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Racial Injustice in Astrid Lindgren's *Kati in America*

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This article addresses Astrid Lindgren's *Kati in America*, which was written in 1950 and translated into English in 1964. The novel reflects Lindgren's impressions of the United States, where she traveled in 1948 on assignment for the publishing house Åhland and Åkerlund. By chance, the author of this article discovered that there is a fifteenth chapter of the book in the Russian, Polish, French, Spanish, and German translations, but which is missing in the English. This missing chapter describes the racism Lindgren's protagonist witnesses during her visit to New Orleans. Astrid Lindgren's depiction of racial injustice in the South is especially relevant in the current era, when the subject of race is so prominent in the national conversation. In light of this fact, it is more important than ever that a new, complete English translation of *Kati in America* be published, one that reflects the racial injustice to which Astrid Lindgren sought to call her readers' attention in Chapter 15.

Astrid Lindgren is considered a national hero in her native Sweden. She is the country's most beloved children's author, and an exceptionally prolific one at that. To English-speaking audiences, she is best known as the creator of Pippi Longstocking, the free-spirited and preternaturally strong nine-year-old who lives in Villa Villekulla with her pet monkey, Mr. Nilsson. Another of her beloved characters is Karlsson-on-the-Roof, a tiny man who lives on the roof of a Stockholm apartment building and befriends a boy who lives there with his family. Karlsson was popular not only in Sweden but in the Soviet Union, where he was the protagonist of two popular animated films as well as a

stage production. But those who are familiar with the greater body of Astrid Lindgren's published work will know that, in addition to being the creator of imaginative and endearing fictional characters, she was also a tireless advocate for social justice.

Two years after publishing *Pippi Longstocking*, which made her famous, the publishing house Åhland and Åkerlund asked Lindgren to travel to the United States to write a series of articles about Black children. Lindgren was initially ambivalent about the proposal, but ultimately accepted and, in 1948, traveled to the U.S. to carry out the assignment. Lindgren was dissatisfied with the articles, which were published in the fashion magazine *Damernas Värld*, but the trip provided the material for *Kati in America*, which she published in 1950 (Andersen, 187-188).

Kati in America was the first of Astrid Lindgren's so-called Kati novels (Kati-böcker). The protagonist of the Kati novels is a young woman who works as a typist and lives with her frumpy Aunt Wilhelmina in Stockholm. Like many of Lindgren's protagonists, she is an orphan, having lost both her parents as a child. In each of the novels, Kati travels to a different country or city, describing its citizens, character, and customs in the course of her narrative. *Kati in America* (*Kati i Amerika*, 1950) was followed by *Kati in Italy* (*Kati på Kaptensgatan*, 1952), and *Kati in Paris* (*Kati i Paris*, 1953). However, English-speaking readers were not introduced to *Kati in America* until after *Kati in Italy* and *Kati in Paris* had been translated into English. It's hard to say why the first book of the series, *Kati in America*, was the last to be translated into English, fourteen years after its initial publication. Moreover, the English language edition, brought out by Brockhampton Press in January of 1964, omitted Chapter 15 of the story, in which Lindgren's heroine visits New Orleans and gets a first-hand look at its culture of racism.

In *Kati in America*, Kati decides to travel to the United States after listening to her boyfriend

Jan boast about his recent trip to the country. Kati uses the money she inherited from her parents on turning 21 to travel to America. Her Aunt Wilhelmina decides to accompany her in the capacity of a chaperone, and the two embark for New York. The narrative form of the novel is picaresque; Kati and Aunt Wilhelmina visit new places, make new friends, and are the subjects of a series of mostly lighthearted adventures. While visiting New York City, they make friends with Bob, with whom they travel by car to Washington, D.C. Later, Kati and Bob take a bus to Jamestown, Virginia. On boarding the bus, they are told to sit at the front of the bus, because they will be crossing the Potomac River into Virginia, where the back is reserved for Black passengers only. This is Kati's first encounter with segregation in the novel, and significantly, the Brockhampton edition's only reference to systemic racism in the United States.

