An Awakening in Sweden: Contemporary Discourses of Swedish Cultural and National Identity

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An Awakening in Sweden: Contemporary Discourses of Swedish Cultural and National Identity

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Undergraduate Honors Thesis
University of Colorado Boulder
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For my

Mothers

Grandmothers

Mödrar

Mormödrar

Around the world
Acknowledgements

I am very lucky to have so many people who have supported me along this journey.

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Abstract

This thesis is an ethnographic study that examines contemporary discourses of cultural and national identity in Sweden. Fieldwork for this study consisted of interviews with fourteen Swedish individuals and participant observation in several locations in Sweden. Relying on insights from scholarship concerning the ethnographic study of Sweden, the study of the Nordic social welfare states, and studies of race, nationalism, and cultural identity, this thesis describes the historical, political, and social factors that influence how Swedish people form perceptions of cultural and national identity. Taking inspiration from Allan Pred’s theory of “the unspeakable”, this thesis develops a theoretical framework based on three sociolinguistic registers: the spoken, the unspoken, and the unspeakable. Using this framework, as well as theories on nostalgia, Benedict Anderson’s theory of imagined communities, and Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of distinction and taste, this thesis analyses situations and concepts that articulate common Swedish themes of belonging, inclusion, and exclusion. The conclusions of this study offer insights into the contemporary discourses surrounding who is a Swede, and what it means to be recognized and accepted as a Swede in Swedish society.
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Introduction

Sweden in 2017

What does it mean to be Swedish today? My thesis is an ethnographic study of how Swedes understand Swedish cultural and national identity at a time of political and demographic changes. Swedish state policies have shifted in the past two decades, expanding their immigration policies and granting asylum to an increased number of refugees from outside Western Europe. These policy changes have noticeably increased the diversity in Sweden. Approximately a quarter of the population in 2016 had some degree of foreign background, meaning that they immigrated themselves or they were born in Sweden to one or more foreign parents (Statistiska Centralbyrån 2017). Although Sweden prides itself on its measures of equality and unity, this increased diversity has had noticeable impacts on the way that Swedes live in and perceive the state of their country. For example, there are now more and more people living in Sweden who do not speak Swedish and whose cultural and religious beliefs differ from traditional Swedish norms and values. Although none of these factors are inherently negative, they can still create strain and tension between Swedish and immigrant communities. Swedish people are taking stock of their own values while also learning about and adapting to the customs of newcomers. My thesis examines concepts of Swedish national and cultural identity and the factors that delimit the ability to identify as a Swede and be accepted as such by other Swedes. As I will argue, Swedish discourses of cultural and national identity—and related questions of belonging, inclusion, and exclusion—are best analyzed by examining their articulation in three different registers: the spoken, the unspoken, and the unspeakable.
Research Methods

The primary research for my thesis was completed during the summer of 2017. I conducted field work in Sweden between the 17th of June and the 16th of July while traveling between five different locations in northern and central Sweden; Sundsvall, Höga Kusten, Hudiksvall, Uppsala, and Södertälje. My fieldwork travel and living expenses were provided through a grant from the University of Colorado’s Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program (UROP). A proposal for my research and fieldwork was reviewed and approved by the Internal Review Board of the University of Colorado. Before traveling to Sweden for my fieldwork I arranged for all of my research related documents and information to be translated into Swedish. My research was facilitated by the support and involvement of Swedish friends and relatives that I have come to know through vacation visits to the United States and international exchange studies in Sweden.

During my fieldwork I both observed daily life and conducted in-person interviews. My informants included friends, relatives, and members of their social circles. I recruited potential interview subjects using an email that included an invitation to participate, the qualifications for eligibility, as well as a brief description of my research. To qualify, a respondent needed to be over the age of 18, currently residing in Sweden, and capable of comfortably conversing in English. I first circulated the recruitment message to my friends and relatives in Sweden, who then passed it on within their social networks. If I was contacted by someone who was interested in participating we would exchange the necessary information to arrange a time and place for the interview to be conducted.

From this recruitment process I conducted 14 audio-recorded interviews that were structured around the conversational discussion of a list of prepared questions and then later
transcribed into dialogue format. Before the interview began, each respondent read and signed a consent document verifying that they understood the specifics of their participation in my research. Copies of the consent document and interview questions were provided to each informant in both Swedish and English. Due to the advanced subject matter and my intermediate Swedish language ability the interviews were conducted primarily in English. During the interviews, I spoke Swedish on a casual level with my interview subjects to establish familiarity and to clarify any words or phrases that caused confusion in either Swedish or English.

Although many of my respondents told me that they were not concerned about the privacy of their statements, I made the decision to assign pseudonyms given the sometimes personal or sensitive subject matter and context of my research questions. Pseudonyms were chosen from published lists of popular Swedish names from the 20th and 21st century. Some of the pseudonyms were assigned to certain respondents based on personal experiences that I shared with them, but the majority are just different enough choices from their real name to prevent identification. Along with the interview, I recorded information including the date the interview was conducted, the city or region where the interview was conducted, the self-identified gender of the respondents, and their self-provided age. Along with the pseudonym, I use this information to describe my interview subjects as they appear in my thesis. In my records there is a list of the real names of all of my interview subjects, but they are not listed in any way that would connect them to their particular interview.

In addition to the formal recorded interviews, I conducted participant-observation throughout my fieldwork experience. Participant-observation is a qualitative research method that involves the researcher interacting with and forming relationships with the group or population that she is studying. The participant-observation portion of my research is based on
what I observed of Swedish society and culture by joining in everyday activities with relatives, friends, and members of their social circles, allowing me to identify their typical social practices (both in the private spaces of their homes and the public spaces they visited, such as restaurants, bars, shops, and recreational areas) and the aesthetic and cultural differences between the different regions of Sweden where I conducted fieldwork. I also was an active participant in holiday celebrations and recreational activities.

I documented my research with notetaking and photography. My notes included descriptions of locations and events, as well as insights gained from conversations and interactions that took place outside of the formal recorded interviews. Any photographs from my fieldwork that have been shared publicly have been done so with the expressed oral consent of those whose image or property is depicted.

The descriptions and analyses described in this thesis also draw on experiences and observations from the semester that I studied at Uppsala University in Uppsala, Sweden as an international exchange student during the period from August of 2016 to January of 2017. This period of time was not official research and thus not included as part of my IRB approved data set. It does include a range of observations and perceptions that originally occurred in personal and public settings.

After returning from the field, I transcribed my interview recordings and typed my handwritten notes. I analyzed these texts to identify common themes and topics. I started this process by combing through each interview and picking out a selection of topics that felt relevant to my research focus on discourses of national and cultural identity. I made a list of these and marked how many times they were mentioned in each interview. The first result of this process
was a list of 14 themes and concepts. I chose to focus particular attention on the four most mentioned topics; holidays (particularly Midsummer), the social welfare system, nature, and Swedes being shy or reserved. After identifying these main themes, I integrated some of the other mentioned topics into the overall conversation as well.

My Swedishness

Part of what inspired my original decision to go to Sweden to study abroad was the opportunity to connect with my relatives and family friends. I am connected to Sweden through my mother’s family who have stayed in touch across the Atlantic for over 90 years after my great-great-grandfather emigrated to the United States, as well as through a Swedish exchange student who is now considered part of my family. Although some of the people that will be referenced in this thesis are in fact my fourth cousins or second cousins twice removed, for the sake of simplicity, and to better reflect how we described and understood our relationships, I will be referring to them in general as my cousins or relatives. During my visits to Sweden, these distant relatives whom I once knew only as names in an address book welcomed me into their homes and I now see them as close family members, just like my extended family in the United States. Even though I was exploring my independence by living abroad, my relatives became a valuable new support system in my life. They are my Swedish culture guides, who have constructively corrected my pronunciation and cultivated my newfound coffee addiction.

With a pale complexion, blond hair, and blue eyes I resemble many of my Swedish cousins. As I traveled around Sweden, the people I encountered did not immediately identify me as American, and, indeed, often assumed that I was Swedish—until I opened my mouth. In the earlier phases of learning Swedish, I would often speak as little as possible in public, whether in
Swedish or English. As I went about the ordinary routines of buying groceries or bus tickets, I found that my interactions flowed more comfortably when they were conducted in silence. Indeed, I observed how many fluent Swedish speakers went through these same sorts of interactions in silence. While my selective use of silence was at first a personal strategy to avoid drawing attention to myself and disrupting the ordinary flow of everyday life with my clearly American accent as I adapted to the new routines of life as an exchange student in Sweden, when I returned to conduct ethnographic fieldwork, I came to see the deep cultural significance of silence in Sweden. As I learned, Swedes can communicate a great deal while saying very little.

At the same time, my own silence allowed me to do a lot of listening and watching. Many of the things that I first observed silently I later came to understand as social and cultural phenomena that were central to my research on discourses of cultural and national identity in Sweden. Through my efforts to experience the everyday ins and outs of Swedish life, I have learned a lot about how Swedish people themselves understand and describe Sweden, while my experiences and identity as an American provided me with some critical distance and a point of comparison for what I learned.

*Swedish Midsummer*

One of my most significant participant observation experiences during my research was Swedish Midsummer. At the time I was immersed in the celebrations and saw the holiday from their perspective, as their Swedish story. Later as I reviewed and analyzed my research I came to see how Midsummer traditions and celebrations in Sweden can be seen as a function of nostalgia and nature as part of how perceptions of Swedish identity are understood in the present.
I experienced my first Swedish Midsummer at a summer cottage in northern Sweden with my relatives Elin and Stefan, their teenage daughter Hanna and young son Anton. Their summer cottage is in a small neighborhood of cottages along a bay on the Swedish Höga Kusten (High Coast). Most of the people who own the other cottages in the area also visit for Midsummer, so the little community celebrates together. It is a holiday filled with eating, drinking, entertaining, and enjoying nature. The morning of midsommarafton (Midsummer’s Eve) is the time to go out into the forest and fields to pick wildflowers. Flexible green branches are collected along with the flowers. These are the supplies needed to construct the midsommarstång (Midsummer Pole). Whatever branches and flowers remain are used to fashion midsummer crowns.

![Image](https://example.com/image1)

Figure 1: Several of the cottage neighbors setting up the midsummer pole (Photo Credit: Kaitlin May)

One of the main focuses of midsummer is the food. Some foods are considered to be absolutely essential in order to fulfill the tradition. On almost every midsommerbord (midsummer table) you will find lax (salmon), sil (herring), farsk potatis (new potatoes), västerbottenpaj (västerbotten cheese pie), and jordguber (strawberries). Swedes seem to have a
lot of spoken and unspoken opinions about the presence of these foods and how they should be prepared. At the same time, while many Swedes will go out of their way to acquire and prepare the foods most traditionally and aesthetically connected to Midsummer, there are often modern and multicultural influences on the table as well. In addition to all of the expected Midsummer fare our selection also included a *tacopaj* (taco meat pie), which many of the Swedes present joked was becoming a new Swedish tradition. Another focus of Midsummer is alcohol and toasts. “Snaps” or *akvavit* is the traditional holiday spirit for both Midsummer and Christmas. At 40% alcohol content it seems to be a catalyst for many of the lively Midsummer stories that are told. Although portioned into small glasses, they are refilled liberally throughout the evening. You drink your snaps whenever a toast is given, which on Midsummer is frequently. A toast was even given for me to celebrate my first Swedish Midsummer. By the end of the meal to the amusement of the group one of the neighbors began to loudly and passionately recite poetry. In this way, Midsummer is an example of a situation where many of the reserved characteristics and social mannerisms of Swedish life are left aside for the evening. It is a night known for arguments, romances, and humorous stories.

When the day finally does end some Swedish girls and women still tuck seven different kinds of wildflowers underneath their pillows according to the folktale that this will make you dream about the man that you are going to marry. Although the sentiment of this legend contradicts starkly with the value of female independence in contemporary Sweden, it is practiced as a folk history tradition that allows for the experience of nostalgia without having to actually believe in or agree with the message.
Starting a Conversation

All of the interviews that I conducted began with the same conversation. First, I asked each person if he or she would identify themselves as Swedish. They all answered quickly with some variation of yes. That was an easy question. The next was much more difficult: “What makes someone a Swede?” Almost everyone had to pause, some sighed, and several first distanced themselves from their answer with statements like: “I don’t know.” “Well maybe...” Even so, I did receive a very interesting set of answers. While there was no consensus among my interview subjects, as I analyzed my interview transcripts, I saw that the answers tended to fall into the following “if” categories:

- If you were born in Sweden
- If you were raised in Sweden
- If your parents and/or grandparents are Swedish
- If your family has lived in Sweden for hundreds of years
- If you view life like a Swede
- If your passport says you are Swedish

I would argue that these “if” responses, though based on a small sample of interviews, are broadly representative of dominant ideas of citizenship, nationality, heritage, social identity, and cultural identity in Sweden. However, when responding to my question about what makes someone a Swede, many of my informants’ answers revealed that they were assuming that the “Swede” in my question referred to someone who has always been considered a Swede. Was it possible, I wondered, that someone—despite what his or her passport said or whose family has never lived in Sweden or identified as Swedish—could ever become Swedish? Did my interview subjects think that some could become a Swede? According to all of the Swedes that I
interviewed, the unanimous response was that yes, you can. However, most of their answers also came with an “if” clarification:

- If you respect our Swedish values
- If you follow our laws
- If you make an effort to connect with us culturally
- If you learn to speak Swedish
- If you want to be a Swede

My thesis will argue that these clarifications represent what many Swedish people would consider to be the unofficial and often unspoken criteria for being a Swede. My interview questions prompted the Swedes I spoke with to reflect on and identify criteria for “Swedishness” that are not always explicitly mentioned, and my interviews often led to conversations about what being a Swede would mean in terms of appearance, mannerisms, cultural practices, and social values. As I will suggest in the following chapters, these criteria for “Swedishness” are perceived, practiced and discursively communicated and signaled in three distinct registers: the spoken, the unspoken, and the unspeakable.

