

Imagining Themselves:  
Voice, Text, and Reception in Anyuru, Khemiri and Wenger

Peter Leonard

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

University of Washington

2005

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:  
Department of Scandinavian Studies

University of Washington  
Graduate School

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Peter Leonard

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Committee Members:

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Ann-Charlotte Gavel Adams

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Andrew K. Nestingen

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Ia Dübois

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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*This 2005 document was revised and updated in 2011 to correct certain biographical and bibliographic errors in the discussion of Alejandro Leiva Wenger.*

– Peter Leonard

## Introduction

In 2003, a fictional Stockholm teenager named Halim started a journal in a book with a bright red and gold cover. He began his story like this: *I dag det var sista sommarlovsdagen och därför jag hjälpte pappa i affären.* (Today it was the last day of summer vacation so I helped dad in the store.) [Khemiri 1] Halim's grammar placed him sociologically no less than his verbs and nouns located him in time and space, for he refused to invert the word order of his subject and predicate, despite starting the sentence with a mention of time (*idag*). The effect was jarring to many readers, including one critic who complained that:

*Språket får en konservativ oförberedd läsare [...] att resa ragg tills man efter några sidor ger sig, förstår att man befinner sig i en annan verklighet: inne i huvudet på en mycket ung invandrarkille med [...] helt andra referensramar än de lagomsvenska. [Niittymäki 26]*

The language makes a conservative unprepared reader [...] see red until after a few pages you surrender, understand that you're in a different reality: in the head of a very young immigrant boy with [...] completely different reference frames than the everyday Swedish ones.

This reviewer, writing in *Nerikes Allehanda*, was wrong about the way she described Halim who was, as most readers discover, a boy born in Sweden. But her mischaracterization of him as an immigrant was evidence that Jonas Khemiri's book spelled trouble for those preoccupied with the *lagomsvenska*.

Indeed, Halim wrote in a time when Swedes of all backgrounds were noticing tension in social and cultural reference frames. One dramatic example was the announcement from the Swedish government's Central Statistics Bureau that the

number of Swedes with “foreign background” had dropped from 21 percent in 2002 to 15 percent in 2003. The eventual explanation for this apparent decrease in Sweden’s ethnic diversity probably disappointed *Sverigedemokraterna* nationalists: no great counter-migration had eliminated of a quarter of Sweden’s immigrants. Instead, the government had merely moved the goalposts. Starting in 2003 the Bureau decided that citizens of the Swedish state would need *two* foreign-born parents to have a “foreign background,” whereas previously, one parent was enough.<sup>1</sup>

One self-identified Swede found himself with a particularly bad case of whiplash: the great-grandson of famed nature painter Bruno Liljefors. Despite this famous last name (and its attendant connection to national fauna), Mats Liljefors found himself categorized as *utländsk bakgrund* until 2002 (due to a grandfather’s career in the States) and then pushed out of that same category in 2003. He went public with his exasperation in the pages of *Svenska Dagbladet*, saying:

*“Invandringen” utgörs alltså inte bara av människor som flyttat hit från andra länder utan också av inbörder som flyttar i och ut ur de begrepp, genom vilka vi talar om dessa människor. [Liljefors 6]*

“Immigration” is thus made up not only of people who have moved here from other countries, but also of meanings which flow in and out of the concepts through which we speak of these people.

We hear echoes in this of the uses to which the census was put in colonial British Malaysia: ethnic categories undergoing what Benedict Anderson has called

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<sup>1</sup> *Sveriges framtida befolkning 2003–2020: Svensk och utländsk bakgrund* Örebro: Statistiska centrabyrån, May 2003. In this document *svensk bakgrund* is defined on page 10 as “personer med en eller båda föräldrarna född i Sverige.” The closest corresponding document from SCB the previous year is *Befolkningsåret 2002*, in which those born in Sweden with *one* foreign-born parent are presented in the same context, and indeed the same paragraph, as those born in Sweden with *two* foreign-born parents.

“an extraordinarily rapid, superficially arbitrary, series of changes, in which categories are continuously agglomerated, disaggregated, recombined, intermixed and reordered...” [Anderson 165, paraphrasing Hirschman] As the late Scandinavian Welfare State confronted a sudden heterogenization of its society and culture, shuffling categories was the first and most basic step in the application of state power and control. The Central Statistics Bureau’s assimilation of tens of thousands of individuals with foreign background into the Swedish nation was accomplished overnight, proving once again the power of the state, through the census, to shape “the nature of the human beings it ruled.” [Anderson 164]

If this instability in numbers, persons and identities unsettled not just recently-arrived immigrants but also those 85% to 79% of Swedes (depending on what year the census was counting) with no “foreign background,” it at least set an appropriate backdrop in first few years of the twenty-first century for the emergence of three young Swedish authors: Jonas Khemiri, Alejandro Wenger and Johannes Anyuru. Their work explored social, linguistic and cultural tensions in Swedish society, focusing attention on the role of imagination in the construction of self. The result was a compelling series of narratives of Swedes turning their attention to their own identity, often setting their imagination in explicit opposition to the Swedish state’s privilege to define and delimit its citizens. For precisely those authors whose ethnic identity the state had been meddling with, these books were a way to meddle back.

In this thesis I’ll examine three books for what traces of what Liljefors called those “meanings which flow in and out of concepts” about a hydrogenous Sweden.

The first is the journal of the fictional Halim, written in 2003 by Jonas Hassen Khemiri and published by Norstedts under the title *Ett öga rött*. The second is a collection of short stories by Alejandro Wenger, *Till vår ära*. The third is *Det är bara gudarna som är nya*, a collection by the Gothenburg poet Johannes Anyuru. In each book, characters ‘break’ language in order to build it back up again, appropriate state methods to construct their own demographic identity, and interject irrationality and superstition into putatively rationalistic discourse. In my conclusion, I’ll suggest a way that the way these three books are written – the very style *Nerikes Allehanda* found so disturbing – can be a testament to literature’s power in the social sphere.

I chose to concentrate on books written by these Swedish authors of (contestably) foreign background because they defined, in the first years of the twenty-first century, the literary response to the larger question of what an ethnically- and culturally-heterogeneous Sweden would be. First-person testimony to the way Europeans imagined themselves in a time of demographic and cultural change, these books reveal the contours of what *Svenska Dagbladet* called, in its own review of *Ett öga rött*, “*det där alltmer svårdefinierade begreppet som kallas Sverige.*” (that evermore difficult-to-define concept called Sweden.) [Rabe]

## State and Citizens

The nation in which these authors lived and worked lends its own inflection to the stories they had to tell. Their concern with identity was connected with the peculiar history of their land. What was it that made Sweden a singularly fertile ground for confrontation between individual and state? From a material-historical perspective, the kingdom is distinguished from the rest of mainland Europe by its rapid industrialization, urbanization and modernization in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This nearly overnight transformation was guided by and enabled through the power of a strong central state. Sweden's extraordinary leap forward took place under the long-running (1946-1969) Prime Ministry of Tage Erlander. Erlander's remarkable success in deploying Social Democratic reforms resulted in the construction of one of the model Modern Welfare States in the form of a social safety net known as the *folkhem* (people's home). Such a radical transformation of the social sphere through state intervention, however, is generally interpreted as emerging from a sense of social *solidarity*.

Indeed, social reform through consensus depended on a (relatively) culturally- and ethnically-homogenous nation which shared a common vision of the future. The annual labor/employer consultations on wages and productivity, initiated in 1938 at Saltsjöbad, are one of the oft-cited instances of consensus politics which rely upon a comparatively similar vision of progress and development. Although never as homogenous as popularly imagined – the integration of Finns, Walloons and Scandians ran the spectrum from voluntary to forced – 20<sup>th</sup> century Swedish society and culture

appears, in retrospect, markedly more uniform than many other European nations. If books on the forging of modern nations such as Germany and Spain are replete with sections on the problems of borders, tongues and faiths, Sweden's diversity is counted in footnotes rather than chapters.

This imagined solidarity lent legitimacy to the actions of Erlander's powerful central state apparatus, and, together with the capital generated from postwar production of consumer and industrial goods (from Sweden's undamaged factories), gave Sweden the reputation as a successful social democracy which represented a "middle way" between capitalism and communism. [Childs] Yet the State remained the guiding force in this transformation: even after downsizing of the public sector in the 1990's, over 30% of Swedes in the labor market worked for the government, and State expenditures comprised over 50% of the Gross Domestic Product. [Economist]

The asylum policies of the 1970's were a watershed step towards demographic transformation, coming on the heels of already increased immigration through the post-war guest-worker policies. Erlander's successor, Olof Palme (Prime Minister from 1969 to 1976) envisioned a broader role for Sweden, entering the global stage as a 'moral superpower.' Now the state's engagement with the outside world would be rationalized through moral imperatives (accepting asylum-seekers from conflicts in southern hemispheres) rather than just economic policies (welcoming guest-workers to confront a labor shortage.) Indeed, the homelands of some of the parents of Khemiri, Anyuru and Leiva Wenger – Tunisia, Uganda and Chile – kindle memories of unrest and civil war during the 1970's, and thus constitute

a map of the engagement which Palme's Sweden sought with the world beyond the Scandinavian peninsula. In this way the literature discussed here exists as a kind of distant echo of the politics of Idi Amin and Augusto Pinochet as much as Tage Erlander.

