

**Heterosexuality vs. Homosociality:
Sexual and Ethnic Performance in Wenger's "Borta i tankar"**
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Alejandro Wenger's 2001 short story "Borta i tankar" climaxes in a surreal blending of violence and intimacy. The protagonist, Felipe, conflates his memory of petting a girl with being beaten up by his brother Jaime:

Jaime shudders, one hand over his face, there, in the eye. Felipe screams I'll kill you, kill you and scratch all I can in his cheeks. We fall, on the grass, Jaime lies underneath and I lay over her, we french-kissed. The grass is wet: he scratches, climbs, claws him in the eye, caressed... Jaime grabs my arms and she squirms out, I fall on my back, we roll in the grass but fatigue, I can't manage, my legs are numb, lying on my back, I looked up: there she was, Jaime over me, she came down, makes a fist, a kiss, a punch: like that colors, want to throw up and everything disappears. He makes a fist again, her tongue over my whole face and strikes: kiss, nice, it tickles, more, more. [Wenger 29]

The two separate events that are fused here represent the physical culmination of the protagonist's two most important relationships. One is homosocial, with his brother Jaime and their circle of male friends, and the other interracial, with the white Julia. These relationships come into conflict when Felipe refuses to help his brother and friends break into and steal from Julia's apartment, in an act of racially-motivated wealth redistribution. If these opposing figures Felipe tangles with embody the demands of ethnic identity and sexual attraction, respectively, then Felipe's tangled memories of the fighting and lovemaking suggests that his own body served as a site of contestation over ethnic and sexual belonging – that, in essence, Julia's kisses and Jaime's punches were linked by more than their common target. Whether through trauma or pleasure, Felipe himself serves as a kind of battleground for the definition of non-white Swedish male identity.

In order to explore some of the forces acting upon Felipe's body, I'll begin by briefly situating Alejandro Wenger's fiction within the context of early-2000's Swedish literature. Then, I'll consider both Felipe's attempts to display his body in a way that adapts to changing social spheres, as well as the cultural implications of the stage on which he performs that act (the subway). Finally, I'll consider the implications of one last conflation the text creates: that of the private architectural space of Julia's apartment and her body, the entry into both of which confounds Felipe. Together, I hope these investigations will show some of the pressures upon individual Swedish bodies in Wenger's fiction.

Wenger's 2002 collection of short stories, *Till vår ära* was a touchstone for a generation of authors whose ranks would grow to include Johannes Anyuru and Jonas Khemiri. Linguistically, Wenger's writing switched seamlessly between 'standard' Swedish and a kind of Latino-inflected street slang which critics and readers quickly dubbed *Rinkebysvenska*. Wenger's facility with both accepted and taboo speech registers paralleled his exploration of both the everyday and the fantastic in his plots. His engagement with the surreal may be seen as an attempt to interject irrationality and superstition into an assimilation discourse widely figured as rationalistic. But whatever its motivation, his fiction was – despite, or because of its slang, references to hiphop, and the fantastic, a thoughtful engagement with the Swedish social imaginary.

Born in Chile, Wenger came to Sweden at the age of two, and his status as foreign-born Swede figures in his reception at both critical and popular levels. For better or worse, many Swedes looked to him for a literary response to the question of what an

ethnically- and culturally-heterogeneous Sweden would be. Wenger and his contemporaries were seen, according to one critic, as “authors who can depict the multicultural Sweden of today *from within*, or what we believe and consider to be an interior perspective, of and by people who live in the chasm between double cultural experiences, and who seek their own expression and language to create a social space.” [Trotzig 23]

Indeed, Wenger’s writing is often most powerful when it engages questions of precisely what that “social space” Astrid Trotzig mentions. The protagonist of “Borta i tankar” meets the white Julia after gaining transferring to an exclusive school in central Stockholm. The sudden change from immigrant suburb to elite institution precipitates a crisis in how Felipe’s body represents its owner. Worried about fitting in with his new schoolmates, Felipe convinces his mother to buy him new clothes:

...paint?, they looked at him, wondered, you mean graffiti?, and then, do you have a PC?, no he didn’t, and they wore different clothes, talked, laughed, walked different, he bought some sweaters, mom bought, and a Peak shirt, it’s too expensive Felipe, but please mom!, she said OK, OK but be careful with it because it’s expensive... [23]

But Felipe’s body, decorated in its new clothes for a new school, is rejected by his former circle of friends. Meeting them on the subway one day, clothed in the trappings of the white middle class, his old friends see through his transformation:

