



TRANSFORMING IDENTITIES IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPE

**CRITICAL ESSAYS ON KNOWLEDGE,
INEQUALITY AND BELONGING**

Edited by
Elisabeth L. Engebretsen and Mia Liinason



ROUTLEDGE



Transforming Identities in Contemporary Europe

Interdisciplinary in perspective, this book explores contemporary struggles around 'identity politics' in Europe, offering a unique glimpse into contemporary tensions and paradoxes surrounding identities, belonging, exclusions and their deep-seated gendered, colonial and racist legacies. With a particular focus on the Nordic region, it provides insights into the ways in which people who find themselves in minoritized positions struggle against multiple injustices. Through a series of case studies documenting counterstruggles against racist, colonialist, sexist forms of discrimination and exclusion, *Transforming Identities in Contemporary Europe* asks how the paradigm and politics of the welfare state operate to discriminate against the most marginalized, by instating a naturalized hierarchy of human-ness. As such it will appeal to scholars across the social sciences and humanities with interests in race, gender, colonialism and postcolonialism, citizenship and belonging.

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Critical Essays on Knowledge, Inequality
and Belonging

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Elisabeth L. Engebretsen
and Mia Liinason**

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Contributors

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1 Introduction

Transforming identities in contemporary Europe

Elisabeth L. Engebretsen and Mia Liinason

This book is emerging at an especially fraught moment in history. The urgency of current crises is important to acknowledge and position this book in relation to at the very start. Beginning from the broader contemporary temporality in which this project has been engaged, it is clear that in the last couple of decades, there has been an increasing fragmentation of the public sphere, growing inequalities, crisis of liberal democracy, and the decline of democracy more broadly, as well as the retreat of a perceived middle – and hence ‘balanced’ – ground in parliamentary politics and societal debate (Kováts 2017, Younge 2019). Disturbing trends globally, including anti-gender mobilisations, anti-science and knowledge disinformation campaigns, reactionary state and extra-state nationalisms, and neocolonial governance, are shown to further destabilise lauded principles of governing authority, what counts as reliable knowledge, and collective political projects for the common good (Giritli et al. 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic emerging just as an escalating climate crisis is finally reaching the policy agendas of the world’s economic and political leaders, is exacerbating pre-existing instabilities and injustices (see Al-Ali 2020, Georgiou and Titley 2022). And, as we are finalising this Introduction chapter in early 2022, the Russian military invasion of Ukraine is further unravelling fraught regional stability and the broader geopolitics of security, resources, and governance. That this historical moment is ‘fraught’ is probably an understatement of sorts; it is nigh-impossible to accurately describe or indeed capture this multiscalar crisis.

Nevertheless, it is at this thematic juncture that this volume engages in discussions and critical analyses of the variegated capacities of identity and its politics, which we understand as practices of theorising with basis in shared experiences of injustice and inequality on the part of people belonging to, or perceived to belong to, particular social groups (Heyes 2020 [2002], Younge 2019). The ‘capacities’ that interest us are to do with the transformative potentials emerging from positionalities of minoritised otherness – ways of existing in this world by way of subjective and collective everyday realities that are framed by dominant structures of exclusion, marginalisation, and violence, but which are also oriented towards change and transformation.

In following this interpretation, we are paying special attention to structural transformations in recent history, particularly the last three decades, and especially the “relentless process of marking and unmarking that has allowed identity to be only located in those who have been actively denied citizenship or subjectivity” (Walters 2018, 476–477). The chapters in this book approach the discursive landscape of identity and its politics comparatively and critically, in emphasising how the discursive and political field of ‘identity’ is constructed in localised, everyday practices and principally analysed from the perspectives of minorised otherness.

The discursive emergences of ‘pressure groups’ and ‘interest groups’ as part of the broad transformations just described have contributed towards destabilising if not transforming hegemonic binary structures that frame political identifications in public discourse (Walters 2018). What was previously ‘far-right’ is no longer fringe or ‘out there’ but quite mainstream and normalised; ideological content and political programmes previously considered unacceptable have been normalised (Eslen-Ziya and Giorgi 2022). Transphobic, homophobic, racist, and Islamophobic statements are routinely passing as free speech and democratic rights to free expression in mainstream media and political discourse (Engebretsen 2021, Pearce et al. 2020). Increasingly, minorities are reduced to ‘topics’ or ‘issues’ to be debated by a toxic and polarised “public rivalry between value systems” (Faye 2021, 14). In turn, attempts at holding such agents accountable are, within this ideologically fractured and politically populist paradigm, considered infringements on perceived rights to free speech and democracy, understood as the majority’s right to decide what constitutes the middle ground.

However, what happens to ‘the middle ground’ if the rules defining conventional parliamentary politics are no longer accurate descriptors of the present? The nation-state level of formal, parliamentary politics is an increasing polarisation with contradistinctions appearing in the ‘traditional’ Left, Progressive, and Conservative politics. Adherent is an increasing politicisation of gender, race, sexuality, and nation connected to citizenship, resources, and identification. A particular point of reference across this book’s contributing chapters, however, is a regional orientation that is attuned to the everyday and bottom-up experiences and articulations of lives in, between, and on the margins of transitional spaces and hybrid identificatory positionalities. Put together, this complex terrain enables new types of disagreements, engagements, and changing alliances between oppositional positions and identifications (Verloo and Paternotte 2018).

Against this themed framework, this volume addresses several questions: What social and political spaces are opened and closed in these movements? What forms of subjective and collective lives and livelihoods are supported by dominant value systems framed by nation-state based geographical, ideological, and political borders? And conversely, what kinds of subject formations and collectivities are labelled dangerous, criminal, and unnatural

within said borders? Finally, by centring marginalised everyday lives and their spatial and discursive counter formations that emphasise the generative potentials of coalition, difference, and movement, how may we begin to delineate alternative visions, desires, and politics for meaningful transformation and justice-based sociality? The complex processes and changes alluded to by asking these questions happen on and in relation to the nation-state level of institutions and governance, but also on the levels of intra- and trans-border and regional dynamics on many scales: cultural, ideological, and political, to name but a few.

In the skewed political universe outlined here, minorities and allies who protest practices rooted in injustice and violence are at best portrayed as problematic interest or pressure groups; oftentimes, they are painted as dangerous enemies of liberal democracy and societal values and positioned as dangerous, violent, and ‘out of order’. Sometimes government politicians and police authorities act upon such tense moments in support of the mainstream populist ‘right’, coalescing around a perceived commonly shared commitment to protect certain – vaguely defined – values, such as nationality and cultural tradition. This, however, oversimplifies a reality that in fact is far more layered. Whereas certain discourses or actions might not appear violent at first instance, and in fact are oftentimes characterised as ‘non-violent’ by powerful actors such as governments and police authorities, there is an insidiousness to such attempts to reframe structural violence as somewhat disputable by isolating (non)acts from systemic injustice, alternatively by seeking to justify tactical application of violence (Butler 2020). Deeper questions about national or personal identity are emerging, and the seemingly unified and commonly agreed democratic ideals of inclusion, equality, and diversity have become a battleground. These tense dynamics are not readily understood by referring back to pre-existing liberal democratic principles of equality, inclusion, and diversity. Nor do international covenants such as human rights charters or the EU’s Court of Human Rights easily diffuse these challenges.

This anthology is an effort to address these complicated questions largely from perspectives that foreground everyday experiences and positionalities at a variety of margins and diaspora. In discussing their methodologies, the authors emphasise various forms of lived marginalisations to do with the intersectional experiences of nationality (or citizenship), sexuality, gender identity, education, migration, and race. As we hope the chapters will demonstrate, the *Transforming Identities in Contemporary Europe* project has enabled different forms of scholarly and scholarly activist engagements to come together through a felt need to articulate collectively and critically our responses to these challenges, all the while forging new forms of analysis through these collaborative engagements. As we will delineate in the sections to follow, the project has sought to frame the collective conversation around select central concepts: identity (and its) politics, exceptionalism, and human/ity.

Transforming identities in contemporary Europe

This book brings together ten chapters that explore the changing landscapes of justice struggles in a time of growing nationalisms, exceptionalisms, and right-wing populisms, by analysing a wide range of feminist, LGBTIQI+, anti-racist and de-colonial movements, and solidarity politics. The particular focus on modern and contemporary Europe, with the Nordic region as a case in point, offers multifaceted critical readings and analyses of the colonial, racist, and sexist underpinnings of current neoliberal societies and the everyday, bottom-up strategies to survive and carve out lifeways imagined otherwise.

The idea for this book emanates from a three-year collaborative project (2018–2020), funded by the Joint Committee for Nordic Research Councils in the Social Sciences and Humanities (2017–00022/NOS-HS) and the Nordic Council's Gender Equality Fund (NIKK). Across three workshops, discussions between scholars and scholar-activists working from a range of locations across Europe, the project sought to articulate and generate dialogue and insights on key questions around humanity, democratic participation, and what it means to live together. As participants were deeply aware of, and devoted to challenging the centrality of whiteness, capitalism, and European expansion for the epistemological foundation for the construction of humanity, and of the threat to interspecies practices and environmental ecosystems raised by human-centrist values of growth and development, the workshops focused on a set of key questions: What does it mean to be(come) human? What does it mean to live together, across differences, in society today? How do we imagine and take part in shaping democratic participation as a route to transform the social and the political? And how do notions of identity reproduce or challenge various forms of exceptionalisms, situated within as well as moving between different local, national, and regional sites?

Taking the problematic lens of 'identity politics' as a starting point for critical investigations and collaborations, the discussion revolved around identity politics as a contested concept. While 'identity politics' by some actors from the left is used in condescending ways, rooted in a refusal to recognise the historical relationship between capitalism and racism, 'identity politics' is simultaneously promoted by right-wing actors and far-right constellations as a marker of exclusionary nationalism (Mulinari and Neergaard 2014). Workshop participants, by contrast, recognised 'identity politics' as a concept that can bring strength and a sense of belonging in the turbulent times and contexts of today, acknowledging the inextricable relationship between race and capital. Understanding identity politics as a form of practice, which enable feminists, LGBTIQI+ people, people of colour, indigenous people, and minoritised populations to exercise a more radical struggle for liveability and change, the approach to identity politics developed in the diversified group of workshop participants found resonances with Paola Bacchetta's approaches to subaltern theoretical production at the margins, or outside, of the university. In her key note during our second

workshop, *Decolonial Indigenous and Feminist and Queer of Color Theory and Practices in Turtle Island (The U.S.)* (2018), Bacchetta highlighted how these forms of subaltern theoretical production can be expressed through both academic and non-academic genres. Yet, in order for these subaltern theorisations to be intelligible, we need to recognise the political-amnesia around coloniality, racism, globalised capitalism, misogyny, and queerphobia, which characterise relations of power on various scales, from the local to the planetary. Such theorisations take shape through the context in which they are formed, but the insights they bring are often erased or reframed to limit their insurgent potentiality.

From this point of departure, and across the three workshops, several themes emerged that allowed us to focus on different themes: workshop 1. *Democratic participation in society – how to live together?* (Stavanger 2018), workshop 2. *Challenging Nordic exceptionalism: Geopolitical lessons and experiences* (Gothenburg 2019), and workshop 3. *Be(com)ing human? Thinking across theories and politics of difference and colonial legacies* (online 2020). An interdisciplinary framework that emerged through participants' own backgrounds situated the project discussions and presentations across scholarly, activist, and artistic domains. In this anthology, these ranges of themes and positionalities serve to frame the chapters as they identify and develop a set of central themes. We are inspired by and seek to further build on the insights developed in recent edited collections such as *Undoing homogeneity in the Nordic region* (Keskinen et al. 2019) and *Pluralistic Struggles in Gender, Sexuality, and Coloniality* (Alm et al. 2021). Accordingly, the contributions to this volume offer wide-ranging analyses of how welfare state policies, the media, and other authorities attempt to govern 'Other' populations in the Nordic region as well as fine-grained explorations of practices of resistance and agency from national minorities, indigenous peoples, and migrants. Taken together, the volume as a whole exposes the power struggles that emerge when powerful figures and ideologies of authority attempt to manage and control different populations historically and today. Building on the significant insights and contributions of previous scholars to post- and de-colonial scholarship in the Nordic region, *Transforming Identities in Contemporary Europe* attempts to further contribute to this area of research by broadening the methodological and geopolitical scope of 'the Nordic', and utilising the conceptual lens of identity as a nodal point from which experiences and protesting powerful authorities and their governance can be fruitfully examined, contrasted, and challenged.

Epistemologies of colonial knowledge regimes and intersections of power in contexts of neoliberal governance

In offering important critiques of the multileveled colonial, racist, and sexist underpinnings of contemporary neoliberal society, the chapters in this book expose and challenge hegemonic orthodox knowledge regimes that define

and contrast identities within an often unacknowledged colonial epistemology of humanity and its sub- and in-human Other. By insisting on making visible the epistemologies of colonial knowledge regimes that operate in neoliberal governance, the contributing authors stress the importance of location, experience, pain, and (story)telling from a position of marginalisation, othering, and exclusion to counter hegemonic and hierarchical structures of differentiation and disenfranchisement. Thus, a principal starting point for producing alternative knowledge focuses on contextualised, critical positionalities, and several chapters in this volume approach such positionalities rooted in the traditions of post- and de-colonial theorisations. To begin with, and based on autoethnographic vignettes and memory work, Linda Lapiña explores the affective figurations of Danishness that surface in white Danes' reactions to Danish citizenship in her chapter "'Welcome to the most privileged, most xenophobic country in the world': Affective figurations of white Danishness in the making of a Danish citizen'. Examining the role of affect in production of national regimes of inclusion and exclusion, Lapiña brings attention to the shifting and complex boundaries that are drawn around Danishness, and highlights how intersections between whiteness and national belonging allow for the emergence of 'affective figurations of white Danishness' in which desires for Danish citizenship are seen as something *un*Danish. Showing how affects outline the contours of white Danishness as simultaneously stable and evasive, Lapiña's chapter brings attention to the ways in which borders and boundaries materialise in everyday life, as embodied histories.

Next, illuminating how the humanity of the West, as well as its alleged superiority, is constructed against colonial fantasies of blackness/otherness, Jéssica Nogueira Varela conducts a reflexive reading of Una Marson's (1905–1965) play *London Calling* in her chapter 'Autobiographical Flesh: understanding Western notions of humanity through the life and selected writings of Una Marson (1905–1965)'. Here, Nogueira Varela critically assesses the life of Una Marson and her migration to London as a black woman and colonial subject, the heart of the British Empire. Examining the multifaceted elements in Marson's play, Nogueira Varela conceptualises wretchedness as a key concept built on the social categories that have been excluded from the Euro-American construction of human and humanity. Nogueira Varela approaches the life and writings of Una Marson as one among many black women writers whose intellectual thought was transformed after travelling to or moving to Europe in the 20th century, to grasp how race and gender are critical for the construction of the category Human. In similarity with several chapters in this volume, Nogueira Varela's analysis lays bare the foundational hypocrisy and violence of Anthropocentric humanism, such as the co-constituent but oft-unacknowledged relationship between 'humanity' and neocolonial modernity (see, Jallo 2020).

Moving from a discussion about imperialism in the early 20th century to more recent expressions of expansionist and neocolonial ambitions of

rule sustained through notions of gender and rights, Christel Stormhøj's chapter '(Not) in the name of gender equality: migrant women, empowerment, employment, and minority women's organisations' is situated in the context of contemporary neoliberal Nordic welfare states. Offering an analysis of governmental programmes to promote migrant women's labour market integration and exploring state-funded minority women's organisations, Stormhøj highlights the ambiguous ways in which women's organisations both comply with and contest existing state and market logics. Critically intervening into the idea of women's paid work as the route to gender equality and women's independence, as one core building stone in the development of gender equality as a national value in the Nordic welfare states, this analysis brings forth the deeply ambiguous dimensions of these projects, as the mutual dependence between state agencies and women's organisations is highlighted. Problematising the need for a deeper engagement with politics and theories of transformation, several chapters in this volume address the ways in which emerging subjectivities and expanding modes of self-determination may open up for new and other possibilities for transformative critique with potential to unsettle the seeming relevance and rigorosity of majority knowledge production.

Using a trans for trans methodology, Nico Miskow Friberg's chapter "'It's our bodies, we are the experts!": countering pathologisation, gate-keeping and Danish exceptionalism through collective trans knowledges, coalition-building and insistence' follows the multiple ways in which trans activists organise around trans care, drawing on a mixture of diverse methodologies and material sources, such as counter-archiving, collaborative-, and auto-ethnography. Locating transformative practices and critical imagination at the centre stage, the chapter conceptualises struggles for gender self-determination as interwoven with other struggles for liberation and abolitionism. Finding that trans activists refuse co-optation and compromise, Miskow Friberg shows that activists link symbolic political gestures to Danish exceptionalism, homonationalism, and pinkwashing, as they simultaneously engage in work for change, redistribution, and improved life chances for trans people.

In addition, taking their departure in the possibilities offered by digital platforms to oppose and refuse colonial violence and white supremacy, in the chapter 'The poetics of climate change and politics of pain: Sámi social media activist critique of the Swedish state', Akvilė Buitvydaitė and Elisabeth Lund Engebretsen build on the insights of indigenous communities to suggest ways in which transnational bonds of solidarity and sharing of resources enable collective imagining of other kinds of futures. Highlighting the public advocacy and performances of Sámi artist Sofia Jannok, Buitvydaitė and Engebretsen illuminate the significant ways in which many indigenous activists and artists bring attention to environmental destruction and human rights violations through the use of digital technologies. Recognising the significance of digital technologies

for Indigenous activism in various locales, such as Sápmi, Greenland, the United States, Mexico, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia, Buitvydaitė and Engebretsen's chapter contributes to further deepen our understanding the role of digital technologies among Indigenous activists, as the growing access to digital products and networks allows for stronger attention to Indigenous issues as a result of intersecting social, political, environmental, historical, and cultural dynamics, and inspires broader and more far-reaching protests on a translocal, planetary scale.

