that comics Sweden looks the same today as it did in 2016. Nor can I claim that colour, depth of image and mediums other than ink and pencil are not in demand by readers and that there will not be a new generation of comics creators who will offer exactly this. I can't say that things aren't changing. But I can still look at trends and ask: “What is the meaning of romance, beauty and colour?” Can we understand its absence if we put it in the context of image history? What space is given to the time-consuming processes of craftsmanship in a time when we are conditioned by economic savings and demands for efficiency?

If norm criticism, which makes norms and their privileges visible, helps us understand and articulate what we do not want - norm creativity is an approach and methods for investigating what we want instead.<sup>25</sup>

I do wonder, of course, why the beautiful and the pleasant cannot be used in socially critical and political stories. Is it not our expectations that set the boundaries?

Actively, frankly and explicitly criticising, commenting on and wanting to change the political landscape or calling for social reform is a way of working that is, for obvious reasons, extremely important. But I myself don't want to work that way and I also wonder if everyone really has the possibility to work that way. Today, we live in a climate of debate where people risk being threatened, hated and harassed for their views and for their activism. I am in no way advocating accepting to be silenced, but I am saying that it is a reality that people who already exist in vulnerability need to be understood if they have to choose their battles and consider what they are exposing themselves to.

All my work aims to show that criticism, opinion, working for change and agency can be done through the soft and the suggestive, through methods and images that are far from the intellectual left, satire and punk. My grandmother's embroidered textile wall hanging carries a story of an existence that I consider valuable for political opinion. The shame I carried, which was about being unsure whether it is really okay to love details, flowers, nature, horses, ornaments and colour. I am convinced but at the same time shaky, in an effort to broaden the image of the intellectual and political.

<sup>23</sup> Monica Hellström, *Svenska seriers särdrag*, Tecknaren #5, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Bild & Bubbla, *Urhundenpriset på is till 2024*, <https://bildobubbla.se/2022/10/07/urhundenpriset-pa-is-till-2024/> [accessed 2024-08-29].

<sup>25</sup> Rebecca Vinthagen and Lina Zavalia, *Normkreativ*, Premiss Förlag, 2014, pg. 10.

The 2002 winner of the Urhunden was Joanna Rubin Dranger with her book *Fröken Märkvärdig & Karriären, Miss Remarcable & Her Career*, Joanna Rubin Dranger, who won the Nordic Council Literature Prize in 2023 for her documentary novel *Thågåkom oss till liv, Remember us to life*, (2022), a graphic novel about her Jewish family..



This is where I come from.

And I have things to say.

## The research fields

This work, despite its many legs sticking out, and with multiple interests, is not research on adoption or comics theory. It is research on visual communication with a focus on illustration through an artistic endeavour. Yet I have spent a lot of time dealing with adoption and comics, I understand if that seems contradictory.

When I do research on illustration, I want to ask questions that feel relevant and important to illustration as a discipline. The goal is to contribute something to the field. To add, nuance and expand. My project is shared through a narrative in a graphic novel format about adoption, among other things. Telling the story of adoption and using the graphic novel format are building blocks in my work that explores illustration. But I do not aim to provide a complete account of the history, problems, or politics of international adoption, nor will you find an in-depth discussion of the various narratives, genres, history, or culture of the comics and graphic novel format. Comics research is now an established, often interdisciplinary research topic where it has become common for researchers to take an interest in the comics genre as a type of avant-garde literature or as educational teaching material

Interdisciplinary research means that the research crosses the boundaries of several disciplines or fields.

Much of comics research has focussed on narrative, theme, language and format, with discussions about what is specific and defining about the comics medium.<sup>26</sup> The comics creator's own reflections and theorising are included in comics research to some extent. This engaged with reflections from the “founders of comics research” in particular, such as Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* and Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art - Principles and Practice of the World's Most Popular Art Form*, which wrote about the mechanisms, function, structure and visual language of comics.

Comics research is often conducted from fields such as literary studies and cultural studies, and less often from fields where methods and analyses focus on artistic practice, images and image contexts, such as aesthetics, craftsmanship, media and materials. Ian Horton and Maggie Gray discuss this skew in their book *Art history for comics, past, present and potential futures*<sup>27</sup> and argue that the tools of art history are useful in contributing to the development of comics research alongside literary methods and theories. Comic book theory, which often borrows from film studies' formulations of frames, rhythm, pace, “gutter” (the empty spaces between the panels), “action” (doing), is in my opinion inadequate as a method of analysing less traditional comics such

<sup>26</sup> Thierry Groensteen, *Comics and Narration*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013.

<sup>27</sup> Ian Horton and Maggie Gray, *Art History for Comics: Past, Present and Potential Futures*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.

as *Heimat*<sup>28</sup> or *The Arrival*<sup>29</sup>. Both of these works deviate from traditional comic book storytelling traditions.



Image 7. Nora Krug, *Heimat: A German family tradition*, Penguin UK, 2019

In *Heimat*, there are few traditional panels and Krug has instead worked to facilitate the narrative through collages of illustrations and photographs. Different types of surfaces, materiality and texture have more emphasis in Krug's graphic novel than sequentiality. In *The Arrival*, the illustrations are divided into numerous and systematic panels. On a number of pages, the illustrations show a progression of a scene, that is, time moves forward with the panels. But several of the pages, thanks to the level of drawing craftsmanship and the characters looking straight out of the images, form a gallery, a wall of images, rather than illustrating a plot like a storyboard.

Comics artist, illustrator and lecturer in illustration Emma Rendel has researched the practices of comic artists through artistic research. Her report *Narrativa processer i mellanrum: serieberättandets praktik*, (Narrative processes in between: the practice of comics storytelling), is mainly illustrated and in comics format. She interviewed three well-known Swedish comic artists, Mats Jonsson, Joanna Hellgren and Hanna Gustavsson. She then created her own comic stories which were modelled on their methods. Emma Rendel wanted to formulate and put into words the specific knowledge that the comic artist possesses and that is required to create an engaging comic narrative.

<sup>28</sup> Nora Krug, *Heimat*, London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2019.

<sup>29</sup> Shaun Tan, *The Arrival*, Sydney: Lothian Children's Books, 2014.

(Translated to english.)

Putting previously wordless knowledge into words gives me an opportunity to deepen my understanding of the practice of sequential storytelling. However, even with words it can be difficult to recognise the knowledge that a practice or method carries.<sup>30</sup>

The difficulty that Rendel describes I think is partly the lack of the habit of talking about the images, which could facilitate and focus the practice and knowledge of the comics maker. Those who both research comics and create comics spend relatively little time talking about (or showing) how the images are made and why. Comic researchers and creators would benefit from more opportunity to reflect on the artistic creation process.

I also think that Emma Rendel reminds us that the act of putting words to the wordless always involves a kind of displacement. The words we add to describe and understand are an addition and often a translation. There will always be a gap between what we see and experience, and what we put into words. This is why her research on comic book methods through creating comics is unique and necessary.

Emma Rendel's report shows, through her comics, that a comic artist does not simply choose a style like clothing or external form. Rather, the comic creator uses tools and devised methods, conscious or unconscious, that are developed through focused work and that shape the comic narrative both

narratively and visually. In her report, she worked with feedback from readers during the creation process that makes visible the illustrator and comic artist's relationship with the reader, the audience. *How and what do the images communicate.*

Already in the introduction to her report, it becomes clear how her presentation of the inquiries animates and activates layers of meaning that would not have been possible through text alone.

This illustration both asks the question and answers it. How do comics actually work? While we are both looking at the author/illustrator as a character, we become part of her narrative and questions. In addition to what is communicated in semiotics and semantics, there is another layer that engages emotions. There is humour and a sense of movement and slight disorder in the image. Life.

My work is artistic. Like Emma Rendel, I have tried to use comics and graphic novels as a direct source without excluding literature that writes about comics.



Image 8. Image from the report *Narrativa processer i mellanrum: serieberättandets Praktik* by Emma Rendel, 2019, pg. 7

30 Emma Rendel, *Narrativa processer i mellanrum: serieberättandets Praktik*, Konstfack, 2019, pg. 32.

There are other examples of academic research presented partially or fully in comics format, even when the focus has not been on illustration or comics narrative as the main subject. Perhaps the best known work in the discipline of education is

Nick Sousani's 2015 doctoral thesis *Unflattening*, which is considered to be the first approved thesis entirely in comics format.<sup>31</sup> While this work has been important in broadening the view of the dissertation format and knowledge-building writing, it has fewer points of contact with my own project in terms of execution and thematic. I found stronger affinities in Kay Sohini's colourful 2022 serialised thesis *Unbelonging* in the discipline of English. This piece explored how the serial format can make public health research accessible to non-academic audiences, where reflections on voice, access and marginalised groups were central to her construction of text and visual narratives.<sup>32</sup>

Then, of course, there are research projects created outside academic institutions. *Ihågkom oss till liv*, (Remember Us to Life), by Joanna Rubin Dranger is an award-winning and acclaimed documentary graphic novel in which Rubin Dranger explores her Jewish family history. It is a massive, personal and moving account of memorialising, guilt, grief and the importance of preserving stories that might otherwise be forgotten. It highlights how trauma can be passed down through generations and how history is never finished and disappears but continues to influence the present.

Rubin Dranger, who always uses herself as a starting point, tells her story with vulnerability and intimacy, but her work is at the same time unbending, highly political and utterly determined. Her honesty and fragility are also what makes the story impactful, sustainable. *Ihågkom oss till liv* shows how one can manifest all these sides at the same time. I wonder if it is not also the case that what we have in common is that we cannot hide our hearts.

In Joanna Rubin Dranger's book, the soft, supple and cute illustrations are contrasted with a real and gritty depiction of life. The majority of the images are black and white. Sometimes the black ink is juxtaposed with inserted archives, documents, photographs or letters reproduced in colour. This juxtaposition reinforces the sense that the illustrations are a record of history. In *Ihågkom oss till liv*, Rubin Dranger has, to a greater extent than before, clearly worked with photo references as models for many illustrations. This hybrid of a captured real moment in time and the transformation of the hand rings true to the illustrator's narrative position. The personal self depicting a real story through documents, evidence of the real.

The size of the book, about 23 x 26 cm, counting 250 pages, is also a statement. It is a large and heavy book that signals something monumental, extensive and rich, as opposed to a small book that can be hidden away, that can be

31 Nick Sousanis, *Unflattening*, doctoral thesis, Harvard University Press, 2015.

32 Kay Sohini, *Unbelonging*, doctoral thesis, Stony Brook University, 2022.

avoided. The size of the pages, of course, allows generous leeway for the illustrator's images. Rubin Dranger has worked entirely without comic frames and text boxes, but the reading order is still systematic, from left to right, top to bottom. The absence of frames makes the images freer. The illustrations do not have a fixed place but move around the pages together with sometimes long pieces of text. But both text and image work dynamically in how much space they are given between each other. Sometimes the illustration is almost a full page and the text short and small. On other pages, the illustrations have been given less space to make room for long, divided pieces of text.

Towards the end of the book, there are four and a half colour spreads where the author states that “she is taking a break”. The spreads show an oil painting of a natural landscape, followed by what look like photographs of the clouds in the sky in various colour changes, so zoomed in that they appear painterly. As a reader, I do not question this for a second. Towards the end of the book it is heavy. It is a long journey. There is a lot of information, many thoughts, many emotions. Rubin Dranger gives herself a break in her work, and me as a reader a moment to catch up. As these pages are in colour and represent nature, pause, spirit, stillness, beauty and returning to one's body “mindful”, I think they reinforce the role of the black and white illustrations as documents.

The fact that *Ihågkom oss till liv* won the prestigious Nordic Council Literature Prize in 2023, as the first graphic novel, shows how the comics medium is gaining ground as a respected literary form.

Joanna Rubin Dranger has chosen to work mostly in black and white, but has not ruled out colour. Her style and manner are far from my own but her honest positioning and being soft but assertive at the same time and taking into account all the emotional shifts has inspired and guided my work enormously.

Theoretical comics research's more restrained interest in colour, form, aesthetics and visual craftsmanship is one reason why it does not constitute a decisive theoretical formation in my research project. Although theoretical comics research contains valuable discussions that I often relate to, I have chosen not to emphasise them as a central part of my work.

In the future, I personally hope that comics research focusing on the visual can be further specified, where illustration as a starting point should be a given, given the subject's expertise in the interplay between text, narrative and image.

## Demarcation, limitation

There are many things I want to do. But I can't do everything.

It is a real challenge for a PhD student to limit their research, but at the same time the limitation is a support.

I hope that my project can be used as a complement to all the overlapping subject areas I touch on, but I myself have not directed my work with the main purpose of contributing new knowledge to adoption research or comics research. Other researchers do that with greater dedication and better precision than me.

My research project has been carried out over a long period of time, but that time is nevertheless limited. I have had to pick and choose. I have chosen not to spend too much time on what I believe I can instead point to, or refer to, where there is already expertise and reasoning that I myself cannot or do not wish to contribute to.

It is important to remember that I do not want to write about everything I am trying to portray. The visual narrative brings the discussion of image analysis, semiotics, voice, style, expression, design. It shows the interaction, communication, mediation, translation, language. Visual material has been used for both theory and methods. Images and visual communication have also been used in the Companion.

There are parts of my writing in the Companion that have been more summarising and in some instances generalising. At the same time, there are pointers to references to more in-depth reading, written by other researchers for those who are interested and have a need for more depth. See, for example, the section on the history of illustration or the history of adoption. In these cases, I made the choice to briefly provide a historical background or introduction to allow the reader to follow me through the thinking and issues that were important to the narrative of the graphic novel or the research inquiries, rather than completely excluding ongoing discussion and research.

The materials and sources I have used come from and seek to represent a breadth and variety of places. From commonly used, well-cited academic non-fiction to popular culture phenomena, commercial works and creators. Well-known authors, established illustrators, students from Konstfack and people with no ties to academia have contributed material and knowledge. I have wanted to work with a lot of visual material and tried to get away from the habit of turning only to academic theoretic literature.

Despite being culturally in-between and having roots in both Sweden and South Korea, my knowledge of Korean art, images and visual worlds is more limited. I am educated in a European, Western context and I will always create, speak and write from it as such. In cases where I have created images about, written about or talked about Korean culture, I have tried to do so while showing that it is my interpretation. In the graphic novel, it is clear that my relationship with Korean culture is gradually emerging but undeniably begins in ignorance. Similarly, the early illustrations dealing with South Korea, or perhaps more accurately Asia, were an unspecified mix of Japanese, Korean and Chinese, reflecting the way in which I learnt to see Asian culture as a young person.



In this project there are demarcations that I tried to control and create an awareness of. However, that does not mean that there are no gaps in knowledge or blind spots. Of course, not all choices are conscious and well-balanced. Artistic endeavour includes both not knowing and being wrong. But it is important to point out that what I have put aside, just outside the focal point, is not of no interest, or no value, but rather a question of priorities and what is most important, most relevant to my inquiries and my subject field, illustration.

# Ghostly Matters

In the Academy, we are often asked to read texts on the recommendation of our teachers or classmates. Sometimes we encounter challenging texts.

When I am asked to read challenging texts within an academic setting, I can understand them in a sort of scrambled abstraction. Who knows how off I am when I say I understand something, but I have to make myself believe so, that I understand it.

What is a difficult text? It could be references. References outside of your own library can make a text difficult. Semantics, signs, and values that you do not read. Words that you don't know, words that you know, but don't recognise in particular dresses. Frameworks, structures. Unfamiliar. Length, mass, body. Demanding. Heavy. Rhythms, advanced, complex

Every now and then we are asked to think about, talk about, deal with the texts we have just read. I exercise my capacity and am asked to channel it through a language that we all share. So we can communicate. Formally this language is often English. Even more zoomed out, a spoken language. The spoken language is formulated in an instant. This is tough, I admit it. I grew up in silence. I can't believe we do this every day.

The text that I read, the difficult one, that I sensed should then be put back into my own retelling using words, and sentences. An art form in itself. All the potential of language is to be put to the test. And out of my mouth comes a retelling so non-sensible, perhaps flat. It does not mirror my perhaps-understanding of the difficult text. I am sad. Maybe I look stupid.

I encountered a book called Ghostly Matters, written by sociologist Avery Gordon.<sup>33</sup> A book that explores how social structures and historical traumas haunt societies and generate ghostly remains. It is not an easy book to read, but it can be felt and sensed. Ghostly Matters did not enter my body as a scrambled abstraction. It was not difficult. I was surprised. When will I be thrown out of this book? When will I be punished for not knowing Lacan or Foucault?

33 Avery. F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

When I am journeying through this book, a little bit on guard I am soon disarmed. I'm not getting punished. I understand. I feel understood. She is saying, "there are ghosts. I believe you. It's ok."

I used the term haunting to describe those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the word lose direction, when the over-and -done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind spot comes into view.<sup>34</sup>

For Avery Gordon, ghosts are something that is real in their presence. Ghosts haunt because they want something. They demand our attention. They are signs that something is repressed, locked away that needs to come out. That makes some of us restless, anxious.

"The ghost is not simply dead or a missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life."<sup>35</sup>

Her presence in this book is like her turning into my (psycho)analyst. But she is writing about sessions analysing our lives. "Life is complicated". Is it okay to state something like that in an Academic room? Our analysis can penetrate much further, can we be satisfied with three words? And yet I am having a sort of emotional relief from reading a statement that can be so obvious. The statement is not the moment of meaning. The moment of meaning is the sigh, breathing out, the release. Of feeling understood.

Her empathy has me. But she also *keeps* me, because she is generously clear, non-abstract about what she means when talking about hauntings and ghosts. Throughout the book, she defines again and again so I don't fall out.

Avery Gordon starts in a frustration of postmodern sociology's inability to address the unseen and non-tangible, in a society where hypervisibility and consumption sets the standards. Are the invisible without value? Gordon is concerned about what is missing in the gaps. What exists in between that which is spoken. Are there things of importance that we simply cannot describe?

To her "the post-modern, late capitalist, postcolonial world represses and projects its ghosts or phantoms in similar intensities, if not entirely in the same forms, as the older world did."<sup>36</sup> We will never cease to live with ghosts that the horrors of society conjured. What matters is how we acknowledge them, and the issues of claiming that they're gone, when they are real to some people.

Avery Gordon creates an illustration of social phenomena by referring to

34 Gordon, 2008, pg.xvi.

35 Gordon, 2008, pg.8.

36 Gordon, 2008, pg. 12.

them as ghosts and hauntings. Ghosts are commonly portrayed in popular culture as both terrifying and frightening, but also timid, cautious and long-ing. In David Lowery's feature film *A Ghost Story*, (2017) the ghost is a harm-less figure dressed in a simple sheet who haunts the house where he once lived his life. The ghost witnesses the passage of time and people coming and going, unable to accompany them or leave the house. He is a whisper, a dis-embodied memory that nevertheless carries decades of human relationships, warm in its collection and sad in its legacy.

In Lowery's film, the ghost is not a representation of social injustices and hidden narratives as they are in Avery Gordon's depictions, but it is a rep-resentation and embodiment of phenomena that we usually associate with the immaterial and intangible. Time, longing, memories, relationships, grief. When the ghost takes on a body, becomes visible, it also becomes a character with its own narrative that we follow and empathise with, that has its own agency. In popular culture stories about ghosts, but also in Gordon's book, the illustration and animation of the immaterial, the intangible, is a way to convey, embody and actualise stories that otherwise risk remaining fleeting.

Lived experience is often messy and complicated. Human agency is ambiva-lent, not always formulated and often shaped in ways that don't always click with institutional tools, languages or categories. However, she claims they should not be re-formulated, that we should learn to sense them. She is ask-ing how we know things and she is looking for mediation, a process that links an institution and an individual, a social structure and a subject, history and biography.

These definitions are clear and close-to-body. They describe knowledge, places, feelings and experiences that probably all of us can relate to. She is talking from a place of common, and not necessarily a place that is made from academic keys and cues. She writes:

The available critical vocabularies were failing (me) to communi-cate the depth, density and intricacies of the dialectic of subjec-tion and subjectivity.... Of course, it is not simply the vocabularies themselves that are at fault, but the constellation of effects, histor-ical and institutional, that make a vocabulary a social practice of producing knowledge.<sup>37</sup>

Although she doesn't write about her mediation as demystifying, or as an act of making it accessible, it is what I appreciate in her text. She provides a place for relaxation, trust and care, by using language that is close to our bodies. Maybe because that is a language that can keep intact when going in between social structure, subject and institution.

Because Gordon put herself in the process of haunting, a personal account and witnessing, sharing how her own body reacts to ghosts, she can make

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37 Gordon, 2008, pg. 8.

herself understood on a level based on relating. I believe her desire to touch the vibrations between a whispered story and the overwhelming structures of the social can happen because her language is traversing and worldly. Inclu-sive, if you prefer.

I can choose to tell you what I believe I know in many different ways. I can try to detach myself and provide you with something which claims to be more objective. Swap out "I say, I believe, I think" with "It is". Clear. Author-itative. A scientific tradition with the idea that there is a truth to uncover. (But preferably, leave your body out of it.) When making art we can agree that leaving yourself out of "it" would be ridiculous. And when researching art through artistic practice the subjective is perhaps even unavoidable. Thus, when I shift to talking about my research, or presenting my research, like I am doing now, should I remove myself? My research subject is, after all, not about me. It is about illustration.

For someone like me, who works with narratives departing from the per-sonal or intimate, reading Gordon helps me navigate in my own messiness of private and social. She maps that mediation, link, and connection of the historically constituted divide that I don't believe in myself. That I find myself sitting in the middle of. The divide between the social and the individual, the abstract and the concrete, the analytical and the imaginary. There is that place there. In-between.

Because Gordon encourages us to put into view that which makes our bodies respond with something we can't always organize, I will now do the same.

Dr Rachel Emily Taylor, through her research project *Heritage as Process*<sup>38</sup>, has explored how illustration can communicate voices from history by ana-lysing how people have been represented in museums and whether they can be reconstructed through illustration. She recommended that I read more about the Foundling Museum in London.

I found a collection of haunting items. The museum used to be a hospital that took in relinquished young infants between the years 1741 to 1760. The hospital created a system of identifying tokens so that parents who left their children at the hospital could retrieve them if they had the chance. Because of poverty, illiteracy and social stigma the parents were asked to leave an item with their child instead of written information. The token would be put in a numbered packet, sealed with wax until the parents returned to make a claim, and the children were given new names as they arrived.

Between these years more than 16,000 children were admitted to the hos-pital and only 152 were reunited with their parents. The hospital is now a museum, exhibiting some of these tokens.

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38 Rachel Emily Taylor, *Heritage As Process: Constructing The Historical Child's Voice Through Art Practice*, Sheffield Hallam University, 2018.

The heart shaped disc token in the bottom left corner says “You have my heart, though we must part” and the disc reading ALE was taken from a bottle of ale. The hazelnut-shell token has a small hole in it, suggesting how poor the mother might have been, and that a ribbon or cord was used to tie the token to the baby for admission. My heart breaks completely. Their hearts will always be broken.

Rachel Emily Taylor worked with the Foundling Museum and found that the children's own stories were absent. the museum was about their lives, probably a remnant of a tradition where children's thoughts and voices were not valued or given the same space as today. Working with the concept of voice is also related to Gordon's ghosts. Creating a visibility of something that no longer has a body. To listen to what speaks. Not to let anything be silenced. To give voice.<sup>39</sup>

Together with contemporary children, she held workshops to explore whether the voices of foundlings could somehow be reanimated. I understand that the workshop resulted in a collaboration and an exhibition that created a link to the foundlings, through the imagining and image-making of the contemporary children that filled the void with new life, new voices that were in dialogue with the lost voices. The apparent absence of answers and complete stories in these objects has grabbed hold of us, buried in the past but still sending shivers down our spines. Because we are still children. Some of us are also parents. Because we still separate children from their parents, out of social stigmas and poverty. Between me and Foundling's foundlings, there is a tension that will not rest.



Image 9. Identification objects from The Foundling Museum, London

39 Rachel Emily Taylor, *Illustration and Heritage*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024, pg. 39.

## Dictée by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (차학경)

Dictée is a book organised into nine parts with chapter names of nine different Greek muses. Written in English, French and a bit of Korean, the author's poetic work is autobiography, auto-ethnography, diary and history. Her writing visits the lives of several women ranging from Joan of Arc, to her own mother, to the Korean independence activist Yu Gwan-Sun, and in doing so links them through their patriotism and exiled identities, to herself.

Cha, Korean-American, was born during the Korean War, in the aftermath of Japan's colonisation of Korea. The women she portrays have different life stories, but their stories bear recurring historical patterns - violence, patriarchy, war. For Cha, as a Korean exile, the Korean language becomes a vital link to her roots: to her family's memories, to resistance against the colonial power, to her suppressed cultural heritage. This book was close to many of my own identities, and from in between the lines I took to heart her description of how oppression is inherited through generations. Making itself felt throughout, though these political conflicts are long over.

Disease is a woman who is a professional reciter. “Let the one who is disease, one who is daughter, restore spring with her each appearance from beneath the earth.”

