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# Collaborative Authorship and Postmigration in Jonas Hassen Khemiri's Novel *Montecore*

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**Abstract:** *Montecore. En unik tiger* (2006) stages its own making through the joint authorship of Kadir, a friend of Abbas', and Jonas, a young writer and Abbas' son. Their collaboration aims at a novel about Abbas, who migrated from Tunisia to Sweden, now a missing person. The interpretation of his life proves to be a conflicting ground for the co-authors because of their generational differences. This article proposes an analysis of *Montecore* building upon the notion of collaborative or multiple authorship (Stillinger 1991; Love 2002), and upon the discussion in Scandinavia and in Germany on contemporary migration and postmigration literature. Through a metafictional collaborative authorship – a so far neglected dimension in the study of *Montecore* – Jonas Hassen Khemiri depicts a young author's ambivalent feelings towards his father and his story. Abbas has vanished from the family, but his special gift to Jonas, through Kadir's mediation, deals with a linguistic talent that defies the rules of Swedish, showing the power of language to invent, and to imagine a different and less oppressive order.

**Keywords:** Collaborative authorship, Contemporary Swedish literature, Jonas Hassen Khemiri, Postmigration

## Khemiri and migration literature

Jonas Hassen Khemiri, born in 1978, has published five novels so far, as well as plays, short stories and articles.<sup>1</sup> The changes towards a multiethnic and multicultural society in Sweden, as a result of migration during the last four decades, define the setting in his novels. Whether in the foreground or background, this historical context, referring in particular to the urban area of his hometown Stockholm, always plays a role. The author represents this reality with literary talent,

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<sup>1</sup> Plays and shorter texts are collected in Khemiri (2008). Others have followed afterwards. See *Jonas Hassen Khemiri* [<http://www.khemiri.se/en/>] 29.07.2021.

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combined with a sharp social awareness and an existential focus. These qualities are intertwined, and in fact impossible to separate from one another. The human relations Khemiri depicts include shortcomings and failures within the family, as we see in his first novel *Ett öga rött* (2003) and the following one *Montecore. En unik tiger* (2006) (*Montecore. The Silence of the Tiger*, 2011),<sup>2</sup> as well as in his latest novel *Pappaklausulen* (2018). In all of them the bonds of affection and shared memory between generations must face the complications of the growing distance between parents, who migrated to Sweden as adults, and their children, who have grown up there. In other novels, such as *Jag ringer mina bröder* (2012) and *Allt jag inte minns* (2015), young adults in search of identity and meaning relate more to peers. In all the novels, racial bias in contemporary Swedish society offers significant contexts. This is true, although the author dismisses the definition of himself as an “immigrant writer” as a misleading reduction, and rightly so.

Critics and the wide reading public appreciate Khemiri’s works, both in Sweden and internationally through translation. His novels combine seriousness with humour, an intelligent observation of individuals and their ordinary social milieu, with a brilliant style and creative approach to language and composition. It is therefore no surprise that even the scholarly discussion of his novels has made valid contributions.

A central issue is whether Khemiri, as well as other writers of the second generation (with a migrant background in their family, but grown up or even born in Sweden) can be defined as immigrant or migrant writers, and what we mean by immigrant or migrant literature or literature of migration. In the first years of the new millennium, several writers and critics reacted against recurring self-satisfied representations about Sweden as a progressive society, open to diversity and eager to acquire “immigrant writers” of the new generation who could depict it. In a seminal article, Astrid Trotzig underscores the risk of reduction, and even of a subtle form of racism, in the otherizing use of “immigrant literature” and “immigrant writer” instead of simply “literature” and “writer” (2005). Anja Dahlstedt shows in her reception study how the reviewers endowed the “otherness” of young Swedish debuting writers with a particular symbolic capital, as they wished to see a mirror of an emerging multiethnic Sweden in the new literature, which led to fallacy and over simplistic enthusiasm (2006). From a sociolinguistic point of view, Roger Källström comes to similar conclusions (2011, 143–144). Thomas Mohnike and Wolfgang Behschnitt have consistently scrutinized the purported authenticity of new Swedish immigrant literature, and questioned it as a cultural construction and a result of a particular horizon of expectations

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<sup>2</sup> I will refer to this translation, by Rachel Willson-Broyles, as Khemiri (2011).

(Behschnitt/Mohnike 2007; Mohnike 2007; Behschnitt 2010). This process of deconstruction is more radical in the works of Magnus Nilsson, who ends up by proclaiming the death of the migrant writer (2010a; 2010b; 2012; 2013).

The drawback of this deconstruction is that analytical intelligence and argumentative skills are spent in mainly saying what these recent literary expressions are *not*. It is true that reducing Swedish authors with a migrant background to the measure of the *invandrarförfattare* is problematic; and it is true that the authors dislike this potentially ghettoizing definition. Still, the subject of migration as both a shared and conflictual place in intergenerational memory, as well as the themes of integration and racism in contemporary Scandinavian society, are salient in these authorships.