The literature produced during this first, postwar wave of immigration is not the subject of this study, though certain thematics stand out as a point of comparison with Khemiri, Leiva Wenger and Anyuru. Some of literature of these 'first-generation' immigrants has been described as an attempt to either memorialize distant homelands which were directly experienced, before exile. First-generation immigrant authors Emin Bozarslan and Ferhad Shakely evoked Kurdistan from personal memory, in contrast to the work Halim must do to imagine Arabia in *Ett öga rött*. Though the result might be an "imaginary homeland" in both cases, to use Salman Rushdie's term, the processes are different: first generation immigrants arriving in the decades since the 1970's generally tried to remember a past life, rather than speculatively reconstruct a homeland of their parents. [Wendelius] In contradistinction to Khemiri, Anyuru, and Leiva Wenger, the artistic imagination of these earlier first-generation writers had a concrete grounding in a geographic reality: a distant hemisphere. Now, forty years after Theodor Kallifatides arrived in Sweden, his figurative sons were beginning to write about the nation in which their parents had made their home.

## The Second Generation

If this ‘third world’ engaged the conscience of Sweden in the 1970’s, then the offspring of diasporas she welcomed would fundamentally alter her consciousness in the 2000’s. Unlike their foreign-born parents, these ‘second-generation’ writers had – on the surface – a surer sense of self. Born in Sweden, or raised there since an early age, Sweden was homeland and earliest memory, its language their mother tongue. Yet it was precisely this intimate connection to the nation-state which proved so problematic for these writers, as well as the state that sheltered them. Though they might share, in the words of Khemiri, “*inte [...] något mer i gemensamn nämnare än hårfärgen, eller det constant felstavade efternamnet,*” [SR1 Sommar] (nothing more in common closer than hair color, or the constantly-misspelled last name), their literature is often grouped together by critics in mainstream reviews.

This practice is an undeniable part of these three authors’ reception in Sweden, and to a certain extent my work is parasitic upon such critical practices for its choice of authorial subjects.<sup>2</sup> This study could be attacked for falling into the trap of thinking these three authors are somehow thematically linked by virtue of their black hair and dark eyes. As a partial defense against this criticism, I would venture that as critics we should not be necessarily beholden to the authors’ insistence that their work is unique and shares no commonalities to that of others of a similar generation and background. No matter how vocal their protest may be, nor how well-

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<sup>2</sup> For examples of critics willing to problematize the grouping of Khemiri, Wenger and Anyuru together, see Bäckstedt, Eva. “Tre svenska män från förorten.” *Svenska Dagbladet*. 23 Nov. 2003 and Trotzig, Astrid. “Biografi som kategori.” *Pequod* 34 (2004): 23-27.

intentioned, they are nevertheless echoing many generations of writers who protest at their ordering into categories by the literary establishment. Many Swedish writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have rebelled against the terms *kvinnoförfattare* or *arbetarlitteratur*, yet these broad categories still have some utility when discussing historical trends in the long view. Nevertheless, I refrain from using the term *invandrarlitteratur* in reference to Khemiri, Anyuru and Leiva Wenger, and I never use the phrase *invandrare* to describe someone born in Sweden – two decisions consciously in opposition to practices in the Swedish mass media.

Regardless of terminological correctness, there can be no doubt that the euphemism “New Swedes” is a double-edged sword: it confirmed these authors’ nationality but also marked them as *arrivistes*, just as what some insisted on calling “*rinkebysvenska*” located their idiolects on both the physical and cultural periphery of the *lagomsvenska*.

Given that background, it is perhaps not surprising that the theme which spans the writing of Khemiri, Leiva Wenger and Anyuru is a preoccupation with the power of imagination. In their work, the individual self is conscious of its own performance through behavior, language and style. Running alongside this theme is a parallel interrogation of the solidity of ostensibly fixed concepts as belonging, community and solidarity. At the same time these texts revel in such concrete manifestations of self as language, clothing and music, they also betray the fear that the self can change under pressure from entities larger and more powerful than the individual. In other words, that imagination alone is not enough to bear the semantic

weight of identity, and that flights of fancy can be brought back to earth when they confront immovable reality.

In Khemiri, this tension manifests itself as the power of Swedish state to enforce behavioral and cultural conformity – the Ministry of Integration as Thought Police. In Leiva Wenger, the threat of worldly assimilation is abstracted to the supernatural domain, giving fanciful expression to the fear of losing one's identity through a kind of black magic. In Anyuru, imagination struggles to find room in the concrete housing projects ringing Gothenburg. Tellingly, all three authors treat problems of assimilation and identity in adolescent protagonists, finding fertile soil for their meditations on self and society in the minds of teenaged narrators.

Against the power of others to define them by census, language council and Integration Ministry, these authors deployed their own writing as a tool to imagine their identity through style and performance. In the pursuit of uncovering how these books functioned as social text no less than literary accomplishment, I concentrate on Khemiri's *Ett öga rött* with side glances to Leiva Wenger and Anyuru as appropriate. Some of my work focuses on how these texts were *read* no less than how they were *written*. For if their reception proved anything, it was that the power of the state to define identity in the service of integration was equaled only by the power of critics, linguists and lay readers to categorize idiolect in the service of interpretation. The literature of Leiva Wenger, Khemir and Anyuru can be thought of as existing in the narrow space between the twin forces of state categories and critical reception. Sandwiched between *Statistiska centralbyrån* and *Svenska Dagbladet*, then, were

these three books, making an appeal to the imagination as medium through which the everyday could be imagined as the as the fantastic, and the individual assume a global significance.

### **Jonas Khemiri: Imagination at Large**

*Ett öga rött*'s striking cover<sup>3</sup> signaled both enticement and danger: richly-detailed arabesques of gold foil on a blood-red background. If this orientalist ornament was a direct provocation to Swedish Modernist design, then at least it was a case of truth in advertising. This book, as we will see, demanded to be judged by its cover, for contained inside was a challenge to the project of the modern Swedish state itself. "*Halim har genomskådat allt*," promises the back of Norstedt's hardcover edition: Halim has seen through everything. Indeed, the protagonist of *Ett öga rött* does not lack for targets in his withering critique of Swedish society and culture. And though his language register may have made an immediate impression on layperson and linguist alike, what distinguished his story from all the other literary descendants of Holden Caulfield is as much what he wrote as how he wrote it.

Khemiri's story took the form of the journal of a 15-year-old Stockholm native who records his attempts to recover his Arab identity, set against his Moroccan father's desire to assimilate to Swedish society. Swearing to become a *tankesultan*, like the medieval Caliphate polymaths, Halim sees the Integration Plan as a government conspiracy to "Swedeify" him. As he sets to instilling revolutionary consciousness in his non-white friends in middle school and dreaming of his plans for an Arabic Cultural Center opposite the Royal Palace, the contradictions and disjunctures of Sweden intertwine with those of adolescence, seen through the eyes of

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<sup>3</sup> Designed by the noted Swedish graphic artist Lotta Kùlhorn.

a narrator who refuses to distinguish between lived experience and geopolitical destiny.

Most of the Swedish literary establishment hailed the book as the first novel to describe the world of ‘New Swedes:’ *Ett öga rött är [...], mig veterligt, den första svenska roman som konsekvent är skriven på det språk som talas bland stora grupper av (andra generationens) invandrare.* (Ett öga rött is, [...] as far as I know, the first Swedish novel to be written consistently in that language which is spoken among large groups of (second generation) immigrants.) [Sjögren 3, parenthesis in original].

The documentary realism which this critic (as well as many others) assigned the book would no doubt please its highly egocentric and idiosyncratic fictional narrator. But what is unique in Halim’s journal is the wedge he attempts to drive between the Swedish state and the individuals it contains. He was not shy about using inflammatory language to do so, nor did he shirk away from appropriating the tools of power from the very state he was convinced was a tool of his oppression. In fact, at the same time the Central Statistics Bureau was re-defining who was who in the Swedish nation state, Halim was perform his own, highly individual, census, and recording the results in the book with bright red and gold cover:

*Idag jag har filosoferat fram en teori om svennarna och svartskallarna<sup>4</sup> på skolan:  
Man kan säga det finns tre sorters svennar. Först det är lyxsvennarna som spelar  
maffia fast på svennevis[...]  
Ändå lyxsvennarna är ganska få för nästan alla i skolan hör till lodisgänget som går  
klädda i tatarstrasor med söndriga skinnjackor och jeansen maxat håliga...*

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<sup>4</sup> Throughout the work of Anyuru, Khemiri, and Wenger, the ethnic slurs *blatte*, *svartskalle*, and *svarting* are appropriated by those to whom they were originally applied and used either in a neutral fashion or as a term of pride. British English’s *wog* is the nearest equivalent, as American English lacks a general epithet for a non-white minority.