Literature

My analysis of historical and contemporary ideas and values of Swedish cultural and national takes inspiration from and contributes to scholarship in cultural anthropology, sociology, history, political science, and cultural geography. In particular, my work builds on three main areas of research: ethnographic studies of Sweden, political, social, and historical analyses of the Nordic social welfare systems, and critical theories of cultural identity, nationalism, and race.
**Ethnographies of Sweden**

Ethnographic research on Sweden has taken many forms since its origins in ethnological studies of peasant culture in relation to folklore, traditions, and home crafts (Berg and Svensson 1934). Studies of life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Sweden often focus on how cultural structures and values were transposed and adjusted during the social and economic transition from an emphasis on peasant agrarian lifestyle to the development of a bourgeois middle class. The remaking of newly formed middle class and working class cultures are later reexamined in the context of the interwar period in Sweden and the establishment of the welfare state (Frykman and Löfgren 1987; Frykman 1985; Löfgren and Ehn 1982). With the rise of Social Democracy and *folkhemmet*, ethnographers of Sweden began to look specifically at the social and cultural consequences of labor disputes and economic change from both individual and group positions (Daun 1969; Daun 1974). Other work, from Swedish and international perspectives, examined Swedish “national culture,” identifying common characteristics and mindsets of Swedes in the context of typical practices, traditions, and perceptions of communication and relationships (Daun 1989; Gullestad 1989). As Sweden became more internationally connected and began accepting immigrants from outside of Western Europe, ethnographers began to look Sweden’s place in the global community and the impacts of globalization on Swedish culture (Hannerz and Löfgren 1994; Löfgren 1996; Hannerz 1996; O’Dell 1997). Ethnographers of Sweden in the twenty-first century began to examine relationships between Swedish and immigrant populations in terms of integration, segregation, racism, and social miscommunications in both large cities and small town settings (Norman 2004; Graham 2002; Andersson and Magnusson Turner 2001). Another body of work is based on ethnographic study of diverse populations within Sweden during the European refugee crisis,
indicating continued interest in topics of integration, ethnicity, and culture, and language (Sundberg 2013; Milani Tommaso M. and Jonsson Rickard 2012; Olwig 2011b). Most recently, Swedish political and social development has been analyzed by ethnographers through lenses of the planning and design of elements such as furniture and city infrastructure (Mack 2012; Murphy Keith M. 2013; Murphy 2015; Mack 2017).

**Nordic Social Welfare States**

My research is also informed by studies of Scandinavia and the Nordic social welfare states that address historical, cultural, economic, and political factors. Initial scholarly observations of social democracy movements in the 1930’s described the Nordic countries, and specifically Sweden, as walking the middle path between socialism and communism (Childs 1936). The development and progress of social democracy governments in the Scandinavian and Nordic countries has been studied in the context of each nation’s approaches to social welfare, equality, and labor market strategies (Hilson 2008; Andersson and Hilson 2009; Sejersted and Adams 2011). Scholars have identified some specific trends and concepts that have defined the history and understanding of the Nordic welfare states. The scientifically inspired approach to building the Swedish welfare state and shaping the nation’s economic and social reform policies has been analyzed by scholars in terms of both positive effects such as reduced poverty and with negative effects such as eugenic compulsory sterilization programs (Cool 2013; Marklund 2009). Other scholars look at the political goals of the contemporary Nordic welfare from an economic perspective and have compared the relative successes and failures of the Nordic countries with welfare systems in other countries (Andersen 2007; Ministry of Finance 2017). The social and political history of the Swedish model, particularly the idea of *folkhemmet* or the people’s home, has been critically analyzed with regard to breaks in the forward movement of social progress.
and politically oriented Nordic nostalgia (Marklund 2009; Andersson 2009). There has also been an increased focus in recent scholarship on the relationships and interactions that take place between the Nordic welfare states and their increasing immigrant populations. This specific welfare context has been addressed in terms of the political decisions that are made in Nordic countries about the support and function of welfare for immigrant populations, debates whether the welfare programs should be the entities responsible for the socialization and integration of new immigrants, and whether the welfare state programs are actually beneficial to immigrant populations or if they are creating new forms of inequality (Olwig 2011b; Olwig 2011a; Eastmond 2011; Borevi 2014; Gebhardt 2016).

_Cultural Identity, Nationalism, and Race_

In addition to these region-specific bodies of scholarship, my thesis also relies on insights from the fields of the study of cultural identity, nationalism, and race, with a Swedish and/or Scandinavian emphasis wherever possible. Foundational concepts in the study of nation and cultural identity show how residents of a country feel connected to one another based on a sense of “imagined community” and through the recognition of symbols and aesthetics that display distinction in relation to expected taste in that society (Anderson 1983; Bourdieu 1984). Scholars have also addressed the physical, cultural, social, and political structures that enable judgements of race, racism, and the impact of those concepts on perceptions of cultural identity for traditionally small and homogenous societies like Sweden and Denmark in light of the steady increase in immigrant populations. The complexities and contradictions of national and cultural identity have been discussed through acknowledging the debates that occur between opposing ideological groups on issues such as race and religion (Hjerm 1998; Pred 2000b; Pred 2004; Nordin 2005; Jenkins 2012). The rise in popularity of Nordic nationalism groups has created a
new scholarly interest in the way that nationalists in the Nordic countries describe and identify themselves ideologically, and in the mediums (such as music and social media) that they express their ideas through in the modern context (Teitelbaum 2017a). There has been a recent increased interest by scholars of Scandinavia and the Nordic countries in the recognition of the origins, perceptions, and performances of whiteness and race in the Nordic context. Nordic whiteness is addressed in terms of social and racial profiling, non-white adoption experiences, receptions of immigrant literature, white nationalist social and political movements, and notions of white hegemonic melancholy (Andreassen 2014; Hübinette and Räterlinck 2014; Hübinette and Lundström 2014a; Garner 2014; Teitelbaum 2017b; Lundström and Teitelbaum 2017a; Gokieli 2017; Catrin Lundström 2017; Sabina Ivenäs 2017).

Framework

My analysis and interpretation of the information I collected from interviews and participant observation has been greatly inspired and influenced by the work of cultural geographer Allan Pred. In his analysis of Swedish society, Pred attempts to create a conversation between the events of the past and the realities of the present. His goal is to create tension between what was and what is, what is remembered fondly and what has been hidden out of sight, so as to “produce flashes of lightning,” or moments of discovery and clarity about complex questions and ideas. In particular, I draw on Pred’s concept of “the unspeakable.” The unspeakable refers to the presence of feelings, ideas, and actions that are manifested in society yet are typically not addressed directly. Pred describes the unspeakable as a constant presence that indicates “an absence, a silence, an invisibility” (Pred 2004:147). The unspeakable is a constant presence in the spaces, practices, and thoughts of everyday life. The unspeakable can exist on the macro-level of global geographies and power struggles, as well as at the micro-level
of specific individual interactions. Furthermore, the unspeakable encapsulates both what is and is not there to be seen, heard, felt, and recognized by different actors in a society. As Pred explains, the unspeakable refers at once to a collection of ideas such as “the taken for granted,” “that which is unutterable because unrecallable,” “the taboo-laden,” “that for which there are literally no words,” and the ‘indescribably objectionable or hateful” (Pred 2004:147–8).

In his research, Pred analyses the presence of racism in Sweden’s cultural history and present by discussing the unspeakableness of racist imagery and stereotypical descriptions that appear in Swedish museum and art exhibits. I do not intend to fully replicate his research and analysis on these ideas. I will discuss racist ideas and places in Sweden, but identifying these themes specifically is not the main objective of my research. Instead, I use the idea of the unspeakable to develop a theoretical perspective on what ideas about cultural and national identity are spoken, unspoken, and unspeakable in everyday interactions and conversations in Sweden. In this analysis the spoken, the unspoken, and the unspeakable are seen as sociolinguistic registers. In the field of linguistics, registers describe varieties of language that are associated with a particular situation of use as well as particular communicative purposes (Biber and Conrad 2009:6). In my research, the particular situations and communicative purposes that these registers articulate are the discourses of Swedish national and cultural identity. The varieties of language that I analyze however, are representative of both direct and indirect communication. Many of the ideas I discuss still function in terms of language even if the mention of them is rare or taboo. In addition to the understanding of the unspeakable as defined by Pred, I view these discourses in terms of what is spoken and unspoken. The spoken includes common topics of conversations and ideas that people discuss with little to no hesitation or discretion. The unspoken, while not to the extent of unspeakable, are ideas and themes that are
commonly recognized and understood but may not be directly articulated or described. I use this framework of the spoken, unspoken, and unspeakable to assess what lies beneath the surface of what was said (or not said) in my interviews. I argue that analyzing conversation and silence in terms of these three registers of speech helps to show the complex ways that identity and culture are or are not being addressed in Sweden in 2017. The aim of my thesis is to describe some of the ways that “Swedishness” is recognized, communicated, and performed in the lives of the Swedes that I interviewed and spent time with. These three registers, I argue, allow Swedes to derive meaning from a spectrum of articulations and expressions between what is directly offered and what is only subtly conveyed.

My thesis also draws on theories of nostalgia. Commonly understood as a sentimental desire for the past, nostalgia often refers to thinking back to an earlier time, longing for a different place or way of being, and wishing that the special qualities imagined as belonging to these other times or places could be re-experienced or replicated in one’s current context. In particular, I draw on two critical analyses of nostalgia in Sweden. The first is from Orvar Löfgren and Jonas Frykman’s classic ethnography of Swedish life, *Culture Builders* (Frykman and Löfgren 1987). Lofgren and Frykman describe a sense of nostalgia in Sweden related to nature and perceptions of the past agricultural and peasant heritage society. This sense of nostalgia is intertwined with the twentieth-century ideology of the cult of nature and a nature-oriented national romanticism. The secondary perspective of nostalgia comes from Jenny Andersson’s analysis of the history and context of Sweden’s social and political spheres (Andersson 2009). Andersson presents nostalgia in terms of conflicting positions toward historical and contemporary politics and social values. The focus of these conflicts of nostalgia that she suggests is the original conception of the people’s home, which is regarded as a common
historical experience in national identity of many Swedes. Andersson argues that the recent political past in Sweden has been characterized by a failure to challenge nostalgic ideas of the people’s home and instead utilize the lessons of the past as a resource from which to rethink Swedish identity in the contemporary context.

Finally, I draw on the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Benedict Anderson to analyze narratives and symbols associated with cultural and national identity in Sweden. The concept of “imagined communities” was developed by Benedict Anderson as part of his research regarding the origins and spread of nationalism. According to Anderson the imagined community describes how the people of a nation will identify with a common imagination of themselves and each other as members of that nation even though they will most likely never be acquainted with the entire community (Anderson 1983:6). The concept of the imagined community is beneficial in understanding how the Swedish values that are associated with the nation-state of Sweden are understood and performed by Swedes on an individual and national level. Bourdieu discusses culture in terms of what symbols or practices are praised as significant examples of what is required to identify with and be accepted by that group or class (Bourdieu 1984). These examples and their meanings are defined in terms of taste and distinction. Taste refers to cultural patterns of preference and choice that establish certain styles, manners, consumer goods as symbols of a particular class or culture. In my discussion of Swedish culture, I draw from Bourdieu’s theories to analyze how nature-oriented traditions and aesthetics are perceived and performed according to a cultural and historic sense of proper tastes and preferences.

“Ethnic Swedes”

According to the Swedish Statistical Database, in 2016 approximately a quarter of the population of Sweden was foreign-born (Statistiska Centralbyrå 2017). This can bring into
question what it means to ask, “who is a Swede?” When talking about my interview subjects, I use the term “Ethnic Swedes,” which is inspired by Richard Jenkins’ discussion of “Ethnic Danes” in his ethnography, *Being Danish: Paradoxes of Identity in Everyday Life*. Jenkins describes ethnicity as “identification on the basis of membership of collectivities that are differentiated from each other by shared ‘ways of life’ or ‘culture’: language, knowledge, beliefs, customs, everyday practices, artefacts, and so on” (Jenkins 2012:3). All of my interview subjects were born in Sweden, speak Swedish, and were raised as part of Swedish society. Thus, they can be identified as members of a Swedish ethnicity in terms of their “ways of life” as Jenkins describes. My interview subjects are also all white. Although the population is not homogenous, the majority of people living in Sweden are white. Although now somewhat socially unspeakably there is a real correlation between the white population and the shared “ways of life” associated with the identification of a Swedish ethnicity. That is not to say that non-white individuals cannot act Swedish, but their non-whiteness will always represent a barrier for full Swedishness. Since all of my interview subjects are native-born, white, and culturally Swedish, I define them as “Ethnic Swedes.” Jenkins uses the distinction of “Ethnic Danes” to refer to white Danes as an ethnic group, though acknowledging that this is not an expression that would be accepted by all Danish people (Jenkins 2012:7). Due to the similarities between the demographics and cultural history of Denmark and Sweden, I find “Ethnic Swedes” fits the same criteria upon which Jenkins reached his decision. The identification “Ethnic Swedes” will be used in this analysis to contextualize the experiences of my interview subjects in terms of their cultural background, national citizenship, and their perceived racial identification. Later in this text there is further discussion of how the identification of a “Swede” as opposed to an “Ethnic Swede” can be determined based on cultural, social, and racial signifiers.
Chapter Outline

This thesis consists of five chapters, including the introduction, conclusion, and three topic chapters where I discuss my research and findings. The first chapter describes elements of Swedishness and being Swedish that I observed in my research and which are often recognized in terms of first impressions. This includes physical appearance and perceptions of race and ethnicity, communication styles, friendliness, and observations of personal space. The discussion begins with background information about the origins and history of Nordic whiteness, as well as the impact of the idea of Nordic whiteness on how people in Sweden are socially and ethnically read. I then address issues around communication and space. I discuss the important social value of silence and subtlety for Swedes and how it relates to the perception of them as a shy or reserved people. I use the imagery of bubbles and the theoretical approach of proxemics to describe the ways in which Swedes function in different social and personal settings. I suggest that these elements of Swedishness are some of the initial factors with which someone might be perceived and identified as Swedish.

The second chapter details the ways in which nostalgia and nature have shaped how Swedish people understand and perceive their cultural identity. I address this connection through descriptions of the ways that Swedes interact with nature and the attitudes and opinions they have developed as a result, the presence of nature and natural themes in Swedish ideas of leisure and enjoyment, and how unspoken understandings of the best ways to interact with nature can create controversy over ideas of “proper” use and to whom these judgments are often applied. This chapter includes an ongoing discussion of how this relationship with nature is based on elements of nostalgia and moral panic, as well as spoken and unspoken understandings of tastes and opinions of how things should be done.
The third chapter takes a close look at how Swedish perceptions of cultural and national identity are informed and inspired by the imagined community created in connection with common Swedish values and the social ideology of the people’s home. This people’s home ideology, *folkhemmet*, is described according to its history and the political perspectives of the “middle” and “third” ways of political governance, as well as through how it relates to the Swedish model as it is understood today. *Folkhemmet* is further analyzed in terms of how its ideas and practices are present in contemporary discourses of the Swedish social system and the values commonly associated with it, welfare and equality. As in the previous chapter, ideas of nostalgia and moral panic are used to discuss the influences of Nordic political nostalgia and the social tension surrounding diversity in Sweden. The concluding discussion of this chapter concerns examples of inequality and imbalance in the Swedish social system and how they are recognized and interpreted by Swedes as spoken, unspoken, and unspeakable, in the context of a *folkhem* inspired imagined Swedish community.