A different direction has been the one that, while questioning fixed, ethnically based conceptions of identity as well as nation-based conceptions of literary culture, has favourably considered the contribution given by literature that represents and discusses contemporary migration. An impulse is, in this respect, Homi Bhabha's work *The Location of Culture*, with its idea of a new, possible transnational space, in which hybridity and in-between positions, such as those of the migrants, acquire a specific value for their work of negotiation and translation, a work that defies traditional concepts of homogeneous nationalities (1994). Ingeborg Kongslien has underscored how the Scandinavian literary systems are enlarging their scope, as they include the voices of writers from the margins. These writers expand national literary canons introducing new themes, new fields of reference and a new language (2006; 2007; 2013). Rebecca Walkowitz (2006) and Søren Frank (2008) have proposed the less biographical and more inclusive notion of "migration literature" or "literature of migration", as a wider concept that helps us analyze features of transnational, contemporary literature. On the one hand, a writer does not need to be an immigrant to write about migration or adopt a migrant's perspective on what is supposed to be familiar and obvious;<sup>3</sup> on the other hand, writers with a migrant background have the right to choose any subjects and stand as simply writers, without limitations. Evidently, definitions are risky when they flatten and simplify, but they are necessary as heuristic tools. Mirjam Gebauer and Pia Schwarz Lausten (2010) have underscored that the migrant becomes a symbol of an age of unprecedented world mobility. "Migration literature" – they observe – "challenges the very institutions of literature as national canons and philological traditions"; furthermore, referential and experimental literature

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<sup>3</sup> In her novel *Øyets sult* (1993), the Norwegian writer Tove Nilsen assumes the voice and the point of view of Shabaz, a male immigrant from India living in Norway.

do not have to be seen as opposites, as migration literature can be both highly autobiographical and stylistically innovative (2010, 3–4), which is indeed the case of Khemiri's oeuvre. In a similar direction, the authors of the introduction to the volume *Globalizing Art* put the emphasis on the forms of Nordic art that are produced in an age when borders, nationalities and ethnicities are questioned in a more radical way than ever before, not least in Northern Europe. They also observe the tendency to lively experimentations in these artistic expressions, which challenge the traditional sense of identity and belonging to a place; however, artistic practice implies new proposals of negotiation, so that the national communities may be conceived in a different manner (Møhring Reestorff 2011).

The concept of postmigration can help to better comprehend the phenomena that are taking place in Scandinavian literature, where more and more second-generation writers are confronted with a simultaneous, double task: remembering the migration story of their parents and forming their present and future identities through new narratives, creativity, and life projects. The discourse on postmigration developed in Germany, both in the artistic scene (Bazinger 2012), and in the field of social studies (Yildiz 2010; Widmann 2014). An active reception of these ideas has occurred in Danish cultural studies (Ring Petersen/Schramm 2016). As Naika Foroutan underscores, "postmigrant" does not mean that migration is over. It reflects the awareness that migration has deeply changed our European societies, and is here to stay (Widmann 2014; Ring Petersen/Schramm 2016, 185). A postmigrant concern does not only focus on migration but on the social and political changes as a consequence of migration, the conflicts, the necessary negotiations, the process of new identity making, the new idea of belonging and community. In a postmigrant perspective, it is important to overcome the binary, ethnically coded oppositions between "us" and "them, the others", even if they are well-meant with respect to "integration". Erol Yildiz observes that everyday life becomes more and more cosmopolitan, and that young people with a migrant background are more used to simultaneous belongings and more inclined to connect different elements into a new identity, beyond the ethnically determined principles. Yildiz emphasises creativity, openness, new learning and *Bildung*. While constructing their life projects, the younger generations include and reconsider the migration of the first generation, in order to make marginalized and silenced stories more visible; this construction of a "projective past" ("projektive Vergangenheit") is, according to Yildiz, part of a postmigrant understanding (2010, 329). This is relevant to Khemiri's authorship.

The in-depth analyses of Khemiri's first two novels have examined the way in which linguistic behaviours distinguish the first-generation immigrants from their children. While the fathers fight for correctness and try to conform to the rules of standard Swedish, their children revolt against the power of this central

norm, and challenge it with hybridization and creolization as markers of identity (Bassini 2009). Christian Refsum observes that Khemiri's oeuvre is the one that most explicitly in the North explores the relationships between personal, social and literary multilingualism (2010, 82–87; 2011, 164–173). Eila Rantonen has described *Montecore* as both “a moving depiction of the relationship between father and son” and “a perceptive study of Swedish society with its increasing number of immigrants and hostility towards them in the 1980s and 1990s” (2013, 144). The sociolinguistic dimensions become questions of identity, and take place within the family, in what Rantonen defines as the intergenerational battles (2013, 145).

Finally, in an engaging reading, connecting literature, philosophy and politics, Elisabeth Hjorth has underscored the young writer Jonas' ambivalent situation in *Montecore*. Jonas has apparently little power to fight hegemonic racist discourse in society, but the power he displays on language and words give him a voice to counterbalance this hegemony (2015, 18, 112–115). Furthermore, the readers of *Montecore* are caught in the conflict between Jonas and his father Abbas, and feel an intrinsic insecurity about the “truth”; this in-between position, however, encourages the readers' active response (2015, 99–104, 121, 148–153, 177, 180, 209–210). A third point made by Hjorth is that the tale of *Montecore* follows a movement from humour to sorrow, according to Kadir's and Jonas' prevailing voices respectively, but also that the tragicomic tone is consistent and well worked-out throughout the novel (2015, 100, 153, 216).

The above-mentioned contributions show how both migration and postmigration are central and connecting topics in *Montecore*. The novel interweaves existential questions of displacement, memory, generation gap and identity with the issues of a possible or impossible integration of the immigrants and of their children in Swedish society; it reflects on the risks of hegemonic assimilation, discrimination, exclusion and racism. Finally, *Montecore* deals with the power of linguistic creativity in order to promote a critical discourse and, possibly, a different order of things.