*Samtidigt jag börjar misstänka lodisäganget också spelar falska för alltid dom har massa fikaflous och ingen av deras föräldrar sitter i spärr eller jobbar städare.*

*Tredje svennesorten är dansklassarna [...] killarna [...] ger alltid leenden på skolfotot som riktiga bögar.*

*Blattarna på skolan är inte så många men kommer ändå i två versioner. Nummer ett är den vanliga blatten: knasaren, snikaren, snattaren, ligisten... Blattesort nummer två är duktighetskillen som pluggar prov och använder finord och aldrig plankar tunnelbanan eller taggish. Som exempel... alla iranier som smörar lärare och vill bli tandläkare och ingenjörer. Dom tror dom får respekt men egentligen alla lärare skrattar åt dom för man fattar dom är vilsna.*

*Men i dag jag har filosoferat fram det finns också en tredje blattesort som står helt fri och är den som svennarna hatar mest: revolutionsblatten, tankesultanen. Den som ser igenom alla lögner och som aldrig låter sig luras. Ungefär som al-Kindi som knäckte alla koder och skrev flera tusen grymma böcker om astronomi och filosofi men också om musik och matte. Förra terminen jag var nog mest knasaren men från nu jag svär jag ska bli tankesultan.*

Today I thought up a theory about the *svennar* and *blattar* at school:

You can say there are three kinds of *svennar*. First there are the luxury *svennar* who play gangster but in a *svenne* way...

Still, the luxury *svennar* aren't that many because nearly everyone in school belongs to the Outcasts who go around wearing ripped clothes with torn leather jackets and holed-out jeans... Still I'm beginning to suspect the Outcasts are also faking it because they always have cash and none of their parents works on the subway or is a janitor.

The third kind of *svenne* is the dance-classers... the guys... always smile like real fags in the school photos.

The *blattar* at school aren't so many but still come in two versions. Number one is the ordinary *blatte*: fuckup, sneak, shoplifter, gangster. *Blatte* type number two is the wanna-be who studies for tests and uses big words and never jumps the turnstile or tags walls. For example... all the Iranians who kiss up to teachers and want to be dentists and engineers. They think they're respected but really all the teachers laugh at them because you know they're lost.

But today I philosophized that there's also a third kind of *blatte* who stands completely free and is the kind the *svennar* hate the most: the revolutionary *blatte*, the thought-sultan. Who sees through all the lies and never lets himself get fooled. Sort of like al-Kindi who broke all the codes and wrote thousands of tight books about astronomy and philosophy but also about music and math. Last semester I was probably mostly a troublemaker but from now on I swear I'm going to be a thought-sultan.

Halim's appropriation of the techniques of the state to categorize and order his world is also an attempt to usurp the government's privilege to define its citizens. His division of *svennar* and *blattar* is simplistic on the surface, but contains fractal-like detail as the two categories develop into groups with competing agendas even within

the same ethnic category. Halim's explanation of how to distinguish *svennar* and *blattar* visually and behaviorally is a first step towards imagining his own identity, as he must first define and organize his classmates finally turning his analytical lens on himself. His final act in this passage is to imagine a third kind of *blatte*, distinct from both the gangster and assimilationist models, which represents a model of the citizen he would become.

While his decision to change is an act of imagining a future into being, his model for that future is distinctly historical. Abū-Yūsuf Ya'qūb ibn Ishāq al-Kindī (أبو يعقوب يوسف بن إسحاق الكندي) was a 9<sup>th</sup>-century philosopher and author of more than 250 books. But apparently unbeknownst to Halim, al-Kindī suffered the ignominious fate of being physically assaulted and having his private library confiscated when he fell out of favor with the ruling Caliph. [Adamson] Whether this gloss on literature's relationship with the state is an intentional one by Khemiri or not is unknown, but we will see more such ironic examples of Halim name-dropping authors whose real history he is ignorant of.

### Alejandro Leiva Wenger: Miracle and Nightmare

Khemiri's penchant for tongue-in-cheek Linnean categorization finds an echo in the writing of Alejandro Leiva Wenger. Born in Chile, Leiva Wenger came to Sweden at the age of nine, and in 2001 published a collection of short stories called *Till vår ära*.<sup>5</sup> [Imigrant Institutet] The prose styles in the book range from naturalistic to stream-of-consciousness to magic realism. In one particular tale, *Elixir*, we find a dark vision of assimilation told through the same first-person perspective as Halim's journal. This time, however, the delineations and borders of identity are effaced in a dark parable of cultural assimilation as both miracle – and nightmare.

As *Elixir* begins, a teenaged boy has received a mysterious package in the mail. Leiva Wenger foregrounds concerns about national origin early in the narrative, as the box is imagined to be a memento of their Latin America cultural heritage:

*[Marco] hade fått en paket och gick och hemta den i posten för han trodde det var från Chile från hans mormor. [33]* (Marco had got a package and went and got it at

the post office cause he thought it was from Chile from his grandmother.) When Marco retrieves it from the post office, he discovers that the governmental stamps on the package confirm it as an object from their contemporary Swedish milieu: [...]

*frimärket och allt va från Sverige så det va nån från Sverige som skickade den.”[33]*

(...the stamp and everything was from Sweden so it was somebody from Sweden who sent it.)

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<sup>5</sup> Some stories from this collection were published previously in 1999 and 2000. [Leiva Wenger, personal communication]

Opening the package, the boys discover a small bottle within, containing a mysterious liquid. Upon drinking it, they discover what it does:

*fetarslet Marco kollade på mej och sa fan du har ju fått lite blåa ögon!! och jag sprang och kolla i spegeln och det var sant. mina ögon var lite blåa. det såg fett grymt ut. [35]*

that fatass Marco looked at me and said damn you got blue eyes a little!! and i ran and checked in the mirror and it was true. my eyes were a little blue. it looked wicked cool.

Leiva Wenger introduces the narrator's physical transformation through the eyes of another observer, whose exclamation prompts the narrator to go to a mirror and see for himself. The emphasis on other's perceptions of self is indicative of the primacy of perception, rather than individual identification, at this stage in the story: the narrator does not yet *feel* Swedish, he has to be told that his eyes have become bluer by someone else. But the boys soon discover the effects of the elixir are more than skin deep:

*när vi snacka, så snacka han lite anor lunda. jag sa va fan pratar du så där för, tjockis. han sa hur??? och jag sa du snackar fett som en svenne. för han jorde det. man hörde inte att han var svarting och han sa ord som svenskar kan. (35-6)*

When we talked, he talked a little different. I said what the hell are you talking like that for, fatty. He said how??? And I said you talk mad like a *svenne*. Cause he did. You couldn't hear that he was a *svarting* and he said words which Swedes know.

In the mind of the narrator *svarting* status can be heard, and its absence in the idiolect of Marco is cause for consternation. The shift in pronunciation is complimented by a change in vocabulary as Marco begins using words which "Swedes" know.

The boys' convictions about ethnic groups, in fact, make the psychological transformation of the *svarting* mind just as striking as their blond hair and blue eyes.

Soon one of them demonstrates proficiency in exactly the kind of cultural knowledge which state apparatus – through the public education system – seeks desperately to instill in “new swedes”:

*för den dagen hade vi prov, och jag hade inte pluggat, och inte marco heller, så klart, för han pluggar aldrig, fetarslet. det var ett prov om svenska författare, typ strinberg och såna. Men marco fick bäst i klassen! för vi fick tillbaka proven på fredag, och han hade nestan alla rätt. och läraren sa strålande marco. flaco frågade fuskade du och marco sa nej jag svär jag vet inte hur jag fick så bra. För Fetarslet är ju ingen plugghäst. han är tillomed lite dum. och ändå fick han så bra.” [36-7]*

cause we had a test that day, and I hadn't studied, and neither had marco, of course, cause he never studies, fatass. it was a test about swedish writers like strinberg and stuff. but marco got best in the class! cause we got back the tests on Friday, and he had nearly all right. and the teacher said excellent marco. flaco asked didja cheat? and marco said no i swear, i dunno how i got so good. Cause that Fatass is no nerd. he's even a little dumb. and he still did so good.

Eventually the narrator himself notices a similar improvement in his own study skills:

*jag märke jag kunde konsentrera mej bättre på leksjonen plus att sen kom Flaco och sa han kunde inte komma ihåg nästan ett enda ord på spanska. [39]*

i noticed i could concentrate better in class and plus then Flaco came and said he couldn't remember nearly one word in spanish.

We see here vicious parody at work, as the goals of the Integration Ministry, filtered through a kind of magical realism, are accomplished overnight through an enchanted potion. But these changes prompt a moment of self-awareness on the boys' behalf.

*vi sa fan den där läskan gör att man blir svenne. Men sen sa marco nej jag vill inte bli för jag är stolt över att va svarting och jag sa jag med för jag är det. vi provade läskan bara för att prova. flaco sa nu måste vi sluta annars kanske vi blir iNne i själva järtat och i järnan. så vi sa att vi skulLe sluta innan det var för sent. [39]*

we said damn, that drink makes you be svenne. but then marco said no i don't wanna be cause i'm proud of being svarting and i said me too cause i am. we tried the drink

just to try it. flaco said we gotta stop now otherwise maybe we'll become in our very hearts and brains. so we said we'd stop before it was too late.

The boys' realization of the transformative power of elixir stirs their

imagination, drawing attention to how they perform their Latino identity. Yet the very *changeability* of that identity is what frightens them, as the elixir's power to transform the body is matched by its ability to transubstantiate the soul. The boys' decision to stop "before it was too late", however, cannot prevent a shocking

*dénouement*:

*men jag tror det var redan för sent för när jag skulle åka hem från vårberg hit till Fittja så våga jag inte planka. jag stog där och sa till mij själv kom igen men vag vågade inte gå förbi spärren. så jag gick hem hela vägen och tänkte är det för att jag har burjat bli i järtat?? [39]*

but i think it was already too late cause when we were going home to Fittja from vårberg i didn't dare jump the turnstile. i stood there and said to myself come on but i didn't dare go over the wall. so i walked home the whole way and thought is it cause i've begun to be in my heart??

