

Annali. Sezione germanica
Rivista del Dipartimento di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Comparati
Università di Napoli L'Orientale

31 (2021)

germanica;



UniorPress

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Annali. Sezione germanica

Direttrice responsabile: Elda Morlicchio

ISSN 1124-3724

Registrazione Tribunale di Napoli n. 1664 del 29.11.1963

UniorPress | Via Nuova Marina, 59 | 80133 Napoli

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Rivista del Dipartimento di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Comparati
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La rivista opera sulla base di un sistema *double blind peer review* ed è classificata dall'ANVUR come rivista di Classe A per i Settori concorsuali dell'Area 10.
La periodicità è di un numero per anno.

germanica;
Università di Napoli L'Orientale
Dipartimento di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Comparati
Via Duomo, 219 | 80138 Napoli
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edizione digitale in *open access*:
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Luca Gendolavigna

A magic potion in present-day Sweden.
Elixir by Alejandro Leiva Wenger

In this article, I will investigate the short story *Elixir* in Alejandro Leiva Wenger's debut collection *Till vår ära* (In Our Honour, 2001), where a magic drink with transformative effects converts dark-skinned characters with foreign background into racially typical Nordic individuals. Since the story relates to both physical and behavioural changes, the transracial *metamorphosis* becomes a central trope to discuss and contest racial and social stratification in ways that the Swedish predominant colour-blind and antiracist discourse does not allow. Critical attention will be devoted to the reaction developed by the characters against the transformation. The main argument is that Leiva Wenger resorts to a supernatural event to question asymmetrical relations between immigrants and Swedes, where whiteness is the norm and non-whiteness is deviance. Developing Hübinette's critical thought concerning race and whiteness in "non-white Swedish literature" (2019), this theoretic analysis of *Elixir* investigates the intersections between race/whiteness from postcolonial and postmigrant perspectives, in the attempt to figure out what is the allegorical meaning of the elixir and how it relates to a *folkhem* (people's home) in crisis. This approach aims to highlight the (im)possibility for the postmigrant subject to locate itself in a Third space of identity.

[Alejandro Leiva Wenger; elixir; whiteness; postmigration; *mellanförskap*]

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And you lied to me so much,
about the world, about myself,
that you ended up imposing on me
an image of myself:
underdeveloped, in your words, undercompetent
that's how you made me see myself!
And I hate that image... and it's false!
Aimé Césaire¹

1. Introduction: Sweden as a multicultural society
and the so-called *invandrarlitteratur* between old and new perspectives

During the second half of the 20th century, Sweden became the main destination of intercontinental migration flows, concerning mainly labour force, refugees,

¹ Césaire 1992: 62.

family reunifications, and adopted children. Sweden took on the role of leader and international top representative in international hospitality, adapting its legislation to an open multiculturalism thanks to the commitment of the then Prime Minister Olof Palme, who was one of the main promoters of the revised Constitution, in which the law 1975:26 *Regeringens proposition om riktlinjer för invandrar- och minoritetspolitiken* ‘Government’s proposition about guidelines for immigrants- and minority politics’ is included. With this law, the *Swedish model* affirmed to be based on the principles of *jämlikhet* ‘equality’, *samverkan* ‘cooperation’, and *valfrihet* ‘freedom of choice’ to promote equal opportunities for ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities. In recent years, Sweden has also tackled discrimination and racism in institutional arenas, officially abolishing the word *ras* ‘race’ from public discourse in 2009², and becoming, at least on paper, a colour-blind society where alternative terms such as *mångfald* ‘diversity’, *etnicitet* ‘ethnicity’, and *kultur* ‘culture’ are employed to denote diversity.

In such a context, the so-called *invandrarlitteratur* ‘immigrants’ literature’ developed in Sweden. The terms *invandrarlitteratur* and *-författare* ‘author’ do not exactly constitute affiliation to a movement, but rather comprise a group of mainly second-generation authors with migration-related backgrounds. Both terms were first applied in the Seventies to the Greek author Theodor Kallifatides, and then to several first-generation immigrants such as Fateme Behros, Jila Mossaed, and many other non-European authors³. Successively, the term was applied to second-generation authors with non-European roots, who either were born and raised in Sweden from at least one parent with foreign background or born abroad and raised in Sweden. *Invandrarlitteratur* became dominant especially after 2001, when the Chilean author Alejandro Leiva Wenger published his debut short prose collection *Till vår ära* ‘In Our Honour’. Other well-known second-generation authors are Johannes Anyuru, Daniel Boyacioglu, Jonas Hassen Khemiri, Marjaneh Bakhtiari, and many others, who all debuted after Leiva Wenger.

Far from wanting to generalise on the purported existence of common features, it might be said with extreme caution that, although with different forms and modes, second-generation authors share a critical interest for diversity, integration, and belonging into the Swedish society⁴. The main characters of their works are

² The *Diskrimineringslagen* 2008:567 stated that there is no scientific basis for dividing people into different races and, from a biological point of view, there is no basis for using the word *race* (*Regeringens Proposition* 2007/08:95, p. 117).

³ For further details about first-generation immigrant authors, cf. the work of Satu Gröndahl and Lars Wendelius.