The aim of this article is to focus on a so far neglected aspect of *Montecore* as a metafictional novel, i. e. the circumstance that it stages a collaborative authorship between the young writer Jonas and his father Abbas' old friend, Kadir. *Montecore* represents its own making through the collaboration between Jonas, who is just about to publish his first novel, and Kadir, who immediately encourages his good friend's son to plan and write a second one. Both Abbas and Kadir experienced migration from Tunisia to Sweden – from the 1970s to the 1990s in Abbas' case, for a shorter period in the 1980s in Kadir's case. Kadir urges Jonas to write a biographical novel about his missing father, cherishing the hope of a possible reunion between father and son after eight years of distance and mutual silence. Kadir becomes the apologetic interpreter of Abbas' life, whereas Jonas'

memory defines a more critical standpoint, dealing both with Abbas' life, the life of his family (including especially his Swedish mother Pernilla and her parents), and his own life. It is not surprising that the project of collaborative authorship fails in the end, because the two co-authors' versions are too conflicting. The description of this "failure" corresponds to the novel *Montecore* as we read it, which Björn Apelkvist rightly defines "a fictional triumph" (2019, 75). Collaborative authorship offers the opportunity of gaining new access to *Montecore*, to its themes, language, style and composition. The authorial competition and the tensions it creates, help us reconsider the conflict, but also the bond and legacy that, through Kadir, connect the father and his son. This legacy has to do with a peculiar voice, a creative way of treating the Swedish language, which belonged to Abbas and is echoed by Kadir's idiolect.

## ***Montecore* as a Laboratory of Collaborative Authorship**

In literary theory, multiple or collaborative authorship reflects the awareness that the common notion of authors as sole makers of their works proves to be a simplification. The representation of solitary geniuses overshadows the fact that conceiving and producing the work are, more often than not, the result of collaboration and exchange. The author proper – defined as the "nominal author" by Jack Stillinger (1991, v) and the "executive author" by Harold Love (2002, 43–44) – remains an indispensable actor, or function. However, he or she must be seen as related to a series of other figures, functions and contexts, if we consider the creative process rather as a cultural practice, embedded in history and social intercourses, than as transcendent inspiration. In short, authors exist, but they have worked and still work in a less solitary way than one is inclined to believe.

Stillinger focuses on "*the joint, or composite, or collaborative production of literary works that we usually think of as written by a single author*" (1991, v; italics by the author). He describes this kind of multiple authorship as

[...] an extremely common phenomenon: a work may be the collaborative product of the nominal author and a friend, a spouse, a ghost, an agent, an editor, a translator, a publisher, a censor, a transcriber, a printer, or – what is more often the case – several of these acting together or in succession. [...]

We routinely refer to a single authorial mind, or personality, or consciousness to validate "meaning" or "authority"; where others besides the nominal author have a share in the creation of a text, we usually ignore that share or else call it corruption and try to get rid of it. But literary works can and frequently do have multiple authors, sometimes with divided or even conflicting intentions among them [...]. (1991, v–vi)

Stillinger concludes:

The romantic notion of single authorship is so widespread as to be nearly universal. In contrast, the accumulation of evidence for the prevalence of multiple authorship can support a more realistic account of the ways in which literature is created and, especially when the ordinary human motives of authors, editors, publishers, booksellers, readers, and the rest are brought into the picture all together, can contribute to the ongoing efforts of new and old historicists alike to connect literary works with the social, cultural, and material conditions in which they were produced. (1991, 183)

This awareness of authorship as a function that is part of a network of relationships is confirmed by Roger Chartier, who describes the author as “both dependent and constrained” (1994, 28). Harald Love proposes a model of authorship “as a repertoire of practices, techniques and functions – forms of work – whose nature has varied considerably across the centuries and which may well in any given case have been performed by separate individuals” (2002, 33). As both Stillinger and Chartier do, Love underscores that thinking of the authorial work as a single author creating a text in solitariness, is a restriction:

It omits, for a start, all that precedes the act of writing (language acquisition, education, experiences, conversation, reading of other authors); likewise everything that follows the phase of initial inscription while the work is vetted by friends and advisers, receives second thoughts and improvements, is edited for the press, if that is its destination, and given the material form in which it will encounter its readers. (2002, 33)

Every reader who is familiar with *Montecore* will recognize the subtlety with which Khemiri stages these aspects in a fictional narrative. He gives shape to a veritable laboratory of collaborative writing, connecting it to the core situation of the by now tense relationship between the writer Jonas and his father Abbas, problematically mediated through Kadir’s voice.

First, the text develops as a variant of the epistolary novel. As Jonas is about to publish his debut novel (the references will make clear that it is *Ett öga rött*, although that title is not mentioned), he is reached by an email written by Kadir. Kadir informs Jonas that his father is now a world-famous photographer based in New York. In the emails, Kadir also expresses the wish that father and son may overcome their divisions and find each other again (Khemiri 2006, 29). Kadir’s emails to Jonas do not form a large portion of the narrative. *Montecore* consists of about 334 written pages, made up of five parts plus a prologue and an epilogue. The emails, 31 pages in all, recur especially in parts one and two, and they are important because they set the situation and the tone of the novel, or at least one of its dominant tones, embodied by Kadir’s voice. A “furious” email from Kadir to Jonas also corresponds to the epilogue of the novel. In addition to the epistolary

novel, a novel cliché is presented in a new fashion, i. e. the found manuscript or, in other words, the idea that the executive author accepts to arrange and revise a text, or a series of texts, that were originally written by someone else. The existence of such a cliché is in itself further evidence of multiple and collaborative authorship as a common phenomenon, widely recorded in both classical, modern and postmodern fictional narratives. Kadir's emails to Jonas contain "the manuscript", i. e. attachments with preliminary versions of the biography of Abbas. Kadir underscores the collaborative nature of the project both in the emails and, directly, in his texts. According to the pact he proposes to Jonas, the attached materials should be arranged by the young writer to write a new novel about his father's life. Kadir intersperses his narrative about Abbas, kept in the third person singular, with a direct address to Jonas, giving suggestions as to how Jonas should arrange his new work; in addition, Kadir writes his own editorial comments in footnotes. Kadir's text corresponds to a larger portion of the narrative (about 140 pages), and it is, by way of electronic attachment, a part of the epistolary communication with Jonas. In his materials, Kadir includes the letters Abbas sent him from Stockholm, in which he described the progress, or rather the shortcomings, trying to find a job and integrate in Swedish society. Abbas' letters correspond to 24 pages of the novel, and reinforce its epistolary element. They are mainly in part two (four letters from February 1978 to January 1979); a later letter from December 1985 is in part three. Kadir supplies even these letters with his own editorial comments in footnotes; as well as this, Kadir is the translator of these letters into Swedish, as Abbas originally wrote them in Arabic, and Jonas' Arabic is, in Kadir's view, poor.