Sometimes he saw them coming from the other direction when he was walking to the subway: Latif, Bollen, Brallan, Nico. It was early morning and there were lots of people downtown running into the station. Then he always wanted to turn around or hide behind somebody else so they wouldn’t see me, and from far away they began to wave and yell, hey what up, you got no love for us, the fuck is up with that, you be all fine now? It was their glances, they saw: new shirt, you a snob now? Fällan’s all fine now, he ashamed of us they said. Sometimes he was tired so I tried to hide when he saw them coming from the other direction: we heard you got a chick yo, she fine?, she a snob?, you do her pussy yet?, that why you got a new shirt? [12]

The critical response Felipe's old friends give his new wardrobe highlights the problem of the body as the marker of belonging. Even as the body can be disguised and redressed, its indexical power to those who know it intimately remains unaffected. To Felipe's old friends, his attempt to 'pass' as a middle-class Swede is both unconvincing and strangely unnerving, worthy of not just comment but teasing and, eventually, physical violence. Using Judith Butler's terminology (with the important caveat that her work is, of course, on gender rather than ethnicity), we can examine "three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality:" corporeal ethnicity, race/class identity, and race/class performance. Felipe's friends view his corporeal ethnicity as non-White, and see his new clothes as an attempt to shift race/class identity through race/class performance: trying to assume the privileges of whiteness by acting white. As one of them tells Felipe, his own brother Jaime is spreading rumors to this effect: "Your bro talkin' mad shit about you man. He say Fällan be sven, Fällan all fine nowadays." [12]

Yet their very anger at his actions, as well as their verbal and physical efforts to discipline him and make him cohere to their conceptions of race and class, point out the threat he poses to that coherence. In other words, their attempts to enforce conformity actually ends up highlighting the arbitrariness of the identities and the slipperiness of the categories ostensibly located in (and bound to) the body. His friends' suggestion that "that why you got a new shirt?" suggests that Felipe's transgressive behavior – an interracial relationship – affords both the promise and the threat of transcending class barriers which were formerly stable and written on the body with melanin.

The location where Felipe encounters this unsympathetic audience is at least as important as the events of the confrontation itself. The Stockholm subway (*tunnelbana*), like that of most other large European cities, connects a vibrant inner city with postwar suburban housing projects generally settled by first- and second-generation immigrants, as well as the poorer whites. Although built as models of ‘modern’ physical and mental hygiene, most are no longer desirable as middle-class housing. Julia’s question when she first meets Felipe – “is it dangerous in Vårberg?” [16] – points to the mythos of these storied spaces as well as their disconnection from the travel networks of many white Swedes.

The subway, then, as the link between these outer-ring ghettos and the (literal and figurative) core of Stockholm, must be considered a fraught intersection of stasis and motion, where classes and races mix. (Not for nothing is the largest rap label in Sweden named Redline Records, after the spur that travels south to Vårberg.) The subway is further implicated not only in the postwar expansion of the city’s suburbs, but also the reaction to the *miljonprojekt* developments which resulted from that expansion: witness the creation of a special *tvärbana* line linking the New Urbanism of *Hammarby sjöstad* with its architectural and social models in central Stockholm: the urban core fights back against the Red Line in a development one critic termed “kriget mot förorten” (SVT’s Katarina Dahlgren, 2002)

Thus Felipe’s chance encounters with his former friends on the subway highlight both the possibility of motion within the urban context (from the outer suburbs to his new, prestigious school downtown), but also the unpredictability and even danger of a

city where social worlds collide. Wenger's other writings, including a short story called Elixir, have called attention to the subway as a fraught space for the performance of citizenship, where the amorphous notions of Swedish identity suddenly crystallize into a teenager's decision to jump the turnstile or wait in line for a ticket like a good Swede.

Finally, from this public network of transport and mobility, we move into the twinned architectural/corporeal markings of privacy and intimacy: Julia's home as well as her body. Sensing a rare opportunity to literally enter the privileged space of the urban elite, Felipe's old friends pressure him to aid them in robbing Julia's apartment. Felipe loses a test of machismo he had hoped would prevent his friends from carrying through with their idea, flinching before his brother Jaime does as they burn each others' arms with cigarettes. Vanquished, and bearing the proof of his conflicted loyalties as scars on his body, he must leave a window open and unlocked in Julia's room.

Crucially, his mixed feelings about carrying through with the robbery are conflated with his confusion about sleeping with Julia. His reluctance to participate in the break-in, despite his friends' pressure, melts seamlessly into his reluctance to sleep with his girlfriend, despite Julia's assumptions.

"Do you love me?"

"You know I love you," I said. "Lay off fatass, 'course I'm not in love with her."

"Why don't you want to, then!" Jaime screams. "Why you punk out if you're not in love with her?"

"Why don't you want to, then?" she asked. "If you love me then..."

