

# What is a *blatte*? Migration and ethnic identity in contemporary Sweden

Corina Lacatus *University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

## Abstract

*Contemporary Sweden is experiencing an interesting sociocultural phenomenon of redefinition of national identity as a result of the rise of awareness of the everyday reality of discrimination and segregation of first- and second-generation immigrants from the Middle East, North Africa and Africa.*

*My article examines the formation and manifestations of a new kind of collective consciousness of immigrants living in Sweden called blatte identity, defined by ethnic markers constructed by opposition to the nationalistic ideals of an ethnically pure Swedish identity. More specifically, my article examines the construction and affirmation of a special kind of blatte identity, called a thought sultan (tankesultan). Briefly, a tankesultan is a Swede of Arabic descent, proud of his Muslim background, and actively engaging in resisting the assimilative forces within Swedish society. The concept was coined by the author Jonas Hassen Khemiri in his debut novel entitled An Eye Red (Ett Öga Rött) published in 2003. My argument discusses the trajectory of the concept from the artistic and literary realm into public discourse through the help of mass media, as well as the relation to other terms in the official and public discourse, such as immigrant, black skull (svartskalle), or ethnic Swede (svenne). From being an individual marker of ethnic belonging to the community of Arabic-speaking, Muslim immigrants to Sweden, a thought sultan (tankesultan) is used as a common denominator for some of the members of the immigrant community living in Sweden who like to consider their marginal social status and their everyday life marked by ethnic and religious discrimination. An instance of such use can be found in the magazine Gringo that is distributed for free in Sweden's large urban areas, which made use of this concept as a categorizational tool of ethnic otherness for blattar, or immigrants, alongside other stereotyping concepts and images circulating in the public discourse of contemporary Sweden.*

## Keywords

migration  
diaspora  
ethnic identity  
blatte  
mass media  
cultural expression  
Arab world  
Islam  
literature  
Sweden

In contemporary Sweden, more and more intellectual voices react against an old-fashioned way of dividing the world in easily measured nationalistic dichotomies, such as *us* versus *them* or *Swedes* versus *the immigrant other* that leads to segregation and the deliberate effacing of sociocultural nuances, variations and complexities. Regardless of the people one talks to, from women living in semi-segregation in the immigrant suburb of Malmvägen in Sollentuna to a successful writer nominated for the Augustpriset, Jonas Hassen Khemiri, one encounters the same subsided anger and stubborn resistance to categorization. Legal terminology that organizes people as foreign or Swedish based on their background, while concepts that circulate in contemporary public discourse, such as *blatte* and its variants, are

experienced as oppressive, discriminatory and, very importantly, as effective ways to invalidate one's personal identity and individuality.

This article discusses the concept of *blatte* and traces its semantic trajectory in various media, from its earlier everyday use as a discriminatory term referring to Eastern European immigrants, to the more general meaning acquired in the past ten years' mass media, referring to a larger number of immigrant minorities living in Sweden, such as South American, Eastern European, African and Middle Eastern. The focus of this analysis is to identify the religious and cultural aspects of the *blatte* category that are related to both the Arab world and Islam, in order to understand the complex processes of identity negotiation at work in contemporary Sweden. Muslims represent one of the groups encompassed by the semantic scope of *blatte*, sometimes referred to as *thought sultans*. In both the mass media and literature today, sociocultural characteristics attributed to Muslim *blattar* are extrapolated to such a degree that they become general feats of the Swede with non-Swedish ancestry, of the *other*.

### ***Blatte* and its semantic scope**

The term *blatte* is used interchangeably with *black skull* (*svartskalle*), and *immigrant* (*invandrare/immigrant*). These terms have been in public use since after World War Two and their meaning has been negotiated time and time again. Immigrant and *invandrare* have been the preferred concepts for official designation of people that have moved to Sweden and their offspring, while *black skull* is a derogatory term initially referring to Eastern European labour immigrants to Sweden, whose distinctive physical feat was their dark hair colour. In the past ten years, *blatte* has become more popular and together with *black skull* has become a household term, whose meaning is linked with a new sociocultural phenomenon initiated in the mid-1990s, namely the affirmation of immigrant identity grounded in ethnic pride. For the first time, representations of immigrants as the negative, inferior and marginal counterpart to ethnic Swedes are contested by self-representations of *black skulls* as complex, multidimensional and proud of their diverse ethnic heritage. On the one hand, *blatte* is used as a conceptual marker of social and cultural *otherness* and becomes an instrument of ethnic segregation; on the other hand, *blatte* is a perennialist identity marker for people who identify with characteristics associated with this concept.

