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## *The Importance of Being Ethnic:*

*A Study of Ethnic Optionality amongst Swedish Second and Third  
Generation European Immigrants*

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## **Abstract**

This Bachelor's thesis examines the individual motivations behind shaping an ethnic identity in order to become interesting to oneself and others. Through understanding how people shape an ethnic identity, what values lie beneath, and placing it into the context of postmodern demands on the identity, this study argues that an ethnic identity may serve a purpose of generating cultural capital and social status. This study thus works as a contribution to the notion of symbolic ethnicity. Scholars on the matter, most notably Gans (1979) Waters (1990) and Alba (1990), have previously treated the prevalence of ethnic identities amongst white third and later generations of European descent, as outcomes of American assimilation process. Ethnic optionality is thus according to their findings, a sign of vanishing salience in diversity among European ethnic groups, that earlier organized much of social life. I argue, however, that the meaning of shaping an ethnic identity, functions as a value creation process for the personality, in an era, whose forces demand uniqueness of the individual.

**Keywords:** *social anthropology; ethnicity; identity; Sweden; symbolic ethnicity*

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## Preface

*I'm sitting in a room together with thirty other soon-to-be high school graduates. It's an intimate setting and we're eating, drinking, cheering, and most importantly, celebrating the end of three intense years of study spent together at a high school in central Stockholm. Amusing, pun-like awards and titles are being handed out whilst we're seated at the long-ended dining tables. The awards given to each student are small plates made out of paper with a motivation behind the labeled header "The ... of the class", collective, socially agreed symbols of what role the students have had and what social position they've taken in their class.*

*Amidst the chanting and clinking I hear my name being called in the microphone. I walk up to the stage and the toastmaster for the evening hands me a plate with a drawing of the Italian peninsula on it. As I'm receiving the award the toastmaster exclaims: "Few are those who can shift instantaneously from yelling "shut up" in the classroom to with ease seduce a girl in the corridor. This combination of anger management issues and fiery passion makes Peter Schwartz the Southern European of the class". My friends and I, who I've spent five days a week together with for the last three years laugh out loud.*

# 1. Introduction

Where does the line between *feeling* and *being* something go? That was the question that set the point of departure for this essay. Let me be more specific of how this had been manifested in my case. I grew up in a regular middle-class family in Sweden and for the most part, I felt like I was just as normal as other kids. Then, along the years and after several visits at various friends' grandparents, I started asking myself questions why I had to call my grandmother by the Italian word for grandma, *nonna*, instead of the Swedish *mormor*. During the following years my grandmother frequently told me that I was part Italian and from my Italian language teacher, I understood that I had Italian facial features. In national football games I cheered for Italy more than Sweden and at family dinners we discussed quirky Swedes and Italian politics. My relationship to Italy grew year by year and it was not long till I spoke the language and wanted to explore my Italian "side" further.

As a consequence, I began to subtly differ myself a little bit from everyone else in typically Swedish crowds. I had started to distinguish myself from others, as many teenagers do, and related the many distinctions to my ethnicity. At this point in my life, I *felt* Italian. By referring to my Italian side, I allowed myself and was allowed by others to speak louder than everyone else and revolt against Swedish social conformity. The differences between my own-invented stereotype "the Swede" and me, grew larger and larger the more I went to Italy, the better I learnt Italian and most importantly, the more I spoke about *being* Italian.

But I *was* not Italian, was I? I lived and grew up in Sweden, spoke Swedish fluently, did not have an Italian citizenship and had by now been told by many that I looked Swedish. My relation to Italy and its culture was undoubtedly present, but ultimately, very marginal being a third generation immigrant. Nevertheless, this thin relationship did not hinder me from continuing to use my ethnicity as an indication of being a little bit more interesting than everybody else.

As I grew older, got a job and a vacuum cleaner, my world perspective broadened. I understood that people who had emigrated from non-European countries and their children, who had grown up in Sweden, were fighting to expand the established boundaries of "Swedishness". The nationalist forces hindering these people from being included in Swedish society said that their "different cultures" were threatening to Swedish culture. In my case, I had worn my ethnicity as something that

made me stand out as something advantageous, and these people had to carry it as a burden. Was there a two-faced nature of ethnicity? What prerequisites were underlying in order to *be* ethnic instead of *feeling* ethnic? It was from these initial wonderings I wanted to explore the matter further.

## 1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of ethnic identities. Particularly, I want to examine why white second and third generation immigrants of European descent choose to ethnify themselves. This tendency has in the previous literature been noted as *symbolic ethnicity*. The scholars who have studied it before have mainly done so in American society and its relation to assimilation theory. In my thesis, I want to contribute further to the field of symbolic ethnicity with proposing another angle on the reason to why people shape an ethnic identity. The main research questions for this essay are:

- *What societal preconditions are essential in order for a person's ethnic identity to be thought of as a "spice" to the personality?*
- *If a person has an ancestral ethnic origin other than Swedish, what factors will determine whether one will or will not present oneself as ethnic?*
- *What features of the postmodern era make it needful for the individual to feel unique?*

## 1.2 Previous Research

To be able to guide these research questions further, it is crucial to examine the existing academic field of ethnicity amongst whites and what it entails. I found the previous research to be rather scarce and exclusively traceable to American scholars working in the US. This is due to the fact that America has a long tradition of immigration, paired with long termed political and social issues of how to integrate ethnic communities into mainstream society (Waters, 1990: 1). American politics has thus historically turned to sociology, and more recently to anthropology, for knowledge on these matters (Waters, 1990: 1). Below, I present three scholars who have most famously treated the subject of symbolic ethnicity or ethnic optionality amongst whites: Herbert J. Gans (1979), Mary C. Waters (1990) and Richard D. Alba (1990).

Herbert J. Gans was the first academic to coin the term *symbolic ethnicity* in his paper *Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America* (1979). According to Gans, symbolic ethnicity is “characterized by a nostalgic allegiance to the culture of the immigrant generation, or that of the old country” (Gans, 1979: 9). Departing in his observations of the significance of ethnicity for third generation immigrants in America, Gans argues that ethnicity is symbolic in that one’s commitment to an ethnicity is not dependent on cultural practices in everyday life (Gans, 1979: 9-12). According to Gans then, ethnic needs amongst third generation immigrants are not crucial for collective social solidarity under the hardships of minority-status, but revolves instead around matters of identity, one of *feeling* Japanese, Mexican etc. expressed through commonly known symbols in mainstream culture of that particular ethnicity (Gans, 1979).

Imperative to the ethnical symbolic usage, according to Gans, is the common knowledge about what the symbols represent in mainstream society. They must therefore be “visible and clear in their meaning”, as well as “easily expressed and felt” to a large group of the population, without imposing on the practicality of everyday life (Gans, 1979: 9). Gans provides examples of sources of symbolic ethnic usages, which vary from consuming goods and foods to identifying with political groups of the ethnicity (Gans, 1979: 10-11). What these diverse usages of symbolic ethnicity have in common, is that they ultimately serve the same purpose, to express one’s ethnicity in a frame of knowledge that primarily is made recognized by mass media and consequently graspable to wider society (Gans, 1979: 10).

Gans argues and concludes that what had before seemed to be an ethnic revival by third generation immigrants, is in fact a sign of a new form of the continuing assimilation<sup>1</sup> and acculturation in American society (Gans, 1979: 2, 6-7). Symbolic ethnicity is thus in the light of acculturation and assimilation, according to Gans, the last resort of ethnicity (Gans, 1979: 2). This is a trend that may be prolonged in several generations to come, but is nevertheless a sign of adjustment and ultimately ethnicity is destined to disappear as factor of identity construction (Gans, 1979: 18).

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<sup>1</sup> Assimilation is, according to Gordon Milton, when different ethnic groups interact, a gradual process where cultural differences tend to disappear over generations. The arguments to support this argument are shown in frequency in intermarriage across ethnic groups and the decline in various cultural practices that beforehand were central to the maintenance of solidarity in ethnic groups. (Milton 1964)

Following Gans' notion of symbolic ethnicity, Mary C. Waters further expands the research field on later generational ethnics in her book *Ethnic Options* (1990). Conducting sixty in-depth interviews with third and fourth generation descendants of white European immigrants in two American suburbs during the late 80s, Waters develops Gans findings by focusing on what happens to ethnic identification when the structural factors maintaining them are not evident in daily life (Waters, 1990: 11).