The conclusion starts with a brief interlude before offering a final take on the major arguments and examples of my thesis and what I believe can be gained from these conversations. Finally, I address my ideas for continuing or expanding on this research including what resources and methods might be appropriate for additional research.
Chapter 1 - First Impressions

Svenskhets. Swedishness. When attached to a word, -ness creates an abstract noun that denotes quality and state, usually exemplifying a quality or state of something. In my mind, Swedishness refers to the types of answers you might get to the question “what are Swedes like?” In many ways, aspects of Swedishness are what makes a Swede a Swede. The common mannerisms and quirks that they see in each other and those I observed in them. Not all Swedes fit every element of Swedishness that I describe. My observations of Swedishness do not define any one Swede, but they describe much of what I observed and was shared with me by Swedes themselves as part of my research.

In this chapter I argue that there are aspects of Swedishness that act as “first impressions,” influencing how people in Sweden are perceived and socially read as Swedes. The spoken, unspoken, and unspeakable registers help to analyze and clarify how Swedes articulate specific aspects of Swedishness. I aim to show that an individual’s ability and success in recognizing these different articulations correlates to how their own Swedishness is perceived. Although there are a vast variety of elements that make up the Swedishness of most Swedes, I will highlight some of the specific concepts and mannerisms that are referenced in my interviews. I analyze these “first impression” using theoretical perspectives on whiteness and race, language and communication, and awareness of physical space.

Nordic Whiteness – How Race Became Unspeakable in Sweden

To have an honest conversation about Swedishness, we also need to talk about whiteness. Whiteness is physical, psychological, and cultural. Whiteness can refer to the color of someone’s skin, or to their visible features. Whiteness can be a mindset or sense of being that goes along
with being part of a white community. In many contexts whiteness has meant power and control over those who are labeled non-white. In social discourse whiteness is often presented as the antithesis of all that is non-white. Linguistic anthropology recognizes that more often than not a contrast is reinforced through stereotypes and tropes that assign positive characteristics to whiteness, and associate negative qualities with whatever is designated as non-white (Brodkin 2001:147). John Hartigan Jr. argues that any thorough study of race in the United States must also address the matter of whiteness, which he describes as a culturally constructed position of social privilege and power (Hartigan 1997:496). I argue that the same is true of any location or social context that has a history of majority white populations. An important distinction made in this article is that whiteness most often implies a context where white individuals benefit from their whiteness regardless of their individual feelings and beliefs regarding race. Consequently, a common characteristic of whiteness is a white individual’s obliviousness to it. White individuals living in predominately white communities are not necessarily faced with situations that would cause or require them to acknowledge the fact that they are white. Whiteness is unspeakable in predominately white communities because it is self-evident and requires no discussion (Pred 2004:147).

In Northern Europe there is a special kind of whiteness: Nordic whiteness. The Nordic region refers to the countries of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. In the social history of these countries there has been a lasting (although not entirely static) idea of “to be white is to be Nordic; to be Nordic is to be white” (Lundström and Teitelbaum 2017b:151). Within this grouping, Sweden has their own Swedish variety of Nordic whiteness. Ideas of Swedish whiteness are strongly tied to the nation’s history of both scientific racism (variously referred to as race biology and eugenics), and the development of a strong moral stance against
racism. In terms of this discussion the overarching idea of racism will be understood as “the belief that humans are subdivided into distinct groups so different in their social behavior and mental and physical capacities that they can be ranked as superior or inferior” (Newman 2014:184). My discussion of whiteness and its associated ideas of race in Sweden’s past and present is framed by the work of Scandinavian scholars Tobias Hübinette and Catrin Lundström. Their discussion is informed by Matthew Hughey’s theory of hegemonic whiteness that can be understood as a conceptualization of whiteness as the collective result of different meanings and practices that perpetuate the ideology that those who are “white” are essentially different from and superior to those marked as “non-white”, as well as through marginalizing practices of “being white” that fail to live up to societal expectations (Hübinette and Lundström 2014b:426).

Hübinette and Lundström’s discussion of Swedish racial temporalities is structured within what they theorize to be three phases of hegemonic whiteness.

First, was the phase of white purity: the foundations of Swedish whiteness 1905 – 1968. This era of Swedish history developed ideas of whiteness and race according to what was at the time was considered “science.” With that context, “scientific racism” is when biology and science are used in an attempt to prove that there are differences between the perceived “races.” To clarify, the observations and reports of this period were made using techniques and methodologies that have subsequently been disproven and rejected from the realm of respected scientific practices. In the early 19th century Sweden was in the forefront of the field of “scientific racism.” However, the roots of these ideologies actually reach back to the eighteenth century when Carl Linnaeus, one of Sweden’s historical icons, published his classification system for living creatures. While this was and is a major scientific resource for the classification of animals and plants, its more complicated side included an assessment by Linnaeus of the
different “races” of humanity. Linnaeus’s work has been frequently cited since its publication by those who would attempt to present evidence for the study of “race science.” In 1843 Swede Anders Retzius introduced the so-called “cranial index” in his publication *Om Formen paa Nordboernes Cranier* (“About the shape of the Northerners’ skulls”). This index presented a method for measuring the length and width of skulls where the combination of those cranial measurements could establish an individual’s moral and mental capacity. The measurements were judged according to what Retzius considered the two basic races of humanity: the dolichocephalic (long skulls) and brachycephalic (short skulls). Using this system, Retzius argued that the contemporary white Nordic peoples of his time represented the descendants of the superior dolichocephalic race, while the non-white populations were deemed brachycephalic. Emphasizing a hierarchy within the Nordic region itself, Retzius clarifies in his writings that the distinction between the characteristics of the superior and inferior peoples can be noticed in the “less developed” Finnish and indigenous Sami people (Andreassen 2014:444–45).

Starting in 1921, Herman Lundberg was made the director of Uppsala University’s newly commissioned *Statens institut för rasbiologi* (State Institute for Racial Biology). Lundberg’s research attempted to rank peoples and races according to their primary activities and accomplishments. Naturally, according to his system, Swedish scientists were at the top of the scale. Nomadic populations—such as the indigenous Sami reindeer herders in the Sapmi region across northern Norway, Sweden, and Finland—and those who still functioned primarily on subsistence lifestyles were placed at the bottom of this scale. In the mid 1920’s Lundberg’s classification work caught the interest of Hermann Wilhelm Göring, who later became one of the most powerful members of the Nazi party in Germany. These myths of the superior Nordic race, at that point supported by “scientific” evidence, allowed the “Aryan” race ideology of the Third
Reich in Germany to become believable to many Swedes. In the mind of Adolf Hitler, the “Aryan” and Nordic races were one in the same, identifying the Nordic people, and in this specific context Swedish people, as the epitome of whiteness (Nordin 2005:19). With this framework came the cult idea of “Nordic beauty”, referring to the stereotypical image of pale skin, blond hair, blue eyes, and a strong physique (Lundström and Teitelbaum 2017b:153). This image of the “true” or “ideal” Swede was part of the Swedish eugenics movement, which included a compulsory sterilization program for those individuals who were seen to pose a risk to the “health” of Swedish society. The Swedish sterilization program was active for over forty years from its inception in 1934 to its termination in 1975. During this time period over 60,000 people were sterilized in order to protect the concept of Swedish “white purity.” The program directly discriminated according to gender, race, class, and sexual orientation. These sterilizations were not always carried out with the full consent and understanding of the patient. The most frequently targeted were lower or working-class minority women, as their fertility was seen as the most threatening to the white homogeneity of Swedish society. This period of focus on “white purity” also saw the beginning of the Swedish welfare system and the social democratic concept of folkhemmet (the people’s home). Folkhemmet is a social policy whose goals included a qualitative increase in the living and development possibilities of the next generation as well as a shift in the burden of responsibility from the individual family to the nation as a whole (Sejersted and Adams 2011:102–3). Hübinette and Lundström suggest that folkhemmet can be translated as both the ‘people’s home’ and the ‘race home’, essentially a social and cultural home for white Swedes. The image of Sweden during this period as an exclusively white and homogenous society defines what scholars and Swedes alike refer to as “old Sweden.”
The second phase of hegemonic whiteness is described as white solidarity: the construction of “good Sweden” 1968 - 2001. The 1960’s - 70’s in Sweden were the scene of a dramatic shift in public messaging regarding race and equality. In an era motivated by the advocation of civil rights, a message of equality for all was pushed jointly by the women’s movement, the labor movement, and the Christian movement. These organizations asserted that in order for Sweden to be seen as a tolerant and liberal country in the Western world it needed to address racism in its society. In response to these social movements, the public message of “good Sweden” regarding race and racism became an ideology of colorblindness. Colorblindness in this context meant claiming that you did not see race and thus a person’s skin color or background should have no bearing on your opinion of them. One of the defining legacies of this phase was an increase in acceptance of migration and refugees seeking asylum from non-Western countries. Since the mid 1970’s Sweden’s immigration statistics have been comparable to those of much larger European countries such as the UK, France, and Germany. Over the following thirty years lasting until the end of this designated phase the percentage of Sweden’s population with ties to places outside of Western Europe increased dramatically. Due to these immigration policies the racial demography of Sweden has changed, yet due to social ideologies this was not something that could be directly acknowledged. Not seeing race also meant not speaking of race. Race and racism became unspeakable. Race became unspeakable like a taboo, something that should not be acknowledged. Racism was unspeakable because it was reminiscent of seemingly old ideas that Swedish society was supposed to have moved past. The reasoning associated with the colorblind ideology in Sweden was connected to the countries’ overall stance toward equality and liberal policies. Racism was deemed a non-Swedish issue. If Sweden was a pioneer in the protection of human rights, social justice, and gender equality then racism should no longer be a
problem. However, ideals do not usually function perfectly. Making race unspeakable does not solve the problem. Ignoring the social presence of race has the potential to be just as harmful as outright racism. “Good Sweden” had good intentions, but was not practical.

The final phase of hegemonic whiteness is white melancholy: a white nation in crisis 2001 - present. This contemporary context, that in which my interviews were conducted, finds many Swedes at a point of great cultural and social discomfort. Melancholy refers to a prolonged sense of sadness or depression. In this sense white melancholy refers to a sense of dissatisfaction among the white majority in Sweden who do not know where to focus their attention and effort. In the country today, there are believers in the different models of “old Sweden” and “good Sweden” who both feel that their vision of Sweden is being jeopardized. Whiteness and race are still often considered unspeakable in polite and civil conversation, but they are the undercurrent of white melancholy in Sweden. Some see the non-white segment of the population as a threat to the nostalgic image of “old Sweden”, while others struggle to reconcile the differences between ethnic groups in their vision of “good Sweden” as a socially and politically progressive nation.

The influence of Nordic whiteness is still present in how many Swedes interpret others within the country and their communities. Even though race is still quite unspeakable as a subject of public commentary, several of the Swedes that I interviewed discussed the fact that physical appearance still influences their perception of whether someone is or is not Swedish. While physical and in some cases stereotypical features are noticeable to some “Ethnic Swedes”, most are accepting of the fact that Sweden is becoming more diverse and those separations are harder to assume. Camilla is a friend of my relatives Karl and Sofia in Hudiksvall who is in her late fifties. She discussed how these ideas are changing with the population over time. “Earlier if you look back maybe fifty years or so then if you saw someone who was not white or were colored or
if they looked like a Chinese person then you would presume that they were not Swedish, but that is not the circumstances today.” However, the perceptions of who is an “Ethnic Swede” often still call back to the stereotypes of “Nordic beauty.” My physical appearance was described approvingly by some of the Swedes that I interviewed as having “the right colors” to be Swedish. For the social contexts of the Swedes I interviewed, ideas of race and whiteness in Sweden can be articulated as either unspoken or unspeakable depending on the situation and intent. Outright racism or subjective judgements based on race are unspeakable and often perceived as embarrassing and ignorant. Observations of whiteness and race though, are articulated as unspoken perceptions of appearance.

Despite attempts in the era of “good Sweden” to downplay the presence of whiteness, it would be ridiculous to try to ignore the fact that Sweden has been and still is a very white country. Having traveled to many of its largest cities I can attest that while there is noticeable diversity, “Ethnic Swedes” are the majority. Understanding the history of whiteness and the discourse around race in Sweden better clarifies how whiteness exists as a cultural phenomenon within Swedishness that is more complex than skin color alone. Swedishness is unspeakably connected to whiteness because the traditional discourses of Swedish cultural identity have been established and perpetuated by white Swedes. Whiteness informs Swedishness. When non-white Swedes act Swedish, they are essentially acting in the way that is associated with white Swedes. The following characteristics of Swedishness are inherently connected to whiteness because of the general demographic makeup of Swedish society.
A Reserved People

One of the largest student housing locations in Uppsala is known colloquially as “Flogsta.” As one of the most affordable places to live, it attracts students of all levels and nationalities. In the tall 1970’s era buildings each floor has two corridors with 14 rooms on either side. The first few weeks I only knew that there was a Swede named Lukas living on our corridor because his name was on the roommate list on the fridge. I started to jokingly think that he didn’t eat, as I had become acquainted with all of my other roommates in the communal kitchen. One day when several of us were eating, he passed by the common area. Caught, he quickly introduced himself before disappearing out the front door. I wouldn’t see him again for a week. Lukas, a 26-year-old student from Småland, is now one of my best Swedish friends. How did that happen? It involved breaking some of Sweden’s everyday unspoken habits and behaviors. I somehow convinced him to be my friend all the same.

There is an element to a common style of Swedish communication that is quite literally unspoken: the use of silence. Early in my relationship with Sweden and its people I often found myself confused and uncomfortable with the presence of silence in our conversations and interactions. In contrast to the more upfront and confrontational style of American interaction, Swedes might seem quite passive and shy. Those who make that assumption would find themselves at a clear disadvantage in a conversation with a Swede. Silent pauses can be used to emphasize a point or express an opinion. Åke Daun describes this conversational method as being part of what creates the perception that people in Sweden can be reticent, or reserved. “In Sweden being reticent derives from the tendency to think before one speaks, to formulate one’s statements in one’s mind before saying them” (Daun 1989:119). Especially when speaking in English, the Swedes I know choose their words (and lack thereof) very carefully. A common
feature of conversations in my research were pauses when the Swede would take the time to select the right word to express his or her point. In my experience, part of being reserved is that either you appear to know what you are talking about, or if not, you at least understand the expectation of how certain topics should be discussed. A historical example of this recognition of forethought and silence are the Silence and/or Vigilance campaigns in Sweden during World War II. While the United States had the motto “Loose Lips Sink Ships,” Sweden had “En Svensk Tiger.” Along with the image of a tiger colored in the national colors of yellow and blue, this phrase is a clever play on words. In Swedish the word svensk has the potential to mean either the noun “[a] Swede” or the adjective “Swedish.” Additionally, tiger can be understood in Swedish as either the name of the animal, or the present tense form of the verb tiga, which means “to keep silent.” Thus, altogether this message has the potential to mean both “A Swedish Tiger” like the image displayed below, or “A Swede Keeps Silent.” The goal of this propaganda was to encourage secrecy and discretion so as to prevent the spread of any information that would jeopardize Sweden’s status as a neutral party in World War II (Beredskapsmuseet 2016). With the countrywide suggestion of silence enforced during a time of both local and global anxiety, it is worth considering that the message of “En Svensk Tiger” is still influencing the continued presence of silence in common Swedish practices.

