Feminism and Multiculturalism: Recognition of Difference and Beyond

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Feminism and Multiculturalism: Recognition of difference and beyond

Aleksandra Ålund.

Women who have immigrated, as well as the questions of ethnicity and multiculturalism, have been invisible in mainstream feminist research in Sweden. In the context of the international feminist debate, however, these issues are gaining high priority. For some time now the importance of pursuing politics of recognition of cultural differences has been on the agenda. But now the debate is turning towards a critical examination of inherent traps. The article examines the problematic of cultural essentialism - a discursive terrain shared by Feminism and Multiculturalism. Multicultural policies and politics of recognition risk reducing social inequalities to cultural differences and thereby promoting the social exclusion of ethnic minorities. If «recognition» is of an oppositional «other», and if it fails to acknowledge that identities are hybrid and composite, it risks lapsing into cultural essentialism. In order to counter culturalism, feminists need, it is maintained, to develop a conception of social citizenship which links citizenship to issues of social rights as well as the exigencies of a transethnic dialogue and politics of solidarity.

1. Multiculturalism and social exclusion

We live in an epoch in which processes of transnational compression are accompanied by those of fragmentation. The latter are crucial to the construction of new and new-old individual, local, regional and ethnic identities. These processes, frequently painful, have become increasingly influenced by public discourses pregnant with intolerance and exclusivism in relation to the Other. This is evident in the current conflicts between different ethnic groups in the new Baltic States, the former Yugoslavia, etc., as well as in the multietnic EU.

The sense of national community is weakened or threatened by homogenizing internationalization, the decline or even collapse of the Welfare State, and the growth of po-
political anonymity in the shadow of the supranationalism of the EU. The sweeping economic transformation and consequent class differentiation, the dissolution of traditional ways of life, and widespread unemployment and social debarment have resulted in extensive uncertainty of identity. The answer to this insecurity is more and more frequently identity-wise rearmament based on negative comparisons between «Europeans» and «immigrants» «us» and «them».

The quest for identity seems to be mediated through the fragmenting symbols and rhetoric of culture, ethnicity, regionalism and community. The notion of community has been fundamental in this context, though not unproblematic. In the discussion of identity politics in particular, the meaning of coherence and community was considered as problematic (cf. Young 1990). It relates increasingly to the particularity of identity or place. But it also celebrates differences and uniqueness in a world of migration, globalization, cultural amalgamation and merging, which discloses the dilemmas and ambiguities of modern society (Ålund 1995).

In a world in which the search for roots has become widespread - from national identities to identity politics - the multiple expression of exclusion has spread. The uniting core of different exclusionary practizes is often a cultural rationalization of social tensions regulated and controlled through definitions of normality; i.e. problematizing members of «other» ethnic groups, or immigrants and refugees - not least «immigrant women» - as burdened with backward traditions that create differences and conflicts with the stipulated normality. Thus the new, harsher social realities of a multiethnic society tend to be understood in simplistic culture-related terms. Culturalization - a culture-related smoothing out of social inequality and discrimination (Ålund & Schierup, 1991, Ålund 1993, 1994) - occupies a prominent place in the processes of change currently affecting European society.

Cultural differences are cultivated and polarized. The increasingly common political and popular argument focuses on whether various groups of refugees and immigrants are suitable or unsuitable, more or less adaptable or foreign, to a greater or lesser extent. Here is the basis for a differentiation and selection among people in cultural terms; its extension supplies the basis of legitimacy for what has been termed «Fortress Europe» and the «Mediterranean Wall». Immigration and immigrant policies are coordinated or «harmonized» restrictively via selection and special treatment at the frontiers of Fortress Europe.

There is a growing interconnection between reinforced external barriers and internal constraints such as discrimination on the labour market, segregation in housing, political marginalization and racism in everyday life. Behind the labels of refugee, immigrant and the new underclass, a new kind of second-class citizen, The Stranger, is appearing in Europe (Ålund 1995). The risk that the culturalization of social disparities will become a type of «new racism» has often been pointed out (cf. Ålund & Schierup 1991, Wrench & Solomos 1993, Silverman, 1992). The winds of right-wing extremism are once again blowing through Europe.