⁴ Cf. Heith 2016: 49.

usually bi- or multilingual youth acting in most cases in multicultural suburbs on the outskirts of Sweden's major cities. Life in these spaces is constantly portrayed as complicated, where the struggle to define one's identity *vis-à-vis* Swedish society's demands is a strong *leitmotif*⁵. As noted by Massimo Ciaravolo, the suburbs have become the concrete and symbolic place for the construction of a new multiethnic and multicultural Swedish identity (2017: 43). Against this backdrop, a *leitmotif* is the persistence of conflictual centre-periphery relationships: these stories are frequently set in *Miljonprogram* areas, known as the most statistically segregated suburbs amongst Western countries⁶. In fact, Leiva Wenger plays an important role in the development of this aesthetics, as he "var [...] den första svenska författaren som så direkt och så tydligt kom att associeras med miljonprogramsområdena och med den så kallade Förorten eller Orten" (Hübinette 2019: 35)⁷. However, it is important to point out that this (in)direct relationship to *Miljonprogram* areas does not depend on whether the authors in question have been living in these places or not, but rather on the spatial frames that form part of their literary settings.

Moreover, in second-generation *invandrarlitteratur* the main characters are most often teenagers or young adults. Youth is frequently issued as a fragile state of becoming, characterised by the typical imbalance of the *Bildungsroman*, where being on the threshold between two or more identities – such as the family's heritage and Swedish culture – plays a pivotal role.

This more or less deep tie to youth in a multicultural suburban dimension is often symbolised by the use of Swedish *multilingual styles*, experimental and subversive forms of literary multilingualism inspired by multiethnic youth language⁸. In fact, literary multilingualism offers evidence of how part of the transnational Swedish society expresses itself and negotiate identities⁹. In several works of

⁵ Cf. Kongslien 2005: 10; Heith 2016: 54.

⁶ The project is known by this name because the Socialdemocratic government aimed to build one million new apartments in ten years (1965-1975), in order to grant higher standard of living and more housing opportunities. Today, these areas have gained the fame of vulnerable places and are associated with criminality, non-Nordic and non-European minorities. Cf. Ericsson/Molina/Ristilampi 2000; Hübinette/Lundström 2014.

⁷ "was [...] the first Swedish writer to be so directly and clearly associated with Million Programme areas and the so-called Suburb or Hood". Unless otherwise indicated, translations are by L.G.

⁸ *Multilingual styles* is here proposed as a valid, neutral, and non-discriminatory term for a set of varieties of Swedish mainly spoken by youth with multi-ethnic background in Swedish (sub)urban contexts (Gendolavigna 2019). For further readings, see – among others – Ulla-Britt Kotsinas, Ellen Bijvoet, Kari Fraurud, Natalia Ganuza, Tommaso M. Milani, Henning Årman, Rickard Jonsson.

⁹ Cf. Willems/Behschnitt 2012. One of the most known multilingual literary texts is Jonas Hasen Khemiri's novel *Ett öga rött* 'One Eye Red' (2003), in which the narrator Halim writes in an idiolectal version of multilingual styles.

second-generation authors (not least Leiva Wenger), linguistic norms are deconstructed to create new morpho-syntactic, and lexical features that challenge the “monolingual paradigm” (Yildiz 2012).

Furthermore, second-generation *invandrarlitteratur* is often related to the concept of *authenticity*, linking both directly and indirectly the authors’ lives and their literary accounts (Behschnitt 2006: 142). Autobiographism is indeed considered a fundamental element for critics and reviewers, as it provides a consistent and fixed image of the immigrant writer (Ciaravolo 2019: 884–887). Anyway, (auto)biographical approaches appear to be problematic because they reduce the complexity of the writers’ works, comparing literature with non-literary facts that only seldom or hardly ever correspond to reality (Trotzig 2005). In light of these considerations, it seems clear that the use of the terms *invandrarlitteratur* and *författare* is quite problematic. In several studies, scholars have critically scrutinised both terms, questioning the prefix *invandrar-* and proposing alternative denominations to oppose shallow and homogenising attitudes¹⁰. The main problem is that the term *invandrare* ‘immigrant’ has gradually lost its neutral meaning of person who moved from a country to another, coming to signify a subject who is not Swedish (Borevi/Strömblad 2004: 10).

As Wilhelm Behschnitt notes, *invandrarlitteratur* is a hegemonic discursive categorisation, marking a distinction between a normative and a deviant *otherised* literature (2006: 144). For this reason, Behschnitt defines this term a “semiotic frame” marking “low status in the literary field” (2007: 80). Anyhow, as he and Magnus Nilsson further suggested in a co-authored work, it is possible to keep using *invandrarlitteratur* in academic discourse, even though “[t]o use the term as an analytical category in literary criticism requires, however, awareness of its hazards” (2013: 6). This means that it is still possible to keep using *invandrarlitteratur*, not only for its widespread academic use, but also in light of its tactical relevance. Writers such as Khemiri, Anyuru and Leiva Wenger have achieved a certain authority in Swedish public discourse through a strategic use of their role as *invandrarförfattare*. This strategy aims at showing critical issues of diversity and integration, as well as deep contradictions and ambivalences in a country that proclaims itself open and multicultural, which is although also tied to the founding myth of *folkhem* as an ethnically homogeneous society¹¹.

¹⁰ See, among others, Kongslie’s (2005) and Behschnitt and Nilsson’s (2013) denomination “multicultural literature”. For a critique of the term *invandrarlitteratur*, see Trotzig 2005; Behschnitt 2006; Nilsson 2010; Olaru 2017.