Confronting methodological regionalism, challenging exceptionalism

In the different projects within *Transforming Identities in Contemporary Europe*, one overlapping interest was to articulate ways to strategise against and move beyond methodological regionalism or nationalism. This concept is typically understood to mean that the region or a country is taken as a self-explanatory or 'natural' unit of analysis in research. One way of doing this was to highlight the discursive use of the concept and politics of exceptionalism in a variety of contexts. As a policy concept, exceptionalism is commonly used in the context of Nordic equality and welfare policy, to indicate the ways in which the Nordic model works as a lesson or model for the rest of the world to emulate. As Kris Clarke and Manté Vertelyté describe it so succinctly in their chapter 'Educational challenges for Nordic exceptionalism: epistemic injustice in the absence of antiracist education', notions of Nordic exceptionalism indicate the ways that the Nordics are "considered unique and even 'better than' other countries in the world due to their distinct social welfare state models and social democratic approach to international affairs". As many of the chapters discuss, albeit from variegated perspectives, a crucial part of this exceptionalising notion is to ideologically separate the Nordic region's past and present from the geopolitical genealogies of colonialism and racism. It is a central ambition of this book to challenge this problematic paradigm, through the situated and nuanced case studies and analyses on the orientation of methodological regionalism in Nordic Europe and the geopolitics of its transnational connections and co-constituent factors and agents. As the project proceeded through the three workshops, we became more aware of the ways in which, in relevant Nordic situated research, for example, methodological regionalism is often applied in research about and situated in (one of) the Nordic countries, where one single national context is taken as a reliable representative example of the Nordic *region* in analyses on themes to do with equality, diversity, welfare, and policy. Sometimes, this regionalist analytic extends to the broader Western European region, and even stretches to encompass the directional concept of the 'West', without accounting for the comparative, hence political and ideological strategies

involved. Indeed, bringing together critical considerations of location, temporality, and movements was an important dynamic permeating all three workshops. Emphasising the importance of engaging the multiscale-ness of locations, broadly defined, we have thus critically applied the concept of exceptionalism to explore the political entanglements between movements, spatialities, and nationalisms in historical and contemporary contexts.

This is perhaps most evident in the chapter ‘Varieties of exceptionalism: a conversation’ by Selin Çağatay, Mia Liinason, and Olga Sasunkevich. Based on a conversation from a collaborative research project set in the Scandinavian countries (Norway, Sweden, Denmark), Turkey, and Russia, they investigate the utility of exceptionalism as a transnationalising concept. Their argument is that this analytical move allows us to move beyond common conceptual thinking that interprets methodological nationalism as the idea that the nation, state, or society is the natural social and political form of the modern world (citing Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002, 302). In their projects, this meant that instead of investigating the ways in which feminist and LGBTI+ activists engage the nation state in three distinct regional and national contexts and then compared them, they considered how specific groups and movements encountered and strategised vis-à-vis challenges that emerged as effects of discourses of exceptionalism in rights-based and justice-seeking work. This approach was based on the premise that discourses of exceptionalism, while resting on discourses and ideologies of modern nationalism, actually owes their existence and maintenance to a geopolitics of transnational normalising regimes of order and regulation. Oftentimes, they found, an implicit ‘identity politics’ of victims and leaders serves to situate various actors: national governments, multinational funding bodies (donors), local communities, and transnational non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Inspired by queer, feminist, trans, black, antiracist, and decolonial epistemologies, the anthology posits a fundamental refusal to position the Nordic region as a particular – exceptional – position outside or beyond Europe proper, or the world at large; the anthology insists on locating Nordic Europe as always already a part of a geopolitics of the mentioned colonial, racist, and sexist world order (Keskinen et al. 2019, Tlostanova et al. 2019). Indeed, although most of the 13 contributing authors are based full- or part-time in a Nordic country, a majority of the volume’s authors hold or have held citizenship outside the Nordics. These diasporic positionalities proved to be extremely generative for engaging with the workshop themes and developing texts for what has eventually become this collective anthology. Thus, put together, the present volume reflects on the ways in which the project theme, however complicated, challenging and changing, clearly spoke to participants whose own positionalities were experienced as somewhat diasporic, transnational, or different vis-à-vis hegemonic concepts of exceptionalism, the Nordic region, community, and identity politics.

Thus, a common theme in this anthology is that of multifaceted diasporic livelihoods wherein identifications and modes of belonging are critically explored, and where hegemonic normative modes of prescriptive identifications and belongings are being challenged. Methodological approaches that mediate between autobiographical narratives, collective political allegiances, and ideologies characterise many of the distinct voices and perspectives that the volume contributes. In Çağatay, Liinason, and Sasunkevich's chapter this is attempted through collective dialogue, a specific methodological tool applied not only in gathering data but also in analysing the data together and in writing for publication, where a multiscalar perspective is key to refrain from the previously mentioned methodological regionalism (and nationalism). They acknowledge their ambition to utilise collective dialogue as a distinct means of academic knowledge production, and as a means to step aside from conventional comparative methodology that risks reproducing inequalities between and within the global East/West and North/South. They write:

all our contexts share a post-imperial position. As we recognized that exceptionalism is closely tied to nation building and the formation of the modern nation-state, we also noted that exceptionalist myths have deeper, geographical, and historical linkages to the post-imperial contexts that we analyse. For instance, the hybrid quality of exceptionalist discourses in Turkey and Russia are anchored in variegated liminal positions between the East and West, and exceptionalist discourses in Scandinavia carry a geopolitical tension between the core(s) and semi-peripheries of the world system.

Through a multiscalar approach that rests on qualitative research in Scandinavia, Turkey, and Russia, they demonstrate that hegemonic discourses of exceptionalism are entangled within discourses of colonialism, empire, national modernity, and the gender equality model.

A methodological approach that resembles that of Çağatay, Liinason, and Sasunkevich is that of Ramona Dima and Simona Dumitriu in their co-authored chapter 'Home is where the cat is: the Here-There of Queer (Un) belonging'. A pointed critique of the conceptual hegemony of progress and mainstream Nordic positivity (supremacy, even) attached to notions of a 'queer community', including the symbolism of the rainbow flag, is prominent foci of critique. Committed to challenge the normativising binaries that characterise Nordic discourses on LGBTI+ activism and their national and regional policy contexts, Dumitriu and Dima introduce 'the here-there' as a methodological, conceptual assemblage to speak to political tensions and temporal and spatial movements, based on their diasporic experiences as queer migrants alternating finding themselves navigating between Romania and Sweden, activism and academia, their private home and society at large, and their (mostly) long-distance relations with parts of their biofamily back

in Romania and chosen kin in Sweden. They introduce a series of vignettes that illustrate the complexities of diasporic queer life and activism: for example, the normativity of inclusion politics in Sweden and their strategic decision to opt out of said inclusions in order to evade migroaggressive forms of violence and discrimination embedded in Swedish homonormative inclusion tactics. They learned, they write with dry sarcastic humour, also of the materialist framings that accompany much queer networking: “projects with radical intentions can actually befriend the devil if that grants them access to space and lowers the rent”.

In discussing transnationally travelling formations of LGBTQI culture and Pride politics, in the chapter ‘Gayness between nation builders and money makers: from ideology to new essentialism’, Anna-Maria Sörberg highlights the intricate ways in which the operationalisation of state power intertwines with race, sexuality, and gender in the locations of Sweden, Netherlands, and the US. Following the rainbow symbolism around, through her own international travels since the 1990s until today, Sörberg ponders what kinds of LGBTQI rights and tolerance are being promoted and imagined at Pride events today, and how they are being discursively practised by the many different actors that invest in them: politicians, activists, corporations, and others. One particularly relevant case that this chapter explores is how the Swedish Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*), a Sweden based far-right political party that has surged in popularity in recent years, is mobilising values of freedom and morality around Pride and ‘gay rights’ to promote a violent anti-immigration and Islamophobic political agenda.

On a broader level, Sörberg critiques what may appear to be a benevolent mainstream ‘homotolerant’ discourse surrounding Pride and rainbow symbolism, and shows how it, in fact, relies on a problematic exclusionary essentialism where nation, race, gender, and sexuality figure prominently. Sörberg warns of the powerful reactionary ‘brand’ of depoliticised LGBTQI culture in contemporary Western society and takes the analysis back to 1990s’ New York when Sörberg lived and worked there. Reeling in the wake of AIDS and the momentous trauma, it unleashed on gay life fundamental struggles between pre-existing grassroots-based radical initiatives and emergent right-wing movements intent on forming a ‘gay mainstream’. To enable meaningful critique of these complexities, and indeed also to hold multiple perspectives in our mind at the same time, Sörberg argues for the importance of re-envisioning the future while simultaneously re-evaluating history, as contemporary queer lives share, albeit unevenly, past experiences of struggles, grief, and community. Paraphrasing Heather Love (2009) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990), Sörberg concludes that progressive, liberal movements that insist on relegating certain struggles, communities, and bodies to the historical scrapheap, are in effect exiling vital shared knowledge of our past, present, and future. Instead, we must actively seek out origins and multifaceted pasts in their simultaneously haunting and inspiring complexities for future-directed struggles.

In their chapter, Kris Clarke and Manté Vertelyté discuss the crucial role of education in combatting racial discrimination: As pedagogical spaces, they provide unique, crucial possibilities for enabling transformational change, antiracism, and critical thinking. With examples from the Danish and Finnish institutional contexts, they unfold the many ways in which epistemic injustice is allowed to dominate in the absence of formalised antiracist education initiatives. A starting point for their argument – one which echoes that of Buitvydaitė and Engebretsen’s chapter on Sámi environmental activism – is the acknowledgement that Nordic exceptionalism is grounded in the ideology and materiality of colonialism and racism. Although Clarke and Vertelyté at the outset focus on two national contexts within the exceptionalism framework of the ‘Nordic region’, they nevertheless avoid the mentioned pitfalls of a bounded methodological regionalism or nationalism through a bottom-up focus on specific local educational institutions and their practices.

Introducing antiracist pedagogy and decolonial approaches to educational thinking and practice in social work professional education (Finland) and secondary school classrooms (Denmark), Clarke and Vertelyté identify how race and racism in large part are defined as issues that exist ‘far away’ from Denmark and Finland, or located in the historical past. They argue that racism and race tend to be used as abstract terms of definition rather than speaking to lived experiences in the current moment, as for example spoken by racialised students in the Danish secondary school classroom: A teacher may invalidate a racialised student’s narrative of experiencing racism by arguing that ‘Islamophobia’ (understood as discrimination based on religion) is different from ‘racism’. Here, Clarke and Vertelyté apply Fricker’s concept of *testimonial injustice* to connect this to the power and violence of whiteness as a central factor in Nordic exceptionalism (Fricker 2007). In a move that echoes the critical and generative methodological project of this volume as a whole, they powerfully argue that educational institutions are responsible for ensuring that antiracist pedagogical tools are made part of study curricula and practices in daily-classroom interactions between students, and between students and teachers. This is a practice with potential for encouraging critical thinking and transformational change. Central to this practice, they conclude, are narratives of personal experiences and active challenges of normative structures and ideologies.

In closing

Taken together, the chapters in this book contribute to scholarly and activist debates on the current reconfigurations of welfare, governance, and society that counter common assumptions of the waning of welfare, loss of democracy, and one-sided authoritarian and populist growth. While there is some truth to the common narratives, this volume shows that there are simultaneously other shifts taking place that refigure society in ways that are not

simply and only about loss of all that is ‘good’ (equality, democracy, diversity, trust, welfare). Nor is it, perhaps, the most useful to discuss these shifts in polarising ways, as so often happen; minority-majority, democracy-authoritarianism, equality-inequality, and so on. In Nordic Europe, often-times ‘the welfare model’ is put at stake for imagining and analysing these threatening changes. Anthropologists Insa Koch and Deborah James have usefully argued, for example, for the ways in which the ‘state of the welfare state’ is in fact marked by “an ever more complex reconfiguration of market, state and civic-society or third sector relations, one which draws a range of actors into the job of governing welfare” (Koch and James 2022). And concurrently, new forms of activist networks and movements emerge, and they utilise timely combinations of advocacy alongside pre-existing forms of advice-giving.

Methodological concerns and struggles over knowledge production and their concurrent inequalities in and beyond the academic terrain and across historical periods have been central to this collaborative project since its inauguration. Situated within a geopolitical crisis that traversed all borders and group domains, the COVID-19 pandemic emerged on top of a longer period of economic austerity, growing inequality, intensifying pressures in academia, as well as the global climate crisis. As discussed at the start of this Introduction, we are now finding ourselves in the middle of large-scale reconfigurations of social, political, epistemological, and moral ways of being in the world that are possibly unprecedented. Crucial for us, during the latter two workshops especially, were collaborations and dialogues on the use of academic research and texts currently and the role and responsibility of university-based intellectuals. Several project participants are or were precariously positioned in academia, or engaged in activist or artistic projects, and it was always important to the project’s steering group that academic status should not determine participation in the workshop or inclusion in the volume. Acknowledging, too, that the concept of ‘research’ and processes of academic knowledge production are problematically imbricated in European colonial and imperial histories, the project has engaged in questions of representation, truth-telling and truth-claims, academic ‘freedom’ and the privileged discourse of academic production (Smith 2012). Placed firmly at the centre of this project’s accounts and thinking are diasporic identities, migrant positionalities, and tactics of resistance based in solidarities that traverse the fraught academic-activist binary. Equally at the core of the project is a problematising of the oft-implicit idea of whiteness at the core of nationalism and exceptionalism. As this volume argues, racism, sexism, transphobia, Islamophobia, and the image of white innocence operate in exclusionary and violent ways to retain hegemonic structural power.

In order to sketch meaningful alternatives and theorise the complex connections and shifts that we have identified and responded to, we propose to start from the grounds of (auto)ethnographic conversations and

reflections. These grounds are consistently from the vantage points of minoritised ‘others’, thus offering a broad-based perspective onto the dominant systems of governance and moralising welfare structures amidst geopolitical upheaval. In this way, too, the Nordics and Europe are always already imbricated in the world beyond its borders, not allowed an exceptionalising position of moral-politician beacon vis-à-vis the world. This methodological framework connects theory and the empirical and bridges scholarly, activist, and artistic positionalities. Narratives and analyses are presented through examinations of everyday lives and experiences, personal voices, vignettes, and narrations, through different movements and travels, across different terrains and temporalities. Positionalities accounted for in, through, and between space and time in the chapters offer useful entry points to thinking critically about identity politics, rethinking the meaning of the ‘Nordic’ and ‘Europe’, their border regimes, their relative claims to being an exceptional space and polity, and hence how ‘other’ places – other European locations, the ‘global’ – the crossings and combined experiences, identifications, and moving between them. These complex positionings disturb and disrupt hegemonic ideas and norms about identity, belonging, nation/ality, and the virtue of spatial-political boundedness.

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2 “Welcome to the most privileged, most xenophobic country in the world”. Affective figurations of white Danishness in the making of a Danish citizen

Linda Lapiņa

Introduction

Naturalization might appear to be the ultimate claim to Danishness – a migrant born outside Denmark can make. This chapter discusses the affective figurations of Danishness that emerge in white Danes’ born with citizenship reactions to my becoming a Danish citizen. I trace the affective, embodied labour of white Danishness, showing how it emerges as a self-contradictory achievement and practice.

I was struck by the affective ambivalence that came to the fore when I spoke about my citizenship application with white Danes. While migrants often simply congratulated me, Danes would display mixed feelings, including shame and resentment. Using memory work and autoethnography, I analyse material from two temporal moments: a conversation in the summer of 2016 briefly after my citizenship application, and three reactions following my procurement of a Danish passport in the beginning of 2019.

The conversation in July 2016 happened at a lunch table at a Danish university. I was a PhD student at the time, attending a seminar. Jens, a male Danish professor, my senior in years and in academic accomplishment, expressed disbelief and even outrage hearing about my citizenship application. Jens is a central figure in my analysis because he embodies a Danishness framed in opposition to the Danish state, Danish citizenship and mainstream channels of political participation. It is interesting to explore whether Jens’ adamant opposition to nationalism and essentialism might contribute to reproducing patterns of privilege and Danish exceptionalism that he speaks out against. This dynamic resonates with a recent study that analyses how homonationalist discourses articulate Danishness as liberal-mindedness, in opposition to conservative views of culture, religion, citizenship and political action (Hansen, 2021). Furthermore, while the central role of the interaction with Jens in my analysis poses ethical dilemmas related to consent and anonymity that I address below, it enables me to point to paradoxes and affective ambivalence of self-critical Danishness as an

aspiration that shapes knowledge-production – also in this chapter. Instead of approaching Jens’ expressions as individual viewpoints, I am interested in how they delineate ways of thinking and relating in predominantly white and Danish academia that, while seeking to be critical of whiteness and Danishness, also reproduces it.

I discuss how Jens’ questioning of my motives and my need and/or desire for citizenship enact and distribute the labour of Danishness. The interaction assigns the responsibility for reproducing Danishness, the Danish state and the violences it commits, to aspiring citizens *like* me. At the same time, the agency of certain others remains unaddressed, whether this be Jens and white Danes born with citizenship *like* him; “deserving”, legitimate citizenship applicants to the extent that these might exist; or people in situations where citizenship remains outside their horizon of possibilities. Drawing on Sara Ahmed’s (2010) conceptualization of happy objects and Lauren Berlant’s work on cruel optimism (2011), I examine how Jens’ framing of my application as unjustified, simultaneously (excessively) Danish and unDanish, enacts a composite Danishness: taken for granted while containing its own negation.

The second part of the analysis visits brief encounters in the beginning of 2019: two exemplary text messages and one face-to-face interaction. The white Danish-born friends of various ages and genders partaking in these encounters congratulate me, while also expressing (self-)irony, discomfort, guilt and unease of Danishness. I draw on Ursula Le Guin’s story “Those who walk away from Omelas” (1973), exploring how Danishness emerges like a luxurious robe adorned with blood diamonds, protective and ill-fitting at the same time.