Thus the tendencies towards the exclusion of immigrants and their offspring reflect contemporary processes connecting the crisis of the Welfare State, fundamental societal transformations and a deterioration of social conditions with anxiety over the future European Union, migration, and the spread of racism and its relationship with contemporary nationalism(s). The situation is a hot-bed for the growth of populist movements, localisms and the building of boundaries between cultures.

Culturalism, which in so many ways affects our understanding of the process of change in modern society, with all its social tensions, conflicts and inequalities, has a powerful effect on choice of direction in immigrant policies in Sweden as well as in the rest of Europe. It is therefore important to look critically at its extent and the part it plays, so that real social inequality is not hidden in a fog of stereotypical images of mental cultural differences commonly described as imported «immigrant problems».

In Sweden (and elsewhere in Scandinavia) a cognitive ordering system embedded in the culturalist «The Immigrant as a Problem» discourse has even penetrated the theories and practices of important popular movements such as the Trade Unions, the youth movement and the feminist movement. Among the consequences is a tacit acceptance of open discrimination against individuals with an immigrant background. There has been a move away from the renowned political visions of «equality», «freedom of choice» and «partnership» which in the mid-1970's marked Sweden's proclaimed egalitarian, multi-cultural ideology.

A gradual change occurred in the character of the public debate in the 1980's, especially after 1988 when there was an intense debate about «refugees as a problem». Public debate has become increasingly concerned with the alleged criminal behaviour of immigrants and with drawing boundaries between cultures. The dominant ideological trend has been towards culturalizing «problematic immigrants» rather than problematizing the structural restraints. A shift in ideological orientation and institutional practices seems to have taken place at various levels since the early 1990's. The complex processes of reorientation range from heavy-handed symbolic manifestations of new, ideologically and politically marginal, racist groups at street level (burning of crosses; assaults on refugee camps, etc.) to discrete and almost imperceptible reformulations of government reports which in general tend to focus on social problems. At the same time, however, a hierarchical ethnic division of labour (Schierup & Paulson 1994) has developed: the Swedish counterpart to the familiar phenomenon of the «vertical mosaic» (Porter 1968).

A blanket of obscurity is, however, all too easily cast over social problems such as segregation and discrimination of immigrants by culturalization of differences. The residential segregation of immigrants is explained on the grounds of their cultural preference for living together (Andersson-Brolin 1984). Debarment from the labour market is seen as being due to the immigrants» mentality. Bad health, early pensioning - off and long periods off sickness - especially in immigrant women - are explained with reference to cultural peculiarities (cf. the critical discussion in Alund 1988, Knocke 1994 and Schierup & Paulson 1994).

«The immigrant problem» is primarily a social problem. As a cultural problem it appears at most as derived: a problem produced in the country migrated to. Social debarment, discrimination, stigmatization and marginalization evolve in parallel with under-representation in the political system. Residential segregation is a fact which hits immigrants hard. Everywhere in Europe we see immigrants being debarred and excluded.

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The ultimate effect of different processes of social exclusion of new ethnic minorities - referred to as «immigrants», generation after generation - carry the the risk of proliferation of what Hans Magnus Enzensberger has called molecular urban warfare.