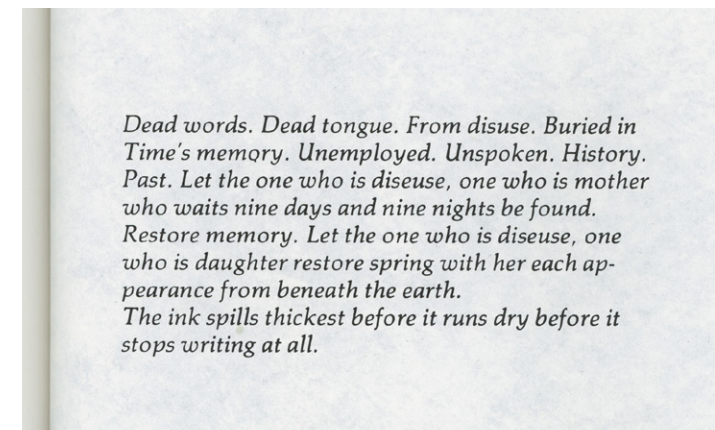


Image 8. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictée*, Tanam Press, 1982, pg. 133

Probably known to many, but not to me at that time when I was reading Dictée, I searched Theresa 차학경's name online and found out that she is dead. She died at 31 years of age. She was raped and murdered in Manhattan, one week after her book Dictée was published. I searched for photographs of her to see if there was anything ghostly about her living face. The first image that showed up on the internet was a still from Cha's video work Permutations and I mistook Cha's sister Bernadette for a very eerie portrait of Cha. A mistake I was not alone in making.



Author Cathy Park Hong did exactly the same but firmly points out the problem in her book *Minor Feelings: A Reckoning on Race and the Asian Condition*:

Asians are always mistaken for other Asians, but the least we can do to honour the dead is to ensure they're never mistaken for anyone else again.<sup>40</sup>

Cathy Park Hong is right, but that doesn't make the still image any less haunting. Theresa's sister Bernadette was breathing down my neck because I read those sentences about how her sister died on a Wikipedia page. I cried with anger. How can life be so terribly violent? Avery Gordon writes:

Haunting is a frightening experience. It always registers the harm inflicted or the loss sustained by a social violence done in the past or in the present. But haunting, unlike trauma, is distinctive for producing a something-to-be-done.<sup>41</sup>

Fear, pain and anger are what is conjured in me after these hauntings. Three of the nine primary affects. Affects are the physical manifestations of emotions, obviously real, felt and active. They don't exorcise or give complete relief but I do believe they are keys to that "something-to-be-done". They make me go to my drawing table and bring into view what we don't want to see, what we keep on forgetting, what we don't know.

Thinking about the aftermath of social injustice and trauma as ghosts and hauntings has given me an illustration I can work with. It makes me understand my own anxieties, it gives legitimacy to my own concerns, and puts body, words and image to what is often overlooked. Gordon's book encourages us to listen to the deeply personal and intimate, reminding us that embodied experience is inseparable from social structures, power relations and history. Rather, in the deeply personal there is an opportunity for transparency, for self-reflective writing and a creative process. I often find that the more personal, bold and open someone's narrative is, the easier it is to understand and recognise. *Det som är botten i dig är botten också i andra*. (What is at the bottom of you is also at the bottom of others).



Image 9. Still from video *Permutations*, 10 mins, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, 1976

### Färjesång

#### Jag tror på den ensamma människan

Jag tror på den ensamma människan  
på henne som vandrar ensam  
som inte hundlikt löper till sin vittring,  
som inte vargliket flyr för människovittring:  
På en gång människa och anti-människa.

Hur nå gemenskap?  
Fly den övre och yttre vägen:  
Det som är boskap i andra är boskap också i dig.  
Gå den undre och inre vägen:  
Det som är botten i dig är botten också i andra.  
Svårt att vänja sig vid sig själv.  
Svårt att vänja sig av med sig själv.

Den som gör det skall ändå aldrig bli övergiven.  
Den som gör det skall ändå alltid förbli solidarisk.  
Det opraktiska är det enda praktiska  
i längden.

– Gunnar Ekelöf (1907-1968)

### Ferry Song

#### I believe in the solitary human being

I believe in the solitary human being  
in her who walks alone  
who does not run like a dog after her own scent  
who does not flee like a wolf from the scent of humans  
At once human and anti-human.

How to find communion?  
Flee the upper and outer path:  
What is herd in others is herd also in you.  
Take the lower and inner path:  
What is depth in you is depth also in others.  
Hard to get used to oneself.  
Hard to get rid of oneself.

Yet the one who does will never be abandoned.  
Yet the one who does will always remain in solidarity.  
The impractical is the only practical  
in the long run.

<sup>40</sup> Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings: A Reckoning on Race and the Asian Condition*, London: Profile Books Ltd, 2021, pg. 173.

<sup>41</sup> Gordon, 2008, pg. xvi.

## Adoption and betweenship

### Adoptions from South Korea

Sweden is often described as a racially and culturally homogeneous country up until the 1960s. This claim is debatable, as the country has had minority groups and immigrants for centuries. However, the number of non-European immigrants remained very low, with people of color comprising only 0.06 percent of the population in 1960. It was around this time that the first non-European adoptees began arriving in Sweden. Sweden has the highest per capita rate of international adoptions in the world. From the 1970s to the 1990s, international adoption reached its peak globally, and adoptees from outside Europe quickly became a significant portion of Sweden's non-white immigrant population. The number of adopted children grew rapidly, from 1213 children between 1966 and 1970 to 1864 children in 1977 alone. By 2018, there were 57 143 international adoptees living in Sweden, of them approximately 7,000 to 8,000 born in European countries.<sup>42</sup>

There are around 9,000 Korean adoptees in Sweden, making it the biggest group of international adoptees. The second largest group are adoptees from India (7,000) and Colombia (5,400). South Korea has sent around 200,000 children abroad for adoption. The main receiving countries are the USA (105,000 children), France (11,000 children) and Sweden (9,000 children), closely followed by Denmark (8,500 children). Other receiving countries are Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium etc.

Adoption from South Korea became common in the 60s but started already in the 50s after the Korean War. Mixed-race children born to local Korean women and American soldiers stationed there were sent away for adoption in fear of discrimination and social stigma in ethnically homogenous Korea, but they were also used as a diplomatic currency to strengthen the Cold War alliance between the United States and South Korea.<sup>43</sup> The American couple Harry and Bertha Holt founded the adoption agency *Holt* in 1956, after they adopted eight orphaned Korean children to the US. The agency Holt still exists today, and have been responsible for more than half of all international adoptions from South Korea.

After the Korean war, South Korea faced growing poverty, low child-welfare and fast-paced industrialization. Adoption became a way for South Korea to enact population control policies. The adoptions came to largely consist of non-mixed-race Korean children and, in 1966, Sweden was the first nation in Europe to initiate a partnership and adoption program with South Korea. The Korean organization Social Welfare Society (former Child Placement Service, CPS, already privatised in 1965) had been chosen as the partner of

the Swedish state agency Socialstyrelsen to arrange child placements from South Korea to Sweden. As such, the Swedish state became responsible for overseeing, guiding and arranging international adoptions.

Much through the work of internationally well-known Swedish politician Olof Palme, prime minister of Sweden from 1969 to 1976 and 1982 to 1986, who was actively outspoken against apartheid and colonialism, Sweden became known as a welfare state with strong anti-racist and anti-colonial values. Sweden's implementation of successful family welfare policies decreased domestic adoptions, at the same time as the idea of the nuclear family became more important. Promoting adoption was not only in the interest of private adoption agencies, but also a state interest where Swedish parents could build nuclear families and at the same time "save 'Third World' orphans".

The first North Korean Information Bureau in Northern Europe opened in Stockholm in 1970 as Sweden was trying to maintain neutral and balanced relationships with the two Koreas. The same year, Korea and Sweden saw a brief one-year interruption in their adoption program. The expansion of the program had gathered attention and critique from North Korean agents in Europe who accused South Korea of selling Korean babies to the West. This was putting pressure on South Korea's Cold War geopolitics but South Korea had to be careful not to escalate armed conflicts with North Korea. However, Sweden quickly objected to the interruption, as the issue of adoption and providing Swedish families with babies was now a government concern.<sup>44</sup>

A second one-year suspension of the adoption program occurred in 1974, when South Korea grew concerned that Sweden's deepening ties with North Korea might pose a security risk. Given Sweden's significant role in United Nations debates on the Korean Peninsula, it leveraged its diplomatic influence to pressure South Korea into resuming the adoption program. South Korea implemented a five-year plan aimed at reducing international adoptions by 1,000 annually while simultaneously promoting domestic adoptions through a newly introduced quota system.

In 1980 the quota system was abolished after president Chun Doo Hwan came to power through a coup d'état. Instead, international adoption was used to expand the emigration program and strengthen ties with Western nations. This allowed adoption agencies to compete with each other and send unrestricted numbers of adoptable children abroad.<sup>45</sup>

During the 80s, the majority of the children who were sent for adoption came from unwed mothers. Korea saw an increase in adoptions from 4-5,000 adoptions per year to 6-9,000 adoptions per year, even though Korea at this time started seeing results from industrialisation as well as a stabilising economy.

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42 Tobias Hübinette, *Adopterad : en bok om Sveriges sista rasdebatt*, Stockholm: Verbal Förlag, 2021, pg. 33.

43 Youngeun Koo, *The Question of Adoption: "Divided" Korea, "Neutral" Sweden, and Cold War Geopolitics*, 1964–75, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 2021 pg.3.

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44 Koo, *The Question of Adoption: "Divided" Korea, "Neutral" Sweden, and Cold War Geopolitics*, 1964–75, pg.10.

45 Tobias Hübinette, *Korean adoption history* (from Eleana Kim, ed., *Community 2004. Guide to Korea for overseas adopted Koreans*, Overseas Koreans Foundation, 2004) pg. 9.



South Korea was the host of the Olympic Games in 1988 and the world was closely watching the newly democratised and industrialised nation. Western journalists criticised Korea's aggressive adoption program and soon became known worldwide as the baby-exporting country, which was a great humiliation. Subsequently South Korea initiated efforts to decrease international adoptions and to eventually stop sending babies overseas completely. However, the plan to phase out international adoption would take over 30 years.

Over the past decade, international adoptions from South Korea have sharply declined. It has dropped from 1,000 children per year to approximately 100. A decrease which was driven in part by widely publicized adoption scandals that gained global media attention. Adoptees have organized, forming alliances with unwed mothers, human rights groups, and legal advocates to push for systemic reforms and accountability. As a result, transracial adoption practices have come to be monitored more closely, and truth commissions, along with government investigations, have revealed serious issues such as corruption, procedural flaws, and human rights violations.

In 2021, Sweden and Adoptionskommissionen initiated an investigation of international adoptions. They look at cases from the 1960's until today, with a focus on adoptions from Chile, South Korea and China, led by professor in civil law Anna Singer. The intention is to investigate how much the Swedish government, authorities, agencies, municipalities and courts knew about suspicious and alarming activities. The investigation deadline was put to fall 2023 but was requested for an extension until at least March 2025.

In December 2022, South Korea's state run Truth and Reconciliation Commission, TRC, announced that they will investigate 34 adoption cases of South Korean adoptees from Europe and the US who believed their documents were falsified or their adoption had been illegal. The cases were handed over by the Danish Korean Rights Group, led by adoptee attorney Peter Møller. By June 2023, 237 more cases were added to the investigation as the commission had strong suspicions of corrupt practices of manipulated documents. In fall 2024, TRC found evidence that women were pressured into giving away their children for foreign adoptions after giving birth at government-funded facilities, where they were confined and sometimes enslaved. These so-called "vagrant" facilities were used to keep unwanted citizens from the streets, a type of roundup and cleaning project ahead of the 1986 Asian Games and the 1988 Olympic Games.<sup>46</sup>

In November 2023, Adoptionscentrum, Sweden's only adoption agency facilitating adoptions from South Korea, announced that it would no longer accept applications for South Korean adoptions. The agency has withdrawn its application from Sweden's Family Law and Parental Support Authority (MFoF), which is required to remain an authorized adoption mediator between Sweden and South Korea. Meanwhile, the Korea Welfare Society

(formerly known as Social Welfare Society, SWS) has decided to terminate its adoption program, as future international adoptions will be managed directly by the South Korean government.<sup>47</sup>

## The image of transnational adoption

Whenever I was asked "Where do you come from?" I was puzzled trying to figure out if the person was interested in where I grew up, (in the north of Sweden), or if they were referring to my ethnicity (Swedish) or if they were asking about my race (Asian) or more specifically the cultural heritage of my first parents (Korean). As most of us who are asked this question regularly know, it is rarely formulated more specifically than that. From experience, most people ask the question because they're interested in what nation my non-white appearance can be linked to. However, quite often, they just want to know what town in the North I am from after they've picked up a bit of subtle northern dialect to my S's.

This question was tricky because it was unclear what reply was really desired, but also because for many young adoptees, we, for obvious reasons, did not know much about the countries where our first parents came from. We crossed borders neither willingly nor unwillingly. We were viewed as neither immigrants nor refugees. We were however displaced and granted entry to the new nation, welcomed and for the most part, accepted as Swedes. Compared to groups categorized as immigrants or refugees, the welcoming was a privilege we received, but came with the condition that we should assimilate as a blank slate, ready to be re-written.

Travellers. Exiles. Immigrants. Migrants. Children. Adults. We have been called many things in different contexts and come from contrasting places, all over the world. Our differences are probably plenty more than what we have in common. But our shared experience of being separated from our families and displaced in a different part of the world has shaped our identities and made us seek community, recognition and political justice in union.

Filmmaker Minh-ha T. Trinh breaks textual genres and uses the story to layer and access multiple modes while staying politically acute and personal. To her, charting ground cannot be made while staying still. The migrant is the rejection of stagnant knowledge.

A story is told to invite talk around it. One can take it as a shallow piece of entertainment; or one can receive it as a profound gift travelling from teller to teller, handed down from generation to generation, repeatedly evoked in its moral truth and yet never depleted in its ability to instruct, to delight and to move. For me, this tale functions at least on three levels: as a cultural marker, a political pointer and an artistic quest.<sup>48</sup>

The following text on adoption and betweenness was published as an article for *The Journal of Illustration*, volume 10, number 2, 2023, a peer-reviewed, international journal.

<sup>46</sup> Tong-Hyung Kim, "South Korean truth commission says it found more evidence of forced adoptions", *AP News*, 9 September 2024.

<sup>47</sup> Patrik Lundberg and Josefin Sköld, "Adoptionscentrum: Inga nya adoptioner från Sydkorea", *Dagens Nyheter*, 27 November 2023.

<sup>48</sup> Minh-ha T. Trinh, *Elsewhere, Within here: immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, New York: Routledge, 2011, pg. 15.

Illustration often operates in collaboration with the political power of story-telling. I have chosen to let the weave of multiple cultural belonging which I consist of, influence and guide my research. Academic writing is not my native language. But stories are.

Images presenting international adoption were showcasing it as an accepting, caring, colourblind act of love. They would often show photographs of hands of different skin colours holding each other. Of hands holding a globe and families with adopted children from several different nations hugging each other. Happiness, unity, trust, home, safety and welfare were some of the messages communicated through ads or information brochures with decorative drawn illustrations like houses, trees, stars, suns and hearts. Common and recognizable symbols of hope, growth and family. These images avoid illustrating the displacement that happens in international adoption. They avoid addressing where the babies come from, how they arrived and what was left behind.

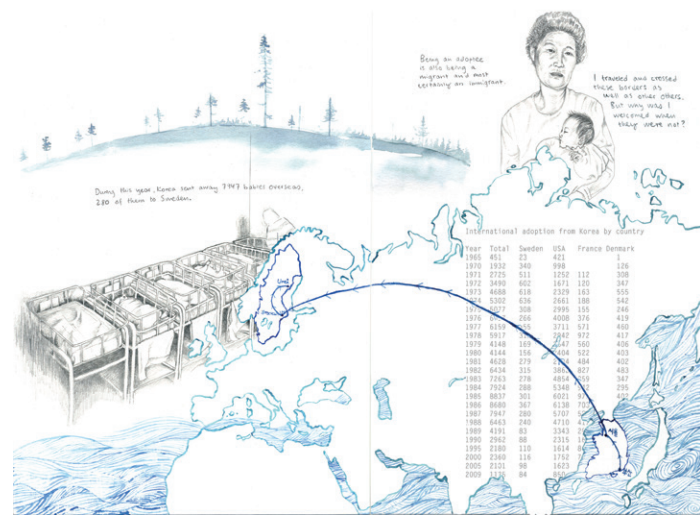


Image 12: Page spread from graphic novel project. Watercolor and pencil on paper. From the graphic novel page 7-8.

This illustration is a spread from the graphic novel page 7-8. The world map shows the stops I had to make, while I was shipped as a baby, before ending up in a small village in the north of Sweden. Inside the map is a list of adoptions from South Korea by year. The pencil portrait shows my foster mother holding me as a baby. The written text reads: “Being an adoptee is also being a migrant, and most certainly an immigrant. I travelled and crossed these borders as well as other Others. But why was I welcomed when they were not?”.

Adoptees in children’s books

In the 1980s, before the internet was easily accessed in most homes, and before the digitalization of visual culture made images and information

available on demand, children’s books served a perhaps even more significant role as a mirror, as well as informative material which could help open up worlds and perspectives to a child. Visual representations of individual adoptees’ lives, fictive or real, were very few and they were often children’s books illustrated or written by parents who had adopted children. These books tried to tackle the difficulties an adopted child could meet in their new environment, such as questions regarding identity, being victims of racism and feelings of not belonging and how to overcome them. Perhaps these topics reveal the adoptee parents’ expression of worry for their children and the topic of exclusion, insecurities and difficulties becomes an act of benevolence and care. However, these stories were not as investigative in the aspects of an adoptee’s identity that includes their original family, culture or language, nor the more political perspectives of adoption pointing to diplomatic ties, stigma and class.<sup>49</sup>

Paradoxically, and known to few, one of Sweden’s most popular and beloved children’s books character called Linnea, written by Christina Björk, and illustrated by Swedish illustrator Lena Anderson, is a character based on the illustrator’s Korean adoptee daughter. Anderson’s colourful and detailed watercolour illustrations are thematically focusing on botanics and nature, especially in the book *Linneas årsbok* (Linnea’s yearbook). This shows crafty close-to-nature ideas and potterings, which for adult Swedes could evoke feelings of nostalgia and a sense of Swedishness. Because Linnea’s heritage is not brought up or mentioned in the books and most readers have missed that Linnea is a non-white person. This is regardless of the fact that she is carefully and respectfully illustrated with black hair and Asian eyes. In a way, an equally representative story about the adoptee child who blends in naturally whilst placed in a “typical” Swedish setting.

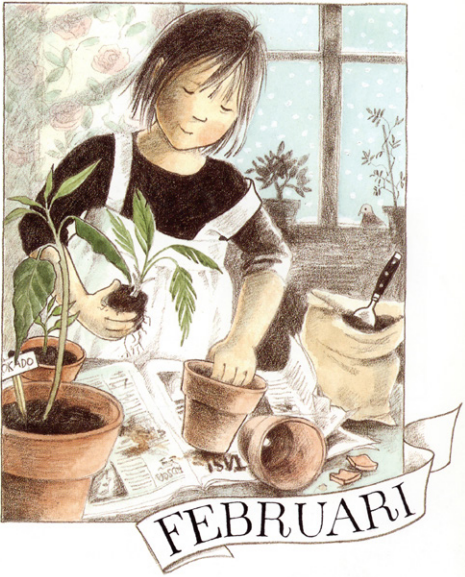


Image 13: Illustration från *Linneas årsbok*, Christina Björk, Lena Anderson, Stockholm, 1982, Rabén & Sjögren, reviderad ny upplaga, 2020, pg. 13

As a child, I would read these books and identify myself with her character’s curiosity and creativity, but it was not until I was an adult and it was pointed out to me that Linnea was a person of colour that I could see her illustrated as an Asian, something which was never invisible in the first place. Race did not need to be addressed for Lena Anderson, she did not intend to make a book about race or representation. But seeing Linnea in the idyllic Swedish landscapes and nature through shifting seasons becomes for me a subversive and politicized work of representation and a counterweight to the many white characters in Swedish picture books from this time.

Heated media debates in Sweden have taken place in the last fifteen years where racist illustrated images in advertising or as logotypes have been called out by activists and demanded to be removed. In almost all cases the remov-

49 Tobias Hübinette, *Adoption ur ett koreanskt och ett svenskt perspektiv*, Barnboken 2/2005.

als were met by protests, denying the images' racist history and defending their value by referring to feelings of nostalgia and that "they've always been there". This denial shows that the general knowledge about racial stereotypes is low in Sweden and that there is an inability to recognize racial stereotypes, especially those depicting Asians. I would speculate that the minor representation of East Asian bodies in Swedish visual culture in combination with an acceptance of racial stereotypes of Asians, wherein racial stereotypes have been allowed and been a common occurrence, are conditions affecting the way we read race regarding characters like Linnea.

Disney cartoons and Disney animation with problematic portrayal of non-white characters used to have a great influence on Swedish visual culture. This in turn shaped how we read race in animation and illustrations. Linnea's racial or cultural heritage is not mentioned, and because we are used to seeing Asians illustrated through stereotypical depictions, such as yellow skin, slanted eyes or protruding teeth, the absence of those features makes Linnea pass as white, even though she is not illustrated as such. When I look at Linnea today, I feel slightly mournful knowing she was with me my whole childhood only as a young girl with black hair, but I (or my family) was not able to recognize her as an Asian protagonist.

It is not the illustrator nor the reader who is at any "fault" here, but the claim I would like to make is the reminder that in the nature of illustration, wherein images are constructions and interpretations, illustrating race. As well as interpreting race, is not a matter of simply seeing, viewing, but a matter of visual literacy, which consists of assumptions, learned knowledge and decoding that is greatly dependent on historical and cultural context. Dr Anne Bamford (2003) summarizes the aspects of visual literacy in *The Visual Literacy White Paper*. She uses the term "semantics" for the social and cultural aspects of image reading as a key to approaching images with criticality, to uncover and re-evaluate sociopolitical embedded values.<sup>50</sup> She lists the cognitive, grammatical and semantic skills needed to be able to interpret an image, a complex process which is easily overlooked in a time when the participation of communicating visually is becoming predominant and taken for granted.

We acquire a basic level of visual literacy from a very young age, learning to connect signs and shapes with meaning. Yet we must continually learn, relearn, and renegotiate these meanings, not only to stay visually fluent in a changing cultural landscape, but also, as practitioners, to take responsibility for what our images are made of and how they interact with the world.

### Decolonizing the view on adoption through visual arts

Someone who has been made to think they're a blank slate still has the ability to write. To be a person of colour in a society which considers itself white is to be marked, visible and questioned. Where are you from?

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50 Anne Bamford, *The Visual Literacy White Paper*, Sydney: Art & Design University of Technology and Adobe Systems, 2003.

Today, finding out where you are from is a more accessible process than when I grew up. Forums, communities and organizations for adoptees are available online, which provide information, support, contacts and networks for adoptees wanting to know more about the first family search process or just getting to know more about Korean culture.

When Korean adoptees started reaching their 20s and 30s in the 2000s a shift in the discourse regarding international adoption occurred. Korean adoptees started visiting their Motherland, studied the language and successfully reunited with their Korean families. Adoptee communities were being built in Korea, as a small number of adopted Koreans who grew up in Europe and North America decided to relocate and seek work there. Korean adoptees started reclaiming their ties to Korean culture and society and simultaneously became increasingly aware of reports of adoptions that did not appear legal. Returning adoptees started finding falsified and manipulated information in their adoption files.<sup>51</sup>

I was one of the 200,000 children that Korea sent overseas for adoption and was one of the 9,000 Korean children who ended up in Sweden. I was 3 months old when I arrived in the North of Sweden, adopted to a working-class family. I reunited with my Korean family in 2007 when I was 19 years old. The reunion with my Korean family and with Korean culture was supposed to be closure, an answer to a question, a sealed gap. But it turned out to become the opposite. My adoption was not legal and I was most likely sent away for adoption for money against my parent's consent. There was a profit to be made from underprivileged women's babies and the western countries had created a demand. They paid and fulfilled transactions, and babies were severed from their language, culture and families, flown over oceans, crossing borders.

Problems linked to international adoption both in terms of illegality and corruption, as well as many reports of adoptees' pronounced mental health issues, clashed with the positivist image that had been promoting adoption as an example of successful integration and acclimatization. When Korean adoptees started voicing their own agency, experience and perspectives through art and visual storytelling it was clear that our identities as Koreans and our bond to the place where we were born mattered greatly, and had become our loss and wound.

### A Quiet Migration

Malene Choi Jensen, a Danish Korean- adoptee filmmaker, directed the Danish-language feature film *A Quiet Migration*, 2023. It is a tranquil portrayal of 19-year-old Carl, adopted from Korea, who has just graduated from high school and is returning home to the family cattle farm that he is expected to take over. Malene Choi Jensen has chosen to portray an adopted young man who has

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51 Maggie Jones, "Why a Generation of Adoptees Is Returning to South Korea", *The New York Times Magazine*, 14 January 2015.



grown up in the countryside where life is both isolated but also small and intimate. Carl is the only non-white. Everyone knows everyone. The open, beautiful landscape speaks in its silence.

It is particularly striking how Carl is so visible in Danish rural life, among all the white people, among all the landscapes, images and objects that are associated with white Danes.

Carl knows the farm, the tractors, the countryside, the cattle just as well as his hard-working father, who walks around in the same work clothes every day. Framed aerial photographs of the farm hang on the walls instead of art. On the dresser are decorative porcelain objects. We know it is his home. Yet it is so apparent, the way he sticks out.



Image 14: Malene Choi Jensen, still image from *A Quiet Migration*, Manna Film, 2023.

