

**Brown Eyed Boy: Narrating Internalized Oppression and Misogynoir in Jonas Hassen Khemiri's *Everything I Don't Remember***

Benjamin Mier-Cruz  
University of Wisconsin

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*The rise of anti-immigrant sentiment and right-wing extremism in Sweden in the wake of growing migration has affected Sweden's global reputation as a model progressive welfare state that prioritizes human rights and generously extends citizenship, welfare, and labor rights to migrants and asylum seekers. In Jonas Hassen Khemiri's *Allt jag inte minns* [*Everything I Don't Remember*] (2015), xenophobia, Islamophobia, and racialized heteronormativity appear in the unlikely form of Vandad, a hypermasculine Muslim immigrant who has secretly fallen in love with another Swedish Arab man. This study involves a narratological analysis of how internalized racism inspires the novel's narrator of color to produce figurative narrative acts of internal colonialism—that is, violent narrative acts, made possible by the effects of racism, against other non-white characters in the story. The essay additionally explores how the objectification of non-white women's bodies and acts of misogynoir, the anti-Black misogyny that Black women experience, by queer men of color in the text operate as secondhand technologies of oppression manufactured by the political discourse of the extreme right. The essay concludes with a critique of the far right's exploitation of collective cultural memory to mass-produce white nationalism in the guise of tradition and the implications this has for non-white Swedes and migrants in Sweden.*

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*Benjamin Mier-Cruz is Assistant Professor of Scandinavian Studies and Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Madison-Wisconsin. His research examines Nordic writers and filmmakers of color and intersectional representations of gender, sexuality, class, and race. Benjamin's current book project explores contemporary representations of non-whiteness in Swedish literature and visual culture. Benjamin is also a translator.*

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In this essay, my reading of Jonas Hassen Khemiri's novel *Allt jag inte minns* [*Everything I Don't Remember*] (2015) shows how the nationalized anti-immigrant discourse of Sweden's political far-right and neo-Nazi fringe groups has reached beyond its target audience and inspired internalized oppression and misogynoir<sup>1</sup>, “the anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience,” among Swedes of color. *Everything I Don't Remember* explores the socio-cultural and economic implications of Swedes with migrant backgrounds who, despite being a prime

target of the anti-immigrant policies, come to espouse the cultural nationalism of the far right. In the novel, the intersections of xenophobia, Islamophobia, homophobia, and racialized heteronormativity meet in the unlikely form of Vandad, a Swedish Arab man who has secretly fallen in love with the novel's eccentric protagonist Samuel, another Swedish Arab man. I begin my study with a close narrative analysis of how internalized racism—"a psychological process that affects all racial minorities, that involves acceptance of the hegemonic hierarchal stratification of race that places [non-whites] beneath White/Europeans" (Whitfield 12)—prompts the novel's narrator of color, Vandad, to produce figurative narrative acts of internal colonialism—that is, violent narrative acts, made possible by the effects of racism, committed by intradiegetic narrators<sup>2</sup> of color against themselves and other non-white characters in the story. I follow this with a critique of the misogynoir enacted by queer men of color in the text as a technology of exclusion and oppression manufactured by Sweden's far right political discourse. I conclude the essay by exploring how Swedish right-wing populism constructs its own narrative of collective cultural memory to mass-produce white nationalism in the guise of cultural nationalism and tradition. Indeed, this act of writing a white nation that looks like cultural preservation ostensibly makes room for people of color in Sweden, but only in the most violent of spaces.

### ***Let's Play Everything I Don't Remember***

Jonas Hassen Khemiri's novel about the death of Samuel, a young Swedish Arab man who may or may not have committed suicide, reads as the making of a novel by an unnamed fictionalized version of Khemiri himself. The laconic intradiegetic author never produces a cohesive narrative; the novel is a series of fragmented interviews that alternate, paragraph by paragraph, among several people in Samuel's life. The disjointed narrative structure obscures the fictional author's literary intent and what has made Samuel the worthy subject of his story. The novel's opening paragraphs introduce Khemiri's disorientating narrative device that regularly directs the reader to sort through, catalogue, and splice together

each paragraph's loose end—a kind of memory game of archiving narrative snapshots into a beginning, middle, and an end.

The neighbor sticks his head up over the hedge and asks who I am and what I'm doing here.

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Welcome. Have a seat. Relax. There's nothing to worry about, I promise. One click of the panic button and they'll be here in thirty seconds.

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The neighbor says he's sorry; he explains that after everything that happened they can't be blamed for being suspicious of anyone they don't recognize. (Khemiri 3)

Surely, the reader is accustomed to their active role in story-making within the ostensibly passive act of following a story. As Peter Brooks notes, “[the] story is after all a construction made by the reader” (25); yet the profound reliance on the reader to make Khemiri's story intelligible is particularly indicative of a post postmodernism that “fetishises the *recipient* of the text to the degree that they become a partial or whole author of it” (Kirby 2006).