Waters' informants in the suburbs, according to her, are the results of white ethnical upward social mobility in American society. They are mostly college-educated and the first generation in their family with a professional occupation, such as lawyers, doctors and teachers etc. (Waters, 1990: 12). Furthermore, the informants are exclusively white of European origin. Specifically, the majority consisted of Italian and Polish heritages, but later mentioned informants also involve Americans of Portuguese, Scottish, Welsh, English, German, French, Slovenian, Lithuanian, Serbian, Norwegian, Dutch, American Indian, Spanish, Russian and Czech backgrounds (Waters, 1990: 14).

The focus on white ethnics is, because of her research questions, a conscious choice according to Waters. Her main interest was what significance their ethnic origin bears or does not bear in her informants' lives and how they accordingly choose to identify with their ethnic origin as people in the "last stage of assimilation" (Waters, 1990: 12). To choose an ethnicity, rather than being ascribed one, is according to Waters a matter of racial reasons. To interview non-white third generation ethnics, then, is according to her a very different experience and process for people in American society and she thus deemed it unproductive for her research (Waters, 1990: 12).

Waters concludes from her findings that ethnic identity is something that does and does not matter to her informants (Waters, 1990: 147). An ethnic identity for white Americans does not impose on choices of whom you marry, where you decide to live, what job you will have, and most importantly, if you will be subjected to discrimination (Waters, 1990: 147). However, ethnic markers carry significance in peoples' narratives of who they are and where they come from, which is reinforced over generations through the storytelling to their children (Waters, 1990: 147).

Waters points to two reasons in American society why ethnic identities linger as a factor for identity construction and preservation. She argues it is generated in a paradox within the American ideology: the importance of a sense of individuality on the one side, and feeling of community on the other (Waters, 1990: 147). According to Waters then, a characteristic of American ideology is the urge of belonging to a greater

community, but without the conforming and restraining parts that it entails, which demand responsibility and compromises on the freedom that comes with individuality (Waters, 1990: 154). Second, she argues that ethnic options are possible because of American race relation structures (Waters, 1990: 156). The very notion of ethnic optionality is a privilege to white people according to Waters. Being part of the dominating race in America, her informants did not reflect much upon the fact how they could “slip in and out of their ethnic roles” without complication (Waters, 1990: 158). Waters contends that in the above-mentioned ways, symbolic ethnicity is not as significant to white “European ethnics” as they are for people whose ethnicity and skin color is not the hegemonic white European (Waters, 1990: 154).

Like Waters and Gans, Richard D. Alba connects assimilation theory to the trend of symbolic ethnicity in *Ethnic Identity: The Transformation of White America* (1990). He argues in the book that ethnicity among whites of European origin in the United States, is undergoing a transformation, and that the differences that used to distinguish European ethnicities apart from one another are now fading (Alba, 1990: 3). Consequently, he argues, the development of this tendency will ultimately turn into a new ethnic group of European ethnics in the US, regardless of which European country one’s ethnicity entails (Alba, 1990: 3). Alba identifies historic social changes in the previous significance of ethnicity amongst white ethnics in America. In the wake of European immigration to America, Alba notes that Protestant groups from the British Isles occupied the top of this ethnic hierarchy. Following, in the middle were other northern and western European groups, and at the bottom were the newly arrived Southern Europeans to be found (Alba, 1990: 4). According to Alba, this changed during the post-Second World War period, and the boundaries of whiteness expanded due to certain factors. Amongst other relevant aspects, Alba argues these factors were an increased generational distance from the first generation immigrant and social mobility. These developments naturally lead to a decline in the mother-tongue knowledge and usage, as well as a higher frequency of interethnic marriages amongst whites (Alba, 1990: 5-11).

In his conclusions, Alba makes only brief speculations about what significance ethnic identities may hold for whites in the third and fourth generations. Just as Waters, he observes that ethnic identities for later generations might have more to do with the individualistic culture in America and that an ethnic identity might bear advantages in an individualistic society (Alba, 1990: 300, 306). He notes a tendency of educated

Americans to identify themselves in ethnic terms as a contradiction to the preconceptions of conventional assimilation theory, and speculates that to ethnify oneself might bear a function of cultural capital for younger generations (Alba, 1990: 308).

The previous research on ethnic optionality amongst whites has mainly been done by sociologists, whose research is often preoccupied with a methodology focused on graphs and surveys on themes such as demographics and public health statistics. The method used in this essay, which will be further explained in the methodological chapter of this essay, has been fundamentally different from examines of surveys and statistics. Further, the research scope of my essay is restricted to Sweden only, and because of this, the focus on assimilation perspectives in my study is more or less absent. However, I argue, that many similar tendencies that Alba and Waters noted amongst second and third generation immigrants of European origin are found in my results. Thus, their research will be referred to throughout the analysis.

Still, the existing field on symbolic ethnicity is relatively small and has been treated most famously in academia by the above-mentioned scholars. The research is therefore mainly American and thus, as Waters notes (1990: 1), related to assimilation theory. Alba, Waters and Gans therefore see symbolic ethnicity, as a trend or evidence supporting wider assimilation processes in the U.S. While this might be the case for American immigrants, the inquiry of my research is to continue where Alba and Waters left off. With maintaining focus on trying to find evidence to support assimilationist theory, the authors only speculate about what makes ethnic identities attractive for white people with European ancestry. As Alba wondered, to willingly “ethnify” oneself, might generate cultural capital and social status. And as Waters suggests in her conclusion, that desire may be sprung from the individualistic culture generated by capitalism. It is from these speculations I continue with my own study.

### 1.3 Theoretical Framework and Implications

To understand the broader questions of my inquiry on a deeper level, it is necessary to first present the basic and most central theoretical concepts used to understand this phenomenon. Below, I present the theoretical concepts of identity and ethnicity. These are well-established notions that will be frequently used throughout the study and function as the theoretical ground to approach my questions. Further, I apply these concepts in larger frameworks in order to explain who is able to use an ethnic marker in order to gain social status, how ethnic identities are shaped and what factors are relevant in its value creation process, and lastly, why an ethnic identity is advantageous in the postmodern society.

#### *Ethnic Identity & Constructionism*

*Identity* derives from Latin's *idem* (Alsmark, 1997: 9) and means, according to Oxford Dictionaries, "the fact of being who or what a person is" or "the characteristics determining who or what a person is" (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016). Gunnar Alsmark (1997) outlines two important aspects of the concept. The first is that the function of identity is that it essentially serves as a sense of *belonging*, either to a community or cultural tradition, historic as well as social (Alsmark, 1997: 10). The second aspect Alsmark notes is the individual's sense of *continuity*. He argues that a feeling of "selfsameness" is important for the identity, and that the individual's identity in this respect can grow or be reduced to a point where the individual becomes identity-less (Alsmark, 1997: 10). The essential function of identity is thus its power to give the individual a sense of stability and certainty (Alsmark, 1997: 10) in an uncertain world (Melucci, 1996: 159).

*Ethnicity* derives from the Greek word *ethnos*, meaning nation, although its reference is more to the unity of persons of "common blood", or descent, which together constitutes a 'peoples' (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998: 16). According to Melucci, an ethnic group is "defined by a set of common biological-hereditary features and a shared historical-cultural tradition, by certain physical and racial traits" (Melucci, 1996: 145). Ethnicity is thus highly compatible with the identity's need of belonging and continuity, and according to many scholars, it is today a prominent organizing unit of one's identity (Friedman, 2003; Melucci 1996; Cornell & Hartmann 1998; Alsmark 1997).

An ethnic identity, taken from these notions, is the individual's sense of belonging and continuity attributed to a community of 'peoples', who share sameness in descent, biology, history, culture and physical traits. But to conduct my research on a phenomenon where people ethnify themselves in order to become interesting, there is a conceptual insufficiency to the above-mentioned definition of ethnicity. With Gans (1979), Waters (1990) and Alba (1990) studies in hindsight, an important implication that symbolic ethnicity contributes to the definition, is that equal significance and salience of ethnicity lies in the person's self-conception, regardless if he or she share sameness in culture, history, descent etc. with an ethnic group or individuals. Cornell & Hartmann, advocates of the constructionist school, provide an addition to ethnicity when they claim that an ethnic group or identity is *also* "self-consciously ethnic" (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998: 19). The authors follow Richard A. Schermerhorn's definition, who defines an ethnic group as "a collectivity within a larger society having real or *putative* common ancestry, memories of a shared past, and a cultural focus on one or more *symbolic elements* defined as the epitome of their peoplehood" (Schermerhorn, 1978: 12, own italic). This definition includes the informants of Alba's, Waters's and my own study, in that it leaves place to a person's subjective definition of ethnicity as well as it integrates the cultural use of ethnic symbols as a defining factor for ethnic belonging.