¹¹ “The people’s home”. The term has long been a metaphor for the Swedish socialdemocratic Welfare State. For further readings, cf. Larsson 1994; Lindberg 2002.

What should be emphasised, in fact, is that both first- and second-generation *invandrarlitteratur* should not be read according to rigid criteria and values that see cultures as distinct and immutable entities. As proposed by Peter Leonard, it is important to stress “both continuity and change in literary representations of Swedish identity over time” (2013: 152), hinting at new critical readerships where second-generation authors and their main characters can *demigrantise* themselves (Römhild 2017), and be considered as integral part of the *people’s home*. However, it is widely known that a *normative* Swedishness is still posited as valid, which is the critical object of the present article. As Katarina Mattsson argues, it is clear that “vithet spelar en central roll i konstruktionen av nationen och svenskhet [...]. Bilden av den ’svenske’ svensken som blond och blåögd, är givetvis en stereotyp bild [...]. Men utifrån ett vithetsperspektiv är det långtifrån en oskyldig bild” (2014: 153)¹². Addressing this problem, this article aims to propose that it might be useful to lean towards a *postmigrant* perspective.

2. New perspectives: non-white Swedish literature and postmigration as a thought-provoking methodological framework

Recent studies on *invandrarlitteratur* allow us to observe racialisation from novel perspectives. For example, the Swedish scholar Tobias Hübinette (2019) proposed the denomination *icke-vit svenske litteratur* ‘non-white Swedish literature’, defined as a set of literary works published since 1969 in Sweden by authors with backgrounds in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, Caribbean, and South-Eastern Europe. In light of his Latin American origins, Leiva Wenger is included by Hübinette in this literary sub-field, which focuses on race relationships in texts written by so-called non-white authors. The racial aspect critically raised by Hübinette is important not only because in the last two decades of the 20th century the arrival of immigrants and refugees from other continents transformed Swedish society from both a social and ethnic point of view, but also because – as a result – whiteness has become an important contrastive category to define Swedishness and the Swedish *prefix-free* literary canon. For this reason, Hübinette’s investigation aims to understand the point of view of non-white Swedes about Swedish society through their artistic expression.

Non-white literature seems, thus, to move towards the above mentioned postmigrant aesthetics: According to Anne Ring Petersen and Moritz Schramm,

¹² “whiteness plays a central role in the construction of the nation and Swedishness [...] The image of the ‘Swedish’ Swede as blonde and blue-eyed, is of course a stereotypical image [...]. But from a whiteness perspective, it is far from an innocent image”.

postmigration is a critical view aiming to “direct attention away from ‘migrants’ and ‘people with a migration background’ as objects or subjects of interest, and towards society as a whole” (2017: 6). In the last decade, this theoretical concept has been gaining increasing centrality in both sociology and the arts. In sociology, postmigration is applied to analyse both postmigrant individuals and societies, i.e. entities that “do not so much mark the phenomenon of migration as that of the aftermath of migration” (Yildiz 2012: 170). Postmigrant individuals are, in details, those who have not experienced migration or exile directly¹³. In the arts, this term originated from a new wave in German theatre, promoted by the producer Shermin Langhoff in Berlin Kreuzberg (2009). Postmigration is understood as a critical perspective aimed at analysing an aesthetics that not only in theatre, but also in literature can help to “invent new ways of understanding and representing the self, the other, and the (dis)order of the world, and to come up with new ‘answers’ and ‘images’ in the imaginative reconfigurations of existing patterns of thinking and modes of representation” (Ring Petersen/Schramm 2017: 3)¹⁴.

Intersecting Hübinette’s concept of non-white Swedish literature with postmigration, the result is that the writers’ perspectives and experiences are fundamental in defining what Swedishness has come to be today. Hübinette is engaged in contemporary Swedish literature in the attempt to highlight textual criticism of social and racial inequalities in Sweden, thematising the possibility to queer racial and social boundaries (Hübinette 2019: 300-310). This possibility is provided by the conceptual term *mellanförskap* ‘betweenship’, an intermediate identity defined by Maïmouna Jagne-Soreau as “en varken-eller dialektik som kulturell identitet” (2018: 91)¹⁵. As will be shown, all these reflections will be methodologically useful in the critical readership of *Elixir* proposed below.

3. Alejandro Leiva Wenger, *Till vår ära* and *Elixir*: a kind of magic

Alejandro Leiva Wenger was born in 1976 in Concepción, Chile, and moved to Sweden at the age of nine with his mother and his two brothers. He belongs to a massive group of Chilean immigrants who fled to Sweden during Pinochet’s

¹³ For further reading about postmigration from a sociologic perspective, cf. – among others – Naika Foroutan, Regina Römhild, Riem Spielhaus, Erol Yıldiz.

¹⁴ For further reading about postmigration from an artistic and literary perspective, cf. – among others – Roger Bromley, Maïmouna Jagne-Soreau, Lena Englund, Sten Pultz Moslund, Joseph Twist.

¹⁵ “a neither-nor dialectic as cultural identity”.

military dictatorship between the Seventies and the Eighties¹⁶. With his debut work, Leiva Wenger marked a change in Swedish literature that Leonard termed as “ethnic turn” (2008: 33). After such a promising debut, Leiva Wenger withdrew from the literary scene, and his literary activity restarted only in 2011 when he staged *127* at Stockholms dramatiska högskola ‘The Stockholm Academy of Dramatic Arts’, a play that sparked a still enduring dramaturgic career¹⁷.