Recalled and re-presented by a cast of unreliable narrators, the distorted diegetic events—or the *fabula*, the totality of events as they chronologically occur to *suggest* the progression of a beginning, middle, and an end—further destabilize the reader's relation to plot lines, which are “...not simply organizing structures, they are also intentional structures, goal-orientated and forward-moving” (Brooks 12). The novel's primary narrators—the politically-active Laide, who recounts her short but tumultuous romantic relationship with Samuel; and Vandad, who narrates with artistic precision his position as the most important person in Samuel's life—contradict one another at every turn. They both, however, depict Samuel, who is terrified of inheriting Alzheimer's, as regularly acting out of character. To ward off the disease afflicting his ethnically Swedish and xenophobic grandmother, Samuel performs increasingly unusual acts at random to add to his “Experience Bank,” into which the more he deposited, “the emptier he seemed” (Khemiri 39). Regrettably,

these acts do no more to cement Samuel's memory than they do to provide the reader their bearings.

In its broader critique of extreme right-wing populism, *Everything I Don't Remember* presents acts of forgetting, intentional or not, as a national trait of cultural amnesia; a collective forgetting of Sweden's history of ethnic diversity, of welcomed labor migration, and of the precarity of societal categories like class affiliation, sexuality, and cultural difference. The interspersed interview snippets by people of color who, intentionally or not, touch on issues of racism and systemic racialization serve as a remedy against this allegorical amnesia, impelling the reader to bear in mind where each fragment left off—or where acts of racism stand in Swedish society today. These out-of-place fragments, however, stimulate memory as much as they risk the reader misrecollecting them. The text negotiates, then, the spatio-temporal demands placed on memory in the reader's construction of the story: "[Just] as in the visual arts a whole must be of a size that can be taken in by the eye so a plot must be 'of a length to be taken in by the memory:' This is important, since memory [...] is the key faculty in the capacity to perceive relations of beginnings, middles, and ends through time, the shaping power of narrative" (Brooks 11). Khemiri's narrative splinters are short enough to recall, yet reconstructing them into a whole risks gaps and missteps, urging the reader to consider everything *they* don't remember. A narrative too small, too long, or too far apart from its logical successor may in turn make the reader unreliable. Glimpsing the possibility of their own unreliability—to read, construct, retell, evaluate the past—the reader finds footing, however precarious, in the present. In *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-Francois Lyotard, contends that "against all expectations, a collectivity that takes narrative as its key form of competence has no need to remember its past. It finds the raw material for its social bond not only in the meaning of the narratives it recounts, but also in the act of reciting them" (22). The urgency of the narrative present to influence the perception of the past, and our satisfaction with it, marks the novel's didactic commentary on populist discourse and constructed national memory. Whether it is the irony of the grandmother with amnesia who misses the good old days of a Muslim-free

Sweden, or the telling of a story about a Swedish Arab man minus much of the story, the novel's negotiation of the interplay between storytelling and (selective) memory loss exposes the double-sided implications of exploiting the present to manufacture the past. For their part, the interviewees' recollections of Samuel "may seem to belong to the past, but in reality [the narrated events are] always contemporaneous with the act of recitation" (Lyotard 22). In the following sections, I analyze how Laide's and Vandad's privileged positions in the narrative present to reflect on Samuel's past reveal, whether intentional or not, their respective resistance to and appropriation of the misogyny, homophobia, and xenophobia of Swedish right-wing populism.

### **Queer Narrativity/Queer Phenomenology**

The novel's steady use of the present tense to actively reconstruct the past produces a sense of spontaneity that, Trinh T. Minh-Ha suggests, mimics life but is often regarded as 'bad' story: "Sometimes [life] just drifts along; it may go on year after year without development, without climax, without definite beginnings or endings. Or it may accumulate climax upon climax, and if one chooses to mark it with beginnings and endings, then everything has a beginning and an ending. ... (Minh-ha 143). Minh-ha argues that 'good' stories are typically those that are deemed good because they are written by and for Western adults who anticipate a ready-made idea of reality (142). Khemiri's novel, then, indulges in 'bad' storytelling by performing, I argue, queer plotting. *Everything I Don't Remember* can be read as a textually queer narrative if we consider how spaces, including narrative spaces, and spatial terms like 'queer,'<sup>3</sup> are regularly sexualized and how, when navigating fictional narratives, physical bodies, including our eyes and our minds, are orientated toward (hetero)normative plot "lines" that move the reader from one logical point to the next. "The phenomenology of the act of following a story ... is understanding the successive actions, thoughts, and feelings in question insofar as they present a certain directedness" (Riceour 174). Khemiri's de-orientation of the narrative space, despite Vandad's attempts to realign it along a forward-moving, heteronormative story-line, is a queer orientation that will not

line up and “which by seeing the world ‘slantwise’ allow[s] other objects to come into view” (Ahmed 84).

If narrative is the “acting out of the implications of metaphor” that is “enacted both spatially [...] and temporally” (Brooks 149), then we can read *Everything I Don’t Remember* as a thematically, spatially, and temporally queer text. Vandad is the unidentified speaker of the novel’s second paragraph: “Welcome. Have a seat. Relax. There’s nothing to worry about, I promise. One click of the panic button and they’ll be here in thirty seconds” (Khemiri 3); but we “meet” Vandad by name when he crashes a “real” Swedish party with “guys wearing suit jackets and the girls wearing special indoor shoes” (Khemiri 5). On a run to collect money for a Middle Eastern loan shark, Vandad forgets his duties the moment he eyes Samuel. Vandad is immediately orientated toward him, but his Muslim name stops him in his tracks:

I didn’t know which name I should use because when I was out doing rounds with Hamza I never gave my real name. [...] I braced myself for the inevitable questions. “What did you say? Vamdad? Venbab? Van Damme? Oh, Vandad. What kind of name is that? What does it mean? Where are your parents from? Did they come here as political refugees? Were you born here? Are you whole or half? Do you feel Swedish? How Swedish do you feel? Do you eat pork? By the way, do you feel Swedish?...Do you feel foreign when you’re here and Swedish when you’re there?” – When people realized I didn’t want to talk origins they would ask about working out, whether I liked protein drinks or what I thought about MMA” (Khemiri 9).