The term *blatte* is one of the most controversial and problematic concepts used actively in everyday speech and public discourse in Sweden. It is both a term of philosophical interrogation and of open debate in the Swedish mass media in the past couple of years. In the online dictionary at the Swedish Language Council,<sup>1</sup> *blatte* (*blattar* pl.) is defined as a derogatory term used in the past in reference to African people and presently about foreigners and immigrants to Sweden:

Bakgrunden till skällsordet *blatte* är mycket osäker. Kanske hänger det ihop med ett verb *blattra* 'pladdra, prata strunt'. Det verkar däremot osannolikt att det skulle hänga ihop med italienska *blatta* 'kackerlacka'.

Det kan beläggas åtminstone 1967, fast det kan gott vara äldre. Det finns med i Gibsons Svensk slangordbok från 1969, både i betydelsen 'pajas' och i betydelsen 'neger'.

Som skällsord om invandrare eller utlänning kan det beläggas i skrift från 1986. Det anses mycket grovt.

[The origin of the pejorative term *blatte* is uncertain. It could be related to the verb *blattra*, which means 'babble, prattle'. It seems highly unlikely that it would be etymologically related to the Italian *blatta*, which means cockroach.

It can be dated back to 1967, but may be much older than that. Gibson's Swedish Slang Dictionary, published in 1969, records two meanings: 'clown' and 'nigger, Negro'.

It can be dated back to 1986 as a derogatory term used in written texts for immigrant or foreigner. It is considered to be very offensive.]

In metaphorical terms, *blatte* encapsulates the crisis of Swedish nationalism driven by a mono-ethnic ideology, at the encounter with migration from specific parts of the world, such as the Middle East, Eastern Europe and Eurasia, Africa and South America. Although the concept does not have a clearly defined referent, there is a noticeable tendency to draw a distinction between its users in the spirit of the perennialist school of thought – if people who think of themselves as 'blattar' use the word to refer to themselves or other people they recognize as peers, the word loses its derogatory connotation and gains an aura of resistance to discrimination, segregation and the authority of legal official categorization. It is usually characteristic of both young immigrants who have lived most of their lives in Sweden, and their children born in Sweden. But any other immigrant who can prove to be worthy of the epithet can use it self-referentially. Nevertheless, there are heritage or non-heritage Swedes who could never be considered *blattar*, since they are rarely the object of ethnic discrimination, such as people moving to Sweden from the other Scandinavian and West European countries, North America or East Asia.

The word *blatte* is not considered to be a perfect synonym for *invandrare*. The definitional arguments of *blatte* as an ethnic category presented above are clearly linked to a specific locality, by accommodating people that are immigrants and/or by living in the immigrant suburbs. Additionally, *blatte* ethnic identity is also linked to questions of class, since *blattar* have a working-class background, and the discourse of race, since the ethnic group has to bear the distinctive marks of a non-Nordic skin, eye and hair colour (non-Caucasian, blue eyes and blond hair). *Blatte* is also an epithet of choice, a self-proclaimed state of mind and action on the part of people who feel discriminated against, oftentimes flaunted with pride as an act of social resistance and defiance.

### Jonas Hassen Khemiri: *blattar* and hip-hop-style thought sultans

In the August 2003 episode of the classic Program 1 summer radio programme entitled *Summer Talk (Sommarprat)*, the young author Jonas Hassen Khemiri builds his radiophonic autobiographical monologue around music. Hip-hop songs, in English and in Swedish, punctuate events in his life, enhancing their meaning and celebrating their real-life heroes. Also, hip-hop's articulation of everyday life is the driving force of Khemiri's debut novel, *An Eye Red (Ett öga rött)*, in which Khemiri lets rhythm and literary prose interweave to create an experimental and

2. Dalanda is a female character that exerts a powerful influence over Halim in the beginning of the novel. She encourages the main character to define himself as an Arab and value Arabic cultural and religious traditions over the Swedish.

original narrative, showing unprecedented linguistic artistry in Swedish literature. Khemiri continues and enriches their ideological legacy and creates a rich novelistic universe in which immigrant experiences are mingled with adolescent rebelliousness, emotional and hormonal confusion, linguistic playfulness and, very importantly, racism and ethnic discrimination.

Khemiri's debut novel builds around the *blatte* concept and constructs a fictional semantic scope for it. The main character, teenage Halim, formulates a *blatte* ontology according to which everything in the world is either Swedish or non-Swedish, or rather *svenne* or *blatte*. He defines these types with the help of categories inspired by stereotypes about immigrants that are commonplace in contemporary public discourse. And the perfect illustration of this dichotomous world is the identity he constructs for himself as a special kind of *blatte*, namely the thought sultan. Khemiri's rhetorical strategy is founded on the construction of a gallery of characters that refuse to become perfect illustrations of the stereotyped reality Halim creates for them. The driving force of the narrative is the main character's unfulfilled desire to be the perfect representation of the thought-sultan identity he constructed for himself. Narrative unreliability stems precisely from the incongruity between Halim's need to live up to his ideal of *blatte* identity and the ontological rigidity of the stereotypes he uses to construct the identity.