Danish citizenship as accumulated labour

Danish citizenship, known as “*indfødsret*” or Danish birthright, is awarded by law. The Danish parliament votes on a list of names of candidates whose citizenship applications comply with current requirements. I applied for Danish citizenship in the summer of 2016 and had my name incorporated in the legal proposition in December 2018. At the Borgerservice (“citizen service”) where I applied for a Danish passport, I heard that the two and a half years it took to process my application was exceptionally fast.

During my years in Denmark, the demands for obtaining citizenship have continuously tightened, reflecting the general tendency towards increasingly restrictive immigration and integration policies since the early 2000s. For instance, the introduction of citizenship ceremonies involving an obligatory handshake was marked as the 100th restriction of policies concerning immigration during the reign of the then Minister of Integration Inger Støjberg, who occupied this post from 2015 to 2019.

One might conceive of the citizenship process as a staircase with steps marked by the fulfilment of certain requirements, such as passing language

and citizenship tests and signing a pledge of loyalty to Denmark. However, I argue that it would be more adequate to conceive the citizenship process as accumulated labour. For instance, in order to pass the required language test, Danskprøve 3, most applicants will have to attend Danish classes. These were once for free; then, for a period, cost 2,000 DKK per module (around 270 euros); and at the time of writing (August 2022) are for free again for newly arrived foreigners on the condition of a 2,000 DKK deposit and within a period of up to five years after arriving in Denmark. Requirements for obtaining a permanent residence permit, which is a precondition for citizenship, include full-time employment for three and a half years within the past four years, living in Denmark for at least eight years, and no debts to the state.

These prerequisites show that applying for citizenship (at a cost of 4,000 DKK or 537 EUR processing fee-numbers from August 2022) is a highly selective process. Fulfilling these demands requires certain privileges while simultaneously moulding the applicant's conduct. For instance, employment and residence requirements presuppose access to labour market and housing that have racialized, classed and gendered reverberations. Danish proficiency, apart from requiring investment of private funds since 2018, will often be easier to achieve for applicants with an Indo-European mother tongue and/or educational proficiency, not suffering from PTSD after traumatic experiences prior to coming to Denmark and years spent in the Danish asylum system.

I have lived in Denmark since 2004, holding a permanent residence permit since 2014. Moving to Denmark just after the European Union's Eastward expansion in 2004, I became a too-young, sexualized Eastern European female love migrant of limited social value (Lapiņa, 2018, 2020b). However, even in 2004, I was a white migrant who could conditionally pass as Danish, in contrast to everyday experiences of many people of colour born in Denmark (Andreassen & Ahmed-Andresen, 2014). This positional-ity matters in the encounters with white Danes that I analyse in this chapter.

Affective figurations of white Danishness

Using autoethnography and memory work to trace how affects outline the contours of white Danishness, I aim to partake a phenomenology of the political, of borders and boundaries as they materialize in everyday life, on the body (De Genova, 2014), out of the tissue of affectively embroidered histories (Berlant, 2011). I follow the cuts, wounds and violence that constitute and flow in routine spaces of life (Povinelli et al., 2017). In the encounters that I analyse, borders and belonging are negotiated and contested through framing of Danish citizenship and Danishness as ambivalent, simultaneously desirable and unworthy goals. Instead of exploring how these bordering encounters delineate migrants' bodies, I explore how white, majoritized Danishness is enacted as a background and a normative

aspiration. Danishness becomes articulated and felt through negotiations of proximity and distance (Fortier, 2010) when my interlocutors locate themselves vis-à-vis an aspiring citizen.

While this chapter draws on and contributes to emerging studies of Nordic whiteness (Ahlstedt, 2015; Garner, 2014; Lundström & Teitelbaum, 2017; Myong & Bissenbakker, 2016; Nebeling & Bissenbakker, 2019; Svendsen, 2015), it differs from existing scholarship in its primary focus on white Danishness, rather than Danish whiteness. When white Danes react to my citizenship application, our shared yet differentiated whiteness (Lapiņa & Vertelytė, 2020) enables Danishness to come to the fore, since it comprises the most significant (fluid) marker of difference between me and my interlocutors. Being a white migrant, fluent in Danish, educated and employed in Denmark, and occasionally passing as Danish (Lapiņa, 2018), citizenship can be considered the final threshold in approximating Danishness.

Race and racism cannot be disentangled from European nation-building and national identities (Cretton, 2018; Lentin, 2008; Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2012). Loftsdóttir (2013, p. 295) argues: “Within the European context, ‘whiteness’ has to be theorized as emerging from particular histories and realities, being entangled with other identifications such as national identity”. On the one hand, Danishness and whiteness are enmeshed and interwoven (Andreassen & Ahmed-Andresen, 2014). At the same time, “white identities in the Nordic countries, like those elsewhere, contain internal hierarchies and contingencies” (Lundström & Teitelbaum, 2017, p. 151). This chapter enriches existing studies by exploring how white, majoritized Danishness emerges through enactments of proximity and distance (Ahmed, 2004; Fortier, 2010), circulations of desire, guilt, irony and resentment.

In analysing these feelings, the chapter draws on scholarship on affect that views politics as a field of attachments (Ahmed, 2004, 2010; Berlant, 2011; Fortier, 2010). I examine the role of affect in production of regimes of inclusion and exclusion (Gregorio & Merolli, 2016), where ordinary affects function as the glue between bodies and discursive regimes (Schaefer, 2013). I evoke the notion “affective figurations” to refer to how Danishness emerges through the cuts and alignments and degrees of proximity and distance enacted in my empirical material. Affective figurations show how emotions are involved in the surfacing of Danishness as they circulate between bodies and signs (Ahmed, 2004). I approach white Danes’ reactions to my shifting positions in the process of becoming a citizen as sites of condensation and saturation for how Danishness is imagined, grasped and enacted.

I use the notions of happy objects (Ahmed, 2010) and cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011) to examine how, in my first vignette, citizenship emerges as a promise and an investment in Danishness, an attachment that keeps ticking, reproducing a collective body of Danishness. In this encounter, my desire for citizenship is problematized, while my interlocutor’s taken-for-granted Danishness emerges as a structuring absence (Mayer, 2005): an unmarked

location from which there is nothing to be desired and consequently, no complicity. In the second part of my analysis, I draw on a short story by Ursula Le Guin (1973) to capture how Danishness emerges as ambivalent, uncomfortable position whose privileges depend on the suffering of excluded others.

Methodological standpoint

Autobiographical styles of writing, including autoethnography and memory work, enable tapping into more intuitive ways of knowing affect in its plurality and complexity (Berlant et al., 2017, p. 15; Militz et al., 2020). Consequently, autoethnography offers a unique vantage point for investigating how systems of forces circulating within and in-between bodies interface with histories, and how discourses, such as those on Danishness, “form ligatures with pulsing flesh-and-blood creatures” (Schaefer, 2013, p. 2). This chapter draws on and contributes to the growing body of scholarship that addresses racialization, whiteness and national identities in the Nordic setting using memory work (Andreassen & Myong, 2017; Berg, 2008a; Kennedy-Macfoy & Nielsen, 2012) and autoethnography (Ahlstedt, 2015; Koobak & Thapar-Björkert, 2012; Lapiņa, 2018; Lapiņa & Vertelytė, 2020; Liinason, 2018; Mainsah & Prøitz, 2015). Both methods involve taking point of departure in the lived experiences of the researcher, using them to tap into cultural and sociopolitical processes (Berg, 2008b; Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 1996), underlining the direct links between everyday lives, social and historical formations (Chávez, 2012).

This article combines memory work and autoethnography to tap into moments of affective saturation (Militz & Schurr, 2016) that occurred during my becoming a Danish citizen. The first vignette emerges from memory work. In 2019, as the intention to write about my citizenship process crystallized, I started writing down my memories of situations where my application had been a topic of conversation with white native Danes (Haug, 2008). The encounter with Jens quickly emerged as a key episode. On the other hand, the reactions from friends, elaborated in the second part of the analysis, occurred in early 2019 when I already had the intention to write about my process of becoming a citizen. Thus, they comprise examples of autoethnography, rather than memory work.

This work highlights ethical dilemmas that can arise in working with autoethnography and memory work, methods where everyday experiences become empirical material for research. At the time of these encounters, I did not present myself to my interlocutors as a researcher. They were thus unaware that their statements, occurring in informal settings, might become part of research. This is particularly problematic regarding the conversation with Jens that forms a key part of my analysis. Jens' location in Danish academia, which is important for the analysis, makes it harder to fully anonymise him, although I have altered the details of our

encounter. Moreover, my analysis of the encounter can read as a critique of a Danishness that Jens performs. However, I emphasize the relationality of our encounter – how the affective figurations of Danishness enacted in our conversation are bound to my privileged position and shaped by my striving and labour. Finally, I pose that the affective ambivalence emerging in conversation with Jens illuminates important constraints in knowledge production, implicating myself as a member of an academic community that, seeking to dismantle and critically interrogate Danishness and whiteness, also comes to perpetuate it. This is why it is important for me to unpack the affects of this encounter – because I believe that they point to possible blind angles in research on Danishness and whiteness from locations privileged by these same structures.

Autoethnography and memory work enable accessing situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988) of my migrant experience on the path to becoming a citizen. The empirical material documents shifting boundary positions with respect to Danishness (Lapiņa, 2018). My location changes in the almost three years that pass between the encounters: from someone who has just applied for citizenship and whose striving can be questioned as it happens in the conversation with Jens in 2016, I become a carrier of Danish passport – in some ways, *like* and *aligned with* my interlocutors. This shift enables tracing changing affective figurations of proximity and distance, complicity, guilt and privileges of citizenship.

I do not claim that my analysis gets to the essence of Danishness, or that such an essence exists. The boundaries drawn in the encounters I analyse are not sharp-cut, but rather shifting and complex. This fluidity enables me to examine the changing intersectional relationality of differentiated whiteness, disrupting notions of Danishness as an either-or category (Lapiņa, 2018). At the same time, my informants channel collective affects and articulations, which resonate with recent research on enactments of progressive, liberal-minded Danishness and Danish whiteness (Hansen, 2021; Lapiņa, 2020a). This underlines how autoethnography and memory work, taking point of departure in specific everyday encounters, enable tapping into larger sociopolitical processes, discourses and structures of feeling (Hinton, 2014; Kirby, 1993).

A guilty club? Affective limbos of white Danishness

In this section, I trace how Danishness, signified by citizenship and modulated by whiteness, emerges in encounters between white Danes, born with citizenship, and me, a white citizenship applicant. My interlocutors have not had to prove themselves worthy or deserving of Danish citizenship, and thus it might be taken for granted. I examine how Danishness emerges when my interlocutors react to my applying for and receiving citizenship – a labour-intensive, deliberate act that I have chosen to undertake, in contrast to their being born with citizenship.

“Why on earth would you want to be a citizen in Denmark?”

It is July 2016, and I am into my third year of a three-year PhD position, partaking in a seminar at a Danish university. In the canteen during lunch, I end up sitting next to Jens, a white Danish professor.

As part of an informal conversation, I mention to Jens that I have just handed in my citizenship application after passing the citizenship test in June. Timing matters, as I will be spending the fall semester as a visiting research fellow in Canada, and time spent outside Denmark needs to be accounted for when applying.

Jens’ reaction takes me by surprise.

“Why are you applying? Why on earth would you want to be a citizen in Denmark!?”

He does not seem angry, rather provoked and struck by disbelief.

I am surprised, at a loss for words.

I cannot bring myself to tell Jens about my vague hope that having citizenship will make me feel safer, more like I belong, that I will feel that the life I have built for myself in Denmark stands on firmer ground. I do not quite have the words. Besides, these feelings seem illegitimate. Do I really have any justification to feel more precarious without the citizenship? Do I really believe that new legislation will be passed in the future that would negatively affect the livelihood of someone like me: a white EU citizen with a permanent residence permit, fluent in Danish, educated in Denmark and quite employable?

I say that there are multiple reasons. At the moment, Latvia and Denmark allow dual citizenship, which might change in the future. And as a citizen, I will be able to vote in Danish elections.

Jens winces as if developing a toothache. He starts speaking about voting being a parody of democracy and political engagement. He talks about the nation state’s hold on its citizens; about how awful Denmark is, about Danish colonialism. He seems to imply that I would be freer, better off, without Danish citizenship.

I am only halfway listening, trying to come up with what to say to justify myself. I think of the research grants, positions and academic memberships that are only accessible to Danish citizens. I am sure Jens would not be able to reject this pragmatic reason. But somehow I feel that bringing up these justifications would not address what is at stake for me.

I try to explain how yes, voting is mostly symbolic, but there are other forms of political participation. I say, I imagine I would feel safer in communicating my research and my opinions in general. I would be less afraid of being disqualified as someone who either does not know what they are talking about or “should just go home” if they do not like how things are done here.

“Nonsense!” Jens exclaims. He says that citizenship has nothing to do with the value of one’s knowledge. He tells me about his time as a guest professor

at an overseas university, and how relevant and valuable his knowledge and research were, despite coming from a Danish context. He mentions other international collaborations, instances when he has co-authored articles on societal processes in other European countries.

Suddenly I feel very tired, even though our conversation has been quite short. I grasp the opportunity to change the topic to my forthcoming research stay in Vancouver.

After the conversation, I wonder whether Jens would have reacted differently talking to someone who, for instance, was not white and/or had arrived in Denmark as an asylum seeker. I am also struck by how Jens presumed that citizenship would not make any practical difference for me.

How does Jens' performance vis-à-vis an aspiring citizen like me (white, Eastern-European, female, junior academic) outline Danishness? From Jens' perspective, it is as if Danish citizenship would make me complicit in (re-)producing Denmark and the violence of the Danish state. I would become more responsible for Denmark's actions. At the same time, Jens finds it naive to believe that as a citizen, I would have more influence on Danish policies or what happens in Denmark. His stance seems to be that through applying for citizenship, I reproduce Denmark as a dangerous dream, a collective fiction (Garner, 2014) that commits violent acts in the world and on its subjects. At the same time, he positions me as someone who is acting on a false promise.

In her book *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), Sara Ahmed develops the notion happy objects, illustrating how specific phenomena become infused with attribution of happiness. Happiness, and, in this case, safety and increased political participation, are believed to materialize as an effect of proximity to the happy object: citizenship. "Buying into" this path to happiness illustrates the circular logic where affective investments into objects are signs of belonging to an affective community: "We align ourselves with others by investing in the same objects as the cause of happiness" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 38). Happiness becomes a shaping force of the subject and its ways of moving in the world. The assemblage of happy objects comprises a perimeter of the "near sphere" of the self. They comprise "our likes, which might even establish what we are like" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 24). Furthermore, the promise of happiness keeps a particular *us* hanging, outstretched – in anticipation of what *will* happen (Ahmed, 2010): a collectively felt future orientation, outlining an affective community of Danishness as an ongoing aspiration.

Ahmed's (2010) conceptualization of happy objects, and the labour of happiness, can be juxtaposed with Lauren Berlant's notion of cruel optimism: a relation that arises "when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project" (Berlant, 2011, p. 1). Rather than a singular feeling (Ahmed's happiness), Berlant's optimism denotes a "knotty tethering to objects, scenes, and modes of life that generate so

much overwhelming yet sustaining negation” (Berlant, 2011, p. 52). These attachments can emerge from trauma; but often they find their form through bodily habits produced in attempts to adjust to everyday pressures and situations of precarity. They bind bodies to fantasies of the good life – a fantasy that I find myself unable to articulate confronted by Jens’ questions.

In his critique of investing in citizenship, Jens situates himself as elevated above the affective community of Danishness. I am positioned as someone held hostage by the promises of citizenship- for me, it comprises an attachment that keeps ticking (Berlant, 2011), a space of possibility. In contrast, Jens seems free, exempted from the pull of promises, false hopes and cruel optimism. At the same time, he *is* Danish, moving in the world with the privileges that Danishness (intersecting with whiteness, male gender, professorship, etc.) affords. Thus, Jens occupies a position located simultaneously within and outside Danishness: moving with it in the world, but free from affective attachments and hence, it seems, not reproducing it, able to critique it “from the outside”. I wonder if, in our conversation, Jens is embodying the promise that I fail to articulate: that Danish citizenship, for an aspiring citizen *like* me, might bring the kind of passing and ease of movement in the world that he seems to enact.

In her article “Emptiness and Its Futures”, Dace Dzenovska (2018) analyses the emptying of Latvia, intensified after the EU enlargement in 2004 and the financial crisis of 2008. She explores how people’s decisions to leave or stay in the deindustrialized Latvian countryside are shaped by “developmental logics that arrange particular places in relation to each other within a broader frame of the good life promised by modernity” (Dzenovska, 2018, p. 25). She writes about how people who are leaving are searching for futures of stable employment and security that in many cases are no longer possible, even in Western Europe. By contrast, the people who stay live among ruins of pre-Soviet farmsteads, Soviet-era collective farms and rural homes that are not just signifiers of the past but also embody dystopian futures ingrained in the present (Dzenovska, 2018, p. 19).

While my applying for citizenship comprises a grasping towards stabilizing form (Berlant, 2011), a future that is somewhat different or improved, Jens seems to inhabit a state where there is nothing to achieve and nothing to give up. He is always already located within the good life promised by modernity, Danish landscapes where material markers of centuries of prosperity, stability and monarchy do not strike one as ruins, although he *knows* that they are. He does not have to travel anywhere or become anyone else to situate himself within “a good life” – which he can simultaneously call out as a lie when it materializes as someone else’s pursuit. Instead, going overseas as a visiting professor or collaborating with European researchers, Jens finds what he already has – “the good life” of holding relevant knowledge, of contributing with opinions that matter. This shows how, it can be unDanish to desire citizenship, unDanish to struggle navigating transnational logics of capitalism and modernity.