Vandad’s body is the material site of out-of-placeness that comes into being when it crosses the socio-cultural parameters of inclusion at the “real” Swedish party, but the roadblock that is his Muslim name renders otherwise effortless acts, like movement and speech, impossible. Unable to be vocalized without others tripping over it, Vandad’s Muslim name stops or slows down speech, “Vamdad? Venbab?”, and societal movement. The interrogation into his background bestows upon the ethnic Swede the authority, or their assumption of it, to regulate the other’s entry into the party—into universal citizenship. Like a passport, a Muslim name “turns

the gaze onto its owner as a suspicious body—even a ‘could be terrorist’” (Ahmed 116). Thus, for the ‘foreign’ body to extend itself in a white space, its owner must rename and re-orientate themselves against technologies of hypervisibility that make its non-white body “here” in Sweden and not “there”—wherever Vandaad *really comes from*—register as out of place. Without skipping a beat, Samuel, a Swedish Arab man himself, welcomes the arrival of Vandaad’s name and his body, and the two quickly become close friends and roommates. The intimate proximity between the two men prompts the first of Vandaad’s narrative re-writes intended to straighten out the story and ‘straighten out’ queer desire. “Even though [Samuel and I] didn’t talk the whole time, we knew that we belonged together. Erase that. Just put that we didn’t have to talk the whole time to know we were going to be best friends” (Khemiri 41).

To be sure, Vandaad’s attempt at normative plotting extends relief to the reader searching all the time for a story-line to follow, making him simultaneously the novel’s most sympathetic character and an out of place storyteller—a first person narrator who tries to take on as much third-person omniscience as possible without getting caught. These textual/sexual straightening devices pave a discursive path toward cultural intelligibility that has been historically fashioned by and reserved for straight, cisgender white men. Western stories with “‘a beginning that rouses interest, a succession of events that is orderly and complete, a climax that forms the story’s point, and an end that leaves the mind at rest’” (Minh-ha 142) are “good stories” whereas “[if] these criteria are to be adopted, then countless non-Western stories will fall straight into the category of ‘bad’ stories” (142). Vandaad’s hypercorrection of narrative progression, then, attempts to make Khemiri’s “bad” story “good,” a commodification of non-white storytelling, by translating it into a “Western” (i.e. White) heteronormative tale.

The double-straightening of both the narrative and sexuality, however, is an overcorrection that “outs” them as unreliable and queer respectively: “Sometimes when I walk into the bathroom in the morning and see [Samuel’s] toothbrush beside mine I think that we have grown awfully close in an awfully short amount of time. That this closeness is—Delete that. Delete all of that” (Khemiri 61). To be

able to tell a story from beginning to end is to enter and speak the language of Western cultural intelligibility, prompting Vandad's desperation to enact a structuring operation, a plot, that "[looking] back from the conclusion to the episodes leading up to it, [enables the reader] to say that this ending required these sorts of events and this chain of actions" (Ricoeur 174). Indeed, Vandad's straightening of his narrative structure, his past, anticipates that "this backward look [at the narrative] is made possible by the teleological movement directed by our expectations when we follow the story" (Ricoeur 174). This very process fails, however, when Vandad's backward look traces with intent those "teleological movement[s] directed by our expectations" to fall in line with Western heteropatriarchal normativity. His straightening of queer desire and the whitening of his Muslim name come to a halt at the intersection of Sweden's progressive welfare state, which 'permits' queerness, and Islamic tradition, which doesn't: "Delete that. Delete all of that."

This systemic halting of non-white and queer speech is further metaphorically (re)enacted by the severing of the author's interviews with people of color. We can consider Khemiri's stop-and-go narrative snapshots as being part of a kind of memory role-playing game that is, as previously mentioned, "indicative of a post postmodernism that 'fetishises the *recipient* of the text to the degree that they become a partial or whole author of it" (Kirby 2006). In this setup, the reader takes on the role of the unnamed interviewer/author (Khemiri), who is both the narratee and, despite Vandad's attempt to construct it, the maker of the story. However, the reader's own compulsion to reconstruct the fragments penned by a non-white author (the real-life Khemiri and his fictional counterpart) reflects Vandad's vain attempt to straighten/whiten it and, as Minh-ha shows, the anthropologist's custom of "looking for the structure of *their* [non-Western] narratives" as an attempt at "re-validating nativist discourse" (142). The act of re-validating the other's discourse inevitably leads to an unacknowledged and "unavoidable transfer of values in the 'search'" (142). Minh-ha adds, "we shall never know if the other, into whom we cannot, after all, dissolve, fashions from the



elements of [her/]his social existence a synthesis exactly superimposable on that which we have worked out” (142).