*An Eye Red (Ett öga rött)* is a novel about identity. The narrative written in the first person centres on Halim's multiple attempts to give structure to the diverse world around him and also define a unique category for himself. He reduces people to two major groups, *blattar* and Swedes, and places himself in the former category as a special kind of non-heritage Swede, namely the thought sultan.

Identity formation is a dynamic process of othering (Lacan 1975), of simultaneously distancing from oneself and mirroring into reality and people outside of oneself. Jacques Lacan illustrates identity construction through the metaphor of the broken mirror. At a very early age, the infant experiences a sense of his/her own body as distant, as the other, when he/she sees its reflection in the mirror for the first time. The self is a collage of experiences reflected by pieces of a mirror and arranged in a coherent entity by imagination.

Halim's fictional self is constructed by attempts to position himself in relation to other characters in the narrative. Most of the characters are constructed schematically to illustrate the twofold world order defined by Halim. The dominant figures, however, Dalanda<sup>2</sup>, his father Otman and deceased mother, and his fleeting love interest, Malin, are too complex to fit Halim's rigid ethnically based dichotomous reality. According to Halim, a teenage *blatte*'s identity is articulated primarily by ethnicity and unusual public behaviour justified by a penchant for hip-hop culture. Three different types can be identified in the *blatte* category – the gangsta, the good guy, and the thought sultan, or the revolutionary *blatte*. Moreover, while the *svenne* category might be rather limited despite its social dominance and alleged superiority over the immigrants, the *blatte* category is large enough to encompass almost everything non-Swedish, whether non-heritage or simply foreign:

I dag har jag filosoferat fram en teori om svennarna och svartskallarna på skolan: [...] Blattarna på skolan är inte så många men kommer ändå i två versioner. Nummer ett är den vanliga blatten: knasaren, snikaren, snattaren, ligisten. Som exempel kan man ta Sebastian och Angelo. I Skäris bästa exempel är Alonzo för det var han som lärde Juan hur vi skulle handla 50-örestuggummin på Gottoken efter ha lagt Snicker och Raiders i jackämnen. Det är tack vare han jag vet hur man hittar civilsnutar i folksamlingar och förstärker soft air guns till riktiga vapen. Blattesort nummer två är duk-tighetskillen som pluggar prov och använder finord och aldrig plankar tunnelbanan eller taggish. Som exempel vi har tvillingarna Fuad och Fadi plus alla andra iranier som smörar lärare och vill bli tandläkare och ingenjörer. Dom tror dom får respekt men egentligen alla lärare skrattar åt dom för man fattar dom är vilsna.

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

(Khemiri 2003: 38)

[Today I've philosophized on a theory about Swedes and black skulls at school: [...] The *blattar* at school are not that many but can still be found in two versions. Number one is the normal *blatte*: the crook, hood, thug, gangsta. For instance, Sebastian and Angelo. The best example in Skäris is Alonzo cuz he was the one who taught Juan how to buy 50-cent chewing gum at Gottoken after putting Snickers and Raiders up his sleeve. Thanks to him I know now how to spot police in plain clothes in a crowd and how to upgrade soft air guns to real guns. *Blatte* type number two is intelligent guy that studies for tests and uses nice words, never sneaks onto the subway trains without paying and never writes tags. For instance the twins Fuad and Fadi plus all the other Iranians that butter up teachers and want to become dentists and engineers. They think that they get respect but the teachers really laugh at them cuz they get that they're really lost.

But today I've philosophized on a new kind of *blatte*, who stands free and is the one Swedes hate the most: the revolution *blatte*, the thought sultan. He sees through all lies and never lets anybody fool them. Almost like al-Kindi who hacked all kinds of codes and wrote several thousands awesome books on astronomy and philosophy but also on music and math. Last quarter I was more the gansta type but I swear that from now on I'll turn more into a thought sultan.]

The first *blatte* type is the *gangsta*, the person who does not fear to manifest publicly his status as ethnic *other* through violent, illegal behaviour. Most likely inspired by the American gangsta' hip-hop, or at least by its representations in the mass media and films, Halim's gangsta is the teenager who steals Snickers bars cool-headedly while paying the price of a chewing gum, is able to spot a policeman in a large crowd and can handle guns skilfully. The second kind of *blatte* is the socially proper Persian good kid, the *lost blatte*, who never misses school because he wants to become a dentist

or an engineer, never writes graffiti, nor is able to realize that the teachers despise him in spite of his hard work. And there is also a third kind of *blatte*, the thought sultan or the *revolutionary blatte*, who represents the epitome of *blatte* wisdom by being able to discern truth from lies in a world dominated by Swedes (*svennar*) and to identify the multiple everyday manifestations of the universal anti-*blatte* conspiracy. And Halim envisions himself as belonging to the third category. Halim is trapped in a dichotomous view of the world as divided into us and them, *svenne* Swedes and *blattar*, characterized by stereotypes and clichés, and cannot seem to escape it. By organizing the world around him according to this duality, Halim reinforces ethnic differences between the two groups, ultimately reaffirming discrimination and racism.

