

BOOK REVIEW

Ryan Thomas Skinner. *Afro-Sweden: Becoming Black in a Color-Blind Country*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022. vii + 308 pp. \$28.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-1-5179-1231-4.

Afro-Sweden: Becoming Black in a Color-Blind Country fills a major gap in the study of black immigrant experiences and cultures by shifting the scholarly focus about them to Sweden. This nation has had an important role in the formation of hybrid black cultures since the 1970s, although most critics have ignored this significant history. Part of this oblivion stems from the popular view of Sweden as a white society. Discussing a July 22, 2019 episode of Trevor Noah's *The Daily Show*, Skinner laments how the TV hosts kept "indulging a stereotype for the sake of a laugh" by repeatedly attempting to make the audience believe that the Swedish government had no reason to fear that American rapper A\$AP Rocky would escape the European country after being charged with "common assault" since he would be "THE BLACK GUY" and "he would be found!" (3). Berating the sardonic laughter that such racialized comments generated from the audience, Skinner indicates his reason for writing the monograph: "Against a cultural imagination that routinely obscures and diminishes Black lives, this book seeks to illuminate the history, culture, and identity of a very real and clearly present Afro-Swedish community" (3). "Afro-Swedish" (*afrosvensk*) is a term that encompasses a variety of "people who trace their heritage within the broader African diaspora, including the Caribbean, North and South America, and elsewhere in Europe; and individuals adopted from Africa or its diaspora" (5).

The book's first major quality is its methodological ingenuity, as is evident in the blend of personal, anthropological, and theoretical frameworks that inspired its research. This rich approach is apparent in Skinner's self-identification as a white American man whose monograph resulted from a deep engagement "rooted" in reasonable periods of residence, work, research, ethnographic fieldwork, and other activities in Sweden, especially about African-descended people (25). Skinner's sustained inquiry and interest led to an interdisciplinary methodology that was inspired by Clifford Geertz's concept of "deep hanging out" (25). It is a useful approach that can help revitalize the field of black diaspora studies in which Europe tends to have minimal space. One exception to this limited presence of Europe in black diaspora studies is Brent Hayes Edwards's *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (2003). This is a book that Skinner lauds for having "brilliantly demonstrated" that the concept of "diaspora" remains "necessarily transformed and refracted through processes of translation to engender a multi-linguistic plurality" (230). Skinner

adeptly uses Edwards's modes of theorizing blackness, language, and transnationalism in terms that help to study how a diverse and vibrant Afro-Swedish community enriches a European nation where it faces sustained racialization and racism. This community encounters trauma resulting from the "fear" and "xenophobia" that Maureen Hoppers, a Ugandan Swede, describes as consequences that children of Afro-Swedish parents face in the city of Älvsjö due to their blackness, which onlookers seem unable to separate from the image of Africa as a continent symbolizing poverty and menace (101). Skinner traces these stereotypes to "the narrative refrains of African poverty, war, and disease," which cannot be disassociated from the rhetoric of "the 'crisis' of immigration that so often objectifies African-descended people as 'foreign'—or even a threat—to Swedish society" (101).

In a similar vein, Skinner's methodology is based on his deep interactions with members of Afro-Swedish organizations, expanding the innovative ways in which black diaspora research can be conducted. For instance, he engages with an Afro-Swedish group called "Tryck (which in Swedish means "Push") (184). According to Skinner, this was "one of the first arts organizations to bring to the fore issues of non-white representation in Swedish public culture" (184). An equally relevant entity that Skinner is engaged with is the art film world of Afro-Swedes. Thus, we read Skinner's captivating discussions of the disappointment that many Afro-Swedish people of sub-Saharan African origin experience as they seek to draw attention to the creative cinema produced by members of their community without being recognized in the mainstream media. "*Vi finns inte!* (We don't exist!). These are the words that begin actor and musician Richard Sseruwagi's public indictment of the contemporary Swedish art world, posted on social media (Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter) on May 26, 2017" (188).

Finally, given the popular depiction of Sweden as a neutral nation where the toxic racial relationships that characterize the United States are absent, one is shocked to see that many African-descended people in this nation do not share this view due to the systemic violence they face in the country. According to Skinner, Rahel Weldeabm—a board member of an Afro-Swedish organization—recalls how Ahmed Hassan, a Swede of Somali origin, was "brutally killed at a public school in the town of Trollhättan in 2015"; how a "pregnant Black woman" was "violently pulled from a Stockholm subway car in 2019" and "forced to the ground onto her stomach while her child, restrained by guards, watched in horror"; and "the many young men and women of African descent who are the frequent targets of racial profiling in the shopping centers and public spaces of towns and cities throughout the country" (238). These testimonies shatter the illusory perception of Sweden as a special country where racism is nonexistent.

Babacar M'Baye 
 Kent State University
 Kent, USA
 bmbaye@kent.edu

doi:10.1017/asr.2024.71