Still, Vandad is capable of exploiting this inexorable transfer of (white) values onto the other because for him, as a man of color in Sweden, this is simply the order of things; he is thus able to make himself appear as the storyteller, the narratee, and the story itself. In his multiple self-appointed roles, Vandad manipulates how people actualize narratives “not only by recounting them, but also by listening to them and recounting themselves through them; in other words, by putting them into ‘play’ in their institutions— thus by assigning themselves the posts of narratee and diegesis as well as the post of narrator” (Lyotard 23). Vandad uses his position as an other to in-validate the other other’s (Khemiri’s) “bad” story and re-validate it as a “good” one—a narrative act of internal colonialism. Internal colonialism, as I present it here, is the inflicting of violence by the (conceptually) colonized other on other subjects of color. The stopping and moving forward of the story, the demands to omit and revise, “represent a person acting, who orients him- or herself in circumstances he or she has not created, and who produces consequences he or she has not intended. This is indeed the time of the ‘now that...,’ wherein a person is both abandoned and responsible at the same time” (Ricoeur 176). As the narrator and the narratee, the textually colonized, decolonized, and internal colonizer, Vandad overcompensates for the moments when the text abandons him, when his interviews are cut off:

Just write that the rest of the year is like a stroboscopic slideshow of rumbling basslines, clinking glasses, nods at people we don’t know but recognize, sticky dance floors, rubber coat-check tags in my back pocket, steamy smoke-machine smell, cigarette butts in overflowing toilets, cigarette packs smushed into empty glasses, conversations in front of speakers where the only way to make yourself heard is to cup the listener’s ear.” (Khemiri 61)

Vandad commands the intradiegetic author to “just write” and babbles on about object after object, losing the narrative coherence he has strived for. The spatial and temporal axes of the diegesis converge as the rest of the year is told in objects,

a metonymical list that suggests stories as much as it resists them, and which endeavors to conceal the narrator's sense of exclusion in the curation of the novel's progression. Additionally, the narrator of color (Vandad) is particularly careful not to be left behind the text for, "If to be human is to be white, then to be not white is to inhabit the negative: it is to be 'not'" (Ahmed 114). To be sure, the narrator of color must further renegotiate the conditions of Western storytelling that similarly posit that if to be human is to write, then not to write is to inhabit the space of not being, or the space of the object. Therefore, the hyper-attention to objects, too, is a means of acquiring cultural intelligibility for the non-white interlocuter. Ahmed adds that whiteness itself is not a reachable object "but rather that whiteness is an orientation that puts certain things within reach" (101). By focusing on objects to tell (and not tell) multiple stories, the narrator of color confirms the many possessions they have the capacity to reach. Desperate for subjectivity and prohibited from inhabiting whiteness, Vandad, then, appropriates the white subject's desire for racial others as a "technology for the reproduction of whiteness" (Ahmed 104) that bell hooks describes as "eating the other." Eating the Other "was not simply to sexually possess the Other; it was to be changed in some way by the encounter... [The white subject claims] the body of the colored Other instrumentally, as unexplored terrain, a symbolic frontier that will be fertile ground for their reconstruction of the masculine norm" (24). As a secretly gay man of color, Vandad is unable to take up the white man's position of "eating" non-white women. Instead he bears witness to Samuel's fetishizing of blackness in order to re-route desire for the non-white woman into misogynoir, the misogyny directed at black women. For the person of color who internalizes racism in their vain reach for whiteness, misogynoir, then, becomes a strategy for reproducing whiteness and toxic masculinity.

### **Misogynoir and Eating the Other through the Other.**

The novel is set in 2010, the same year the Sweden Democrats (SD) first gained parliamentary representation, and Vandad's right-leaning discourse is effectively crosscut by Laide's social justice activism. Laide, an immigrant and interpreter for

asylum seekers, is the linguistic bridge between the “here” of Sweden and murky “over-there-ness.” Her profession resists SD’s populist marketing of an “*öppen svenskhet*” [open Swedishness] that would require full cultural assimilation as opposed to either lenient integration policies or radical national expulsion of migrants (Teitelbaum 35). Additionally, Laide literally diversifies the traditional Swedish home when she convinces Samuel to convert the suburban home of his conservative, ethnically Swedish, and currently hospitalized grandmother into a safe house for migrant women and children. In reality, SD had successfully gained, and continues to gain, widespread support from older voters who fear this very scenario.<sup>4</sup> What is more, Laide strictly prohibits men from entering the home, which indirectly emboldens SD’s anti-male Muslim rhetoric by stoking fears of the rampant sexual violence they regard to be implicit in Muslim culture. Whereas SD appears to fall more in-line with Swedish cultural values by cleverly appropriating feminist values, Laide boldly chooses to step ‘out of line’ to prioritize the safety of Muslim women.