A *blatte* is a dark-haired masculine man, who takes pride in his foreign heritage, enjoys a hip-hop lifestyle, and can code switch between standard Swedish and Swedish with a thick foreign accent whenever appropriate. On the other hand, a *Swede* is a person from a wealthy family, who dresses well even when trying to pass for a hip-hop fan, speaks standard Swedish and is opinionated about literature and music:

Man kan säga det finns tre sorters svennar. Först det är lyxsvennarna som spelar maffia fast på svennevis. Dom har märken som är dyra fast ändå dom har små loggor och syns mindre än dyra blattemärken. (Svartskallar spelar rika mera ärliga.) [...]

Ändå lyxsvennarna är ganska få för nästan alla i skolan hör till lodisgänget som går klädda i tatartrasor med söndriga skinnjackor och jeansen maxat håliga. Ofta dom har total oreda i håren och ibland tjejerna har långa sammetskjolar och rutade strumpor. Om man vill bli en av dom man måste säga ryssar gör bästa poesin och lyssna på Bob Hund istället för Snoop Doggy Dogg. [...]

Tredje svennesorten är dansklassarna fast egentligen man ser dom inte ofta på skolan för jämt dom hänger uppe i balettsalen och tränar träning. Danstjejerna är pyttesmala och har knutfrisyr och killarna är kanske fyra-fem stycken per klass och ger alltid leenden på skolfotot som riktiga bögar. Alla dansklassare går med tårna utåt och ryggen rak som värsta bräda.

(Khemiri 2003: 37)

[We can say that there are three different kinds of Swedes. First come the luxury Swedes who act like mafiosi, only in a Swedish way. They have expensive brand clothes, but their logos are small compared to the *blatte* brands and you can barely see them. (Black skulls act like rich people in a more real way.) [...]

But there aren't that many luxury Swedes cuz most people at school are in the bums' gang that walk around wearing Tatar-style rags with torn leather jackets and jeans with huge holes. Oftentimes their hair is all messy and sometimes girls have lace skirts and checkered socks. If you want to be one of them you have to say that Russians write the best poetry and listen to Bob Hund instead of Snoop Doggy Dogg. [...]

The third kind of Swede is in the dance classes though you don't really see them at school so much cuz they hang out in the ballet studio and practise their practice. The dance girls are super tiny and wear their hair in a bun and the guys are like four or five in each class and always smile in the school



photo like real gays. All in the dance class walk with their toes outward and their backs straight like timber.]

Halim's view of the *blattar* is formed through the reversal of the Swedish/*blatte* dichotomy and the power relations at work in contemporary Sweden's everyday reality. He constructs an imaginary world where *blattar* are more powerful than *svennar* and manifest their dominance in subversive ways. His fictional reality is composed of essentialist interactions among *blattar* and *svennar* might, enhancing Halim's *blatte* identity:

Aldrig jag kommer äta sur strömming med sillnubbe på Skansen eller dansa smågrodor i träskor runt töntigaste midsommarstång. Aldrig jag kommer låta politikerna förbjuda buffalos eller spänniströjor eller höja hårvaxpriser. När Dalanda berättade jag trodde henne, men ändå jag visste inte tecknen var så här tydliga.

(Khemiri 2003: 56)

[I will never eat fermented Baltic herring with aquavit at Skansen or dance the little frogs' dance while wearing wooden clogs around the the dumbest midsummer may pole. I will never let politicians ban buffalo shoes and stretchy sweaters or raise the price of hairwax. When Dalanda told me about this, I believed her, but I still didn't know the signs were so evident.]

Halim strives to become a free thinker and to make a leap of faith from being a gangsta *blatte* to becoming a thought sultan, but is not aware of his unchanging and bounded ontological status. A thought sultan is merely another type of *blatte*, an intellectual and free thinker, whose main acquired skill is the ability to discern anti-*blatte* conspiracies organized by Swedes. As a non-heritage Swede, or a *blatte*, he is a cultural and linguistic hybrid.

The meaning of the concept of a thought sultan is determined by one's Arabic ethnicity and Muslim religious beliefs; the second word of the compound, 'sultan', implies the existence of a certain authority or power exerted over a group of people of the same Muslim confession. The word *tanke*, or thought, gives the prototypical thought sultan a reflective quality, similar to the one of a philosopher of religion. In Halim's words, however, the concept acquires a new meaning contextualized in contemporary Sweden, designating an immigrant with intellectual preoccupations and an uncanny ability to identify manifestations of assimilationist subversiveness in the political, public and personal spheres dominated by Swedes. The kind of power Halim attributes to a thought sultan is exercised subversively in the name of the anti-Swedish revolution rather than the religion of the Koran, and confers this special kind of *blatte* a higher status among its non-heritage Swedish peers due to his critical cunning. Yet this semantic distance from the word's connotative and denotative meanings becomes a very efficient stylistic device, meant to induce the reader's mistrust of the main character as a reliable narrator.