Perhaps this position of disinvestment is indeed the kind of Danishness that I would most desire to occupy, to be in a place where I can dismiss citizenship as unnecessary. Yet it is not available to me. Due to our whiteness and locations within Danish academia, as PhD student and professor, Jens presumes that the same modes of movement and ways of feeling are available to us. I believe that my privileges, including whiteness, fluency in Danish, and employment at a Danish university, prompt Jens' disbelief in my application for citizenship. He does not see how Danish citizenship might make a *real* difference for someone *like me*. To Jens, I am already Danish (enough), seem to always have been Danish, which is accentuated when he evokes his position as a visiting professor overseas as a parallel to my movements as a migrant in Denmark and abroad. At the same time, my Latvian citizenship is null, void of meanings and complicities. If asked, I doubt that Jens would think that Latvia was a "better" nation state than Denmark; yet it is my applying for Danish citizenship that is problematized as making me complicit in state violence. The Danishness that Jens seems to embody and that I aspire to emerges as simultaneously solid and evasive: a taken-for-granted position which at the same time seems disenchanting and unattached. In contrast, my friends' reactions to my having become citizen outline Danishness as simultaneously privileged and uncomfortable, a burden of *shared* complicity.

Welcome to the club

On a Saturday morning in February 2019, I find a small but quite thick envelope in my postbox. It is white, with my name and address printed in capital letters. I open it to find a Danish passport. It has my name, my personal details and a photo where I smile somewhat awkwardly, my hair dishevelled. I recall how I rushed to the Citizen Service in the nearby municipal library three weeks ago to make it before closing time, almost colliding into another bike when turning around the corner of my housing block. I arrived seven minutes to 4 PM, panting and sweating, waving my slightly crumpled citizenship certificate. The brown, stocky middle-aged male employee who spoke Danish with an accent shrugged his shoulders and kindly waved me past the reception area, pointing to a machine. He barely looked at the citizenship certificate and did not ask for any additional documentation. It turned out that I was in the system. The machine found me eligible for a Danish passport; it asked for my digital identification, took my fingerprints and a photo and accepted my credit card for payment of the 600 DKK (80 EUR) fee for the passport.

I place the passport on my kitchen counter. I feel disoriented.

I take a photo of the passport and send it to a couple of friends. Andreas, a white Danish friend in his early 40s, writes back: "*Welcome to the world's most privileged and xenophobic country*" ("Velkommen til den mest privilegerede, mest ksenofobiske land i verden"). Signe, a white Danish friend

in her late 50s, writes: “*Welcome to the passport club*” (“Velkommen til pasklubben”).

I meet Anne, another white Danish friend in her 30s, a few weeks later, at my self-organized citizenship ceremony. I have asked my guests to bring objects that signify citizenship to them. Anne has brought a soft children’s toy belonging to her one-year-old child, the figure of the frog Kaj from the children’s programme “Kaj og Andrea” (Kaj and Andrea) screened on Danish national television in 1970s, with new episodes in 1999–2007. She speaks about how the toy, given to her child by her parents, signifies being Danish through generations, Danishness and citizenship rights passed on through blood. She reflects on the privileges that her child is born into, as opposed to children whose parents are not Danish citizens.

In these situations, Danishness and Danish citizenship emerge as bound to privilege, interwoven with xenophobia (Andreas), exclusivity that compares to a club membership (Signe), and materializing through intergenerationally anchored everyday acts of ownership and play (Anne). My interlocutors’ thoughts and reactions convey discomfort: there is a link between their, their children’s and now our, benefiting from the advantages of Danishness and the exclusion of others from “the club”.

In the short story “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas”, Ursula Le Guin (1973) describes a city where everyone is happy – truly happy. However, their happiness depends on a child being trapped in a tiny, foul broom closet: naked, constrained, covered in sores. Everyone knows that the suffering child in the broom closet is a condition of their happiness:

They know that they, like the child, are not free. They know compassion. It is the existence of the child, and their knowledge of its existence, that makes possible the nobility of their architecture, the poignancy of their music, the profundity of their architecture. It is because of the child that they are so gentle with children.

(Le Guin, 1973)

In Le Guin’s story, none of the inhabitants of the city attempt to overthrow this order of happiness. There is no social transformation. Yet, some leave Omelas, going to places that are even less fathomable than the city of happiness. Even so, they seem to know where they are going.

In the introduction to her book *Economies of Abandonment*, Elizabeth Povinelli (2011) visits the story by Le Guin to illustrate how violent entanglements of disadvantage and privilege fuel late liberalism or neoliberalism; how dispersed, naturalized suffering is part of a shared collective body, such as the welfare state. She observes that “Europe is in the bodies of the colonies as surely as the citizens of Omelas are in the body of the child in the broom closet” (Povinelli, 2011, p. 27). The bodies of suffering, excluded others are *in* the bodies of Danishness, as is apparent when my interlocutors

simultaneously evoke privileges and xenophobia, rights and deprivation, as being integral to Danishness.

In these encounters, majoritized Danishness emerges as a bitter happy object: like a luxurious robe, adorned with blood diamonds, protective and ill-fitting at the same time. On the one hand, our now shared citizenship works to assert “our” likeness and proximity (Ahmed, 2010), situating us within the same “club”. My Danish passport reinforces already-existing alignments through whiteness and other intersecting markers of privilege where “bodies come to be seen as ‘alike’ (...) as an effect of such proximities, where certain ‘things’ are already ‘in place’” (Ahmed, 2007, p. 155). On the other hand, the constitution of this “us” implies complicity in violence, it is itself a result of a series of cascading wounds (Povinelli et al., 2017). When I received the passport and subsequently the text messages from Andreas and Signe, I did feel less free. Something clicked in place, became fixated. I was held *in place*, my likeness and shared proximity (Ahmed, 2007, 2010) enforced via my Danish passport, in a way that also implied a sense of shared burden and discomfort.

Anne’s story about her child’s toy can provide a prism for revisiting how Danishness emerged in Jens’ reaction to my citizenship application. Anne speaks of Danishness, along with the rights and privileges it gives access to, as continuously unfolding, materializing through everyday habits, inherited proximities and orientations (Ahmed, 2007). Danishness resides in the body of the toy, passed on among generations. The seamless transfer and durability contribute to the simultaneous solidity and evasiveness of Danishness. The everyday knowledge of cultural practices, their largely undisrupted history, lend Danishness its circular, self-(re)generating form, in contrast to striving for a good life in superior elsewhere of Western modernity (Dzenovska, 2018) that might shape migrant orientations towards Danishness.

The affective contours of Danishness emerging in these encounters signify an affective limbo of privileged situatedness in structural inequality (Lapiņa, 2020a). Writing about cruel optimism, Berlant (2006, pp. 31–32) explores “how people learn to identify, manage, and maintain the hazy luminosity of their attachment to being *x* and having *x*, given that their attachments were promises and not possessions after all”. In the encounter with Jens, Danishness seems to be a dangerous, luminous promise for *me* as I am applying for citizenship, while being unquestioned *in his possession* and perhaps enabling the critique he presents. In the reactions from Andreas, Signe and Anne, the cruelty resides not in the fact that the possession might turn out to be an empty or unfulfillable promise – but in the wounds and cuts (Povinelli et al., 2017) engendered by its seemingly solid privileges, the exclusions that are part and parcel of the make-up of its affective community (Ahmed, 2010). The promise of Danishness emerges as an anchoring that tears apart the matter it is anchored in. It comprises an affective limbo, fuelled by guilt and discomfort.

Retracing the contours of white Danishness

In this chapter, I trace how the affective contours of Danishness and belonging in Denmark emerge in encounters between me and white Danes in my process of applying for Danish citizenship. For Andreas, Signe and Anne, Danishness seems to feel like a lavish costume made in a sweatshop in an elsewhere that is simultaneously part and parcel of its very constitution, a happiness that presupposes the suffering of others. In contrast, the Danishness articulated in the conversation with Jens emerges as a structuring absence (Mayer, 2005), simultaneously stable and evasive: seemingly able to be disillusioned and disenchanted with itself. It makes me recall the tale “The Emperor’s New Clothes” by H.C. Andersen, a canonized 19th-century Danish author known for his fairy tales, which include “The Little Mermaid” and “The Ugly Duckling”. In the story, the emperor is deceived to believe that he is wearing the most delicate, luxurious gown, while he is in fact walking naked. Everyone pretends to admire the luxurious robe until a child yells: “The emperor is naked!” The Danishness enacted in the conversation with Jens seems able to call out its own nakedness, even as it continues to carry itself as if wearing delicate robes.

The interaction with Jens highlights how my application for citizenship can constitute an (un)Danish act. While it is Danish because it reinforces an affective community where Danishness is a marker of belonging and a happy object (Ahmed, 2010), at the same time it emerges as unDanish to harbour attachments and strive towards Danishness. From this perspective, Danishness can only be owned, not achieved. Jens’ anger at the violent state and me as enacting myself as its extension enacts a Danishness outside complicity. In this case, it is Danish to resent and reject Danishness, while at the same time being located within it.

These paradoxes of affective constitution of Danishness are important to consider, concerning knowledge production on Nordic identities and whiteness, from locations that are, in different ways, *within* Nordicness, whiteness and institutions embedded in these structures, such as universities. They pose questions as to how one’s critiques of these structures and affects might perpetuate them while seeking to dismantle them. In our conversation, Jens’ critique of Danish citizenship paradoxically materializes as a superior Danishness unattainable to me or other (perhaps white and privileged) migrants who actively pursue citizenship. Our whiteness and locations within Danish academia make Jens presume that I am already able to move in ways that, from my position, are moulded by Danishness.

The encounters highlight how Danishness and whiteness, while being differentiated and malleable, can operate as ongoing aspirations, proximities that never *quite* add up. I have always been white: even when I passed as an Eastern European migrant in Denmark, I had the possibility to approximate white Danishness (Lapiņa, 2018). This shows the difficulty of disentangling “the historical and contemporary interconnection between Nordicness and whiteness” (Lundström & Teitelbaum, 2017, p. 156). While

Danishness emerges as distinct from whiteness in the encounters I analyse, it materializes through our racialized and classed, relationally constituted positionalities. I am already aligned with my interlocutors' white Danishness via my whiteness and my abilities to move in Denmark. My having met and befriended them, seeming *like* them, result from years of accumulated labour, involving many of the performance criteria formally evaluated in citizenship applications: education, employment, and Danish language skills. These circumstances enable Jens to presume that citizenship does not matter for me, and Signe to welcome me to the passport club. In many ways, I am *already like them*. And yet, the very labour invested in achieving this proximity sets me apart and can potentially be never-ending, a continuous quest to belong, which, as Jens so aptly points out, reproduces structures I would rather be part of dismantling.

The affective figurations of white Danishness comprise “sites of convergence for the social” (Berlant, 2011). They delineate who can become what kind of Dane, and how Danishness materializes as a marker of an affective community – an exuberant attachment that keeps ticking (Berlant, 2011, p. 23), but that upon its attainment deflates like a balloon, into an affective limbo populated by guilt, ambivalence and awareness of own privileges. Anne’s child’s toy and my new Danish passport are ambivalent, sticky objects. Their stickiness (Ahmed, 2004) resides not only in affective investments in them as happy objects (Ahmed, 2010) but also in the cuts (Povinelli et al., 2017) that they make apparent: the have-nots; the child in the broom closet. It is a stickiness that illustrates an aspiration never quite to be fulfilled and yet clicking in place, comprising an affective limbo.

These affective figurations of Danishness speak to Dzenovska’s (2018) research on emigration from Latvia’s deindustrialized countryside, where people move in search of “historically shaped and at the same time profoundly postsocialist spatial imaginaries (and material realities), which posit ‘the West’ as the measure of past, present, and future and as a desirable location” (Dzenovska, 2018, p. 25). Danishness represents a situatedness within “a good life” where cruelty seems relegated to elsewhere in its effects, while at the same time comprising the backbone of the social body. Moreover, the affective limbo of Danishness, materializing as an absence from striving, as already having arrived, in the conversation with Jens, seems to conflate past, present, and future. White, privileged Danishness presents itself as a location somehow untouched by the rubble of history (Benjamin, 1970) and simultaneously at the heart of its generation – with nowhere to escape from and nowhere to arrive to.

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3 Educational challenges for Nordic exceptionalism

Epistemic injustice in the absence of antiracist education

Kris Clarke and Manté Vertelyté

One of the cornerstones of modern Nordic societies is the belief that the state structures of social welfare, health, and education undergird the human rights of all citizens ensuring a more egalitarian society. Some research has documented that cohesive and cooperative Nordic welfare states reinforce greater equality, better health and social outcomes, and even higher levels of self-reported happiness (Hänninen et al., 2019; Witoszek & Midttun, 2018). Notions of Nordic exceptionalism emerged during the Cold War period when northern European nations were considered unique and even ‘better than’ other countries in the world due to their distinct social welfare state models and social democratic approach to international affairs. Such branding of Nordic exceptionalism shaped regional identity formation in the last half of the 20th century (Browning, 2007). The dissolution of the Cold War, the rise of neoliberalism and growing questions about the role of northern European countries in Western colonial history, however, has challenged Nordic conceptions of self-identity and self-importance.

There is growing recognition that Nordic exceptionalism is (and always has been) grounded in the ideology and materiality of Western colonialism, which provides an explanatory framework for continuing relations of racism and racialization in these societies (Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2016). While certain European nations led the forces of global colonization (e.g. the UK, France, and Belgium), all European countries benefitted in a myriad of ways through increased favourable trade relations and inclusion in the asymmetrical global category of whiteness (Leonardo, 2002). Though regional power relations created complex local dimensions of colonialism through distinct national histories, many Nordic countries have framed their own societies in terms of ‘white innocence’ as Nordic nations not directly involved in the colonial project, despite the fact they have been complicit ideologically and materially (Fur, 2016). As Lundström and Teitelbaum (2017) point out, Nordic identity has been foundational in conceiving whiteness in colonial pseudoscientific discourse since early anthropologists sought to project their race theories of ‘Aryanism’ onto Nordic populations culminating in infamous Nazi conceptions of racial purity (see also, Kemiläinen, 1998).

Constructions of cohesive and homogenous white Nordic nations are not univocal and represent distinct colonial histories and contexts as Keskinen (2019) underlines, but they share similarities with past efforts at forced assimilation with Sámi and Roma communities and fluid ways of centring whiteness and erasing racial diversity, particularly in relation to migrants and Muslim minorities. The structures, policies, and practices of universal Nordic social welfare states thus influence and are, in turn, influenced by prevailing hierarchies of culturally, racially, and ethnically homogenous national identities, which has important implications for inclusion, social justice, and antiracist action.

As contested notions of race and racism (both overtly and covertly) hold space at the heart of Nordic welfare states, educational institutions shoulder a unique responsibility to provide a pedagogical space for transformative change, critical thinking, and antiracism. In this chapter, we consider the contradictions of education as an inclusive process of critical learning in the matrix of social power disparities by exploring the complexity of critically examining racism in educational settings that silence race. This chapter considers how Nordic educational institutions (in this chapter, referring to public schools and universities) reproduce racialized processes in curricula and classrooms in seeming contradiction to their stated purpose of education for all. We depart from the premise that when talking about the possibilities for antiracist education in the school and university, it is important to think about educational institutions as sites of racialized production. This means that we ought to approach these institutions as sites through which processes of racialization are not just being reproduced, but, more importantly, can also be potential sites for challenging, dismantling, and decolonizing these reproductions (Vertelyté & Li, 2021).

This discussion is based on two illustrative examples: a brief examination of Finnish social work education core courses and an ethnographic observation in a Danish classroom. Clarke scrutinizes how the structure of Finnish social work curricula implicitly centres whiteness by compartmentalizing race into ‘multicultural’ and ‘international’ specialized courses. The absence of core courses focusing on the complexity of race in social structures and practices was striking to Clarke, who returned to Finland after 12 years in US social work education where diversity and oppression courses were generally the first class that incoming students took. Vertelyté draws on ethnographic situations that occurred during her 2016–2017 fieldwork in one of the racially diverse secondary schools in Copenhagen. In her research on processes of racialization in friendship formation practices among adolescents, Vertelyté recognized that the ways that racism was explained by the students (and silenced by the teachers) was key to understanding the absence of and challenges for antiracist education in Denmark (2019). Discussing the illustrative examples through the lens of Miranda Fricker’s (2007) notion of epistemic injustice, we first look at ways that social work education in Finland systematizes ways of not knowing race in the curricular texts and

then explore how Danish schools reinforce testimonial injustice about racism in classroom practice. Our aim in this chapter is to explicate educational situations where epistemic violence occurs in the absence of antiracist education. Therefore, we ask: how are social relations of racialization (re) produced in education and how can education centre the values of equality, non-discrimination, and critical thinking when processes of racialization remain unquestioned in colour-blind curricula? We proceed by opening up the discussion on racialization, Nordic exceptionalism, and antiracist education in Nordic contexts.

Racialization and Nordic exceptionalism

Racialization is a process by which socio-economic and political sovereignties differentiate bodies into those that matter and those that do not (Gržinić & Tatlić, 2014), and through which human differences are embedded in frameworks of explanation, everyday action, and affect (Essed, 1991; Zembylas, 2015). The invisibility of whiteness invokes racialized everyday practices where the category of race belongs to some, but not to others (Lobo, 2013). Relatively recent migratory movements to Europe have brought the question of race to the forefront in new ways. For example, Nasar Meer (2013) points out that Islamophobia or anti-Semitism ought not to be regarded as solely religious forms of discrimination, but rather as constitutive of racism and processes of racialization.