Having provided the boys with blond hair and blue eyes, the elixir completes its work by exerting its pull on the behavior of the teenagers in the public sphere of the municipal subway. Here, in this site of transportation so linked with the development of the *miljonprogram* suburbs – Vårberg, Rinkeby, Skärholmen – housing Sweden's immigrant families, the narrator comes face-to-face with a frightening change in his interaction with the state infrastructure. As we remember that, instead of being a gift from a Chilean grandmother, the stamps confirm that the elixir was sent from "someone in Sweden," we find the Integration Ministry taken to its logical limit: Better Citizens through Black Magic.

Leiva Wenger's tale from the Twilight Zone of integration might seem to stand alone in thematic isolation, were it not for the striking similarities present in an early chapter of *Ett öga rött* where Halim watches as a family friend rehearses for a role in a performance of Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. As his father and the actor go thorough what Halim initially dismisses as a "svennepjäs" written "many hundred years ago," we see Halim record details of the play which mirror the fear of supernatural transformation played out in Leiva Wenger's short story:

*Dom övade på en scen där Per satt med Trollkungen. [...] Texten berättade hur Per egentligen inte ville bli troll men sen kungen övertalade, lockade med guld och guss och då Per drack trollöl och satte på trollkläder och till och med han satte på sig liten svans för att bli som troll. Till slut i alla fall Per skärpte sig, sa nej till trollkungen och gittade. [29-30]*

*The worked on a scene where Per sat with the Troll king. [...] The text told how Per really didn't want to become a troll but then the king persuaded, tempted him with gold and chicks and then Per drank troll beer and put on troll clothes and even he put a little tail on himself to become like a troll. Anyway finally Per pulled himself together, said no to the Troll king and got outta there.*

As Timothy Tangherlini has written in his article *Trolls to Turks: Change and Continuity in Danish Legend Tradition*, the figuration of the immigrant as a threat to the 'Danish' in urban legends and other contemporary folklore can be traced back to earlier tales where similar dangers were coded as supernatural. The shift from inhuman other to immigrant other is given an ironic twist by Halim, whose anti-assimilationist take on *Peer Gynt* is emblematic of his more overt desire to avoid 'Swedification.' Later in the book, he proclaims his opposition to a different kind of bodily and behavioral transformation:

*[...] jag svor jag kommer för alltid stå tvärtemot svennefieringen. Aldrig jag kommer äta sur strömming med sillnubbe på Skansen eller dansa smågrodor i träskor runt tontigaste midsommarstång. Aldrig jag kommer låta politikerna förbjuda buffalos eller spänniströjor eller höja hårvaxpriser. [55-6]*

[...] I swore I'm always gonna stand against Swedification. I'm never gonna eat herring and schnaps at Skansen or dance Small Frogs in clogs around the lamest maypole. I'm never gonna let the politicians ban Buffalos shoes or tight shirts or raise the price of hairwax.

### Breaking Down Language

As the reader of Swedish has no doubt noticed, the language deployed by both Khemiri and Leiva Wenger is marked by certain stylistic characteristics which my English translations labor in vain to translate. This language register in which parts of *Det är bara gudarna som är nya*, *Till vår ära* and *Ett öga rött* are written has often generated as much comment in both lay and professional circles as their plot and thematic. Returning to the opening line of *Ett öga rött* as well as *Elixir* demonstrates how the syntax, vocabulary and orthography of these two first-person narratives assumed semantic content in its own right:

- *Ett öga rött*: I dag det var sista sommarlovsdagen och därför jag hjälpte pappa i affären.
- “Elixir,” *Till vår ära*: idag vi lovade vi ska sluta dricka skiten och sluta jaga katter.

In both cases, subject comes before predicate, despite the preceding temporal qualifiers. Though this deviation from the grammatical rules of Standard Swedish is a sign of the personal, informal nature of the narrative in both cases, it is also a linguistic trope engaging some of the most pressing questions of language and identity confronting Sweden today.

Considered by some linguists to not yet constitute a true dialect,<sup>6</sup> *rinkebysvenska* is perhaps best considered a “gruppspråk” whose namesake suburban housing estate has become a kind of shorthand for all the promises and problems of a heterogeneous Sweden. Linguistically, the language register is counted as one of the most significant recent developments in the Swedish language, and its early manifestations in rap music are now matched by the textual work of Khemiri, Leiva Wenger and Anyuru.<sup>7</sup> According to the Swedish Language Council, charged by the government with the task of “language cultivation,”<sup>8</sup> the grammatical variance shown in the two first lines above is one of the most common grammatical constructions defining *rinkebysvenska*. The Secretary General of the Council, Olle Josephson, provided this clarification in his 2004 book, naming *Subjekt före predikat också när annan satsdel än subjekt inleder satsen* (Subject before predicate when a clause other than the subject begins the sentence) [67] as the first item on his list of the most common grammatical constructions in *rinkebysvenska*.

To be sure, the language which is written on the pages of Khemiri, Leiva Wenger and Anyuru is anything but uniform. The latter’s stories are set in outskirts of Gothenburg, rather than the suburban Stockholm milieu of Leiva Wenger and

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<sup>6</sup> Josephson 66. He claims dialect status would necessitate usage among different ages and varied situations – the emphasis on a generational specificity reinforces my separation of these new writers’ from the first generation.

<sup>7</sup> The link between spoken word and printed word was further blurred by the 2004 publication of the Swedish rap group The Latin Kings’ texts in book form, with an introduction by Anyuru. The book furthered the collective project of ‘language education’ in *rinkebysvenska* by the inclusion of a lexicon listing 150 words and phrases with their “Swedish” definitions.

<sup>8</sup> “Literally, *språkvård* means ‘language care’, but is often translated as language cultivation or language planning.” [Swedish Language Council]

Khemiri. Leiva Wenger's writing style varies in each of the short stories in his collection, ranging from *rikssvenska* to the highly personal, phonetic and variably-capitalized form hinted at in the example above. And Khemiri's narrator, Halim, shows himself to be as adept writing Standard Swedish as he is at his own idiolect, when he wishes to represent the grammatically-correct Arabic he speaks with family members and friends.

Nevertheless, the three authors' choice of language register unquestionably framed their texts in a certain light and made a powerful first impression on critics and reviewers. Though aimed at a lay audience of the general reading public, and not intended to be academic discussions of the texts, reviews published in major Swedish newspapers serve nevertheless as a crucial window into reception of this new generation of writers. Overall, the critics' reaction to this new form of Swedish weigh heavily upon, and at times overwhelmed, their evaluation of all other aspects of these books. This thesis began with a quotation from *Nerikes Allehanda* which made mention of the striking style in Khemiri's novel. An examination of other reviews broadens our perspective on critics' reactions to the prose.

One example, from *Hallands Nyheter*, stands out for its ascription of pedagogical significance to both Khemiri and Leiva Wenger's texts:

*Alejandro Leiva Wenger, som debuterade för två år sedan med novellsamlingen "Till vår ära" var först med att skriva på den nya språkvariant som [...] kallas Rinkebysvenska. Av Leiva Wenger lärde jag mig att polisen kallas aina, att flous och para är samma sak som pengar och en tjej också kan kallas guss. Språkligt sett är "Ett öga rött" konsekvent och skickligt skriven på samma innovativa vis, och även om Leiva Wenger var först känns det fortfarande originellt. [Kvist 16]*

Alejandro Leiva Wenger, who debuted two years ago with his collection of short stories "Till vår ära" was first to write in the new language variant which [...] is

called Rinkeby Swedish. Leiva Wenger taught me that the police are called *aina*, that *flous* and *para* are the same thing as money and that a girl could also be called *guss*. Linguistically “Ett Öga Rött” is consistently- and cleverly-written in the same innovative manner, and even if Leiva Wenger was first, it still feels original.

The use of the passive voice here, in relation to Leiva Wenger’s book, emphasizes the face value at which the reviewer has taken the literature of these two authors. Police “are called” *aina* – the question of by whom and in what context are never interrogated. In addition, Kvist has apparently not noticed that Halim’s “rinkebysvenska” is not consistent at all – he frequently uses *rikssvenska* when he wishes to record grammatically-correct Arabic conversations.

When asked by an interviewer if *rinkebysvenska* was the right term for the language Halim used, Khemiri replied

*Jag skulle nog kalla det för innovativ svenska eller Halimsvenska. Det värsta ordet är "rinkebysvenska", det är ett så enkelt fack att stänga in språket i. Det skulle vara roligt om boken inte blev sedd som en "Rinkebybok" eller en "förortsbok". Det vore en förenkling, då ser man bara en dimension i texten. [...] Men kanske har Alejandro Leiva Wenger och Johannes Anyuru fått ta det mesta av invandrarförfattarstämpeln så att det blir mindre sänt när min bok kommer. [Törnvall]*

*I would probably call it innovative Swedish or Halim-Swedish. The worst word is Rinkeby Swedish, that's such a simple box to close the language into. It would be great if the book wasn't seen as a "Rinkeby book" or a "ghetto book." It would be a simplification, when you only see one dimension in the text. [...] But maybe Alejandro Leiva Wenger and Johannes Anyuru got to take the most of the immigrant writer stamp so that it will be less true when my book comes.*

In the introduction this paper I invoked Theodor Kallifatides – Sweden’s most honored foreign-born writer – to make a broad comparison between first- and second-generation writers. In the context of the debate over “rinkebysvenska” as prose style, it may be productive to recall how Kallifatides learned Swedish at precisely the age that Khemiri wrote *Ett öga rött* in “Halimska”:

*Man måste fråga sig hur många procent av sig själv man kan tänka sig att förlora i sitt nya liv. Mitt svar på den frågan var 0 procent. Kan man inte uttrycka sig tappar man stora delar av sig själv. Jag bestämde mig för att jag ska vara den jag är i detta land. [Karlsson]*

You have to ask what percent of yourself you can afford to lose in your new life. My answer to that question was 0 percent. If you can't express yourself, you lose large parts of yourself. I decided that I would be who I am in this country.