Published in 2001 by Bonniers and re-edited in 2015 by Modernista, *Till vår ära* is described as a long awaited debut of the new multicultural Sweden (Mohnike 2006: 151). The collection is composed of six short stories, all with different plots and figures. The stories seem to have no apparent connection to one other, and not always are linked to the experience of exile, not least *Elixir*. Leiva Wenger’s themes diverge very broadly, even though it is possible to find a thin *file rouge* linking his stories: the collection could be seen in fact as a series of accounts narrating the personal growth of different individuals in social contexts where their sensitivity and uncertainties are overwhelmed by external (not rarely supernatural and imaginary) influences and expectations¹⁸. The stories are told against the backdrop of a dialectic relation between objective and subjective reality, the obligation to show strength and masculinity, and the need to release one’s weaknesses and fragility (Heith 2004).

Generally, *Till vår ära* can be said to be a work in which ethnic, linguistic, ontological, and social borders are discussed and negotiated, so much so that the typical transnational “trespassing of borders and of ‘off limits’ territories – both material and symbolic” (Ponzanesi/Merolla 2005: 3) becomes a central element in the collection, particularly in *Elixir*.

Elixir is the second story of the collection and was previously published in the second issue of «Bonniers Litterära Magasin» in 1999. It is an uncanny account of surrealistic metamorphosis in which a group of non-white Latino youths transform into Swedes by means of a mysterious brew. Today, *Elixir* is one of Leiva Wenger’s most known stories, also thanks to a short film adaptation from 2004, scripted by Leiva Wenger and directed by the Iranian-Swedish film-maker Babak Najafi.

¹⁶ Cf. Camacho Padilla 2006.

¹⁷ As the author stated in an interview for Sveriges Radio (2015), *Till vår ära*’s success was excessive for him. Leiva Wenger did not explicitly explain why he withdrew from the literary scene, but he acknowledged that he did not feel at ease with the obsessive attention paid to his work, as well as he disliked the association with the figure of *invandrarförfattare*. Furthermore, he did not really understand the label “hip-hop novelist”. Perhaps this helps to explain in part why he refused to continue writing immediately after his debut.

¹⁸ Cf. Leonard 2011; Gendolavigna (in press).

The story is told in the first person by a young anonymous male student of Hispanic origin. One day, his friend Marco receives a bottle containing a brew mysteriously delivered by an unknown sender. Marco drinks it and the next morning, as if by magic, he wakes up with blue eyes. When some days later Marco receives a second bottle with the same content, the protagonist and his friends decide to taste it together. The day after, the characters wake up and find out that their hair has turned blond and their eyes blue, acquiring thus the typical ethnically Nordic features: “fan du har ju fått lite blåa ögon!! [...] han hade fått lite jusare hår där bakom öronen” (2015: 37)¹⁹. When some days later Marco receives a recipe from the unknown sender, the group prepares the drink to complete the transformation into totally blond, blue-eyed and linguistically perfect Swedes: “och när vi snacka så snacka han annorlunda [...] du snackar fett som en svenne” (*ibidem*)²⁰. Surprisingly, the characters even achieve excellent school results, even without studying, as if the elixir had given them a sort of *a priori* knowledge. Furthermore, the elixir also takes over their behaviours and habits, as they are no longer able to assume typical thugs’ conducts, such as jumping the turnstiles at the station or using violence against school mates. The characters benefit from this new condition, although one of them, Flaco, confesses that he is forgetting words in his heritage language Spanish. It follows that the characters soon realise that they are no longer themselves. So, feeling trapped in a coercive form of Swedishness, and fearing to have been permanently transformed “inNe i själva hjärtat och hjärna” (*ibidem*: 40)²¹, they react by asserting with pride that they are *svartingar* ‘coloured’, promising not to drink the brew anymore. In a rather bizarre way, Marcela – Marco’s girlfriend – tries the elixir but the effects are tragic: the girl loses consciousness and the story ends with the girl being taken to hospital, while the protagonists promise to burn the recipe and never drink the elixir anymore. When the story ends, the reader is left with the question of whether it is too late for them to return to normality or not.

The text presents very peculiar graphic and linguistic features that pertain to the discussions on literary multilingualism discussed above. Although *Elixir*’s linguistic features are not a central aspect²², it is important to say that the story is written in a very subversive textual and linguistic form. There are no divisions into paragraphs,

¹⁹ “you’ve got blue eyes [...] he had got a little paler hair”.

²⁰ “and when we talked he talked differently [...] you talk very much like a Swede”.

²¹ “into heart and brain”.

²² For more detailed information about language use in Leiva Wenger, cf. – among others – the works of Roger Källström and Monica Gomér.

the story is a continuous flow of facts and dialogues without adequate distinctions between direct and indirect discourse, punctuation and, above all, orthographic conventions. As a matter of fact, capital letters are randomly and improperly scattered within words throughout the text. In addition to it, many words are roughly misspelled so that the reader is given the impression of a text composed quickly and with high emotional involvement by a non-native speaker. On the other hand, this so-called *anti-language* seems also to perform the stereotype of the poorly educated and non-proficient immigrant with a contaminated vocabulary²³.