The photography is static, combined with slow pans across the beautiful green landscapes. The silence is palpable. Out in nature but also at home. It is not Carl who is silent. The whole family is silent. Because there is no need for more. Just like in my own graphic novel, which shows how silence is not a void. It contains its own meaning and holds its own way of communicating love and connection.

*A Quiet Migration* is empathetic and understanding. The intentions are good. The caring is there in its ignorance. On Carl's birthday, the family takes him to "China Wok House" to celebrate. In this scene and many others, it stings. The dual nature of being cared for, receiving care, but at the same time totally alone, being something that your parents never understand.

In another scene, Carl endures racist comments from drunken relatives and the biggest betrayal is that no one comes to his defence. But this scene is not only about whiteness and passivity, but also about being part of a type of

working or rural culture where it is important not to get into conflict and especially not to disturb an otherwise good atmosphere. It's about sticking together and taking responsibility for something you're not even allowed to be a part of.

Carl may be inarticulate, but it's clear what he feels, what he thinks. Inside him is his Korean mother. Inside him is Korea, a place he belongs to without having to prove himself. He longs.

### Loving Belinda

Danish Korean adoptee, Jane Jin Kaisen, a filmmaker and visual artist made a mockumentary in 2006 called *Loving Belinda*, about an Asian-American couple adopting a white girl from Denmark.<sup>52</sup> In one colour photograph, she shows the family standing together, posing for a traditional and simple family photo. The artist herself is acting as the mother, lovingly holding her arms around the young white girl, who in turn is acting as the daughter. The father, standing next to them, is acted by Swedish Korean adoptee Tobias Hubinette. He is a well-known researcher, senior lecturer and writer about critical race and whiteness, adoption research and migration studies. This is a seemingly ordinary photo, yet with the racial dynamics reversed, our own expectations of who can adopt, and who can be adopted are revealed. A paraphrase of happy images from pro-adoption ads and stories. Before this image could disrupt the idea of the saviour as being only a white person, it first makes us question the liability of two nonwhite parents to a white girl. This exposes the racial and cultural hierarchies that have been established by a repetition of images typically showing non-white parents giving up children rather than being the charitable hosts. This work speaks against the idea of colour blindness and that racial hierarchies can dissolve if we choose to not address them.



Image 15: Jane Jin Kaisen, *The Andersons*, 2015. Colour photograph. 93.3 cm × 142 cm.

### Skin color: Honey

Belgian illustrator Jung wrote and illustrated a comic book about his upbringing as a Korean adoptee. Part 1 out of total 4, was published in French in 2006 and has since been translated into several languages, including Korean, English and Swedish.<sup>53</sup> It was adapted to an animated film with the same name in 2012. His illustrations are in black and white, placed within image frames which vary in size, together with airy text and speech bubbles. The outlines seem to have been painted with a thin ink brush and the shadows providing depth are painted in a watercolour style, possibly together with watercolour pencils.

Jung's autobiography, an intimate, revealing and at times dark portrait of a life as a Korean adoptee. It mainly deals with the sensitive subject of his com-

<sup>52</sup> Jane Jin Kaisen, *Loving Belinda*, [single channel video], 2006.

<sup>53</sup> Jung, *Couleur de peau : miel*, tome 1, Toulon: Quadrants, Soleil, 2006.



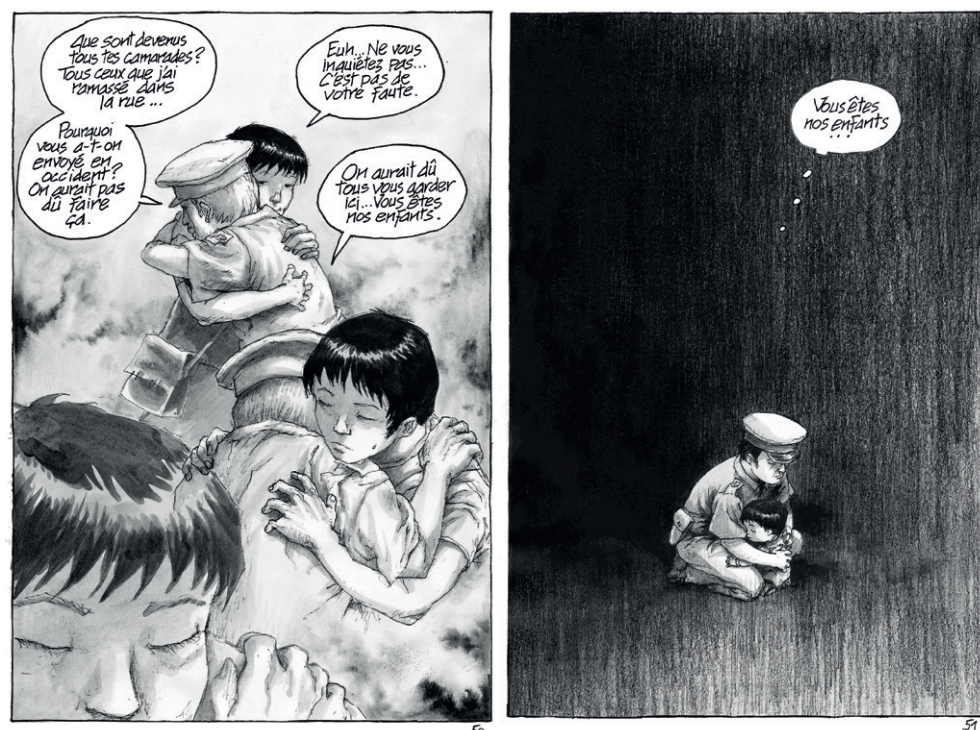


Image 16: Page spread from *Couleur de peau : miel, tome 1*, Jung, Quadrants, Soleil, 2006.

Translation: What happened to all your comrades? Everyone I picked up from the street... Why were you sent to the West? We shouldn't have done that.  
Um. Don't worry about that. It's not your fault.  
They should have kept you all here. You are our children.  
You are our children.

plex relationship with his siblings and adoptive parents, whom he criticizes openly and quite strongly. At the same time, he shows empathy and understanding of the antagonist sides of both himself and his surroundings. He lets an adult voice and version of himself narrate, be in dialogue and accompany the child and teenager that is portrayed in the books. He raises questions about belonging and the hardships of navigating identity through school and puberty as an Asian man. He laments and mourns the Korean adoptees that he knew who struggled with mental health issues, some of whom committed suicide. Jung gradually describes adoption in the larger context of structures of class, politics, economy and welfare. He is voicing his concern for adoptees' lives as well as the families who were separated. By the end and conclusion of the books, he writes about his first trip back to South Korea and the search and longing for his Korean mother. The contains the paradoxical feeling of "coming home" but still being a stranger and the understanding of and reconciling with his child-self.

Jung's illustrations oscillate between childlike and cartoonish, to sketch-like and more realistic. The story of him as a child is expressed with (a child's) brazen attitude which leads to emotions involving shame and excitement. The graphic novel format allows the narrator to work with different levels of

explicitness in tandem. The illustrations can act naive and innocent and when paired with the written text the reader is asked to question the seemingly cute and mild appearance. Many of the events this character experiences are far from similar to my own, and yet the intimacy, care and understanding I get to feel for the characters in these books is considerable. The nakedness, rawness and honesty are key in Jung's work to make us experience the same feelings the main character does. Through this method, a kind of agency is expressed without being articulated in writing. The hardships of being an adoptee are understood through emotions shared with the reader. When they are connected with the sociopolitical context, the reader is introduced to the emotional aspects of adoption before the political, making it difficult not to be involved or participate.

### Palimpsest

Swedish Korean adoptee illustrator and activist Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom wrote a graphic novel<sup>54</sup> about the process of finding her Korean family. The title of the book, *Palimpsest*, refers to writing material (such as a parchment or tablet) where the original writing has been effaced and superimposed by a new text. Her illustrations and text bubbles are placed within rhythmical and balanced frames, and the outlines are slightly wavy and unevenly drawn with what looks like a thin ink pen, adding to the presence of the hand. The illustrations rest on a textured background which resembles old paper or parchment which adds to the connotation of documents, archives, files, history and past. Some illustrations have been merged with scanned adoption files, handwritten letters and signatures placing real people and "true" stories closer to the surface of the pages. Lisa, who has been advocating for adoptees' rights actively on social media for many years, criticizes several of the systematic errors and hardships that adoptees run into when seeking the truths in their adoption cases. She also reveals how illegal and corrupt practices by adoption agencies were not exceptions but systematized. Her book can be described as a detective story in search of both identity and legal justice.

In image 17, a conversation between Lisa and a former orphanage worker is shown. We learn that adoption agencies even had intake quotas from orphanages to meet the adoptive parents' requests. Her book is an example of a thoroughly organized autobiographical graphic novel which layers the personal, lived experience with documentary storytelling. It is a narratively technical book which shows the graphic novel's potential for journalism and research dissemination. In essence, Sjöblom's book presents inquiries to which the disclosure of her research process replies. This is where methods and sources such as adoption documents, files, media, archives and interview work are displayed.

These adoptees' work and narratives give examples to Stuart Hall's description of the signifying process of stereotyping and othering by talking about the consequences of not being able to pass as white. This is despite naturally

<sup>54</sup> Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom, *Palimpsest*. Stockholm: Galago, 2016.





Image 17: Left: Cover from graphic novel, *Palimpsest*. Right: Page from *Palimpsest*. Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom, Stockholm: Galago, 2016.

inhabiting required codes and cultural consensus from white milieus. They deal with the process of racial stereotyping which is in effect by reducing, essentializing, naturalizing and fixing differences from the white norm. The fixed and natural difference must be projected for the western world to feel an urgency to help out and adopt The Other's children, which can be considered a fetishism for the Other's babies where the "fascination or desire is both indulged and at the same time denied."<sup>55</sup> The paradox unfolds when the adopted children have been acquired; the adoptive parents and the adopted children try to eliminate the idea of difference in order to assimilate. The presence of the adoptee's first home, family, language and culture is made unimportant, a hegemonic erasure with good intentions.

Perhaps this is where the autobiographical format is of importance for adoptee artists. A chance to express the dismissal of being othered and at the same time the importance of heritage and in what non-fixated, non-stereotypical ways we can still talk about difference. It is this difference which the adoptees themselves can identify and formulate, through their own agency, in their own time. Just as Hall claims, simply reversing stereotypes is not necessarily to overturn or subvert them. Stereotypes can include observations we identify with and which even connote "positive" characteristics. Jung and Sjöblom demonstrate how racial stereotypes were present in their upbringing, shaped their self-view, how they were internalized and their effect. It is a pedagogic way to talk about and understand stereotypes in the sense of what they do to us, rather than talking about how they are good or bad.

I believe that the autobiography is a format fitting for stories embedded within ourselves which are connected to types of trauma, possessing an ability to offer therapeutical support. Working through oneself as both subject and archive, sharing this work with intimacy and care, can be both healing and a political intervention. Although these adoptee artists are working with different styles, media and expressions, the connecting thread is clear. We are demanding a more critical and nuanced look at international adoption by using ourselves as subjects in intimate and personal narration. Our images refer to real-life, true events which reveal social structures supporting corrupt and illegal adoptions and they all give witness to first-hand, lived experience of what it is like being a victim of those systems. Their work comprises acts of resistance to the widespread, uncritical and naive views of international adoption.

## Betweenship

But, home has proven to be both a place of confinement and an inexhaustible reservoir from which one can expand. And exile, despite its profound sadness, can be worked through as an experience of crossing boundaries and charting new ground in defiance of newly authorized or old canonical enclosures.<sup>56</sup>

- Minh-ha T. Trinh

Far from all Korean adoptees are interested in their Korean heritage. Nor do they agree with the critique of international adoption. Moving between identities is emotionally and physically burdensome for many. In the Scandinavian context, ethnic categories equivalent to the category of being Asian American, which is recognizing multiple cultural identities in one, are not properly established. Scandinavian adoptees have expressed a feeling of pressure to talk about themselves as either Korean or Swedish/Danish/Norwegian. To choose a side, a self. If adoptees fear being excluded from their culture when exploring their roots, the conditioning of identity becomes double. My Swedish identity can be granted to me, but it can also be taken away if I become too Korean again. The unpacking of one's origin could imply a risk, a loss, rather than an asset.

Jung, Sjöblom and Kaisen address the discrepancy between their races and their ethnicities in their work and indirectly point to the gap and absence of accepted hybrid identities in society. When I experienced their stories I understood the importance of making this uncharted space visible, a challenge well suited to the graphic novel's capability to put in view that which is invisible.

The state of being in between is not unique to transracial adoptees. In a time where the paradox is an increasingly globalised world and at the same time

<sup>55</sup> Stuart Hall, *Representation*, London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 1997, pg. 257.

<sup>56</sup> Minh-ha T. Trinh, *Elsewhere, Within here: immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, New York: Routledge, 2011, pg 34.

strengthened borders and walls being raised, a whole generation can recognise the feeling of existing between worlds.

In Swedish, the word *mellanförskap*, meaning betweenship, is a semantic play on the word *utanförskap* (exclusion), *utanför* (outside). It started appearing organically, occasionally in media and social media around 2009, used arbitrarily to describe immigration politics, social identification and cultural belonging by ethnicity. A small non-religious and politically independent organization called *Mellanförskapet* was formed in 2005 to establish a community where people with overlapping identities and experiences from *mellanförskap* could gather, define and formulate the understanding of living in-between cultures.<sup>57</sup> They consisted of a group of people who identified as Swedish but grew up with or in relation to a second ethnicity. They were multiracial race, adoptees or second-generation immigrants. The majority of them were people of colour, but not exclusively. Via their website, social media, lectures, workshops and seminars they tried to spread awareness of the term “betweenship” and for the word to be shared and recognized. The word *mellanförskap*, which is not very widespread and not recognized in the Swedish Academy dictionary, points to cultural belonging and not race specifically, and could potentially also be used to describe walking between social classes or other positions which exist in a type of frictional relationship.

What is unique to transracial adoptees, is the experience of being a person of colour and growing up with, most commonly, two white parents. Therefore adoptees’ betweenship can be described as both cultural and racial. East Asian adoptees are sometimes jokingly referring to each other as “bananas”. “Yellow on the outside and white on the inside”. Continuing to categorize identity in an “either-or” way reinforces the ideas of borders, containment, boundaries and binary. Homi K. Bhabha talks about hybrids to break ideas of binary opposition and an in-between space which becomes a ground for subverting colonial discourse.<sup>58</sup> However, even though adoptees are speaking about illegal adoptions as colonial practice, there needs to be a nuance of our position that can represent the emotional complexity and the fact that many of us are not comfortable identifying as being between colonizers and the colonized. In this way, our own parents, siblings and homes would be our colonizers, an allegation neither true nor false, but which requires a more sensitive and considerate juxtaposition.

Betweenship could borrow from the idea of Bhabha’s “Third Space” but for me, the purpose of speaking about betweenship instead of hybrids is what Trinh T. Minh-ha describes as “a mode of dwelling”<sup>59</sup>. That is the between of

homes and relations that are in friction, not necessarily opposition, that we wander back and forth from. Betweenship speaks to the desire to speak about belonging or home. The exiled will always be mourning their birthplace or perhaps their mother tongue. “Between” is a space of melancholy. However, identifying in-between is not without home; we have multiple homes, and those of us who were reunited with our first families may have parents on two sides of the globe. Because of our multiple ethnicities, multiple languages and transcultures, we can move here to there, in and out. But we are neither travellers nor tourists. Betweenship can also adapt and be a less politically charged space because it can accommodate adoptees who have chosen to or have not yet decided to be in a relationship with a second or more home.



Image 18: Illustration from graphic novel page 187. Watercolor and gouache on paper.

This watercolour is a portrait of me and my Korean mother in her living room. A viewer knowledgeable about Korean culture might recognize the Korean TV furniture and the fact that we are sitting on the floor as a way of placing the setting in a Korean environment. A viewer familiar with Scandinavian culture might recognize the white sweater as a hint to the iconic Swedish live-action version of the children’s book character Pippi Longstocking. The monitor in the background shows an image of a typical Swedish northern forest and becomes a window to look into a place that is elsewhere, not here. Two Asian people are sitting next to each other, together but not close; relaxed, but not comfortable. Their eyes wander and fail to properly meet. The carpet and the cloud-like stains are fluid and watery, an aesthetic and thematic reference to clouds in Japanese woodblock prints used as frames and negative space to create dreamlike and serene scenes to depict “the floating world”, a world of impermanence and beauty. I work with details and exactness to show that this is a scene and place existing in the real world but the added elements of fuzziness, skewed and obscure, make it fleeting. A place in between, but with the presence of various homes.

*Third Space* is a concept that describes a place where the meeting of cultures creates something new. A place that opposes binaries and opposites, but instead utilises how new identities can be formed. Third Space is not a fixed place but a dynamic and changing zone of reformulation and resistance, an in-between space freed from established structures.

57 Daphne Arbouz, ‘Vad betyder det att inte känna sig hemma där man är född och uppvuxen? Om mellanförskap i dagens Sverige’, in T. Hübinette, H. Hörnfeldt, F. Farahani and R. Ros (eds), *Om ras och vithet i det samtida Sverige*, Linköping: Linköping University Electronic Press, 2012, pg. 37–41.

58 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994.

59 Trinh, *Elsewhere, Within here: immigration, refugeeism and the boundary event*, 2011, pg. 33.



The reader is presented with signs of familiarity as an invitation. What language and memories do we share? Could it be the feeling of sitting on the heated Korean plastic carpets, with the smell of kimchi leaving the fridge? Or the soft creaky sound from the tall pine trees as they sway in the wind? Perhaps we even share that specific feeling of looking at your own mother, whom you longed for your whole life, but who sees you as an alien, a stranger. Asian on the outside. Swedish on the inside.

The graphic novel and the picture book are often celebrated as the ultimate formats where the multiplicity of illustration shows its true potential. Text and image combined in narrative strategies where they are dependent on each other. Both require their own type of literacy. Hillary L. Chute analyses the narrational methods in autobiographical graphic novels: "Through its hybrid and spatial form, comics lends itself to expressing stories, especially narratives of development, that present and underscore hybrid subjectivities."<sup>60</sup> The hybrid subject in my illustrations, like Jung, Sjöblom, and Kaisen, uses self-narration to layer positions and to move from private spaces, which become shared, toward political representation within the broader public discourse.

I mix expressions, styles and systems according to what needs to be narrated, and defy the idea of one coherent style. I can go between media, layouts and styles to emphasize certain voices or moods. The watercolour's lightness and overlapping, delicate shadows are put in contrast to illustrations made from ink pens, flat, simple and blunt. Semiotic systems from Scandinavian culture and Korean culture are fused to speak of the between. It creates a hybrid of not only the subject but also of its frames and its dress.

By using the graphic novel as a format and genre, I would like to stress the openness, versatility, importance and capacity of illustration by creating images which can be equally experienced as they can be read. Comic books are not considered to require elaborate and high-quality illustrations for the purpose of successful narration. Panels, gutters and negative space create meaning as well as the drawn character and their actions. Swedish graphic novels follow an aesthetic tradition with less colour, prominent linework and an emphasis on textual presence. A way of working where I did not feel at home. Where the panels were too small for colourful, layered, romantic and detailed illustrations. Silent images dressed in beauty are not without value, especially not when put in a context of hybrid visual voices. They add to my questioning of the historical hierarchies between writing and illustration, where illustration was labelled ornamental, superfluous and juvenile.

In my book, I want to let the images carry the weight of the storytelling. They are not dependent on the written text, which is intended as a support. I am interested in approaching the graphic novel from the maker's practical point of view, through analysis of style, aesthetics and craft. The autobiog-

raphy creates a timeline where transitions from the child to the adult and self-reflections are in conversation. By creating detailed and time consuming illustrations, I paint time onto the book spreads where the temporal life is embroidered and told. An attempt to make time into something tactile.

What values are found in methods and aesthetic registers when put in the context of art and illustration history? Echoing Chute's rejection of the conventional understanding of drawing as more fictional than the system of writing, my images often show that a snapshot of real life has been used as a reference to paint from. But my paintings are not photographs. The presence of the hand matters, the weaving of details and the manual layering of colour matters. The trace of the hand reveals the body's presence, while also exposing the materiality of the work. In my book, the writing is fictional, suggestive and interpretable, whilst the illustrations are connected to the real, exact, detailed and careful depiction of people, concepts and spaces.

The dual meaning of the title *There Is No Place Like Home* reflects the versatility and the melancholy of being in-between. For me, coming home is moving from another.

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60 Hillary L. Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2010, pg.5.



## *A day when everything fails...*

15/3

I have carefully painted the lines by hand in black ink with the smallest brushes on earth. The glasses were put on. The kitchen lamp was at full power.

That's a start. Now there is a page. Bodies with faces. Information without emotion. It looks pretty good without colour.

I scan the paper and spend hours polishing the digital file in Photoshop. Dust and pencil marks have to be removed, the light and whiteness have to be balanced. So much time is spent on work that is not visible. But we know that. That's the way it is.

I put the file on my iPad to try out a colour palette. It's the combination of colours that will make the image, I think. Korean colours should bring the image to life and tell the story.

I colour, mask off edges, colour again. But there is no life. The right colour, the right technique. The right image. It is there, somewhere in the air. But I can't find them. I don't have them.

A whole working day has been spent creating an unusable image. The digital file doesn't even look worked on. Like I've been tinkering with it for a few minutes. I try to think that I learnt something from the process. That even if it didn't yield any fruit, it was a lesson learned. I hate platitudes as much as I hate cassoulet. Tomorrow morning everything will change, I believe.

Do I have to wake up and deal with you? I want to be a child and procrastinate or give you up. But you have to be made. Just like all the other 196 images.

It's almost lunchtime and I've tried adding textures, changing the colours, reducing the opacity, but the digital looks digital, stiff and plastic. You can tell it's not my language, even though I want it to be. (You could save me time!) Why did I even choose to work in colour? There are so many decisions, but my head is empty.

If I write a reflective and intelligent meta-text about this process, I might get away with a bad illustration. It will show that I have produced something. But even in my text I sound like a child. Simple, short and stiff. Just like my picture. I thought I could write? There's a curse on me.

6/6

So much time has passed. Time that should say something about my work. I have existed in this for so long now that I no longer feel any satisfaction when I reach a milestone. I don't feel like I am moving forward. I know I'm making progress but the end is not in sight. Is this really useful to anyone? Anything?

22/8

Let's not talk about how much I doubt. How much I grunt, sigh, puff, snort at my own work. The more I learn, the more time passes, the more my hands and legs tremble. Everyone goes through this, I think. This is part of the process. It's normal. The important thing is that when it's all done, lift your chest, fix your gaze and erase the tremor. Lift the edge of the carpet, underneath is where all the doubt lies. Hide, conceal. Here there is only certainty and assertiveness! Let no one see all the anxiety.

## What's in the page

An illustration is not just an image. It is a solid work that has been planned, built, shaped, designed and developed with many years of craftsmanship. The illustration is often supported by an in-depth study of the theme, context and images such as photo references or perhaps colour palettes. It is a merging of the insightful, intellectual and the artistic, intuitive.

In the following section, all texts point to a page, a spread or an illustration in the graphic novel. The thumbnail gives a look back to the illustration and the number indicates the page of the graphic novel on which it appears.

## 1-2. Chapter images



The graphic novel has four chapters. Each dividing spread features illustrations with backgrounds taken from two older versions of Swedish passports, before the design was changed in 2022.

The passport pages were scanned, manipulated in Photoshop and then printed. Then I painted on the prints with both gouache and acrylic. The overpainted prints were then scanned and the final details were painted on digitally in Procreate.

## 6. Red reindeer



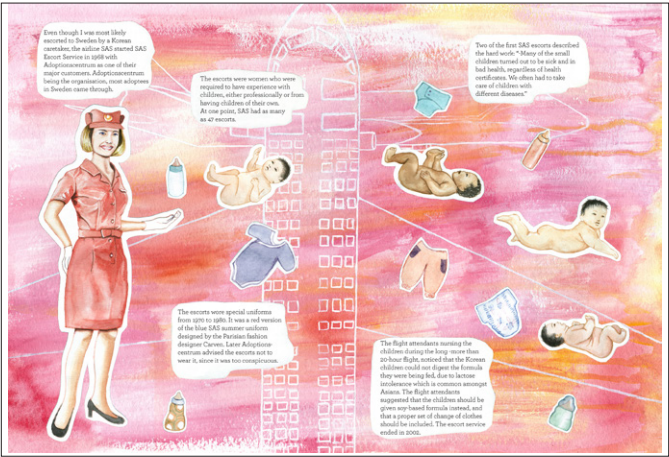
Image 19. Västerbottens coat of arms, my own illustration.

The provincial coats of arms were first used during the funeral procession of King Gustav Vasa in 1560. At that time, 24 young noblemen rode with a coat of arms designed for each province. There are no surviving designs, but there are descriptions of what they looked like. The provincial coats of arms

were later developed into county coats of arms in the 18th century but were not officially established until the 20th century. The motifs could vary quite freely, except that they related to a simple description of the coat of arms. The coat of arms of Västerbotten consists of a running reindeer in silver with red horns.

“In a blue field with 6-pointed stars of gold, a running reindeer of silver with red antlers.”<sup>61</sup>

11. SAS Escorts



Source reference for information on the escorts as mentioned in the graphic novel.<sup>62</sup>

61 Clara Nevéus and Vladimir A Sagerlund, *Våra landskapssymboler - Vapen, djur och blom-mor*, Lund: Historiska media, 2007.