Identity construction theory relies on a dynamic interaction between claims of self-ascription made by the individual or group, as well as acknowledgment from outer forces such as family, other ethnic groups or society (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998: 72). Ethnic identity formation is consequently a product of an inter-play between what the individual believes him/herself to be, and what outer forces say what the person is. The constructionist school, which I, in order to make sense of my informants' use of ethnicity, is grounded on Fredrik Barth's (1969) notions of ethnic boundaries. These boundaries are certain criteria of belonging to an ethnic group that are constructed and reproduced through factors such as language knowledge or skin color (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998: 81).

The constructionist school and its connection to Barth's (1969) notion of ethnic boundaries will be used in this essay to understand what prevalent aspects are relevant amongst my informants in their decision to identify with their ethnicity, and how they decide to convey their ethnic identity. Whether they will emphasize or downplay their ethnic marker, and according to what factors, will enable us to understand the dynamics of ethnic identity construction further, but will leave us unaware of the reasons that

might make an ethnic identity desirable. Although Waters and Alba have previously analyzed the significance of ethnicity amongst whites, they did so during the late 80s. The majority of my informants were instead born in the 1990s, which could explain differences in generational attitudes toward ethnic identities. To draw this speculation further, I combine the results of what factors are underlying in their identity creation process, with fundamental features of the postmodern era and what demands it makes on the individual.

### ***Postmodernity & a Narcissistic Society***

Sociologists (Sennett 1976; Lasch 1979; Friedman 2003; Bauman 1992) have noted that our time, the postmodern era, is defined by a state of fragmentation and fluidity. They argue that this is a process of erosion of the modernist Western state, which previously organized much of social life by determining the differences between private and public life. The consequence of this trend has had implications on plausible platforms of belonging, which beforehand was governed by the modernist nation-state. The modernist nation-state, which used to have a monopolized ownership on the individual's identity, now becomes insufficient as this fragmenting process of globalization makes people look to other forms of solidarity. Consequently, Appadurai (1996) calls the changes in the identity post-national, and Melucci (1996) argues that ethnicity, as a source of social solidarity and individual belonging, respond to postmodern identity needs.

While the above-mentioned trend of fluidity and fragmentation leads to confusing feelings of belonging for the individual, I argue that Gans notion of symbolic ethnicity, a self-constructed ethnic identity that does not involve cultural practices of everyday life, does not contain any form of group solidarity. It is therefore more salient to explain it from the observations Christopher Lasch (1979) makes in his book *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. Lasch argues that Western culture in its age of late capitalism has eroded the previous solidarity of socialism and created a narcissistic personality. He notes amongst other things, that with the postmodern shift of capitalist production to consumption, the individual's personality itself becomes a work resource, and the individual thus becomes obsessed with the practice of selling it to others as if it were a commodity (Lasch, 1979: 63). Since symbolic ethnicity has more to do with the individual's identity than plausible

platforms of belonging, the reason to its existence is better traceable to Lasch's implications, than viewing symbolic ethnicity as a form of European solidarity, as Alba (1990) argues.

## **1.4 Disposition**

The following chapters will further explore my research questions in depth. In the following chapter, I describe the method I used to gather my empirical samples. I did so by deep-interviewing 8 people that had shared similar experiences with me and thus I considered them fruitful for my thesis. Following, the chapter "The Change of the Nose Ring" discusses who is able to choose and convey an ethnicity and why. In the chapter "Whole, Half, Three-quarters or Quarter?", I examine the fundamentals of ethnic identities and how they are constructed as well as how my informants position themselves accordingly. The last chapter of the analysis part, "The Importance of Being Ethnic", examines the core question of this thesis, why people whose lives are not troubled by an ethnic identity, choose to convey one anyway. The thesis ends with a section of conclusions and suggestions for further research on the matter of symbolic ethnicity.

## 2. Method

My field is, in a classic anthropological sense, a non-traditional one. My informants were not part of a special community where members met on a frequent basis, on the contrary, many of them were unknown to each other. Thus, the lack of a meeting point well suited for observation, made the anthropological hallmark method *participant observation* unproductive for my research. My informants were middle-class, educated, white men and women, most of them in their twenties. The reason why these people were suitable for my research questions, was mainly because they are people with experiences, sentiments and thoughts about having a different heritage and ethnic marker than the dominant Swedish. To limit the field further, they can be seen part of what Appadurai (1990) calls an *ethnoscape*, or as I argue, a *symbolic-ethnoscape* – a conceptual landscape of people with common experiences of an ethnicity, which does not impede on their daily life, but does however carry significance for the person's self-conception and identity.

### 2.1 A Sensitive Field

Initially, I had ideas of broadening the empirical spectrum of my research to include people with non-European ethnic heritage in my investigation. With regards to the scope of my subject, I reasoned and was advised however, that including non-white experiences in my essay would make the subject of inquiry too broad. In this aspect, I agree with Waters (1990) that the possibility of choosing whether your ethnicity should stand out or be hidden, in Swedish society as well as American, is a matter of white privilege and that non-white experiences in this sense are fundamentally different and consequently, impractical to answer my research questions.

Noting that contemporary Sweden 2015 is a European country with white ethno-nationalist forces represented in government, expressions of racial discrimination become more and more accepted. I noted that the subject of ethnicity was not always an uncomplicated matter to discuss with my informants. Discussions about race in Sweden have been a taboo and instead gone under the notion of ethnicity (Hübinette et al., 2012: 14), which is why many of my informants chose to be anonymous in this essay.

## 2.2 Interviews and List of Informants

In order to collect empirical samples for my research questions, I conducted eight open-ended interviews in the fall of 2015 with informants from Stockholm and Lund. I got in contact with my informants via my personal network, they thus consist exclusively of friends and family. The interviews lasted between 40-60 minutes and were semi-structured, which Davies (2002) explains, are interviews where the purpose of the method is to create an open atmosphere in order for the interviewee to give such open answers as possible, in their own words and unconstrained by the interviewer's preconceptions (Davies, 2002: 95). Thus, my interviews were open conversations, with the initiating question: *How do you define your heritage?* Successively, the conversation revolved around the discussion topic of ethnicity, how my informants had experienced it and how they felt about it. Because of the sensitive field of ethnicity and none the least, white ethnicities, some of my informants chose to be anonymous. Since I see no reason in presenting any of my informants' identities, they will all be described in pseudonyms, age, their claimed ethnicity and gender.

- *Fredrik*, 22 years old, quarter-German, quarter-Estonian and half-Finnish, male.
- *Max*, 22 years old, three-quarter Spanish and quarter-Swede, male.
- *Simonetta*, 50 years old, half-Italian and half-Swedish, female.
- *Sara*, 15 years old, half/quarter-Italian and half/three-quarter Swedish, female.
- *Malin*, 17 years old, half/quarter-Italian and half/three-quarter Swedish, female.
- *Stig*, 23 years old, quarter-Greek and three-quarter Swedish, male.
- *Viktor*, 21 years old, quarter-German and three-quarter Swedish, male.
- *Johanna*, 21 years old, half-Norwegian and half-Swedish, female.

### **3. The Value of an Ethnic Identity**

#### **3.1 The Change of the Nose Ring**

“I guess the reason why I’ve used my Italian-ness is because I, as well as others, would otherwise consider myself too boring. It’s kind of the same thing with my nose piercing that I just removed. I was just going to change it and I was almost crying because I couldn’t get the new one in. I’m very sad about it, because now I feel less unique. And it’s really not that big of a deal, because it’s just a piercing. I can redo it, but I won’t. Nevertheless it was something that made me feel special, that I stood out a little bit more than the others. Kind of like my Italian side” (Malin).

The ability of ethnicity, and more specifically an ethnic identity, to make one feel unique or interesting, is central to the inquiry of my study. As the quote above suggests, significant to the concept of symbolic ethnicity is that it is essentially subjected to individual choice and control. Much like changing a nose piercing, an ethnic identity can be seen as an attribute to the individual, or as many of my informants said, a “spice” to the personality. To occasionally add spice to the personality through ethnic references, where it is possible for the individual to occasionally use or express the other heritage through language use, and various other cultural expressions like foods and attending cultural festivals, is what Waters calls “a slip in and out ethnic roles” (Waters, 1990: 158). What is interesting about this particular performance of an ethnic identity then, is that it is rather flexible, than of a static nature.