In recent decades, there has been growing scholarly interest in processes of racialization in the Nordic countries (Danbolt & Myong, 2019; Hervik, 2018; Keskinen & Andreassen, 2017). Studies in these contexts have shown that processes of exclusion are often built on racialized structures that position ethnic, racial, and cultural minorities as incompatible others. Scholars in Nordic contexts have opened up how racial marginalization is enshrined in media and social media debates (Hervik, 2006, 2011) and how emotions, senses, and affects are inscribed in the everyday making and unmaking of race and racialized subjectivities (Andreassen & Vitus, 2015) and knowledge production that involve matters of race, racism, and racialization (Vertelytė & Staunæs, 2021). Important work in racialization research has emerged from postcolonial-decolonial perspectives which have shown how Nordic colonial history continuously plays a role in contemporary race relations and the structures of society (Eriksen & Svendsen, 2020; Jensen, 2015; Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2016). Specifically, research has pointed to schools, universities, and extracurricular educational spaces as those institutions through which racialized exclusions are (re)produced (Jaffe-Walter, 2016; Lagermann, 2015a, 2015b; Li & Buchardt, 2022; Svendsen, 2014; Vertelytė & Li, 2021).

Yet, concepts such as racism, race, and racialized discrimination remain heavily contested in Nordic public and academic discourse (Kyllingstad, 2017; Seikkula, 2021). Race and racism are often associated with Nazism

and anti-Semitism and considered to be temporally oriented toward past eras of European colonialism and slavery in the US and, as such, are regarded as inapplicable to the contemporary Nordic context of exceptionalism (Sandset, 2018). The omission and even resistance to recognizing the concepts of race is aligned with claims of Nordic exceptionalism (Danbolt & Myong, 2019) – maintaining an image of Nordic countries as culturally homogenous yet imbued with the core values of tolerance, diversity, and love for the ‘other’ (Bissenbakker & Myong, 2021).

Denmark and Finland are both Nordic countries that nonetheless have distinct histories and social contexts. Denmark is located near the heart of continental Europe and its language has Old Norse and Germanic roots. It has deep history as a mercantile empire that extended east all the way to Estonia 1,000 years ago and as a colonial power in the West Indies, Africa, and Asia until the mid-20th century. In World War 2, Denmark was invaded by Nazi Germany but was part of the victorious Allied Powers. Finland, on the other hand, found itself squeezed between two large colonial powers that ruled it until Finnish independence in 1917. In World War 2, Finland had a complicated series of wars and alliances on both the Allied and Axis sides resulting in a treaty that demanded Finland pay large reparations to the Soviet Union. To maintain its independence, Finland maintained a policy of strict neutrality while refraining from criticizing its neighbours. Due to widespread poverty and underdevelopment, many Finns have emigrated since the 19th century, and they remain one of the largest ethnic groups in Sweden; but it was only towards the late 20th century that there was a rise in immigration to Finland. While many Danes have emigrated to the US in the 19th century, immigration to Denmark started in earnest in the 1960s due to the needs of the manufacturing sector. Since the late 1960s, Denmark has invited and received so-called guest workers (in Danish: *Gæstearbejdere*) from countries such as Turkey, the former Yugoslavia, Pakistan, and Morocco and had received refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Somalia, among others, in the 1980s and 1990s. These recently changing demographics have been perceived by some Danish political actors as a threat to ‘national security’ and a challenge to the representation of Denmark as ‘a white homogeneous nation.’ Denmark is a country with colonial legacy: it participated in the transatlantic slave trade and had colonies in the Danish West Indies in the Caribbean and the Gold Coast in Western Africa, as well as subordinated Greenland and Faroe Islands, Island. While Finland never had overseas colonies and has been seen as located on the periphery of Europe, Finland nonetheless has been a crossroads between east and west with an Indigenous population in the north, the Sámi, that have faced colonial repression from various governments. The Finnish language is part of the unique Fenno-Ugrian language group that does not have Indo-European roots, though there is a Swedish-speaking minority that maintains significant language rights. Loftsdóttir and Jensen (2012) have noted that Nordic exceptionalism is a broad term

that can refer to the peripheral status of Nordic countries in relation to the rest of Europe or the notion that Nordic self-perception is fundamentally different than other western countries. Both concepts reflect a view of Nordic countries as international ‘good citizens’ unembedded in the legacy of colonialism (Keskinen & Andreassen, 2017).

Although Nordic countries differ in their colonial histories and nation-state welfare structures, Nordic exceptionalism is commonly based on the discursive notion that Nordic societies are post-racial societies; namely, that the issues of race are relegated to the dustbin of history and as such do not have any contemporary relevance. Thus, any claims about racism and racial discrimination, both in academic sources and everyday life experiences, are contested as irrelevant or unscientific (Danbolt & Myong, 2019). In the analysis part of this chapter, we show how Nordic exceptionalism enters everyday classroom interactions and hinders discussions on race and how in social work curricula, race is subsumed into the category of multiculturalism which represents a colour-blind approach to race, while whiteness remains unexplored, unrecognized, and firmly centred in the curriculum.

Antiracist education and critical pedagogies in Nordic research and practice

Antiracist educational orientations emerged in the English language context of the UK, Canada, the US, and Australia as a response to the developments of global forms of inequality and racialization at large and as a critique of the multicultural take on education in particular (Banks, 2013; Cole, 1998; Gillborn, 2005; May, 1999; Niemonen, 2007). Early multicultural education in the US and the UK was criticized for often taking a superficial ‘saris, samosas and steel bands’ approach that exoticized racial and cultural diversity rather than tackling the structures of racism and ethnocentrism (Smyth, 2003). Antiracist education and multicultural education, particularly in the British context, were thus often dichotomized and seen as oppositional and antagonistic (Modood & May, 2001). Antiracist education proponents have criticized multicultural education pedagogy for being based on the essentialization of culture as a resource, leading to the exoticism and tokenism of different cultural groups, which, in turn, construct ethnic racial minorities as being in need of help (Troyna, 1993). Instead, antiracist education focused on challenging structural and institutional forms of inequality, understanding racism as a system of oppression and inequality as embedded in all spheres of society.

Antiracist education is based on a few basic premises. First, it approaches racism as an ongoing global colonial structure and a system of oppression. Applying a decolonial approach to antiracism suggests “an opening for a reframing of solidarity based on a rethinking of humanist commitment, and on a vision of global coexistence that respects epistemological difference and autonomy” (De Lissoyoy & Brown, 2013, p. 540). Second, it approaches

educational institutions as already-heterogeneous communities, regardless of their cultural, racial, and ethnic composition. Educational institutions are heterogeneous also in terms of learning styles, socio-economic statuses, gender positions, sexuality, neurodiversity, etc. (McMahon, 2003, p. 258). As such, antiracist critical pedagogy recognizes that “groups are [always, already] differently situated in the production of knowledge” (McMahon, 2003, p. 264). Third, it approaches teaching as morally positioned practices situated in particular socio-economic processes and beliefs. As Brenda McMahon puts: “Educational legislation, policies and procedures as well as curricular resources are written and presented from within particular locations, belief systems and moral stances” (2003, p. 259). Fourth, while insisting on recognizing that race and racialization are formative structures, antiracist education pays attention to whiteness as a racialized structure as well. As De Lissovoy and Brown point out (2013, p. 540), if

whiteness is as much an ontological and epistemological ordering of human beings as it is a system of material and cultural oppression [...] then antiracist solidarity projects have to contemplate a basic reorganization of being and knowing, and not merely a critique of ideology.

More recently, critical pedagogy frameworks have incorporated decolonial and postcolonial perspectives, challenging not only intersectional formations of racialization but also disturbing western epistemological notions and understandings of what constitutes knowledge (De Lissovoy & Brown, 2013, p. 540). Decolonial approaches challenge Nordic detachment and denial of its colonial past as well as current forms of coloniality that are supported through notions of Nordic exceptionalism which view these societies as unmitigatedly open and tolerant spaces free from the taint of Western colonialism (Menon et al., 2021).

Antiracist education strategies equipped to tackle the processes of racialization that occur in educational settings are officially codified in some nation-state education projects, such as the US, the UK, Canada, and Australia. In Nordic countries, however, antiracist education is not included in state education policies. Nordic research nonetheless shows that despite this absence, antiracist pedagogies are explored by some educational institutions, individual teachers, non-governmental organization, and activist groups (Alemanji & Mafi, 2018; Alemanji & Seikkula, 2017; Børhaug, 2009; Seikkula, 2019); for instance, through organizing specialized workshops, learning tasks or the development of antiracist digital tools (Alemanji & Mafi, 2018; Alemanji & Seikkula, 2017).

Recently, an emerging body of scholarship has documented and discussed the potentialities for decolonial education in Nordic countries, emphasizing the importance of questioning hierarchical epistemologies inscribed in curricula and teaching agendas (Eriksen & Svendsen, 2020; Velásquez Atehortúa, 2020). Affective dimensions inscribed in antiracist education

as well as scholarship on the subject have been debated. For example, in a Danish context, Vertelyt  and Staun s (2021) showed how antiracist education, though applied and experimented with in the Danish comprehensive school context since the 1980s, gradually disappeared when issues of race and racism became the ‘elephant in the room’ (Staun s & Hveneg rd-Lassen, 2019). The authors show how, from the 2000s onward, feelings of unease, embarrassment, discomfort, and anxiety about addressing race have become integrated in antiracist education research and practice. Similarly, Iram Khawaja (2022) shows how the methodology of memory work as a pedagogical practice can create collaborative spaces of learning about racialization, whiteness and privilege through affects such as shame. In Finland, Alemanji discussed how the denial of racism and Nordic exceptionalism obstructs possibilities for antiracist action in education and further advocated for antiracist education that actually recognizes the existence of racism (Alemanji, 2017). What Nordic societies need, according to Alemanji (2017), is a consolidation of practices, discourses, and tools equipped to tackle race, racialization, and antiracism specifically in a Nordic context where the very notion of race is denied. In the sections that follow, we show precisely how race, racism, and racialization enter educational settings in the absence of more concrete antiracist education action.

Searching for race in the texts of Finnish social work education: systematizing invisibility

There is a robust tradition of social work research in Finland that has emerged historically along with the development of the welfare state (e.g. H nninen et al., 2019; Kuusi, 1961; Sipil , 1973). As a practice profession that empowers and advocates for people using the principles of collective responsibility and social justice, Finnish social work research has taken up issues related to vulnerable and marginalized groups in terms of disability, poverty, mental, health, and addiction (e.g. Kokkinen et al., 2015, Kuronen et al., 2021). The Finnish welfare state retains remarkable trust and support in society (e.g. Rantanen et al., 2015) and the strong link between the field of social work and the state is largely viewed as unproblematic, perhaps due to the culture of consensus-orientated policy-making.

The Finnish Social Welfare Act from 2014 mandates social workers to enact structural social work, which is the idea that social workers have deep professional knowledge about the context of service users that should influence policy making in relation to community development (Matthies, 2022). Structural social work was first theorized by Moreau (1979) and Mullaly and Dupr  (2019) through the lens of class struggle as the responsibility of professional social work to intervene in societal structures that perpetuate injustice resulting in the myriad social problems seen in everyday social work practice. However, the fact that most Finnish social work remains casework underlines the contradictions between the progressive aspiration

of the law and the reality of social work practice. Social work education and research thus often struggle to find the connections between endeavours to have an impact on societal structures from the perspective of street-level social service practice.

Narratives of diversity in Finland often overlook native ethnic minority groups like the Indigenous Sami and Roma viewing race as a new phenomenon brought from abroad (Keskinen, 2019). In Nordic countries, welfare state policies and practices have been predicated on the notion of Nordic identity as embodying a homogeneous consensus. Hence, there has been a greater tendency to coalesce work with populations viewed as non-Nordic into the category of ‘multicultural’ seen as synonymous with outsider or non-national. Viewing the needs and challenges of racialized people as a cultural matter reinforces a colonial gaze that others them as not belonging to the nation-state.

International education emerged in Finnish universities in the 1990s at the same time that racialized immigrants first became a topic in Finnish social work research in the 1990s (e.g. Valtonen, 1994). Finnish social work education was slower to internationalize and diversify than many other disciplines (Anis, 2005). The term ‘multiculturalism’ nonetheless became prevalent in social work education by the late 1990s, focusing on the need for intercultural communication skills, though it rarely addressed the power differential between racialized communities seen as outsiders and those seen as belonging to the homogenous nation (Clarke, 2004). Cultural explanations often prevailed when addressing the challenges that racialized people faced in society. While there have been studies of multiculturalism (Lastikka & Lipponen, 2016), critiques of the predominance of cultural explanations (Anis, 2005), and even discussions of racism (Heino & Kivijärvi, 2013) in Finnish social work, there is still a gap in explicit discussions of structural racism in Nordic societies from a social work perspective perhaps because race is generally seen as an attribute of people of colour but not white people.

The social work curriculum data that has been used for this brief analysis consists of the public curricula posted on the online websites of Finnish universities. These curricula include the titles of courses, a brief description of content, and required books. It reflects only the explicit curriculum, namely, how the course of professional studies is constructed, and it does not delve into the implicit curriculum, which is the lived experience of the learning environment. There are six Finnish universities that offer master’s degrees in social work (MSW). An MSW is a legal competency necessary for social work practice in statutory settings such as adult and child protection for the registered profession of social worker. Social workers are legally empowered to make binding decisions about issues regarding child custody and other care issues, meaning that social workers must have expert practice skills to assess complex family and individual situations and navigate appropriate support and solutions.

Table 3.1 Grid of terms in university curricula

<i>University</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>International</i>	<i>Multicultural</i>
Helsinki	No	Yes	No
Tampere	No	Uses term 'social work across borders'	No
Turku	No	No	Yes
Lapland		Uses terms 'glocal' and 'cultural social work'	No
Eastern Finland	No	Yes	No
Jyväskylä	No	Yes	Yes

Table 3.1 offers a limited overview of the use of three terms in Finnish university social work curricula. The curricula that were examined were brief textual summaries of course content and readings that give the broad outlines of approved professional and disciplinary content. There are many factors that go into the selection of terms and a more detailed study of individual course syllabi and ethnographic observations could provide greater insight into everyday practices of the implicit curriculum where individual professors incorporate discussions of the concept of race, structural racism, and antiracism in their teaching. Interviews with faculty members about the selection of terms in the curricula could also illuminate the reasoning behind vocabulary choices and actual course content. Nonetheless, this basic framework provides a snapshot of the key terms that prevail in Finnish social work education.

While there are many courses on multilingualism in social work communication, inequality, multiculturalism, and the impact of globalization, there are no core courses in these universities that explicitly take up the issue of structures of racial inequality, racial injustice or antiracism. Further, there are no core social work courses that explicitly problematize the normativity of whiteness in social work practice from the perspective of structures, work communities, or practice. In recent years, structural social work has emerged as a required course in the Finnish social work curriculum to focus on issues of systemic oppression and injustice, but these courses rarely explicitly take up the centrality of whiteness or antiracism. Instead, many of the course outlines focus on ways that social work can influence public policy. The centring of whiteness in the Finnish social work curriculum thus legitimates colour-blindness and systematizing whiteness at the core of social work education creating a hermeneutical injustice, in Fricker's (2007) terms, that creates a gap in collective social work interpretive resources to make sense of the social experiences of racialized people.

Finnish social work is largely practised by white social workers in state structures shaped by neoliberal policies who must often 'translate' and enforce regulatory state power over racialized people with low social power.

Social workers are therefore expected to manage a diversity of people in challenging circumstances through racialized, gendered, and class-based systems and policies that may not be responsive to client and community needs and can even increase social control and alienation from racialized communities (Clarke & Yellow Bird, 2021). Critical reflection on the complexity of power dynamics of racism should be at the core of the social work education to prepare students to reflect on their own position in society, to inform structural social work interventions, to diversify the profession, and to support antiracist social work practice. Further, a fundamental reconsideration of how whiteness informs the core concepts that comprise the Finnish social work curriculum is long overdue.

Discussing racism in a Danish secondary school classroom

Danish research in education have showed how processes of othering, racialization, and exclusion are a part of education policy making and everyday schooling practices (Buchardt, 2016, 2018; Gitz-Johansen, 2006; Staunæs, 2007). For example, scholars have showed how categories such as ‘bilingual’ (*tosprogede*), ‘multi-lingual’ (*flersprogede*), and ‘Muslim students’ are built on the notions of these students as ‘problems,’ ‘lacking qualifications,’ ‘lacking support from parents,’ or being ‘trouble makers’ (Gilliam, 2006, 2018). The expectations to become ‘proper Danish pupils’ have been playing a formative role in ethnic-racial minority students’ subjectivities (Staunæs, 2007) and identity, sense of belonging (Khawaja, 2010), figuring in their everyday friendship relations (Vertelyté, 2019), affecting their engagement in learning, and obstructing their future possibilities (Lagermann, 2015a, 2019). Despite scholars pointing to colour-blind structures and processes of racialization embedded in the school educational practices, race and racism is not explicated in teaching and school leadership pedagogical practices.

Ethnographic research (Vertelyté, 2019) shows that while in Danish discourse and educational policies and practices, race and racism are silenced categories, among students in schools, the words ‘race,’ ‘racist,’ and ‘racism’ are part of the everyday vocabulary. Comments between students such as ‘that’s racism’ or ‘you are racist’ could emerge abruptly from situations that are not related to issues of race and racism at all. For example, one student could point to the black car, the other student would say – ‘that’s racist!’ In other instances, the terms ‘racist’ or ‘racism’ may be invoked when a discussion turns to a person’s phenotypical features or cultural differences. The use of tropes such as ‘you are racist’ or ‘that’s racism’ are not limited to a particular group of students in the classroom, but rather are invoked by most of the students, regardless of their ethnic, religious, cultural, or racial positions.

Yet, while the words race, racism, or racist are regularly used by students in their socialization practices, teachers are reluctant to talk about racism in their teaching and pedagogical practices or they simply do not know how to

take on the conversations about racism with their students. The following fieldwork situation from the classroom illustrates the discrepancies of the understandings and language about racism between students and teachers:

For the past week seventh graders were involved in project work. All of them had to form groups and work on a topic of their choice. Hafsa, Selma and Catherine decided to work on the topic of racism in Denmark. Hafsa and Selma are both Muslim Danish girls and Catherine is an ethnic Danish-born girl. As I talk to the group, it is clear that Hafsa's and Selma's motivation for taking up this topic is personal – as they share briefly about the racialized experiences they encounter in Denmark, as well as the experiences of their parents. The group decided to do interviews with people around the school and ask about their experiences of racism in the school and in Denmark. When they were about to do the interviews, the teacher comes to talk to the group. As the girls tell the teacher about their project idea, the teacher proposes to do a project on racism in the USA, rather than Denmark. 'It will be easier' – the teacher says. After feedback from the teacher, Hafsa and Selma very quickly decided to change the topic from racism in Denmark to racism in the USA, because they thought that it will be less complicated to find material about racism in the US using YouTube and Wikipedia than collecting interviews around the school.