In other words, thought sultan is a higher position in the *blatte* ontology, and Halim strives to occupy it. Its etymological make-up is inspired by Arabic culture, while its referential scope is imaginary, modified by Halim's own fictitious understanding of it. The concept's newly acquired meaning is

significant for the understanding of Halim's psychological disposition throughout the novel – it is the embodiment of his need to dominate and control an entirely diasporic world he constructs from indistinct memories of early childhood in Morocco and fragments of conversation with his father. Halim creates a world much like a diasporic collage, as the expression of his need to ground himself in a world outside of Sweden that feels familiar and welcoming. Moreover, the entire narrative is the representation of Halim's struggle to combine the two worlds he likes to inhabit, namely contemporary Sweden and an imaginary diasporic land of thought sultans.

To Halim, hip-hop culture represents the only acceptable kind of social behaviour, since it is grounded in a sense of rebelliousness and resistance to all forms of authority, attempting to sublimate anger and frustration in scratching, dancing, rapping and graffiti writing. And the most appealing reality to Halim is tagging, which is a simplified form of graffiti writing, mostly as a manifestation of his feelings of alienation and frustration with ethnic discrimination by Swedes. In the greater process of shaping an identity built on ethnicity and a sense of belonging to a community, Halim's writing of his own name on walls around the city acts as a kind of symbolic self-affirmation, a visual manifestation of the only power he can exert over other people, and a metaphorical projection of his desired thought-sultan identity:

Jag lovade från nu fittorna kommer ångra dom försöker göra om Halim till en puckellös kamel och nu det är totalkrig för släktingar till Hannibal och Saladin ger sig ALDRIG. Innan jag gick tillbaka till klassen jag attackerade två toaletter nära slöjdsalen, kryssade alla keffa tags och fyllde varje kakel med svarta stjärnor och månar.

(Khemiri 2003: 22)

[I promised that starting now those cunts will regret trying to turn Halim into a humpless camel and now we're at war cuz Hannibal's and Saladin's relatives NEVER give up. Before I went back to the classroom I attacked two bathrooms by the crafts' room, drew all over the bad tags and filled every single tile with black stars and moons.]

In the spirit of hip-hop, Halim portrays himself as a typical oversexualized man, enjoying the company of women on a physical level. In Halim's mind, sexuality is regarded as an ethnic marker for men of Arabic descent, differentiating them from the much more feminine *svennar*. As an established thought sultan living in the ivory tower located in old Baghdad, Halim gets the attention and interest of numerous women due exclusively to his unusually refined intelligence:

Jag satt där på geografien och kände mig som gammal arabisk vetenskapsman med fez och snabelskor som bodde i torn (kanske gamla Bagdad). Jag hade kikare som räckte hela vägen till Europa och rykte som gjorde att andra lärda tittade på mitt torn med blandad hat och nyfikenhet. Dessutom jag var värsta kosmonovan och hade massa gussar som ville komma till mitt torn för att röka shisha och sen baza bara för jag var så grymmish klokish. (Såklart dom skulle få fetdiss för Marit är min enda.)

(Khemiri 2003: 109)



[I was sitting in geography class feeling like an old Arabic scientist with fez and snail-like shoes who lives in a tower (maybe in old Baghdad). I had binoculars that saw all the way to Europe and smoked so much that all the other wise men looked at my tower with a mix of hatred and curiosity. Moreover, I was the best Cosmonova and lots of girls wanted to come to my tower to smoke shisha and later just fuck cuz I was so phat smart. (Of course, I would diss them big time, cuz Marit is the only one for me.)]

3. 'Gringo väljer att kalla det miljonsvenska eftersom det är en svenska som pratas i miljonprogramsområden i Sverige.'

Yet another time, Halim compensates unsatisfactory reality with an imagined world where he would be the object of everybody's envy and the centre of women's attention – instead of being a rebellious and aggressive teenager, with no girlfriend and very few friends, he thinks of himself as a classical Arabic scholar with a rapper's sex appeal.