In the case of Kallifatides, 'mastering' Swedish was the key to performing his own identity fully in his new country. His expression of himself in Swedish was not just a key to his private identity, it was also critical to his participation in the public sphere: accused of robbing a cash register when he first arrived in Sweden, he could not defend himself against the allegations because of the language barrier. [Karlsson] Thus learning perfect, unbroken Swedish carried connotations of performing *citizenship* as well as individual identity.

In contrast, Anyuru, Khemiri and Leiva Wenger treat perfect *riksvenska* as their birthright, as native speakers of Swedish. If Kallifatides, newly arrived from Greece, chronicled how he taught himself Swedish by reading Strindberg, these new authors initiated their readers (and critics) into a language of a different type. Together they brought slang from Arabic and Spanish, the loss of reverse word order in subordinate clauses, and free play with prepositions to *skönlitteratur* put out by mainstream publishing houses<sup>9</sup> for the first time.

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<sup>9</sup> Anyuru, Wenger and Khemiri were published by the mainstream firms Walmström & Widstrand, Bonniers and Norstedts, respectively.

To advance his literary goals, Khemiri uses the privilege of being born into a language to *bryta* (break or speak with an accent) the language. This involves not just grammatical rules, but also the re-invention expressions and sayings:

*Jag började tänka på det som en makthandling: att vad händer om man med flit bryter ner språket? Om jag hela tiden visar att jag kan, jag vet precis att det heter "vimmelkantig" men jag säger att "huvudet är fullt av vimmelkanter." Jag började spåna på den maktförskjutning det innebär. [Horth]*

I began to think about it as an act of power: what happens if you break down language deliberately? If I show the whole time that I know what I'm doing, that I know perfectly well that it's called "dizzy" but I say that "my head is full of spindizzies." I began to mull over the power displacement it involves.

Other authors were mulling over the implications of language play as well.

Johannes Anyuru, a poet born in Sweden to a Swedish mother and Ugandan father, invokes a similar notion of 'breaking' language in his poetry collection *Det är bara gudarna som är nya*.

*När jag skulle sova saknade jag min farsa,  
den främmande vålnaden  
som bröt sönder språket  
och gjorde det helt, knastrade  
på andra siden telefonluren. [47]*

When I should be sleeping I missed my father,  
the foreign ghost  
who broke language apart  
and made it whole, crunching  
on the other side of the telephone.

Although this poem speaks of a 'foreign' father, it is the narrator himself who appreciates the effects of the older man's speaking style as he makes language 'whole' by means of 'crunching.' Even if the father's accent is not something he has any control over, the son's *appreciation* of the effect is reminiscent of Khemiri's comments, above, about willful linguistic play.

Indeed, elsewhere in Anyuru's poetry we find a similar appreciation for the imaginative possibilities brought about by the 'obliteration' of language:

*Där är språket som system helt uplånat  
Och bara dess vilja, dess rörelse  
Mot enkelhet, förvandlingen till drömbilder,  
Återstår, som en tyngdlös silverwire genom tanken... [50]*

*There language is totally obliterated as system  
And only its will, its movement  
Towards simplicity, transformation into dreampictures  
Remains, as a weightless silverwire through thought...*

In the midst of the linguistic panic over *rinkebysvenska*, Anyuru's poetry stands as an affirmation of the language shared by Khemiri, Leiva Wenger and himself. In his narratives, the power lying latent in words is only activated when they are broken and rebuilt:

*Spänningsfälten som finns runt orden  
smäller till  
och bryter laddning,  
när språket bryts sönder, bryggs upp igen  
och bryts sönder på nytt... [57]*

*The voltage field around the words  
snaps  
and breaks electric charge,  
when the language is broken apart, built up again  
and broken apart once more...*

There were certain reviewers who seemed to glimpse the artistic imaginary at play in these books. *Svenska Dagbladet's* Annina Rabe, from whom I have quoted in an earlier part of this paper, gave Khemiri credit for self-consciously playing with stereotypes in order to fashion something new, praising "*sitt ironiska användande av den brutna svenskan*" (his ironic usage of broken Swedish). And another reviewer of *Ett öga rött* wrote in *Göteborgs-Posten*:

*Genombrotten för en svensk invandrarlitteratur beror naturligtvis inte bara på att den bildade vita medelklassen önskar veta något om hur den "andra sidan" lever. De beror inte minst på att sociolekten - Rinkebysvenskan eller vad man nu väljer att kalla den - ger en expressiv samtidsfärg och kan användas för att ge det litterära språket en förnyelsens fräschör. [Gunnarsson 36-7]*

The breakthrough a Swedish immigrant literature naturally doesn't depend only on that the educated white middle class wishes to know something about how the "other half" lives. It depends not least on the sociolect – Rinkeby Swedish or whatever you want to call it – gives an expressive contemporary color and can be used to give the literary language the freshness of a renewal.

In contradistinction to Kallifatides, then, these writers born into the language exercised their privilege to 'break' it and make it new again, in the service of an imaginative practice of identity formation. It was as if language had to become more flexible to accommodate the multivalent possibilities and dangers of a Sweden become suddenly *svårdefinierade*. Anyuru seems to be working with such problems of definition when he begins his poetry collection by introducing of the recurring characters, 'Achilles':

*Vem är Akilles? En ängel från Buenos Aires, Den Farligaste Niggern På Jorden, killen som står under en lyktstolpe när du går förbi, han som kliver ut i gatan och väser "hit med stålarna din jävla fitta": samurajens demonmask av porslin, som vi ibland bär, som ni ibland bär, som de ibland bär: alla som jag har känt som har försvunnit, in på barer eller nattbussar eller kåken... jag själv, den jag ville vara och inte ville vara. Inte för att spela bonanza men... [9]*

Who is Achilles? An angel from Buenos Aires, The Most Dangerous Nigger on Earth, the guy standing under a lamppost when you walk by, who strides out in the street and hisses "c'mere with the coins you fucking cunt": the samurai's demon mask of porcelain, which we sometimes carry, which you sometimes carry, which they sometimes carry: everyone who I've know who's disappeared, into bars or night busses or the joint... my self, the one I want to be and don't want to be. Not to get tough but...

In this meditation on identity's mutability and the conflicted sense of belonging within the narrator, we glimpse the multiple roles and overlapping imaginations which characterize Anyuru's characters, as he appropriates figures from classical Homeric poetry and mixes them in with street hoods and the poem's protagonist himself. In answer to the question of "Who is Achilles?" Anyuru can only provide a list of non-exclusive possibilities, leaving the final decision to the imagination of the reader.

## Dangerous Imaginaries

Despite – or perhaps because of – the polymorphic possibilities the imagination of Anyuru, Khemiri and Leiva Wenger’s literature produced, many readers found themselves threatened by this literature’s alternate reference frames to the ‘lagomsvenksa.’ [Niittymäki 26] Whether or not artistic production depends on shared frames of reference is perhaps a question for those who interrogate assumptions behind cultural criticism in the Swedish press, but easier to divine is the way in which Khemiri’s imagination was demonized in some reviews for its allegedly harmful effect. The poet Ragnar Strömberg, in the pages of *Aftonbladet*, made explicit an assumption lurking beneath many reactions to the novel: Halim was but a thin disguise for the ideas and attitudes of Khemiri:

*Ett öga rött kännetecknas inte av subtila distinktioner mellan författaren och det skrivna.[...] Och för att ingen ska sväva i tvivelsmål på att [Khemiri] står för varje ord, varje påstående om tingens ordning och sakernas tillstånd, flyttar han själv in i samma uppgång som sin hjälte som öppet redovisar dealen med sin upphovsman. [Strömberg 4]*

*Ett öga rött* is not characterized by subtle distinctions between the author and the written. [...] And so that nobody doubts that [Khemiri] stands for every word, every assertion about the order of things and the condition of affairs, he himself moves into the same building as his hero who openly presents the deal with his author.