As previous scholars on the matter (Waters 1990; Gans 1979; Alba 1990) have noted, a prerequisite for an ethnicity to be subjected to an individual’s choice and used at will, is that it has to carry little or no social organizing significance within the ethnic group or in the eyes of wider society. In order for the ethnicity to be symbolical, it cannot have a practical effect on the individual’s everyday life. More specifically, the ethnicity of choice cannot be a determining factor of what partner you marry, what occupation one specializes in or whether one will be subjected to discrimination. Thus, the symbolic ethnicity is an individual allegiance to what Waters has described as a “costless community” (Waters, 1990: 147), a “personalized ethnicity” (Alba, 1990: 300), and an “ethnicity of last resort” (Gans, 1979: 1).

These scholars argue that the symbolic ethnicity amongst white Europeans in America is an evidence of assimilation in wider American mainstream society. They

conclude that ethnicity for white Americans no longer serves as a primary form of belonging, but is nevertheless an important part of their identity, whose importance will diminish in time (Waters 1990 et al.) In other words, it is an ethnicity that is rather bound to the person's subjective belief and self-conception, than assignation by other people or society in large. Ultimately, symbolic ethnicity revolves more around the sense or *feeling* of belonging to a certain community, than having to participate in cultural practices and prove oneself loyal to an ethnic group (Waters 1990 et al.).

An ethnicity that carries low social significance is what Cornell & Hartmann's calls *thin ethnicity*. The word thin, according to the authors, refers to the comprehensiveness of ethnicity and how it organizes social life for the individual (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998: 74). In South Africa for example, race was a significant social marker before the 1990s, where the color of one's skin regulated all of the social, economic and political activity in the country (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998: 74). Since the 90s, however, following the inauguration of Nelson Mandela and the many political efforts to end South African apartheid resulted in a thinning of the ethnic comprehensiveness of skin color as a social organizing part of South African life (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998: 74).

The thick and thin aspect of ethnicities is thus in relation to factors that change society, such as economics, policy, immigration and migration, a transformational matter (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998: 75). Swedish immigrants, were for example in the US during the 1850s, known and described as filthy and "dumb" because of their difficulty in learning the English language, and accordingly, not as *white* as Anglo-Saxons and Germans (Larsmo, 2013). When the next wave of immigrants arrived in America, namely people of Slavish origin, Swedes got a reputation of being good workers, and as a result, rose in status and became whiter in the eyes of the first-comers to the US (Larsmo, 2013). One of my informants, who grew up in Sweden during the 1960s also noted the transformable character of ethnicity's comprehensiveness. Being the daughter of an Italian immigrant and a Swedish born, she told me that growing up in Sweden with brown hair and brown eyes during that particular time made her stand out amongst the blonde and blue-eyed crowd, in contrast to its "chiqueness" today.

In relation to thick ethnicities, thin ethnicities do not impede on an individual's social life (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998: 75). They do not determine where you live, whom you marry, what job you can get or whether you will be discriminated because of differences in your complexion or cultural customs in relation to the major population.

More generally, a thin ethnicity implies that a person is integrated and accepted in the country's mainstream culture (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998: 76), which has been the case for all of my informants.

“I've always felt that it [the ethnicity] has been a benefit for me, because I stand out amongst others. I've never been just all Swedish. I've always been a little bit extra than others, more interesting. Not like the norm. My ethnicity doesn't include any responsibilities. I don't have to marry a Spanish woman and I'm not raised Catholic, as many other Spaniards. It's more that my South European background has made me more attractive.” (Max)

For many of the people I interviewed, the ability to use an ethnic marker, as a spice to the personality whenever it suited you, was an indication of a thin ethnicity in Swedish society. Just as Waters (1990) concludes however, it is important to highlight the underlying structures that enable my informants, and white ethnics overall in Western societies, to construct an identity and be able to convey it whenever it was practical. Therefore, I cannot stress enough that ethnic optionality is ultimately a matter of white privilege, in Sweden as in America, and that the purpose of this study is not to name and shame the usage of ethnicity for people whose lives are not regulated by it. Neither is it to trivialize ethnicity itself as merely something symbolical for the people in this study, indeed many of my informants had strongly felt ties to their ethnicity. To treat it as something symbolic here, however, is the best conceptual way possible to observe this kind of ethnic performance or trend, which in comparison to thick ethnicities, does not hinder any of my informants' lives in any way. It should be recognized that ethnicity is a prevalent marker for many people whose ethnic features, such as skin color and surname, are subjected to structural discrimination and whose lives are shaped by it in a most oppressive manner. Rather, my study seeks to examine why ethnicity as an identification marker is useful or significant for the people who claim themselves to be ethnic, but are affected by its cruel downside the least.

As it has been discussed in this part of the analysis then, the ability to use an ethnic marker, and in a second be able to switch back to the privileges of passing as a Swede, is ultimately a white privilege. Why then, does ethnic identification still exist for people whose ethnicity is not a determining influence on their lives? Why do white second and third generation immigrants in Sweden ascribe themselves to an ethnicity

when they already are, as one of my informants put it, *Swedish passing*?<sup>2</sup> To be able to answer this question, it is first important to further understand how ethnic identities are constructed. In other words, how does symbolic ethnicity manifest itself for my informants, and what aspects of it are noteworthy in order to understand why white ethnics choose to ethnify themselves?

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<sup>2</sup> Swedish passing derives from the sociological term *passing*. Passing is the ability of a person to be regarded as a member of a social group different from his or her own. In this case, a different race and/or ethnicity, with the goal of gaining social acceptance (Renfrow, 2001). Swedish passing thus, means to be included in the Swedish ethnic norm, which to my informant were matters of racial features such as having white skin, blue eyes and/or blonde hair. It was also the knowledge and practical usage of cultural customs.

### **3.2 Whole, Three quarters, Half or Quarter?**

In my interviews, I found three aspects of symbolic ethnicity to be especially important in the shaping of an ethnic identity. The most significant parts of this process, were to my findings, the informants' views on ancestry, language, and the unique cultural image each ethnicity carried in popular thought. I found that underneath these views, were values of authenticity, legitimacy and desirability. These values will further be discussed in the next chapter.

#### ***All are Ethnic, but Some More than Others***

When I asked my informants in the beginning of our interview to describe their ethnic identity, it was in the partitioning of one's ethnicity into parts of a whole. I often found, however, that this splitting meant two things. First, how the informant used the language use of whole, half and quarter, was in reference to his/her biological mix. A whole-Norwegian person, for example, was thus someone who had contained an ethnicity within the family for four generations or more. To be half-Norwegian, then, meant that one had a whole-Norwegian parent and a whole-Swedish parent. Consequently, to have a half-Norwegian parent and a whole-Swedish one, meant that in sum, you were a quarter product of the different ethnic origin in your gene-pool.

The second way to communicate one's ethnicity was in reference to one's distance from the first ancestor that immigrated. Fredrik, for example, was a third generation German and Estonian, but also a second generation Finnish immigrant. When he spoke of himself in ethnic terms, though, he was a quarter-German and the other parts were not as noteworthy, meaning that he was three-quarters Swedish, since his family on his father's side had been here for three generations.

As the definition of ethnicity goes, it is a matter of ancestry and descent. Waters discusses the popular language use of ethnicity amongst her informants, and came to the conclusion that most people assumed that ethnicity is a non-negotiable matter, inherited from ancestors (Waters, 1990: 17). This popular conception was evident in my informants' relation to their ethnic identities and often expressed who they were. Whether one wanted to highlight or downplay one's ethnic heritage then, was irrelevant to the ancestral *fact* that one was ethnic. For example, Viktor, whose grandmother had immigrated to Sweden from Germany, had not identified with his German "side" or made much fuss about it. He said in the end of our interview that irrespective if he

wanted to identify with his German side or not, he was ultimately “de facto” part German. It was evident from most of my interviews that my informants confused, or related, their ethnicity with their ancestors. Conversely, the notion of identity as something shapeable was nothing my informants had ever thought about. One was by “blood” part Greek or Finnish because one had ancestors from Greece or Finland.