Laide’s voice, then, is a habitual stopping device that re-orientates and disorientates Vandad’s straightening of the text and makes visible the “material terrain” of his veiled queer articulations that can never be crossed, despite always being close at hand (Ferguson 61). Laide effectively re-queers or “outs” Vandad’s narrative in addition to SD’s dubious appropriation of gender equality, showing us what is lost when the straight line is followed (Ahmed 79). To begin, in Laide’s introduction in the text, Samuel immediately fetishizes her when they first meet, regarding her as a conglomeration of hypersexualized Black celebrities: “She was Beyoncé times a hundred, we’re talking Janet Jackson before the plastic surgery, we’re talking the girl from 21 Jump Street, the sister on Cosby, Hilary from Fresh Prince but with brains, she was so beautiful that I DIED” (Khemiri 79). The projection of Beyoncé and the actresses who came before her onto Laide’s body is an example of a “technology of exclusion” that according to Damani J. Partridge “[manages and produces] noncitizen bodies” (19). Popular culture is but one of many “social technologies of governance, representation, and population construction” that regulate who is here and who is there—in this case, regulating

which Black bodies, according to their proximity to whiteness, are visible, desirable, and consequently suitable for commodification. Laide's brains, moreover, merely garnish the desirable Black body, increasing her value (her proximity to whiteness) but not so much as to make her a subject unto herself. Laide's Beyoncé body is therefore another orientation device that negotiates the extent to which "some exotic there and not here" (Ahmed 51) remains manageable and profitable, a technology of exclusion that blacklists women of the wrong color as it extends greater cultural intelligibility to Samuel's own lighter-skinned, male form. Thus, Samuel's commodification of the Black female body causes his own body to gain ground—to gain matter in citizenship and citizenship in matter.

Ahmed additionally remarks that: "An arrival takes time, and the time that it takes shapes 'what' it is that arrives" (40). Indeed, the decades-long formation of Laide and the Black female celebrities reappears in Beyoncé's "Formation"



Figure 1. Beyoncé, "Formation"

(Figures 1 and 2.), demonstrating the negotiated reshaping of the silhouette into the legible Black body over time (16). The temporal reshaping of subjectivity is also a direction of matter (16), allowing Samuel's personhood to gain weight after eating the Other. Samuel, who was bullied in high school for being *perceived* as gay, gains even more footing with the help of Black lyrics. He tops off his praise of Laide:



Figure 2. Beyoncé, “Apeshit”

“What is it Biggie says in that song? She was so beautiful I was ready to suck her daddy’s dick?” (Khemiri 79). The value of Black gold is so great that Samuel, as the minoritized subject whose light skin has earned him some capital, will pay in queerness to get modern confirmation of universal citizenship in return (Ferguson 66). Consequently, the superimposition of Beyoncé onto the screen that is Laide’s body and the adjacent authoritative quotation from the Notorious B.I.G. straighten and whiten Samuel’s articulations of queerness, making his own body *appear* just a little further down the path to universal citizenship. An act of Black Girl Magic that is not her own.

Vandad, on the other hand, “couldn’t quite explain what made Laide so special. Was it “her saggy body, hairy forearms, doughy face, or small breasts?” (Khemiri 141). Further commenting on Laide’s out-of-placeness, Vandad complains:

people like Laide appear out of nowhere and find fault, they say: “What do you mean Asians are ‘super good at studying?’ How can you say that women are weaker than men...And why do you use ‘he’ as a general term? ... [It] only symbolizes people who have penises, so I prefer to use the

gender-neutral ‘they.’” Do you know how popular someone like that is at parties? Not popular at all. (Khemiri 114-15)

Vandad’s misogyny, and the misogyny directed at women of color in general, is also directed at Panther, Samuel’s childhood friend: “If there was any animal this person did not resemble, it was a panther. Drowned Turkish hamster, maybe. Kurdish marmot, definitely. Oversized Syrian meerkat, possibly. Stoned Persian peacock, yes [...]” (47-48). Vandad’s misogyny is, I argue, displaced in the novel. His depiction of Laide and Panther as desexualized, animalistic, masculinized ‘feminazis’ is another faulty straightening device. Vandad’s physical and emotional proximity to Samuel is so close that their alignment must be straightened out, put back in line; so Vandad re-orientates his queer desire toward a “desire for the ‘other sex,’ or for what [he is] ‘not’” (Ahmed 47), and he attempts this by feminizing Samuel. He is adamant, for example, that Samuel wasn’t interested in having sex with Laide on their first date and instead returned home to Vandad, wearing Laide’s sweater because he was cold (Khemiri 93). Vandad’s attempt to straighten his body in relation to Samuel’s fails to extend his own body along the path to universal citizenship; his projected drag-at-a-distance echoes, rather, the feminization of Blackness in early sociological studies of Black Americans. In Robert Park’s *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* (1921), Park posits that while most races are masculine in nature, “The negro is the lady among the races” (qtd. in Ferguson 58), a tactic used to “discipline nonwhite immigrants” according to the ideal citizen worthy of becoming a subject (58). Whereas hypersexualization of the female Black body in reach of the white body makes her visible under the gaze of the state, any degree of feminization of the non-white male body—adding yet another angle from which to objectify him, to turn him into a thing of the state—makes him all the more twisted, that much darker, and more over “there.”