Figure 2: "En Svensk Tiger" Image (Beredskapsmuseet 2016)
A technically spoken yet socially unspoken aspect of communication and language in Sweden is the use of ingressive speech. Ingressive speech consists of sounds that are produced while the speaker breathes in, in contrast to most speech sounds, which are produced as the speaker breathes out. Although ingressive speech is a common linguistic phenomenon, it is frequently associated with Scandinavian languages. The most common form of ingressive speech in the Swedish language is used to express agreement. This is done with the *ja* (yes) being vocalized as part of an inhaled breath (Ingressive Sound 2017). In my own terminology, I would refer to it as a “gasp” or a sharp “whuop” sound. Once you are familiar enough with these sounds it becomes easier to recognize the somewhat subtly vocalized *ja* within the inhaled speech. That being said, some Swedes seem to drop the vocalization altogether and just retain the inhale. Depending on the Swedish speaker and their regional dialect the effect will be more or less pronounced. The northern regions of Sweden are known for including these gasps more frequently in their speech. Based on my field observations this practice of ingressive speech is present when Swedes speak both Swedish and English. This type of speech can be very confusing for the uninitiated because it is such an unspoken action among Swedish society. Thus, most visitors and/or migrants to Sweden have to make the connection themselves or directly ask why people seem to be breathing heavily throughout the conversation. After a period of confusion during my first visit to Sweden I had to ask one of my relatives what was going on with the “gasp.” They had to think about it for a minute in order to decide how to explain it to me. From what I have been told and personally observed, the gasp is a common and important element of Swedish conversational communication. The connection could be made that the inhaled *ja* in Swedish is used in a similar fashion to “uhuh” in English. It is a conformation of the listeners attention as well as a way to express agreement with what is being said. In this context,
the unspoken element of communication is an inverse of typical speech that imparts its own meaning to its use in common Swedish interactions. The use of the “gasp” is commonly interpreted as a sign that someone has been socialized and brought up speaking Swedish in Sweden.

Norms, the standards and patterns that inform the rules of conduct that are expected within a societal group, are often alluded to but not directly acknowledged (Newman 2014:20). For a member of a particular society, norms are taken for granted due to the fact that they are habitually represented and reinforced. Norms are typically unspoken because they are so commonplace and natural for those who have been socialized as part of any given ingroup. Silence and careful choice of speech come with so many aspects of typical Swedish mannerisms that they are examples of social rules that are inspired by unspoken norms.

In my interviews I found evidence of the presence of Swedish social rules based on how my subjects described their perceptions of common interactions. For example, when I asked my friend Lukas, “How do you think you could guess that a stranger is not Swedish?” He responded, “if you greet someone without knowing them, like a stranger, then you wouldn’t be Swedish.” Based on my personal knowledge that Lukas works on and off at ICA, a Swedish supermarket chain, I rephrased the question in the context of a consumer situation. “Unless you are working in a restaurant or something?” That changed his answer. “Precisely. If you have a reason, even we do have people that we have to [talk to], but as long as we don’t have to perhaps…then we won’t do it. If you do that then you’re probably not [Swedish].” Thus, for many Swedes the control of speech and silence is as relevant within a conversation as in the decision to have any sort of conversation in the first place. The tendency in Sweden to speak concisely and directly is
displayed both accurately and humorously in the following text that was shared with me on Facebook by my cousin Elin.

![A lesson in Swedish](image)

**Figure 3: “A lesson in Swedish” (Something Swedish 2016a)**

In my experience, brief responses like those referenced in the text seem to be especially common with younger Swedes. With my beginner language skills it often felt like one of the primary interactions I had with my teenage cousin Hanna included my attempts to make a statement or ask a question in Swedish and her predictable response of “Va? (What?)”

Pred also describes the unspeakable as “that which is most thoroughly socially constructed, so obviously meaning-filled that it would be meaningless to give it expression” (Pred 2004:148). For most Swedes the relationship between speech and silence is representative of an unspeakable ideal form of communication. Silence has its own meaning. Åke Daun discusses this idea in that the notion of *kallprata* (small talk, literally “cold talk”), reflects the Swedish disparagement of talking for the sake of talking…there are many negative vernacular expressions for people who talk “too much” (Daun 1989:119). This hesitation among some
Swedes for talking for the sake of talking reinforces the significance and power that discourse and even the choice of words can have in the Swedish societal context. When Lukas says, “if you have a reason, even we do have people that we have to [talk to], but as long as we don’t have to perhaps…then we won’t do it,” he is expressing a normative understanding of purposeful speech in Swedish society. There are some obvious exceptions to this idea. If you are an outsider in need of assistance, you can borrow the attention of a Swede for a moment without too much difficulty or hassle for either party. Conversely, real conversations are a commitment of both time and energy. Curious about the idea of *kallprata*, I asked my Swedish instructor if there was such thing as *varmprata* (“warm talk”). She laughed, and responded in a somewhat joking manner “that’s not an actual word but talking with you would always be *varmprata*.” Her response is an example of the different levels of commitment that Swedes may consider when starting a conversation. My interpretation is that small talk is cold because it often concerns more trivial subjects and lacks significant social connection. The idea of *varmprata* would imply that the conversation has value both in the sense of time and for the emotional connection that drives it. So, there is a clear implied difference between the substance and meaning of what is considered small talk versus a genuine conversation. An individual’s awareness of this difference and corresponding behavior would likely be a noticeable indication in Sweden of their degree of Swedishness.

Another discussion of this difference is found in a linguistically focused analysis on the silent mannerisms of the Finnish. “In their attitudes toward speech and silence, Finns share the overall tendencies with their Nordic neighbors: just like their fellow Scandinavians they are of the opinion that you only speak when you have something to say. If you do not have anything to say, you keep silent. Talkativeness is an indication of slickness, which serves as a signal of
unreliability” (Jaworski 1997:270). A very interesting part of this description is the authors use of “slickness.” It can be understood in this context to mean that the speaker is persuasive and smooth, but possibly shallow and unreliable. According to this assessment, from the perspective of the Finns in the context of Scandinavia as a whole, there is an implication by the authors that talkativeness may also be a sign in Sweden that the speaker might not actually mean what they are expressing. While setting up a comparison for the discussion of the Finns, the article further references Sweden. “The phenomenon of painful silence is also found in Sweden, but there silence is mostly taken to be a positive phenomenon” (Jaworski 1997:272). This is in agreement with the position presented by Åke Daun regarding the consideration of silence that Swedes make when choosing whether or not to speak. “There are few nationalities that feel equal comfort when keeping silence. Finns cannot be considered talkative, but they too may feel that Swedes are uncommunicative” (Jaworski 1997:273). This assessment provides both an inside and outside perspective on the social results of silence in Sweden. While it is suggested that within Swedish society silence is performed with a degree of comfort, it can be seen as a lack of communication from an outside perspective.

A useful example of the complicated nature of small talk is the prevalence in American society of what I would call “habitual conversations.” Habitual conversations usually happen when you encounter someone you know or are familiar with, but either you have limited time or you don’t actually know them that well. The standard form of a habitual conversation in the United States consists of, “Hello. Hello. How are you? Fine, You? Yes, fine as well. Goodbye. Goodbye.” Depending on your own cultural context this interaction can have different spoken and unspoken meaning. In the United States this type of conversation, though inconsequential, is a way of saying, “Yes, I acknowledge you and the connection that we have.” It lacks depth, but
is a socially acceptable form of brief interaction. If you find yourself in one of these habitual conversations in the United States, it is most likely that the other person is not actually asking to know how you are and what is going on in your life, they are just following a social script. Having discussed this idea with many people who are not American, I know that it has the potential to leave them feeling dissatisfied. This is an intersection of different interpretations of communication through the spoken, unspoken, and unspeakable registers. “The unspeakable as that which just makes (common) sense, which demands no comment” (Pred 2004:147). The common-sense of a habitual conversation to an American is that it is socially important to appear friendly and reinforce relationships. To outsiders this is can be perceived to be a rude and shallow form of social interaction. Their common sense tells them that I do not care about having a real and substantial interaction with them. In Scandinavia this kind of habitual conversation can be seen as slick or unreliable, as previously discussed. In my experience, the Swedish equivalent of this type of interaction is a nod, a quick hej (hi), and perhaps a smile. In comparison to more talkative cultures, the more selective use of conversation in Swedish society has created an outside stereotype that Swedes are not just reserved but cold. Using the insights from this discussion, the Swedish tendency to stray away from conversation can be seen from a different light. In Swedish society there is value and significance to the use of silence and the choice to start a conversation. Thus, when a conversation does happen it is much more likely that it will either concern something that they find important or indicate that they have a genuine desire to talk with you. To many of the Swedes that I know, Americans can seem surprisingly or somewhat overly friendly. The choice and value of communication is an often unspoken, yet important social element in Swedish society.
Based on my own personal experiences, as well as what I have heard from others, I feel that is perfectly fair to say that many Swedes intentionally avoid social interactions that feel unnecessary or uncomfortable. A popular subject of conversation among international students who have lived in Sweden is the Swedes use of passive aggressive notes. Most commonly found in communal laundry rooms and kitchens, these notes indicate that the expected standards are not being met. It is perfectly acceptable that in a shared space there are guidelines to follow and standards to be met. What is significant in Sweden, somewhat to the amusement of international students, is that these messages are rarely delivered in person or directed at any one culprit. One of my international friends who happened to live in a corridor with several Swedes often spoke of the notes left in the kitchen expressing the author’s disappointment regarding the state of cleanliness. Understanding this perception of expectations would be another unspoken indication of someone’s socialized or acquired Swedishness.

Continuing with this theme, many Swedes have described putting actual effort in to avoiding their neighbors. Emma, a teacher in her late 30s from outside of Hudiksvall, described how, “[Swedes] don’t talk too much when we meet new people. For example, you can stand, if you live in an apartment and you hear a person coming down the stairs you will wait until the person has left the building and then you can go out.” Linnea, a cousin in her 40’s also spoke similarly her neighbors in Hudiskvall. “We are more isolated in our home and our neighbor is the neighbor, they live over there and you don’t talk to them.” This habit of avoidance, which to many Swedes seems to be culturally normal, feels very much like the unspeakable. Avoidance of social interaction in these ways seems unspeakable in a way that so thoroughly socially constructed that it almost feels incapable of being otherwise.
When reflecting on my experiences in Sweden, I began to think of the country as a society of different spatially and socially oriented bubbles. I choose the idea of a bubble because it is translucent and pliable, but still represents a barrier. I will also borrow from the idiomatic ideas of “personal bubbles” and “bursting someone’s bubble”. In Swedish culture there is a noticeable yet unspoken barrier between the different social realms of life. Proxemics, a theory developed by anthropologist Edward T. Hall, is “the study of how man unconsciously structures micro space—the distance between men in the conduct of daily transactions, the organization of space in his houses and buildings, and ultimately they layout of his towns” (Hall 1963:1).

Proxemics is a theoretical method that can help to explain the function of different bubbles in Swedish society. Although the theory that Hall lays out in *The Hidden Dimension* is vast and detailed in its study of human societies, I will focus on a particular feature of its assessment. Within proxemics Hall designates four main distances of interaction; intimate, personal, social, and public (Hall 1990:114). The intimate distance is where we as humans would most expect to experience physical contact. It is a distance at which another person is very difficult to disregard. The personal distance is the distance at which you feel comfortable with others in most situations. The social distance is where most conversations and interactions occur. Finally, the public distance includes that which is happening directly around you and may still affect your experiences. In my analysis these four distances can help to represent in Swedish society bubbles of social and spatial awareness. Each bubble functions with its own rules regarding what is permeable and what could cause it to burst. Additionally, these bubbles as representations of physical and social spaces function alongside the reserved and unspoken style of communication that I have described. Communication and space reinforce reserved qualities in each other in most Swedish contexts.
For most Swedes the intimate distance is a bubble that would include themselves, their clothes, and whatever else may physically touch them. The intimate bubble becomes significant in crowded situations. For the most part, like in the United States, a Swede would not randomly choose to touch another person in public. In Swedish society though, I have observed some of the situations that are uniquely Swedish in an exception to this norm. Although Swedes value their intimate space, I would argue that they value their avoidance of communication even more.

In a crowded pub, transportation station, store, or club, the intimate bubble is frequently disrupted for the purpose of movement. Instead of being asked to move it is much more likely that another person will nudge (or sometimes shove) you out of their way, possibly throw out an ursäkta or förlåt (excuse me, sorry), and continue on. I found personally that in party or club situations the apology is not even necessary because it is too loud to hear anyway.

The personal bubble in Sweden is most recognizable in the things that Swedes do alone. Waiting for the bus is a commonly referenced example of when the personal bubble is especially visible in Swedish society. It has even inspired a collection of internet jokes such as the following image.

![Waiting for the bus like a Swede](image_url)

*Figure 4: “Waiting for the bus like a Swede” (Something Swedish 2016b)*
Unless you are there with a friend or see someone that you know, the bus stop is not a place for striking up conversation in Sweden. Random social interaction or standing too close while waiting for the bus was a common response when Swedes described how they could guess that someone is not Swedish. When talking to Ida, a retired psychologist in her late sixties, she described that someone may not be Swedish “because they break some rules and I mean not the law, I mean social rules.” Being at this point accustomed to the some of these rules I offered back, “like talking to someone at a bus station?” In immediate agreement she responded, “Yes! And standing too close and not having this distance,” as she stretched her arms out widely. Erik, a 42-year-old software technician living in the north of Sweden, reaffirmed this idea of the personal bubble at bus stops saying about most Swedes, “like if you stand at a bus stop, you usually don’t talk to each other. I guess you have experienced that.” He is correct. During my time in Sweden I definitely came to understand that a smooth bus stop experience involved finding your own spot and keeping to yourself.

The social bubble is where Swedes typically exist with friends, family, and anyone else with whom they want to socialize. When in a group of friends, I observed Swedes to be quite lively in public. The important distinction is who is understood to be the recipients of that attention. There will still be a bubble barrier between an outsider and the socially perceived familiarity existing between that group of friends.

The public distance in Sweden is a bubble that allows for more variety of behavior within the general expectations of the established social rules. The public bubble may include situations such as walking through a city center or attending a large social gathering. While the unspoken barriers of the previous bubbles still exist, there are distinct actions that are deemed more or less acceptable in the public bubble. When visiting a torg or torget (town or city square) it is more
acceptable that someone might seek your attention to sign a petition, give you an advertisement, or ask for directions. Even though situations like these exist in a space that is completely public, there is still an unspoken understanding among Swedes of what is acceptable behavior.