Outsiderism can also help to create exclusionary subcultures. Modern cities tend to fragment into a patchwork of apartheid-like «homelands» of subordinated outsiders. The formation of gangs; conflict; symbolic disputes and violence reflect the new poverty, civil insecurity and homelessness in society. This is the social context of cultural identity: the conditions of life as it is lived set the stage for the drama of the formation of identity, its space and symbolic forms. An important backdrop to this drama comprises the cultural hierarchies which accompany society's social differentiation, regardless of whether the cultural pecking order is based on class, gender, age, ethnicity or race. Ethnic identities are firmly anchored in their social contexts and cannot be understood away from their embeddedness within particular social settings (Ålund 1996a). Numerous ethnically mixed communities - such as Swedish multiethnic suburbs - have become isolated refuges, social havens in the midst of a modern «multicultural» world. These structurally isolated and exploited areas of ethnic and class segregated living have frequently become the basis for political mobilization. Beyond new inclusive solidarities we can, however, in the constitution of these new often multi- and transethnic communities, find a number of exclusivist reactions. They may express a social closure towards «internally», even if usually «externally» estranged Others. The immigrants are the constructed Others who, in turn, construct their own Other. Development of this kind of «ethnic absolutism» (Gilroy 1987) can thus be understood as a modern reaction to contemporary forms of exclusion from the dominant culture and structure. Social inequalities create cultural differences, but without a reflexive connection between the two, «multiness» may be understood as, and subsequently turned into, simple demands for the right to be culturally different.

The position of immigrants within the ethnicized societal division of labour, as well as in the societal status hierarchy of culture, emphasizes the importance of the relationship between social structure and culture. Culture has become a universal ideological category in the political struggle, an indispensable tool for techno-scientific administration and organization of differences, a general common-sense popular cliché celebrating the separateness of «cultural belongings». Immigrants' ethnicity has become an expression of a hierarchization of cultures, popularly reduced to questions such as the right of Sikhs to wear turbans or not; a stigmatized space of folkloristic traditionalism. The projection of oriental images onto Others is merely a reflection of the basic trajectory of multiculturalism, biased by the union of culturalist primordialism and hegemonic Eurocentrism. Cultural diversity is reduced to cultural differences, a folkloric spectacle, while culture has become the depoliticized domain of multimedia events.

The cultural has acquired an independent role. In their bare and distorted forms, cultural explanations have colonized the social by means of culturization. The social space has been reduced to a site for the production of identities or merely differentiated entities. What is not usually recognized is inequalities in the economic domain, and that the social struggle continues through the cultural. This is the sensitive dialectical relationship between culture and social structure which must be observed.

2. Feminism and recognition of difference

Dominant academic discourse has actually helped to construct opposition between Us and Other. The problem of continuous strangeness is bound into the dominant societal construction of the Other and the Self. The ways and forms in which it operates across time and space, forging marginalized social categories through various combinations of racialized, gendered or ethnicized humanity, in politics and through cultural production and representations, should be a central theme for feminist research and political discussion. Not least because the excluded, «the Other» the «Invandrare», the «Ausländer», as Nora Räthzel (1995) informs us, are constructed as «the counterimages of Heimat». They represent a threat of exposing internal contradictions of the imagined harmony of the Heimat.

However, the force of an oppressive traditional culture has, on the whole, been a dominant theme in popular as well as academic conceptions of Swedish migrant women, who are otherwise largely invisible in Swedish feminist research. The popular dichotomization of people into categories like «Swedes» and «immigrants», «modern» and «traditional» have governed the understanding of difference. It is in this spirit that the image of immigrant women became constructed within the framework of opposition between modernity and tradition.

Women of migrant background have continuously been represented as belonging to an undeveloped culture, in contrast to a modern, superior and supposedly homogeneous «Swedish culture», with connotations of a «natural order». The very notion of «immigrant women» - a discursively created stereotyped category - comprises a significant example of stigmatized «Otherness» (Ålund 1988, 1996a). With few exceptions, the little that has been published has only contributed to confirming the popular image of «immigrant women» as largely subordinated, passive and driven solely by tradition (cf. critical discussion in Kocke 1991, 1994, Ålund 1991, 1994a, 1996a).

What is usually not recognized is that cultures are formed within the framework of both pre- and post-migratory antagonisms and related to emergent struggles in the pre-political contexts of everyday life, as well as in wider public arenas (Ålund 1991). Rat-
her than being passive victims, women who immigrated actively employ the complex cultural symbolism of their histories to challenge contemporary forms of subordination and, in the process, they create new solidarities. In the Swedish context the role of women in the development of culture and local urban communities is often essential in that they act as the main bearers of informal networks integrating local public life. Centred around the family, the household and local community life, such female networks may nurture boundary-crossing cultural dispositions and give birth to new forms of social organization. Within the locus of the local neighbourhood and of everyday life, a subtle and complex identity work anchors new forms of consciousness and alternative definitions (Ålund 1991).