The multiple authorship becomes even more complex through Jonas' autobiographical voice. It is a timid voice in the first two parts (6 and 10 pages respectively), but makes itself heard in the latter part of the novel. As it takes about 140 pages in all, it counterbalances the weight of Kadir's voice and point of view. When the disagreement between the two authors becomes evident, Jonas' texts and Kadir's texts are interspersed in a kind of authorial competition, in which the reader must take a stance. Another aspect of Jonas' voice is that he represents himself in the second person singular, as "you". As Philippe Lejeune has observed, this device multiplies the perspectives and emphasizes the distance (in life experience, norms, viewpoints) between the self as narrator and the narrated self, making autobiographical writing a more prismatic object (Lejeune 1977).<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, addressing oneself with "you" emphasizes the intimate dialogue with

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<sup>4</sup> See also the French version in Lejeune (1980). It was published three years later than the first version in English.



oneself and with one's own identity as memory constructs it. The effort of memory is a leitmotif in Jonas' pages, and the verb *minnas* often recurs at the beginning of each of his entries. Kadir's hyperbolic version of Abbas' life as a hero and the best daddy in the world provokes Jonas and stirs his memory. As a child, Jonas too found that his father was a hero, but his present standpoint indicates a critical distance. Jonas' texts become therefore a counter-narrative that is alternative to Kadir's hagiographic version. As Jonas' version develops, it tells the story of the family from the child's, then the teenager's and finally the young adult's point of view, and it explains the reasons for the growing conflict between father and son.

Actually, the task of attribution remains problematic in *Montecore*, as it is sometimes difficult to distinguish Kadir's texts from Jonas' sharply. In the whole novel, Kadir's and Jonas' voices contain and echo each other. They submit their own texts to each other and comment on them in one way or another. We never read the emails with which Jonas answers Kadir, but Kadir's emails often comment on Jonas' replies. Jonas' autobiographical versions reply to Kadir's text and "contain" them. In his turn, Kadir makes further editorial remarks on Jonas' texts, either in his own emails or as direct interventions in Jonas' texts, with footnotes. In the fourth part, Kadir proposes five chapter titles of his own to Jonas' entries, which creates a strong, ironical contrast between the glorious titles he gives and the far less glorious contents of Abbas' progress as described by Jonas (Khemiri 2006, 228–261).

If we now reconsider Stillinger's description, we see that Kadir is eager to collaborate with the "nominal author" Jonas both as a friend, a ghostwriter, an agent, an editor, a translator, a censor and a transcriber; we also observe that "divided or even conflicting intentions" between the co-authors indeed form a main feature in *Montecore*. Love, in his description, underscores that collaborative authorship includes the circumstance that "the work is vetted by friends and advisers, receives second thoughts and improvements". In *Montecore*, we see how active an adviser Kadir can be, when he elaborates on Jonas' "initial inscription" of his auto/biographical text. The sequence of authorial functions Kadir and Jonas put into practice correspond to some of the categories proposed by Love (2002, 32–50). By providing a preliminary version of the biography of Abbas, Kadir fulfils a "precursory authorship"; in addition, Kadir as an adviser, editor and even censor, fulfils a "revisionary authorship". In spite of his interventions, Kadir never doubts that Jonas must have the final task of rearranging all materials into one composition, and that Jonas must and will be the one who "signs" the novel to represent the "executive authorship".

The contrasting versions shed critical light upon each other; the depiction and definition of Abbas' life experience is a conflictual ground. In the intergenerational space between the North African immigrant and his son who was born in

Sweden, readers are invited, as Elisabeth Hjorth has observed, to construct their own oscillatory truth, the result of a negotiation between different and even opposite experiences, which cannot be reduced to one coherent formulation. The texts differ even in the style and size of their types and in the layout. The types in the emails are different from those in Kadir's narrative, and both differ from Abbas' letters. Jonas' texts about himself, his father and their family are narrower, with wider margins on the page; a new entry is always marked with bold characters.

## Linguistic and stylistic marks

The collaboration of a younger writer with friends and publishers who want to help him succeed is, as Stillinger observes, a common situation; John Keats, for instance, did not always approve of his friends' help as a young man and author, but he was however dependent on it and welcomed it (1991, 22–49). It can recall the situation in *Montecore*, where Kadir is an intrusive adviser and Jonas is doubtful about the collaboration. Why, then, does Jonas accept collaborative authorship with Kadir? Although Jonas shows himself reluctant, he accepts the project as he receives and, in fact, welcomes Kadir's texts as a point of departure for his own memory work. Jonas feels a bond of memory and affection towards his father. Kadir's proposal to write a biography/novel about Abbas strikes a chord in Jonas, because Abbas represents a legacy that Jonas cannot ignore.