### **Narrating the Nation and Internalized Oppression**

Since gaining parliamentary representation in 2010 despite their neo-Nazi roots, the Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna) have dramatically increased their political capital while softening their explicit ethnic separatist rhetoric. Undeterred

by constant accusations of racism and mass expulsions of party members,<sup>5</sup> the Sweden Democrats (SD) have branded a new cultural nationalism that ostensibly welcomes migrants as long as they adopt Swedish culture at the expense of their own—an effective cultural whitening device that rhetorically safeguards Sweden Democrats from charges of racism. This recent swell of extreme right-wing populism, anti-migrant sentiment, and racial violence in Sweden has compromised the country’s global reputation as a model social-democratic welfare state that boasts institutionalized gender equality, a ‘feminist government,’ universal access to healthcare and education, and generous resident, welfare, and labor rights for migrants.

The glossy public exterior of Swedish exceptionalism dims when policy meets practice in a nation struggling to adapt to growing cultural and ethnic diversification. Until the 1980s, the Scandinavian countries—Sweden, Norway, and Denmark—had been mostly yet not entirely ethnically homogenous, with “less than 2 percent of the population having a non-Western background” (Lolle 2016, 323), and diversity was, for the white majority at least, considered a matter of social class (Bay, Strömblad, and Bengtsson 2010, 1). Starting in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark have each experienced similar migration patterns: “labour migration in the 60s and 70s [primarily from Italy, Greece, Yugoslavia, and Turkey]; asylum seekers in the 80s and 90s; [...] [followed by another] wave of labour migration in the 2000s” (1). The European migrant crisis in 2015 has marked the most recent wave, with Sweden receiving 162,877 asylum applications that year (Migrationsverket, “Statistik”). The political fallout was immediate. By 2016, Sweden no longer had the most generous asylum laws in the European Union, having gutted them to the bare minimum while exponentially increasing its temporary border controls. In 2018, Sweden granted protection status in 11, 217 of 35,512 cases that year, and 6,088 of 22,635 applications in 2019 (January-November)<sup>6</sup> (*Migrationsverket*, “Statistik”).

Long before the migration crisis, however, Sweden’s growing cultural and ethnic diversity have triggered waves of anti-migrant sentiment and extreme right-wing populism. Neo-Nazi skinheadism had reached its peak in the 1990s (Löow

1998); but by the late 90s, even the largest of these extremist groups, *den nationella rörelsen* (the national movement), had begun to lose influence, as white power concerts and nationalist demonstrations led to mass arrests for anti-hate speech violations (Teitelbaum 35). Another impediment to Neo-Nazi noise was the rise of Napster and YouTube, which offered free access to the latest White Power tunes, essentially bankrupting numerous nationalist record companies (34). Under pressure to rebrand, the white supremacists broke up into three camps, one of which would eventually become the Sweden Democrats. Founded in 1988, SD underwent a potent makeover in the early 90s in order to distance itself from its fascist, white nationalist roots in parties like *Sverigepartiet* [The Sweden Party] and *Bevara Sverige svenskt!* [Keep Sweden Swedish]. The new Swedish nationalists dropped the skinhead aesthetic in favor of intellectual, dapper, young leaders who are quick to denounce anti-Semitism and racism despite recurring resignations and mass expulsions related to these issues since 2010.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, SD received the third-highest percentage of votes in Sweden's latest national election in 2018 and gained 62 seats (17.53%) in the 349-seat parliament (October 2018).

The Sweden Democrats' platform outwardly welcomes diversity as long as everyone, regardless of ethnicity, assimilates to Swedish culture:

We welcome those who contribute to our society, who abide by our laws and who respect our practices. In contrast, those who come here to take advantage of our systems, commit crimes or put our citizens in harms [sic] way are not welcome. [...] We will never give space to Islamism or any other extremism, this is a land of democracy and equality. In our Sweden, we are proud of our culture and our traditions. We value and wish to cherish what we inherited from previous generations. (Sd.se)

This cultural nationalism ostensibly invites migrants to adopt Swedish culture but only at the expense of their own, a narrative strategy of exclusion that employs inclusive discourse to conceal a nationalist imperative bearing cultural and ethno-racism. SD's slogan "*Trygghet och tradition*" [Safety<sup>8</sup> and Tradition] additionally reflects the party's pandering to the "arbitrary signs and symbols that signify the affective life of the national culture" (Bhaba 141). The political success of SD relies



on the collective cultural memory of these arbitrary signs and “the historicism that has dominated discussions of the nation as a cultural force” and a “holistic cultural entity” (Bhabha 139).

We [SD] feel that Swedish welfare should be for Swedish citizens. Health care must be available all over our country, no matter the size of our wallets. We want to give care staff a better work environment, good opportunities for development and a good salary level. We want a school that prioritizes knowledge and order, where both teachers and students thrive and can perform. In our Sweden, the elderly get a pension they can live off, for real.  
(sd.se)

In “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” Homi K. Bhabha argues that “as an apparatus of symbolic power, [the nation as a narrative strategy] produces a continual slippage of categories, like sexuality, class affiliation, territorial paranoia, or ‘cultural difference’ in the act of writing the nation” (139). Promoting a ‘real’ welfare state for all children, teachers, healthcare workers, and the elderly, SD would preclude non-citizen immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers from “taking advantage” of this system (se.se). Indeed, SD’s political platform includes a host of xenophobic and anti-LGBTQ+ proposals intended to maintain the appearance of Sweden’s “cultural shreds and patches [of] arbitrary historical inventions” (Bhabha 141) as national identity.