At the end, the group produced a ten-minute presentation on racism in the USA, including some slides about slavery, segregation, the civil rights movement and the Black Lives Matter movement. They also added a slide about racism towards Muslims in the USA. After the presentation, teachers and classmates posed some questions to the group. One of the teachers provided feedback: 'You talked about the past', the teacher said. The girls responded that, no – we also included Black Lives Matter, which is a contemporary case. Another teacher says "You talk about Islam and racism, but is religion and racism the same? I think you should really work on your definitions and facts."

While girls are presenting the project, I hear laughter, noise and complaining voices from the white students. One of them whispers to another classmate – "so what, are we are all now racist?" When the time comes for the classmates to ask questions about the presentation, Thomas, a white Danish boy, asked if calling someone a 'Danish potato' (in Danish: Dansk kartoffel¹) is also racist? Everyone laughs, the girls answer -Yes, teachers are silent. After the presentation I asked girls how did it go – they answer in disappointment – 'Teachers didn't understand us.'

This episode illustrates how the ideas of Nordic exceptionalism, understood as a framework for the denial of racism, plays into educational practices. It illustrates how racism is understood as a matter of concern for other

countries, such as the US, but imagined as inapplicable to Denmark. When Hafsa, Selma, and Catherine decided to do a project on racism, it seems apparent why they sought information in US contexts. Taking into consideration that the word has barely been used to address issues of inequality, colour racism, and Islamophobia in Danish contexts, it is easier for the girls to refer to racism in the US through easily accessible sources such as Wikipedia or YouTube. Yet the girls were also keen to show how racism works in Denmark. They might not have been able to find sources online that address the issues, but they could have certainly conducted interviews around the school. Yet, under the supervision of their teacher – who did not suggest comparing racism in the US and Denmark as an alternative – the girls skipped over Denmark and instead adopted a singular focus: racism in the US. When the girls received questions from their teachers and classmates, it was apparent that they did not treat the issue seriously. The first question by the teacher – ‘But you talked about the past’ – challenged the girls by implying that racism is a matter of the past and so lacks contemporary relevance. Instead of asking about how historical policies such as segregation affect the present-day situation of racialized communities in the US, the teacher instead proposed that the topic of the project is illegitimate because it lacks a contemporary edge. In the same way, the question from another teacher that expressed doubt about the girls’ definition of racism – since religion and race are not the same – similarly delegitimizes the girls’ arguments, which hold that Islamophobia is also a practice of racism. Lastly, the seriousness and assertiveness with which the girls approached their topic was met by laughter and irony when one of the classmates asked if calling someone ‘Danish potato’ is also a practice of racism, to which the girls answered in frustration: Yes.

The situation highlights how student’s experiences of racism do not always align with how teachers define and understand the concepts of race and racism: for the girls, racism can take many forms and shapes; yet the teachers evidently had a narrower definition: racism was a purely historical phenomenon. Similarly in his research on antiracist education in Norway, Christian Stokke (2018) argues that “teachers and many students perceive schools as colorblind societies without racism, but minority students experience forms of marginalization that fit a broader concept of racism.” Also in Norway, Stine Bang Svendsen (2014) illustrates how despite the efforts of multicultural education to reject the concept of race as scientifically ungrounded, they nonetheless fail to take into account the present-day realities of racist beliefs and experiences of racism that students encounter in their everyday lives. Similarly, the situation I described from my field notes demonstrates that Danish multiculturalist education is based on the implicit idea that Danish society is colour-blind, and therefore it is not necessary to talk about contemporary practices of racism. Moreover, the incident shows how only certain historical forms of racism are acknowledged as legitimate. From the teacher’s point of view, Islamophobia – which the girls brought up in their presentation – cannot be discussed as a form of racism. Despite the

colour-blind ideologies, the prevalence of the tropes race, racism, or ‘you are racist’ in everyday situations illustrates that students are aware of racial differences surrounding them, and that their negotiations of racial difference are part of their relations to school, their teachers, their friends, and their classmates.

Epistemic injustice in the absence of antiracist education: concluding remarks

A core element of Nordic exceptionalism is the notion that racism and structural racial discrimination are not prevalent in these nations, but rather are issues that exist ‘far away’ or are long in the past. Our examples illustrate how the invisibility and denial surrounding racism in pedagogical spaces circumvent critical thinking and racialized experiences consequently creating epistemic injustice. Fricker (2007) uses the notion of epistemic injustice to capture how persistent discrimination against certain groups of people can seed doubt about their capacity as knowers based on prejudices about them. Recognizing that trust and credible knowing is intrinsically linked to social power, Fricker sees *hermeneutical injustice* as systematizing oppression because there is a gap in the dominant group’s collective interpretive resources to make sense of a different group’s social experiences. In the context of our discussion, when white institutions lack the capacity to conceive and communicate, hear out and acknowledge how systemic racism injures and traumatizes racialized people, then these structural experiences are not validated as harmful and disadvantageous. Indeed, they further marginalize racialized people by denying a language of systemic discrimination and the power of whiteness. Clarke’s exploration of the terms used in Finnish social work education indicates that the absence of core courses that explicitly tackle issues of race and racism reinforces relations of hermeneutical injustice that has an impact on how social workers are prepared to go into the field. It further limits how notions of structural social work could be applied to racism in Finnish society. Vertelyté’s discussion reflects relations of testimonial injustice. For example, the point raised by teacher to students in the classroom observation: ‘But you talked about the past’ – implying that racism is an antiquated issue and lacks contemporary relevance – rendered the students’ own experiences invalid. *Testimonial injustice* in Fricker’s conception (2007) refers to the lack of credibility given by dominant hearers to specific speakers’ experiences. In our case, this idea captures to the disbelief in racialized people’s personal stories of hurt and bigotry in white spaces.

Our examples show how race and racism is commonly understood as a definition rather than a lived experience. In Clarke’s example, issues of race and racism are subsumed into specialized courses that compartmentalize ‘cultural others’ into a category distinct from mainstream Finns. As we see from Vertelyté’s classroom observation, the teacher expresses doubt about the students’ ‘correct’ definition of racism – since in his opinion religion and

race are not the same. The situation particularly shows how the eagerness to put definition to racism delegitimizes certain forms of racism. From the teacher's point of view, Islamophobia – which the student brought up in their presentation – cannot be discussed as a form of racism. As we argued in this chapter, such situations must be understood in the context of Nordic exceptionalism, which presumes cultural homogeneity and neglects and denies the lived experiences of racialization and racism. Educational institutions, in situations as described in this chapter, have the responsibility to ensure that antiracist tools are implemented in curricula and everyday-classroom interactions. This means that epistemic injustice must be tackled head on through concrete measures that ensure a broadening of curricula and concepts by including voices and lived racialized experiences long marginalized from educational settings. Emphasizing the skills of critical thinking allows space for students to grapple with questioning societal structures and ideologies and can enhance reflective citizenship that can break the cycle of reaffirming past injustices in contemporary forms.

Notes

- 1 A category used to mark the whiteness of ethnic Danish classmates.

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4 Autobiographical flesh

Understanding Western notions of humanity through the life and selected writings of Una Marson (1905–1965)

Jéssica Nogueira Varela

Answering the calling

In this chapter, I propose examining Western notions of human and humanity through Una Marson's life and selected writings. I focus on her first sojourn from Kingston to London in 1932, building from Delia Jarrett-Macauley's biography *The Life of Una Marson, 1905–65* (2010 [1998]), and Lisa Tomlinson's biography *Una Marson* (2019). In addition, I examine Una Marson's selected writings produced during her first two years in London, particularly her poetry, and the play *London Calling* (2016 [1937]). To further examine Marson's case, I am borrowing from decolonial theory to understand Western notions of human and humanity. I will interpret these concepts through the analytical framework of coloniality as discussed by Aníbal Quijano (2000), María Lugones (2008), Sylvia Wynter (2003), and Walter D. Mignolo (1999, 2017). As I will explain coloniality is the underlying premise of modernity, capitalism, and globalization, it connects these three through hierarchical constructions of race, gender, sexuality, and class. Coloniality offers an alternative perspective into narratives of linear progress by explaining how power is structured (economically, politically, and socially) around processes initiated in the 14th and 15th centuries through European colonization (Quijano 2000, 548). Coloniality serves as a lens to investigate notions of human and humanity in Marson's life and writings, thereby allowing us to better understand the endurance (and entanglement) of sexism, racism, classism, and otherness in contemporary Europe. I conclude with a brief comparison between Marson's position and Sara Ahmed's postcolonial approach to the figure of the wretched as the individual which feels out of place and disjointed in the metropole.

Una Marson was a journalist, public speaker, playwright, editor, and poet who would eventually become the first black woman hired at the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in 1941. Despite having a successful career in London, Marson's mental and physical health deteriorated, and in 1946, she was taken by a friend back to Kingston. Marson was committed into a "home for the mentally ill" during the next two years, never to return to London (Imaobong 2018, 73). As I shall detail, Marson's first

year as a migrant was extremely difficult. She was forced to reckon with the specific colonial matrix of power present in London which failed to recognize people like her as British subjects. If not for the black and feminist activist networks established in London, such as Harold Moody's *League of Coloured People* (LCP), Marson would probably have had to return to Kingston without accomplishing much. In that sense, black women migrants from British colonies were effectively dehumanized as the other of the other, especially, but not only in the job market, as I will discuss. Marson's position was precarious, and, yet, one of the most impressive aspects of investigating notions of human and humanity through her work is noticing how she struggled to make sense of herself and her context. By assessing Marson's poetry, and the play *London Calling* ([1937] 2016), it is possible to map her intellectual turn towards a Pan-African, feminist, and anti-colonial praxis that was critical of Western notions of humanity and human – as I will explore in this piece.

This chapter is theoretically indebted to Sara Ahmed's postcolonial feminist analysis of the figure of the wretched in "Killing Joy" (2010). It is also indebted to studies about migration and blackness in Europe. These two strands of intellectual thought guide a part of my concerns regarding Una Marson's migration, especially considering her moving to the UK when the British Empire still held many colonies. Another part of my framework is based upon black women's interventions in academia, especially through black internationalism.¹ Studies in this field allow me to better contextualize Marson's case within black women's multiple histories of travelling activism which are now being given more attention. By comparison, my contribution has a historical and literary approach to the question of race, racism, and colonialism through a gendered perspective by reading Marson's life and work. I focus on understanding notions of human and humanity through her writings and biography hoping to contribute to debates which situate histories of racism in the European continent at large. I am joined by other activists, researchers, and critical thinkers in different efforts to demystify how Western systems of oppression work by centring human at its core while simultaneously displacing all those that are less-than-humans (Mignolo 2017). Una Marson is one amongst other black women whose travelling, writing, and activism engaged the public in contemporary Europe. In this sense, my chapter is a small addition to multiple efforts in recovering and interpreting black women's histories and writings in/about Europe.

Autobiographical flesh

It has become increasingly popular to use different types of life-narratives in academic research. Online posts, memoirs, personal essays, letters, post cards, and journals have been acknowledged as valid sources of knowledge. While some authors recognize that trend in life-narrative research as an act of inclusion by investigating materials that weren't necessarily understood

as sources before (e.g. photo albums, novels, plays), others see it as the result of “disenchantment with the dominant Cartesian paradigm of rationality at the heart of modern social sciences” (Cosslett et al. 2000; Ettore 2016, 1). In either scenario (of inclusion or disenchantment), life-narrative studies have an interesting potential to cut across disciplinary boundaries. Additionally, those life-narratives themselves are challenged by the methodological and theoretical concerns of each disciplinary field (Cosslett et al. 2000). In this chapter’s case, my reading of Una Marson’s life and writings is tentative because within the disciplinary boundaries of literature, a more traditional approach would be to read one source (life) or the other (writings), closely examining the text itself. Nonetheless, my methodological decision to investigate Marson’s life in this way can be justified through her play, *London Calling* ([1937] 2016), which has a melancholic tone despite being a comedy. Marson’s use of the play to criticize what she found problematic, including colonization itself, got me curious to interpret possible connections between her life and work with closer attention to Western notions of human and humanity. In this sense, I invoke Cherríe Moraga’s “Theory in the Flesh” as a valuable framework “where the physical realities of our lives – our skin colour, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings – all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity” (1983, 23).

In the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* (1983), edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, the theorization the body as a site of memory and knowledge is crucial for the praxis of “bridg[ing] the contradictions” of different experiences (1983, 23). It is important to highlight here, as suggested by Clara Román-Odio (2013) and Paula Moya (1996), that although “Theory in the Flesh” considers one’s body *in* their experiences and location as interwoven, this does not mean that one’s body is trapped in their own positionality. Instead, “Theory in the Flesh” proposes a radical framework that “seeks to explain the political implications of living in a particular social location” (Román-Odio 2013, 4). For example, Gloria Anzaldúa in “Speaking in Tongues” analyses the struggles and risks that Third World women writers face as they attempt to think, read, speak, and write in a context that does not offer the tools for doing so with confidence (1983, 163–165). Anzaldúa argues that absence of confidence is one of the results of different structures of power that effectively makes social mobility harder for those with little financial resources, those who do not fit the heteronormative politics of gender, and those that are deemed as ‘others’ in general.

It’s important to note that as in Anzaldúa’s (1983) example, theory in the flesh animates a complex, contradictory, and continuous process of revision of the *self* through practices of reflection on the *social*. It becomes a relevant tool in my interpretation of Marson’s life and writings as it captures the possibilities of understanding what it means to be *writing as*. In other words, what it means *to write* from and through oneself. Thinking about similar questions, Mary Evans writes in “Auto/biography as a Research Method” (2013) that for research through auto/biography to be productive, it has to

embrace its contradictions and what it can teach different fields. By putting together, the (*I*) in between the terms auto and biography, Mary Evans signals to the use of both sources (autobiography and biography) as a possible method in themselves. Thus, she points that these paradoxical relations can be insightful because of their potential to bridge (a) the subject of auto/biography within a given time and space, (b) how the subject's environment is written and accounted for by them, and, most importantly, (c) how those circumstances possibly influenced the subject. As an example, Evans looks at biographies written about Sylvia Plath, what Plath herself wrote, and what critics of those biographies have written. For instance, Evans convincingly explains the conflicting negotiation Plath had in relation to US cultural values (how she positioned herself in relation to it) and to British cultural values (where Plath migrated to later).

In Marson's case, writing also becomes a platform to reflect upon the distinct cultural narratives she witnessed as a colonial subject who migrated to the heart of the metropolis. This "Theory in the Flesh" approach does not mean that Marson's gender, class, race, and colonial status would determine the content, quality, or range of her writing. Instead "Theory in the Flesh" suggests that Marson was willing to engage with the contradictions of *being* a black woman writer and a colonial subject who migrated to a particular place in time. In addition to writing three plays, among them *London Calling* (2016 [1937]), Marson wrote four books of poetry: another source of literary expression where she beautifully unpacked different parts of her-*self* and her experiences. I chose to engage particularly with *London Calling* (2016 [1937]) because I see it as a layered and insightful look into the complexities of Marson's disillusionment with the humanist values of her time. Writing about recent scholarly interest in "challenging the notion that race has no place in the ideological framework shaping Europe," Fatima El-Tayeb notes that these works are "often authored by members of racialised groups" (2011, 182).² One way to explain such phenomena is that, as Donna Haraway would argue, the disfranchised, racialized, gendered, and colonized subject is positioned in such peculiar manner that it can take itself, simultaneously, as "object," "actor," and "agent" (Haraway 1988, 592). I suggest that a critical aspect for developing alternative frameworks that can historically understand and examine power relations and their continuities is signalling towards the centrality of Euro-American whiteness for the epistemological construction of human and humanity.

In that sense, by drawing from scholarly work that scrutinizes the racialized, gendered, and capitalist structures, spread and enabled through colonialism and imperialism, we can better understand how the conceptualization of human and humanity is critical in separating colonizer from colonized. However, I do not suppose that the world can be simply divided between colonizer and colonized or human and dehumanized, after all, colonial and imperial histories are complex and not ubiquitous. As Lars Jensen and Kristín Loftsdóttir write, there is no "universal narrative," but

colonizations’ “ramifications [...] entail the recognition of the transnational and transcontinental connections” (Loftsdóttir and Jensen 2012, 1). Similarly, I believe that by assessing Una Marson’s migration from Kingston to London, we can glimpse and explore some of these transnational ties, challenging the belief of a raceless and innocent Europe. As Fatima El-Tayeb writes, a transnational framework allows us to defy “the powerful narrative of Europe as a colorblind continent, largely untouched by the devastating ideology it exported all over the world” (El-Tayeb 2011, xv). Thus, decolonial and postcolonial theories constitute a fundamental part of this chapter’s central idea: that Marson’s life and writing significantly portray much the melancholy of being dehumanized as a colonial subject and as a black woman migrant. In this sense, this chapter contributes to ongoing debates on the history of the category of the human concerning colonization, anti-blackness, sexism, and struggles to combat the “global designs” of social inequality (Mignolo 2000).