This legacy finds its way through language. When Love points out that collaborative and multiple authorship must include contexts and circumstances that even precede the act of writing, he mentions among them “language acquisition, education, experiences” (2002, 33). These aspects are paramount in the existential situation depicted in *Montecore*. Jonas inherits a linguistic attitude from his father, and this talent eventually contributes to his becoming an author. In some biographical sketches that Kadir would like Jonas to insert directly in his book, Abbas is remembered for “his impressive dressage of the world's tongues” (Khemiri 2011, 48).<sup>5</sup> In addition, Kadir writes to Jonas in an email that Abbas' ability to play with languages has infected Jonas “with the ambition of an author” (Khemiri 2011, 38).<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, part of the ambivalent truth of the novel is that language both connects Jonas to the sphere of influence represented by Kadir and Abbas,

5 Khemiri (2006), 63: “hans imponerande dressyr av världens tungomål.”

6 Khemiri (2006), 51: “[...] har smittat dig med författarens ambition.”

and separates him from it. Jonas is both dependent on his father's linguistic spell, and must emancipate himself from it, trying to find his own voice and tone.

From the very start of the novel, or rather, from its paratextual thresholds, a spell is cast upon the reader by Kadir's hyperbolic and bombastic language.<sup>7</sup> He fills his Swedish text with loanwords of Latin origin, only a few of which being actually created for the purpose. Most of them exist in Swedish, as they arrived either through German in the late Middle Ages, or through French in early modern times and during the Enlightenment, or through English in modern and contemporary times. To this, Kadir adds a trait of Arabic style through his particular dexterity in ornate writing, full of praise and wonder. The effect of such a hybrid and creolized language, a break with the rules of standard Swedish, is often irresistibly funny. At the same time, Kadir's intention is serious, and precisely the high language register he tries to adopt shows his seriousness of purpose. Kadir is addressing someone he respects, and as his immigrant Swedish is evidently not faultless, he tries to compensate for it with creativity and knowledge. He heightens his register by resorting above all to French, a language of high status and prestige, as well as the given postcolonial legacy for a man from Tunisia. A similar intention seems to direct Kadir's use of formal register with its solemn and magniloquent turn, which Kadir defines as "min metaforiska magnificens" (Khemiri 2006, 21) – "my metaphoric magnificence" (Khemiri 2011, 10). This is how he presents himself in his first email to Jonas:

Devinera vem som skriver dig dessa fraser? Det är KADIR som knappar tangenterna!!! Din fars mest antika vän! Du memorerar väl mig? Min förhoppning är ditt ivrigt guppande huvud. Året nummerades till 1986 när jag visiterade er i Stockholm: Din leende mor, dina nymedkomna småbröder, din stolta far med sin färska fotostudio. Och så du som assisterade mig och din fars lärdomar i det svenska språket. Memorerar du våra språkregler? Då var du en korpulent språkbegåvad pojke med välvuxen aptit på glassar och Pez-godisar. Nu är du plötsligt en erigerad man som snart ska publicera sin premiärroman! Prisa mina gigantiska gratulationer! Ack, tiden tickar snabbt när man har humor, inte sant? (Khemiri 2006, 13)

Kadir ends his first letter with the proposal of a collaborative authorship, aimed at a book about Jonas' father:

Också jag har haft litterära drömmar. En längre tid projekterade jag en biografi vigd åt din far. Tyvärr handikappades min ambition av kunskapsgap och blaserade publikationshus. Inför skrivandet av detta meddelande radierades min hjärna plötsligt av en genial idé: Vad anses om att i din sekundära bok gestalta din fars magiska liv?

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7 "Threshold" is the term chosen by Gérard Genette in his seminal study about literary paratexts as an initial and crucial phase of interpretation (1987).

Låt oss kollidera våra kloka huvuden i ambitionen att skapa en biografi värdig din prominente far! Låt oss kollaborera i skapandet av ett litterärt mästerverk som attraherar global publik, nominera Nobelpris och kanske till och med en invitation till Oprah Winfreys tv-studio!

Korrespondera mig snarast din positiva respons. Du kommer INTE kondolera dig! (Khemiri 2006, 14–15)

Kadir displays the magic of his language in these opening passages. If we take them as a sample of his voice in the novel, we can observe that words of Latin origin abound; this is a main marker of his language. Many of his words, however, are standard in contemporary Swedish; a common word like “glass” (‘ice-cream’) comes directly from French *glace*; other similar words are “tangent”, “aptit”, “biografi”, “roman”, “gigantisk”, “gratulation”, “litterär”, “ambition”, “genial”, “idé”, “magisk”, “prominent”, “opus”, “global”, “publik”, “positiv”. Sometimes Kadir chooses the Latin variant, closer to both French and English, instead of a more common Germanic alternative. Such a variant sounds either more formal, literary or old-fashioned in Swedish, making Kadir’s text slightly divergent and weird (“korpulent” instead of ‘fyllig’, “publicera” instead of ‘utge’, “projektera” instead of ‘planlägga’, “kreera” instead of ‘skapa’, “attrahera” instead of ‘locka’, “invitation” instead of ‘inbjudan’/‘inbjudning’). Kadir’s prose becomes more destabilizing when his European (mostly French) variants are, in fact, false friends that create semantic collisions with comical effects. This is often the case: “fras”, “antik”, “memorera”, “numrera”, “visitera”, “färsk”, “assistera”, “väl vuxen” (standard Swedish ‘väl växt’, a calque of the French expression ‘bien grandi’), “erigera”, “premiär-”, “handikappa”, “blaserad”, “radiera”, “sekundär”, “kollidera”, “kollaborera”, “korrespondera”, “respons”, “kondolera”; all these words mean something (slightly) different from what Kadir means, or are used in an unusual way, in the wrong context. Among these cases, the verb “visitera”, used for standard Swedish ‘besöka’ (‘to visit’) actually means ‘to inspect’ or ‘to examine’, and the key verb “kollaborera”, used instead of standard Swedish ‘samarbeta’, actually means ‘to work’ and ‘cooperate with an enemy’. Only some words in these passages are, to my knowledge, created by Kadir. The verb “divinera” comes from French ‘deviner’ and means ‘to guess’ (standard Swedish ‘gissa’); Swedish ‘divinera’ did exist, according to SAOB, but with few occurrences.<sup>8</sup> The compound “publikationshus” is taken from both English ‘publishing house’ and French ‘maison d’édition’. The adjective “nombrös” comes