The constructionist claim opposes the popular idea that an ethnic identity is something primordial or static, but sees it as a social construct. Drawing on the premise that the identity is fluid, dependent on self-assessed claims and others’ judgments, an ethnic identity is accordingly transformative and negotiable. The identity and its formation does not have a set goal or an end product and consequently, to understand ethnic identities closer, one should pay attention to its forms and functions (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998: 72-3).

**PS:** *How would you describe your ethnicity?*

**Sara:** I usually say I’m part Italian and part Swedish and if anybody asks, I say I’m half-Swedish and half-Italian. In school I’m half-Swedish, half-Italian and outside I’m a quarter-Italian and three-quarters Swedish.

Sara speaks of herself as half sometimes and quarters on other occasions, and was thus more ethnic in certain environments than others. In this case, the use of half and quarter reflected a flexibility of Sara’s ethnic identity in her desire to be accepted as ethnic. Gupta & Ferguson (1996) notes the concept of hierarchy of purity when they analyze what an appropriate field site in anthropological methodology is. They explain that all works are field work, but some fields are considered better suited than other fields (Gupta & Ferguson, 1996: 13). This notion implies that certain values are connected to what an *accepted* field is, such as far away from home, undiscovered and dangerous (Gupta & Ferguson, 1996: 13). The same concept could be applied when discussing the claim to be ethnic, or what an accepted ethnic identity is. I found that some factors, such as close connection to the first immigrant and greater knowledge of language use, which I will return to later, generates greater authenticity and legitimacy to one’s ethnic identity. This meant that the person, through this unique competence or uncommon ancestry in relation to the Swedish, had greater entitlement to an ethnic claim.

**PS:** *When do you speak of yourself as half-Italian?*

**Sara:** It's hard to explain. If somebody asks if I have another heritage it's just weird to say that I'm a quarter Italian. To answer that you're a quarter means that you actually don't have another heritage [than Swedish]. So it feels more right to say that I'm half, given that I have a good relation to Italy.

To Sara then, the meaning of labeling herself as half-Italian instead of a quarter, implied a closer connection to the first-generation immigrant and the "homeland". Consequently, this gave her greater entitlement to present herself as ethnic. The insufficiency of cultural knowledge of the home-country and the illegitimate claim to be ethnic was, according to my informants, connected to the quarter-ship. All were ethnic, but some were more ethnic than others. And to only be a quarter-something was not sufficient as a legitimate claim to be able to emphasize or convey another ethnicity than the Swedish. If one was a quarter-something, one was ultimately a Swede.

The aspect of ancestry is thus an important first step in the shaping of an ethnic identity. To have an ancestor from another country than Sweden, meant that one was "authentically" ethnic by biological evidence. As Cornell & Hartmann observes, crucial to the definition of ethnicity is the claimed descent from a common homeland, which in turn should be regarded as a metaphor for kinship (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998: 19). But as Alba notes, ancestry does not need to be synonymous with identity, since identity owes much to the individual's own subjectivity, what he or she believes him- or herself to be (Alba, 1990: 38).

### ***Proving the Ethnic Self***

My informants had a choice. To have an ancestor meant that you *could* present yourself as ethnic at certain occasions, but it was not always determinant if you would do it. Stig, for example, had not included his ancestry as relevant for his identity. The main reason for not doing so was his poor language speaking abilities.

**PS:** *How would you define your heritage?*

**Stig:** I guess I mostly see myself as Swedish.

**PS:** *Do you often get reactions on your Greek surname?*

**Stig:** Yes. People always ask me “do you speak Greek?” I usually answer that I’m quarter-Greek, but that I’ve always lived in Sweden and that my dad has too. And that neither of us speak the language. When people hear that, they often get disappointed and walk away.

To be able to understand the function of language use, it is first important to recognize Fredrik Barth’s (1969) notion of ethnic boundaries. These boundaries are sets of criteria that distinguish ethnic groups and individuals from each other, such as language, skin color, ancestry or other signifying markers. The signifying markers are created and maintained by outer forces such as society or others who do not share the same ethnicity, and inner forces, such as individuals and family within the particular ethnic group (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998: 81). The logic of boundary construction and maintaining them is essentially the same: to establish and show who fits the group, and who does not (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998: 81). When it comes to language speaking abilities, it is in the light of the concept of ethnic boundaries, that its function becomes comprehensible. To claim an ethnic identity comes with, as we noted, demands on the individual to prove oneself ethnic. According to my informants, the ability to speak the language was the most prevalent marker of being ethnic.

**PS:** *What factors in your opinion determine how much or less ethnic you are?*

**Max:** How well you know the language and how others judge those competencies. I notice that I feel very Swedish whenever I hang out with my Spanish cousins and their aunt. This is because I feel that I can’t contribute as much to the conversation as them, they speak very fast and use complicated words. At such times I feel more Swedish than I usually do. During such occasions, I feel more like half-Swedish, half-Spanish.

As Stevens notes, language is a container of cultural information and is an important marker of self-identification with an ethnic group, as well as an affirmative sign for other ethnic members that one belongs to it (Stevens, 1985: 74). According to Alba (1990), the practical use of language is a cultural expression of one’s ethnicity, clarifies its boundaries and helps to define its uniqueness that is worth maintaining. In the maintaining of ethnic boundaries, the cultural expressions are carriers of subtle ethnic attitudes and values (Alba, 1990: 84-5). Language use is thus a direct form of shutting

other people out of the margins of the groups' ethnic boundaries, as well as it is an important vessel of cultural knowledge.

Ethnic boundaries however, illustrated by Max's case, are not binary. One is not ethnic just because one knows the language, but the choice to present oneself as ethnic is also a matter of the environment in which the competencies are tested. To Max, language was in its practical usage, the most important factor to be ethnic. He explained that when he found himself in typically Swedish environments, where people did not speak Spanish, he was three-quarter Spanish. When he spoke with Spanish family members, however who were fluent speakers, he felt more Swedish than usual. The boundary constructing effect of language use in this case is evident. Functioning as a cultural vessel with embedded information about the country of descent, Max's language deficiencies expressed a lack of knowledge about the country's culture. As a consequence, Max spoke of himself as *less* Spanish in settings with people who had a higher knowledge of the culture, and a more legitimate claim to being Spanish.

The importance of one's ability to speak the language in the choice of an ethnic marker was determinative for whether how much my informants wanted to highlight their ethnicity. The level of language-mastery was also decisive in what *particular* ethnicity they chose to emphasize if the case was that they had several to choose among. One of my informants, being a third generation immigrant, claimed to be quarter-German, quarter-Estonian and half-Finnish. When asked to rank his heritage, Fredrik said his German ancestry was the most relevant ethnic marker for his identity.

**Fredrik:** Apart from being Swedish, I usually consider myself to be German.

**PS:** *Why?*

**Fredrik:** Mostly because I speak German. I couldn't have chosen to be Estonian even if I had wanted to. I don't know anything about Estonia. I don't know the language and I've never been to the country. You can't choose an ethnicity you don't know anything about.

In the case above, language in its symbolical sense implies more than just being able to speak it. Just as Alba and Stevens note, it also serves as an indicator of having cultural knowledge and insight in another country. This was important to the reason behind wanting to shape an ethnic identity. According to Malin, when somebody introduced

him- or herself as partly ethnic, she said that you immediately thought that person was “cool”.

“You think, “Ah, so you have insight into another culture mixed with the Swedish one”. Then you’re interesting. You become interesting because that particular person knows more than oneself, and maybe another language. That’s why it’s cooler”

According to my informants’ views, if you did not speak the language, no actual claim could be made on an ethnic identity. Malin, who did not speak the other language fluently and labeled herself as half-Italian, expressed anxieties towards the legitimacy of her ethnic choice. She told me that she had lied about her actual quarter-ship, and this had put her in a problematic situation. Attending a school where many of her classmates were children of first-generation immigrants and were “halves”, she explained that she had chosen to exaggerate her ethnic identity in order to fit in with them as well as the Swedes. When she told me that she had lied about her actual quarter-ship to everyone she knew, I asked her what the difference between quarter and half was according to her.

**PS:** *What do you miss that a half-Italian has?*

**Malin:** The language. Most definitely. And an Italian grandfather. Besides that I’m okay, I have the rest.

**PS:** *What would have been different if had you said you were a quarter-Italian, instead of half-Italian, and spoke the language?*

**Malin:** It would have made a huge difference. In that case I would’ve just said that mom is half-Italian and that I speak Italian, because then you get an immediate respect from others. If you can prove that you speak the language, then people think, “Ah, but you actually seem Italian now that I come to think of it, because you actually speak the language”. But like me, who doesn’t speak Italian well enough, I’m not a legit half-Italian. In the end, if I say I’m quarter-Italian, I’m just Swedish.