### **Gringo: thought sultans in the written press**

Jonas Hassen Khemiri's fictional definition of *blattar* as well as his conceptual construction, the thought sultan, entered contemporary Sweden's public sphere through his very popular debut novel. Moreover, the mass media popularized the terms in numerous reviews of the book or biographical articles about the author. There is one newspaper, however, that continues *An Eye Red's* ideological agenda of problematizing the dichotomy us/them or *blattar*/Swedes and draws heavily from the same Swedish hip-hop tradition. The magazine *Gringo*, whose chief editor Adami, turned the duality *svenne/blatte* into a successful business idea. It is a series of articles published monthly in the free daily newspaper *Metro* and collected four times a year in a separate magazine called *Gringo Grande*. The magazine is written in what the editors call 'One Million Project Swedish' (*miljonsvenska*), a term that refers to the government housing project from the late 1960s, thus anchoring their journalism into a tradition of spatial and ideological resistance to authority. Their linguistic choice is justified simply and unproblematically in a 7 November article by Nivette Dawod: '*Gringo* has made the deliberate choice of calling it 'million' Swedish, since it is the kind of Swedish spoken in the 'million programme' areas in Sweden.'<sup>3</sup> *Gringo* continues the Latin Kings' and Jonas Hassen Khemiri's agendas of resistance to discrimination in a journalistic format. Ultimately, the ideological goal of the editorial board is to shape its readers' critical thinking, demystify the word *blatte*, and symbolically redefine the power imbalance it connotes:

Vart ordet blatte kommer ifrån ursprungligen vet vi inte. Den hetaste teorin är att det kommer från franskan och betyder kackerlacka. En annan är att blatte kommer från blading som är ett bladätande kryp. Oavsett ordets ursprung föddes det inte av kärlek från början. När allt fler avvek från den blonda mallen behövdes ett nedvärderande begrepp för att markera att vitt är bäst. Gringos mål är att ifrågasätta den hierarkin. Vi menar att vitt är lika bra som svart och alla andra färger med för den delen. Vårt sätt har varit att avdramatisera och lyfta upp blatte för att jämna ut nivåskillnaden. Genom att inte använda ordet går vi annars med på att det är sämre och reproducerar på så sätt maktobalansen. Det senaste året har vi sett en högkonjunktur för användningen av ordet blatte. En liten T-shirt trend för märket 'Blattelicious'.

Rekryteringbolaget 'Blatteförmedlingen'. Prisutdelningen 'Blatte de lux'. Och sist men inte minst 'blattesvenska'. Ordet har tagit sitt första steg i att inte vara lika känsligt och bli allt mer rumsrent. Allt fler blattar tar till sig epitetet med stolthet. Samtidigt finns det fortfarande många som blir sårade när någon kallar dem för blatte. Och de ska respekteras. Är du osäker på om du vågar använda ordet eller inte så fråga. Med tiden hoppas jag att ordet blatte försvinner. Det kommer hända när vi slutar dela upp oss och alla ser varandra som svenskar.

(Adami 2006)

[We do not know the origin of the word *blatte*. The hottest theory is that the word comes from French and means 'cockroach'. Another theory is that *blatte* comes from *blading*, which is a kind of leaf beet. Regardless of the origin, the word was definitely not born out of love. More and more people started breaking the patter of blond hair, and the need for a new word surfaced, indicating the fact that being white is the best. *Gringo's* goal is to question this hierarchy. We believe that white is just as good as black, or any other skin colour for that matter. Our strategy has been to normalize and elevate *blatte* in order to level out the hierarchical difference. If we don't use the word, we acknowledge that that it is worse, thus reinforcing the power imbalance. This past year, the use of the word *blatte* has been particularly profitable. A fashion trend with t-shirts featuring logos for a company named 'Blattelicious'. A recruitment company called 'The Blatte Agency'. Or the 'Blatte de Luxe' award. And last but not least, '*blatte* Swedish'. The term has moved toward desensitization and political correctness. More and more *blattar* embrace the epithet proudly. There are still quite a few people who feel offended when somebody calls them *blattar*. And that should be taken in consideration. Are you unsure whether you should dare to use the word or not, please write to us. We are hoping that the word *blatte* is going to disappear in time. But that will only happen when we stop dividing ourselves and everybody starts considering himself/herself a Swede.]

*Gringo* turns Halim's *blatte* ontology from fictional ideology into a journalistic representation of everyday stereotypes circulating in contemporary Sweden's public sphere. In the first issue of the magazine *Gringo Grande* of July 2005, Mayrem Can writes a psychometric test meant to determine which stereotype category one belongs to. According to him, stereotypes are the best way to measure the evolution of prejudice in a society:

Stereotyperna i samhället behövs fett mycket, utan dem skulle det bli himla svårt att hålla reda på alla fördomar, till exempel. Vilken stereotyp är du? J-Lo, Bling-bling eller kanske en Tankesultan?

(Can 2005)

[Stereotypes are a social necessity. If they didn't exist, it would be awfully difficult to keep track of many things around us, including prejudice. What's your stereotype? J-Lo? Bling bling, or perhaps the Thought Sultan?]