62 Gunnel Höglind, *Dröm och verklighet: ett yrke i det blå*, Österbybruk: Allt om hobby, 2006.

17. The textile wall hanging



Textile wall hanging by my grandmother Inga Maria Nilsson. 1924-1998

Typeface: *Mina Stygn* by Ebba Hagne

In the everyday home, women have a place. Their place. She has been seen as confined, bound to rooms and activities that involve cleaning and cooking while men were in charge of the economy and navigating systems that set whole communities in motion. Countless still life paintings have told of women's ability to bring harmony, symmetry and calm to the domestic space in contrast to the chaotic, cosmopolitan vigour of men. Her universe was depicted as small and contained, filled with mundane and decorative objects that were unable to tell us anything about the world. Flowers, fruit, bowls, handicrafts. The depicted worlds of men, on the other hand, were limitless, grandiose and historical, and their objects, documents, maps, pipes and swords, were imbued with influence, lust and power.<sup>63</sup> Through this lens, or rather canvas, we glimpse rooms, homes and objects that have been carefully depicted. But the male painters have not told us about the home or the value of the home. They have told us about their view of women as limited and without capacity.

Norman Bryson describes how the home is made to be the woman's, with the man looking in:

The male artist peers into a zone that does not directly concern him. In a sense, its values are alien to the masculine agenda. And spatially it cannot be recognised from the inside. The result is often a production of the uncanny: although everything looks familiar, the scene conveys a certain strangeness and alienation, at its coldest in *trompe l'oeil*.<sup>64</sup>

What is the woman's own story of home, seen through her own eyes? Depicted without the framing created by men and male-dominated institutions?

63 Norman Bryson, *Still Life and Feminine Space from Looking at the Overlooked. Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 1990, pg. 160.

64 Bryson, 1990, pg. 170.



One of many responses to this is through craftivism, a term coined in 2003 by craftsperson and writer Betsy Green with a major focus on textile crafts. Craftivism is a practice that seeks to elevate political discourses through traditional female artistic expression and challenge the image of female craftsmanship as apolitical.<sup>65</sup> Textile art and textile crafts are regaining popularity and the status of textiles through the ages, as well as the role of women as artisans, is being widely discussed.

In this updated discourse we find wall hangings similar to my grandmother's, which have been given a feminist make-over. The rural wall hangings have had their messages replaced by statements or slogans such as “feminist as fuck”, “hell's bloody shit” or “crush the patriarchy”, a response to the woman's expected domestic skills in the form of a satirical and modernised textile hanging. The Swedish feminist comics scene has not least picked up craftivism as a way of working with embroidery and textile art in comics format.

Illustrator and cartoonist Lotta Sjöberg has worked with embroidery by questioning the idyllic folk home and the dream of the nuclear family. Her satirical embroidered images reuse the expectations of life and happiness of textile wall hangings but tear up the romance by embroidering protesting objections: “Hjälp till med disken för HELVETE” (*Help with the dishes for CHRIST'S SAKE.*) A humorous illumination of the patriarchal inequalities hidden under the surface of the ideal and calm.

These types of paraphrases contrast with neoliberal “carpe diem” and similar inspirational quotes about harmony, individualism, heteronormativity, and how to become a better, more effective version of oneself. The “feminine” here becomes instead a rebellion against rules and expectations of the cosy and proper.

Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre was described as a caged bird whose intelligence and emotional depth were far too lively and wide for the restrained and patriarchal bourgeois world in which she was set. There she was forced to embroider and manifest “female” knowledge as she gazed out of her window.

“I would always rather be happy than dignified.” – Jane Eyre

I suspect that this is the kind of embroidery and textile work that craftivism wants to satirise. Sympathising with Jane Eyre's disinterest in sitting with needle and thread, where embroidery is a measure or proof of a woman's refinement. But the neoliberal or bourgeoisie textile is essentially different from the peasant or working-class textile. “Seizing the day” does not have the same meaning for a peasant as it does for a patron. Their ideas of romance are expressed with completely different needs.

In my grandmother's and great-grandmother's working life, the world was

home. The day labour they did, husbands and wives together, was to have a home. Not to dream of leaving home, travelling, or seeing a bigger world.

One may think it is a small world. A small dream. Or perfectly reasonable given what their finances and backgrounds allowed.

My grandmother had a small farm, wove rag rugs from textile scraps, and sewed necessities for the home. She also used to embroider simple wall hangings using cross stitch with rhymes or sayings. So did her grandmother and mother. These wall hangings were not artisanal works by any means. The very idea of creating art or craft art was probably never the goal. They were objects that were meant to be decorative, cute and to give a little thought to the day.

Many of the sayings or short phrases were easily recognised. Like “Egen härd är guld värd” (Your own hearth is worth its weight in gold) I had seen in someone else's country home. Often the designs were copied from existing templates. Often the textiles were inherited from someone's mother or grandmother. Like an echo, they came back. Like mantras. They were relatively easy to sew, which meant that mother and grandmother could spend a “reasonable” amount of time embroidering after the day's work was over.

I want to believe that they took the time. That it was important. To have peace and quiet, to be able to work with their hands in a way that was not related to the day's work. That they could create something even though they were not craftsmen. They were not forced.

They didn't write, but they could express thoughts and feelings through a library of rural realities in short verse. That's why I always thought there was something unromantic, real and hard in the textile image that showed a simplified, cute farmhouse combined with the text “MITT HEM MIN LYCKA” (MY HOME MY HAPPINESS) embroidered in capital letters. Because that's how someone writes only if they dream of home and happiness. Who is in a precarious relationship with home and happiness. All these modest, shy embroideries spoke of a desire. Of deep longing. “Egen härd är guld värd” (One's own hearth is worth its weight in gold). “Ett vänligt ord i rättan tid det mäktar mycket i livets strid” (A kind word at the right time can do much in the battle of life). “Man ska inte sörja det man saknar utan glädjas åt det man har” (Do not mourn what you lack, but rejoice in what you have). “Lyssna till den granens susning vid vars rot ditt bo är fäst” (Listen to the whisper of the tree to whose root your nest is attached) “Små smulor är också bröd” (Small crumbs are also bread). “Litet bo jag sätta vill” (A little nest I will make).

Litet bo jag sätta vill.

The simple imagery on these wall hangings depicts flowers, houses, farms, nature, children, birds, the workhorse, the kitchen, the dining table. Both men and women are in the images. But above all, the woman is part of the narrative. As a voice. As creator. As a storyteller.

65 Anna Nordenstam and Margareta Wallin Victorin, *Comics craftivism: embroidery in contemporary Swedish feminist comics*, *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 13:2, 2022.



In contrast to how these wall hangings are often referred to, as simplistic, naive and gullible, I feel a deep presence of the woman's voice and an emotional depiction of reality in these soft images. Where care and kindness are sought, and humility and gratitude are the virtues rather than efficiency and growth, thus distancing themselves from neoliberal values. In these images, the home is not an elaborate scene that tries to show a surface of splendour but rather where the utopia – a simple warm house with a roof, food, flowers and family – is the goal. Where nature and humanity are close.

My grandmother's wall hanging says "ny dag, nytt hopp, ny glädje" (new day, new hope, new joy) framed by decorative roses and leaves. She has also embroidered a small red cottage with smoke coming out of the chimney. It is placed by a lake with green trees and the sun looking up over the waterline. It's a generic motif that can be filled in with yourself, your own landscape, your own nature. The smoke coming from the chimney says that you live there. That you are alive and that it is warm. The rising sun, bright yellow and radiant, reflects the message of hope.

I always thought there was something unsettling in this wall hanging. In a contemporary context, the words day, hope and joy can feel empty, watered down and meaningless. But the fact that my grandmother wrote *new* day, *new* hope, *new* joy always made me wonder. Why name the new day? What was yesterday like? What was the old hope? These short words, which looked to the future while saying something about the past, hinted at what was never achieved or realised. The day, the hope, the joy were in the future, not in the present or the past.

As farmers, security was in the fickle hands of nature. Good harvest, bad harvest, healthy animals, sick animals. Conditions could change overnight. For example, after an unexpected rainfall which rotted the hay. After a pandemic which infected the animals. An existence where hope and the desire to have luck and nature on your side were embedded in life.

It's likely that Grandma was working from an existing template when she embroidered the wall hanging, but her choice of text and motifs tells me something. It reflects her love of nature, her relationship with her home, which was simple but which she revered and was proud of. It tells of her hard work and that she took nothing for granted. Her wall hangings do not need to be edited to say something about the present, the past, the future or real life. The soft, fuzzy and simple stitches can tell us about the unromantic that longs for the romantic. Where longing and hope mark will and determination. Grandma's wall hanging is neither art nor skilful craftsmanship, but it tells the story of her life, the farmer's life and existence with the same empathy as art. It is melancholic, cute, beautiful and sorrowful all at the same time.

It now hangs on my wall,  
in my little nest.

### 37-38. Time:



As a visual and narrative art, [comics] produce meaning out of images which are in sequential relationship, and which co-exist with each other spatially, with or without text.<sup>66</sup>

A definition proposed by Ann Miller in *Comics and Narration*.

Comics and graphic novels whose illustrations are divided into panels and grids clearly show how time moves between panels. The panels can create a balanced rhythm and slow down or speed up the reading process. Comics with a grid and frame system direct and control the reader's eye across the page.

Picture books, comics and graphic novels that do not use the grid system also convey a sense of both time and narrative moving forward, although they cannot show stages of past time in the same level of detail. Space and time can be created by something as small as one image relating to another image.

In this graphic novel, there is no consistent system for how the image sequences convey the passage of time. Some pages feature only a single image, stretching the moment and requiring the reader to fill in what happens between the scenes. Other pages contain multiple illustrations that overlap or flow freely without frames or marked borders. Even without clear divisions, these images create a sense of sequentiality, forming a scene. On other pages, the illustrations are placed within more distinct panels or boxes, offering the reader a clearer path to follow across the page.

But in addition to showing time through the sequential, or through the narrative of the text, the narrator's (my) lifetime is also captured in the book by showing how the project has developed, progressed.

This illustration is a collage of a marbling and a drawing I made at the age

<sup>66</sup> Thierry Groensteen, *Comics and Narration*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013.

of four. The reader can look at this image and, knowing that it was made by the same illustrator but 33 years earlier, it becomes a document of time and a kind of proof that a life has been lived.

Similarly, the progression of craftsmanship is allowed to tell the story of time gone by in the project. The illustrations are created at different points in the project timeline. There are illustrations that have matured more and also illustrations that are more naive, simpler. The first part of the graphic novel takes place from the child's innocent perspective and I thought it was appropriate to use simpler, sloppier and more intuitive illustrations. Also illustrations that contained technical carelessness or that, in general, could have been refined in terms of quality.

The narrative voice also changes from the beginning to the end of the graphic novel. A curious, naive voice that asks many questions gradually gives way to a narrative that is more analysing and assertive, that dares to make more statements and that lives in a larger world.

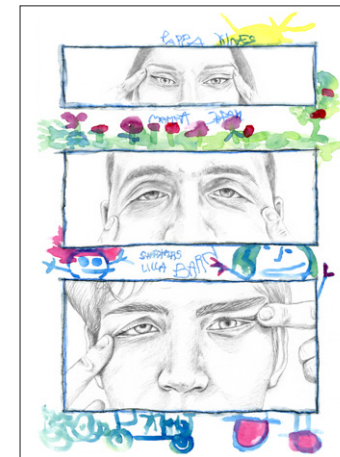
As most of the illustrations show nature, landscapes or flora, the changing seasons are also represented in the story. The shifting colour palettes bring temperature to emotions, food and environments.

Repetition is also a way to talk about time. In the graphic novel, certain images, themes and sentences recur or are repeated. When the child's nightmare about being abandoned by her family returns for the second time, we look back at the first dream and understand both all the more clearly as dreams.

The dragon as a symbol is found throughout the story in various forms and is an allegory for both myth and transformation. It follows us stealthily through the book like an acquaintance, but leaving behind a thread.

Only at the end of the graphic novel is it explained to the reader that what they have just read was an artistic research project. The self-referential and “meta” nature of this addition became the final shift or turn of the story.

## 42. Daddy chinese:



This is an illustration of the gestures that accompanied a type of rhyme which was popular in Sweden when I was a child. It goes: “Pappa kines, mamma japan, stackars lilla barn.” (Daddy chinese, mommy japanese, poor little child.)

## 45. The Doll Test

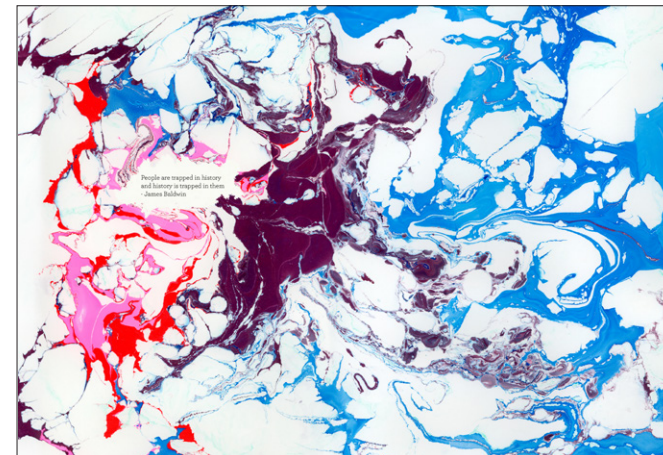


*The Doll Test* was a psychological experiment conducted in the 1940s by psychologists Dr Kenneth Clark and Dr Mamie Phipps Clark. The test was designed to study children's understanding of race and ethnicity. In the experiment, African-American children were asked to choose between two dolls that were identical except for skin colour and hair colour.

One doll was light-skinned with blonde hair and the other was brown with black hair. The children were asked to choose which doll they preferred, which doll looked “good” or “bad” and which one they thought looked like them.

The majority of children preferred the light-coloured doll and attributed more positive qualities to it than the brown one. The experiment showed that young children have internalised racial prejudices, and that African-American children who grew up in segregated schools had a more negative self-image than children who attended more diverse schools.

## 47-48. James Baldwin



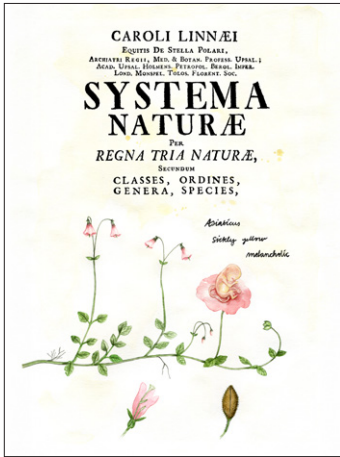
James Baldwin (1924-1987) was an American queer black writer who wrote some of the most important texts on racism and segregation in American literature. He wrote about love, relationships, longing, and compassion through a body of work that was as elegant and poetic as it was fierce, but always with integrity and intellectual depth.

It is impossible not to admire the way Baldwin writes. At times silky smooth, always honest and self-exposed but with a voice that is powerful and persistent. Reading Baldwin, it is easy to see how his emotionality, intellect and political commitment still inspire and call to action. Despite all the time that has passed between us, his writing feels more relevant today than ever. We are trapped in the cycles and repetitions of history and with each new era we must continue to stand up for democracy and equality, despite the wounds we carry, despite how tired we are.

Source reference to the Baldwin quote in the graphic novel.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>67</sup> James Baldwin, *Collected Essays: Notes of a Native Son / Nobody Knows My Name / The Fire Next Time / No Name in the Street / The Devil Finds Work*, New York: The Library of America, 1998, pg. 119.

51. Systema Naturae



Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) is known as the “father of modern taxonomy”, as one of the most influential natural scientists in history. He developed biological classification systems to categorise animals and plants, including humans. This formed the basis for the development of racial biology and attempts at scientific and hierarchical ways of categorising people.

In a later edition of Systema Naturae (1758), he names humans as the species *Homo sapiens* with five subgroups: *Homo americanus*, *Homo europaeus*, *Homo asiaticus*, *Homo afer*, *Homo monstrosus*.

*Homo asiaticus* is described as yellow, melancholic and greedy.<sup>68</sup>

In the illustration we see Carl Linnaeus' favourite flower, the Linnaeus, which is the landscape flower of Småland, although it is more common in northern Sweden. Next to Linnean, a large pink flower has given birth to a baby, or perhaps more a foetus. The handwritten text reads “Homo asiaticus, sickly yellow, melancholic”

When I made this illustration, I had school posters from the late 19th century in mind. Also botanical illustrations similar to those you can find in classic books such as *Bilder ur Nordens flora* (Images from the flora of the North; 1901-1905) with illustrations by Carl Lindman (1856-1928), which today are popular retro interior design motifs. I wanted to reference these botanical motifs, studies that are often beautiful, well-illustrated and apolitical to clash with the reminder of Sweden's dark history of state-funded racial biology and not least the Institute of Racial Biology. A heavy legacy that Sweden would like to hide.<sup>69</sup>

68 Jeff Werner and Thomas Björk, *Blond och blåögd : vithet, svenskhet och visuell kultur / Blond and blue-eyed : whiteness, Swedishness, and visual culture*, Göteborgs konstmuseum, 2014, pg. 70.

69 Tobias Svanelid "Rasbiologiska institutet 100 år", *Sveriges radio*, 11 May 2021, <https://www.sverigesradio.se/avsnitt/rasbiologiska-institutet-100-ar> [accessed 2025-03-06]

59-60. The Quiet



But the one dimension of the culture that profoundly struck me during my first year there was again the language of silence. In other words, silence not as opposed to language, but as a choice not to verbalize, a will not to say, a necessary interval in an interaction - in brief, as means of communication of its own.<sup>70</sup>  
–Minh-ha T. Trinh

*You are so quiet.* It was often pointed out to my young adult self. A well-meaning encouragement to take up more space.

But I never pointed out to anyone:

The amount of **space** you take. The level of **noise** you make. Why can't you think before you speak?

Even though I think many people would benefit from hearing this. The quiet has not been silenced. The quiet tells as well as anything else. Is it not rather that we are bad at listening?

70 Minh-ha T. Trinh, *Elsewhere, Within Here: Immigration, Refugeeism and the Boundary Event*, New York: Routledge, 2011, pg. 12.



## 66. Lena Furberg



Lena Furberg, creator of the comic strip character *Mulle*, is one of Sweden's most read cartoonists. Born in 1957 and living in Skåne, Lena grew up in Skellefteå and came from a creative and literary family. Her father worked in a bookshop and Lena was introduced to comic books early on, like *Donald Duck* and *Moomin*.

Her interest in horses began at the age of 10 when she accidentally started watching the 1961 French black-and-white TV series *Poly*, about a young boy who rescues a small circus pony. Lena was not interested in horses, but thanks to the TV series, she became hooked and started dreaming of owning her own horse.<sup>71</sup> She went to riding school, started drawing horses and read horse magazines, even though they were few and far between. Lena originally wanted to be a writer or artist and had been drawing all her life, but she started her lifelong career as a cartoonist by chance.

In 1972, when she was 15 years old, the magazine *Ponnybilderna* had a lottery where the prize was a horse poster. She sent in a postcard with her name on it and won, but the poster never arrived. Lena then wrote an angry letter to the magazine's editors asking for her promised prize. In the margins of the letter, she had illustrated caricatures of horses bucking, kicking and grimacing. Some time later, Lena received a call from Stockholm from the magazine's editor Erik Norlander. He asked if Lena was interested in drawing horse comics for the magazine, based on one of the horse characters in Lena's letter. It was a paid job. Lena, who had never been south of Umeå, who had never drawn a comic strip in her life, said yes and Erik Norlander wrote a script for her to illustrate.

At first she called the horse character Munter och Blixten, but the editors renamed the horse *Mulle*. She battled and struggled with the cartooning. Suddenly, the undemanding and pleasurable drawing involved responsibility and commitment. Lena remembers the hard work:

<sup>71</sup> Jimmy Wallin, "Avsnitt 6: Lena Furberg om sin långa karriär som serietecknare (hästen *Mulle*)", *Bakom Rutorna*, 28 August 2023, podcast.

But it was NOT fun. Suddenly, at the age of 15, I had to make complicated comics which had previously been carefree doodles. I struggled and toiled, drawing the comic strips one by one instead of as a full page, which I couldn't do. I was criticised and had to redraw and it wasn't fun at all. I think I cried a bit too. But I got paid a little, and thought that if I worked hard, it might be enough to buy a horse...!<sup>72</sup>

Lena continued to dream about horses and took on some horse jobs that didn't work out for her. She applied for an artistic high school programme but was not accepted and ended up dropping out of the social sciences programme.

The magazine *Ponnybilderna* was closed down after two years and Lena tried to get *Mulle* to join the magazine *Vi i Sadeln*, which turned her down as they considered *Mulle* to be too "grotesque".<sup>73</sup> Eventually, *Mulle* ended up at the children's and youth magazine *Min Häst* where he is still published and continues to live.

In Malmö, *Mulle* is immortalised in a mosaic tile on Friisgatan outside Möllevångsskolan. The artwork was created by Björn Carnemalm and was part of a municipal project that worked to establish Malmö as a comics city. As part of the project, several mosaic tiles celebrating famous cartoon characters have been placed around the city, a project carried out by the non-profit association BID Malmö, Boende, Integration och Dialog.

Although Lena is best known for her humorous portrayal of the cartoonish horse *Mulle*, she also created more realistic comics and sequels for the magazine *Min Häst*. These included the popular series *Stallgänget på Tuva* (The stable gang at Tuva), which was based on the stable where Lena grew up and all the events depicted were stories based on real events.

Lena does not colour her comics herself. She works completely analogue and does everything by hand. She draws on Canson the Wall paper with steel pen and ink. Her husband fills in all the black fields, scans her images and processes them in Photoshop. In addition to the comics for *Min Häst*, Lena paints in watercolour and writes books for young adults about the characters who were born in comic form.

Lena has said that she does not want to write or make comics for adults.<sup>74</sup>

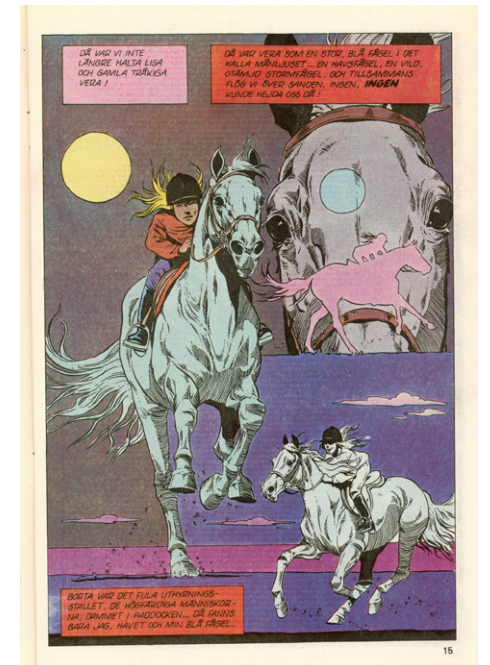


Image 20. from the comic *Min blå fågel*, *Min Häst*, nr 24, 1992

<sup>72</sup> Hästnet, *Författarintervju Lena Furberg*, 23 November 2023, <https://www.hastnet.se/artiklar/forfattarintervju-lena-furberg-131.html> [accessed 2024-09-26].

<sup>73</sup> Wallin, Furberg, *Bakom Rutorna*.

<sup>74</sup> UR Samtiden. Bokmässan 2016, *Hästboken som samtidsdokument*, Uppsala universitetsbibliotek, 9 August 2018, YouTube video.

## Dear Lena Furberg?

Like you, I have been drawing and painting all my life. Now I am also doing work that involves reflecting on where all these images come from, and how my very first images were born from other people's images, as it has been for all artists, I would like to think.

My older sister was subscribed to *Min Häst* for many, many years. The oldest issue I can find is from 1989. I was born in 1987. Your illustrations were there from the very beginning, along with Elsa Beskow, Sven Nordqvist and Lena Anderson's images.

In an interview with you by Jimmy Wallin, you described how meeting the TV horse *Poly* changed your life. The love for horses was born there and then. I've always loved horses, but I don't know what came first. The encounter with the animal or the encounter with your illustrations of the animal. Either way, your illustrations were a way to be with, and look at horses in the absence of the real thing.

At this early age I wasn't that interested in being a rider, that came later. But who can resist the sensitivity and beauty of horses, whether they are in your proximity or not. In your careful depictions of horses, I understood exactly how they moved. How they carried their tails and how their manes lay. That the legs were nimble but exposed and that the ears and nostrils spoke of readiness and focus. On your comic pages, the panels are large to give the animal space. So that you can really see the horses. Before I had the opportunity to get to know real horses, I knew them through your illustrations, and they were so real and alive.

I started riding sometime around school age, and that's when you start to realise how vast the horse world really is. Being with horses is as much about mucking out poo and polishing leather as it is about brushing the soft fur and riding out into the countryside. Your pictures and stories captured this too. The romantic and the unromantic. The detail and accuracy required to depict horses and equine equipment was so impressive and compelling. Nothing else, of course, would have been accepted by the readers, horse experts of different kinds.

Your stories often depicted a horse world that was familiar. *Stallgänget på Tuva* was based on an unpretentious stable in Skellefteå. Retired trotters and North Swedish draught horses, beautiful and fantastic despite being far from the revelation of dressage-competing, high-class Warm-bloods. Perhaps it is both our roots in the north that have made us interested in a realistic and varied picture of horse Sweden. One that is not automatically about middle-class riders on expensive and trained horses. Maybe that's why I could also dream about horses, because you also depicted the humble horse world.