Vandad’s rejection of queer desire, for another Muslim no less, and his attempt to straighten the novel’s queer narrative structure orientates him more in line with SD’s superficial immigrant ideal than with the social democratic ideal of the “equal citizen,” who has the right to be straight, gay, lesbian, queer, non-binary, and after 2013, transgender without having to be sterilized. Moreover, Vandad’s textual and sexual straightening devices are also whitening devices (Ahmed 97), a de-racializing of the self to gain entry into the universal heteropatriarchy (Ferguson 221). This de-racialization occurs when Samuel and Vandad, who repeatedly face racial discrimination in Stockholm (Khemiri 58), travel to Berlin. Removed from the hostile white gaze of Sweden, their use of the Swedish language makes them appear, to the Turkish and Lebanese residents of Neuköln,

more Swedish than Arab. Finally a considered a “real Swede,” Vandad seeks out authentic, “real live Germans”:

Then we biked to Neuköln and ate tortillas and drank beer. Panther wanted to introduce us to her friends and I nodded and thought that it might be fun to meet some Germans. Unfortunately, none of them were German. There was a Thai-American author, his Irish artist girlfriend, a red-haired British language teacher, a Polish girl who was dating a Hungarian director of short films. (Khemiri 176)

Vandad’s discontent with the lack of white Germans grows as Panther resists cultural imperatives to fetishize white citizenship, which is always just out of Vandad’s reach: “Panther introduced us to more and more people and all her friends said they lived in Berlin and loved the city “despite the Germans,” but no one could speak German... Time and again, Panther said that she didn’t miss anything in Stockholm, and every time she did it was like Samuel’s neck stiffened” (Khemiri 176-177). The foreigners’ love for Berlin “despite the Germans” subverts the supposed hypocrisy of Germany’s liberal state making and citizenship making that does not take “a ‘special path,’ or *Sonderweg*, but a European path toward the future that is related to a configuration of the politics of ‘freedom’ ... ‘in which African children, men, and women are dying in sinking boats on the Mediterranean, just trying to get in” (Partridge 22). Panther’s resistance to nativist constructions of Swedish and German citizenship jars the men’s “almost-there” Middle Eastern bodies—a stinging tactile reminder of their own negated position under the hostile white gaze. Stockholm, too, is the site of discontent for the women. According to Laide, Stockholm is “[...] populated by peasants, as far north as you can get, a city that completely lacks purpose and is so afraid of its own shadow that people don’t talk to each other ... It’s the only city in the world where newborns learn how to avoid eye contact” (Khemiri 72). The city is no longer the mecca of egalitarianism and gender equality but of hyper whiteness, displaced feminism, and white nationalism:

[...] the Sweden Democrats were having a rally in Farsta. [...] There must have been two hundred of us [...] The usual mix of people. The anti-fascist

action kids, old hippies, multicolored families, hand-holding queers. [...] [It] wasn't until the [Sweden Democrat] representative had given his barely audible talk about the importance of closed borders and a return to the classic values that made this country what it is that [...] I realized that [Samuel] wouldn't have been there even if he had been in Stockholm. (Khemiri 167-168)

The text critiques the shortcomings of Sweden's claims to gender equality as the women's disillusionment with Stockholm exposes the growing contradictions of the country's global status as the locus of "resolution, perfection, progress, and confirmation" (Ferguson 3). The men's toxic masculinity, on the other hand, makes them more susceptible to the sexist, xenophobic, Islamophobic, and homophobic platform of the far right. For non-white Swedes, white nationalist populism in the guise of cultural nationalism makes whiteness an impossible cultural imperative that may induce acts of internalized oppression. Camara Phillis Jones defines internalized racism as:

acceptance by members of the stigmatized races of negative messages about their own abilities and intrinsic worth. It is characterized by their not believing in others who look like them, and not believing in themselves. It involves accepting limitations to one's own full humanity...It manifests as an embracing of "whiteness" (use of hair straighteners and bleaching creams, stratification by skin tone within communities of color) ... self-devaluation ... and resignation... (Jones 1213).

Vandad's use of the Swedish language in Germany brings his body closer to whiteness, and being regarded as "a real Swede" by the people of color in Neuköln prompts him to view the other with suspicion upon his return to Stockholm: "There were new last names on the schedule, non-Swedish names that weren't listed in the salary binders. The owners of these names came in early and worked late and...At the end of the day they received their pay in cash, just like we did" (Khemiri 129). Migrant workers pose an economic threat that would send him to the back of the line for universal citizenship, so he resorts to "extorting money from the [women at Laide's safe house;] he raised the rent every week, he confiscated their

passports, he threatened to call the police on those who couldn't pay" (250). In this instance, the non-white subject learns to marginalize a group they regard to be lower than their own; they distance themselves from "obviously" pathological subjects and social relations ... as a way of claiming access to state and civil society" (Ferguson 75). Unfortunately for Vandad, full assimilation demanded by the Sweden Democrats is not possible, however; his non-whiteness stops him before mobilization can occur, since "whiteness is not a reachable object...[but] an orientation that puts certain things within reach" (Ahmed 126). If whiteness puts citizenship within reach but whiteness itself cannot be successfully reached for, then the brown or black body's reach for subjectivity may sometimes extend too far.