Malin’s worries about her insufficient cultural knowledge to be able to present herself as ethnic, was confirmed by those informants who had claimed half- or quarter-ship, and did in fact speak the language. Fredrik said that people, who had no legitimate claim to their ethnicity, annoyed him. According to him, if they tried to be something they were not, they were just “playing around” but essentially Swedish.

**PS:** *How would you have reacted if someone said they were a quarter-German but had no relationship to Germany whatsoever?*

**Fredrik:** There are actually people who go about doing just that. They say stuff like “my aunt’s brother’s husband’s German, so I’m actually part German”. Then I feel like “no you’re not”. I really feel angry when people do that. That people try to make themselves non-Swedish when they really are.

Translating the function of language use as an expression of cultural knowledge, it can further be seen as an indicator of legitimacy to an ethnic claim. How well one spoke the language consequently had effects on what degree one would consider oneself to be non-Swedish, as stated in Max’s case. This was evident when my informants interacted with other part ethnics. When the recorder was off, Fredrik said that he would, in contrast to his earlier claim, back off if someone had told him that a person was half-something, spoke the language well and had relatives in the country. In such a situation, a half-ethnicity and a well proficiency in language skills triumphs a proclaimed quarter-ethnic identity with good language speaking abilities. Returning to Malin and her insufficient claim in calling herself half ethnic then, Fredrik’s quotes contribute to the reason why she would lie to begin with.

### ***Ethnic Desires***

If ancestry meant that the person was ethnic, irrespective of individual choice, language-speaking abilities would be the most prevalent factor if one were to construct an ethnic identity in the first place. Mastery of the “mother-tongue” also determined if one were to shape an ethnic identity, as well as if the person would show it or hide it. Another important aspect to how the people I interviewed would handle their ethnic identity, was found in their and other people’s preconceptions of what the certain ethnicity meant.

According to Gans, the factors that make an ethnicity *symbolic* lies not only in its uncomplicated allegiance to an ethnicity, but also in its pragmatic and communicative use. The communication of a symbolic ethnicity must be “visible and clear in meaning” as well as “easily expressed and felt” (Gans, 1979: 9). Apart from language use then, the web of cultural imagery that one’s ethnic identity referred to in the interaction with others, was relevant for the choice of an ethnic identity. This means that the communicative force of one’s ethnicity must also rely on wider society’s

already established preconceptions of the heritage one, as a “symbolic ethnic”, represents.

This is to suggest that when the person in question makes an ethnic claim, he or she also embodies the stereotypes of that country, which are created through mass media (Gans, 1979: 12). Thus, identity construction in relation to ethnicity also becomes a conscious choice dependent on the associations wider society holds to the specific country’s cultural mosaic of images. When talking to my informants, they often spoke of their ethnicity as being *desirable* or *undesirable*. To themselves and to others. Some ethnicities were considered to be of higher cultural value than others, and because of this, some combinations were considered better than others.

“In Sweden, the picture of a typical Norwegian is quite harmless I guess. When you think of a Norwegian, you imagine a charming, comfy, nature-loving guy who’s skiing... It isn’t a more complicated image than that. If it weren’t for others’ positive associations to Norwegians, I’d felt it’d been totally unnecessary to say I’m Norwegian” (Johanna)

“I’ve thought a lot about how happy I am that it’s these two countries especially. I consider myself very lucky. I mean, a Swedish father and an Italian mother. It couldn’t have been better.” (Simonetta)

When my informants spoke of their non-Swedish ethnicity it was always in relation to what images they had conceived of the particular country. Some images of what it meant to be part Italian, German or Norwegian were directly traceable to mass-media and cultural stereotypes, and some were direct observations of or relations to ancestors or family in the specific country. Since they all grew up in Sweden, my informants were highly conscious of the cultural status of their particular origin and what particular traits it entailed. Whether one wanted to make one’s ethnicity noteworthy, was consequently also related to the cultural status of the ethnical marker. When one “slipped in and out of ethnic roles” (Waters, 1990: 158), these were the images one embodied.

**PS:** *Can you slide in and out of your ethnicity?*

**Simonetta:** Yes, and I think it’s a super privilege. I can really benefit from it. One example is when I’ve represented Sweden on European courses. Sooner or later it slips out that I have an Italian mother and then people often come forward and say, “We

understood you had another origin! You're so fun! So dynamic! We thought it was impossible that you were just Swedish". In that sense, being Italian gives me perks, because, it's a much more famous country than Sweden. Being only Swedish doesn't give you any real bonuses. It's quite an unknown culture. Italians you have a more hate-love relationship to. Swedes you admire, and that's it.

"My Southern European heritage has definitely made me more interesting. I think the prejudices and associations of Spain, and South Europe in general, is that it's an area of rich cultures and good food... Famous artists, beautiful languages and so on... Cultures that people kind of look up to.... I don't have a problem, for example, to speak Spanish in front of friends whenever grandma calls, because I notice them paying attention and afterwards commenting stuff like "Wow, that's nice". So that just makes me happy. I've had it [ethnicity] all along and never wanted to hide it. (Max)

"I think you take advantage of the culture's benefits and that your ethnicity represents this. Today, it's more chic to be Italian, compared to when I grew up. I think the reason to its cultural value is that it's ultimately a beautiful country. At the same time, Italy stands for a lot of our basic needs, such as food and sex." (Simonetta)

This reason to emphasize one's ethnicity was very common amongst my informants of South European ancestry, meaning that its cultural status in Swedes' minds was very high. When asked if they thought it would have been the same if they had had an Eastern European origin, they all answered no, referring to its undesirable image. This was however also an individual matter and dependable on what one valued. Fredrik's reflections on his split ethnic identity and how he had chosen it connected to its desirability, was an especially interesting case in this sense. Having multiple ancestries, he had now gotten a new awareness of his partial Estonian ethnicity's cultural worth.

**PS:** *How would you rank your ethnicities?*

**Fredrik:** First German, then Estonian, and lastly Finnish. But if I had had a more legitimate claim to my Estonian side, I would have emphasized it more than my German side. Because Estonia is cooler than Germany. Germany is too close. It's too much like Sweden. It's developed etc. Estonia's not quite like that. Estonia's Eastern Europe."

**PS:** *Isn't Estonia low-status in the minds of Swedes?*

**Fredrik:** Not Estonia. Not to me anyway. I would've chosen Estonia, but now I can't, since I'm not really Estonian. I don't know anything about it. There's status in being Estonian... I mean, it's me, Filip Hammar and Kristian Luuk<sup>3</sup>... Unlike the many minuses on my German side and its history of the Nazi-regime and the war. I mean that's not a nice picture.

In his desire to become Estonian, the difference between legitimacy and authenticity, as discussed in the previous section, here becomes crucial. Not speaking the language, nor having any relationship to or knowledge about Estonia, my informant notes his incapability of making such a claim, even though it might be desirable. Fredrik thereby deemed it impossible to make his Estonian ancestral precondition more than what it was, a heritage.

Regarding its desirability then, Fredrik's newly recognized value of Estonian-ship points to certain aspects of how an ethnic identity can relate more to social or cultural status, than merely being regarded as a form of belonging. Noting factors such as *famous people* who share his Estonian origin, and its unbiased and undiscovered mental landscape in the minds of others, the desirability of an Estonian ethnic identity in particular becomes relatable to social status. Functioning as a cultural representative then, an ethnic identity of Estonian-ship in Sweden would make Fredrik seem to share traits with the important media figures, rather than being connected to the country of Estonia. This was in turn something Fredrik valued. Following Gans' logic of the communication of symbolic ethnicity and as also Waters notes, the importance of stereotypes as sites for identity construction (Waters, 1990: 138), symbolic ethnicity may relate more to people's preconceived notions of an ethnicity and its status in society, than it might do to a platform for solidarity.

In his main ethnic identity, Fredrik recognizes the negative associations of Germans and its undesirability as an ethnicity. According to Fredrik, this has to do with Germany's role in the Second World War. Viktor, whose grandmother grew up in Germany during the war, had chosen to identify with her role as a war refugee, rather than German.