I must admit that *Mulle* was never a favourite. His exaggerated, thick body and irritating temperament was perhaps too similar to the ignoble Shetland pony I learned to ride on. Fuxe was his name. Fux = chestnut. Buff as a cow, with a habit of biting both adults and children until they cried. I was most in love with your stand-alone series set both in fantasy land and on 'home turf' and I read them a million times over. I drew your magical pictures all the way through high school and that's how I learnt to draw horses, storytelling and comics. I don't think I would have drawn and painted as much if it wasn't for your illustrations.

In the interview you mentioned that you have never exhibited your illustrations which I think is terrible. It's a shame that readers have never had the chance to meet your originals and watercolours. I rarely hear you mentioned in contemporary comics contexts and I miss your name when influential Swedish illustrators are referenced. I wonder if it has to do with the fact that you create images that are popular among children, young people, girls and women. Groups whose culture has historically been ascribed a lower status.

Equestrian sports in Sweden is practised by about half a million people. Among women in Sweden, equestrian sport is the third largest sport and the second largest youth sport in the country.<sup>75</sup> I wonder how many of these people do not know about *Mulle*. Probably very few. You are such an influential, important, invaluable and permanent part of equestrian Sweden and comics Sweden, and your pictures and stories have touched so many through several generations. Those of us who dreamt about horses, who drew and painted and have continued to draw, paint. We carry your images with us, and for my own part I can clearly see how your horses gallop out through my own drawn horses.

Yesterday I arrived at my childhood home outside Umeå and in the far back of my old room there is a chest of drawers with all the old *Min Häst* magazines saved, organised in purple *Mulle* folders. A few single issues, but in general full folders mainly between the years 1991-1994. Here is my childhood but also a part of my adult self who still loves horses and who feels a tingle in my stomach when I see your illustrations. Images that are over 30 years old and still have the ability to captivate, enchant and create a link to that beloved animal.

Thank you for all the inspiration, for all the dreams, for your tirelessness, for your knowledge, for your craft and for all the eternal magic.

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<sup>75</sup> Svenska Ridsportförbundet, *Statistik*, <https://ridsport.se/om-oss/statistik> [accessed 2024-09-26].

## 70. Step into the system



This page introduces a short section of the graphic novel that deals with aesthetics and systems. The first image at the top left is unframed and displaces the frame of the next image. The person sitting on the chair has the pattern covering her upper body cut away with large hedge clippers. Next to her, a person is bent over and in the middle of putting a green garland into a trash can. The garland returns as an ornamental frame, later on page 77, when I introduce my parents' work.

In the illustration, the person is being washed and the colours disappear panel by panel, shadows and details are reduced and the black becomes more pronounced. The person is invited into a grid system that becomes prominent on the following page. On pages 70-75, I tried to work with the shape and layout that I felt least comfortable with. I tried to use a lot of black, simplified the illustrations, worked with small frames and fitted text into boxes and bubbles. It felt cramped, difficult and uncomfortable.

On page 76, the imagery returns to my "usual" expression. Two hands tear open a black grid pattern to reveal a romantic, flower-crowned figure whose eyes are covered with a strip of Asian eyes. Beautiful but queer, deviant, she undoes the canvas where the opening is shaped like an eye, or a vagina. Freed from the blackness and the grid systems.

## 72. Swiss design



Here I worked with graphic designer Rui Ribeiro to give the page a more pronounced, designed character, focussing on typography and the placement of elements. It was a continuation of the theme of frameworks, systems and structures, based on the grid principles of Swiss modernist design.

I started from a modular, square structure that made the illustrated picture elements appear enclosed and controlled. At the same time, generous white spaces were left – a reference to modernism and minimalism's emphasis on emptiness, balance and restraint.

We played on the rigidity of the grid and tried to create a visually strict, almost mathematical and authoritarian form, deliberately emotionless. Rui chose the classic typeface Helvetica, a sans-serif often associated with readability and neutrality. He emphasised certain sentences by scaling up the font size and creating contrast, resulting in dominant text elements and a hierarchy of information.

We emulated the "objective", functional design philosophy that dismisses illustrations and decorative elements as unnecessary and non-functional.

All this was in clear contrast to my own way of creating images, and to my values about content and expression, but the aim was to explore other, to me unfamiliar, ways of structuring image and text.



## 73. Hierarchies



On this page, I placed an inverted triangle to show the hierarchies and values that exist in art according to some famous philosophers, art historians and writers. Portraits of William Wordsworth, Immanuel Kant, Joshua Reynolds and an image by Leonardo da Vinci. At the base of the triangle we find fine art, literature, linked to masculinity. At its tip we find illustration, linked to the childish and beautiful.

At the top of the image is an illustration of me at high school age, sitting in front of a bookshelf. The reference image I used was taken in my high school classroom, while I was deep in thought. Questions about art and images are formulated in speech bubbles. “Why have there been no great women artists?” is a reference to Linda Nochlin’s famous 1971 essay in which she asks the sarcastic question. In her essay, she responds by saying that the question is misguided and that it fails to understand the systems, historical conditions and definitions that have excluded women from the art canon.<sup>76</sup>

Initially, I had placed quotes by both Wordsworth and Reynolds in the triangle reflecting their ideas about image and/or text. The quote by Wordsworth is already discussed on page 20 of the Companion and was too long and complex to include in the graphic novel illustration. The following quote by Reynolds was therefore also difficult to fit in and weighed down the page:

If deceiving the eye were only business of the art, there is no doubt, indeed, but the minute painter would be more apt to succeed: but it is not the eye, it is the mind, which the painter of genius desires to address; nor will he waste a moment upon these smaller objects which only serve to catch the sense, to divide the attention, and to counteract his great design of speaking to the heart.<sup>77</sup> – Joshua Reynolds

<sup>76</sup> Linda Nochlin, *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*, ARTnews, 1971.

<sup>77</sup> Joshua Reynolds, *Seven Discourses on Art*, Book Jungle, 1769, pg. 34.

In it, Reynolds urges the talented painter to create works that appeal to the mind through their grandeur, nobleness, and not get caught up in painting small details that only imitate reality.

Immanuel Kant, philosopher, (1724-1804) presented his thoughts on aesthetics and beauty in his text *Critique of Judgment*, 1790. He argued that beauty was a subjective experience but could be formulated in terms of universal values and that true art was created without purpose, “*zweckmäßigkeit ohne zweck*”, “purposiveness without purpose”, without practical utility, in freedom, a product of genius. His ideas of truths valued systems that were considered greater than subjective opinions e.g. the mathematical, the rational.

Clement Greenberg used Kant’s theories to articulate the nature of modernism where purity, truth and form were paramount, while emotion, narrative and the subjective were not considered sufficiently self-critical.

Leonardo da Vinci’s (1452-1519) iconic drawing *The Vitruvian Man* has been widely used in popular culture to show the fusion of engineering, maths and art. The image is also associated with the Golden Ratio, a mathematical system of perfect harmonious proportions, identified in so-called “masterpieces”.

Through their own formulations, or through the interpretations of others, these men have set the tone for the Western world’s view of taste, aesthetics and art. Often it was through the formulation of systems that overlooked the illustrative and decorative, that masculinised the grand, intelligent and universal.

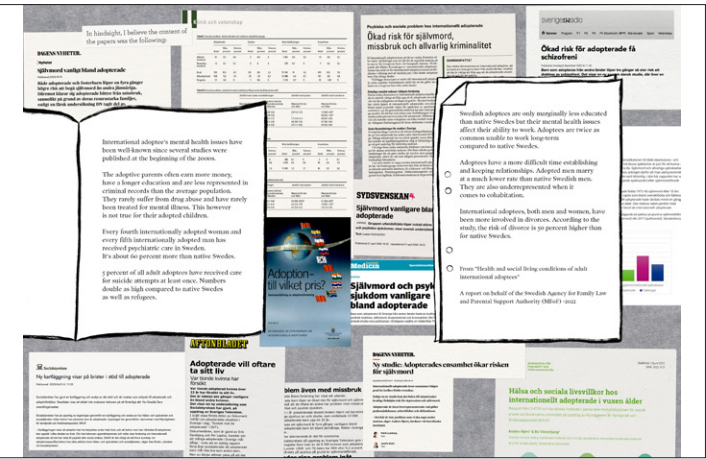
In my illustration, my high school self is surrounded by these men, but I have placed myself at the top of the page. I am now and they are the past. I was asking big, philosophical questions which I did not know the answers to, just as I think you do when you encounter these men in primary school education.

## 77-78. Digital sketch to finished illustration





87-88. Adoption – mental health issues, sources



Source reference to information and reports on mental health issues of adoptees.<sup>78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87</sup>

108. Den blomstertid nu kommer



Swedish hymn from 1695 that was traditionally sung at school graduations before the summer holidays.

Verse 1 of 6.

Translated to English:

Den blomstertid nu kommer  
med lust och fågning stor.  
Du nalkas, ljuva sommar,  
då gräs och gröda gror.

The time of blossom now approaches  
With lust and great beauty.  
You are on the eve, lovely summer,  
When grass and crops grow.

Med blid och livlig värma  
till allt som varit dött,  
sig solens strålar närma,  
och allt blir återfött.

With gentle and eager warmth  
To all that's been dead,  
The rays of the sun approaches,  
And everything is reborn.

78 Kerstin Nilsson, "Adopterade vill oftare ta sitt liv", *Aftonbladet*. 8 March 2011.  
79 Lasse Holmström, "Självmoder vanligare bland adopterade", *Sydsvenskan*, 13 January 2002.  
80 Sten Erik Jensen, "Självmoder och psykisk sjukdom vanligare bland adopterade", *Dagens Medicin*, 8 September 2002.  
81 Patrik Lundberg, Josefin Sköld, "Ny studie: Adopterades ensamhet ökar risken för självmord", *Dagens Nyheter*, 13 June 2022.  
82 Anders Hjern, Bo Vinnerljung, "Hälsa och sociala livsvillkor hos internationellt adopterade i vuxen ålder", Rapport från CHESS och Karolinska Institutet i samarbete med institutionen för socialt arbete vid Stockholms universitet på uppdrag av Myndigheten för familjerätt och föräldraskapsstöd (MFoF), 2022.  
83 Jens Ericson, "Ökad risk för adopterade få schizofreni", *Sveriges Radio*. 6 December 2007.  
84 SOU 2003:49. *Adoption - till vilket pris?* Stockholm: Socialdepartementet, published 2003-06-01, updated 2015-04-02.  
85 Peter Letmark, "Självmoder vanligt bland adopterade". *Dagens Nyheter*. 15 October 2003.  
86 Frank Lindblad, Anders Hjern, Bo Vinnerljung. "Psykiska och sociala problem hos internationellt adopterade. Ökad risk för självmord, missbruk och allvarlig kriminalitet", *Läkartidningen*. Nr 9. Volym 100. 2003.  
87 Ny kartläggning visar på brister i stöd till adopterade. *Socialstyrelsen*. 1 April 2022. <https://www.socialstyrelsen.se/om-socialstyrelsen/pressrum/press/ny-kartlaggning-visar-pa-brister-i-stod-till-adopterade/> [accessed 2024-04-24].

## 109. The hero gets dressed



Image 22. Photo reference for the illustration.

On pages 102 to 109, I wanted to illustrate a more filmic sequence where movement and perspective were important. On almost all of these pages, I used photo references to ensure that the movement was correct and the reference to film or moving images was clearer. On page 106, the entire page is covered by a photograph, an image of the dress I illustrated, to emphasise how the images, illustrations and photographs are taken from reality, reproduced, but that the objects and people are real.

The sequence begins with the person, me, leaning over the edge of the bathtub to be standing up and implicitly stepping out of the tub. Depictions of stairs and steps symbolise upward or downward movement but also effort. Full body, then close-up of feet stepping, walking, then “zoomed out”, lots of air. In the illustration the person walks up the steps which seem to be endless, the room has expanded. On page 104, a bird's eye view is introduced where we see the stairs from the top, which then form a long spiral with no view of the bottom. The spiral symbolises the infinite but also progress, time, travel, flow, transformation. In this illustration the person is holding a red object which in the next image becomes clear is a red dress. On the following page we see the person putting on the dress, buttoning buttons and adjusting her hair.

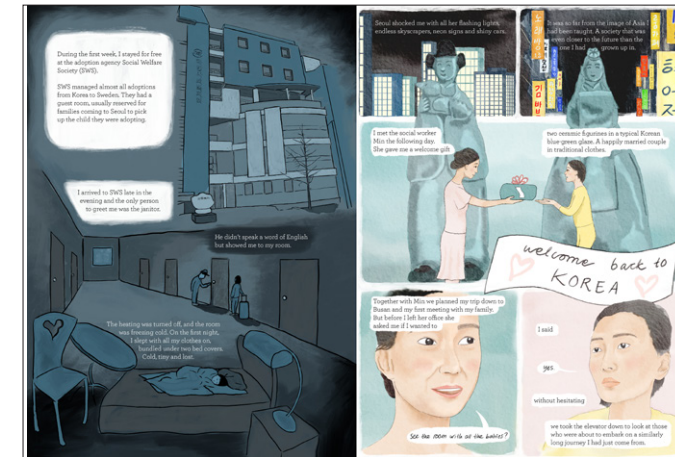
Trope: a twist on a word and its meaning but in everyday speech something that points to a recurring theme, concept or storytelling technique.

In the world of film, there is a recurring trope, showing the hero, or the film's protagonist getting dressed for the big battle, challenge or mission, often preceded by a defeat or failure. The hero gathers strength and focuses as they put on their armour or costume. New tools or clothes that show how the protagonist has “leveled up”, gained new knowledge or experience and can face the struggle with a new outlook.

In my images, the “scene” ends with a prolonged illustration in which the student's cap is picked up and finally placed firmly on the head, the “crown”. The person is looking straight into your eyes, ready for what is to come, just as we recognise the pose of the film hero, whether they are holding Thor's ham-

mer or have pulled the mask over their face. In this case, created with a little humour, it is the student cap that is the weapon/tool. An undramatic object in a dramatic scene but which tells us that the achievement was to finish high school, to graduate and dare to come out on the other side. Wanting to live, wanting to move on, ready for new battles.

## 123-124 “Good enough”



These are two illustrations that have been fully painted and coloured digitally, on an iPad in Procreate. Over the course of the project I moved a lot between Photoshop and Procreate, mainly to add small details or textures, hand-textured elements or touches to the image. Procreate is a user-friendly and popular programme for creating digital illustrations, but my limited experience meant that I had never really dared using it to paint a full image. Alongside the project, I experimented a bit with using Procreate for the full image creation process, but found that the resulting illustrations worked better in a more quick and casual context such as Instagram.

In the majority of illustrations, I have tried to paint and draw completely analogue. This is because this project celebrates and values materials, craftsmanship and time. By this I do not mean that digital illustrations cannot show and represent time-consuming craftsmanship, but that my images, in my limited experience of digital painting, cannot reach the level of workmanship that I would have liked.

On this page, however, there is an attempt to work entirely digitally. I had a thought that it might save me some time if I tried a slightly simpler and faster approach. The advantage of creating fully digital illustrations is that it is easy to adjust them against text boxes or similar. You can edit the image and change the colour, so it's less sensitive to changes or corrections that may come afterwards.

The idea was good but the execution was extremely bitter. I spent an unreasonable amount of time on these two pages. Once I had reached the limit of “a lot of time” and still wasn't satisfied with the result, it was just as well to



keep going as the other option was to start an analogue image from scratch.

For my part, I suspect that what is distracting about digital drawing and painting tools is that they allow you to tweak, adjust and zoom to infinity. In the end, I had spent hours on details that were not even visible!

For the longest time, these images were marked to be redone. But in the end, I chose to keep them in the graphic novel to show how a work process is exploratory, where some results are not perfect, or as intended.

It is uncomfortable to show images you are not happy with but this project would not be human if there were no “good enoughs”. I’m trying to get better at accepting good enough and at the same time trying to get better at my tools. When it comes to digital painting I still have a lot to work on.

129. Without a common language



Bubble 1, Swedish: Ah. Where do you want me to put this?  
Bubble 2, English: Where do you want this?  
Bubble 3, Korean: Yes, what?  
Bubble 4, left, Korean: My feet feel a bit numb. I can't wait to have a nice bath. Did everything work out with father and the car? Hye Mi should see the countryside...  
Bubble 5, right, Korean: It was fine. On Thursday I can go buy more milk and diapers. Do you have enough blankets? The green blanket is too big now, isn't it? I must remember to get more gosari, I can't believe we've already run out.

In the graphic novel *In Limbo* by Deb JJ Lee, the illustrator depicts the Korean-American between-ship through her autobiographical story of teenage life, family relationships and mental illness. The comic is written in English, but *hangul*, the Korean writing system, is frequently used, neither translated nor romanised. The written Korean does not represent any crucial information in the sense that the overall narrative cannot be understood but the Korean words and expressions are also not included as an embellishment, they still carry meaning important to the characters' conversation.

In particular, it is possible to see how the Korean language in Lee's graphic novel represents speech in an American-Korean family where English alternates with short Korean words or expressions. Many Korean names are written in hangul, but even words like “honey”, “darling”, “teacher”, “hello” are written only in hangul. When Lee talks to her grandmother on the phone, most of the dialogue is in Korean.

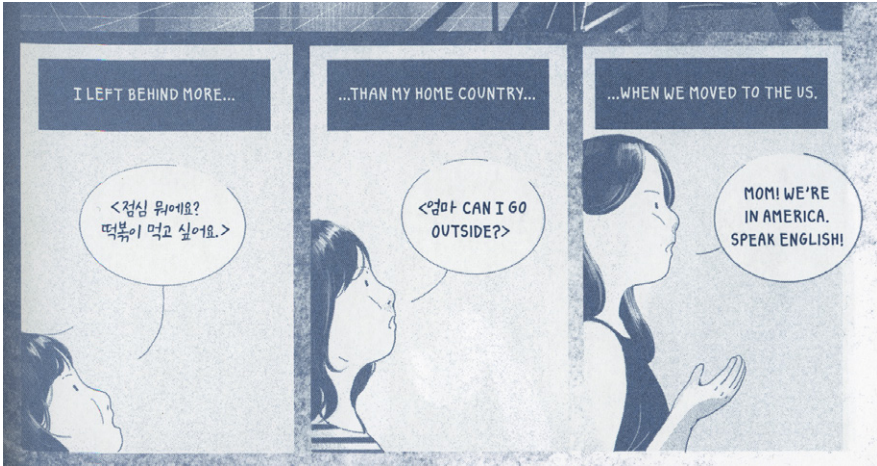


Image 23. Panels from *In Limbo* by Deb JJ Lee, Roaring Brook Press, 2023, pg. 93

In feature films, scenes like this are common in depictions of between-ship. It clearly shows how spoken language, can represent cultural identities and belonging. But in the world of film, a spoken language we do not understand becomes only a sound, and the other visual information and context fill in the rest. In a graphic novel, a written language we do not understand becomes more pronounced as a knowledge gap. The language that is not understood has a permanent place on the image surface.

Those readers who can read and understand hangul, of course, get the whole message. Both in terms of meaning, and how the sentence sounds, even though it may happen silently in our heads.

As a Korean reader, I feel a sense of belonging with the images that are partly written in Korean. Lee has written something that not everyone can read. But I can read it. We share something. A language that she has chosen to give space to.

In my own illustration there are three languages. Swedish, English and Korean. The scene depicts a time when I couldn't understand Korean and wanted the unknowing to be in the image. Therefore, the Korean language through hangul was given a lot of space and appeared to be a longer piece. For those who cannot read Korean, it becomes obvious how what is being communicated is not accessible and is placed offstage. In this way, I hoped the frustration and alienation could be conveyed in the image through the interplay of languages.



## 138. ANGER



Anger is my most difficult feeling. The feeling that I have learnt to suppress throughout my life. It is also my most powerful emotion. What am I most like? Happy? Scared? Sad? Curious? I am mostly angry.

Not so angry as a child, but angry as a teenager and terribly angry as an adult. All the tears I cried that I thought were sadness were actually anger. Anger. Disgust. Hatred.

Anger is not without function. We get angry in order to set boundaries. To protect ourselves. The body says no by setting you on fire. The flame's power is explosive – it both gives and drains all strength and energy. But if you were burning, at least you were listening to yourself.

I burn inside but the flames never flare up. It is not expected of those who are quiet and gentle. It is not appreciated in the low-key Swedish environment. If you are the one who is not expected to get angry and you get angry and start burning, you can be punished extra hard. It happens sometimes. Surprised and disappointed faces have met my eyes after the fire has gone out.

I take responsibility for my anger, for the sake of others, but I shit on my own needs. I'm so good at putting the lid on, and I see so many women with the same lid. It's like a hat that has become so ordinary that it's an accessory.

“But you don't seem so angry? What are you angry about?” What a bloody stupid question. What is there not to be angry about? What is there not to be horrified about? Where can I be a PoC woman without getting angry? Where are we free from the idiocy, or even evil, of the world?

A load of bollocks. I can say it in two ways. With a resigned, slack tone. I lie down. I feel nothing. I give up. Or I say it with anger, with flames erupting or not. I am angry because I protest. I refuse. I will not accept any of this shit, stupidity or evil. Why should we? How can we?

When the twig bends and breaks, it makes a short, sharp sound. At the breaking point, something fragile and sharp is revealed in its temporary exposure. The twig gave way to all the pressure.

She raises her voice and pushes away.

It is a fantasy that I allow the twig to break when I meet people. It doesn't happen. But in my own world of images, a furious “snap” has flashed. Unexpectedly inserted, it breaks off the tidy, reasonable, gentle and sane. It's an ugly and messy image that has been given no tenderness. But it is angry and true.

But perhaps snappiness might be required to right a wrong when a wrong requires we bear it; that we take it, or that we take more of it.<sup>88</sup> – Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*

## She is Angry

Danish Korean adoptee and writer Maja Lee Langvad published her book *Hun er Vred* (She is Angry) in 2015. A poetic and furious charge at international adoption as an industry, and a spiteful matra-like testimony of what it is to be an adoptee. Maja Lee discloses the ties of adoption by braiding emotions, facts, lived everyday experiences and socio-political observations. All it has done to her, and how the system of adoption was supported by patriarchal societies, colonialism, racism and capitalism.

SHE IS ANGRY about being an import.

She is angry about being an export.

She is angry that adoption agencies in sending as well as receiving countries make money off transnational adoption.

She is angry to read in an essay in *Outsiders Within — Writing on Transnational Adoption* that South Korea earns more than 15 million dollars annually on mediation for transnational adoption of children.<sup>89</sup> – Maja Lee Langvad

The repetition, mantra, or charge created by Langvad's structure makes it impossible to ward off her anger. Like hail, it lashes out – concisely, firmly, and unwaveringly.

My illustration is dense, and the page is crowded with opinions. There is no room for anyone else. It speaks out and shows that I, too, am constantly exhausted, forced to endure the persistent, creeping pressure that consists,

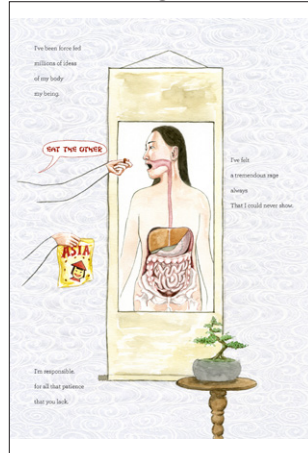
<sup>88</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2017, pg. 190.

<sup>89</sup> Maja Lee Langvad, *Hon är arg*, Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag, 2016, pg. 13. Quote translated from Danish to English by Katrine Øgaard Jensen.

not least, of constant sexism and racism. What Sara Ahmed, the British-Australian academic and writer, calls a “snap” is not an expression of weakness but, on the contrary, an expression of incredible endurance and empathy with those who are driven to the breaking point and let their snap lash back.

The illustration was created on 6 November 2024, the day it was announced that Donald Trump had been re-elected President of the United States. Despite its visual flatness, it was created on a precipice of despair and frustration. I am not asking for your understanding – I am demanding it.

### 139. Eating the Other:



*Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance* is an influential essay, written by author bell hooks in 1992, which examines how the image of race, and the idea of difference between cultures, is commodified and fetishised. “The Other” is the stereotypical antithesis of the norm and the majority that can be consumed for pleasure or enjoyment. As a trend, novelty or “spice” to the established, ordinary. In order for the Other to be consumed, it must be made different and given attributes that distinguish it from the norm. These attributes then form the basis of desires that demand what is different, exotic and exciting, often through an alleged intention of diversity and inclusion. In order to emphasise a desirable and appealing difference, cultural appropriation becomes a method of liberally using desirable attributes and rejecting others. Loose symbols, images or practices are extracted but tradition and context are left behind. The Other becomes an object that pleases with her difference and various “flavours”.

### Kinapuffarna

My illustration refers to the candy *Kinapuffarna* and the debate that arose. In the autumn of 2011, journalist and Korean adoptee Patrik Lundberg wrote a chronicle in Helsingborgs Dagblad about his experience of everyday racism. The chronicle mentioned Fazer's candy bag as an example of derogatory images and ideas about Asian men that he encountered on a daily basis. Fazer's bag of sweets was illustrated at the time with a racist stereotype, a yellow man with slanted eyes and a conical hat. In other words, a typical racist image

of Asians. A short time later, Fazer announced that they were removing the stereotype image but leaving the name China in the stereotypical font and the yellow background colour. Lundberg's chronicle of everyday racism shifted into a heated debate about identity politics and ill-informed statements about which images count as racist and which do not. Many argued that Fazer's stereotype image was not racist at all.