Sustained by the mediating space of female social networks, new solidarities and complex cultural identities can emerge from struggles centred around the power of definitions. Collectively experienced social injuries (related to segregation, discrimination and political marginalization) affect the generation of shared values in such a way that, instead of the «personal» representing the «political», the political (or communal) position becomes personalized. Dynamic communication linking an individual experience with the reason for an intimate social circle generates a critical awareness. Creative resistance to stigmatizing institutional labelling is articulated through their own culturally derived discourse (Ålund 1988, 1991 Ålund and Schierup 1991).

Among Swedish women from the former Yugoslavia experiences of solidarity, cooperation and rebellion against oppression seem to have their historical roots in female practices in spheres such as the household, the fields, handicrafts, or trading (cf. Rihtman-Augustin 1984). Embedded in the values and types of social relations found in the rural societies most of them emigrated from, informal subcultures have developed and been transformed into networks of «immigrant women» trying to cope with new dilemmas and conflicts.

In that they deal with current dilemmas and social problems (of discrimination and ethnic conflicts) and are often expressed in broader forms of solidarity transcending narrow ethnic boundaries, emerging forms of consciousness are definitely «modern». At the same time they are connected with «tradition» and a socio-cultural «heritage» in the country of origin. This tradition cannot, however, be reduced to the «patriarchal oppression»; just as there is a strong element of patriarchal oppression in modern countries of immigration, there has always, as Dunja Rihtman-Augustin (1984) argues, been an element of rebellion embedded in concealed «female subcultures» flourishing in the interstices of the patriarchal system. In The Structure of Traditional Thought Rihtman-Augustin (ibid.) rejects the static, unidimensional, normative approach to what is conventionally described as «traditional society». Instead, she draws attention to the existence of a complex and dynamic duality between the prescribed norms of an ideal order and an everyday reality marked by conflicting definitions and resistance.

Rihtman-Augustin's argument concerning the multidimensional aspects of the traditional female subculture fits in well with the global approach of Linda Nicholson's (1986) Gender and History. Nicholson claims that «ignored facts» (ibid.: 205), such as cultural experiences from «non-Western countries and family forms», retroactively forced them to adopt the Western concept of history, which became «the norm to which oth-
nocentric feminism", or a woman-centred standpoint ("Standpoint feminism"), based on what is distinctively womanly, such as maternity and caring, was dominated by a homogenized image of Woman as normative: the white, middle-class woman. The marginalization of black and migrant women and what was called "the other opinion" in the mainstream feminist discourse was met with criticism, exposing the problems of ethnocentrism and politics of domination in the production of scientific knowledge.

Gloria Hull (1982) expressed this pitifully with the title of her book "All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave". In a much publicized article, "White women listen!", Hazel Carby (1982) argues that to get women to get together to fight for their common interests, it was first necessary to get white women to do something about the racism within themselves. Racism became seen as the root of the problem.

In claiming that race is the primary source of their oppression, feminists among black and migrant women "threw into doubt the universality of the central categories and assumptions of mainstream feminist analyses", as Daiva Stasiulis (Stasiulis 1987) argued. For black and migrant women, as Ellie Vasta (1992: 14) also claims, to start to identify themselves "outside the mainstream women's movement was both a political gesture to break the notion of homogeneity and an act of self-empowerment".

This kind of criticism from minority women was followed by self-criticism within mainstream feminism from the mid-80s. Critique within mainstream discourse put forward arguments that, historically, white femininity had been constructed through offensive stereotypes and myths pitting "European" and "civilized" against "non-European" and "non-civilised" (cf. e.g. Barrett & McIntosh 1985 Harding 1986 Elshtain 1986 Nichol­son 1986).