"It's bad style, yo, go loot someone's home," he says. "I mean I want to but... not today, Julia. You must think I'm a wimp."

"I swear you're a wimp," Nico says. "Mama's grave you are. You don't even have to come with us, yo, understand. Just open the window, no one's gonna know!"

"Right," says Bollen. "Nobody coming, we sneak in like cats, nice and quiet yo."

"You aren't a wimp at all," she said. "Did I say that? And actually..."

"Actually what?" Felipe said, I said, he said, Fällan said.

"Actually I don't want to either. I just thought, since you're a boy." [19]

In the dialog both Felipe's girlfriend and his group of old friends combine into a seamless continuum of behavioral expectations pressed upon the narrator, who himself shifts between first- and third-person. In Butlerian terms, for both Felipe's old friends, as well as his new girlfriend, "coherence is desired, wished for, idealized, and ... this idealization is an effect of a corporeal signification." [171] Thus Felipe must conform to his friends' ideas of coherent class and race identity through his performance of larceny, and to his girlfriend's expectation of (if not desire for) coherent male sexual performance.

By initially refusing to take part in both the robbery and the sex act, Felipe presents a challenge to the normative standards of both ethnic and sexual belonging. His reluctance is connected with his own insecurity about his body penetrating private spaces. The blurring of the lines between his complicity in the eventual break-in of Julia's apartment with his ambivalent desires regarding her body is, on the micro scale, a reflection of the conflicting desires and allegiances of adolescence, of the pull of both homosocial and heterosexual expectations on individual conception of the self. Yet on the macro scale it can be read as engaging unresolved tensions in the Swedish social imaginary over race and assimilation.

These tensions do not resolve into an easy or uplifting ending. Like Rufus in James Baldwin's *Another Country*, Felipe finds himself living up to the worst expectations of white Swedes by ruining a personal relationship in what seems to be a self-destructive action. Wenger certainly infuses Felipe's apologia with a Baldwin-esque puncturing of liberal, utopian notions of ethnic harmony:

PLUS YOU DIDN'T TELL ANYONE THAT WE WERE TOGETHER, JUST YOUR DAD AND YOUR MOM. MAYBE YOU WANTED TO ANNOY THEM ... THAT YOU WERE

WITH ME 'CAUSE YOUR DAD DOESN'T LIKE, I DON'T KNOW. BUT I GOT ANGRY 'CAUSE YOU WERE A LITTLE FAKE YOU KNOW. THAT'S WHY I DID THAT. DEEP INSIDE I DIDN'T WANT TO BUT I LOST AND JAIME AND THEM PRESSURED ME, YOU KNOW, THEY SAID THAT IF YOU PUNK OUT YOU'RE AN IDIOT, YOU'RE A FAG. OK I KNOW I FUCKED UP. I KNOW I WAS FAKE BUT YOU WERE A LITTLE FAKE TOO. YEAH, JULIA, YOU WERE, BUT THAT'S NOT YOUR FAULT. EVERYONE IS FAKE SOMETIMES, NOW I KNOW EVERYONE IS, THEY GET LIKE FORCED TO EVEN THOUGH THEY DON'T WANT TO. ME TOO, I WAS TOO. [24-25]

Felipe's despair might be thought of as the exhaustion of a body at odds with too many forms of conformity: failing to meet to his homosocial network's expectation of ethnic performance, as well as his heterosexual relationship's expectation of sexual performance. A segregated urban landscape where a center/periphery dynamic describes not just the real estate values but also the boundaries of national belonging, Felipe's Stockholm is a stage on which the ethnic body engages in a daily struggle over how it represents itself to others. That Felipe should lose both the love of his girlfriend and the trust of his brother and friends over the resulting contradictions is a testimony to what is at stake in their psychological and physical struggles. The picture Wenger paints, at least in this story, is a bleak one: Felipe seems to stand alone amidst every other character's unrealistic expectations of him.

Yet if we consider Michael Warner's in *Publics and Counterpublics* claim that new publics spring forth into being at least in part by virtue of the manner in which they are addressed, we can see how Wenger's fiction may be engaged in a reciprocal relationship with the counter publics it fictively represents. Felipe's body, scarred by the fraternal self-injury competition with Jaime, bruised by fists, and kissed by Julia, is corporeal evidence of the difficulty of answering Warner's question: "...how, by what

rhetoric, one might bring a public into being when extant modes of address and intelligibility seem themselves to be a problem.” [130] For a nation confronting basic questions of identity and belonging, Wenger’s fiction may be the first step towards creating a social imaginary more nuanced and complex than before, attuned to the polyvalent intersections and dependencies of race, class and gender. Felipe’s physical and psychic bruises, then, may yet not have been in vain.