4. *Elixir* and the act of “writing back” between postcolonial and postmigrant theory

Elixir's publication is contextualised within a social and historical moment in which debates on multiculturalism were quite intense in Sweden²⁴. After the social and economic crisis of the Nineties, Swedish public opinion began to forcefully mark integration-related problems, general insecurity, and the growing burden of copious flows of refugees on welfare budgets. After the Social Democratic Prime Minister Olof Palme was murdered in 1986, the Swedish political climate changed irremediably, taking on nostalgic shades of a now dissolved and irretrievable *folkhem*. This political shift resulted in manifest xenophobic speeches along the first half of the Nineties. In that period, several social groups manifested an increased xenophobic attachment to Swedish national culture, in the attempt to give an exact definition of Swedishness (Ehn/Frykman/Löfgren 1993), such as the party *Sverigedemokraterna* ‘Sweden Democrats’ in 1988, whose motto was *Bevara Sverige Svenskt* ‘Keep Sweden Swedish’.

At the dawn of the new millennium, Leiva Wenger breaks in with his Goethean *unerhörte Begebenheit*, addressing this political and social exclusionary climate by questioning the concepts of *integration* and *diversity* in Swedish society (Leonard 2011). This critique becomes clear later in Leiva Wenger's doctoral thesis, in which he states that “[d]iversity’ is defined in terms of integration and equality but the operative definition is assimilation: immigrants should become ‘Swedes’” (2019: 24). So, Leiva Wenger reads the Swedish model based on integration as a system actually based on assimilation according to a single, dominant cultural

²³ Anti-language ‘*antispråk*’ is a way of speaking to express resistance to the establishment (Bijvoet/Senter 2021: 178).

²⁴ As a matter of fact, Hübinette defines the story “en kommentar till den integrationsdebatt som pågick kring det senaste sekelskiftet” (a commentary to the integration debate that took place during the last turn of the century) (2019: 280-281).

paradigm. In this light, the brew contained in his *Elixir* eighteen years before could be read as a first step in Leiva Wenger's critical thinking of how diversity is managed in Swedish society.

The transformation caused by the drink and the reactions of the characters propose a critical rethinking of both personal and national identity that need to be seen "as a 'production' [...] always constituted within, not outside, representation" (Hall 1996: 210). The story seems, therefore, to relate to a topic of great importance in *invandrarlitteratur*, i.e. the perception of being essentially different or not Swedish enough in relation to dominant representations of Swedish society. Seen from this perspective, *Elixir* is definable as an archetypical work of non-white Swedish literature, as it clearly marks racial differences in a society characterised by social, ethnic and spatial asymmetries²⁵. In this respect, the presence of a magic drink works as an allegorical tool to criticise a society that, as will be shown below, comes forward with a prefabricated idea on ethnicity as a form of control²⁶. This power instance unveils the relationship between the non-white disadvantaged periphery and the white privileged "metropolitan centre" (Ashcroft/Griffiths/Tiffin 1989: 2), where both *peripheral* bodies and behaviours should conform to the white norm²⁷. Leiva Wenger's critical stance *vis-à-vis* this issue is performed by the postcolonial acts of "writing" (*ibidem*) and "talking back" (Parati 2005), i.e. addressing the centre from the non-white periphery. Bearing in mind that such a comparison with postcolonial concepts is both challenging and delicate, it is possible to maintain that *Elixir* enacts a process of *writing/talking back* to Swedish society in accordance with the author's own words about *Elixir* in an interview with Sveriges Radio (2015): "Det är en satir [...]. Jag försöker blåsa upp stereotyper. [...] Novellen handlar om själva diskurser om integration snarare än hur jag blev integrerad"²⁸. With these words, Leiva Wenger confirms his intention to address the problem of assimilationist integration and to scrutinise how the relationship between cultures is unidirectionally imbued in power (Heith 2004: 3-4). The act of *writing/talking back* takes place from Fittja and Vårberg, two of Stock-

²⁵ Further works in Swedish contemporary literature addressing the same problem are, e.g., Jonas Hassen Khemiri's novels *Montecore* (2006) and *Jag ringer mina bröder* (2012), Athena Farrokhzad's *Vitsvit* (2013), Zulmir Bečević's *Avblattefjeringsprocessen* (2014), and Johannes Anyuru's *De kommer att drunkna i sina mödrars tårar* (2017).

²⁶ Cf. Olaru 2017: 146.

²⁷ Cf. Leonard 2011: 165.

²⁸ "It is a satire [...] I try to amplify stereotypes. [...] The story concerns the very discourse about integration rather than how I became integrated".

holm's south-western suburbs, where *Elixir* is set. Fittja is one of the most publicly debated neighbourhoods in Stockholm, which has been investigated by several sociologists. For example, Adrian Groglopo's reflection shows how skin-colour associations are often used to describe strong polarizations in socio-spatial relationships between centre and periphery: "den mörka hudfärgen i stadens utkanter, den ljusa i centrum" (2005: 108)²⁹. Fittja is thus located beyond a specific "color line"³⁰, where the *displaced* migrantised subject writes back to the centre, proposing a *regeneration* of identity concepts against the way different cultures and places are ascribed different status³¹: "Periferin skriver tillbaka, höjer rösten, invaderar centrum med sina egna tolkningar av världen och makten", claimed Stefan Jonsson (2005: 166)³². The periphery brings new interpretations about how society is conceived and power is distributed. Recently, also Hübinette has framed the action of "writing back" to metropolitan Sweden in non-white Swedish literature:

den icke-vita litteraturen som i motsats till vad den majoritetssvenska färgblinda antirasismen påbjuder både centrerar ras och avkodar de svenska rasrelationerna samt dekonstruerar den svenska vitheten och decentrerar och även objektifierar vita majoritetssvenskar såsom den postkoloniala litteraturen i den engelsktalande världen har gjort sedan länge enligt devisen "The Empire writes back" (Hübinette 2019: 185)³³.