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<sup>8</sup> The etymology of all the mentioned words from Kadir’s first letter has been checked in *Svenska Akademiens ordbok* (SAOB), the historical dictionary of the Swedish language consisting of 37 volumes in its paper edition, by now a part of a full-text open-access resource on the internet, *Svenska Akademiens ordböcker*, [<https://svenska.se/>] (12/01/21).

from French ‘nombreaux’ or English ‘numerous’. There are other weird uses, such as the compound “mästeropus” instead of standard Swedish ‘mästerverk’ (‘masterpiece’), as well as the expressions “knappar tangenterna” (‘snapping the keys’), “ditt ivrigt guppande huvud” (‘your eagerly bobbing head’), “dina nyledkomna småbröder” (‘your newly landed small brothers’), and “biografi vigd åt din far” (‘biography devoted to your father’). Kadir’s creativity is, finally, always something more than any such attempts at classification can manage to cover.

Although Kadir has experienced the oppressive effects of French colonial power (this is actually a starting point in his biography of Abbas), he turns the historical hegemony of French – on both North-Western Africa and Europe – to his advantage. Especially French is, after all, the language that can provide him with a bridge to Swedish and help him keep a high register. The extraordinary quality and richness of Kadir’s Frenchifying Swedish consists in the fact that his linguistic destabilization and carnivalization employs largely the resources of Swedish as a diachronic system, which has been importing words from Latin, German, French, and English over the centuries (Bergman 2013). A general consequence is that this language proves to be historically far less pure than the hegemonic, ethnocentric point of view, obsessed with “Swedishness”, would like to think. The outsider’s peripheral gaze defamiliarizes our cherished object, the Swedish language, but also reminds us of its richness and historical dimensions. It is a gift, not impoverishment. Needless to say, this kind of language is a major challenge for translators.

The opening of the novel, featuring Kadir’s special voice, tells us about another trait. Kadir’s references to the internationally known Pez candies, and to the even better known American talk show presented by Oprah Winfrey, are typical of the author’s inclination to intermingle high culture with popular culture, existential, social and political issues with common, everyday situations. In addition, Kadir’s references show that Khemiri’s perspective is transnational more than simply Swedish or Scandinavian. Of course, this also happens because Scandinavian culture is, or can be, curious and open to international influences. This is, I suppose, one of the reasons why Khemiri does not like to be reduced to the simple measure of the “immigrant”. In one of his letters from Stockholm, Abbas complains to Kadir about the attitude of Pernilla’s left-wing friends, who have a tendency to always consider him an exotic presence, a representative of the Orient: “Why doesn’t anyone want to discuss anything but the Middle East or baklava? Why doesn’t anyone want to discuss Otis Redding?” (Khemiri 2011, 76).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Khemiri (2006), 94: ”Varför vill ingen diskutera annat än Mellanöstern eller baklavas? Varför vill ingen diskutera Otis Redding?”

A miniaturized depiction of collaborative authorship is the notebook with rules and observations about the Swedish language, which Abbas, Kadir and the young Jonas wrote together in Stockholm back in 1987, according to Kadir's memoirs (Khemiri, 2006, 199–213), when Jonas, as a Swedish mother-tongue boy, was asked to become the teacher of his grown-up pupils. This exercise and development of linguistic awareness was promoted by Abbas, who decided that he had to dedicate his efforts to learning Swedish properly, and give up his inclination to mix languages, in order to be fully accepted in society. This turning point represented, by the way, a crisis for Jonas, who remembers that the heroic stature of his father began to shrink, as he decided that Swedish was the one and only language to be used (Khemiri 2006, 200). On the other hand, Jonas admits that meditating on language with his father and Kadir helped him to observe Swedish at a distance for the first time, arousing his curiosity. Even Kadir remembers that time of learning as an expansion of his possibilities. He too loves Swedish, and their collaborative authorship is a sign of this shared passion. It is not by chance that Kadir, in his first letter, quoted above, mentions this memorable past experience, and relates it to the fact that Jonas is becoming an author.

Kadir, who possesses the notebook, copies the ten “mnemonic rules” listed in it. They are subjective and idiosyncratic, but contain witty remarks on Swedish, seen from the peripheral, multilingual perspective that belongs above all to Abbas. The first rule confirms the feature I have tried to describe; Swedish is impure, open to import, and especially rich in loanwords from French. It is precisely this feature that is exposed through Kadir's style. This is how Kadir first quotes and then comments on the rule written in the old notebook, as part of the memory work he shares with Jonas in the letter exchange:

#### MINNESREGEL I

Svenskans är lånets språk. När i tvivlet på ett svenskt ord – välj franskans ekvivalent. Eller engelskans. Detta sparar mycket tid i lärandet av vokabulär. Svenskar är ett folk med snabba influenser från omvärlden.