An underlying element of Swedish spatial interactions and communication that is inherently related to the unspoken and even unspeakable is familiarity. By familiarity I mean the extent to which you know someone, how that will affect your interactions, and thus your overall relationship. This kind of familiarity came up in my conversation with Erik when he offered, “I guess we [Swedes] are reserved but when you get to know us I guess we can be pretty open.” In my opinion the most important part of this statement is that Erik acknowledges that familiarity is a barrier to what might be a “real” or “genuine” interaction with a Swede. This in itself is a very important distinction. If there is a certain level of interpersonal connection and knowledge that is perceived in Sweden to be socially required, then there is an unspoken system of inclusion and exclusion.

I observed this distinction of familiarity in bubbles often during my visits to Sweden. Contrary to what the discussion so far may suggest, Swedes can be very talkative. Swedes have plenty of conversations when they are at home, on the phone, and in public if the conversation is concentrated within a specific group of people. These are all situations where someone is usually familiar with who they are speaking with. This is an example of how more lively and meaningful conversation can be an inclusive practice in Swedish society. Strangers or outsiders are usually excluded from this kind of conversation. In fact, as an outsider it can be incredibly noticeable to Swedes if you try to force your inclusion in their bubble without following the social rules of familiarity and conversation. To a somewhat more liberal sense of privacy the personal bubble often includes telephone conversations. In my time living and conducting research in Sweden it
was a regular experience for Swedes to be talking on the phone in public, with a perceived sense of privacy although their conversation is somewhat audible. These ideas of familiarity were evident in my interview with my friend Alice, a 24-year-old woman going to university in Uppsala. When I asked her about recognizing Swedes she responded in terms of familiarity and bubbles. “I think that if they seem overly friendly or if they, even if they don't talk to you, if they have another or different personal space, a smaller personal space. If they unintentionally burst your personal bubble I think that is a telltale sign that they are either not Swedish or that they are ‘weird’.” It is important to note that Alice specifically uses “weird” to describe a person that would “burst your personal bubble.”

During my time studying abroad I assume that I often displayed “weird” behavior that indicated to the Swedes around me that I was not one of them. Somewhat ironically, that is how I became friends with Lukas. By committing one of the most common (yet relatively mild) social offences in contemporary Swedish society. I started talking to him when he was sitting on the bus, by himself, with headphones on. It is laughably awkward in hindsight. Luckily, I was able to somewhat excuse myself with the stereotype of being an overly friendly American. It also helped that my reasoning for wanting to talk to him, living about fifteen feet away from each other, was acceptable enough in terms of social utility. Admittedly, Lukas is also a pretty funny and easygoing person. So, in my case I was fortunate to have broken social rules with a Swede who was understanding and found the situation amusing.

Swedishness is a way of describing many of the qualities and social habits of Swedes that are noticed by visitors to Sweden and to an extent recognized by Swedes themselves. Sweden’s Swedishness, its legacy of whiteness and its social personality, are in different forms spoken, unspoken, and unspeakable in contemporary Swedish society. Swedishness is always present and
always influencing the way that Swedish people perform their social and cultural identity. A person’s performance of the common aspects of Swedishness will have a real impact on how they are socially perceived and accepted by others in Swedish society. That being said, these norms and characteristics are only one piece of the larger picture of how Swedes understand their national and cultural identity. From these “first impressions” and social habits I will now shift to some of the lived qualities of Swedish identity.
Chapter 2 – Nature and Nostalgia

In this chapter I discuss how Swedish descriptions of nature articulate nostalgia for a particular version of Swedish history and culture. In addition, I will analyze expectations and preferences regarding how cultural traditions and symbols interact with nature using Bourdieu’s theories of taste and distinction. While addressing these nature oriented examples I discuss both the contexts from which Swedes understand and perceive their culture, as well as contrasting aspects and elements of moral panic that I observed from a more outside perspective. These frames of reference will be addressed in continuation with the discussion of how discourses of national and cultural identity are expressed and performed by Swedes in terms of the registers of the spoken, unspoken, and unspeakable.

Ideas of Swedish identity are often articulated in terms of a specific sense of how nature and life are and should be connected. For example, Helena described “nature, belonging to nature,” as a common feeling among Swedes. Having a relationship with nature is a specific kind of nostalgic Swedish identity. In a sense, nostalgia is everywhere. Nostalgia can be understood as a cultural practice with culturally specific forms, meanings, and effects (Stewart 1988). It is commonly understood as a longing for those moments, ideas, and places that may seem lost to the past. Nostalgia is also a form of discourse between perceptions of the past and the present. However, an important distinction is that although feelings of nostalgia exist in the present, the material of nostalgic experience is the past (Davis 1977). The recognition of nostalgia as a specific vision or image of the past is essential in understanding how and why nostalgic feelings arise in the present. In his discussion of nostalgia, scholar Fred Davis provides two clarifications:

(1) “Whatever in our present situation evokes it, nostalgia uses the past-falsely, accurately or, as I believe is more the point, in specially reconstructed ways; but it is not the product thereof.”
(2) “The ability to feel nostalgia for events in our past has less (although clearly something) to do with how recent or distant these events were with what they contrast—or, more accurately, the way we make them contrast—with the events, moods, and dispositions of our present circumstances” (Davis 1977:417).

Davis argues that although nostalgia is an individually felt and embodied experience, it draws on both personal memory and broader social discourses and images. To say that “nostalgia uses the past-falsely,” is to acknowledge that nostalgia often means evoking memories that fit the narrative of the past that we want to remember rather than adhering to the realities of what actually occurred.

Nostalgia also involves the creation of contrast and conflict. Dissatisfaction with present circumstances is a common catalyst for nostalgic ideas. In order to view the past nostalgically, there needs to be a recognizable contrast between the conditions of the past and present. Katherine Stewart discusses nostalgia as a result of ideas of common culture becoming more and more unspoken and unnamed (Stewart 1988:227). As people become more disconnected from their perceptions of themselves as part of a cultural identity, they may form nostalgic ideas of the cultural past as a stabilizing frame of reference. Davis also addresses this idea of nostalgia being used as a form of identity that links our past to our present and future. “Nostalgia (like long-term memory, like reminiscence, like daydreaming) is deeply implicated in our sense of who we are, what we are about, and (though possibly with much less inner clarity) whither we go” (Davis 1977:419). As these scholars have argued, nostalgia can work as a method of developing identity through constructed images of a past that represents a desirable contrast to perceptions of the present. In this chapter, I analyze Swedish discourses of nostalgia for nature as way of imagining what Swedish culture was, what it is, and what it should be.
Descriptions of nature and nostalgia for an imagined Swedish past also offer a subtle commentary on a moral panic in the present. Sociologist Stephen Cohen (2002) describes how moral panics occur when “a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests […] Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way the society conceives itself.” Moral panics establish a clear distinction between what is understood as “us or ours” and “them or theirs.” Moral panics, by evoking concepts that seem to threaten societal values, can reveal many of the unspoken and unspeakable discourses of cultural identity.

The “Nature” of Swedishness

Elements of nostalgia and moral panic in Sweden reflect how people perceive and address ideas of culture and national identity. Nostalgia and moral panic were often present in the ways that Swedes performed their Swedishness in the context of nature. In a conversation with Stefan, he talked very passionately about nature in terms of not just holidays, but as an ever-present element in the life of Swedes. “We have a special relationship to nature in this country because we have so much of it. In the summer we want to spend time on our holidays being close to nature in some way. Nature is very close to the identity of Swedes.” As in Stefan’s description, many Swedes I talked to spoke about nature as a source of leisure and recreation, a reward for time spent working. Contemporary Swedish attitudes toward nature are similar to how Orvar Löfgren describes the views of nineteenth century Swedes. “Nature came to stand for the authentic and unaffected in contrast to the artificial, manmade, and commercialized milieus of the urban world” (Frykman and Löfgren 1987:57).
Similarly, during my research, I observed how many Swedes drew on nature as a source of the “authentic and unaffected.” For example, Stefan and Elin live on a hill that overlooks one of the bays along the channel out to the Baltic sea. Most nights we would set out from their house for a \textit{kvälls promenad} (evening walk). \textit{Kvällens promenad} is a common Swedish habit that usually takes place sometime after supper and involves ambling around the neighborhood (Brantmark 2017). Depending on where you live in Sweden this can involve different lengths of walking through a variety of urban and rural settings. In Stefan and Elin’s case, just beyond the perimeter of their neighborhood was the forest. Having lived there for several years they know all of the different paths and have developed and informal schedule of which they will take throughout the week. Most of the trails in these settings are narrow and rough. I could never quite decide if they were planned or just followed. For them talking these walks is a source of leisure that both benefits their general sense of wellbeing and articulates an unspoken desire to be close to nature and experience the natural world around you as part of your everyday performance of Swedishness.

One of the common symbols of nature oriented leisure and recreation among Swedes is the \textit{sommarstuga} (summer cottage). It is estimated that around 1.8 million Swedes, or approximately 20\% of the population own their own summer house ( Hincks 2013). These cottages are preferably located in remote areas away from population centers, where they are often grouped in small neighborhoods. Swedes described the purpose of their summer cottages as a way to get away from the responsibilities and demands of urban or “normal” life and spend time in a more natural setting, evoking a nostalgic desire to seek out what they saw as “natural” in their typically “unnatural” world.
Taste is a spoken and unspoken factor in how many Swedes perceive what is appropriate for a summer cottage. Paint is an important symbol of taste. Stefan and Elin’s *stuga* in the picture above is an example of the popular *Faluröd* (Falu-red) style. All over Sweden you will find buildings painted the historic red with white trim. The current producers of *Faluröd* paint, Falu Rödfärg, describe the color nostalgically as an index of wealth and status in an idealized Swedish past dating back to the sixteenth century. The origin narrative of the color describes King Johan III, in an attempt to copy the continental European style of copper roofs and siding, having had the Stockholm castle painted with red “mining clay” from Falun. This spurred a trend among nobles and elites who wanted their homes to be in style with the king. Thus, the *Faluröd* style became indicative of wealth and status. By the nineteenth century painting one’s house became more accessible to the lower classes and there was a new romanticism for having *Faluröd* houses (Falu Rödfärg 2017a). The rich red color became famous and spread throughout the
country, now representing a stereotype of “typical Sweden.” The nostalgic vision of an imagined Swedish past is perhaps clearest in the paint manufacturer’s description of the color: “Falu-red holds Sweden’s rise from poverty and its journey from peasant society to urbanized industrial society. Falu-red paints people’s origins, family stories, childhood memories, and future dreams” (Falu Rödfärg 2017b).

Another taste trend is that summer cottages are usually small and simple, with only the basic amenities. This simplicity is a quality that is frequently mentioned and favored among many of the Swedes that I know. When visiting Karl and Sofia’s summer house I was directed to observe one of the properties down the road. This building is much more similar to what you would imagine an American summer house to look like, rather than a Swedish stuga. It is a large white two-story house built in a modern minimalist style with lots of metal and glass accents. In another context it might be regarded as normal, if not high class. However, here on the coast it does not fit the unspoken taste of what the neighboring Swedes think of in a summer cottage. The aesthetic of the typical stuga evokes the nostalgic image of the simpler life that was lived by “authentic” Swedes of the past. However, this connection between the ideas having a summer cottage and living according to a historical ideal of Swedishness demonstrates some of the selective aspects of nostalgia. While my interview subjects evoked an image of cottage living as peaceful and practical in a simpler time, other aspects of peasant living conditions in the nineteenth century, such as heavy agricultural labor are not part of the preferred narrative. While summer cottages are imagined as simple and unpretentious, only about 20% of Swedes own summer cottages. This version of nostalgic and “authentic” Swedishness associated with red summer cottages, may not be as accessible to the 80% of Swedes who do not visit or own their own summer cottage.
Due to the time of year that I conducted my research, most of the Swedes I spoke with had Midsummer on their mind. Midsummer in Sweden is a holiday where the past and present meet in the setting of nature. As it is commonly practiced in Sweden, Midsummer is a collection of elements with links to both modern reality and nostalgic fantasy. One simple example of this intersection is the timing of the celebration itself. Although traditionally the celebration always took place on the summer solstice, the holiday is now explicitly planned so that Midsummer’s eve always falls on the Friday between the 19th and 25th of June (Tidholm and Lilja 2013). While some Swedes will have already started their semester (summer vacation), that Friday is a day off work in many industries and it is common for the entire weekend to be seen as the holiday. Even though the celebration of Midsummer may not fall on the correct dates according to the historical calendar, Swedes will follow the traditions on the culturally preferred date.

The connections between nostalgia and traditions like Midsummer are becoming more pronounced as many Swedes feel that the cultural atmosphere in the country is changing in light of increased immigration and diversity. Descriptions of exactly how and why Midsummer should be practiced can take on characteristics of moral panic. For example, my family friend Ida, who is in her 60s, remarked. “That’s very important, all of that sort of traditions to dance around the Midsummer pole again. I think that many adults thought that was not an adult thing to do but when they got children it becomes more important, and nowadays I think it is even more important because people have become more aware of the Swedish traditions because of all the immigrants.” Ida’s comment connects a perceived social change with feelings of moral panic and associated nostalgia. Swedish moral panic about “outsiders” disrupting traditions reinforces nostalgic longing for traditions from a time when Sweden was perceived to be more wild and genuinely Swedish (Frykman and Löfgren 1987:55).
Allemansrätten and Acting Swedish

Another example of what many Swedes described as “very Swedish” was mentioned by Erik, “We have this *allemansrätten* (all man’s right). The ability to go outside everywhere, even on private property to some extent. That is a part of Swedish culture.” *Allemansrätten* or “the right of public access” sets the standard that people in Sweden have the freedom to explore nature.

“You rely on the Right of Public Access whenever you go out in the Swedish countryside – whether it is to take a walk, go kayaking, climb a mountain or just sit down on a rock to think. Under the Right of Public Access, we do not need permission to cross private land. This is the basis for the wide-ranging freedom we enjoy to spend time in the countryside” (Swedish Environmental Protection Agency 2017).

The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency have provided guidelines for what kinds of actions are permitted in a natural setting under *allemansrätten* and what is strictly forbidden. These guidelines are presented in pamphlets written in over 15 different languages.

We have a wonderful opportunity to experience nature and pursue many different activities. Swedes are extremely interested in outdoor life and nature. So that everyone can enjoy nature, it is good to keep some things in mind:

- Remember that crops, replanted forest or other vulnerable land should not be damaged.
- To avoid disturbing those who live in the area, do not cross over or occupy someone’s lot. Residents have a right to be undisturbed.
- Do not interfere with the activities of landowners.
- When you ride or cycle in terrain, there is a risk of damaging the ground. Do not ride or cycle over soft, fragile ground or on designated jogging tracks, ski tracks or hiking trails.
- If you cross enclosed pastureland, do not disturb animals or damage fences. Close the gate after you so that livestock does not get out (Naturvårdsverket 2011).
Many of the behaviors and practices that are permitted under *allemsrätten* are unspoken and even somewhat unspeakable elements of Swedishness. The ability to forage in the forest for berries, mushrooms, and flowers or to camp anywhere for at least one night is seen as a culturally significant factor to many Swedes in their understanding of Swedish identity.