The illustration of the yellow person with slanted eyes is not designed as it is by chance. The red colour and yellow tint were once carefully chosen and the illustration of the person is clearly linked to racist images of Asians that have roots dating back to the 19th century.

This image is stylised in a way to appear cute and happy, but it is still linked to racist depictions of Asians. The yellow colour comes from taxonomy. South Asians were first linked to the colour yellow in 1684 in the publication *New Division of the Earth, According to the Different Species or Races of Man that Inhabit it, sent by a Famous Voyager*<sup>90</sup>. Asians continued to be described as “sickly yellow” when ideas of human races were established in the 18th century. The slanted eyes and moon-shaped smile come from images that demonised Asians, depicting them as evil, dishonest, scheming and cunning.



Image 24. Fazer's candy bag before the design was changed.

The racist images of the 19th century were created with a clear intention to harm and degrade. Fazer's image was probably created with the idea that the consumer would be taken on a quick, imaginary trip to East Asia, while eating the chocolate-covered rice puffs. The little figure on the bag was meant to express something light-hearted and fun, but also something we recognise. Often, this is exactly how logos work. They are simplified, easy to remember and in their simplification they often rely on symbolism, semiotics, a type of visual pre-knowledge. Fazer chose a caricature image to communicate that the candy is fun and exotic. The idea that it comes from another place was shown through a figure that would symbolise Asia.

Racist slurs have also been “slipped into” Swedish animated children's programmes such as *De Tre Vännerna* and *Jerry*, 1998-1999 by Magnus Carlsson, and the early design of the British band *Gorillaz*'s fictional character *Noodle* is also questionable. Both examples have evaded criticism.

The old Fazer logo for liquorice sweets which dates back to the 1920s would probably be unthinkable today. While racist images of black people still exist in commercial and popular culture, I think we have a more comprehensive understanding of these types of images and the ways in which they are harmful and painful.

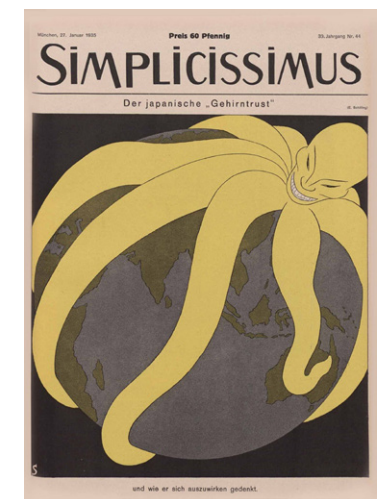


Image 25. Erich Schilling, *The Japanese 'Brain Trust'*, *Simplicissimus*, vol. 39, no 44, 1935. Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York.

90 John Kuo Wei Tchen and Dylan Yeats, *Yellow Peril: An Archive of Anti-Asian Fear*, London: Verso, 2014, pg. 11.





Image 26. *De Tre Vännerna och Jerry* by Magnus Carlsson.



Image 27. The character Noodle. Stills from animated short *Jump the Gut*, 2001.



Image 28. Fazer's liquorice candy logo 1927-2007.

It was alarming and fascinating to see how people with no experience of being racialised as Asians and no knowledge of racist imagery, came to the strong defence of Fazer's Kinapuff logo. People were angry and upset at the idea that the bag of sweets that had been in their shop for so long would suddenly look slightly different. People who expressed relief at the disappearance of the image were labelled over-sensitive and told that there was real racism to fight instead. Patrik Lundberg's chronicle and basic thesis were even more confirmed. Sweden's knowledge of the racism that Asians face was extremely low, not least when it came to racial stereotypes and their origins.

Tobias Hübinette, Docent, Senior Lecturer and Researcher at Karlstad University, analyses this image in his book *Svenska asiater : Antiasiatisk rasism och framväxten av en ny minoritet* (Swedish Asians: Anti-Asian racism and the emergence of a new minority) (2024). He argues that Swedish Asians are rarely seen as victims of racism in Sweden, compared to other immigrant groups, and that Swedish Asians themselves find it difficult to identify and recognise anti-Asian racism.<sup>91</sup> A common image even outside of Sweden, wherein Asians as a group are not expected to make much noise or cause problems. These are repeated

mantras that add to the complexity of the discourse because many perceptions of Asians can be understood as “positive”. However, both “yellow peril” and “the model minority”, although they may seem to be opposites, are ideas about Asians that are formulated from narratives that were meant to control Asians. Narratives that are derogatory, conditional, formulated from the outside, that create divisions and an “us and them” mindset.

There is a need for more stories about Asians in Western popular culture that are told from the perspective of Asians themselves. Where Asians can show and formulate their own existence, culture and identity. Where they can show their own norm. Through popular culture film, Asian-Americans have fought for stories about Asians to be sold to the general public. Commercial successes such as *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), *Shang Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021) and *Everything, Everywhere All at Once* (2022) have gained ground bit by bit. In 2023, after 95 years of Oscars, Michelle Yeoh became the first Asian actress to win an Oscar for Best Actress for her performance in the maximalist film *Everything, Everywhere All at Once*.

When Sweden witnessed through the Kinapuff debate that Swedish Asians could rebel, be hurt, be victims of racism, say no and assert their rights, I think people were shocked. It wasn't expected and that's why many were so upset by the debate.

10 plus years later we have made progress. Although I would argue that anti-Asian racism is still the most invisible and the least talked about form of racism. Hübinette writes that research in Sweden on Asians and racism, migration, integration, discrimination and segregation barely exists. That government reports and action plans have mapped racism against Roma, Jews, Sami, Afro-Swedes and Swedish Muslims but not Asians. This is despite the fact that Sweden is one of the countries in Europe with the most Asians.<sup>92</sup>

Our blindness and ignorance to the history and impact of racist stereotypes means that images with a violent history continue to be produced and continue to perpetuate racist structures. This can only be countered by talking about the power, history and meaning of images. Images, despite being cute, sweet, innocent in their appearance, have their context and background. Regardless of the intention of the creator, they convey values, beliefs and messages. As image creators, we are responsible for knowing or finding out what our images contain.

### 140. Skin color



Image 29. Sketch.

In Sweden, when I've wanted to buy a make-up product in a skin-coloured shade, I've asked shop assistants to help me find my way through the jungle of hues. The person usually looks at my face quickly and even faster recommends me “a yellow hue”. I understand that they mean that they have chosen a warm tone, rather than yellow and I try the colour to see if it matches my own skin tone. Sometimes they've got it right, but more often than not I've been recommended a product that's far too dark, beige and warm-toned. It cannot be argued that the language used in the make-up industry is based on primary colours. Shop assistants do not turn to a white person and recommend them a “blue-tinted shade”.

I never questioned this until I travelled to South Korea for the first time. When I stepped into the make-up stores there, I was surprised to see that

<sup>91</sup> Tobias Hübinette, *Svenska asiater : antiasiatisk rasism och framväxten av en ny minoritet*, Stockholm: Verbal Förlag, 2024, pg. 76.

<sup>92</sup> Hübinette, 2024, pg. 20.



powders and foundations were often offered in as few as four shades. All the shades were very light and marketed with pink-tinted images. There was not a trace of the colour yellow, or the mention of yellow anywhere.

Today, Korean cosmetics and skincare are very popular and the products, now sold globally, have expanded the range of skin-toned colour shades. The shades are often named such as “ivory, petal, rose, vanilla, sand and tan.” Koreans didn't seem to see themselves as yellow-toned, but used language about their skin tone that I myself had long associated with that of white people.

It became clear to me how spoken language projected images and perceptions onto reality. I looked at my cheek and saw a colour. But it was as if the colour changed whether I called it “yellow-toned” or whether I called the colour “sand”. The yellow colour was wrong. But very persistent, and obviously more connected to my race than an accurate description of the colour of my cheek.

### 141-142. Dating is a political experience



I am having dinner with close friends and they ask me how everything is going. I summarise as briefly as possible what I'm doing in my research at the moment, afraid of boring them. After a while, I'm asked what I want to do after I graduate. “Do you want to continue doing research? Do you want to do something completely different?” Almost instinctively, I answer: “No, God! This has been so hard. I might apply for a post-doc or something in the future, but the idea of doing another research project after this is not something I'm considering.”

Some time later, I am meeting with my main supervisor, Professor Sara Telemann. She has gone through new illustrations that have been added to the project and stops at the watercolour I painted showing two naked people on a blue bed. At the time, I had just finished reading *Minor Feelings* by Cathy Park Hong, an unforgiving, sharply critical and honest book about the experience of being Asian-American and the kind of racism that is particular to East Asians.

I was disappointed that while Park Hong writes revealingly about several friendships and family relationships, she seems to avoid writing in depth about the dynamic between herself and her white boyfriend. There is a glaring gap in the portrayal of Asian women's lives. Stories of how racism and power are at least as much in our love relationships as they are repeated in the workplace, on the bus, with friends.

Sara looks at my painting and says “Yes, but this is a teaser for something that will have to be a project of its own, about exactly that!” I laugh in agreement, a little nervously, and then dismiss the thought. But a seed was sown there that was gnawing away.

On the occasions that I met my Asian female friends, I asked about their experience of dating and being in relationships with both white and non-white partners. They told me about the absurd and degrading racism they had endured while dating and they unanimously answered “yes” when asked if there was a difference between being in a relationship with a white man or a racialised man. About the extreme sexualisation and expectations of them as Asian women. About the recurring, “innocent” preference for Asian women. The more we talked about how race affects our encounters in sex and relationships, the more I felt the need for these testimonies, thoughts and experiences to be lifted, surfaced, dissected, understood and put into a larger context. It was also obvious why it was sensitive. Facing and standing up to racism at work is one thing, but facing racism from someone you chose and love is something else entirely.

Especially when I've been dating, I've felt like my Asian appearance is there like a screen or a veil that the people I've met couldn't see through. At least not initially.

My proposal is that we see race as a medium, an intervening substance, to take the most literal definition. Race, in other words, is something we see through, like a frame, a window, a screen, or a lens, rather than something we look at. It is a repertoire of cognitive and conceptual filters through which forms of human otherness are mediated. – W.J.T Mitchell.<sup>93</sup>

Can I trust that I will be seen for who I am? My experience was that men saw race (Asian) before they saw me. That's how I was chosen. That's how I was rejected.

In Caroline Seung-Hwa Ljuus' 2016 artistic text work *Som skal som sticker ut som skal som smälter in* (As shells that stand out as shells that blend in), Ljuus interviewed 28 people adopted from South Korea. Translated to English from Swedish:

93 W.J.T Mitchell, *Seeing Through Race*, Harvard University Press, 2012.

The questions were about childhood, upbringing, dreams, memories, other people's and my own experiences of my own body, etc. I have made selections from these interviews and compiled an artistic interpretation of everyone's stories. In this project, I wanted to investigate and portray what it means to be brought up in the whiteness norm as a person of colour.

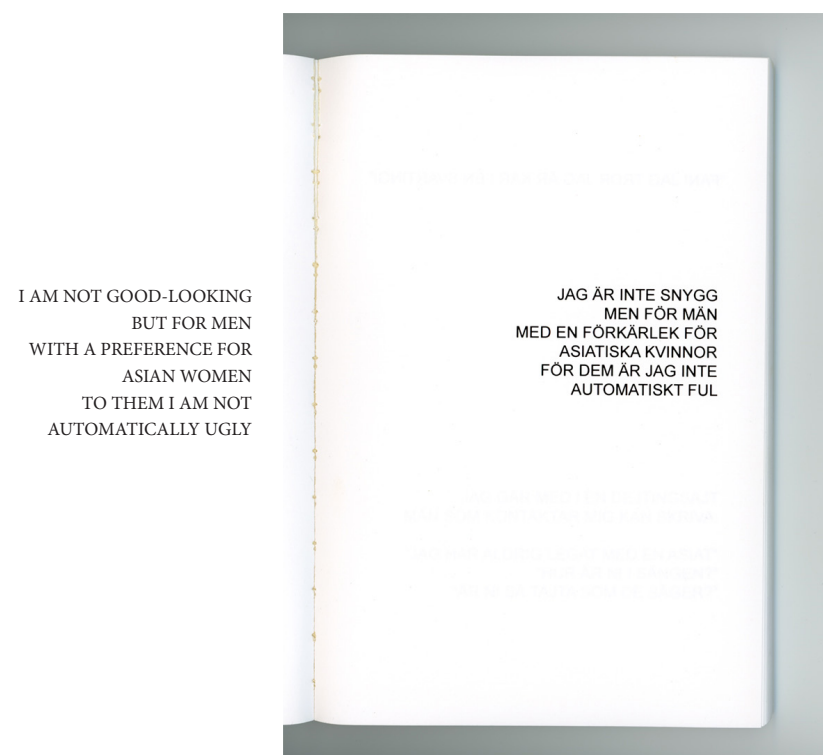


Image 30. Page from the book *Som skal som sticker ut som skal som smälter in*, Caroline Seung-Hwa Ljuus, 2016

In the book *Svenska Asiater* Hübinette paints a demographic image that I found remarkable:

Sweden has around 240,000 inhabitants with a background in East or South-east Asia. Two-thirds of these are foreign-born and two-thirds are women. In 2023, the largest group was from Thailand (45,940), China (38,253) followed by Vietnam (21,983).<sup>94</sup> Most have immigrated to marry majority Swedish men. 80 percent of mixed Asians, i.e. those with one white parent and one Asian parent, have a white father. For most other immigrant groups, the pattern tends to be the opposite.

In other words, a large proportion of Asian women in Sweden live here because of romantic relationships with white men, or are the children of Asian women with white men.

<sup>94</sup> Tobias Hübinette, *Svenska asiater : antiasiatisk rasism och framväxten av en ny minoritet*, Stockholm: Verbal Förlag, 2024, pg. 46.

That seed that was planted pointed out “we need to talk about how perceptions of race affect Asian women's lives in relation to sex and relationships.” That few have been able to address this sensitive topic is understandable. But the need is great, I think.

Perhaps. Maybe. Probably. It will be a future project. Because I have to.

## 151. Chaekgeori



In the spring of 2022, I spent a semester at Hongik University Seoul, South Korea to learn about Korean traditional painting. Without any prior knowledge, I was admitted to courses given to the bachelor programme students in the “Department of Oriental painting”, taught entirely in Korean. The teachers were Dr. Chang Tae-Young (장태영) and Professor Lee Jinju (이진주).

During the first weeks, under the guidance of the professors, we learnt how to prepare the different materials needed for painting, such as how to mount mulberry paper on wooden canvases, wooden boards, and how to mix the glue with which the paper is coated.

We learned basic techniques for mixing colours from colour cakes but also pigments, and painting by copying existing motifs. During the last part of the courses we produced our own designs and concepts and presented our work to the class.

Initially, I was a bit overwhelmed by the strict teaching methods, but as I began to realise the importance of handling the materials properly, I became fascinated by how traditional Korean painting is firmly rooted in the philosophy of craftsmanship. It was valuable to witness how much knowledge and respect there is for paper in Korean culture. As I learnt more about the different genres of traditional Korean painting, I understood that there is a strong connection between folk art, storytelling and narrative.

I particularly liked the genre of *Chaekgeori* (책거리), which to Western eyes probably looks quite cute, decorative and illustrative. It's a type of still life painting with a skewed perspective that tells the story of a person through their personal artefacts, without the person themselves being in the painting. They are a celebration of colour, pattern and detail.

During my time in Korea, I began to apply my basic understanding of the different types of Korean traditional painting genres to my own themes. I continued to connect with the cultural relationship and tried to move away from just merging images and references, but now also used the techniques, materials and narrative methods that I had learnt in class.

I will continue to work with and be inspired by the genres, techniques and materials of Korean painting despite my very limited knowledge. In the future I hope there will be opportunities for me to deepen my knowledge of Korean painting, so for now this nod to these rich traditions is just the beginning of a conversation in my practice.

Chaekgeori is traditional Korean still life painting which can be translated as “books and objects”. It was a genre popular in the late 19th century in Korea. Chaekgeori is characterised by a particular type of *trompe l'oeil*, a play on distorted perspectives to create a space in the image, with no requirement for realism, resulting in a somewhat graphic expression. Most often, books were depicted to symbolise knowledge and class, but it became increasingly popular to depict symbols of success and happiness such as flowers and fruit. Other objects that symbolised the family's good taste, experience or knowledge, such as paintbrushes or vases, were also used.

In this image, a paraphrase of the Chaekgeori genre of painting, there is a Swedish sewing box, ornamented with *kurbits*, Swedish folk ornament. “Fika”, a “princess cake” and cookies, seven types, are placed on porcelain dishes with pattern designer Stig Lindberg's famous pattern *Berså*. On the box is a blue Korean tassel together with a Korean vase in the typical icy, blue-grey glass. The vase is filled with a simple bouquet of apple branches and oats. The books are covered in Buddhist patterns and yellow ginkgo leaves are scattered on the ground. Spring, summer, autumn and winter between two ethnicities.

**155-156. Korean society**



Illustration by Nanna Li

When Cecilia asked if I wanted to illustrate a spread for her book, it was an obvious “yes!.” The structure of Korean society has similarities with Chinese society but also its differences. Patriarchal structures are common to both but are, in my experience, not as pronounced in Chinese culture, at least not in big cities and among the well-educated. In rural areas, however, traditional structures are certainly more common.

I am neither adopted nor Korean, but grew up in Norrbotten and recognise myself in many of the book's situations and images. Cecilia has done an incredible job in representing many of us Asians who have grown up in Sweden. Images are powerful. Seeing black hair and Asian features depicted in traditional Swedish settings – in a Lucia procession, wearing a graduation cap or standing next to a Christmas tree, reflects our shared experiences and creates more space for us all.

The book mixes many different styles, which would normally raise questions, but in this case feels completely natural to me. As I see it, Cecilia is addressing a gaping void. For decades, there has been a lack of nuanced representation of Asians in Swedish culture. Now we are treated to a smorgasbord of varied imagery, a cascade of colors and forms – all in one book. *Now we're talking!* The fact that the book contains so many styles made it easier for me as a contributing illustrator to support the whole. I could work in a way that was comfortable for me without worrying too much about inconsistencies. The characters and composition are based on sketches from Cecilia. It felt right to keep her voice through the characters

– Nanna Li, 2025





163-164. Abortion laws



Illustration by Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom

I find it hard to separate drawing comics from talking about adoption. In my life, the two have been intertwined for about 18 years now, and I can't imagine them existing separately. Reflecting on my experiences as an adoptee—finding my Korean family, discovering that my adoption was based on lies and deceit, and becoming an outspoken adoptee rights activist—has all been expressed through the medium of comics. First as shorter strips, then in the form of my first memoir, *Palimpsest* (2016), followed by hundreds of quick one-panel comics on Instagram, and later in my second graphic album, *Excavated Earth* (2022). In between, I've contributed shorter comics to various magazines and anthologies.

People often don't believe me when I tell them that I find drawing extremely difficult: I'm slow, I can't draw much from memory and need constant references, and I lack self-confidence in my work. I can't count how many times (per day) I ask myself why I continue working in a format that causes me so much grief and frustration. But it boils down to this: comics are insanely addictive and my absolute favorite art form. When words and images come together, there is no limit to the stories they can tell or the emotions they can convey.

As those who have read my comics or followed my activism know, my position on adoption is extremely critical, and most of the time, this is met with skepticism, gaslighting, and even hatred. However, I've noticed that when I let the message come through in comics, people pay attention in a different way. Without downplaying the seriousness of the topic, comics have a fascinating ability to make controversial issues more understandable and difficult subjects more comprehensible. By making comics, I also believe I'm making my stories more

accessible to the adoptee community, many of whom struggle with reading and writing. When I started making comics about being an adoptee and adoption, I felt rather isolated. So, it's encouraging to see more and more adoptee artists turning to comics to tell their stories. The variety of styles and topics is beautiful to witness. I can't wait to see what comes next.

– Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom, 2025

Source reference for information on childbirth in Korea.<sup>101 102</sup>

171. Ornament and Crime



*Ornament and Crime* is a famous and influential essay written by the Austrian architect Adolf Loos (1870–1933) in 1908, which strongly criticised ornamentation in architecture and design. Loos argued that ornamentation was unnecessary and an expression of short-lived trends, and that it could even be culturally backward and associated it with primitive cultures. Loos believed that the real progress in design lay in clarity and functionality, values that underpinned modernist architecture.

Loos reacted to ornaments and especially the popular art nouveau movements of the time, which were associated with exclusivity and luxury. Ornaments were accused of increasing costs without adding any function, but in his eccentric essay he equalises all ornaments and takes no account of any cultural or social differences. He accuses the tattooed man, the “Other”, of being degenerate and uncivilised in his inability to see through the eroticism of ornamentation.

101 Jean Mackenzie, “Why South Korean women aren’t having babies”, *BBC*, 28 February 2024.

102 Ji-Hye Shin, “Government neglect of single moms sends babies abroad despite S. Korea’s low birth rate”, *The Korea Herald*, 21 January 2024.

In my illustration, I combine Michelangelo's iconic statue of David with the idea of water, purity and a washing woman whose back is covered in Japanese tattoo art. Through this, I want to highlight how notions of purity and whiteness, characterised by Eurocentrism, stood in contrast to ornamentation and the idea of unwanted influence from the visual cultures of the Other.

## 172. Postcolonial theory

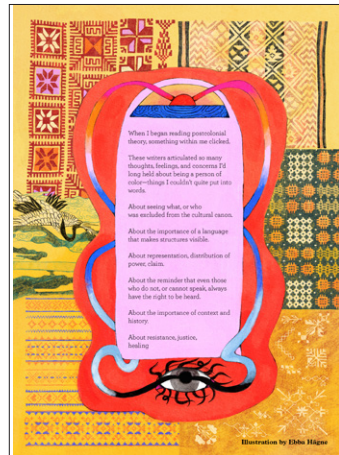


Illustration by Ebba Hagne

At the time of writing, I am in my second year of the Master's Programme in Visual Communication at Konstfack and have been incredibly lucky to have Cecilia as my external supervisor. I come from a multicultural Swedish-Chinese background and have lived in both Sweden and China for roughly the same amount of time. This makes my experience different from Cecilia's, but the way she has used her artistry in her research project to talk about between-ship and her own story has been such an inspiring and healing journey to witness.

My master's project is called *YU HONG QIAO – Jade Rainbow Bridge*. During the project, I have conducted research, explored, and dissected symbols and ornaments often used in embroidery from my regional background: Guangzhou (China) and Skaraborg (Sweden). I have woven these inspirations into my artistic work, conveying personal stories of home, identity, and belonging.

It was exciting to be able to experiment with and adapt the methods I use in my own project to create an illustration for Cecilia's thesis. Instead of drawing from embroidery patterns from my own cultural background, I took inspiration from embroidery and woven patterns from several different cultures that have been influenced by colonialism in various ways. Nevertheless, it was incredibly difficult to select which patterns to highlight — I would have loved to

include so many more! After much thought, I decided on Palestine, Mapuche, Korea, Wales, Sápmi, and Sudan. I chose these cultures to present a limited selection that can tell the story of colonialism's impact in a nuanced and current way. Here is an explanation of why I selected textile ornaments from these areas:

**Filastīn:** Palestinian embroidery *Tatreez*. Palestine was the first country that came to mind when I started thinking about which textile ornaments I wanted to highlight in this illustration. During an ongoing genocide, we need to take every opportunity to speak about it, again and again. I found an incredibly well-made website called *Tatreez Traditions*, which offers a free image bank of Palestinian embroidery designs.

**Mapuche:** Woven patterns from the textile heritage of the Mapuche, an Indigenous people from the area that is today Chile and Argentina. During my research, I found an amazing article called *Heirs of Llallín*. What I found particularly beautiful was how, in Mapudungun (the Mapuche language), there are several unique words that express people's spiritual relationship to weaving.

**Daehan Minguk:** Korean embroidered and painted cranes. During my research on Korean embroidery, I came across many depictions of cranes. I was particularly drawn to the cranes embroidered with silk thread, a common motif also found in China. Funnily enough, the crane is also the regional animal of Västra Götaland. I couldn't resist taking advantage of such a coincidence.

**Cymru:** Welsh woven felt patterns. The patterns I referred to originate from the town of Caernarfon. Wales is a country I have visited many times and holds a special place in my heart, as it is my partner's homeland.

**Sápmi:** *Duodji* is the North Sámi word for handicraft. The Sámi are the Indigenous people of Sápmi, the northern part of the Scandinavian peninsula. I chose to highlight *Duodji* to acknowledge Swedish colonial history. The ornaments on the page are inspired by patterns from Sámi woven bands.

**as-Sūdān:** I was inspired by embroidery patterns from Northern Sudan. Similar to my choice to highlight Palestinian embroidery patterns, I decided to reference Sudanese embroidery because of the ongoing war.

“Nobody's free until everybody's free.” – Fannie Lou Hamer

– Ebba Hagne YangJiQiuZhen, 2025



173. Munjado



This illustration consists of Swedish flora that together form the word “hitta” (to find), on the following page is the word “hem” (home), where the illustration has been cut out/removed. I chose plants that have a strong meaning for me, that were present in my childhood or that I feel nostalgic about. Poppies, barley, oats, bluebells, clover, apple and lily of the valley. The inspiration came from the traditional Korean painting genre *munjado*, which combines calligraphy with painting and was popular during the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910) among the middle and upper classes.