Writing back opposes to an instance of cultural power that defines its values by separating a culturally well-defined "We" group from a "They" group. This is visible in *Elixir*, where the author resorts to a magic drink to decode racialised relationships in a society where immigrants, as Leiva Wenger himself says, "blir svenskar bara inom citationstecken" (Sveriges Radio 2015)³⁴.

²⁹ "The dark skin colour at the city's margins, the fair one in the centre".

³⁰ The term "color line" addresses questions of racial segregation and was used in this context in 1881 by the American abolitionist Frederick Douglass. It was later developed in 1903 by W.E.B. Du Bois in his book *The Souls of Black Folk*.

³¹ Cf. the way Heith reuses the concepts of *displacement* and *regeneration* (2016), and her suggestion of the appropriateness of the *writing back* with respect to Leiva Wenger's *Borta i tankar* and *Elixir* (2004: 3-4).

³² "The periphery writes back, raises the voice, invades the centre with its own ideas of the world and power".

³³ "[...] non-white literature, contrary to what the majority Swedish colour-blind antiracism imposes, both centralizes race and decodes the Swedish racial relations, and deconstructs Swedish whiteness, and decentralizes as well as objectifies white majority Swedes as the postcolonial literature in the English-speaking world has done for a long time according to the motto "The Empire writes back".

³⁴ "become Swedes only in quotation marks".

When the characters manifest their pride of being coloured after having turned into perfect Swedes (“jag är stolt över att va svarting och jag sa jag med för jag är det”, 2015: 40)³⁵, they are challenging former dogmas about assimilation, negotiating social and racial hierarchies, developing a counter-discourse about the national “who we are” (Ring Petersen/Schramm 2017: 6). Such a statement of pride reflects about social and ethnic coexistence in post migrant societies, characterised by increasing diversity. In this sense, the characters’ affirmation of pride to be *svarting* ‘coloured’ takes distances from ethnocentric conceptions and essentialist, binary views about Swedishness, breaking the claims that there are clear distinctions between different cultures (Heith 2004: 4-5), and that physical traits such as dark hair and eyes are a symbol of deviance (Mattsson 2014: 155).

5. The allegorical meaning of the elixir: a critique of hegemonic whiteness

The term *Elixir* comes from the Arabic الإكسير (*al-iksir*), with which the ancient alchemists called the substance (solid, powdered or liquid) that was supposed to turn metals into gold. Later, elixir became the name of hydro-alcoholic solutions with therapeutic actions. A well-known elixir in history is the Elixir of Long Life, a potion said to grant eternal youth. In Leiva Wenger, instead, the elixir gives (traces of) whiteness³⁶.

Traditionally, an elixir is used to treat an illness, an imperfection. Seen in this perspective, diversity is compared to an abnormality that has occurred within a traditionally homogeneous society. For this reason, diversity has a conflictual character against the nation-state homogeneous *grand narratives* and, as such, it needs to be *corrected*. In 1971, the Turkish born poet and photographer Lutfi Özköks wrote his debut poetry collection *Utanför* ‘Outside’, in which he testified how it feels to be different in Sweden, where hope for inclusion is more like “att vänta en metamorfos ett under en magi” (1971: 43)³⁷. In *Elixir*, the long-awaited metamorphosis hinted at by Özköks thirty years before actually takes place, even though it hardly satisfies the expectations of a real, effective inclusion.

As René León Rosales notices, *Elixir* is a literary creation with thematic aspects that, however, deal with manifest social phenomena of contemporary Sweden (2013: 53). In fact, the argument of this section is to reflect about the allegorical significance of the elixir as a tool allowing the dominant ethnic group

³⁵ “I’m proud of being coloured and I said me too because I am”.

³⁶ Cf. Groglopo’s interpretation of *Elixir* (2005: 113-115).

³⁷ “To wait for a metamorphosis, a miracle, a wizardry”.

(white Swedes) to affirm its dominance by erasing the immigrants' diversity through a full but impossible racial assimilation. The Sweden presented in the story is, thus, a place where ethnicity becomes a key code to bridge the gap of a lacking homogeneity. Leiva Wenger introduces the elixir in the story as an allegory because, as he himself affirms in an article published in 2013 on «Expressen», “[a]tt tala om ’vita’ och ’svarta’ är i Sverige kontroversiellt”³⁸. As a result of this controversy, Leiva Wenger resorts to allegory as a critical instrument to convey a message of protest against what is otherwise called *hegemonic whiteness*, a social status marker related to a normative and privileged position. *Hegemonic* is to view in relation to the well-known definition by Antonio Gramsci, i.e. a concept of domination accomplished by a dominant group through the circulation of specific discourses on reality, aimed at fixing a vision of the world functional to the supremacy of the group that produces such discourses³⁹.