This brief summary also points to the further evolution of feminist research which, particularly since the early 1990s, has begun to be characterized by recognition as well as scrutinization of differences.

4. Identity politics: their potential and traps

To start with, the recognition of a variety of experiences and identities - social, cultural and sexual - was met with opposition. Identity politics was seen as representing a divisive threat to the political unity and theoretical core of feminism. However, assisted by vital impulses from French deconstructivism and post-structuralism, new orientations have spread internationally throughout post-modernist discourses (Evans 1995 Farganis 1994). They focus essentially on culture and identity. At the same time, however, critical disputes about the political and theoretical consequences of identity politics started to make their mark. Theories and politics of difference were criticised for their culturalizing and essentializing impact. An increasing interest in social dimensions such as class, institutionally embedded racism and social exclusion is coming to the fore. A new research agenda is taking shape. The association between social, cultural and identity-seeking processes is being stressed.

Several feminists engaging in the debate for the need for reorientation have warned against reductionist separation of structures of domination. Androcentrism, racism and class oppression both overlap and conflict. As argued by Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval Davis (1992), we have to be aware of intersection between gender, class, ethnicity and racialized state practices. Reductionist disconnection of ethnicity from an interrelated spectrum of "structured inequalities" may lead to a fruitless debate and competing hierarchizations of oppression. In other words, competing claims regarding the extent to which race, gender or class constitutes the greatest oppression.

Attention is also drawn to the pitfall of distinction implicit in identity politics (Yuval-Davis 1996) - particularly the risk of creating new "purified" cultures. One result of culturally defined forms of politics of identity can be a retreat into "ghettoized lifestyles" (Parmar 1989).

Conceptions of what identity is are frequently based on reductionist assumptions of cultural homogeneity. The relationship among group identities and cultures in Western society is, as Iris Young (1990) pointed out, blotted by racism, sexism and xenophobia. Identification of Us and the Others may develop via demarcation of different Others as being inferior. What is needed, Young tells us (ibid.), is recognition of cultural differences within the framework of equal conditions. However, in the same instant she claims that we have to open up for the "unassimilated Other". This position is biased by essentialist notions of culture and lack of recognition of hybrid and composite identities. Recognition of the culturally different, such as the "unassimilated" Others, which Young pleads for, risks producing new demarcations and constructions of Others. No-one today lives in worlds which are "genuine" and "unassimilated" in terms of cultural identity. Well-meaning attempts at rendering Others culturally visible may give rise to just as many problems as does homogenization of femininity (Brun 1989 Bottomley 1991).

The issue of politics of recognition is complex and by no means straightforward (cf. Trow 1996). In black academic circles, for instance, it is met with ambivalence. As bell hooks (1991) pointed out, identities are complex, and the deconstruction - whether from within or without - of essentialized black identities can make their heterogeneity highly visible. This can facilitate recognition of a similarity of worlds of experience across constructed boundaries. The reality of blacks is, however, characterized by racism, and as long as racist practices remain, politics of identity will remain central to the black political struggle (ibid.).

This illustrates the connection between identity politics and social exclusion. It also exposes problems related to citizenship and its central issue of universalism versus particularism. The academic challenge which identity politics gave rise to within feminist research has resulted in a search for new analytical categories in order to find "new modes of articulation between the universal and the particular" as Chantal Mouffe (1993) expressed it. Concepts such as "differentiated universalism" (Lister 1996) and "transversal dialogues" (Yuval-Davis 1996) express this endeavour. New forms of the politics of solidarity, which would be capable of encompassing the cultural voices and representations of difference, are added (Yeattman 1993). Pertaining to ethnically or racially defined minorities, the academic discussion centres increasingly on the problem of injecting recognition of cultural particularity into universalism, but without overshadowing socially constructed inequalities appearing as divergences (Lister 1996).