This policy of allowing people to roam at their own discretion is clarified by the Swedish EPA with the phrase “don’t disturb – don’t destroy.” Thus, the use of land in Sweden is a natural right and privilege as long as it is treated with respect. However, the understanding and recognition of what is “respectful behavior” in natural spaces can be dependent on cultural knowledge and influences. Many of the Swedes that I spoke with described the use of nature in terms of *allemsrätten* in a way that invoked an unspoken expectation of particular social values and behaviors. While many Swedes tend to view nature nostalgically in terms of recreational and social value, other people in Sweden see land as a source of capital and resources. While this how land was used in Sweden’s agricultural past, many Swedes now find the idea of using of public land for personal profit distasteful. This sometimes creates conflict over what is seen as a “proper” use of a space and what it means for a space to be called “nature.”

A longstanding controversy over the use of public land according to *allemsrätten* involves the practice of berry and mushroom picking. Foraging of forest resources is popular and nostalgic activity for many Swedes, drawing on a narrative that the collection of forest resources such as berries and mushrooms are both a benefit to the nutrition of a household and an opportunity for the family to spend time in nature (Yngve 2007). However, the wild berries also have a history of being commercialized and exported. There has long been tension between those who see berries as a commercial resource and those who value them as a natural resource. In the
early twentieth century, “the invasive character of the berry harvesters was stressed, along with the fact that they were strangers to the local people, the forests, and the landowners. It was claimed that these foreigners, especially those from cities, did not know how to behave in the woods and were even harvesting unripe berries, driving local people out of the market completely” (Sténs and Sandström 2013:56). Spoken and unspoken expectations of appropriate ways of interacting with nature suggest that “foreigners do not know how to behave in the woods” and imply that there is only one “Swedish” understanding of behavior. These kinds of disputes led to public discussions about the strengths and weaknesses of allemansrätten. However, allemansrätten did prevail and berries remained free to pick by both local consumers and outside industries.

The foraging controversy has recently reopened as a moral panic as Roma migrants have become a common source of berry picking labor for large berry buying companies. One of the understandings among many Swedes of allemansrätten is that you can only stay on private land for a limited amount of time and you must not disturb the residents of that land. In a 2011 article written for a Swedish newspaper in the Uppland region of central Sweden, Upsala Nya Tidning, describes local frustration that Roma berry pickers are driving and foraging on private land (Gunnarsson 2011). The local Swedes interviewed in the article present a narrative that the Roma workers are either ignorant of the regulations of or willfully ignoring them. They stress the main issue as being that Swedish laws and values are not being respected. One man is quoted as saying, “I want to emphasize that we are absolutely not xenophobic. They are welcome to pick berries here and it is good that they have work. But you must comply with laws and regulations!” However, emphasizing that something you are saying is not xenophobic tends to indicate that you are aware that it very well might be. I would question whether the same complaints would be
raised against “Ethnic Swedes” who made similar “violations” of the expectations of Swedishness in regard to *allemansrätten*.

Groups of migrant Roma berry pickers have also been accused by local Swedes of violating this social agreement by setting up unauthorized encampments on private land. The Swedish interpretations of these events imply that they see the Roma encampments as testing the limits of *allemansrätten* and interacting with the land in ways that are very unlike the commonly expected “Swedish behavior.” Since adherence to the understandings of *allemansrätten* can be seen as a social expectation of Swedishness, there is no easy process for Swedes to evict those whom they believe are “problematic” visitors. Thus, many of these land owners, rather than directly contesting the Roma for having violated the terms of *allemansrätten*, wait quietly until the Roma leave on their own at the end of the berry season. Some landowners, however, have been “erecting barricades on forest roads, digging trenches and placing large rocks as a means of inhibiting vehicle access to those seeking to set up encampments” (Mešić and Woolfson 2015:46). This has created a considerable amount of social tension among Swedes because these farmers feel that they must prevent the practice of *allemansrätten* on their land in order to protect it and themselves from the actions of those who they see as an outside threat to their values and practices. “Foreign berry pickers” and in this specific context Roma migrants, have been a target of moral panic. There is an unspeakable judgment that they are a threat to the practice of *allemansrätten* as a performance of Swedishness.

The typical Swedish understanding of “don’t disturb – don’t destroy” with regard to *allemansrätten* comes with a shared spoken narrative of what is “proper use” and an unspoken understanding of what should be viewed as inherently destructive behavior in nature. From a Swedish perspective these Roma migrants disrupted an unspoken “code of conduct” that informs
the way that many Swedes value and perceive the use and treatment of nature. Whether the berry picking practices of the Roma migrants are “destroying” the land depends on the cultural perspective from which they are viewed. This creates an ideological conflict between the idealistic and even nostalgic messaging of *allemansrätt*, that anyone and everyone has a right to use and enjoy the land, and the social expectation of a particularly Swedish view of “proper use.” This conflict is another example of a Swedish sense of taste and distinction dictating the socially and culturally “right” way to interact with nature in Sweden.

As I have demonstrated, nature is a powerful symbol in how many Swedish people perceive their identity. For a Swede that is raised in Swedish culture a connection to nature is a spoken element of the framework for their personal sense of national identity. At the same time, ideas about improper use of nature can be an unspoken commentary on belonging and exclusion, drawing a boundary between those who should and should not make use of the forest. The desire among some Swedes to find belonging in nature seems to be a nostalgic reaction to the ways that they see the world changing around them.

Based on the events and conversations that I observed and took part in, I argue that the relationship with nature that is felt by so many Swedes is representative of a nostalgic framework of Swedish cultural identity. For most Swedes, a respect and affection for nature has been culturally and socially intertwined into their inherent understandings and opinions of how life in Sweden should be lived. It is also unspoken in the ways that Swedes might socially perceive and critique the ways that others interact with the natural world in Sweden. Based on the contexts that I have described, I argue that there is an unspeakable nature in how the discourses of nature in Sweden are distinctly oriented towards a social preference for the ways in which Swedes typically use the land. The free and frequent use of Sweden’s natural landscape is only unspoken
when it is done in the “right” Swedish way and by people who look and act like “real Swedes.”

The presence of nostalgia and moral panic in Swedish discourses of cultural and national identity is not limited to perceptions of culture and nature. The next chapter will address how these ideas influence perceptions of Swedishness and an imagined Swedish community.
Chapter 3 – Evoking *Folkhemmet*

Along with the “first impressions of Swedishness” and a nostalgic connection formed between nature and culture, my interview subjects perceived and identified Swedish identity as indicated by what were described as “common Swedish values.” When discussing diversity and the changes in Swedish demographics, many Swedes will tentatively acknowledge that there are varying levels of social tension and anxiety about the increasing population of immigrants from outside of Western Europe. Most Swedes are comfortable with what they see as easily sharable features of different cultures: food, music, literature, and art. They tend to be more concerned however, that there is potential for disagreement and even conflict when it comes to more complex aspects of culture such as values of religious belief, community hierarchy, and social behavior. Many of the Swedes I interviewed claimed that “things would work out” as long as Swedish social values were respected by the immigrant populations. This carries an implication that Swedes would like immigrants to act “more Swedish,” and to an extent I would say that is true. When talking with Ida she described this implication with an opinion that I would infer is shared by many Swedes. “I want them [immigrants] to keep their own personality and their own culture but adjust and be aware of the Swedish rules and how to consider and connect with others.” I interpret this as a position among Swedes that immigrants can “be themselves” as long as their choices are not perceived as in conflict with Swedes’ own customs and values. Thus, it is important to establish a frame of reference for the social values Swedes are referring to when they make these kinds of statements and how they are expressed in articulations of Swedishness.

I argue that many of the values that are mentioned by Swedes in my interviews are reminiscent of the Swedish social democratic ideology of the *folkhem,* or the people’s home. The legacy of the *folkhem* is an influence for many Swedes in how they perceive an imagined
Swedish community. This discussion of the folkhem will also be informed by the previously addressed perspectives of nostalgia and moral panic. From the context of the folkhem there are significant examples and contradictions that are important to recognize when analyzing the spoken, unspoken, and unspeakable discourses surrounding cultural and national identity in Sweden.

The concept of imagined communities was developed by Benedict Anderson as part of his discussion of the origin and spread of nationalism. Anderson argues that the nation is a political community that is imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. According to Anderson, the four significant features of that description are that a nation is imagined, limited, sovereign, and community. A shared national identity is imagined in that the all members of a nation will never be able to know each other. Nations are limited and sovereign because while they seek power and freedom from the direct structure of religion, they are still dictated by mental and ideological boundaries of who is and is not part of that nation. Finally, the sovereign and limited nation is imagined as a community because regardless of the presence of inequality and exploitation there is a common connection among its members that they are all a part of that nation (Anderson 1983:6–7). The concept of the imagined community is beneficial in understanding how the values that are associated with the folkhem are understood and performed as a way of imagining a shared Swedish identity.
Folkhemmet and the Swedish Model

*Folkhemmet* is an ideology that originated in a famous speech given to the *Riksdag* (Swedish parliament) by Per Albin Hansson in 1928:

“The foundation of the home is community in solidarity. The good home knows no privilege or neglect, no favorites and no stepchildren. There, no one looks down on another, no one strives to gain advantage at the expense of others, the strong do not repress and rob the week. In the good home equality, thoughtfulness, cooperation and helpfulness prevail. Applied to the great people’s and citizens’ home this would mean the breakdown of all social and economic barriers that now divide citizens into privileged and deprived, into the rulers and the ruled, into rich and poor, the propertied and the destitute, the robbers and the robbed. Swedish society is not yet the good citizens’ home...If [it] is to become [so] class differences must be banished, social care must be developed, and there must be an economic leveling out, the workers must be accorded a share on economic administration, democracy must be introduced and applied to social and economic life” (Hilson 2008:106).

Hansson was a member of the *Socialdemokratiska arbetareparti* (The Social Democratic Party), the oldest political party in Sweden. When the party gained majority power in the Riksdagen in 1932, Hansson was appointed prime minister. The idea of a social welfare state like that which Hansson described in his speech was engineered in Sweden by the Social Democratic Party. A main message from the Social Democrats in Sweden and other Scandinavian countries was that freedom from fear and want were essential for people to be free members of a democracy (Vivekanandan 1988:3). Key agendas for the party included improving the health and diet of the Swedish population, and raising the quality of housing and infrastructure throughout the country. Hansson’s leadership of the Social Democrats changed the parties image to become a symbol of modernity, rationality, Swedishness, patriotism, and national pride. Hansson was
described by some as the “father of the country,” ushering Sweden into an era of Social Democratic hegemony (Cool 2013:27; Sejersted and Adams 2011:73,159).

In 1936, American journalist Marquis Childs published a book entitled *Sweden: The Middle Way* (Childs 1936). Sweden’s “middle way” according to Childs, was a path between the practice of socialism in Russia and capitalism in the United States. This characterization of Sweden’s government and social system as the middle way later connected the countries policies to the concept of the “third way” that was developed in the 1950’s by German economist Wilhelm Röpke. The “third way” suggests a compromise solution, where there is synthesis between the projects of different political groups (Andersson 2009:235). These discussions of Sweden standing between opposing ideologies has contributed to the narrative of Sweden holding a position of utopic neutrality in large scale political conflicts such as the Cold War (Andersson and Hilson 2009:3). Being *mellan*, or “in the middle” has become a common theme from which Swedes view the best practices of culture, society, and politics. *Mellan* informs spoken, unspoken, and unspeakable ideas and values of Swedishness. On a basic level, in Swedish grocery stores you can buy mellanmjölk (lowfat milk) and mellansalt smör (medium salt butter). From a deeper and more complicated perspective, there is an older saying, *Den spik som sticker ut blir slagen* (The nail that sticks out gets struck). This is an example of *jantelagen*, or “the law of Jante.” This is an idea that comes from Danish-Norwegian author Aksel Sandemose (Sandemose 1936). Sandemose identifies the ten “laws” of Jante that describe what he sees to be a standard of social expectations in the Nordic societies of the early twentieth century. The ten “laws” include ideas like, “you're not to think you are anything special,” and “you're not to think you are as good as we are” (Sandemose 1936). I would argue that the sentiments of *jantelagen* reinforce some of the *mellan* themes of *folkhemmet*. *Jantelagen* is
representative of a usually unspoken social understanding that Swedes should not extravagantly show off either their successes or failures. By enacting mellan and jantelagen, Swedes can perform a version of Swedishness that reaffirms their understanding of an imagined folkhem community in solidarity with goals of social equality and cooperation.

Much of Sweden’s history of social and political policies since the establishment of the folkhem can be discussed in terms of the Nordic model and more specifically the Swedish model. The Nordic model originated in the 1930’s in tandem with folkhemmet. One of the early features that set the Nordic countries apart from the rest of Europe was that their economies recovered quickly from the Great Depression while keeping their parliamentary democracy style of governance. The Nordic countries also reached political settlements between working class and agricultural laborers by compromising between the methodologies of liberal capitalism and state communism (Hilson 2008:19). The principle feature of the contemporary Nordic model is comprehensive welfare states with publicly provided social services financed by taxes (Andersen 2007:13–14). Talk of the Swedish model became common in the 1960’s and 70’s. A defining feature of the model was a change in the discourse of how and why social and political policies have been successful in Sweden. Discourses of the cohesiveness of the social system had often been attributed to the nostalgic perception that the Swedish population was relatively culturally homogenous when the folkhem was founded. As civil rights movements changed the national conversation regarding prejudice, the defined strength of the Swedish model was reframed as social equality (Marklund 2009:277–8). According to a report published in 2016 by the Swedish Ministry of Finance, the contemporary Swedish model consists of three main focuses; a labor market that that facilitates adjustment to change, a universal welfare policy, and an economic policy that promotes openness and stability (Ministry of Finance 2017:5).
folkhem that was created in the 1930’s no longer exists in the same form, but its ideological memory still lingers in the contemporary Swedish discourses of cultural and national identity.

The Contemporary Presence of Folkhemmet

When I talked to Swedes about social values and the Swedish state, there were many spoken and unspoken references to the idea of the folkhem. The most commonly addressed aspects of the Swedish state were social welfare and equality. When talking to Stefan about things that he thinks are done well (or even best) in Sweden he gave an overview of some of the main social benefits that Swedes enjoy and appreciate through state policies:

“For example, how we deal with when you get children, not having to leave them, and that kind of stuff. I think we do that well. And the gender equality that comes with that as well. It makes it possible for both parents to have a career. They don’t lose their career because they have a kid. And I think that is truly beneficial for the whole society. So that is definitely something that we can be proud of. And lots of the social securement system, like many can complain about higher taxes, but we also get a lot of things back from it. you don’t have to think about do I have money enough to go to hospital or anything like that because that’s already been taken care of. You just go there and get well. I think we have also found a way to make people, even if you are not rich, that you can feel secure that you will get help if you need it.”