Detta var vår initiala språkregel. I skrivboken kollektionerade vi en monstruös mängd korrespondenser mellan svenskan och franskan och engelskan för att effektivt bygga våra vokabulärer. I dubbel spaltform med länkade pilar står substantiv som paraply, aveny, portmonnä, valör. Adjektiven inkluderar ord som malplacerad, excellent, vital. Ett särskilt uppslag har vigts åt mängdens verb, där står prononcera, terminera, negligera, marchera, respondera, logera. (Khemiri 2006, 203–204)

Jonas is aware that this family language, by him called “khemiriska”, is a matrix for both his identity and authorship. Abbas, who used to break the rules of

standard correctness and create his own language, was a hero for Jonas as a child and a boy (Khemiri 2006, 107–108, 111). This linguistic universe is intellectual but also emotional; it deals with love and familiar intimacy, and Kadir seems happy to have been able to share it for some time. The collaborative writing of the notebook marks, in fact, the peak of intimacy between father and son. Afterwards, they begin to part, both because Abbas becomes too anxiously absorbed in his project of being accepted by the Swedes, and because Jonas becomes a teenager who sees things from a more critical point of view, noticing the widespread racism Abbas is determined to ignore and deny.

One of the questions the reader of *Montecore* is confronted with, is whether Kadir's language corresponds to "khemiriska" and, consequently, whether Kadir and Abbas are the same voice, the same person. In his memoirs, Jonas remembers his father being proud "about having mixed a little proper Swedish into French-Arabic" (Khemiri 2011, 85);<sup>10</sup> in addition, as I have mentioned, the style in Abbas' letters is identical to Kadir's, since Kadir is the translator. As some critics have pointed out, a suspicion grows in the reader that Kadir might be Abbas in disguise, trying to get in touch with his son (Refsum 2010, 84; Refsum 2011, 169; Apelkvist 2019, 105–106). Besides acting as Abbas' advocate, Kadir seems to possess an intimate knowledge of Jonas and the relationship between him and his father; furthermore, he possesses, as we have seen, the notebook with the language rules; finally, he has got Abbas' telephone number, and suggests that Jonas should get in touch with him. In the epilogue, in a last email to Jonas, Kadir protests against what Jonas has reported; according to rumours in Tunisia, Kadir became a gambler and committed suicide. Kadir denies that he is Jonas' father in disguise (Khemiri 2006, 358–359). Even in this case, the novel does not give a solution, and lets the reader try to construct her or his truth. Clues in the novel can lead to either one truth or the other. Perhaps, determining this sort of truth is not essential to the reader of *Montecore*, since the pact with the reader is different. *Montecore* is not a thriller or a spy story, but a work of autofiction and metafiction, where the reader must imagine and test possible truths.

As I have mentioned, the project of collaborative authorship becomes problematic for Jonas, who, as a debuting author, must find his own voice and tone, getting rid of the spell that belongs to that other sphere, no matter how fond he may be of it. Part three opens with Jonas' doubts as to the viability of the project of collaborative authorship with Kadir; the doubt refers in particular to the linguistic influence:

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<sup>10</sup> Khemiri (2006), 105: "[pappor] ser stolta ut över att ha blandat in lite finsvenska mitt i fransk-arabiskan.

**Så där sitter du nu**, nyss hemkommen från en läsning i Södertälje med en pappersinslagen bukett och en bok av en lokal författare om runstenar. Du läser Kadirs kommentarer och känner ett svidande sug i magen, ett sånt där sug som säger att det här kommer aldrig gå vägen, att du inte är redo, att du istället borde koncentrera dig på att arbeta vidare på något av de andra projekten. Då där du ägnar tid åt att tänka ut intrig, där karaktärerna bara är fantasier och en lagom peripeti kan injiceras på precis rätt ställe. Och du har precis skrivit klart meningen när du inser att "injicera" är Kadirs ord och inte ditt, att det är hans språk som har börjat influera dig och då växer sig tvivlen ännu starkare. För hur bra är egentligen idén med en gemensamt skriven bok? (Khemiri 2006, 127, bold style by the author)

Jonas' language in *Montecore* can be colloquial and familiar; it can display idiosyncratic uses, most notably the plural forms "Dads" and "Moms" ('pappor' and 'mammor') to call his parents. His language is however different from Kadir's and Abbas', because it is, without any doubt, standard Swedish. Jonas' objection in the above-quoted passage anticipates a problem for the author Jonas Hassen Khemiri, who, after his success with *Ett öga rött* and *Montecore*, felt the need to give up the linguistic magic he had employed in his first two novels (Cartagena 2015). As Elisabeth Hjorth observes, while Abbas shrinks in the Swedish language, Jonas grows and conquers a room of his own thanks to his skills (2015, 151–152).

## A Tale of Migration, Impossible Integration, and Growing Distance between Father and Son

Abbas' story – told in part by himself in his letters to Kadir, and in part by Kadir and Jonas in their co-authorship – is, in spite of the funny episodes it contains, a serious and melancholic tale of migration from Tunisia to Sweden. Initially, it is about a young man's dream of emancipation through the art of photography; about his love story with the Swedish girl Pernilla, met at the seaside in Tabarka; about his moving to Sweden, his life with Pernilla, their marriage and marital life with three children. Eventually, it deals more and more with the daily difficulties and the apparently soft but structural racism he meets in society, his struggle to be recognized and accepted as a new Swede, and the daily humiliations he is subjected to.<sup>11</sup> Abbas works first as a dishwasher, then as an underground train driver, but he dreams of becoming a photographer. His unsatisfactory level of Swedish is a constant reproach and a handicap when he looks for the job he loves:

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<sup>11</sup> "Structural racism" means a form of non-violent race- and ethnicity-related discrimination which often remains undetected and is a widely accepted part of everyday life (Ring Petersen/Schramm 2016, 195).