This conflation of author and protagonist went hand-in-hand with the assignment of documentary realism to the ideas of both, and a moral panic over thoughts and prejudices at odds with a Swedish self-image of tolerance and acceptance. Deploying the rhetoric of Francisco Goya – whose works chronicled the social destruction of the Napoleonic Wars – Strömberg characterizes “Hamil’s” thoughts as ‘monsters’ and equates the novel with the sleep of reason:

*De vidundren är närvarande [...] när Hamil [sic] hävdar att det aldrig funnits några stora judiska idrottsmän för i sporten kan man inte ta sig fram med hjälp av "pengar och kontakter". Det senare påståendet är häpnadsväckande – om det är något som kännetecknar den samtida internationella idrotten är det en mediahypad penningcirkus – medan det förra bara är okunnigt: Max Baer, Mark Spitz, flera av spelarna i 30-talets österrikiska fotbollslandslag Das Wunderteam. Så utan att vilja göra förlagen till censurinstanser, menar jag att någon i huset under resans gång borde visat integritet nog att påpeka det i sak befängda. [Strömberg 4]*

The monsters are present [...] when Hamil [sic] maintains that there have never been any great Jewish sportsmen because you can't get ahead in sports with help from "money and contacts." The later statement is astonishing – if there's anything which characterizes contemporary international sports, it's that it is a media-hyped money circus – while the former is just ignorant: Max Baer, Mark Spitz, most of the players in the 1930s Austrian national soccer team Das Wunderteam. So without wanting to turn publishing houses into censorship authorities, I believe somebody in the building should have shown enough integrity during the process to point out the absolutely ridiculous.

Strömberg's treatment of the book here is quite remarkable. In his insistence that he doesn't want the publishing company to censor Khemiri's book, he of course activates precisely that same idea. The effect is to embellish Halim's fumbling conspiracy theories with the veneer of legitimacy. Strömberg takes Halim's opinion of Jewish athletes very seriously, and dignifies it with an extended rationalist response.

Yet in his treatment of Halim's anti-Semitism, Khemiri always colors his protagonist's statements with enough obvious misinformation and ignorance that the rhetoric resembles a game of Telephone, as memes are combined and intermixed until the result reads as parody: Halim complains about *en jude som heter Salman som dissat Koranen* (a Jew called Salman who dissed the Koran.) [77] Strömberg's oddly insistent rationalism in this review – as he attempts to marshal facts and figures to refute the ignorance of a fictional teenager – is perhaps best understood as testament to the power of Khemiri's novel to viscerally communicate Halim's imagination in

such a way that it appeared as a direct threat to mainstream Swedish society. (In a final irony, the effort apparently drives Strömberg to play fast and loose with other independently-verifiable facts, such as the spelling of “Hamil’s” name.)

But even if we dismiss the idea of Norstedts contacting the fictional Halim to correct his misconceptions of Jewish athleticism, perhaps Strömberg has hit upon the right question by means of the wrong answer. In a book so rife with imaginaries, who is actually the writer, and who the written in *Ett öga rött?* And what modes or practices of reading could account for the answer being one or the other?

To answer these questions we must turn back momentarily to Strömberg, who lays the groundwork for us by citing textual evidence in support of the conflation of narrator and author. He quotes a fascinating passage towards the end of the book, when a frustrated young writer named “Jonas Khemiri” moves into Halim’s apartment building. According to Strömberg, Halim writes in his journal:

*Jag tänkte Khemirikillen borde inte ge upp för Sverige behöver fler arabförfattare och kanske min hjälp kan lära honom skriva äktare än dom andra... varje gång han får priser det kommer ny check till mig... Alla svenskar köper boken för dom tror dom får mesiga halvvarab med flygfrisyr fast egentligen dom får äkta arabisk fullblod!*  
[Strömberg 4]

*I thought this Khemiri guy shouldn’t give up because Sweden needs more Arab writers and maybe my help can teach him to write realer than the rest... every time he gets prizes a new check come to me... All Swedes buy the book cause they think they’re getting a wimpy half-Arab with a flight-haircut but actually they’re getting a real Arabian fullblood!*  
(elipses in Aftonbladet article)

In his review Strömberg takes this passage as evidence that the real-life Khemiri “*står för varje ord, varje påstående om tingens ordning och sakernas tillstånd*” (stands for every word, every assertion about the order of things and the

condition of affairs) in *Ett öga rött*. In this conviction Strömberg sees the fictional Halim as *id* to Khemiri's *ego*: rather than two separate individuals, Halim is the dark heart of an ideology which masquerades with a half-Swedish face. Following a Eurabian version of the 'one-drop' rule, the real-life author's foreign background becomes an absolutist (and absolutizing) influence on his writing.

It is not surprising that a close reader like Strömberg would seek to map out the Bermuda triangle between Khemiri the author, "Khemiri" the character, and Halim the fictional narrator. But it is interesting to note that in order to fix a one-to-one relationship between author and text, Strömberg takes at face value a fictional character's claim to control and direct a real-life author who is responsible for creating that character in the first place.

Indeed, close readers of the book, and of Strömberg's review, might do well to examine not just what lines the reviewer has included, but which lines he has left out. For within the ellipsis of his quotation from *Ett öga rött* lies a sentence which casts into doubt not only the quoted text but its anticipated reception. Strömberg omitted a crucial sentence where Halim fantasizes about the eventual publication of his journal through the medium of "Khemiri," imagining:

*När tidningar ger hård diss för hans filosofiers äkthet och när Khemirikillen inte kan försvara han säger allt är bara fantasihistoria. [Khemiri 249]*

When newspapers diss his philosophies' realness hard, and when this Khemiri guy can't defend, he'll say that everything's just a made-up story.

In selecting only certain lines from the passage to quote in his review, Strömberg edited out Halim's prescient expectation of exactly the kind of critique the

book receives in *Aftonbladet*. Halim anticipates Strömberg's "hard dis[respect]" of his ideology, as well as "Khemiri's" expected capitulation to criticism. But crucially, this is where the final sentence which Strömberg quotes turns up: after "Khemiri" writes off Halim's story as fantasy, then "*Alla svenskar köper boken*" (all the Svens buy the book,) convinced by the wimpy half-Arab "Khemiri" of its make-believe nature. The book's imaginary is thus a Trojan horse, delivering "real Arabic" revelations whose true import is only cosmetically obscured. What Strömberg has elided in the text is a pivot on which Halim's fictional narrative gracefully turns sideways to elude its real-world attackers: the more that Khemiri seeks to distance himself from Halim's ideas, the wider the potential audience for Halim's "philosophies."

Strömberg wrote his review in early August, 2003, shortly after *Ett öga rött* was released in hardback. Lest the above example be dismissed as an isolated occurrence, we can turn to a review of a different book in a different newspaper, fourteen months later. Mats Gellerfelt, writing in *Svenska Dagbladet*, began his review of a volume on football history by saying:

*I en av de senaste årens osmakligaste böcker på svenska, Jonas Hassen Khemiris "Ett öga rött", hävdas på fullt allvar att judar inte kan vara framstående idrottsutövare. Det är ett häpnadsväckande historielöst och djupt fördomsfullt, för att inte säga rasistiskt, yttrande. Att den unge mannen inte hört talas om det en gång berömda fotbollslaget Hakoah Wien, om en av USA:s främsta basebollspelare Lou Gerigh, om världsmästaren i lättvikt Benny Leonard eller om Liverpools speedkula Ronnie Rosenthal kan väl vara förståeligt. Men att inte ha hört talas om Mark Spitz eller den store Johan Cruyff, tja, då kanske man inte skall uttala sig om idrott över huvud taget. [Gellerfelt]*

In one of last year's most tasteless books in Swedish, Jonas Hassen Khemiri's "Ett öga rött," it's asserted in complete seriousness that Jews can't be prominent sports practitioners. This is an astonishingly ahistorical and deeply prejudiced statement, not to say mention racist. That the young man hasn't heard about the once-famous

soccer team Hakoah Wien, about one of America's foremost baseball players Lou Gerig, and the world champion lightweight Benny Leonard or about Liverpool's speeding bullet Ronnie Rosenthal could be understandable. But to not have heard of Mark Spitz or the great Johan Cryff, well, then maybe you shouldn't talk about sports at all.

Here, as before in *Aftonbladet*, the reviewer's fixation on the Khemiri's presumed anti-Semitism seems to transcend normal literary discourse and burst through the genre of the book review to assert itself boldly on the page. That this should happen even when *Svenska Dagbladet* is (ostensibly) reviewing a completely different book is but more evidence of the threat that Khemiri's imaginary posed to those unaccustomed to reading 'immigrant literature' as anything other than as a kind of monolithic documentary form. This attitude was summarized by Astrid Trotzig's ironic pronouncement that *Endast "invandraren" kan skriva "äkta invandrarlitteratur" om "förorten"* (Only "the immigrant" can write "real immigrant literature" about "the ghetto") in the pages of the literary journal *Pequod*, naming the phenomenon "biography as category" [Trotzig 24]

Indeed, *Ett öga rött* deploys a considerable amount of countermeasures to thwart such oversimplifications, not the least of which is kaleidoscopic reflexivity. Is the encounter between teenager and writer in the apartment building a case of Halim appropriating the character "Khemiri," or the real Khemiri appropriating Halim? In the former case, a voice claiming pureblood authenticity (Halim) exploits a biracial author who can "pass" acceptably in society and carry his revolutionary ideas to a wider audience. "Khemiri's" anticipated claim that the book is pure fantasy works to Halim's advantage, providing a subterfuge to spread the work more widely. But in

the latter case, an author exploits an autobiographical voice not his own, taking on the power of the genre of personal narrative without bearing any of the responsibilities of truth-telling.

The positions enumerated above are not dichotomous but instead symbiotic, each crucial to the text's flexibility. Combined, the genre slippage that results from the real-world author Jonas Khemiri showing up in Halim's hallway as "Jonas Khemiri" leaves Ragnar Strömberg boxing at shadows, lecturing about Jewish athletes to a subject just the other side of fictive.