On Una (Victoria Maud) Marson

A poet, playwright, essayist, journalist, broadcaster and editor could be some of the adjectives used to describe Una Marson’s career as she crossed the Atlantic several times. Marson’s range as a writer can be further investigated under Carole Boyce Davies’ proposition that black women’s writing “should be read as a series of boundary crossings and not as a fixed, geographical, ethnically or nationally bound category of writing” (1994, 3). Likewise, Marson’s biography impresses due to her talent as a writer, the multiple borders she crossed, (travelling to the UK, the US, Switzerland, Turkey, Italy, and Israel) and the consequences her physical and mental health suffered which all started in London. Una Marson was born in Jamaica in 1905, “the youngest child of a middle-class Baptist pastor and mixed-raced mother” (Umoren 2018, 4). Marson and her five siblings grew up in a rural area of Jamaica and were taught how to read at a young age, laying the foundations her “avid interest in the art of writing,” according to biographer Lisa Tomlinson (Tomlinson 2019).

Marson received a scholarship to attend Hampton School, a prestigious and “conservative” boarding school for girls in rural Saint Elizabeth, Jamaica (Tomlinson 2019, 5). According to historian Imaobong Umoren, the school was “modelled on British public schools, where [Marson] was one of the few dark skinned girls” (Umoren 2018, 4). Notably, Marson’s education in such a colonial setting would later complicate her positionality concerning Jamaican struggles for independence. After moving to Kingston in 1922, Marson’s feminist advocacy flourished and she became “one of the founders and main editor and writer” of *The Cosmopolitan*, a political magazine, the first of its kind to be “started and edited by a Jamaican woman” (Tomlinson 2019, 8–9). Marson’s feminism was both progressive and conservative, agreeing with its historical time. Differences among women were

not a part of feminist debates in the way it would be understood in the 1980s, for example. Instead, the so-called woman's question chiefly centred middle/upper-class elite women who aspired to gain the same rights middle/upper-class *white* men held. Her conservatism did not stop Marson from arguing for suffrage or the combination of race and gender issues, for instance, by criticizing Miss Jamaica's organizers for repeatedly picking white girls to represent the country (Jarrett-Macauley 2010 [1998]; Tomlinson 2019).

Marson's move to London is a remarkable moment in her life, according to the archival research by Anna Snaith (2008), Alison Donnell (2011), and Imaobong Umoren (2018). Snaith writes that "it was in the heart of the empire that Marson's anti-imperialism, her feminism, and her West Indian identity deepened" (2008, 96). Many scholars (Donnell 2003; Jarrett-Macauley 2010 [1998]; Snaith 2008; Thomas 2018; Tomlinson 2019; Umoren 2018) argue that after migration, Marson's position changed quite dramatically. My research also indicates that she became more vocal and critical of colonialism and imperialism, as well as racial hierarchies particularly after her first year in London when Marson struggled to find a job. Biographer Delia Jarrett-Macauley writes that even though Marson was amply qualified she would eventually accept working as the unpaid secretary for Harold Moody's League of Coloured Peoples (LCP), an organization founded to help migrants settle in London. Discussing the topic of unemployment, Jarrett-Macauley notes that "like so many of the West Indian women migrants of the 1950s, Una found herself blocked at every turn" ([1998] 2010, 51). Marson is quoted as saying

one agent told me she did not register black women because they would have to work in offices with white women. Another told me [...] that though my references were excellent, firms did not want to employ a black stenographer.

(Marson quoted in Jarrett-Macauley 2010 [1998], 51)

Black women were rejected on the grounds of their race in places that hired white women while simultaneously being rejected on the grounds of their gender in places that hired black men.

Marson's position changed through her lived experiences as a migrant, a black woman writer, and a colonial subject whose presence embodied many of the characteristics that would structurally marginalize her as the quintessential other. For instance, in 1935, Marson became the secretary to Haile Selassie, emperor of Ethiopia (at the time Abyssinia), in Britain. She travelled with him to Geneva to support his appeal to the League of Nations (LoN) during Mussolini's fascist invasion of Ethiopia. Their mission would eventually fail which had a lasting impact on Marson. For instance, in 1937 when two of Ethiopia's ministers to the UK, Dr Charles Martin's children (Benyam and Yosef) were murdered, Marson dedicated a poem to them, titled "To Joe and Ben" (republished in Donnell [1937] 2011). This does not signal, however, that her beliefs remained the same throughout her life.

Marson's views of herself in the world and of the world in relation to her kept changing as she grew older after significant disillusionments with colonial and humanist values. Writing about Marson, Imaobong Umoren notes that

in her twenties and thirties, Marson had been a progressive, but as she aged, her politics changed and by the late 1950s, reactionary rhetoric replaced some of her left-leaning views. By the 1950s [...] Marson began to express more socially conservative views on women's roles and marriage that perhaps mirrored some of the personal challenges she faced in life.

(Umoren 2018, 7)

Considering such changes in Marson's position constitutes yet another reason for this chapter to focus only on her first sojourn to London, and not on the many other journeys and misadventures she lived later.

According to Anna Snaith, through LCP, Marson became "involved with leading black intellectuals [...] yet she is written out of the majority of histories of pan-Africanism" (Snaith 2008, 95). Snaith observes that Marson also became

involved with high-profile feminist organisations such as the *British Commonwealth League* and the *International Alliance for Women's Suffrage and Equal Citizenship*, speaking at their conferences [...] as a black feminist [whose] perspective was rare, if not unique, within these organisations.

(Snaith 2008, 95)

Still, according to Snaith, Marson's time in those organizations is not as prominently registered in the collective memory. Snaith posits that "Marson's almost total erasure from literary and general histories of the period belies her important role in several literary circles and political movements and ignores her complex writings about the experience of being black and female in London" (Snaith 2008, 95). A sentiment echoed by Alison Donnell who writes "the absence of Marson from most literary and cultural histories is lamentable [considering that she] merits serious attention as a political intellectual and as an imaginative writer" (Donnell 2003, 128). In this sense, prioritizing an analysis of Marson's life and work allows us to see that a longer history of racism, classism, and sexism in Europe can be traced through the lives of marginalized women of colour who were overlooked.

On humanity

In 1933, one year after she migrates, Marson publishes a poem that stands out as it offers critical insight into Western notions of humanity. According to Snaith, the poem "suggests that [Marson's] political position

was immediately radicalised by racial abuse” (Snaith 2008, 96). Through *The Keys*, the LCP’s newspaper, Marson published a poem titled ‘Nigger’ which poetically explores the anger that racism brings about as a dehumanizing process. It opens with “They called me ‘Nigger’/Those little white urchins./ They laughed and shouted/As I passed along the street, /They flung it at me:/‘Nigger! Nigger! Nigger!’” (Marson reprinted in Donnell 2011, 85). The poem continues with the speaker feeling humiliated by racist attacks which seems deeply at odds with the speaker’s Christian faith. Coming to understand the place she is put in, the speaker struggles to forgive the assailants that torment her, and this internal conflict comes forth in the couple last lines that read “God keep my soul from hating such mean souls, /God keep my soul from hating/ Those who preach the Christ/ And say with churlish smile/” “This place is not for ‘Nigger’/ God save their souls from this great sin/ Of hurting human hearts that live/ And think and feel in unison/ With all humanity” (Reprinted ed. Donnell 2011, 87; [Marson 1933, 10]).³ Marson’s poem opens the question of why the concept humanity structures how we think about ourselves as relational beings. To answer that, I will very briefly explain how colonial and imperial expansion processes are intimately related to the ontology of humanity and human in the West.

Decolonial theory becomes an important analytical tool in my concern to unpack what Western notions of humanity are and who is conceptualized as human. I am considering the “coloniality of power” and “coloniality of gender” as developed by Aníbal Quijano and Maria Lugones, respectively (Lugones 2008; Quijano 2000). The coloniality of power/gender, as I shall refer to it from now on, places colonialism as a pivotal problem in historically understanding hierarchies of power and how the human body becomes a site of difference that is discrete, catalogued (e.g. able-bodied, black, white, cis, young, indigenous, and old), and classified as either inferior or superior (Lugones 2008; Quijano 2000). As Walter D. Mignolo suggests in “Racism and Coloniality” (2019), it is through the processes of European expansion (colonialism and imperialism) that the ontological foundations for the definition of human are set. He writes that

[t]he logic of racial, sexual, and natural classification is the same. It presupposes a point of reference: the invention of the Human in relation to which lesser religious and ethnic human entities were identified and described. There were neither Human nor humans before the European Renaissance.

(2019, 461)

He goes on to argue that the more proximity one has to whiteness, maleness, heterosexual practices, and Christianity, the closer one may be to the Western description of Human(ity). Mignolo spells it with capital ‘H’ to indicate how this ontological construction centres itself as universal, whilst

still building its image against “others” or those who are “lesser-than” (2019, 462). It is not as though such ontological constructions are inconsequential, and Marson’s poem ‘Nigger’ ([1933] 2011) becomes a strategy of resistance to feel and write about the effect colonial structures have.

In this sense, it is important I add to this discussion the concept of “everyday racism” as developed from a psychoanalytical perspective by, Afro-Portuguese artist and writer, Grada Kilomba in *Plantation Memories* (2019). Kilomba describes “everyday racism” as a combination of “vocabulary, discourses, images, gestures, actions and gazes” that position the black subject as Other, as the unwelcomed body, “denied the right to exist as equal” (Kilomba 2019, 43–44). Marson’s poem, ‘Nigger’ ([1933] 2011), is a case-in-point example of how painful every-day racism is. It captures a moment in time to discuss how racist attacks dehumanize those at the receiving end. Marson’s decision to have the poem end with the speaker’s inner conflict of possibly forgiving the assailants is an interesting subversion of who is the most honourable and respectable person. The poem’s ending suggests that it is the person who suffers racism that sees their own assailants as sharing the into the concept of humanity, and therefore, being deserving of forgiveness. These themes (anger at racism, Christianity, humanity and dehumanization, conflict over the right thing to do) will reoccur in Marson’s writings as seen in *London Calling* ([1937] 2016).

Closely reading Una Marson’s play *London Calling* (2016 [1937]), I was impressed with how critical she is of the British civilizing mission and its claim to humanity. In one of the play’s most interesting scenes, Larkspur, one of the main characters, reads aloud a letter sent by a (now former) friend of the Burton family. The letter opens with,

Dear Lord Burton, I have long since felt that the aristocracy of this country was going to the dogs, but the sight of negroes as guests in your old and respected home convinces me that it *has* gone to the dogs.

(2016 [1937] 117, my emphasis)

The play is structured in three acts. Act one introduces the core characters: the siblings Rita and Sydney, Alton, and Prince Alota. They all meet in Rita’s flat where Alton realizes that Rita and Sydney are feeling “miserable” and frustrated due to the racism they face in Europe (2016 [1937], 78). Alton tries to cheer them up, but when that does not work, and Rita asks him instead “why don’t you find some cheerful friends?” his answer is “why don’t I pal up with these white students? [...] Why don’t we go out together? [...] Go on, ask a few more ridiculous questions” (2016 [1937], 78). This line indicates Alton’s knowledge of how he is positioned in the eyes of white Londoners. As a black man, Alton is underestimated: he cannot be humanized within a colonial matrix that understands him as less than human, and cannot simply become friends with white folk because that would demand from white Londoners that they confront their internalized racism. The suggestion that

he could possibly be granted that degree of humanity makes Rita's question sound "ridiculous" (2016 [1937], 78).

Rita, Alton, and Sydney, all from Novoka, often compare themselves to the British. In one scene, Rita and Alton discuss how Christianity is out of fashion, even though British people still "hand it out to the poor heathens to keep them content" (2016 [1937]), 75). In another, Alton says to Rita: "You have got to realize that this is London and not Novoka. We have come here to study – everything – but are we going to let that get us down? Not a bit" (2016 [1937]), 75). Each character has a different approach to the racism they endure, some try to assimilate and others to rebel, but Rita seems to be the one most upset about the reality they face. It is directly stated that her reason for saying that she wants to go back home is the racism she faces in the city, but before she can elaborate further on it, she receives a couple of letters. One of them is from the Burtons, a white wealthy British family that will be introduced later, inviting Rita and her brother to join them for a Christmas dinner in their estate. The dinner had been cancelled a few times before, and it is assumed that this has to do with the family's fear of receiving black guests. The other letter Rita receives invites her to join an event where colonial subjects are expected to do a native sketch and represent their cultures. Rita is reluctant at first, but eventually agrees with the rest to play a prank on the attendees, and instead of doing a native sketch about Novoka which "only has English customs," they agree to perform an exaggerated parody of racist stereotypes (2016 [1937], 85). Act one finishes with Rita by herself and longing for the fictional West Indian Island of Novoka: "Soft music and 'No place like home' comes over. She covers her face with her hand and sobs" (2016 [1937], 90).

Reviewing the play, Carolyn Cooper (2017) points to the fact that Marson's characters and their prank performance "extends beyond the International Social" when they agree to spend the weekend with the Burtons (Cooper 2017, 393). The Burtons attempt to receive their guests is anything but welcoming since they are too afraid for their reputation, and overall prove that they not only are ignorant about Britain's colonial history but also fantasize Rita and her friends as *backwards* people. Marson ingeniously begins act two/scene two by showing the Burton family at their manor before Rita and her friends arrive, which gives the Burtons the space to freely discuss their dehumanizing, racist, classist, and sexist views with one another. By performing that parody, Marson's characters make a satire of what Quijano (2000, 555) identifies as "the myth of the state of nature and the chain of the civilising process that culminates in European civilisation" where "some races – blacks, American Indians, or yellows – are closer to nature than whites." In the play, Marson's characters are called "uncivilized" by one of the members of the Burton family (2016 [1937], 102). As Quijano explains in "Coloniality of Power," the articulations of dualisms such as civilized/uncivilized serve as a core part of modernity and its rationality, Eurocentrism, along the "the naturalisation of the cultural differences between human groups by means of

their codification with the idea of race” (2000, 553). In that sense, by playing a prank on the Burtons who deem their guests as uncivilized, Marson’s characters make a parody of their expectations over them. It is the insertion of another performance in the play that subverts the Western idea of humanity as tied to the notions of civilization, progress, superiority, power, and whiteness. Rita and her friends trust that the Burtons do not know anything about them, not even being able to point their island on a map, because they see that for the Burtons their Humanity grants them the right to *not know* any better. The Burtons are so secure in the fact that those they entertain are colonial subjects, therefore “non-people,” that they expect to be entertained *by* Rita and her friends. By the last act, when the Burtons realize they fell for the prank Rita and others perform, they become upset as they realize they were the ones being played when they failed to notice any signs of humanity in those they consider as ‘others.’

Looking back to see forward

In “Killing Joy” (2010), Sara Ahmed writes “the word wretched also has a suggestive genealogy, coming from wretch, referring to a stranger, exile, or banished person” (2010, 573). Ahmed’s observation bridges some of Marson’s understanding of the difficulties of feeling as though one is a stranger to oneself and a stranger to one’s own (s)kin: Marson left Jamaica expecting to find some level of receptiveness amongst those that should (should they not?) have a set of similar cultural values due to colonization. Marson’s feeling of strangeness is a recurring theme in her creative work, as it is in black scholarship that describes the strangeness and uneasiness of being unfamiliar to oneself. As elaborated by Alison Donnell:

although her time spent in Britain had enabled Marson to develop her ideas on African unity and women’s rights, her work also discloses her difficulty and unease in challenging the authority of the metropole or European culture at close quarters. Indeed, her writings which reflect on her time spent in England offer us both a condemnation of racism and a testimony to its effects.

(Donnell 2003, 118)

In this sense, what grounds *London Calling* (2016 [1937]) as an interesting source into Western notions of humanity is precisely Marson’s conflicted consciousness. The play is simultaneously critical of Western notions of progress, modernity, and civilization while also holding onto the same values it aims to criticize.

By deploying the coloniality of power/gender to critically locate Marson’s life and work in space and time, I hoped to highlight how coloniality is intrinsically embedded in the Euro-American framework of what being *human* is. I contended that to critically read Marson’s life and writings, it

is necessary to also understand what she was writing against, that is the backdrop of her *being* (black woman, Jamaican, colonial subject) against that of her *not being* (white male, European, real citizen). Marson came to experience first-hand that being a colonial subject did not quite translate into being a subject. In other words, her very humanity was delegitimized in the mother country through the same colonial discourse that had conceived of humani(ty) in the first place. Alienated, Marson faced the consequences of such structural othering in her own flesh as she increasingly felt distant from the ideal metropolis her colonial education had presented her with. But, instead of completely letting go of that belief, Marson's disappointment with reality becomes a creative source for her writing. It was only by becoming the *wretched* in London that Marson's writings changed as she realized the lie she had been told: colonial peoples may see themselves as humans because they are part of the empire, but their proximity to it did not include them in the category of humanity posited by the British. It did not make them just *as human* as she thought it would. More importantly, the exercise of reading her work allows us to glimpse into how racism, sexism, and classism functioned in the past via concepts of human and humanity, which, in turn, allows us to consider the future of European colonization as similar issues insist to persist.

Primary Sources

Marson, Una, "Nigger." In *The Keys*, 1 Saturday 01 July 1933. London. 10–28.

Notes

- 1 Recent publications on black women who travelled to Europe in the 1930s include, but are not limited to, Gerald Horne's *Race Woman: The Lives of Shirley Graham Du Bois* (2000), T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting's *Negritude Women* (2002), *The Veiled Garvey: The Life and Times of Amy Jacques Garvey* (2002) by Ula Yvette Taylor, "Den Sorte: Nella Larsen and Denmark" by Martyn Bone (2004), and *Race Women Internationalists Activist-Intellectuals and Global Freedom Struggles* by Imaobong D. Umoren (2018).
- 2 Examples from the last decade include, but are not limited to, *Black Europe and the African Diaspora* (2009) edited by Darlene Clark Hine, Tricia Danielle Keaton and Stephen Small, *Black France: The History and Politics of Blackness* (2012) edited by Tricia Danielle Keaton, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Tyler Stovall, *Afro-Nordic Landscapes* (2014) edited by Michael McEachrane, Fatima El-Tayeb's *European Others* (2011), and *To Exist is to Resist: Black Feminism in Europe* edited by Akwugo Emejulu and Francesca Sobande (2019).
- 3 Originally published in July 1933 in *The Keys*, 8–9, in Alison Donnell's *Una Marson Selected Poems* (2011, 87).