Here ethnicity is more and more frequently associated with varying conditions for
membership of society; social justice, participation in the political process, and other aspects of the status and conditions of citizenship (Marshall 1950, Turner 1990) under which questions of social exclusion and inclusion occupy a central place. This applies in particular to the political exclusion of refugees, temporary asylum, temporary labour conditions, and to the discrimination to which migrant and minority women in general are exposed within the European Union (cf. Morokvasic 1984, 1991, 1993 Knocke 1995 and others).

Women as independent migrants have to an increasing extent become «the new helots» (Cohen 1987) of a changing world order. Women now constitute well over half of those involved in global migration. A significant example of this development is represented by the thousands of Third World maids and nannies, without any legal rights whatever, forced to leave home to go into service with rich families in the USA, Hong Kong, Europe and other places.

However, Philippine housemaids are organizing world-wide against the extreme oppression to which they are exposed (Stasiulis & Bhakan 1996). This example illustrates the emergence of organised resistance among migrant women, a development that since the beginning of 1990s has been reported from different parts of the world of immigration. Discussing political activism of Pakistani diasporic women, Pnina Werbner (1996: 5) argues that «they have, literally, rewritten the moral terms of their citizenship - from passive to active, from disadvantaged underclass and racialized minority to an elite cadre of global citizens». On behalf of Australia, Ellie Vasta (1992: 3) writes that «migrant women's racially structured gender position has led to the emergence of organizations like the SPEAKOUT and ANESBWA, and has led to their struggles and 'cultures of resistance' against marginalization in economic, state, cultural and political arenas. From this kind of political platform, migrant women seem to start moving towards broader solidarities, across ethnicities and sexualities. They have recognized that identity politics is not an end in itself but a precursor to further, more broadly based activities and alliances, based on political commitments rather than on identities (Ibid.).»

An increased insight into internationalization of racialized boundary-building as well as into the politics of resistance, alliances and coalitions across ethnic and gender boundaries has thus developed within international gender research. In Sweden, these questions have long been confined to a small group of feminists with immigrant background.

The gradual awareness of ethnicity in the Swedish feminist debate and growing interest in women who have immigrated raises the need for a general analytical shift: a shift from stereotype interpretations towards a more comprehensive recognition of the conditions of their belonging, here and now, and of their own experience (Ålund 1991).

This has become particularly important as the focus of empirical research and the academic and public debate in Sweden as well as in the rest of Scandinavia has moved away from first generation migrants to so called «immigrant youth». These new Swedes are fighting for membership of a society which still does not regard them as part of itself or as real Swedes. Their search for an identity is marked by conflicting experiences of local integration into segregated conditions of suburban life and a broadly based feeling of being excluded from the wider national community (Ålund 1997).

5. Culture and the politics of resistance

Complex societies are characterized, on the one hand, by global movements of people and commodities; an intense cultural development underpinned by ramified networks of communication and social relations. The inequable evolution of modern society leads, on the other hand, to the polarization of the distribution of resources and of economic and political power, to the formation of hierarchies globally, nationally and locally. These processes underlie migration, segregation and social conflicts in «the global city» as well as constituting the framework for the growth of contemporary expressions of culture. Living in complex societies entails a multiplicity of participation in «more or less discrepant universes of discourses» as Barth (1989: 130) observed. Referring to culture, Barth argues that people today move between different partial and simultaneous worlds and therefore «their cultural construction of reality springs not from one source and is not of one place» (Ibid.). In a similar vein, Hall (1996) describes identities (in late modern times) as strategic and positional, constantly in the process of change and transformation, «never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions» (Ibid.: 4).

Diversification of cultures is closely related to a remarkable openness towards the ability of a specific cultural idiom to interact with «outside» signals and to incorporate them (cf. Sollors 1989). This development represents, as Ulf Hannerz argues, not just «a matter of assimilating items of some distant provenance into a fundamentally local culture» (1990: 238) particularly by way of globalized commodities. Much of what «passes for novel cultural interchange these days is instead», Steve Vertovec writes (1996: 394) with reference to Hannerz (Ibid.), a view of «cosmopolitanism as a perspective, a state of mind or a mode of managing meaning».