If we accept Halim's decision to break with the traditions of *riksvenska*, can we extend that freedom to his delusions about history and culture? His flirtations with Holocaust denial are troubling, but there seems to be no doubt they are also a part of a conscious effort to *choose* what to believe, just as his syntax demonstrates his determination to choose how to write. As his teacher begins a lecture on the Holocaust, Halim records how he retreats into his own counter-curriculum:

*Sen Alex började snacka på om dom sex miljonerna som dödats och gashusen och brännugnarerna och godstågen. ... Men han kom för sent för Dalanda har redan berättat dom flesta siffrorna är lite överdrivan och mest används som propaganda för Israel. Plus det var inte bara judar som dog utan också mass polacker, zigenare och bögar. Sen alla som säger sanningen arresteras och spärras in som Ahmed Rami. Förstås Alex kunde inte lura och inte ens bilderna på massgravarna jag lät komma in för nära. Istället jag trycket mute och gjorde tankeattacker mot politikerna som stoppade moskébygget i Botkyrka. [66-67]*

*Then Alex began to talk about the six million who were killed and the gas houses and the crematoriums and the freight trains. ... But he came too late because Dalanda already said most of the numbers are a little exaggerated and mostly used for propaganda for Israel. Plus it wasn't just Jews who died but also lots of Poles, Gypsies and gays. Then everyone who told the truth was arrested and locked in like Ahmed Rami. Of course Alex couldn't fool and I didn't even let the pictures of the mass graves come too near. Instead I pressed mute and did thought attacks against the politicians who stopped construction of the mosque in Botkyrka.*

Though we may find Halim's willful ignorance of historical facts disturbing, there can be no doubt that he is an active participant in the construction of his own reality. In addition, Khemiri's evokes an infamous figure in the wider cultural debate about anti-Semitism in Sweden among Arab immigrants. (Ahmed Rami gained wide exposure on public-access radio in Sweden in the early 1970s following the state's grant of asylum from Morocco.) [Anti-Defamation League] This reference to a real-life figure outside the narrative of the book could be construed as showing Halim to be a consumer, rather than producer, of anti-Semitism. At the very least, Khemiri's depiction of Halim's identity formation practices in all their manifestations – cultural as well as linguistic – suggests that he is as interested in the *process* of imagination as he is in the end result.

In that sense, if Halim's idiolect was successful in convincing many of his essential *difference* from the "lagomsvenska," we are compelled to regard Khemiri's experiment as a success. But the very efficacy of the book in this regard compels us to investigate further the role of the text in shaping identity. Having seen how others read Halim, we might ask how Halim himself uses texts in his own project.

## Thinking the Nation

Beginning from the 18th century, Benedict Anderson positions the textual forms of both the novel and newspaper as “two [new] forms of imagining,” [24] claiming a new apprehension of time allowed citizens to “think” the nation. Events recorded in both genres of writing proceeded in homogeneous, empty time, untethered to an eschatological end goal and united only by the clockwork of standardized chronology and national consciousness. Two centuries after the historical examples Anderson relies upon, Halim performs his own kind of active reading of a Swedish newspaper and records his impressions in his journal:

*Mellan vegan undersökning och Twilfit-annons journalisterna försökte smuggla nyheten att flera bostadsbolag hotat vråka alla blattar som har parabolantenner på sina balkonger! ... Nu blattarna startade motorganisationer och hade demonstrationer på Platten för såklart dom var inga vingelpettrar som tyckte det var okey att bostadsbolagen lekte rasister. I samma tidning det stod reportage som sa polisen ska börja göra hårdare tag mot svarttaxi. Såklart jag fattade det var också som attack mot oss blattar för vem har någonsin sett en svenne ge svarttaxi? [55]*

Between a veganism study and a lingerie ad, the journalists tried to smuggle the news that several landlords had threatened to evict all niggers who had satellite dishes on their balconies! ... Now the niggers started opposition movements and had demonstrations on Sergels Torg because of course they were no pushovers who thought it was OK that landlords played racist. In the same newspaper there was a report which said the police are going to start cracking down on gypsy cabs. Of course I understood it was also like an attack against us niggers because who's ever seen a Sven drive a gypsy cab?

One cannot accuse Halim of shying away from synthetic thinking. But while his construction of everyday Swedish life as a power structure arrayed against revolutionary consciousness may strike us as paranoid, I have chosen to reproduce this passage because the events notes of are embedded in what Anderson would call modernism's homogenous, empty time: the actants involved do not know each other,

nor does Halim know them personally. He is not a witness to these events with his own eyes, nor even the after-effects (the demonstrations) but instead learns about them through the print media. Nevertheless, Halim imagines them as a representative body which includes himself: *blattar*, and demonstrates what Anderson might call his “complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity.” [Anderson 26] Halim feels himself so firmly embedded in this virtual society that he can pass other *blattar* on the street, not know each other, and still be connected. [Anderson 25]

In addition, the overarching scope of Halim’s rhetoric echoes (albeit in a different register) Arjun Appadurai’s framework for the exploration of imagined worlds. Halim’s own “deeply perspectival constructs” [33] demonstrate this central role of imagination in the construction of self, and it is this imaginary which is at large in the Sweden of Khemiri, Anyuru, and Leiva Wenger.

In *Modernity at Large* Appadurai envisions cultural change and communication as flowing through a number of different virtual terrains. [33] The first of these, the *ethnoscape*, is in play throughout the work of Khemiri, Anyuru, and Leiva Wenger, but perhaps never so clearly as in the angry writings of Halim in *Ett öga rött*. As the child of Arabs, born in Sweden, Halim is the living product of global migration and demographic change. His family’s journey from southern to northern hemisphere, from Orient to Occident, is as much a psychological voyage as it is a geospatial one. Rejecting the Integration politics of the Social Democratic government, Halim holds fast to an essential difference between the Swedes and the *blattar*. That his racial concepts are inflected as much by western Orientalism as by

any kind of notion of the reality of Arab culture is not surprising: he has grown up in a European country distant from the Middle East and freely deploys stereotypes of sexual prowess and ethnic food as the currency of his racial identity. The mobility of global populations has created this relatively new phenomena: a self-identified Arab whose notions of self are dependant on the Swedish ethnoscape in which he has grown up.

The *technoscape*, or the expansion of communication and information-processing systems worldwide, proves crucial to the plot of *Ett öga rött* as Halim attempts to convince his father to install a satellite dish on the balcony of their apartment. The technology of the parabolic antenna enables Halim and his father to participate in the *mediascape* of television programming from the Middle East, instead of the mix of Swedish state television and private channels such as MTV. In Halim's mind, the programmatic nature of pan-Arab culture, sent through satellite, will have the effect of delivering the Middle East into a Swedish living room. If he cannot return to the geographic site of his cultural heritage, then at least he can bring the words and images of the region into Northern Europe. *Ser du?* he asks his father when the box is opened. *Med det här får vi in allt! Marocko, Algeriet, Libanon... Libyen, Qatar, Saudiarabien...* (You see? With this we'll get everything!...) [Khemiri 75]

This leads us to Halim's central goal: to subvert the ideological power of Swedish state, a battle fought on and in the *ideoscape*. It is on this terrain that Halim

chooses to stake his ground and fight for a different idea of self: an ethnic counter-public in opposition to the hegemonic power of the Swedish state.

But can one create such a public out of whole cloth? Is it really possible to, in Benedict Anderson's words, "*think the nation*" into being? [Anderson 22] How are groups thought into and out of being, how is identity made and effaced through words: These are the central problems of both the fictional Halim and the 'real' society in which his book is read. Literature is a key space in which these efforts play out, but in order to understand how this happens we must look more closely at construction practices both within and outside the text of *Ett öga rött*.

Halim was born in Stockholm, so when he makes reference to *oss blattar*, the phrase has to be understood as an imagined community of something different than shared citizenship. This complicates the task of reading, for in Halim's view the newspaper is both the messenger of radical truth as well as mechanism of that truth's obfuscation via the apparatus of state control. To practice the act of being a counter-public, and thus create the counter-public itself, he must read between the lines of consumerist artifacts (lingerie) and upper-middle-class conceits (veganism) to uncover the truth, and his language reflects his (over-)active discovery. The media may "[try] to smuggle," but "of course I understood" what is really going on.

There is, of course, a level of reflexivity here: Just as in those novels of colonial Indonesia which Anderson relies upon, we sense in Halim's diary "the doubleness of our reading about our young man reading... [imagining] from the print in the newspaper" just as the reader him or herself conjures up an image of Halim.

[Anderson 32] And if he seems eager that we should trust him and believe that what his writing describes, it is perhaps because “realness” is the central claim around which is built many facets of his identity. In the next chapter I will explore what is at stake when Halim makes claims of truth and ‘realness.’