If one selects more 'A' answers, thus fitting the description of a self-absorbed rocker with an intellectual side, who likes to use his/her free time

for thinking and philosophizing and has Noam Chomsky as a role model, one is a thought sultan. Can recontextualizes Khemiri's term, focusing more on the thought sultan's intellectual preoccupations rather than Halim's religious or cultural references to the Arab world and Muslims:

### A. Tankesultanen (tjej/kille)

Du tänker och tänker, så att du tänker på vad du tänkte att du skulle tänka. Du tänker på precis allt och ser ner på alla som inte tänker, som dig, dåra. Du har rufsigt frisy, basker, liten skäggodling, glasögon med feta bågar, slitna manchesterbyxor, grön militärinspirerad jacka och anser dig vara en intellektuell snubbinna/snubbe. Du vägrar erkänna att din bara existens är synonym med 'pretto'.

### [A. The thought sultan

You think and think, so that you end up thinking about what you think that you should be thinking. You think about everything and look down on people who don't think like you. Just fools. Your hair's lank and a little dishevelled; you wear a beret, glasses with thick black frames, worn-out pants, and a green military-style coat. You call yourself an intellectual.]

This is an interesting example of semantic renegotiation occurring in the public sphere – characteristics initially identified as typically Muslim or Arabic become general feats of the *blatte*, of the non-Swedish other in general.

The concept *blatte* appears overdetermined and saturated, despite the semantic ambiguity of its referent in real life. In more abstract terms, *blatte* is a sociocultural metaphor that stands for a current sociocultural reality in Sweden; it also stands for a raised awareness of both the prevalence of the us/them dichotomy in our understanding of the world around us and the necessity to resist and combat ethnic discrimination and segregation. *Blatte* encapsulates several ethnic markers of sociocultural otherness. Its referent is overdetermined by numerous definitions that attempt to delimit a fixed space of signification, a sociocultural context that would make all *blattar* visible, identifiable and more easily categorized in the greater national discourse of Swedish identity. To a self-identified *blatte*, visibility created with the help of official categories or everyday labels is not only a personal offence, but also the reaffirmation of the power imbalance represented by the dichotomy of us/them.

### References

- Adami, Zaniar (2006), 'Miljonsvenska är framtiden', *Gringo*, 7 November.
- Appadurai, Arjun (1996), *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minneapolis Press.
- Balibar, Etienne and Wallerstein, Immanuel (1988), *Race, nation, classe: Les identités ambiguës*, Paris: Éditions La Découverte.
- Bammer, Angelika (ed.) (1994), *Displacements. Cultural Identities in Question*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Bendix, Regina (2000), 'Heredity, Hybridity and Heritage from One Fin de Siècle to the Next', in Pertti J. Anttonen, Anna-Leena Siikala, Stein R. Mathisen and Leif

- Magnusson (eds), *A Festschrift for Barbro Klein*, Botkyrka, Sweden: Multicultural Centre.
- Bhabha, Homi (1994), *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge.
- Can, Mayrem (2005), 'Vilken stereotyp är du?', *Gringo Grande*, 1 (June).
- Césaire, Aimé (1972), *Discourse on Colonialism*, New York and London: Monthly Review Press.
- Chambers, Iain (1994), *Migrancy, Culture, Identity*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Cosgrove, Denis and Domosh, Mona (1993), 'Author and Authority', in James Duncan and David Ley (eds), *Place/Culture/Representation*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Cresswell, Tim (1996), *In Place/Out of Place*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Cross, Brian (1993), *It's Not About a Salary: Rap, Race, and Resistance in Los Angeles*, London: Verso.
- Cross, Malcolm and Keith, Michael (eds) (1993), *Racism, the City and the State*, London: Routledge.
- Daun, Åke (1989), *Svensk mentalitet: Ett jämförande perspektiv*, Stockholm: Rabén & Sjögren.
- Dawod, Nivette (2006), 'Vem äger ditt språk?', *Gringo*, 7 November.
- Derrida, Jacques (1985), *The Ear of the Other*, New York: Schocken Books.
- (1995), *Points... Interviews 1974–1994* (ed. Elisabeth Weber)ed, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Doggelito, Dogge and Kotsinas, Ulla-Britt (2004), *Förortsslang*, Stockholm: Norstedts.
- Donald, James and Rattanasai, Ali (1992), 'Race', *Culture & Difference*, Newbury Park, CA, London and New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Duncan, James and Ley, David (eds) (1993), *Place/ Culture/Representation*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Ekström, Simon and Gerholm, Lena (2006), *Orienten i Sverige: Samtida möten och gränssnitt*, Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Eliot, T. S. (1948), *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, London: Faber and Faber Limited.
- Frans, Joe (ed.) (1988), *Välkommen i princip*, Borås, Sweden: Periskopet.
- Fraurud, Kari and Hyltenstam, Kenneth (eds) (2001), *Multilingualism in Global and Local Perspectives: Selected Papers From the 8th Nordic Conference on Bilingualism*, 1–3 November, Stockholm/Rinkeby: Stockholm University, Centre for Research on Bilingualism and Rinkeby Institute of Multilingual Research.
- Frith, Simon (ed.) (2003), *Popular Music: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*, vols 2 and 4, New York: Routledge.
- Gröndahl, Satu (2002), *Litteraturens gränsland: Invandrar-och minoritetslitteratur i nordiskt perspektiv*, Uppsala: Centrum för multietnisk forskning, Uppsala University.
- Hall, Stuart (1993), 'Cultural Identity and Diasporas', in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (eds), *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hall, Stuart and du Gay, Paul (eds) (1996), *Questions of Cultural Identity*, London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Hall, Stuart and Whannel, Paddy (1964), *The Popular Arts*, London: Hutchinson Educational.