Traditionally, *munjado* (문자도) is based on stylised Chinese characters with illustrations representing the eight main Confucian virtues. More modern interpretations of the genre show creative fusions of image and text that remind us of the *drop cap*, *initial*, the decorated first letter in certain typography traditions.

In the following image, the virtues are seen as Chinese characters mounted on a folding screen, read from right to left:

- Hyo, 효(孝): filial piety
- Jae, 제(悌): brotherly love
- Chung, 충(忠): loyalty
- Shin, 신(信): trust
- Yae, 예(禮): etiquette, courtliness
- Ui, 의(義): righteousness
- Yeom, 염(廉): integrity
- Chi, 치(恥): aware of shame, sensitivity

My illustration was an exploration, a test of letting the letter and the image become one and the same. On the one hand, *munjado* shows a painting that is full of values and guidelines while being extremely playful and illustrative. I wondered if the Roman letter could also marry illustration in a similar way to the pictorial Chinese character. On a horizontal line, the letters turned into plants became stiff and unnatural, but placed in a diagonal direction they gained more life and freedom.



Image 31. Unknown artist, Ideographs of Eight Confucian Virtues, ink and color on paper, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, early 1900's

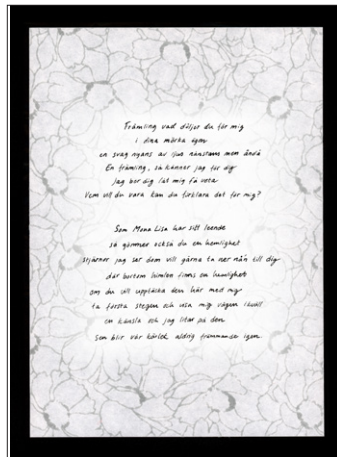
176. Baby Box



Source reference for information on the baby box.<sup>103</sup>

103 Jung Hae-Myoung, “Baby box is last resort to parents, newborns in Korea”, *The Korea Times*, 26 January 2019, [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2024/05/113\\_264411.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2024/05/113_264411.html) [accessed 2024-05-29].

## 180. Carola



Främling by Carola Häggkvist, written by Lasse Holm and Monica Forsberg, was Carola Häggkvist's breakthrough song and entry to the Swedish Melodifestivalen in 1983.

Translated to English:

Stranger, what are you hiding from me  
In your dark eyes?  
A faint shade of light somewhere but still  
A stranger, that's how I feel about you  
I beg you, please let me know  
Who do you want to be, can you explain it to me?

Like the Mona Lisa has her smile  
You too are hiding a secret  
Stars, I see them, want to bring one down to you  
There's an eternity beyond the sky  
If you want to discover it with me  
Take the first steps and show me the way tonight  
A feeling and I trust it  
Then our love will never be unknown again

## 185-186. Aquarelle



The watercolour. My worst and best friend. How we harmonise and fight. Singing and shouting at each other. Why are we even together?

As a child, I was given a box of beginner's watercolours. I guess it was unthinkable that I would get oil paint or acrylics. Messy, expensive, demanding materials and prior knowledge that my parents didn't possess. Watercolours required only water, brushes and paper. Not so different from those really cheap paints you had available in kindergarten.

I grew up with watercolour, we belonged together. When I was introduced to oil paint, I was already so much more used to watercolour. Working with oil and acrylic also meant a working process that was the opposite of watercolour, where you leave white and light surfaces. With oil and acrylic, you could paint over mistakes and you had to wait for the paint to dry. With watercolour, you can never make mistakes and you have to work fast, fast before the water dries.

Watercolour is a technically challenging and difficult medium that gets far too little appreciation and respect in my opinion. Watercolour in combination with paper is seen as short-lived in comparison to oil on canvas which lives on for hundreds of years. Even high quality watercolour paper, often made of cotton, becomes expensive when it reaches a certain size, but also difficult to handle as it cannot be mounted on a frame as a canvas can. Watercolour is also time consuming. It takes a lot of paint, water and pigment to fill large areas and often you work with several layers that are not even visible. For this reason, watercolour is particularly challenging in large formats, but not impossible.

The greater tendency to work in watercolour at smaller sizes is probably one reason why watercolour was ascribed a lower status than oil. The permanence of oil and its suitability for large, high-status jobs for royalty, the church, patrons and wealthy clients made oil painting a more prestigious



medium. Watercolours are often reminiscent of amateur or leisurely outdoor painting. Landscapes, cityscapes, salon art.

We usually associate watercolour with satisfying, unpredictable “blooms”, paint flowing onto the paper, creating organic forms that cannot be fully controlled. We see traces of water, the texture of the paper and different levels of transparency. Watercolour appears to be free, alive, playful, flowing. But perhaps the truth is that those who paint in watercolour with expertise and long experience have tremendous control and feeling for the behaviour of water and how different pigments mix and move. A control over what cannot be controlled.

The watercolour is thus temperamental and unforgiving. There is no way to erase or change the colour that has been applied to the paper. You must not accidentally spill anything. You have to know in advance where the light is going to be, because those areas will not get any colour, or will even be masked out.

Displaying originals in an exhibition context was also laborious work as it often required the paintings to be framed behind glass as watercolour paper is sensitive to touch, dirt and moisture. In many ways a demanding medium, despite many people believing the opposite.

Although I often wonder if I shouldn't switch to a technique and medium that lasts longer and sells for more money, I am deeply rooted in the elements of watercolour. Paper, water and the sheer.

I work with cakes, hard cubes that dissolve with water, instead of, for example, watercolour paint from a tube. The cakes are practical, last a long time and need no maintenance. There is no complicated process to mix the colours. The brush is dipped in water and massaged into the colour cake. Less water, more concentrated colour. But mixing the colour is a constant dance, as the water dries quickly both on the brush and when it lands on the paper. The water is in constant flow.

When I was younger, I often worked in plenty of water giving the “typical” watercolour look. Parts of the paintings had blossomed on the paper in their own temperaments. Layers of the paintings could be glimpsed where the faint, thin lay next to surfaces that were dark, opaque.

The older I got, the more I started working from photographs and the more detailed and realistic the paintings became. The brushes became smaller and in order to work out contrasts with light and dark colours with small brushes, the amount of water was reduced. This is probably the basis for my now rather “dry” watercolour style.

During my time as an exchange student in Korea at Hongik University, I learned about Korean painting techniques that produced expressions similar to the delicacy and layering of watercolour, but at the same time could

be worked up to the size of oil paintings by mounting large sheets of paper on lightweight wooden boards. A technique that proved to be able to range between colors of total black and the lightest, thinnest.

In watercolour, I can sometimes miss opaque black and, as mentioned earlier, the colour white is not usually used. However, Korean traditional painting includes black ink which can be both transparent and opaque on paper. The white colour is also used to paint white details. Something that I had to relearn completely. During my foundation art training, I learned that white paint reduces clarity when mixed with other colours and that it “mattes” other colours. In Korean painting, white paint was layered to appear as white paint. With great scepticism, I tried using white paint both according to Korean tradition but also in some of my watercolour paintings. However, I found that the cotton paper tended to absorb too much of the white paint to produce the same effect as on the prepared Korean mulberry papers.

Despite using watercolour and cotton paper for so long, I was late to realise that there are techniques that can challenge the limitations of watercolour. Without knowing or daring to try different types of paper or treatments of the paper, I thought that the options were relatively few. My encounter with Korean painting opened a door that I had to slowly understand and get to know, but also meet with respect. Craft is knowledge that is being built upon.



Image 32. Lee, Jinju, 3막, Act3, powdered pigment, animal skin glue and water on unbleached cotton, 220.5cm x 182cm, 2022-2023



## 197-198. Things that take time



*Seize the day. Become a better version of yourself. Time is money. Work more efficiently. Do more in less time.*

Nope.

This painting is 76 x 57 cm. It took a summer to finish, at a slow pace. It spread out on my kitchen table, the food had to be enjoyed elsewhere. I sat with my back to the warm window, like a living solar cell, so that I could let the rays keep me going. Many of my illustrations vary in original size but most of them are elaborate, detailed and very time-consuming.

I want to work in an organised way and absolutely, to the extent that it is possible, efficiently. I also want to work slowly, carefully and thoughtfully. Time is not a void to be filled, not a mass we can squeeze into a concentrate and still expect the same results as something that has been allowed to grow at its own pace.

What is lost when things are not allowed to take their time? What happens to complexity and nuance when we simplify and compress work? What kind of images do we create and how do we learn to read images if everything has to be simple and fast?

Craft is synonymous with time. The time you put into the work. The time you have behind you that is experience. The time you have in front of you, where you grow and build on your knowledge. Craft doesn't take all the time, but it takes its time. It requires patience, regardless of today's economic marathon.

We live in economic systems. Spending time on something today is a question of resources. I understand that. This project has been made possible thanks to the fact that an art institution has been able to finance an artistic four-year project with government funds. I could never have done this project in two years. Not even three and a half years. All that time and effort is embedded in my images, and I hope that the care made possible by time can

also be found in this Companion.

Don't do things faster. Don't become another version of yourself. Don't turn time into money.

Work with reflection, with meaning. Even if we can't always realise it, dream about, value, support and elevate the work that has taken time, is complex and detailed. We will need them as a resistance to dumbed down, simplified and reduced narratives.

## A day...

15/10

The feeling of drowning in your own work is overwhelming. I see nothing else. I feel nothing else. Only worry and doubt. My body is heavy, but I swim.

Every stroke counts. Every stroke is a movement, an effort. I move even though I can't see it. All I see is the mass of nothingness in front, behind, above and below me.

The surface is there all the time. I know, I know. I reach it, sometimes.

25/11

The hand breaks the surface without me even realising it. I keep swimming, but now I can see both above and below the tense bar that divides water and air. There is another state than drowning. I had just forgotten what it feels like. So relieved that it is not an illusion. Every stroke counts. I'm carrying myself.

## Work process

The workfile I've been working on, which could eventually be sent to print as my thesis, was created as early as 2015. It has since undergone endless reformatting, rewriting and editing. In many ways, it is a project that has evolved and grown so much that it is hard to say if it is the same work that was born ten years ago, but there is a large number of words and images that have accompanied me throughout this long journey.

Ten years ago I wrote a script about my adoption and upbringing that was about 100 pages long. I started by noting down key themes and events in my life that I thought were important to the story. Then I placed these on a timeline to get an overview of the scope and time frame I would be dealing with. When I started to feel comfortable with the content, I wrote down intuitive, short, prose-like sentences. *"I was born out of paper."*

I thought about which events were relevant. When does something become too introverted, too self-centred? Was there a risk that it would become too naked? Who can recognise themselves in such specific and singular experiences? These are certainly recurring questions for anyone writing autobiographical stories. A fear of telling the story through the first person, without engaging or connecting with the reader. It requires a belief that the self has something to say.

When I meet students who tackle these questions, the answer is obvious. The more generous, honest and open you are, the easier it is for others to recognise themselves in your experiences. Sometimes the story is told at a level of detail that surely no one else can relate to. And that's exactly what happens. In the details, in the specifics, in the nakedness, we see each other.

I worked with an Indesign document where the text manuscript was spread out on blank pages with the hope of creating a pace and readability that felt quiet, airy and accessible. The shorter sentences were embroidered, given larger bodies and tied together. Once the text manuscript had taken shape, I began to imagine illustrations for each page. I made simple digital sketches with a Wacom tablet in Photoshop and filled in page after page.

Sketching at this time was frustrating, difficult and time-consuming. The method that was supposed to save me time and be an aid mostly contributed to a slower work process. I did not know how to sketch. Therefore, I produced several original illustrations without sketches while struggling to create sketches for the story. The advantage of sketching is, of course, to get an overview of the narrative through images, text and sequencing, and how these create a coherent whole. Perhaps it is especially important when working with longer and/or complex narratives. It probably took me a year before my sketches felt like a tool rather than a kind of mandatory process. A lot of it was about letting go of the idea of prestige. The sketches were for me and no one else. I made ugly sketches and it didn't matter.

An additional time-consuming process in the very beginning of this project was the fact that I had very limited knowledge of Photoshop and Indesign. I had worked entirely with analogue methods until I started the MA programme. Much of the digital-related work that I might take for granted today, I had to learn from scratch back then. Document size, colour settings, margins, but also image processing and correction of dust and light. File management that would still be considered very disorganised today. For each page of the book there are between 6 and 10 files. Sketch, original, original "clean", original "mounted" ver 1, ver 2, original ver 1 "final" and so on.

A watercolour larger than an A4 needs to be scanned in parts. They are merged into an image in Photoshop to be colour edited and polished. The image is placed in a Photoshop file with the correct size and aspect ratio with print margins included. If necessary, the illustration is edited further in Procreate on an iPad. Then the image is brought into the Indesign document to be mounted on the correct page together with overlying text.

At the start of the doctoral programme, the manuscript was 200 pages long. The first part of the graphic novel had relatively many illustrations finished, but at least as many remained. I needed to find visual solutions for all the pages.

## Getting stuck and writing

In the third year of my studies, the drawing and painting process came to a halt. I neither wanted nor could paint. Neither sketching nor making originals was stimulating or enjoyable. That's how it is sometimes. Creative or artistic work can just turn into hard work, without being particularly fun or enjoyable. But for me, the love of image-making had disappeared. It wasn't just a lack of inspiration. I found it hard to paint or draw. At the same time, I knew how many illustrations I needed to make in order to complete the work. I felt paralysed by stress but also shame at not being able to produce. It was not supposed to happen but it did. And it happens to everyone at some point. I felt a fear that the inability could become permanent.

It is often said that creativity or artistic endeavour cannot be forced. You have to try to find other ways. I did both. I forced illustrations at half speed and they were neither the height of creativity nor artistry, but they ensured that the project did not come to a complete standstill. While I was agonising, I tried to find other ways.

During this time, I also tried to figure out how my work would be presented as a thesis. Should it just be a graphic novel? Did I need to write some kind of project report? What is the role of writing for us doctoral students doing artistic research? Do I have to write?

Initially, I was convinced that there would be no separate written report or text-heavy thesis. I was concerned that this would limit accessibility, readability and my desire to reach a wide audience. It also involved a rejection of

the tradition that illustrations are subordinate to the text. The problem lies not in the writing itself, but in a textual format that exists solely to validate a complete work, which in turn reinforces the hierarchy between text and illustration.

I had heard of and witnessed stage seminars and dissertations in art practices, where all the time and focus ended up on the person's writing. As if the artistic work was secondary. But I still wanted my thesis to be educational and transparent. Although I thought that the graphic novel could answer my inquiries through its being and doing, I realised that a high level of semiotic, semantic and visual literacy is required to engage with the work as such.

My first idea to bridge this gap was to create a kind of glossary presented as an appendix at the end of the graphic novel. This way, references, sources and short comments about the graphic novel could be included, while making that reading optional. It was designed as a traditional footnote system, but the more I started to sort out what it was I wanted the appendix to offer the reader, the more I realised that the limitations of the appendix format were too great.

That's when I started thinking about guides.

A guide is a help, a support and points to something that is the main experience. I thought that there had to be formats that could highlight the graphic novel and that did not claim the whole PhD project.

Inspired by Avery Gordon's way of writing and being present in her texts, and with a reminder that my entire graphic novel is autobiographical, I saw how the human body was so embedded in the project. I began to understand how my text guide is not a guide in the sense of an object, a flat, written brochure that you pick up like an extra map. My guide is a person who accompanies you on your journey. Who experiences things together with you, who has a heart, a voice and who has a mission. The idea of variety became important. Let the reader feel that it is okay not to want or need to read everything. Offer a variety of different types of texts that can appeal to different types of readers.

The general feeling of stress started to settle down a bit. I was trying to come up with strategies to keep the illustrations going. I was finding it difficult to get a proper overview of the work on the graphic novel. It felt like there were endless illustrations left to do, but at the same time I was afraid to count exactly how many were left. Finally, I pulled myself together, identified important deadlines and calculated how many illustrations I had to do per week to make it in time. The answer was many. It was something of a cold shower. I created a visual schedule of how many illustrations needed to be made. One box represented one page. Each box was then marked with colour. Red = illustration missing, yellow = parts of illustration present, green = illustration completely finished. While writing the Companion – the text part – I did my best to force the illustrations out. One by one I could fill the visual

scheme with green colour. In this way, I could also see that the proportion of unfinished illustrated pages was slowly decreasing.

This method did not revive any passion or creativity. It was painful, dreadful to make the last illustrations, but they just had to be done. Pragmatism had to take precedence over thoughts of performance and artistic quality. My project won't be perfect. But it has to be finished.

## Inviting others

I tried not to stop and ponder too long on pages of the graphic novel that felt difficult, but jumped on to the next. Finally, only the most difficult pages were left. Some of them without a sketch. I simply had no ideas for those pages.

For illustrators, it is common for our work to consist of illustrating other people's texts. I therefore wondered if I could hire other illustrators to create some of the illustrations I was not able to do myself. I also thought it was a nice and concrete way to have other people tell their stories directly through their own images. It was important to me that they all had experience from betweenship. I asked Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom, Ebba Hågne, Nanna Li and Jung, who all said yes.

In this way, I was able to get help with the parts of my work that were difficult. I was careful not to call the participation a collaboration because collaboration requires a common goal and equal access to resources and shared responsibilities. But their participation as “features” or “guest appearances” represents the important relationships we have between image makers. My PhD work has been largely independent but in my artistic practice I am part of a network of makers where we create conditions for each other. I have been inspired by their images, thoughts and work. They are with me. I am deeply grateful that they wanted to participate. Sjöblom's and Jung's series have also been influential and affected the entire adoption discourse. The fact that they wanted to participate and illustrate my voice, but with space to write about them in the Companion, I see as a potential way to work with a type of citation and corroboration in research illustration practice. This time there was not enough budget or time to explore this approach in depth, but it is something I will take with me to future projects.

Since the beginning of the project, I have known that the thesis will be printed as a book. Publishing a book involves work that I have not mastered at all: graphic design. In the project budget, there is a separate line for this to cover both fees and printing costs. I therefore knew early on that I would not have to do the design work myself, but could hire a graphic designer.



## Design

This concerns the design of the Swedish-language Companion. The English version was not worked on by a graphic designer.

When designing this book, some of the wishes were that it should be decorated, accessible, and in colour—and that it should not outshine the graphic novel. As I understood it, we were to create a beautiful companion, a gentle and friendly guide to all the references that informed Cecilia's graphic novel.

The ornaments throughout the pages are a mix of traditional Chinese corner motifs—also used in Korean culture—and cross-stitches inspired by embroidery from Cecilia's childhood home. In the background along the margins is “Stardust,” a speckled pattern that Brita Leitmann and I have used in the majority of our collaborative projects since 2012.

The book's colour palette is based on the traditional Korean spectrum *Obangsaek* (오방색), where white (non-possession), black (wisdom), blue (integrity), red (passion), and yellow (wealth)—each corresponding to one of the five elements—form the foundation. By blending these, you arrive at *Ogansaek* (오간색), another traditional colour set consisting of burgundy, dark yellow, green, light blue, and light red.

The lettering is set in William Text, a contemporary interpretation of Caslon, designed by Maria Doreuli. It offers a wealth of decorative characters and was chosen for its elegance and legibility.

For diary entries and letters, we used Compagnon, a typeface inspired by historical typewriter fonts. It, too, possesses ornamental qualities. The styles used here were drawn by Juliette Duhé, Léa Pradine, and Valentin Papon.

This has been a wonderfully rich and intricate material to work with, and my hope is that the intention behind the design is felt in the final form.

– Alexandra Falagara / Bastion Agency, 2025

### Page size and aspect ratio

During my master studies, I decided to use a page size of 171.45 mm x 260.35 mm for the graphic novel, referencing common American commercial comic book formats (e.g. Marvel or DC Comics) to make the book look neat, popular culture, accessible and commercial.

Many years later, I found that this long and narrow format was made for a specific type of sequential storytelling that didn't work well with my illustrations. These required slightly more surface area and width. I eventually had to change the page size to a slightly wider and shorter format, 185mm x 255mm. It felt important that the size was somewhat standardised, even if it was a Swedish one. I touched and checked books from Swedish comic book publisher Galago and based the size on Joanna Hellgren's *Frances*<sup>104</sup> with an approximate size of 182 mm x 254 mm.

104 Joanna Hellgren, *Frances*, del 3, Stockholm: Galago, 2012.



Image 33. Old and new aspect ratio.

As the original illustrations were painted with the first aspect ratio in mind, it became difficult and time-consuming to resize all the images for the new page format. This left them with blank, white borders on the pages. Some illustrations have been reworked, stretched for the new format and some illustrations have been left in their original aspect ratio. In cases where the images have not been reworked, the border remains as a trace of artistic decisions and a not always predictable working process. This makes the book function more as a document than a finished work. Page 43-44, shows how the illustration does not cover the entire cover but has been mounted on a black background so as not to leave blank white areas.

### Typeface

When I studied the MA program at Konstfack I knew nothing about the history, the characteristics or the meaning of any typeface. I claimed to be completely typeface blind which is rarely true for anyone. We can see the change of dress, change of voice as the shape of the letters we type out vary. But for the majority of us who are without training, we don't know how to put the design variations in their social contexts or origins.

At one point in the program, I had progressed enough on the graphic novel project and it was time to replace the typeface placeholder with an active choice. An active choice which my classmate Eliza Hearsam made for me. She suggested the typeface 'Archer', purely based on its look, and my request for it to be a match with the decorated and “pretty” in my book.

I couldn't remember having come across the typeface before and found Archer to be a good balance between ornamented, romantic, cute and formal.

Archer is a typeface designed in 2001 by Tobias-Frere-Jones and Jonathan Hoefler<sup>105</sup>. It was commissioned to be used in Martha Stewart Living magazine and released in 2008 for commercial licensing. It was also used in Wes Anderson’s movie *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014).

In the early creation process of the typeface, Tobias-Frere-Jones and Jonathan Hoefler looked at antique nautical maps but ended up with a sketch which “brought to mind the Peanuts cartoons”, an unwanted and too informal and juvenile direction. Martha Stewart was fond of the well-known typeface Courier and the type designers felt encouraged to take inspiration from this typewriter- and rather “clunky” look. They kept the typewriter reference in the ball terminals of Archer.

One of the art directors at Martha Stewart Living, was fond of the typeface Landi, from the Nebiolo Type Foundry in Italy, which would later serve as a starting point for the duo to create Archer’s italic version.

When naming the typeface the designers wanted something which mirrored the American nostalgia and primness of its character.

I found Archer to be a pretty and clear typeface with enough character to still have its own voice, without taking over. However, my lack of typeface knowledge meant that I did not look for alternatives or researched other solutions. I relied on the graphic designer I was working with to tell me if the font didn't work at all in the book. I felt I couldn't spend time on something I knew I had no knowledge of, and instead, relying on the designer to fill in with their expertise.

Material

The majority of the illustrations are painted by hand. Many with the use of photo references.

Paper used

Small size watercolor illustrations: Canson illustration, A3, 250 g/m2  
Small size watercolor, more detailed illustrations: Arches - Watercolour Grain Satiné, 26 x 36 cm, 300g/m2  
Big size watercolor: Arches, Fin Natural White, 56 x 76 cm, 300 g/m2

Colors used

Watercolor: Winsor & Newton Professional Watercolor  
Gouache: Winsor & Newton Designers gouache

“Oriental” painting: Shinhan Professional Korean color  
Color pencils: Faber-Castell Polychromos  
Staedtler Karat Aquarell, watercolour pencils  
Ink pens: Sakura Pigma Micron  
Sakura Pigma Brush Pen  
Calligraphy ink: Mook Jung Korean ink

Hardware

Computer: Macbook Pro 16 inch, 2009, 2,6 Ghz 6-core Intel core i7, 16 GB RAM, AMD Radeon Pro 5300M 4 GB  
Monitor: Dell U2722DE 27" 2560 x 1440 16:9 IPS 60Hz  
Scanner: Epson Perfection V600 Photo  
Wacom Intuos 4  
Ipad Pro 12,9-tums Wi-Fi 256 GB  
Apple Pencil 2nd gen

Software

Adobe Photoshop  
Adobe InDesign  
Adobe Lightroom  
Procreate

105 Frere Jones, *Designing Archer*, Doug Wilson, 16 June 2023, <https://frerejones.com/blog/designing-archer>, [accessed 2023-10-19]

## Ethics

### Representation

Many people have wondered how my family (Swedish and Korean) feels about me portraying them through personal memories and anecdotes in my book. The narrative gradually becomes more political and positional and thus my family becomes part of a politicised discourse. The responsibility I feel towards my family's involuntary participation in this story has fluctuated as a dilemma at different stages of the project and has mainly been about an uncertainty about whether I should include the more realistic portraits, the depictions of my family members. Beyond this, I have felt that I have the right to talk about my family, my relationships with them, from my own perspective, through my own voice, without their consent. Having said that, both my Swedish and Korean family know that I have been working on this project all these years, what it has been about and what the overall theme is. However, they have not been involved in the process of developing it. If anyone had expressed at any time that they were uncomfortable or did not want to be involved, I would of course have taken this into account.

I was unsure whether I wanted to include the more photorealistic portraits in the graphic novel. This is for the reason that these could be an intrusion on privacy as there is a risk that people can be recognised and identified based on the likeness of the portrait. But no matter how I approached it, I couldn't think of any way in which the illustrations could be modified without it being perceived as a form of censorship. I wondered if some portraits could have their eyes covered or faces blurred or pixelated. But this would have drawn even more attention to the anonymisation. I wondered if some portraits could be painted over and faces simplified or made more "cartoon-like". But this was also not compatible with my technical, detailed and close-to-photography style. In cases where the illustrations and portraits were created in a manner where the person could not be recognised from the painting, I thought it was okay.