My first encounter with *Kati in America* was the English translation of the novel. However, I later happened to read the book in Russian (*Katu v Amerike*) and Polish (*Kati w Ameryce*), in which I am also fluent, and was surprised to discover that both translations included a fifteenth chapter which was absent from the English. Intrigued by this omission, I obtained German (*Kati in Amerika*), French (*Kati en Amérique*), and Spanish (*Kati en América*) translations of the novel, and, with the help of colleagues who are proficient in each of those languages, was able to verify that each translation included a Chapter 15 whose contents were essentially the same as the Russian and Polish translations.

Chapter 15 recounts the bulk of Kati's visit to New Orleans - which begins in Chapters 14 and ends in 16 - and is based on Lindgren's own impressions of the city, which she visited while on assignment for Åhland and Åkerlund. In all of the novel's translations, the chapter begins with the statement, in English, "*We don't want to mix with them people!*" This imprecation is muttered by a taxi driver whose views on the status of Black people Kati has just asked for. He even goes on to say

that the only “good negro” is a dead one, i.e. “one resting five feet underground”¹ (*Кати в Америке*, 110). Kati is appalled.

From this incident, the narrative flashes back to a lunch date Kati has in the French Quarter with her new friend John. Over lunch, Kati condemns the systemic oppression of Black people in the South. In what is the most disturbing scene of the novel, John explains to Kati that it’s impossible for non-Southerners to be objective on the subject of racism. He goes on to say that segregation and other forms of institutionalized racism are needed to keep Black people in subjection to whites. In one especially damning passage, he asks his young Swedish friend to imagine a plantation where Blacks vastly outnumber whites, asking her, “What do you think would happen if the negroes did not absolutely believe that white people are untouchable?” (*Кати в Америке*, 111) When Kati continues to argue with John, he tells her that “It [will be] absolutely necessary to keep black people in their place for at least the next hundred years . . . at least until they become more educated.” (*Кати в Америке*, 113)

Afterward, Kati sits on a bench in Jackson Square and wonders what visiting New Orleans would be like if she were a young Black woman instead of a young white one (*Кати в Америке*, 113). She wouldn’t be able to go to restaurants in the *Vieux Carré* like the one she’d just eaten at with John, or visit the museum where, ironically, she’d seen an exhibit on slavery. She wouldn’t be able to go on a boat ride or attend a football game as she had done. Water fountains and seats at the front of buses and streetcars would be forbidden to her. She wouldn’t even be able to sit on the bench she was occupying, which was marked “For Whites Only.” Her reflection ends with the observation that, to the majority of Southerners, Black people - and here Kati adopts several commonly used racial slurs - “are nothing but a herd of wild animals that recently came out of the jungle.” (*Кати в Америке*, 113)

Later in the chapter, Kati befriends a housekeeper at her hotel, a Black woman named Rosie. Rosie is initially suspicious of Kati's interest in her - Kati says that "you should just see how hard it is for a white woman to start a conversation with a negro in a country where whites practically never speak to them" - but gradually warms to her. As she has done throughout her visit, Kati asks her new acquaintance what she thinks about the racism that is endemic to the South. Rosie is initially reticent, but ultimately says, "I doubt the good Lord thinks it should be like this. White people look at us like we are animals. *I just wonder why.*" (*Кати в Америке*, 115) She tells Kati about her children, whereupon Kati asks that she be allowed to come visit Rosie at home. Rosie is pleased at Kati's request and says yes.

Later, when the taxi driver brings Kati to Rosie's neighborhood, she notes that he looks "as though he had swallowed something inedible" and asks her several times if she doesn't want him to wait for her (*Кати в Америке*, p.116). When she enters Rosie's home, she is disheartened by its wretchedness; Rosie, her cousin, and five children are crowded into a two-room windowless shack to which daylight is admitted only when the front door is left open to the street. Kati's new friend tells her that as oppressive as conditions are for Black people in Louisiana, Mississippi is worse. There, she tells Kati, they are known to disappear in the night, sometimes never to be heard from again, others to be found hanging from trees. Rosie sings Kati a few lines from "Strange Fruit," the protest song written by Lewis Allan and recorded by Billie Holliday in 1939:

Southern trees bear a strange fruit.

Blood on the leaves and blood at the root.

Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze,

Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

After her visit, Kati starts back to her hotel on foot, tired and dispirited. She recounts, "I walked through poor derelict neighborhoods until I got blisters on my foot. It hurt, but what hurt even more was my soul. I was even glad about my foot - it was some justice, at least. I kept walking and walking, cursing all the time. Angry curses upon my own race." (*Katu в Америке*, 118) When she is finally able to hail a taxi, it's the one from the beginning of the chapter whose driver so offended Kati. She gets out of the cab and limps the rest of the way back to her hotel.

There is a good deal of literary criticism devoted to Astrid Lindgren's work, but most of it is dedicated to her better-known works, like the *Pippi Longstocking* series. The Kati books, on the other hand, have not received much critical attention. Vivi Edström, in her critical study of Lindgren's work, gives only passing attention to the Kati-böcker, writing that "the purpose of the Kati trilogy is primarily didactic . . . to provide information about the world outside Sweden, not least to young people who have never been abroad" (Edstrom, 37). And while she briefly discusses *Kati in Italy* and *Kati in Paris*, her study overlooks *Kati in America* entirely. This lack of critical attention is perhaps understandable when we weigh the novel's literary merits; one could argue that the narrative's tone is uneven, and its protagonist lacks the imaginative flair that endeared Pippi Longstocking and Karlsson-on-the-Roof to readers. Neither does it contain the archetypal themes that ground other Lindgren stories, like *Mio, My Son* and *Ronia, the Robber's Daughter*.

However, Chapter 15, which was likely omitted from the Brockhampton edition because it depicted Americans - who would make up a large proportion of the novel's readership - in an especially damning light, is important to Lindgren scholarship in its clear denunciation of racial injustice. Margareta Strömstedt's biography of Astrid Lindgren reveals the latter's abiding antipathy to racism (288), as does Lindgren's collected correspondence with German singer and intellectual, Louise Hartung. Unfortunately, neither of these texts has been translated into English, and these

omissions create yet another gap in English-speaking scholars' appreciation both of Astrid Lindgren's work and her concern with social justice.

In October of 1963, Astrid Lindgren traveled to the United States to meet with her publishers at Viking-Penguin in New York. She began her trip, which lasted for three weeks, with a visit to New England to see the foliage. In one of her letters to Hartung about the trip, she describes a speech she heard Martin Luther King Jr. give at a New England college. While the letter does not say what college she was visiting, it's likely that it was Wesleyan University, where King spoke twice on October 20, first in the college chapel and later at a civil rights rally (*The Wesleyan Argus*, 1). Although she doesn't say so in her letter, it's likely that she heard his sermon in Memorial Chapel, where he complained that "American morality was merely 'group consensus' and conformity to what is right and wrong according to the Gallup poll" (*The Wesleyan Argus*, 1). Lindgren writes in her letter to Hartung, "He is a great speaker, and I think his words made a strong impression on the students – not his religious message, of course – but what he had to say about *civil rights*. Those in the North feel superior and think that they do not practice discrimination as is done in the South, but as soon as Negroes really begin demanding something, then all white Americans, regardless of what state they live in, consider it impudent, yes, though there are exceptions. Oh, how much hypocrisy there is in this world!" (Lindgren and Hartung, 523).

These observations are especially pertinent in the current age, when we are witnessing an increase in the espousal of racist views and violence against Black Americans. In light of these developments, Astrid Lindgren's views on race in America, formulated over half a century ago, are strikingly prophetic, and one has to wonder how much progress this country has made since Rosie intoned those lines from "Strange Fruit" to her new friend from Sweden. As for Chapter 15, if some contemporaneous reader had compared the Brockhampton edition with translations published for

European readers - as the author of this paper has done - they would have noticed its omission and been prompted to learn what the publishers didn't want English speaking readers to see, that young Kati was idealistic and, in her characteristically ingenuous way, unafraid to speak truth to power. Had this been the case, it's hard to imagine English-speaking reviewers summing up the story as this one did: "Kati goes on a trip with her stern Auntie . . . sees Washington with Bob, New Orleans with John, adores drug-stores, ignores politics, flattens her nose against the windows of Fifth Avenue store, and returns cheerfully to Sweden and Jan, her steady, at the end of a light, accomplished and entertaining book" (Fisher). It's high time that a new English translation of *Kati i Amerika* was published, one that includes Chapter 15 and restores the integrity of Astrid Lindgren's original work.

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