The features of welfare and equality that Stefan mentions exist as the result of several key historical moments and changes to social policy. In the early the 1920’s there was the concept of a “housewife contract” where men and women would hold equal status in the family but have different roles and responsibilities (Sejersted and Adams 2011:89). In the mid 1960’s feminist movements began to challenge ideas of the nuclear family and the housewife contract. In 1972 a
new social contract was established with the message of gender equality in both the family and the labor market. The two-income family, where both parents provided financial support, was seen as a solution to both economic and social concerns. More women joining the labor market also meant that new measures needed to be taken to support children now that both of their parents were working. This inspired an expansion of childcare services and paid leave policies (Sejersted and Adams 2011:410–11). The *folkhem* ideology relies greatly on the perceptions of equality that were built during this period in Sweden. Enabling men and women to have equal access to the labor market by expanding childcare and parental leave was widely seen as a statement that all are treated according to the same standards in the *folkhem*. This message of overall equality and uniformity, however, has become problematic when applied to contexts other than gender. This perception of equality as sameness does not always translate well in contexts where equality requires acknowledging difference rather than establishing social uniformity. Cultural and religious differences between Swedes and Muslim immigrants, for example, have been sources of tension. Nostalgic evocations of the *folkhem* can therefore offer an unspoken or unspeakable commentary on inequalities and cultural and religious differences in the present.

Healthcare in Sweden is often discussed in terms of insurance and security. Many Swedes see the social welfare system as instantiating a national promise that the system will take care of them. Linnea expressed this enthusiastically. “You can get everything you want in Sweden. When you’re sick you can go to a hospital and you don’t have to pay much money for it[...]there are a lot of insurances in Sweden.” The contemporary Swedish welfare state is known for its support “from cradle to grave.” There are different kinds of support programs for each stage in a Swede’s life. Karin, whose children are in their teens and early 20s, talked about healthcare in
terms of youth, “the healthcare system, I think that is very good because up until you are 18 you don’t have to care for anything you just go to the doctor and it is paid for.” On the opposite end of the age spectrum, my relative Karl has come to appreciate social benefits for older Swedes. “The social welfare I would say we all get scheduled and we want to know that that it will be a good life when we get older things I didn't think of 40 years ago but now I am 70 and I think of it.” The social importance of values like parental leave, child care, pension support, and elderly care are spoken, whereas anxieties about the scaling back of some of these services are generally unspoken.

As noted by Stefan, when talking about social welfare and equality, most Swedes also mention the support of children and families. Compared to the contemporary policies in the United States, the social welfare programs of the Swedish state promote a very different perspective on parenting and family life. The defining feature of this is parental leave. In Sweden all leave is handled by Försäkringskassan (The Swedish Social Insurance Agency). Through this agency, Swedish citizens and those living and working in Sweden can apply for compensation to cover leave for reasons such as sickness, disability, unemployment, and to care for children. Swedish parents are entitled to 480 days of paid parental leave when a child is born or adopted, with 390 of those days at nearly 80 percent of their normal pay. Parental leave can be taken up until a child turns eight and parents can accumulate leave from several children (Åkerström 2013). There is also a special program to help compensate expenses for youth in Sweden up until the age of 18 (Försäkringskassan 2017). These social benefits are a central to how many Swedes think and talk about their country and its values. Many of the Swedes that I know speak frequently about the benefit of being able to stay home with their children after they were born. This benefit was especially appreciated by those Swedes who experienced the evolution of the
policies into what they are today. Camilla remembered when the different leave policies started to come into effect:

“Yes, I had three children. When I got the first girl in 1970 then I could stay at home 6 months with full payment…The other, she was born 72, 1 year before I think it was the same six months but not the father then. But then we had a son born in 85 and then I could stay at home I think it was for a year or something and [the father] could stay at home the first 10 days when you got home from the hospital. Oh, what a difference.”

These social benefits often serve as important symbols of Swedish national identity, and can index nostalgia for the Swedish welfare state in the period of Social Democratic hegemony. Late twentieth and early twenty-first century politics in Sweden have seen a resurgence in feelings of Nordic nostalgia regarding the original conception of the folkhem. Jenny Andersson addresses a resurgence in Nordic nostalgia in politics surrounding perceptions of the Swedish model as a utopian standard (Andersson 2009). She draws on ideas presented by Lars Trägårdh and Henrik Berggren in Är svensken människa?, who argue that there is a common historical definition of Swedishness that is deeply rooted and inherently linked to the concept of the people’s home (Trägårdh and Berggren 2006). Andersson argues that the metaphor of the people’s home has become a trope in the Swedish political consciousness that represents an imagined community where all Swedes can connect their Swedish identity to the shared social and historical experience of the people’s home. However, the concept of the people’s home can also become a symbol of “paradise lost” where nostalgia glorifies the practices of the past and creates resistance to change. Andersson argues that there has been a failure by both the political and academic communities in Sweden to critically challenge this nostalgic reimagining of the people’s home (Andersson 2009:241).
My research focused on Swedish national identity as a form of imagined community, yet the current social and political climate necessitates a discussion about the presence and implications of nationalism in Sweden. Nationalist ideology is represented most clearly in Swedish politics by the social conservative Sverigedemokraterna parti (Sweden Democrats party). With a motto of “security and tradition,” their platform promotes Swedish national and individual responsibility and condemns the social encouragement of multiculturalism (Sverigedemokraterna 2011a). Although they describe themselves as being in the political center, the Sweden democrats have been referred to in the Swedish media as a “xenophobic” and “far-right” party (Sveriges Radio 2014; Mellgren 2013). The Sweden Democrats have seen an increase in popularity in Swedish politics since their founding in 1988. They had a public breakthrough in the 2010 election when they received approximately six percent of the vote and gained representation in the Swedish parliament (Hellström Anders, Nilsson Tom, and Stoltz Pauline 2012) In the 2014 election that occurred in the midst of the European refugee crisis the Sweden Democrats capitalized on the concerns of Swedes who opposed Sweden’s immigration policies, receiving approximately thirteen percent of the vote and becoming the third largest party represented in the Riksdag. In his book Lions of the North, Benjamin R. Teitelbaum addresses the rise of a Nordic radical nationalism in the connection between music and self-described social and political “nationalists.” To help clarify the predominant ideologies within the concept of Nordic nationalism, Teitelbaum identifies three main camps: identitarians, race revolutionaries, and cultural nationalists. Based on his fieldwork, he describes the main messages and goals of each sector of Nordic nationalism. Teitelbaum describes the he identitarians as the most complicated group ideologically. The identitarians tend to claim that ethnicity and race are essential aspects of a person’s identity. Yet instead of advocating directly for the goal of racial
purity, instead they argue that distinct social diversity should be promoted in order to prevent the homogenization of all human societies. While they are the smallest nationalist group in numbers, the identitarians are the main producers of online journalism, print publishing, and social networking initiatives that advocate for and spread the ideas of Nordic nationalism. The race revolutionaries are those who are more likely call themselves “white nationalist” and celebrate the symbols and mythology of historical Nazism. They identify with the idea of distinct Nordic racial community based on historic lineages and tend to identify Jews as their main enemy (Teitelbaum 2017a:4). Finally, cultural nationalists emphasize the importance and superiority of Nordic cultural and social practices and believe that they can be adopted regardless of ethnicity. They are the largest critics of Muslim immigration in Sweden and argue that Islam is the greatest threat to the cultural integrity of Sweden. Cultural nationalists are currently the most populous and widespread nationalist group in the Nordic countries and their ideology is represented in the policies and programs of the Sweden Democrats party (Teitelbaum 2017a:5–6).

Ideas of nostalgia for the *folkhem* and moral panic regarding diversity are very recognizable in the cultural policy of the Sweden Democrat’s party (Sverigedemokraterna 2011b). What is tricky is that these politicians seem to have become quite good at adopting the language and terminology of the social sciences so that they can phrase these ideas in ways that are more socially palatable. Within their cultural policy they tend to establish a more widely accepted concept, and then restrict and condition it according to their own ideology. An example is how they acknowledge that culture is dynamic and changes over time, but then amend their statement with the belief that important cultural changes should only occur very slowly and according to established national and cultural norms. The Sweden Democrats have a strong sense of nostalgia for what they call “the core of Swedish culture,” which they stressed needs to be
preserved. The ideology and image of the *folkhem* is invoked in how they describe “a solidarity-funded welfare model” as a particularly important element of the aforementioned “core.” The focus of their moral panic about a perceived threat to Swedish culture and the ideology of the *folkhem* is what they term “foreign phenomena.” This is their attempt to describe Sweden’s increasing diversity in an indirect or unspoken register. However, later in the policy statement they are very blunt in their opinion of diversity in Sweden, stating that they are “opponents of both cultural imperialism and cultural relativism,” meaning that they do not believe that any culture should have superiority over another, but also that cultures can use their own cultural lens to pass judgement on the practices and traditions of other cultures. They consequently contradict their rejection of cultural imperialism with their spoken assertion that some cultures are better than others at creating beneficial living conditions for their populations, and those who they perceive as negligent should have to address their “destructive aspects” by their own means.

Although the Sweden Democrats are careful to never explicitly say Sweden is a superior country, there is a clear unspoken assertion in their cultural policy that Swedish culture is special and should be protected from the threat of outside influences.

I would not identify any of my research informants or their opinions about Swedish national identity as contextually “nationalist.” In conversations outside of my interviews Swedes would mention nationalists with reactions ranging from concern to disgust. When a segment on the local news showed footage from a nationalist rally my relatives frowned, shook their heads, and scoffed before changing the channel. In fact, some Swedes I interviewed expressed concerns that the radical rhetoric of the nationalist groups was making it harder for people to constructively address pressing social and cultural issues in Sweden. The reputation of the Sweden Democrats being a party that holds racist views and opposes Sweden’s immigration
policies has become socially attached to conversations regarding immigration in general. Lukas expressed a lot of frustration when talking about this issue:

“That’s why the Swedish Democrats have become to be so strong, we have had, it hasn't been really [politically correct] to talk about [concerns about immigration] because if you just mention ‘I think we need to restrict immigration’ then you get the racist sign on you and some people [who] are definitely racist voice their thoughts anyway.”

The general distaste that many Swedes have developed regarding the rhetoric of the Sweden Democrats has created a situation where Lukas believes that it has become unspeakable to publicly criticize immigration policy without immediately being labeled as a racist. A common theme that was spoken across the Swedish social circles that I spent time with was that nationalists and political parties like the Sweden Democrats were socially embarrassing for the image of Sweden both at home and abroad. I argue that nationalist messaging like what is expressed by the Sweden Democrats is embarrassing and uncomfortable for a majority of Swedes because it is bringing socially unspeakable subjects and ideas to the forefront, complicating common perceptions of how and why these issues should be addressed in Swedish discourses of cultural and national identity. That being said, the folkhem nostalgia and moral panic regarding perceived outsiders is not unique to the Sweden Democrats, it is just articulated in different registers of the spoken, unspoken, and unspeakable.

Many Swedes believe that their social democratic style of government and social policies are misunderstood by many people outside of Sweden. Lukas again had a response to those possible misconceptions, “I think we are usually described as and depending on who the narrator is, it's a socialistic paradise or hell. That is not the truth at all.” Helena is from Stockholm and in her fifties, and we spoke while she was staying at her summer cottage. When talking about
outside perceptions of Sweden Helena’s opinion was, “they think that we pay a lot of taxes and that we are really stupid people who pay for…you know.” At the time she did not elaborate what she meant by “you know.” Although it was unspoken, I would make the inference that she is referring to immigrants’ integration into the Swedish social welfare system. I make this claim because of her context of discussing taxes. One of the main uses of tax revenue in Sweden is the management and function of the social welfare system. When talking with Swedes there was often an unspoken or unspeakable sense of moral panic in terms of who the welfare system was supporting and benefitting. The ideology of the folkhem relies on the idea of social care for a community in solidarity. There is an unspoken expectation that benefitting from the social welfare system means being a member of Swedish society and performing Swedishness. When Swedes identify someone as not being or acting Swedish, they may form an unspoken question as to whether that person is fulfilling the expectations that work to provide a system of social support. Sofia gave an example of the unspoken reference to these expectations, “we have free healthcare, that’s very good, but sometimes the social is, they give it, oh I can’t explain it. Some people who don’t, who shouldn’t have it can have it, it is too easy to get help from the social system.” Although Sofia does not mention what sort of people she is referring to, the social implications of folkhemmet and Swedishness that I have been discussing would suggest that they are those who she would view as outsiders, likely referring to recently arrived immigrants. In the imagined community of the Swedish folkhem, solidarity extends to people who would be considered Swedish and are welcome to the full support of the social welfare system, whereas unspoken references to immigrants may indicate the limits of this solidarity.

Many Swedes mentioned a desire and appreciation for balance and relative social harmony in their society. However, when speaking about balance the unspeakable topic is that
for some Swedes, nostalgia for the imagined harmony of the _folkhem_ may also index nostalgia for an imagined homogenous Sweden of the past. Most are very happy with how their lives are influenced by the social ideas and policies of the Swedish state, but they admit that there are groups and contexts that are disadvantaged in the system. With the increase in cultural and ethnic diversity, Swedes are having to reevaluate what social equality means in their country. I found that many Swedes that I talked with had difficulty with trying to identify what might ordinarily be unspoken or unspeakable critiques of life in Sweden. One of the downsides of a supportive and structured social welfare system is that there is the potential for the individual to become isolated. Helena mentioned loneliness.

“`I would probably say some not so good things about loneliness, lonely people in Sweden, and how if you are not connected you could be very lonely. If you are old that we have children there and old people somewhere else. I don't like that so much but it is also because of the development. I mean a hundred years ago we were all living in families, big families and now we are all (separate), at least in the cities.”`

The risk of loneliness in Sweden is the result of both social norms and policies. As I discussed previously, there is a social tendency in Sweden to keep to yourself and not interact with strangers. If you are living in Sweden without a strong social network it may be difficult to develop one. Many of the Swedes I interviewed seem to be recognizing the risk of isolation in their society and making the topic spoken. Linnea simply suggested that, “I think that we (should have) a little more socialization as part of daily life.”

