

Her(stories) – tales of passing

This work was made as a response to a commission for a “Provocation” by curators Tawanda Appiah and Simona Dumitriu. The curators presented works online on the GIBCA biennale webpage in conjunction with their curated exhibition *Comforting the machine*, part of GIBCA extended. In the physical exhibition I exhibited photographic works from a series called the *Tangled web of Belonging* that are from my research on hybridity and specifically on the position of the non-white European.



For the display online I decided to combine my current theoretical and artistic research on hybridity in a variety of sources – the archive of the State Institute for Racial Biology at Uppsala university, the history of Sweden’s former colony St Barthélemy, theory and literature on hybridity and my own experience of racial hybridity. Using text I took the opportunity to string together histories that connect. The fragments are illustrated by a single image which is a cut-out of a well-known photograph of Herman Lundborg, the Swedish infamous race biologist. Rather than focusing on depicting the ‘others’ who are so often depicted from this archive of racial biology, I focused on the hands of power who made such research possible.

Provocation image



Bild: Hands of Herman. Fragment from Uppsala universitetsbibliotek, Rasbiologiska institutets arkiv. Fotografier, album A 1: Bilder omfattande Rasbiologiska institutet och dess personal

This process became a beginning for me to understand how my various types of research can be combined. It gave me an output and provided space for dialogue with the curators who gave feedback on the text before it was completed. I have since continued experimenting with this form of fragmented structure in text in a forthcoming article.

Provocation text

(her)stories – tales of passing

1802 Gustavia

She sold liqueur to the men who'd given her life but refused to see her as their own. The words she had overheard echoed in her head: 'Can a free Coloured ever forfeit their freedom and be sold again as a slave?'¹

1893 Chicago

She was born to a Danish mother and father from the West Indies and grappled with shifting identities in multiple locations. Her fiction, on the ambivalence of race, was critiqued for having contradictory endings, by those who believed in the single story.²

1924 Uppsala

She stood out as a woman and as Jewish as the first stately employed genealogist. The other hands holding power at the State Institute for Racial Biology were white and mainly male.³

1969 London

She replied nothing when her landlady asked her not to bring him here again. It was the first time she encountered this, but the first of many to come.

1987 Veberöd

She ran laughing towards the school canteen although the words had created a lump in her throat that would not leave her. 'Have you dipped your head in the toilet bowl or what?'

2018 Gothenburg

She looks up at her mother, holding on to the bars of the cot, 'Mamma, are my eyes blue?' Her mother looks at her with almost black eyes, knowing that the answer will disappoint her.⁴

¹ There was much ambivalence over laws on the island of St Barthelemy during Swedish reign. Rather than following Swedish law, the law was based on neighbouring colonies. In 1802 a questionnaire was compiled to St Thomas to clarify some questions, such as the status of the free coloureds, the people who descended from both whites and blacks. Thomasson, F. *32 Piskrapp vid quatre piquets – svensk rättvisa och slavlagar på St Barthélemy* (Uppsala Universitet, 2012)

² In the 1920's Nella Larsen wrote *Quicksand* and *Passing*, that dealt with ambivalences of both race and sexuality and incorporated her experience from the USA and Denmark at the time. Larsen, N and McDowell, D. E. *Quicksand & Passing* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1989).

³ Information on Ella Heckscher taken from <https://skbl.se/sv/artikel/EllaBerthaAmaliaHeckscher>, accessed on 22/07 2021.

⁴ In my current research I am searching for traces of hybridity ranging from the encounter between Sweden and its former colony for slave-trading, St Barthélemy, to contemporary situations. I use the personal in combination with historical records and theory to speak of entanglements between rules, structures, and feelings. This can be thought of as such an example.