Emerging mixtures of cultures and cultural innovations, as well as a multiplicity of identities (in an individual as well as a collective sense), illustrate the diversity of contemporary multiculural society and its potential for change. However, one sore lack in the predominant debate (in Sweden as in Europe in general) is non-recognition of this kind of «multi-cultural multiplicity» (Ibid.). As the British sociologist Stuart Hall (1993:361) puts it, cultural multiplicity is the destiny of modern society. This does not automatically mean that anyone will notice the variety of multiplicity, if I may put it like that: the real risk is that the cultivation of various «pure» forms of national and traditional identity continue to represent the public discourse for the organization of multiculturalism.

Several scholars in this field have pointed out that the growth of new cultural expressions and cultural fusions transcending frontiers characterise multicultural European societies to an ever-increasing extent (Gilroy 1987, Jones 1988, Hannerz 1990, Ålund & Schicrup 1991, Hall 1992, Hewitt 1992, Vertovec 1996).

The emergence of cultural multiplicity is related to transethnic social relations and new bridge-building transcultural systems of meaning, as well as to the association between new cultural expressions, social subordination, resistance through culture, and the growth of new transethnic social solidarities. Development of new distinct aesthetics, as well as the emergence of new social movements, is based on the charged mixture of breaches of cultural frontiers and social marginalization - not least among young people in
multietnic cities. The complex interplay between ethnicity, gender and generation forms the implosive force for a reflective rejection of both old and new forms of oppression, as well as new forms of solidarity and collective identity. Youth especially are being moulded into new transcultural communities by the conditions and realities of contemporary multietnic society. This is a social force which for far too long has attracted insufficient attention.

As Angela McRobbie pointed out (1994), international research into young people contains many uninvestigated areas in the field of relationships between gender, ethnicity and youth. An encroaching societal context of social and cultural submissiveness characterizes the lives of ethnic-young girls in particular. But, as McRobbie stresses, it is not least among young women that a thought-provoking kind of resistance and a new cultural language seem to be growing; a new, «hybrid» ethnicity in which not least the rhetoric of proud young womanhood comes to expression.

In the multietnic cities of today, young people develop complex life forms related to the social conditions experienced and the entire polyphony of cultural styles; local, national and global influences fuse with each other. In Stockholm, as in the other big cities of Western Europe, new cultures transcending frontiers, cultural amalgamations and transetnic urban social movements have taken successive form (Alund 1993, 1995, 1996b, 1997). Daily meetings with and experience of ethnically mixed society stimulate young people in particular to a bridging of ethnic boundaries and fusion of cultural expression, as reflected in work on identity at the collective level as well as at the individual one (ibid.).

Young people are socially conscious and critical of the increasing discrimination in society. Consciousness of a shared position of subordination in society diffuses down via the words of rap music, branching out into new and growing social movements against racism and enforced ethnic boundaries (Alund 1994). Formation of new voices and new «hybrid» identities is, as Homi K. Bhabha says (1996: 58), closely related to construction of visions of «community and versions of historic memory that give narrative form to the minority positions they occupy, the outside of the inside: the part in the whole».

The expression of these processes is deeply embedded in the autobiographical stories of young women which I collected in the course of my fieldwork in Stockholm (Alund 1997). The feeling of outsider identity, and the search for socio-cultural belonging characterize in a high degree their identity-work. The social contexts and immediate life-worlds, with their inequalities and tensions, carry fundamental conflictual forces (belonging/not belonging), which are particularly important for young people who are called «immigrants» and strangers, generation after generation. Their often marginal position in the societal division of labour - and that of their parents as well - carries great significance for the character and role of their ethnic identity. However, ethnic identity, and identification based on ethnic affiliation, are by no means self-evident. The individual interviews repeatedly expose a destabilization of fixed ethnicities in the process.

Young people mediate experiences related to a variety of social and cultural worlds. They live in close and constant contact with the intensive cultural multiplicity of daily life. Diverse cultural elements are mixed and crossed; new identities are created. What


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