“My image of Germany is not a sexy one, and maybe that is why I haven't emphasized it. I've never been interested in the culture and I haven't studied the language either.

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<sup>3</sup> Filip Hammar and Kristian Luuk are famous Swedish media figures with Estonian background.

There's nothing in the German culture I've wanted to identify with, and to me, my grandma has been quite unconnected to Germany. It's more that I see her as a war victim and that she acted independently, that's what I admire." (Viktor)

According to Winawer-Steiner and Wetzel, the horrific events of atrocities in which Germany had been the perpetrator during WWII had effectively shaped the image of Germany and consequently the entire experience of being German (Winawer-Steiner & Wetzel, 1982: 253). Out of necessity, it was thus best to downplay one's German origin and experienced in secret (Winawer-Steiner & Wetzel, 1982: 253).

"To some extent I've been ashamed of Germany's history. Probably more than others have. I mean, people who don't have a connection to Germany, don't. So the war has definitely contributed to my preconception of Germany, and this is the reason to why I haven't wanted to highlight my German-ness". (Viktor)

Even though Viktor had made no claim to a German identity, he still felt as if his German ancestry could hold him accountable for this horrific image. The choice to emphasize or downplay one's ethnic identity is thus relatable to the image or social status of one's particular origin in the society where one is living in. That an ethnic identity can be desirable and undesirable

### 3.3 The Importance of Being Ethnic

According to my findings, ancestry, language use and cultural value explain fundamental parts of the logic to ethnic identity formation. If the shaping of an ethnic identity should be regarded as a useful social tool to become interesting it is, as explained, still a very complicated and tiresome process. It is an endeavor that requires legitimate and authentic evidence when presenting oneself as ethnic. If it meant so much effort for the people who did not possess a truly valid claim to an ethnic identity, why try then? Perhaps the question should be posed differently, why did one become interesting through an ethnic identity? Something that Fredrik said stuck with me.

“Because it’s boring not to care about stuff. I mean, you always have to color your existence and personality as interesting to others and yourself. When it comes to emphasizing one’s ethnicity, it’s in the end to problematize your background. I could have said that I’m whole-Swedish, because I am, my parents and I all grew up here. But you’d rather make your personality problematic to appear more interesting.” (Fredrik)

Returning to the beginning of this chapter, we have recognized that perhaps the most salient function of an ethnic identity for my informants is to satisfy the desire to be “a little bit more interesting than everybody else”. To regard an ethnicity as a spice to the personality to be changed like a pair of pants, has to Waters (1990), Alba (1990), Gans (1979) been seen as support of assimilation theory. The clinging on to an ethnicity for many late generational immigrants, is according to them, an expression of decline in importance of European white ethnicity that once regulated differences amongst people. Their assimilationist theory suggests that European ethnicities no longer have the function to organize social life, pointing to evidences such as social mobility, intermarriage and decline in language use. While this may be the case, the previous scholars have only speculated on the motivation behind symbolic ethnicity. Why do they need to feel unique? To Simonetta, the only informant who was not born in the 1990s but grew up during the 1970s in Sweden, the need to exaggerate an ethnicity was perplexing.

“The difference is that you have not had to wrestle with your heritage as much as I have. My ethnicity was something that I tried to hide when I grew up. You have always wanted it. That I don’t understand.” (Simonetta)

If the *desire* of an ethnic identity, or the feeling of uniqueness, is indeed a generational feature, it is feasible to examine what demands our time makes on the individual and its identity. To be able to provide an answer to why the subjects of this study need to feel special, we have to examine what is demanded of the individual in the contemporary era. What changes in values can be traced to the phenomenon?

### ***Postmodernity***

Prominent sociological scholars have noted that a fundamental characteristic of our late capitalistic, late modern or postmodern time in the West, is the corrosion of its predecessor, modernity, as social organizer. Richard Sennett (1976) and Zygmunt Bauman (1992) have related this phenomenon to the changing features of society itself, and more specifically, the eroding boundaries between the public and the private. The conditions that during the modern era formed much of human life in the West, have now dissolved and become fluid. Friedman (2003) has described the trend in a global perspective, as a fragmentation process of the nation-state, a consequence of a shift in the leading center of capital accumulation from West to East. Consequently, Friedman argues that the nation-state and its nationalism as the previous primary source for identity construction to all its inhabitants loses its power in this causation and thus, people need to seek other plausible platforms of belonging and shaping of the identity (Friedman, 2003: 26).

Following the observation of the individual's search for other belongings than the modern nation-state, Appadurai (1996) calls this form of group solidarity as post-national. Central to his suggestion is that the eroding features of the nation-state in the global paradigm, has lost its monopoly on identity allegiance (Appadurai, 1996: 169). Melucci (1996) continues on this observation and argues that because of the contemporary incapability of the modern nation-state to construct a homogenous identity in a globalized world, the ethnic solidarity re-emerges as a viable option and an autonomous force. He claims that in our increasingly complex society, forms of solidarity and identity allegiances as ethnicity, responds to postmodern identity needs (Melucci, 1996: 148). Christopher Lasch (1979) traces the reason behind West's contemporary crisis and future sign of civilizational downfall to the radicalization of the individualism upon which it was built, this has consequently led to the production of the

narcissistic individual.

What is extractable then from the above-mentioned scholarly notions, is that there is a relation between my informants' ethnic identity construction and an observed decline in Western world's dominating role. The principal expression of this decline is found in the transformation of what before was public and private, a moral crisis that itself, like falling dominoes, provokes a chain reaction throughout wider society. One of the chain reactions, which will be further examined down, is the eroding feature of modernity's previous monopoly on identity. This connection has further implications on the individual, who consequently seeks other platforms for identity formation in the postmodern era. Down, I examine two aspects of this connection further.

### ***The Narcissistic Society***

**PS:** *Have you used your Italian-ness to "market" yourself?*

**Malin:** Yes, absolutely. I make it very clear to others that I'm mixed, both Italian and Swedish... Because I want both privileges of each ethnicity. The Italian side implies that I'm cool, exotic and that I know about another culture. The Swedish side because the Swedes are in the end the privileged ones.

The findings of symbolic ethnicity's expressions, presented in the second part of this analysis, will in this section be connected to the postmodern characteristics of society and what type of individual it produces. As recognized before, the importance of ethnicity's cultural value in wider society, as well as the need of sufficient knowledge to claim an ethnical marker, influence the choice whether to downplay or to highlight your ethnicity. To understand the underlying reasons why people may choose an ethnic identity in the first place, we have to further examine why individual needs of uniqueness or heterogeneity are significant for the individual's self-conception today.

Lasch argues that a significant change in the social structure in our time, in contrast to those of modernity, is traceable in the shift from focus on capitalist production to consumption of our time. This has in turn had further effects on the individual. According to Lasch, the characteristics of 19<sup>th</sup> century's introvert personality has transformed into postmodern extroverts. This personality type, he describes, is dependent on other peoples' opinions and actions, seek affirmation from others, are eager to get along with others and most importantly, willing to "sell himself as if his own personality were a commodity with an assignable market value" (Lasch, 1979: 63).

Lasch argues that because of the shift in working conditions, from manual and white-collar labor, it today increasingly focuses on the importance of the personality as a work resource, “Men and women alike have to project an attractive image and to become simultaneously role players and connoisseurs of their own performance” (Lasch, 1979: 92). As a consequence of the postmodern erosion of private and public, Lasch argues that today’s personal life becomes full of stress, an extension of work, in order to construct a successful personality with heterogeneous traits on a competitive market (Lasch, 1979: 65, 73).

“A reason why I’ve been able to take a lot of social space and talk more than the ordinary Swede does, is because I’ve ethnified myself. When I talk a lot, people immediately think, “Fredrik’s not Swedish, he’s part German, Finnish and Estonian”.

(Fredrik)

The very insight that a certain role-play of the personality might be regarded as a commodity that generates social capital to fit the characteristics of our time, responds to my informants experienced need to be special. Lasch’s implication on how the individual’s personality itself becomes a work resource and a competitive quality is key to understanding this need further. In the face of a radicalized market-controlled and individualized society, the unique traits of an ethnic identity become a favorable personal trait in a personality-focused market. Recalling Fredrik’s quote in the beginning of this last part of the analysis, where he stated that to problematize one’s background is an advantageous strategy in order to appear more “interesting than others”, relates directly to the connection of personality and market value. As discussed through this study, the primary act of symbolic ethnicity is ultimately to be able to convey another identity with cultural value when it is opportunistic to do so. If the personality itself is as Lasch notes, an extension of work, the shaping process of an ethnic identity, is ultimately a value creation process and a matter of achievement in an individualistic society.