By the effects of the elixir, it is possible to see a stereotypical shift from *blattar* to *svennar*, two derogatory (but nowadays mostly perceived as ironic) denominations used with regard to stereotypical youth with foreign background and gangster attitudes on the one hand, and typically diligent, peaceful and dutiful Swedes on the other⁴⁰. The elixir only works on an external layer: *blattar* turn to *svennar*, which means that, allegorically, the drink is an instant trick, a *deus ex-machina* for a *melancholic* Sweden⁴¹, where the *folkhem* is lost for good⁴²: as Hübinette maintains, in Swedish context it is possible to posit a “melankoli förorsakad av en sorg över att den svenska befolkningen inte längre är lika vit som tidigare och att svensk idag [...] kan vara icke-vit” (2014: 63)⁴³. In this sense, the elixir could be seen as an antidote to this melancholy. Moreover, the fact that the sender is unknown is a sign that the elixir may have been delivered by anybody in Swedish society⁴⁴ or,

³⁸ “To talk about ‘whites’ and ‘black’ in Sweden is controversial”.

³⁹ For a deeper understanding of the concept “hegemonic whiteness”, cf. Hughey 2010.

⁴⁰ Resorting to Natia Gokieli’s words, *Svenne* refers to “the Swedes who are white, educated, progressive, liberal, non-problematic”, while *Blatte* refers to “the non-Swedish, non-white, with lack of education, regressive, patriarchal and violent” (2015: 213).

⁴¹ Cf. Hübinette/Lundström 2014.

⁴² Through Freud, we have learned to consider melancholy as the impact of failure to recognise a loss. The lost object is consequently fetishised and removed from any critical analysis. For a critical readership of melancholia in a similar theoretic framework, cf. the work of Paul Gilroy.

⁴³ “melancholy caused by a sadness that the Swedish population is no longer as white as before and that Swedish today can [...] be non-white”.

⁴⁴ This interpretation is corroborated by the short movie version of *Elixir* produced by Najafi, in which the sender’s telephone number is composed by the sum of every Swedish citizen’s telephone number. In fact, when the police try to contact the sender’s number, every single telephone in Sweden rings. Since calling the sender means to reach every citizen, it is possible to

quoting Mohnike by “Vollblutsschweden” ‘full-blood Sweden’, a part of society that hopes “dass schon alles so bleiben könnte, wenn auch die Wirklichkeit sich ändert” (2006: 155)⁴⁵. Hence, through homogenising wizardry, Us and Them dichotomies are not eliminated, but reinforced and reproduced, according to a hegemonic identity model that always needs to oppose something to define itself.

6. The reaction as a not submissive sentiment: refusing mimic identities

As anticipated above, the characters react to a process of *Swedification*, refusing the new identity in which they have landed up, which is evidenced in the story by quotes such as:

vi lovade vi ska sluta dricka skiten. Fetarslet svärde på hans morsas grav han ska brenna reseptet. [...] Vi sa fan den där läsken gör att man blir svenne. fan tänk om vi skrattade som fan 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 läsken bara för att prova. flaco sa nu måste vi sluta annars kanske vi blir iNne i själva järtat och i järnan (2015: 40)⁴⁶.

In their pride to be coloured, it is possible to grasp their resistance and belonging at the same time. Their physical features may have changed, as well as their language use, but the elixir can neither reach their heart nor their brain – metaphorically the most intimate aspects of personality – so they still can control their sentiments. The characters seem prepared to definitely transform their identity and benefit from the advantages of whiteness, but they regret it in the end because the price to pay for social acceptance is too high: they don’t want to give up their authenticity. The sentence “fan den där läsken gör att man blir svenne” is not just a naïve cry of surprise, but rather the insight that they are becoming something they do not recognise as authentic. As a consequence, they not only promise not to drink the brew anymore, but also to burn the recipe, preventing

maintain that the sender is an embodiment of the Swedish society as a whole, and that his/her responsibility allegorically corresponds to every citizen’s responsibility in trying to assimilate the immigrants’ ethnicity into one given norm.

⁴⁵ “that everything could stay as it is, even if the reality changes”.

⁴⁶ “we promised to stop drinking that shit. The fat-ass swore on his mother’s grave he was going to burn the recipe [...] We said damn that drink makes you Swede. damn figure it out, we laughed as fuck but then marco said no I don’t want to become it cause I’m proud of being coloured and I said me too because I am. We tasted the drink just to try it. flaco said now we have to stop otherwise maybe we become into heart and brain”.

any risk for further transformations in the future. In this context, also language use is pivotal: in fact, the event that triggers their reaction corresponds to Flaco's acknowledgment that he does not remember words in Spanish: "jag märkte jag kunde koncentrera mej bättre på leksjonen plus att sen kom Flaco och sa han kunde inte komma ihåg nästan ett enda ord på spanska [...] flaco sa nu måste vi sluta" (*ibidem*)⁴⁷. In this quote, both benefits and drawbacks of the elixir are shown: on the one hand, the narrator can concentrate better at class, on the other hand, his friend Flaco is losing memory of his heritage language which, just as in colonial imperialism, leads to the achievement of civil recognition at the expense of one's identity.