Social isolation also characterizes relationships between different cultural and ethnic groups in Sweden. A social equality issue that was recognized by many of my interviewees was the segregation of different populations, particularly of immigrants from non-western countries.
Segregation is the correct term for the situation in Sweden in that it describes how groups are being set apart from one another. The main form of segregation taking place in contemporary Sweden is through settlement and housing policies. This is not a new phenomenon, it has been going on since the 1970’s (Pred 2000a:80). My interview subjects spoke about segregation as inhibiting opportunities for social integration and discourse. When immigrants and refugees are either placed by the government or economically guided into areas and neighborhoods where they have little interactions with the Swedes those areas are much more likely to become ethnic enclaves. Some Swedes attribute this isolation to the immigrants themselves, suggesting an unspoken sense that immigrants, rather than Swedes, are responsible for cultural integration or the lack thereof. Gustav discussed his view of the issues that Swedish cities are facing, “in the big cities, there you can have people of, from the same country, they don’t assimilate they stay with their own people. It is natural of course, the language and the way you live.” Jennifer Mack writes about the Swedish city of Södertälje in her research on how immigrant oriented housing projects have altered the structural and social environments of Swedish cities since the 1970’s (Mack 2017). Karin has lived her whole life in Södertälje and has witnessed many of these industrial and social changes in the city. When talking with her about the demographics and history of Södertälje, she offered an interesting perspective on the kinds of opinions and perceptions that are held by some Swedes regarding segregation, isolation and social and cultural integration.

Kaitlin: “It seems like some people talk about Södertälje as, ‘oh that is where all of the immigrants are.'”

Karin: “Yeah it was bad before.”

Kaitlin: “Yeah? What do you think made the change?”
Karin: “I think they grew up. The people who were bad. Cause they came like lonely kids and they were in big groups and they attacked young Swedish people who were out at parties, but now those people are grown up.”

Kaitlin: “So maybe it’s just a bad combination of being a teenager and being somewhere very strange?”

Karin: “Yeah being alone and nobody taking care of you […] I think the government needs to think about something to do for those kids that come here alone, they should live in a family, or at a farm or something, five of them together and working and getting an education.”

There are several parts of this conversation I that I believe are important to break down. The main distinction to be made is between how Swedes like Karin feel about the issues that have occurred regarding the immigrant communities in Södertälje, and the (in this conversation) unrepresented position of said immigrants about how they have experienced life in Sweden and interactions with “Ethnic Swedes.” From Karin’s perspective she is expressing what was “bad” according to social expectations of “good” Swedish behavior. I would argue that many Swedes probably see the encouragement of “good” Swedish behavior as a helpful or even caring practice that facilitates smoother integration, thus preserving the goal of balance and social cohesion. However, whatever the intentions, these perspectives are very problematic. The way that Karin talks about Södertälje’s past implies a racially motivated social narrative in which immigrants are labeled the “bad” influence and Swedes are portrayed as the innocent victims of the immigrants very “un-Swedish” behavior. Unacknowledged in this context is whether or not the immigrants in Södertälje faced discrimination or harassment from Swedes that may have contributed towards the potential for protests and confrontations, or even just the construction of
a narrative of opposing values. Perhaps what is truly unspeakable are the racist and xenophobic undercurrents that influence stereotypes and subjective social judgements. Acknowledging the problematic and discriminatory actions and ideas in society is uncomfortable, as it should be. I would argue that this is especially discomfiting and awkward for the many Swedes who identify themselves as part of a social and cultural community that believes in equality and tolerance. From that perspective, I respect and appreciate Karin for her ability to be upfront and share the narratives that are so often unspoken and unspeakable in Swedish society.

Much of the way that many Swedes think about themselves as Swedes is through spoken, unspoken, and unspeakable articulations of their place in an imagined Swedish community. As I have demonstrated, this imagined community is greatly influenced by nostalgia for the Swedish social democratic ideology of the folkhem, or the people’s home. One of the original definitions of nostalgia was as an ailment, “a painful yearning to return home” (Davis 1977:414). Swedes have, quite literally, an imagined social home in the folkhem. The “good home” as Per Albin Hansson said, which “knows no privilege or neglect, no favorites and no stepchildren.” The presence of nostalgia and moral panic in contemporary Swedish society is often expressed as a yearning to return to a comfortable idea of social solidarity in the people’s home. Perhaps that is because the stress of the conflict between increased diversity and nostalgia for a past Sweden is challenging the imagined Swedish home to grow and adapt. When talking with my friend Alice about how Sweden might address the topics of immigration and diversity going forward, she evoked the idea of the social home in an interesting metaphor.

“I think that is bad that we don't really...of course we see it as a problem but we don't see it as like this urgent sort of fixable thing that we have to work with. It is more like we are trying to see if...its like if you have a house, if it springs a leak in the pipes you are like
‘oh yeah we have to fix this right now’ but this is more like ‘oh yeah I can see the paint is sort of starting to peel somewhere and we should fix that’, but that is not what is happening. This is actually a pipe that has sprung a leak and that is a problem and we need to fix it, but we don't see it that way, and I think that is bad.”

My interpretation of Alice’s metaphor is that the leaking pipes are the social tensions that Swedes are resistant to openly acknowledge or discuss because it would mean exposing unspeakable thoughts and ideas. I see Alice’s contrast between the peeling wallpaper and the leak in the pipes as emblematic of how nostalgic ideas are clouding the realities of the present. A leak implies a pressing issue, one that may be causing the creation of nostalgic ideas for when conditions were presumed to be better or easier for the one who imagines them. The leak seems to be the result of the kind of peeling wallpaper problems that were most likely overlooked as nostalgic ideas and moral panic were developing in the first place. Whatever the cause or progression of the leak, it still needs to be addressed and fixed before this house is flooded.
Conclusion

Fikapaus

In concluding my thesis, I am going to take a figurative fikapaus (fika pause) to talk about an important social aspect of national and cultural identity in Sweden. Fika. For my family in Sweden, fika is frequent and unquestionable. Morgonensfika (morning fika), eftermiddagsfika (afternoon fika), kvällsfika (evening fika), söndagsfika (Sunday fika). Fika is technically a coffee break, but really it is more of a social phenomenon. When meeting for fika, or taking a fikapaus, Swedes create an atmosphere of real or imagined familiarity where they can connect with others and engage in conversation. Fika allows the world to slow down for a little while. You can sit and relax, drink coffee or tea, and indulge in sweet pastries or fruit. Fika is a social ritual that I used as the setting for many of the interviews that I conducted for this research.

Figure 6: A popular artistic representation of fika culture (Ohlsson 2016)
At its core this thesis is about how the Swedes that I interviewed perceive themselves, their lives, their communities, and their country as Swedish. These perceptions play into larger ideas of how the discourses of Swedish cultural and national identity are expressed and interpreted in the registers of the spoken, the unspoken, and the unspeakable. The conversation started with the ways that Swedes identify and explain who is and can be a Swede, alluding to spoken, unspoken, and unspeakable social and cultural criteria. From this perspective, I examined and analyzed different ideas and perceptions of Swedish culture, social values, and social norms from the perspective of my own fieldwork observations and from the responses of the Swedes that I interviewed and spent time with.

Swedishness is part of what makes a Swede a Swede. There are things about Swedishness and being Swedish that can act as “first impressions” when observing the daily routines of Swedish society. While the population is becoming more diverse, Sweden is still a very ethnically and socially white country. Perceptions of ethnicity and race in Sweden are influenced by the concept of Nordic whiteness and the history of Swedish scientists practicing “scientific racism.” Sweden’s history of relative ethnic homogeneity has led to the normalization of the lifestyles of white Swedes as the “right” way to be Swedish. Communication and social interactions in Sweden are typically considered to be reserved, even by Swedes themselves. Silence is a normal part of conversations and everyday interactions. There is a social meaning in the choice of whether or not to speak and what to say when you do. Aspects of conversations and expressions are often unspoken and in some cases unspeakable, requiring a level of cultural knowledge to understand the situation or interaction. Perceptions of space also exists as a sort of unspoken language in Swedish society. I developed a model of spatial bubbles that can help to
explain the social rules that most Swedes inherently follow. There are different Swedish expectations of both physical and social interaction in a range of intimate, personal, social, and public bubbles of space.

Most Swedes describe themselves as very socially and personally connected to nature. This relationship with nature is based on elements of nostalgia as well as spoken and unspoken understandings of taste and how things should be done. Swedes nostalgically look to nature as a source of what they imagine to be wild, genuine, and truly Swedish. Summer cottages in Sweden are representative of the connection between ideas of leisure and recreation and the natural world, as well as socially informed opinions of aesthetic taste. The right of public access in Sweden demonstrates how the culture surrounding nature often relies on exclusionary ideas of who counts as the “public.”

Along with the nostalgic images and traditions of nature, discourses of national and cultural identity are informed by the idea of the *folkhem*. The people’s home is part of how Swedes may view themselves to be part of an imagined community. When discussing the welfare system and its social benefits many Swedes evoke ideas of the *folkhem* in ways that are spoken, unspoken, and unspeakable. Benefits like having the ability to take leave to care for children and access to health care gives many Swedes a sense of security that they will be taken care of as part of both a literal and imagined Swedish community. However, nostalgic visions of the people’s home and social solidarity can also include racially motivated social narratives that label immigrants as a “bad” influence who exhibit very “un-Swedish” behavior and are undeserving of welfare benefits.

Discourses of cultural and national identity in Sweden are best analyzed by examining their articulation in spoken, unspoken, and unspeakable registers because this framework
provides insight into why questions of belonging, inclusion, and exclusion are so complicated in contemporary Swedish life. I would argue that what makes the Swedish context significant is that many norms and values of Swedishness are defined by unspoken or even unspeakable elements of social and cultural knowledge. As a researcher it was to my benefit that through my family and friends, I was able to learn about aspects of Swedish identity that often go unspoken.

_Fika as a Social Context_

Based on my own experiences, _fika_ has the potential to facilitate connections and allow people to speak about what is otherwise unspoken or even unspeakable. I argue that it represents a significant social context for communication for many Swedes.

_Figure 7: Captured images from the video "Swedish Fika" (Go Royal 2017)_

The images above are from the video “Swedish Fika,” by the Swedish music-comedy duo Go Royal. I bring in this cultural reference because it displays both the kinds of good intentions that are held by many Swedes, as the spoken and unspoken discourses of exclusion that exist between groups in Sweden. In the video, the duo humorously sing about using _fika_ as a strategy to achieve world peace. Although they are quite obviously exaggerating the power of this ordinary social ritual, they are also invoking the meaning and utility that _fika_ has for many Swedes.
Unfortunately, they quickly contradict themselves. Another line of the song states that, “you can only come to our fika if you pronounce kex (cookie) with a ‘K’.” So, while they are advocating for a context of social cohesion and communication, they are also simultaneously establishing rules of inclusion and exclusion. With the problems of this contradiction in mind, I would still argue that the Swedish ritual of fika can be a metaphor for the kind of social opening that needs to occur more frequently in order for Swedes to address the spoken, unspoken, and unspeakable aspects of belonging and exclusion in their cultural and national identity in productive discourse. An everyday suggestion of ska vi fika? (shall we have fika?) could be an opportunity to rethink the ritual of fika to include not just Swedish cookies and drip coffee, but baklava and Turkish coffee.

An Awakening in Sweden

“I think it's kind of an awakening in Sweden.” The title of this thesis comes from my interview with Karl. That was his first response when I asked him about the future of life in Sweden. The “awakening” he is referring to is essentially the recognition that nostalgic longing for the imagined comforts of the folkhem era is not a viable response to the demographic and cultural changes occurring in Sweden. It is a growing social recognition that discourses of Swedish national and cultural identity need to be reevaluated in the context of a more diverse and global Sweden.

When talking about how she felt about Sweden becoming more diverse, Elin described this idea in her own words. “I think we need to find a way to celebrate and to be relaxed with ‘What is Sweden?’ and ‘What do we stand for?’ We should also be more open minded towards and learn more from other people and involve them in the celebrating of Sweden.”
This “awakening” reaffirms the fact that research on the discourses of cultural and national identity in Sweden is far from complete. If I have the opportunity to continue this kind of research there is an essential expansion of study that needs to occur. What does it mean to be Swedish today? My research analyzed this question from the context of individuals who have never questioned their Swedishness. To truly have a contemporary and comprehensive analysis on the discourses of national and cultural identity in Sweden there should be input from different demographics of the population. I am very interested in the prospect of exploring the types of questions that I asked of my informants, such as “What makes someone a Swede?” and “Can someone become Swedish?” with groups of people living in Sweden who are not “Ethnic Swedes” and who could offer valuable perspectives on Swedishness, identity, and belonging. In order for a reevaluation of the discourses of Swedish national and cultural identity to be successful it needs to acknowledge the opinions and experiences of everyone that identifies as a Swede, no matter their background or birthplace.
Appendix – Interview Questions

English

Research Study Interview Questions

1. How long have you lived in Sweden?

2. Do you identify yourself as Swedish? Why?

3. What makes someone a Swede?

4. In general, what are some things that you think most Swedes do?

5. How do you think you could guess that a stranger is not Swedish?

6. How would you describe Swedish culture to someone who knows nothing about Sweden?

7. How do you think the rest of the world imagines life in Sweden? Are there any common misconceptions?

8. Could you pick something about life in Sweden that you think is done better than in other countries?

9. Are there things about other places in the world that you think Sweden could benefit from introducing to Swedish society?

10. Do you think that there is a collective national Swedish identity? If so, how would you describe it?

11. How do you feel about Sweden becoming more ethnically and culturally diverse?

12. Do you think it is possible for someone to become Swedish after moving to Sweden? How would you decide that?

13. Do you think that those who immigrate to Sweden are becoming part of Swedish culture?

14. How would you describe the general public’s reaction to the attack in Stockholm?

15. What do the issues with immigration, terrorism, and even just increased diversity make you think about the future of Sweden?
Intervjufrågor till forskningsstudie

1. Hur länge har du bott i Sverige?
2. Identifierar du dig som svensk? Varför?
3. Vad innebär det att vara svensk?
4. Rent allmänt, vad är några saker som du tycker att de flesta svenskar gör?
5. Hur tycker du att du kan gissa att en främling inte är svensk?
6. Hur skulle du beskriva svensk kultur för någon som inte vet någonting om Sverige?
7. Hur tycker du att resten av världen föreställer sig livet i Sverige? Finns det några vanliga missuppfattningar?
8. Kan du välja något från livet i Sverige som du tycker fungerar bättre än i andra länder?
9. Finns det något i andra delar av världen som du tycker att Sverige kunde ha nytta av att införa i det svenska samhället?
10. Tycker du att det finns en kollektiv nationell svensk identitet? Om ja, hur skulle du beskriva den?
11. Vad tycker du om att Sverige får större etnisk och kulturell mångfald?
12. Tycker du att det är möjligt för någon att bli svensk efter att ha flyttat till Sverige? Hur bestämmer du det?
13. Tycker du att de som invandrar till Sverige blir en del av svensk kultur?
14. Hur skulle du beskriva allmänhetens reaktion till attacken i Stockholm?
15. Vad får frågor som invandring, terrorism och även just ökad mångfald dig att tänka om Sveriges framtid?
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