A body of color that is systematically regulated, stopped, and returned to spaces of the negative is left to inhabit a body whose search for orientation must land somewhere. A study on internal racism in Black youth found that "When present among African American male youth, a lack of self-respect and/or negative attitudes toward their own race may result in a greater propensity to engage in acts of violence" (Bryant 692). Vandad's masculine, migrant-looking body has been socially situated next to violence his entire life—whether under the violent gaze of the welfare state, or in the parts of town designated for "people like him" where (perceived) repetitive performances of dark-skinned, brown-eyed bodies congeal over time to produce the illusion of a violent, no-go, neighborhood (Valentine 150). Laide additionally relates Vandad to violence: "I never felt safe with Vandad... There was a darkness to Vandad. I couldn't trust him. ...One time, all three of us ate lunch together. Vandad cracked his knuckles and eyed me" (Khemiri 191). Near the novel's end, the reader discovers that Vandad has been in prison for physically assaulting Laide's sister whom he had mistaken for Laide herself (another layer added to the conglomeration of her body); however, flipping back to the beginning of the novel, the reader finds that the revelation of his imprisonment is an illusion they are implicated in constructing—Vandad was in prison on the very first page. Regrettably, bodies of color that take up space in prison, even in Sweden, make up the very space of prison. "[Spaces] are not exterior to bodies;

instead, spaces are like a second skin that unfolds in the folds of the body” (Ahmed 9). This renders the hypervisible, dark, violent criminal that is culturally unintelligible on the ‘outside’ intelligible yet imperceptible behind bars. The prison cell and the body of color are perceived as one and the same.

Vandad’s compulsion to follow the straight line of white [nationalist] Swedish culture causes the reader to focus on the societal, political, and cultural institutions making that line impossible, while losing sight of, or forgetting, the very material terrains of the internal and external violence Vandad inflicts on himself and others. Depending on the reader, we, too, might over-reach in our desire to see a queer person of color in positive light. Incidentally, it is Samuel’s grandmother, whose memory is fading with each paragraph, who reminds the reader that Sweden’s status as a beacon of equality and inclusiveness is still eclipsed by racialized constructions of equality. Convinced that Samuel and Vandad were in love, she remarks, “Samuel went on and on about that Vandad. And the way he said that name, I knew it was something more than friendship. You can’t hide that sort of thing. Not from your grandma” (256). Her acceptance of same-sex relationships suggests that conservative Swedes, particularly senior citizens—a primary target audience of the Sweden Democrats—have welcomed gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights into the matrix of Swedish national culture. Still, she laments the changes in Sweden, its immigration policies, the school system, and the EU, sighing, “that’s what happens when you marry a Muslim” (234). *Everything I Don’t Remember* presents intentional and unintentional acts of forgetting as a cautionary metaphor for the damages inflicted by national forgetting and, at the same time, as a kind of necessary queer orientation that “might [not] line up [and] which by seeing the world ‘slantwise’ allow[s] other objects to come into view” (Ahmed 84). The text’s double-outing of a Muslim man threatens the precarious heteropatriarchal structures imposed on him and which he has imposed on himself, including the semblance of his authority as a reliable narrator: “You can decide for yourself who to believe—me or an old lady. The guy with a photographic memory or the woman who can barely remember her own name” (Khemiri 256). The revelation carries

with it, however, the possibility to release himself from himself—if not from the prison bars around him then from the walls of oppression that is his own skin.

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<sup>1</sup> See Moya Bailey & Trudy. (2018) On misogynoir: citation, erasure, and plagiarism, *Feminist Media Studies*, 18:4, 762-768.

<sup>2</sup> An intradiegetic narrator is one who exists within the diegetic (story) level of a text. As a character in the text, the intradiegetic narrator bears qualities like gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and socio-economic status that are generally less visible in third-person extradiegetic narration.

<sup>3</sup> “We can turn to the etymology of the word ‘queer,’ which comes from the Indo-European word ‘twist.’

Queer is, after all, a spatial term, which then gets translated into a sexual term, a term for a twisted sexuality that does not follow a ‘straight line,’ a sexuality that is bent and crooked (Cleto 2002: 13)” (Ahmed 43).

<sup>4</sup> In 2010, the majority of SD voters were between ages 18 and 30. In 2014, the majority of SD voters were between 61 and 80 (Oscarsson 20). In 2018, the majority of SD voters were between 31 and 64, followed by voters over 65 (*Sveriges Television*, “Vallokalsundersökning Riksdagsvalet” 16).

<sup>5</sup> Scandals involving racism and anti-Semitism have led to resignations and mass expulsions since the party first gained parliamentary representation in 2010. “This fall [2013], the party instituted a zero-tolerance policy against racist declarations and adopted a communication plan to wash away the image of Sweden Democrats as ‘young, angry men.’ Since then, several of the party representatives have had to leave Parliament.” *Sveriges Radio*, February 9, 2013, <https://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=2054&artikel=5438206>

<sup>6</sup> The number of decisions granting asylum for the years noted do not include pending cases.

<sup>7</sup> See Jon Stone. “Conservatives enter alliance with Swedish far-right in European Parliament.” *Independent*. 4 July 2018. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/conservatives-sweden-democrats-european-parliament-far-right-reformist-group-a8430281.html>. Accessed 28 Dec 2019.

<sup>8</sup> *Trygghet* connotes a sense of safety, security, and well-being.

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