### ***The Commodified Ethnicity***

It is now relevant to recollect some of my informants’ anxieties toward the legitimacy, cultural value and authenticity regarding their claims of ethnicity. In the second section of this analysis, we noted that the legitimacy and authenticity of claiming an ethnic

identity are regulated through language and ancestry. Eventually, the function of these expressions was in close connection to ethnic boundaries, deciding who could and could not be ethnic. We also found that the choice of one's ethnic identity was influenced by the cultural value of the country's cultural traits in popular thought. It is ultimately in the light of Lasch's views, the reason to why my informants choose to shape an ethnicity becomes graspable. The personality as something to *work* on, in order to become a competitive commodity on the market follows the informants' anxieties around legitimacy, authenticity and value. To draw this further, it is viable to understand further how the shaping of an ethnic identity translates into an individual value creation process.

As Caglar argues, commodities are objects of consumption, whose values are negotiable and dependent on their specific social situations as well as subjected to the socially negotiable values of demand, desire and power (Caglar, 1997: 180). Further, commodities are attached to a wider web of images that come to signal the consumers' lifestyles through these commodities, thus commodities are always socially specific (Caglar, 1997: 180). To the majority of my informants, the reason behind ethnifying oneself was essentially to be different from the "boring" Swede. In relation to consumption logics, of position-bound value creation of demand and desire, a Swedish ethnic identity was in the case for many of my informants already the prevalent norm and was thus a commodity that existed in overflow. The difference between desirable and undesirable ethnic identities was thus a consequence of the socially specific premises of its value creation. As found before, to be German meant also in part to embody the atrocities Germany had performed during the Second World War, and was accordingly an ethnicity the informants I interviewed did not want to convey. This was in contrast to the informants of Mediterranean and Scandinavian origin, whose ethnicity was more desirable than the German.

"To say that you're Italian, Greek or Spanish gives you status. To say that you come from a South European country makes you attractive" (Sara)

However, nothing was worse to my informants than just being Swedish. As one of my informants said, "You know the background story of a Swedish person, no surprises, everything is safe and sound and his or her grandmother probably makes cinnamon buns". Consequently, to not have another ethnic origin than the Swedish lowered the identity's appeal to others. To be Swedish, conveyed no value of interest

and was thus deemed “boring”, which implied a low market value for the personality.

**PS:** *Could you have marketed yourself as whole-Swedish?*

**Malin:** Yes, I could’ve done that, but I would’ve felt really boring. I think we all want to be a little bit unique. You want to be like everybody else, but special in your own way. As long as you’re not *too* special.

Caglar further argues that the symbolic and expressive functions of commodities serve to convey social status and prestige and its symbolic utility is used to socially position groups in society and maintain these differences (Caglar, 1997: 181). Much like ethnic identity construction and the maintenance of ethnic boundaries, the functions of commodities work in the same way, but with the very important addition that it also conveys social status.

The use of another ethnicity was thus a solution to the problem of being as one of my informants put it, just another a Swede. To have an ethnicity up the sleeve whenever it was relevant, made my informants appear more interesting to others and themselves, and thus generated a higher social value in one’s personality. The symbolic use of an ethnic identity adheres a lot to Caglar’s notions, it strategically positions the individual in social situations, maintains its boundaries through its expressive use and lastly, the ethnic commodity in itself functions to convey social status and prestige.

Regarding the ability to perform a slip in and out of ethnic roles, relates more to an act of consumption, more than it does that Waters (1990) et al. argues, to the signaling of an assimilated, white and European ethnicity in a diminishing state. To use an ethnic identity like a nose ring adheres more to this notion. As Caglar argues, consumption as an act is related to the construction of ourselves, the world around us and others, specifically how we perceive the world, our place in it and our relationship to the Other (Caglar, 1997: 182). Further, Caglar means that in lack of public institutions that determine the individual’s identity construction, individuals are free to construct their own cultural self-definition through exchange and collective consumption (Caglar, 1997: 182). In postmodern times, when modernity loses its grip on identity construction, it becomes instead a matter centered on the individual’s choice and consumption. To slip in and out of an ethnicity and to highlight it, *if* it is desirable in the eyes of others, is thus a way of consuming and constructing an advantageous identity under the prevailing forms of capitalism.

#### **4. Summary, Conclusions and Further Implications**

The aim of this thesis has been to show how the shaping of an ethnic identity can be an advantageous strategy for the individual to gain status in an era that craves uniqueness. To reach this conclusion, it has been necessary to dissect and understand the foundations of what an ethnic identity is, what it meant to my informants as well as the need to examine the existing literature of why ethnic identities matter. Underlying the complicated expressions of language knowledge, ancestry and the cultural status of the ethnic marker of choice provided in this essay, are factors of legitimacy, authenticity and desirability. These all intersect in a value creation process for the individual, making an ethnic identity appealing and advantageous or unattractive and difficult. These factors make symbolic ethnicity correspond much more to the *brand* of a product than to the actualities and lived experiences ethnical solidarities often entail. The ability and performance of slipping in and out of ethnicities and to treat them like a nose ring is to my conclusion, a way of consuming an identity in order to become attractive on a market of personalities.

Consequently, another intention of this essay has been to provide a different take on the concept of symbolic ethnicity as it has been formulated in existing literature. As Gans, Alba and Waters have persistently argued, the reason why symbolic ethnicity exists is because it is a sign of assimilation in American society. As noted in the section of previous research, to assimilate ethnic groups has long been a social issue in the US, with the hope of reducing conflicts and discrimination based on ethnic discrimination. Because of this linear idea of ethnic prevalence and hopes of decline in ethnic formation in society, I argue that these authors miss the important matter of what societal implications our time has on the concept of the individual allegiance to a symbolic ethnicity. To my informants, the main instrumental use of an ethnic identity was to generate social status and become interesting and/or attractive to themselves as well as others.

However, using of an ethnical marker to brand the person in question does not mean that the identity is any less real, or that the people I interviewed do this for fun. It is an actual social existence that comes with its own anxieties. The way the previous authors on this subject have treated the notion of symbolic ethnicity is to reduce the people relevant for their studies, with the implication that there are true and false ethnicities. In relation to the downside of ethnicity, and people, whose lives are shaped

by structural oppression and racism, I agree. In that sense it seems offensive to do something such as using a European ethnicity in order to make oneself more interesting. However, one must see this in its whole context and not only relate to false/true ethnic conditions. As observed, many of my informants experienced that their ethnic identity was a complicated and often tiresome matter. To merely call such an ethnicity symbolic, then, is to not treat it with the respect it deserves. Many of my informants experienced their ethnicity as being essential to their identities.

Continuing on this matter, as I mentioned in the first section of the analysis and as Waters (1990) also argues, the very fundamentals of being able to brand oneself with an ethnicity, is that the individual is in the clear of racial discrimination. In Sweden as in America, racism is still a prevalent marker of social organization and expresses itself through structural discrimination. In relation to the thick ethnicity of people with ancestors outside of Europe, the color of one's colored skin in a society that favors whites becomes a very painful reality. As one of my informants responded to my question if she could have slipped in and out of ethnicities if she were black.

“That is entirely a different thing and is by its very definition a cruel matter. In that case it's about the color of your skin, and you can't negotiate your way around it in the same way you can when you're white. In my case, you can leave and enter the room, and in that way you're much freer. I think that opportunity is sadly a matter of white privilege. I can for example screw things up and jokingly blame it on my Italian side, like “Trust me, I'm Italian...” but black complexion is something much more static. This is about a joke on one's character... Your complexion has nothing to do with who you are as a human being.”

Lastly, for further research, or perspectives that would have nuanced this thesis further, but that I did not have the time for and was not under the scope of this essay, could be to also specialize the desire of ethnic identities. In my case, it would be salient to analyze how the Swedish cultural remnants of *jantelag* plays in in the desire of another ethnic identity and how they might explain other types of behavior.. Finally, it would be interesting to further look at the flow of images from a perspective of “soft power”, that generate these images of undesirable and desirable ethnicities. Because, in the end, it is the flow of these images that are to blame in making ethnicities desirable or undesirable. This production still generates pains for people with an “undesirable” ethnicity in a society where the white European ethnicity is the dominant one.

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