- Johansson, Alf W. (ed.) (2001), *Vad är Sverige? Röster om svensk nationell identitet*, Stockholm: Prisma.
- Jonsson, Rickard (2007), *Blatte betyder kompis: Om maskulinitet och språk i en högstadieskola*, Stockholm: Ordfront.
- Kamali, Masoud (1997), *Distorted Integration: Clientization of Immigrants in Sweden*, Multiethnic Papers 41, Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala Centre for Multi-ethnic Research.
- Keith, Michael and Pile, Steve (1993), *Place and the Politics of Identity*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Khemiri, Jonas Hassen (2003), *Ett öga rätt*, Stockholm: Norstedts.
- King, Bruce (1996), *New National and Post-colonial Literatures*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Kotsinas, Ulla-Britt (2001), Kotsinas, Ulla-Britt, "Från Ekenssnack till Rinkebysvenska" *Pedagogiska magasinet. Lärarförbundets tidskrift för utbildning, forskning och debatt*, April 2nd. pages 8–14.
- Krekow, Sebastian (1999), *Hiphop-lexikon*, Berlin: Lexikon Imprint Verlag.
- Kitwana, Bakari (2002), *The Hip-Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture*, New York: Basic Civitas Books.
- Lacan, Jacques *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book 1* (Jacques-Alain Miller, ed.) 1975 New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company
- Leyens, Jacques-Philippe, Yzerbyt, Vincent and Schadron, Georges (1994), *Stereotypes and Social Cognition*, London: Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Lovell, Nadia (ed.) (1998), *Locality and Belonging*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Phillips-Martinsson, Jean (1991), *Swedes as Others See Them*, Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Rojas, Mauricio (2005), *Sweden after the Swedish model: From Tutorial State to Enabling State*, Stockholm: Timbro.
- Romero, Madeleine (2005), 'Blatte – en etnicitet? om ungdomars med utländsk bakgrund syn på sin etnicitet,' Masters Thesis, Lunds Universitet.
- Pile, Steve and Keith, Michael (eds) (1997), *Geographies of Resistance*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Rahn, Janice (2002), *Painting Without Permission Hip-Hop Graffiti Subculture*, Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- Sernhede, Ove (2002), *Alienation is my nation: hiphop och unga mäns utanförskap i Det nya Sverige*, Stockholm: Ordfront.
- Shields, Rob (1992), *Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Sibley, David (1992), 'Outsiders in Society and Space', in Kay Anderson and Fay Gale (eds), *Inventing Places: Studies in Cultural Geography*, Sydney: Longman Cheshire.
- (1995), *Geographies of Exclusion: Society and Difference in the West*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Strage, Fredrik (2001), *Mikrofonkåt*, Stockholm: Atlas.
- Tigervall, Carina (2005), *Folkhemsk film med 'invandraren' i rollen som den sympatiska Andre*, Doctoral Dissertation Umeå, Sweden: Umeå University.
- Wenger, Alejandro Leiva (2000), *Va' ska jag med hiphop len?*, 2000: 6 Stockholm: Journal Arena.

— (2006), 'Blattesvenskan står för spåkglädje', *Dagens Nyheter*, 27 April, Stockholm.

Westin, Charles (1999), *Mångfald, integration, rasism och andra ord: Ett lexikon över begrepp inom IMER – Internationell Migration och Etniska Relationer*, Stockholm: Socialstyrelsen and CEIFO.

### **Suggested citation**

Lacatus, C. (2007), 'What is a *blatte*? Migration and ethnic identity in contemporary Sweden', *Journal of Arab and Muslim Media Research* 1: 1, pp. 79–92, doi: 10.1386/jammr.1.1.79/1

### **Contributor detail**

Corina Lacatus teaches at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign and is a research affiliate with The Center for Research on International Migration and Ethnic Relations at Stockholm University. She graduated from Bucharest University (Romania) with a BA in Arabic and Scandinavian and from University of California, Los Angeles with a doctoral thesis discussing ethnicity and cultural expression in contemporary Sweden. She is interested in the issues of migration to Western Europe and its representations, the Middle East, and the interplay between cultural history, literature, the arts and the law. Contact: Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2090 Foreign Languages Building, 707 S. Mathews Avenue, Urbana, Illinois 61801 USA, Research Affiliate, The Centre for Research on International Migration and Ethnic Relations, Stockholm University