I ended up making the decision not to modify any existing illustrations. Ultimately this is my story and I believe that the friends and family I have included in it are both written and depicted with empathy, care, respect and love. My paintings are detailed and precise but they are done by hand which adds a kind of filter. It will never be the same as including a photograph of someone.

In two cases there are photographs of family members where the whole body or face is visible: one of my sister and one of my brother as a child. Here, I felt it was okay to include the photographs as the images are small, blurry and depict my siblings from a bygone time.

In 2018, I interviewed three unwed mothers I got in touch with through the KUMFA association. This was before the book was part of a doctoral project. The women did not speak English and I brought an interpreter and a doc-

ument translated into Korean that described the book project and what the interviews would be used for. The interviews took about an hour per person and were recorded and transcribed into text. Then I typed up the interviews containing both names and quotes and fitted them into the graphic novel. That is how it looked until the final phase of this project.

At the time of our meetings, I had their agreement to include their first name and age. I also promised that they would be able to read the interviews when they were finished, to have the chance to adjust anything they were not happy with.

A year or so after the interviews, I reached out to request additional visual material and provide an update on the project. However, I realised that no email address I had was in use anymore and received no reply from them. After this project turned into a PhD project, it became even more important for me to be able to tell the women that the context of the work had changed, even if the narrative remained largely the same. Despite asking around for tips and clues, I have no way of contacting the women I interviewed, and thus have not been able to get updated consent to feature them as interviewees with quotes and details that personify their stories. Unwed mothers face strong stigma in South Korea and I fully understand if their life situations have changed, or if the organisation does not want to share their contact information. I have therefore chosen to completely remove the interviews in the format I initially wrote them in, and instead I greatly shortened and summarised them as my experience of meeting these women and their stories.

It is unfortunate that their stories could not be told in the book as originally intended, as there was a point in including the voices of other people who would not be anonymised or become a large group of "women". In this case, I felt I had no choice and that their consent was more important.

I often think of these three women and their moving stories and hope they are living brighter lives today. I want to thank them for our meetings and I hope we will have the chance to meet again.

### AI

I have used generative AI tools in both my artistic and investigative process. My general approach to AI is cautiously positive, but I believe that its development and use needs to be regulated, criticised, analysed and made transparent and clear. AI must be adapted to comply with copyright rules, laws and ethical guidelines. Its use must be disclosed and made visible.

I don't think AI will replace the need for artists, illustrators, writers and translators. These are professions with artistic knowledge that machine learning cannot match. However, we see how the fascination with this new technology is being exercised and tested. Children's books with full AI-generated images may have been sold, but the consumer has only bought a book with anatom-



ically incorrect bodies. This may be sad, but it is not wrong. We won't be able to stop a wave where the limits and capabilities of AI images are tested. But we can have conversations about the invaluable knowledge, status and value of artists. We can question what happens to quality if we value time and efficiency at the expense of visual craft, linguistic and emotional knowledge. We can and should continuously scrutinise, criticise and influence the ethical framework of AI and fight copyright infringement and protect the visual integrity of creators.

Ultimately, AI is just a tool without agency or intent, but power, influence and capital are interests that drive and generate unethical behaviours. AI is both a tool to be used in creative endeavours as well as a threat to some of us. The threat is the change, and being able to set up legal frameworks as the technology evolves. The threat is that the industry will change, shift and that means uncertainty. We don't know exactly what will happen, that's scary. But this uncertainty will harbour both positive and negative change, I believe. Regardless, I am convinced that AI cannot replace human artistic creation. It can be imitated, but we also learn to identify imitations with the passing of time.

In terms of image processing, I have used Photoshop's built-in AI function. I have no knowledge of, or experience with, other image AI programmes.

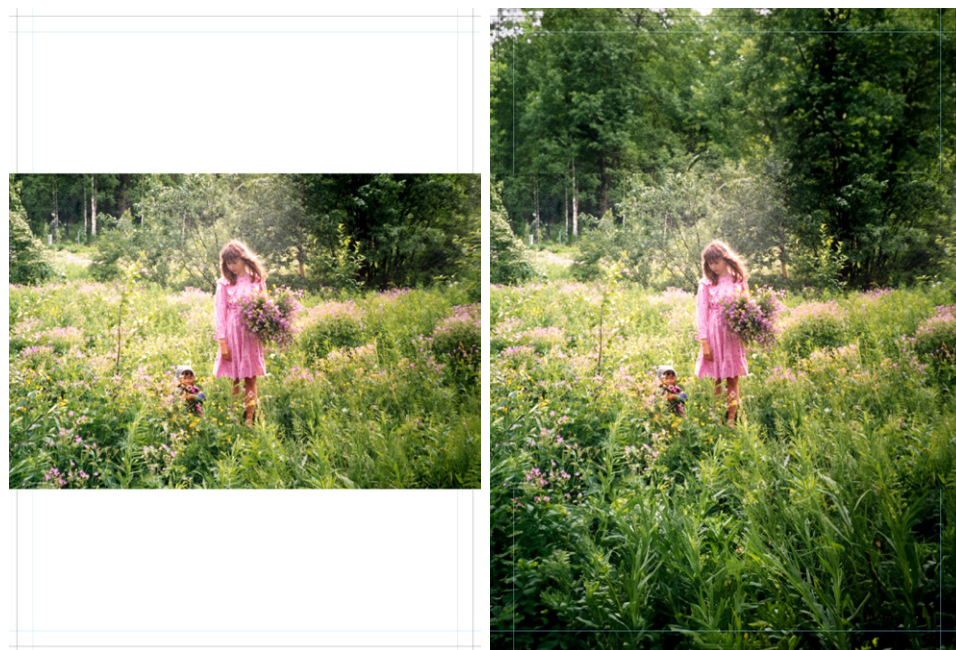


Figure 34. AI and Generative fill on own photograph.

Example: On page 69, the original photo does not fill the whole page but leaves white, empty fields. Here I have used Photoshop's AI function "Generative fill", where I have selected an area and without a prompt let the programme fill in the selection based on what is already in the image. I found

the result useful, as the photograph now fills the entire page, with no trace of collage or borders. The AI-generated material was a seamless repetition of foliage, twigs and branches. It is not visible at a glance, but the added material has no artistic merit either. In my opinion, the photo retains its artistic integrity both with and without the added fields, and the added fields have not altered the core, content or feeling of the image.

On page 120 I have used Katsushika Hokusai's, *Seaside Village in Snow*, from 1814 (thus copyright free). It is a woodcut from the book *Hokusai's Album of Pictures from Nature*. The principle was the same here. The original image did not fill the page and Photoshop's "Generative fill" filled in the blanks. As this is an original image where the materiality is clear, with texture, dirt and discolouration, knowing this, you can see that the AI-generated part differs from the original. The AI part is more vague and blurred. (The reindeer is painted digitally afterwards, without the help of AI)

Here I reasoned that the woodcut was a background, which was stretched with the help of AI and became a canvas that I could fill in. In my image, the woodcut represents a style, an era more than it depicts a farm in a winter landscape.



Image 35. Stock-photo frame and AI-generated frame.

Page 20, which shows a Lucia celebration in a photo frame. I originally used a photograph of a frame to create contrast with the rest of the hand-painted image. The photograph was a stock photo and ultimately too low resolution for me to use. Here I tried using Generative fill with prompts, i.e. instead of letting the computer fill in selected fields based on other information in the image, I typed in words that guided what the generated content should be filled with. For example, I tried "antique golden photo frame", "old gold photo

frame ornamented” but did not get any results that were close enough to the original image I had. When I tried similar prompts that described “painted” instead of “photo”, the computer at least started to show frames that were stylistically similar to the one I was looking for, even though the images were now imitating paintings rather than a photo. In the end, I chose a generated frame that looked painted but with some photorealism.

The fact that I could generate the frame that might as well have been a stock photo, instead of painting it by hand saved me several hours. In this case, I felt that the frame did not have a weight-bearing role on the craftsmanship of the image, and that the digital collage allowed for both a stock photo or a non-hand painted frame. In these examples, I have used AI where I felt I could save time, work more efficiently and where the AI-generated part did not undermine the artistic work or weaken my presence in the image.

My knowledge of the AI tools in the Adobe suite is very limited, but the way I've used AI in these examples, I've found them to be useful tools. Instead of manually creating textures that end up in the background, or looking for stock photos of simple objects, I can ask the computer to generate these for me. However, I don't want to use AI-generated images that are responsible for the narrative of the image. For example, I don't want to generate whole characters, figures or objects that tell the story or are told about. Then I feel that my presence as an illustrator has been diluted. I wouldn't ask AI to generate the mannerisms or styles of any named creator where copyright applies.

Creators are constantly looking for methods, strategies and tools to make their work easier. I believe AI can also be an extremely useful one. This is not the same as letting AI-focussed work replace trained, artistically skilled, experienced, reflective, socially responsible creators. It's a cost-cutting strategy that will cost us quality.

For transparency, I have listed on which pages, in addition to the above, I used AI tools, as well as a brief summary of the extent to which AI was used.

P. 9-10 Generative fill to extend the outer red-blue frame by 2 cm in the centre of the spread.

P. 77-78 Generative fill to extend the flower border and the pine border about 3 cm so they can meet in the centre of the spread.

P. 115-116 Generative fill. On the right side, the original painting left an empty space of about 3-4 cm towards the right edge. AI filled in there to fill the entire spread.

P. 157-158 Generative fill. The entire background was AI-generated and based on Jung's illustration (the colour palette) which I then painted over digitally.

P. 171 Generative fill. In the background is a blue pattern with fish scale-like shapes. I had a stock photo of the scales that was too small to cover the page,

and asked AI to repeat the pattern to get a larger image.

P. 184 Generative fill to remove the embroidery text and create a blank textile canvas.

See the Svenska Tecknares' AI Principles.<sup>106</sup>

## DeepL – translation tool

DeepL is a professional translation tool that I was introduced to in the final stages of my work. It has both paid and free versions and I have translated text from Swedish to English using the browser-based free tool.

Initially, I was prepared to present the entire Companion in Swedish because it was faster and easier for me to write in Swedish. I thought there would be no time or budget to have it translated into English by a professional translator.

After trying DeepL, a better version of Google Translate, I realised that I could do the translation work myself using the tool. This way, my budget would be sufficient and I would have time to share materials in English for my seminars. This in turn meant that I could invite non-Swedish speaking participants.

Unlike the AI work on the images, this is a compromise. I realise that machine translation will generate a clumsier text with many errors, which in turn will require many manual corrections. I accept this this time because it enables me to defend my thesis with an English version. That's how I see it: the English version is a more unpolished version of the Swedish one and obviously not translated with the same feeling and accuracy as if it had been translated by a professional translator.

## Image references and image citations

The Companion contains a number of images for which I am not the copyright holder. I felt it was important that this part of my thesis was also visual and included visual material.

Where possible, I have asked the copyright holder if I could include their image in my thesis and in what context and to what extent it will be shown. In cases where I have not directly asked the copyright holder for permission to use the image in the thesis, I have relied on what the Swedish Copyright Act says about image citation, with the guidance of a lawyer.

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<sup>106</sup> Svenska Tecknare, *AI-principer från Svenska Tecknare*, <https://svenskatecknare.se/ai-hallning/svenska-tecknares-ai-principer/> [accessed 2024-11-18]

23 § of the Copyright Act contains an exception that gives the right to reproduce published works of art and images by means of image quotation. Image citations may be made for scientific or research purposes that are not produced for commercial or profit-making purposes. The right only applies if the reproduction is made in accordance with good practice and to the extent justified by the purpose, i.e. the same requirements as apply to other types of citation under 22 §.

There is less guidance on what constitutes good practice and what is reasonable for the purpose. As far as non-image quotations are concerned, it is thought that good practice implies loyalty and restraint when using other people's works. The purpose requirement can be interpreted to mean that a quotation should always normally be part of something else, generally a larger work. The quoted work must be used to illustrate something in what is a principal work.

Furthermore, with regard to the exception for quotations, it has been stated that the quotation is generally an aid within the framework of one's own work, where the work quoted is, for example, criticised or used to emphasise one's own positions. In other words, quotations may not be used solely to increase the entertainment value of one's own product.<sup>107</sup> Doctoral theses are given as examples of non-commercial scientific presentations.<sup>108</sup>

In this thesis I have considered it good practice to show others' images without being harmful or defamatory. Where there has been criticism, opinion or analysis, I have made it clear that it is my own opinion and all images are credited.

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<sup>107</sup> SOU 1956:25, *Upphovsmannarätt till litterära och konstnärliga verk* [Copyright in literary and artistic works], pg. 199.

<sup>108</sup> Prop. 2004/05:110, *Upphovsrätten i informationssamhället - genomförande av direktiv* [Copyright in the information society - implementation of directives], 2001/29/EG, m.m., pg. 395.



## The end

How can one bear to live in this society? Witnessing and participating in all the inhumanity.

We try to put up with ourselves, despite all the guilt, shame and responsibility, everything we should do but do not. Is that why we turn to art? There are no answers here either, but we can be comforted by small echoes of humanity. Her ability to survive and create at the same time.

One day in November 2024, I visited the Victoria and Albert Museum in London for the first time. A museum that exhibits art, crafts and objects from all over the world.

Completely mesmerised, I tried to take in their collection. Incredible ornamented objects. Ancient. Unbelievable. Unreal. I had never seen such beautiful, elaborate craft objects, so charged that they vibrated. Precious, perfect, made by human hands. Hardly alone in asking myself: “How could something as beautiful as this be created by man, the smallest and most flawed of creatures on earth?”

We live in this chaotic contrast. Although the objects vibrate with knowledge and beauty, some objects vibrate by being removed from their original environment. Where the violence of colonialism is embedded in the pillars of the museum.

What can we do when the most beautiful and delightful things seem to be marked by violence and oppression? Ignorance, polarisation and simplification are the loudest voices in political debate. It is easy to be paralysed by apathy and a sense of hopelessness.

A once-stolen museum artefact can vibrate with injustice and greatness at the same time. If art makes me feel something, defeat can't be absolute, can it? As long as we are horrified, angry, tired and want to tell the story of injustice for tomorrow, there is hope.

I encounter vibrant art everywhere, not just in grand institutions like the Victoria and Albert Museum. It vibrates when Konstfack students make art. Painting, performance, illustration, design, animation and more. They come with resistance, perseverance, curiosity. Hope.

It vibrates when teachers support each other and their students to make art. When they encourage students to be socially responsible, critically thinking makers whose work has the potential to illuminate, change, challenge, encourage, criticise, question, subvert, overturn and more!

When I am close to art, that is, close to the people who make art, I can bear with myself and then I can bear with the world. This is a place of emotion, a place of resistance and activity. Even my work, microscopic in the world, has

been created with the hope of contributing something. To change something. To say something.

I know quite a lot, I want to know a lot more and there is a huge amount that I know nothing about. I can only be as transparent and clear as possible about what I think I know and what I don't know. This is work that does not hide mistakes and shortcomings. It is a natural part of doing research.

At the end of this journey, I can look back and, with an overview of the work, create an image of what I have achieved and yet failed to achieve.

As mentioned earlier, a fundamental principle of illustration is the communicative aspect. Illustration is interested in and takes into account the recipient/reader/audience and the illustrator often continues to follow their work even when it is “released to the world”. How has it been received? How was it understood and read? How did people interact with it? What do I learn from it for the next project?

This Companion will unfortunately not be able to report on these important parts of the work, as the thesis is disseminated, released to the world on the day of my defence. The work will live on after that, but the analysis of that encounter is missing here, as it belongs to the future and is outside the scope of my PhD programme.

However, this work has met a kind of test audience on a few occasions during the doctoral programme. As a doctoral student, it is part of the programme that the project must be presented publicly at least three times. These are called stage seminars, and an external discussant must be invited to identify the project's strengths and weaknesses. The stage seminars do not function as examinations but as opportunities for the doctoral student to receive feedback and recommendations on how the work can be developed. The doctoral student can control the size and format of the seminar.

For my combined 80%+90% seminar, we invited Dr Rachel Emily Taylor, Course Leader of the BA Illustration programme at Camberwell College of Arts, Associate Editor of the Journal of Illustration and member of the Management Committee of Illustration Educators.

Taylor picked up on the graphic novel's literal and figurative reference to paper. “I was born out of paper” or “a blank page, ready to be re-written” when she reflected on my project:

Paper is not always smooth, it can cut. Paper cuts can be very painful, although not noticeable, as they may not bleed very much at all. An invisible pain. They often take time to heal, and if knocked, the wound can reopen. Like each revisitation of a painful memory. This gnawing feeling of paper cut stays with me during my reading of Cecilia's work.<sup>109</sup>

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109 Rachel Emily Taylor, her response to my project during the 90% stage seminar, 2025-01-15

Taylor's likening of the work to a “papercut” was unexpected but fitted in well with the way the graphic novel was presented. I appreciated her ability to recognise and respond to the work with the same sensitivity and gentleness. A paper cut is exactly as she describes it - small and delicate, yet painful and tangible. Furthermore, Taylor wondered how a project that works through the personal, intimate and sometimes painful, can and should also include and address self-care, and the potential for healing, for those who wish to follow in similar footsteps.

Rachel Emily Taylor identified and asked for methods or strategies that promote emotional sustainability and I had to admit that during the course of the project I have been working in the absence of this very thing. This is despite understanding how important it is in self-exhausting work. In hindsight, I would like to reflect on this, even if I am still looking for answers myself.

## Pillars of support

I would like to emphasise that I have never been left alone in this project. I have had colleagues, supervisors and administrative bodies that have provided a stable base to work from. Without all this, I would never have been able to carry out a project on this scale.

A doctoral student is usually assigned at least two supervisors. The division of roles and responsibilities between the different supervisors may differ between different doctoral programmes. For me, my main supervisor was the one who had an overall responsibility for my work and who followed me through the whole journey from start to finish. Secondary supervisors were selected where we felt that complementary or specialised expertise relevant to the project was needed. There were also formalities that required at least one of my supervisors to have a PhD.

Two years into the programme, my new second supervisor was Dr Moa Matthis, Senior Lecturer in History, Theory and Context. Moa Matthis became involved in my project with the responsibility of looking closely at text both in the graphic novel and in the Companion. She has been invaluable in working on the Companion in particular. At the beginning of the writing process, she helped me to reorganise and re-evaluate. I was encouraged to evaluate whether I was writing about something, or in a certain way because it was expected of me, or because it was relevant to my project. Many times I and many others have been amazed at how Moa, whose main tools are writing and text, has always been ready to defend images. Moa has a deep understanding of the possibilities and limitations of both images and text. She made me look for the purpose the text needed. Its role, its voice. The differences between when the text describes a doing and when the text does, performs.

My main supervisor since day one has been Professor of Illustration Sara Tleman. She has been there, answering questions, supporting and cheering me on

every single day, throughout this long project. Even when I spent four months in South Korea, we were in regular contact, despite the 8-hour time difference and the fact that the support I needed during that time was often more emotional than intellectual.

I have always looked forward to our tutoring sessions and I have always left them feeling lifted, encouraged, clearer. Sara gives feedback with such clarity, humility and insight.

Sara's feedback on my project and her ability to go into both detail and overview has refined the graphic novel in particular. She has always understood my intentions and helped me clarify them, helping me stand up for my images and the format of the project. Her expertise in both the history of illustration and in illustration as a practice encouraged my work to be loyal to illustration as a research subject. We both see possibilities in transdisciplinary practices in illustration but at the same time want to safeguard that illustration is formulated and established as an independent field, by illustrators themselves, where illustration is given the main role.

Overall, it is up to the doctoral student to shape and take responsibility for their project and to some extent their education. Here I made a personal decision to work alone. Lacking experience of other ways of working, but also based on a kind of idea that the field of illustration can benefit from not being formulated on the basis of transdisciplinary projects, giving instead full attention and space to illustration as a discipline in its own right. I chose not to involve other influential actors, partners or artistic research practices.

I still believe that the subject of illustration benefits from being distinctive and self-assertive, but I now realise how I somewhat hastily overlooked the fact that collective work and collaboration need not dilute the distinctiveness or integrity of the subject field. It has been extremely difficult and at times unmotivating to work alone in this way. Emotionally and mentally, I found myself constantly questioning whether what I was doing was of any value.

I wish I had dared to ask for more help and support. In the final stages of this project, I invited people to help me finalise it in various ways. I deeply regret that these valuable resources were not involved earlier. Not only because it would have favoured the timeframe and workload of the project, but above all because I found that the participation and involvement of other people in my work made it more enjoyable, warm and rewarding. Was it the solitude that made me crash into a creative wall?

As mentioned earlier, I am aware that the people who helped me in this project were invaluable but participated in a limited and orchestrated way. I have a lot to explore and learn about truly collective and organised collaborations, something I will definitely implement more in future projects.

Even the pillars that are easy to overlook in life have been extremely important. Making room for and having free time. Meeting friends. Treating your-

self. Going to the gym. They are a different kind of foundation for mental wellbeing, which has nevertheless dictated whether or not I could finish this project.

### “Good enough” and compromises:

Another strategy for sustainability and something I have been practising during the project is the idea of being good enough. The times this project has stopped and I have felt paralysed are the times I have doubted my own capacity and whether my work can live up to both my expectations and those of others. I feel a strong responsibility for this project, which is funded by taxpayers' money, but it is of no value to anyone if I crumble under too much pressure and stress.

Under supervision, I was reminded that there is life even after a PhD, and that this project is a licence for more research endeavours, a building block on the way, not the end. I “only” need to do what is required to be passed and that is fine. It may seem superfluous to have to point this out, or it is perhaps necessary for women in particular, who suffer a higher risk of mental illness than men during their doctoral studies.<sup>110</sup> For me, it was valuable to realise that this is not my only life project, even though it has sometimes felt like it. The reminder of good enough has made me accept and feel okay with the parts of it I wish were even better.

Above all, I wish I could have developed more and more varied ways of combining text and illustration. Where the text could have become an image to an even greater extent, or where it could have explored a more organic space between text and image. In this case, it was probably the timeframe that made me deprioritise this research, which would have been needed to improve the overall aesthetic completion of the graphic novel as a whole.

I also wish that, within the timeframe of my doctoral programme, there had been time to both complete the thesis and have it published by a commercial publisher. But that ambition was not at all realistic. Instead, the compromise was to print a very limited edition for my defence, and after graduation to try to get the project published by a publisher interested in disseminating the work to the public.

The time-consuming work of preparing and formatting the thesis for physical print also meant that compromises had to be made in regards to linguistic accessibility. The Companion was written in Swedish and only received a temporary English translation for the defence. In this case, both budget and time constraints prevented a professional translation into English.

110 Sanna Bergvall, Clara Fernström, Anna Ranehill and Anna Sandberg, *The Impact of PhD Studies on Mental Health—A Longitudinal Population Study*, Department of Economics, Gothenburg, 2024

### The road goes ever on and on...

Don't be afraid to be afraid. Somewhere, it must mean that you care. It is meaningful.

Many, many years after I first read Joanna Rubin Dranger's illustrated book *Fröken Märkvärdig och Karriären*, (Miss Remarkable and Her Career), I borrow it from the library and read it again. The first time I read it, I was a young adult, small and not confident in my own future. It was dark and Miss Remarkable with her enormous performance anxiety and constant impostor syndrome felt like my own reflection. I was touched and moved by the fact that my state of being was illustrated, that another human being could empathise with these feelings.

Now I am reading it again, as an adult. I am more steady on the ground, have things to hold on to and have considerably more experience under my belt. Still, I cry when I see Joanna's illustration of the *Mörkermonstret*, (The Darkness monster) holding back, hugging and suffocating Miss Remarkable as she heads out to “wander out into the world to fight windmills”.



Image 36. Illustration by Joanna Rubin Dranger from the comic book *Fröken märkvärdig & Karriären*, Albert Bonniers Förlag, 2002

I am still Miss Remarkable and yet not. I realise that I will never get rid of the fear of not being enough. Of always doubting myself. Of not being sufficient. But just like Miss Remarkable, I have to learn to live with monsters and also allow myself to be a small human.

It scares the life out of me to finish and leave this project that was started 10 years ago to the world. At the same time, I want nothing more than to move on now. To finish. To work on something else.



But delivering is definitive. What will people think and say? In ten years, in one year, I will not be the same person I am today. I will certainly look back at this project and want to change, add or take away. I hope I will be proud. I also think I will regret some things.

I stand by everything I illustrated and wrote, but the project is as far from perfect as I am far from perfect. I have done my best. Maybe this is what is like to leave something behind.

The journey continues and I look forward to seeing where this project takes me. The companion and the graphic novel have already described what went well and what was less successful or did not go according to plan. But something I never anticipated along the way was how much I would enjoy teaching.

I had relatively little teaching experience when I started the PhD programme but the more I got to meet the students and the more I was able to shape the course content, the more I found how great it was to work in the role of a mentor or educator. Sometimes I secretly wished I could stop researching and teach instead. Teaching was hard work. But fun! Teaching is in itself a craft that is honed and improved.

I cannot wait to meet more students and become a better teacher. I long to be part of their amazing work, to see them develop, to see them develop me.

I hope that this project can inspire and guide others.

Until we meet again, my friend.

The Road goes ever on and on  
Out from the door where it began.  
Now far ahead the Road has gone,  
Let others follow it who can!<sup>111</sup>

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111 J.R.R Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1955

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