Realising that the elixir results in a sort of oblivion for them, they rebel to the imprisoning assimilation, enacting their counter-knowledge of identity, which is made possible by a leeway of action provided by the fact that the drink, not affecting "brain and heart", allows the characters to refuse its power. So, in the end, their transformation is not completed, resulting in a cold *mimicry*, the repetition of a set of habits, gestures and linguistic articulations with which they never really comply (Bhabha 1984). These traits, reproduced as "almost the same, but not quite" (*ibidem*: 126) allow the characters into a higher and generally more favourable social status, getting good school results and better consideration, even though they *only* mimic Swedishness. As a matter of fact, this ambivalent *mimic-metonymic passing* only works as *pars pro toto* for it (Dyer 1997).

7. An open ending for open alternatives

As mentioned above, the story has an open ending as it is not clear whether the characters will return to their original condition or not. One thing is certain: a return to the *status-quo* of a society divided into *blattar* and *svennar* is impossible. Rather, the characters' reaction may be the precondition of a new transitional form of society to overcome given cultural and racial dimensions – *blattar* and *svennar* – opening a space that in Swedish context is called *mellanförskap* 'between-ship'. Introduced above, *mellanförskap* is a neologism officially recognised in 2014 by *Språkrådet* 'Swedish Language Council', referring to a cultural association founded in 2005. *Mellanförskap* has also become an analytical concept for a postmigrant intermediate dimension that presupposes a critical reassessment of identity and its representation⁴⁸. Since *mellanförskap* is intended as a condition,

⁴⁷ "I noticed I could concentrate better at class, and then Flaco came and he said that he could not remember almost a single word in Spanish [...] flaco said now we must stop".

⁴⁸ In the Neologisms' list issued by the Council, *mellanförskap* is defined as "upplevelse av att inte

rather than a desired identity⁴⁹, the concept does not directly draw on Homi Bhabha's concept of *Third space* (1994)⁵⁰, i.e. the hybrid condition of the subject determined by encounters where traditionally homogeneous notions of race, culture and belonging have no stable ontology. Indeed, unlike Bhabha's post-colonial term, *mellanförskap* does not result from *agency*, but it rather refers to postmigrant subjects who are *already* born or grown up within a hybrid thirdness, and have no chance to subjectify themselves otherwise (Jagne-Soreau 2019: 49). However, both terms refuse polarised identities: Third Space referring to the identity of the ex-colonised once colonisation is over, while *mellanförskap* referring to an innate inbetweenness of the postmigrant subject in the 21st century. As further specified by Daphne Arbouz, *mellanförskap* is characterised by the fact that "specifika kroppsliga markörer [...] gör att man blir nationellt och etniskt exkluderad och inte tillerkänns ett hemmahörande i vare sig västerländska eller icke-västerländska, vita eller ickevita sammanhang" (2012: 38)⁵¹.

In *Elixir*, the development of a hybrid condition is not given by the characters' awareness that their identity lies beyond Manichean ethnic divisions. This suggestion in the text is not explicitly given: there is no clear evidence of a given *agency* in their reaction, so the category of *mellanförskap* seems to work better to describe their condition. However, the very fact that Leiva Wenger resorts to a metanarrative tool as the elixir to question the significance of national belonging, race and identity, is symptomatic of the urge for a new conceptualisation of Swedishness, which takes shape in the text.

8. Concluding remarks

In this article, I have tried to show how the transformation into a racial category perceived as superior and desired can lead into an unfitting dimension. In few words, the characters have become a screen on which the society projects its own self-image. By analysing their reaction to this Kafkaesque change, I have tried to show how the dichotomy between *blattar* and *svennar* can be overcome: none of them has ontological bases, both are constructed identities serving dominant models of identification in the national self-image. In the words of another

helt tillhöra någon samhällsgemenskap" (experience of not completely belonging to a societal community) (see *Institutet för Språk och Folkminnen* 2014).

⁴⁹ Cf. Hübinette 2019: 120-121; Jagne-Soreau 2019.

⁵⁰ Cf. Arbouz 2012: 39.

⁵¹ "it is often specific bodily markers that make one nationally and ethnically excluded and not recognized as a resident in either Western or non-Western, white or non-white contexts".

Swedish-Chilean writer, Neftali Milfuegos, it is now time to look towards a future in which “[m]ina nationer faller. Men om svennen ska falla så måste blatten falla. Balansen måste brytas. För jag är bortom den här kroppen” (2015: 230)⁵². The collapse of both *blattar* and *svennar* seems to suggest a transnational turn, a militant recalcitrance where postmigrant identity become a space of resistance. Seen in this perspective, it may also become clear why this article was opened by a quote from Aimé Césaire’s postcolonial rewriting of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. The characters’ reaction is similar to the black slave Caliban’s response to the coloniser Prospero: Caliban despises Prospero for being a liar, a coloniser who not only subjugated him with magic, but also for having imposed an identity on him that he finally rejects as false. Just like Caliban, *Elixir*’s characters recognise that their new identity is a lie, a construction, and that the magic is used to mask political and social power, so they hate their image because it’s *false*. In this story, Leiva Wenger shows both the risks of a long tradition of ethnic assimilations, and the social importance of the color line as two ambivalences of postmigrant Sweden. Further investigations about how Leiva Wenger’s work and (post)*invandrarlitteratur* seek to overcome pre-established identity boundaries from anti-essentialist perspectives are urgently needed.

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⁵² “My nations are falling. But if the Swede must fall then also the Immigrant must fall. The balance must be broken. For I’m beyond this body”.

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