### Truth and ‘Realness’

Halim himself gives the problem of truthfulness early attention in his journal. At the close of the book’s first chapter, after he has described receiving the blank book as a gift from an older Arab woman, Halim writes down his thoughts on what he should record in the blank pages which stretch ahead of him. He is remarkably conscious of his own voice and position in society, even as he thinks through larger questions of genre (crime thriller) and authenticity (‘realness’). His pontifications are worth quoting in full:

*På kvällen jag satte länge på rummet och funderade vad jag skulle skriva. Först jag provade tänka fram historia om en knarkarkille på Plattan som får fultjack av juggemaffian och sen går hämtar vapen för hämnd. Men jag droppade tråden för vad jag vet om knarkarliv eller fultjack? Plus jag har aldrig skjutit med en riktig Glock. Därför jag rev sidan och istället provade skriva rakt på pucken om vad som hänt i dag. Det måste ju vara äktast möjliga och såklart Naguib Mahfouz skulle aldrig skriva historier om annan än sig och sin liv.*

*In the evening I sat in my room for a long time and thought about what I should write. First I tried to think up a story about a junkie on Sergels Torg who gets bad drugs from the Yugo mafia and then goes to get a gun for revenge. But then I dropped it ‘cause what do I know about drug life or fake drugs? Plus I’ve never shot a real Glock. So I tore up the page and instead tried to write straight up about what happened today. It’s gotta be the realest possible and of course Naguib Mahfouz would never write stories about anything other than himself and his life.*

If Halim seems eager that we believe his writing is real and authentic, it is perhaps because this “realness” is the central claim around which is built many facets of his identity – a citizen of Sweden imagining himself as a ‘real’ Arab. But in this passage, as well as others throughout the book, Khemiri shows Halim to be precisely kind of ‘unreliable narrator’ which Wayne Booth defined in his 1983 book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Halim, in his imagining of the Middle East where he locates his

own identity, “believes himself to have qualities which the author denies him” – namely, specific knowledge of the culture of the Arab world to which he imagines he belongs. [Booth 159]

Khemiri uses a variety of methods to make Halim’s unreliability clear, some overt and some subtle. Occasionally characters challenge Halim’s knowledge directly, as does Halim’s father in a moment of amused frustration with his son’s penchant for ‘authentic’ Arabic expressions: *Tror du ett ordspråk blir arabiskt bara för att man sätter in lite Nilen och några kameler?* [222] (Do you think a proverb becomes Arabic just you put in a little Nile and some camels?) As one of the few actually born and raised in the Middle East (Morocco) in the book, Halim’s father has unique credibility on questions of authenticity which his son finds difficult to refute.

Other examples of Halim’s unreliability are self-evident from his own writing, without being reliant on other characters’ challenging them. Halim makes early mention of *en jude som heter Salman som dissat Koranen* (a Jew called Salman who dissed the Koran). [11] Halim’s assumption that an author accused of being an enemy of the Islamic faith must be Jewish results in him glossing over a complex practice of reception and interpretation. The result is a harsh parody of ignorant anti-Semitism (as well as an unwittingly prescient foreshadowing of *Ett öga rött*’s own treatment in some Swedish newspapers.)

In a third kind of unreliability, Khemiri hides factual inconsistencies and omissions within Halim’s headstrong prose, challenging the reader to uncover irony and contradiction beneath the surface of the journal’s strident text. In this way *Ett*

*öga rött* can be said to make what Wayne Booth calls “[strong] demands on the reader’s powers of inference” [129] to discover the truth of the narrative amidst a great deal of dissembling – and even self-delusion.

In the paragraph quoted above, Halim invokes the name of Najīb Maḥfūḥ (ماحفوض محفوض) as an example of somebody who would “never write about anything other than himself and his own life.” It’s unclear what degree of familiarity Khemiri expects the Swedish reading public to have with Maḥfūḥ. Halim, at the very least, has probably never read him, instead learning his name earlier that same day from the woman who gave him the blank diary.

If Halim was better-acquainted with Maḥfūḥ’s work, he might be less-inclined to invoke his name in the cause of his struggle. For the Egyptian is intimately bound to two larger cultural discourses present in *Ett öga rött*: the Swedish reception of Arabic culture, and the conflict over whether literature can be ‘un-Islamic.’ Halim is well aware of the former connection, lauding the author for receiving *Sveriges finaste Nobelpris* (Sweden’s finest Nobel prize,) [Khemiri 11] and indeed his novels garnered him the first Nobel prize in literature given to an Arabic writer in 1988.

But Halim is ignorant of the second connection, for when he mentions *Salman som dissat Koranen* (Salman who dissed the Koran”) [11] he seems unaware that Maḥfūḥ was the target of a *fatwa* as well, issued by the extremist Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, for alleged apostasy contained in his 1959 allegorical novel *Awlād ḥāratinā* (*Children of Gebelawi*). [Moosa 274] In 1994, at the age of 83, Maḥfūḥ

was seriously injured in a knife attack outside his house in Cairo, in an attempt to carry out the dictates of the *fatwa*. Though this event never surfaces in Halim's narrative, his very ignorance of the Egyptian writer's fate suggests a willingness to freely appropriate Arabic literary and cultural names for their perceived authenticity without engaging in a deeper understanding of the complex social practices of reception. Clearly Khemiri is having some fun at the expense of what a character in the book calls this 'little dreamer.' [12]

There is a further irony to Halim invoking Maḥfūz as a model for his own writing. Those who have read his books, or who investigate his biography, will discover that Maḥfūz first gained acclaim for his historical novels. Composed under the influence of the work of Sir Walter Scott, they would surely disappoint Halim and his insistence on writing about "himself and his own life," were he to have read them. Indeed, one of the first academic critics to write on the author seriously has characterized the early national romantic works in the following way:

*[Maḥfūz] knowledge of ancient Egypt was fragmentary [...] the outcome is nothing but a romantic reflection of the national past, full of marvelous occurrences and stock characters. [Somekh 60]*

Such critique could well apply to Halim's own daydreams of the Middle East, to where he has never been:

*Jag satt där på geografien och kände mig som gammal arabisk vetenskapsman med fez och snabelskor som bodde i torn (kanske i gamla Bagdad). [...] Dessutom jag var värsta kosmonovan och hade massa gussar som ville komma till mitt torn för att röka shisha och sen baza bara för jag var så grymmish klokish. [109]*

I sat there in Geography and felt like an old Arab polymath with a fez and pointed slippers who lived in a tower (maybe in old Baghdad.) [...] Also I was a total pimp

and had tons of chicks who wanted to come to my tower to smoke a shisha and then screw just 'cause I was so smart.

Halim's daydreams transport him out of the mundane everyday life of a middle-school student, and give him idealized heroes to look up to, but they also lead him astray by tempting him with visions of a mythologized past that belongs more to western cinema of the 1930s than contemporary middle eastern cultural reality. Though he surely deny it, Halim shows all the signs of buying into the discourse of Orientalism identified by Edward Said. Through passages such as the above, Khemiri emerges as a skilled portraitist of both the promises and perils of imaginative practice.

Halim is hardly the first unreliable narrator to emerge on the Scandinavian page; his predecessors have ranged from Kierkegaard's Johannes in *Enten – Eller* to Hamsun's Glahn in *Pan*. But in his insistence on the text's truthfulness, Halim's rhetoric mirrors that of another Stockholm flâneur: Doktor Glas. Hjalmar Söderberg's quintessential modern soliloquist wrote a passage on the problem of truth in his diary, claiming:

*Det som jag skriver ned på dessa blad är icke någon bikt; för vem skulle jag bikta mig? Jag berättar icke allt om mig själv. Jag berättar blott det som behagar mig att berätta; men jag säger ingenting som icke är sant. Jag kan dock icke ljuga bort min själs eländighet, om den är eländig. [Söderberg 7]*

*What I write down on these pages is no confession; to whom should I confess? I don't tell everything about myself. I tell only what pleases me to tell; but I say nothing which is not true. Nevertheless I can't lie about my soul's misery, if it is sad.*

For Halim no less than Glas, this fixation on truth-telling can be interpreted as a gloss on the problem of mode of address and therefore, implicitly, audience. Their ostensible realism is a mannered rhetorical strategy with implicit goals, presupposing

a reader in order to effect an outcome. In the language of Michael Warner, in order for his narrative to succeed, Halim is imagining a near future linked to him by a chain of continuous transformation. [126] Halim's steadfast faith in his own realness is required in order for him to communicate to his audience: those *blattar* who will one day consider him a cultural hero. As he swears to *aldrig skriva historier om annan än sig och sin liv* [13] (never write stories about anything other than himself and his own life), he imagines both himself and others like him as an oppositional community, a counter-public within the Swedish nation-state.

## Conclusion

It is all too easy to reduce the literature of Anyuru, Khemiri and Leiva Wenger to simple sociological artifact: voices long absent from literary discourse – but ever more present in demographic fact – have finally broken through to the best-seller list. Instead of interpreting them in this way, I'd like to suggest that we consider Michael Warner's claim that new publics spring forth into being at least in part by virtue of the manner in which they are addressed. In his words, "in modernity... an extraordinary burden of world-making comes to be borne above all by style." [129] How Halim uses language, no less than how he (mis)uses history, plays a role in answering Warner's question, posed in *Publics and Counterpublics*, of "...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]

If the language used in *Ett öga rött* and *Elixir* render them *de två mest kända försöken att göra Rinkebysvenskan till litteraturspråk*. (the two best-known attempts to make Rinkeby Swedish into a literary language.) [Josephson 66], then I would argue that the imaginative practices which the texts' language describe are parallel attempts to make the experience of second-generation authors into a literary canon. In dedicating his book of poetry, Anyuru comes as close as any of the three writers to crafting a manifesto for the overactive imaginary which characterizes the three books examined here: *vi ska ta oss ut ur den här friheten/och in i en annan*. (we will take ourselves out of this freedom/and into another.)

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