Det premiära steget var att lokalisera en assistenttjänst. Jag vandrade mina steg från ateljé till ateljé, jag presenterade mina arbetsprover från Tabarka och erbjöd mig till reducerad eller nästan gratis kostnad. Min succé var inte särskilt abrupt. Frekventa var de fotografer som detaljerade att dom tyvärr inte kunde assistera en assistent som inte kultiverar svenska språket. Mina argument om att bildens värld inte per automatik kräver språklig exakthet ignorerades. (Khemiri 2006: 89–90)

Abbas' foreign perspective allows the implied author represent Swedishness from the outside as well as the inside (Apelkvist 2019, 87). Abbas' gaze on people's behaviour when spring comes, for example, is affectionate and moving; they look like shy plants, longing for the sun, enjoying its first warmer rays and stretching towards them (Khemiri 2006, 92–93). Abbas' gaze becomes more critical when he observes how Pernilla's friends, the left-wing Swedes of the Seventies, play the role of the world's political conscience from a comfortable position (Khemiri 2006, 93–94).

Abbas needs to convince himself and others that he can integrate himself, moreover, assimilate himself into the Swedish lifestyle. His optimism is heroic, in a way, but leads to overt conflicts in his family. His wife Pernilla works as a nurse and is the actual breadwinner; she is dissatisfied with a husband who has neither learned Swedish properly nor got a steady job after several years in Sweden. Abbas keeps dreaming of his own photo studio, and he firmly believes, against all odds, in the myth of successful integration, and in Sweden as the open society for all those who want to improve their condition. Abbas finally becomes a photographer, as he gives his professional identity and his shop a Swedish name – and specializes in dog pictures. He pays a price for his success, becoming more and more absent from the family, an anxious workaholic absorbed in his purpose. Through memory work, Jonas recalls his father with solidarity and a need to pay homage to his efforts and suffering, but also with a growing irritation and critical detachment.

In his last letter to Kadir, from 1985, Abbas notices, in fact, a change in social climate, with a more overt hostility against immigrants, as their number is increasing in the country (Khemiri 2006, 163–164). Eventually, he denies that racism exists in Sweden, as if he cannot bear that truth. This is what divides him from Jonas, who experiences, on the contrary, a more brutal social climate as a teenager. Owing to the economic crisis, opposition against mass immigration and xenophobia become even stronger in Sweden in the 1990s. The so-called Laser Man, who shot immigrants at random because of their dark complexion, becomes a symbol (Tamas 2002; Khemiri 2006, 285–295). At the beginning of the 1990s, Jonas and his friends start to revolt against this state of things, and acquire an identity as *blattar*. The term (singular *blatte*) “is a strongly denigrating designation for immigrants,

especially young men with dark hair” (Källström 2011, 133), but it becomes for Jonas and his peers a sign of identity and resistance against the oppressing conformity imposed by Swedishness. Abbas disapproves of his son’s approach. Such a conflict between Jonas and his father clearly recalls the one between Halim and his father Otman in *Ett öga rött*, which again can be seen as the author’s reply to a rather superficial autobiographical reading during the initial reception of his debut novel. The autobiographical space that the interplay between *Ett öga rött* and *Montecore* creates, offers a more precise explanation.<sup>12</sup> The *blatte* identity and the suburbia language connected with it were a phase in Jonas’ *Bildung*, and possibly in Jonas Hassen Khemiri’s as well.

As both a precursory and revisionary co-author, Kadir is disappointed with the outcome of the story written by the executive author Jonas. He thinks that Jonas is ungrateful. He is dissatisfied with the lack of mythical dimension in Jonas’ portrait of Abbas and with his depressing depiction of family life, in short, with his realism. As much as Jonas criticizes the structural racism Abbas is a victim of, he is shocked by the way his father vanished from family life. In the end, Kadir tries desperately to arrange a mythical happy end of the novel, with a father-and-son reunion in Stockholm, which of course cannot occur.

The last part of *Montecore* conveys a sense of loss and dissolution, in fact far from the reconciliation between Otman and Halim at the end of *Ett öga rött*. Abbas’ shop is damaged in a racist attack. Pernilla and Abbas divorce, Abbas leaves the family and moves back to Tunisia in 1992. Kadir and Jonas cannot agree on a shared version of the truth about Abbas. The reader is left with versions of truth that clash. It is her or his final task to try to find a possible version within the space created by Khemiri in the autofictional and metafictional novel *Montecore*, which deals both with migration and with the traumas of postmigration for a Swedish family.

## Conclusions

The authenticity readers can look for in *Montecore* cannot correspond to exact biographical facts, although Khemiri’s autofiction always hints at an experienced reality that is very personal and even intimate. A son’s sorrow towards a beloved

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<sup>12</sup> According to Philippe Lejeune (1975, 165–196), an author can express an autobiographical intention and strategy in his oeuvre, even if she or he does not write an autobiography proper. This is what he terms the autobiographical space.

father, who has eventually vanished from family life or disappointed the son's expectations, remains a leitmotiv in his authorship. It is confirmed by his latest novel *Pappaklausulen*, which enlarges the writer's autobiographical space especially in connection with *Ett öga rött* and *Montecore*.

Khemiri's novels show a double movement: mastering the past and sharing memory are a part of young men's learning process, of their effort to understand their present condition and create a project for their own lives. The condition of postmigration affects their existential and familiar sphere, as well as the social and political world they live in. *Montecore* represents a chapter in this complex literary universe. Collaborative authorship proves to be more than a brilliant literary, metafictional play in *Montecore*. The multiple authorship staged in the novel, featuring Abbas's presence in Jonas' work thanks to Kadir's collaboration, allows Jonas Hassen Khemiri to pay a tribute to his father and his generation, recognizing their part in his authorship. With their experience of migration, they have co-authored Jonas' texts. They are a part of his memory and his universe. Their legacy consists of a particular linguistic genius that defies the rules of Swedish, displaying the power of language to invent, and to imagine a different, less oppressive order of things. Interpreting Kadir's and Abbas' standpoints offers Jonas Hassen Khemiri the possibility of a peripheral point of view on hegemonic, self-complacent, unreflecting Swedishness – a healthy form of critical thinking.

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