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5 ‘It’s our bodies, we are the experts!’

Countering pathologisation,
gate-keeping and Danish
exceptionalism through
collective trans knowledges,
coalition-building and insistence

Nico Miskow Friborg

When talking about Denmark, it is often referred to as a liberal, open, tolerant and diverse country. And the new legislation on legal gender recognition would definitely seem like an improvement of trans people’s rights and a step in the right direction. However, this is far from the case. If you are a trans person, then you live in a different Denmark than what the media often describes.¹

Above (MONO lydkollektiv, 2015), the trans coalition *Til Kamp for Informeret Samtykke* [Fighting for the Right to Informed Consent] (TKIS), later named *Transpolitisk Forum* (TPF), analyses how a new treatment protocol for trans-specific healthcare (TSH) was implemented in the shadow of the highly praised self-declaration model for gender classification. The protocol intensified the state gatekeeping and monopolisation of TSH, and the pathologisation and medicalisation of transness that trans² activists had been resisting for decades. From 2014, one state-run clinic gained monopoly, and the psychiatric diagnosis ‘transsexualism’ was made a requirement to access both surgeries and hormones. This deterioration sparked instant mobilisation among trans activists who required the protocol repealed and proposed informed consent as an alternative model where, as noted by TPF, “the choice of hormone treatment is up to the individual person, and where the role of the healthcare system is solely advisory and informative” (MONO lydkollektiv, 2015). As TPF’s analysis demonstrates, this not only required coming up against medical guardianship and the state’s rigid regulation of transness but also entailed countering discourses that portray Denmark as an exceptionally progressive (Nebeling Petersen, 2016; Puar, 2007), “liberal, open, tolerant and diverse country” and a “trans paradise” (Raun, 2010).

In this chapter, I follow activist rehearsals of disruptions, trans knowledges and coalitions to repeal the protocol and organise around trans care. I explore which trans knowledges are created, complicated and centred?

And how do they shape the ways activists disrupt and counter medicalisation, pathologisation, state abandonment and Danish exceptionalism?

By invoking prison abolitionist and geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore's (2020) understanding that "abolition is presence, which means abolition is life in rehearsal", I aim to think gender self-determination as interlaced with other liberation and abolitionist struggles (Gossett, 2014; Stanley, 2015), and to centre transformative practices and critical imagination.

The chapter is structured in five parts. After reflecting on the methodology, I trace the historical continuity of the Danish medico-legal complex governing trans lives, and then follow its reform in 2011–2014. Next, I explore trans knowledges on and resistances to medicalisation, pathologisation and gatekeeping of TSH. I then unfold how trans activists keep the state accountable, resist symbolic political gestures, and counter Danish exceptionalism and trans liberalism (Raha, 2017). In the closing section, I consider the (im)possibilities of disinvesting in the 'smoothing over' of the trans medico-legal complex (Gleeson and O'Rourke, 2021, p. 33), and of rehearsing trans care and coalition-building.

A t4t methodology

The methodological framework of this chapter, and of my wider PhD project,³ is grounded in my commitments and accountability to the queer and trans coalitions from where and with whom I engage in this research. Through a trans for trans (t4t) methodology, I explore how we can cultivate research practices that emerge from and contribute to our ongoing collective struggles for trans liberation? I do so by employing collaborative approaches to research and ethnography (Jourian and Nicolazzo, 2017), autoethnography, as well as counter-archiving as a "means to investigate the racial and colonial logics that shape' which subjects, objects, conducts, events and histories are heavily inscribed and remembered, and which are 'forgotten, erased, or denied altogether'" (Haritaworn et al., 2018, p. 5). As I understand trans knowledge and trans DIY as a wide, rigorous repertoire of expertise knowledges and practices (Gill-Peterson, 2021; Pearce, 2018), I rehearse paying attention to and engaging the theorising of fellow trans activists through a 'trickle-up' approach (Nicolazzo, 2019; Spade, 2015) to knowledge-creation.

The materials I draw on are generated through (collaborative) memory work, co-facilitated workshops, oral history interviews and (counter-)archival research, such as zines, manifests, autobiographies and media entries, detailed notetaking at selected activist meetings and events and supplementary policy and law analysis.

By drawing on and stitching together trans knowledges circulated in trans coalitions as well as in/against the academy, my hope is to contribute to our collective imagining and organising around trans care. Such hopes are deeply shaped by my own desires for and struggles to access trans care and

trans-specific healthcare as a white, queer, nonbinary, mad, trans person, as well as by those of my trans kin and fellow organisers.

From the eugenicist castration law to the first national trans-specific healthcare protocol

The control of reproduction has long been central to the administration of trans lives and embodiments in Denmark. Historian and queer studies scholar Sølve Storm (Holm, 2017, pp. 185–186, 189) finds that since the 1930s, the idea that it was crucial to have “a clear-cut gendersex identity” gained importance in Denmark. Further, as eugenics⁴ became influential throughout Europe in the early 1900s, state programmes, laws and regulations were created “on the basis of societal welfare, including eugenic considerations (...) towards persons who are degeneratively determined” (cited in Holm, 2017, p. 203). One of these was the Danish castration law of 1929, which since 1935 has encompassed a section on people whose reproduction was considered a threat to the nation, and people whose “sex drive [...] causes [them] severe mental suffering or social deterioration”, including ‘homosexuals’, ‘transvestites’, and gender ‘deviants’” (Holm, 2017, pp. 203–205, 320; Honkasalo, 2020a). Since Christine Jorgensen’s surgeries in Denmark in the early 1950s, the law has also regulated access to “sex change” which demanded castration. Furthermore, the law required castration to change name, legal gender status, and personal ID number, which indicates legal gender status (Holm, 2017, p. 37).

Applications to access TSH, change name, legal gender status and permission to wear clothes not considered to be of your gender were sent to the Ministry of Justice who requested case statements from *Retslægerådet* [the Medico-Legal Council]. Since the 1930s, the Medico-Legal Council emphasised self-identification alongside assessing a person’s ability to ‘pass as a man or a woman’. This involved analysis of autobiographical accounts and later an evaluation procedure comprising systematic interviews, questionnaires, observations and interviews with relatives (Holm, 2017, pp. 185–186, 189–191). From 1986, *Sexologisk Klinik* [the Sexological Clinic] (SK) at Copenhagen University Hospital undertook these assessments, which relied on a standardised evaluation procedure, on the indication of ‘suffering of the soul’, and on the early psychiatric diagnoses ‘genuine transvestism’ and ‘transsexualism’ (Holm, 2017, pp. 202, 361; Sexologisk Klinik, 1999).

Following a public reform in 2005, the 1929/1935 castration law was included in §115 of the Danish Health Care Act. Shortly after, *Sundhedsstyrelsen* [the Danish Health Authority] (DHA) (2006), under the Ministry of Health, expanded §115 by narrating the first national, treatment protocol on “castration for the purpose of gender reassignment”. The protocol applied to all doctors working within the Danish healthcare system,⁵ and has clear links to the 1929/1935 castration law, the standardised assessment scheme,

and to SK's internal protocol from 1999 both in language, requirements and procedures. Furthermore, it links the term 'suffering of the soul' to the WHO's ICD-10 psychiatric diagnosis 'F64.0 Transsexualism'. Requirements included an application to the DHA, undergoing two years of clinical observations and hormone treatment, interviews with relatives, mental and physical exams and a clinical assessment of the necessity of surgery, and of whether one "will be able to cope" (Sundhedsstyrelsen, 2006). Moreover, it maintained castration as compulsory to change legal gender status, which additionally required divorce (Raun, 2010).

This shows that the national treatment protocol reinforced the 1929/1935 castration law, formalised and bureaucratised the assessment scheme, and centralised trans-specific healthcare to SK. When tracing the changes in the diagnosis codes from present-day regulations and assessment practices back to the castration law of 1929, the ongoing configuration of transness as 'degenerate', 'asocial', pathological and fixable (Pearce, 2018), and thus the simultaneous configuration of cis embodiment as 'normal', 'healthy' and stable, becomes noticeable. Trans activist(s and) scholars have demonstrated how, in the Nordics and beyond, this has ripple effects beyond TSH. As access to TSH depends on being read as a legible, deserving trans subject within white supremacist, colonial, capitalist, ableist, cisheteropatriarchal systems of knowledge, the treatment protocols and assessments reinforce normativity, and produce notions of 'real' trans subjects to be 'fixed' through the TSH process, which then disappears trans/ness either by (attempts at) assimilation or by denying access to care (Holm, 2017; Honkasalo, 2020a, 2020b; Linander et al., 2019; Nord, 2019; Pearce, 2018). Further, these categorisations are fundamental for state recognition and participation in a variety of social, political and institutional contexts (Alm, 2021). Scholars have noted how the structural, violent effects of these administrative systems are covered up by the presumption that gender classification is a 'neutral' feature of administrative systems (Spade, 2015), hereby naturalising it as a tool for governance (Odland, 2020). As trans studies and law scholar Dean Spade (2015) notes, these neutral appearing administrative systems are carefully crafted to distribute life chances through producing security and vulnerability, and hereby sorting the population into those whose lives are cultivated and those who are abandoned, imprisoned and marked for death.

Due to the rigid, bureaucratic, gatekept TSH regime and administrative systems, activists and scholars have explored the numerous ways that people with trans experiences rely on analysing, negotiating, resisting and hacking these systems (Holm, 2017; Honkasalo, 2020b; Linander et al., 2019; Nord, 2019), as well as on finding alternative routes to TSH (Fondén, 2020; Gill-Peterson, 2021). This intimate labour hinges on the collective creation and circulation of trans knowledges and the organisation of trans care webs (Gill-Peterson, 2021; Malatino, 2020; Pearce, 2018), which, as I unfold further in this chapter, in turn, shape the collective organising around trans health and care.

‘A dirty political trick’

While the 2006 protocol formally only regulated access to castration, other medical interventions were informally regulated by SK’s monopoly. For decades, trans people and activists have described the clinic’s long and slow⁶ process of psychiatric assessments as mistrustful, non-affirming, degrading, humiliating, dehumanising and cisheteronormative (Amnesty International, 2016; Pedersen-Nielsen and Magnild, 2014; Tams, 2016a). Before 2011, TSH was also provided by a few private hospitals, independent endocrinologists and gynaecologists. This however changed when the top surgery of a young trans man, Caspian, became publicly known in 2011 and led to a media frenzy (Raun, 2016). Shortly after, the DHA released a warning to all doctors in Denmark, stating that TSH is a highly specialised area pertaining only to SK, and that a more extensive, national treatment protocol would be created (Raun, 2016). As trans and media scholar Tobias Raun (2016) has unfolded more in depth, the news sparked immediate organising in trans coalitions.

While the DHA drafted the new protocol, the Ministry of Justice was revising the law on gender reclassification (Amnesty International, 2014, p. 39). At the time, trans activists had been fighting for years, nationally and internationally, to end coerced sterilisation of trans people *and* to improve TSH. This included international depathologisation movements such as ‘Stop Trans Pathologization!’ (Millet, 2020, p. 41; Pearce, 2018, pp. 185–187), and campaigns through Transgender Europe (TGEU). Locally, the Guatemalan trans woman, activist and writer Fernanda Milán’s⁷ organising to obtain refugee status based on persecution due to her trans status and activism changed Danish and international asylum policies and had ripple effects on media coverage and parliamentarian discussions on gender reclassification. In this context, local trans activists convinced Amnesty International to include Denmark in their report on Legal Gender Recognition (LGR) in the EU (Amnesty International, 2014, p. 39; Raun, 2016, p. 94). The Amnesty report voiced a serious critique of the Danish state and attracted massive media coverage which impacted legislative initiatives (Raun, 2016, p. 94). Shortly after, coerced sterilisation of trans people was ended and a self-declaration model for gender reclassification was passed. This was seen by many trans coalitions as a huge improvement, and Denmark was celebrated internationally (Nord, 2019). However, the law is conditioned as it includes a compulsory six-month reflection period, excludes people under the age of 18, provides only binary gender options and is unattainable to people who are undocumented or incarcerated in asylum camps.

That same month, the DHA published a draft of the new treatment protocol. The requirements included making TSH a ‘highly specialised area’ operated by a multidisciplinary team (MDT) of doctors “with special knowledge of transsexuals” (Sundhedsstyrelsen, 2014, p. 2). Furthermore, the WHO ICD-10 psychiatric diagnosis ‘F64.0 Transsexualism’ was made a requirement also to access hormones. These demands formalised SK’s

monopoly and caused the few hormone-prescribing endocrinologists and gynaecologists to stop treatment immediately (Amnesty International, 2016; Raun, 2016, pp. 94–95). Moreover, it criminalised the acquisition of hormones, especially testosterone, outside of this rigid scheme.

Trans activists instantly contested the simultaneous moves of ending coerced sterilisation while severely deteriorating TSH (Pedersen-Nielsen and Magnild, 2014; Raun, 2016). Elias from TPF understood this simultaneity as an intentional “dirty political trick”. Amnesty similarly noted: “[It is as if] the [DHA] and [SK] have purposefully sought to repeal the effects of the new rules on the change of legal gender” (Amnesty International, 2015). Thus, while the state’s regulation of trans lives and embodiments was lowered in one administrative area, it was heightened in another.

In the following section, I follow how trans coalitions contest these ‘dirty political tricks’, and explore which trans knowledges on pathologisation, gatekeeping and transness shape the organising.

Trans knowledges on and resistance to pathologisation and gatekeeping

The most immediate effect of the treatment protocol draft was the instantaneous stop to accessing hormones outside of SK. Elias recollects how a trans assembly was organised:

personally, I couldn’t obtain access to the treatment I needed. ... There was a big meeting for trans people ... where we talked about ‘what the fuck are we going to do?’ ... I was completely worn down. ... So, I think I went there because I needed someone to tell me what to do. Or, like, what are we going do as a community? And what do I need to know?

Many meeting participants had lost access to hormones while others had generally had enough. As Elias had hoped, trans knowledges on the medico-legal complex were shared throughout the meeting, but he also recalls internal disagreements on modes of organising and no consensus on ‘what to do’. Some were too exhausted, some felt hopeless, many were afraid that drawing attention to the issue would worsen the situation and some were not particularly critical of SK’s monopoly. Elias remembers:

we sort of agree to start some kind of campaign. And raise awareness that this is happening. ... I remember this deep sense of no one is going to do anything if we don’t do it. And I remember deeply feeling, I can’t afford not to do anything.

Following this collective analysis of the failures of the state and the call to action, Elias and his friend, Axel, agree to be ‘spokes persons’ for what became TKIS/TPF, and from the kitchen table they began organising:

we started writing something without knowing how it will end up, or which platform we are writing it for, or even what it is that we want! And then I started really dissecting the treatment protocol in great detail and looking into the Caspian case to try to understand how it is, that it has come to this.

As they analyse the treatment protocol's genealogy, compile trans knowledges and start building coalitions with accomplices, they frequently "check in" with other trans activists. Elias notes how this necessitated critically engaging trans knowledges and requirements of fellow activists, as some urged to "not demand too much", to prioritise "only trans men and women", and to "not mention the word 'queer'". I suggest that we can interpret the moves of some activists to erase queerness and gender nonconformity and to centre (white) binary trans men and women in relation to respectability politics and thus as attempts to make trans experiences and struggles more palatable and respectable, and thereby more legible to politicians. In this light, they are also moving towards assimilation into (white) cisheteronormativity. Such universalising uses of 'trans' and 'community' tend to erase internal inequalities and privilege "hegemonic categories of practice" (Edelman, 2021, p. 12).

TPF's complication of trans knowledges, their refusal to universalise and simplify and their insistence on queer informed trans organising offers a break from narrow trans organising. As trans knowledges form the basis of trans political demands (Pearce, 2018), critical reflections on which knowledges and needs are centred in the organising are vital to shaping trans coalitions and interventions that meet the needs of those most directly impacted by anti-trans structures and related oppressions. In my forthcoming dissertation (Miskow Friborg, forthcoming), I analyse how much of the trans-specific and trans for trans organising in Denmark until the 2010s was structured by Nordic coloniality, whiteness and narrowly defined trans struggles. This affects who can form (part of) trans coalitions and knowledge-creation. In her analysis of trans organising in the early 2010s, Fernanda Milán notes that as a trans woman of colour, her knowledges and skills were not taken into consideration: "everybody thought that they were saving me! You know? Ooh, this poor Guatemalan girl who knows nothing". This experience is echoed by trans activist Lizethe who finds that t4t organising at the time "did not offer a space for trans women with migrant experiences". Therefore, while TPF's careful collection and complication of trans knowledges is crucial, it is evidently also shaped by the structuring of trans coalitions at the time.

TPF also publicly circulated and 'repeated' collective trans knowledges (Pearce, 2018) by writing articles on alternative media platforms, initiating a petition, and organising marches demanding self-determination and "the right to decide over our own bodies" (Pedersen-Nielsen and Magnild, 2014). Other trans activists and organisations, such as LGBT Danmark,⁸ wrote

public statements, letters to the Minister of Health and sent stakeholder consultation reports on the protocol draft requiring access to TSH based on informed consent (Eltard-Sørensen and Knold, 2014). In doing so, activists insisted on holding the state, and its various actors, accountable for its violence against and abandonment of trans people, highlighting how these structures impact trans survival. Some activists publicly shared their medical journals relating how SK had asked them: “did your mother take any medications during pregnancy?”, “what were your preferred toys at age 4–6?”, “have you ever harmed someone?”, “how old were you when you started masturbating?”, and specifically for transfeminine people and trans women: “do you use your genitals actively during sexual contact?” (Eltard-Sørensen and Knold, 2014; #Sundhedsforstyrrelsen, 2014). With these testimonies, activists (#Sundhedsforstyrrelsen, 2014) disrupted the “ultimate power” held by the DHA and SK by exposing their “state-sanctioned barbaric” treatment of trans people:

[they] reference the expert-autocracy, thereby making it easy to hide what is actually going on at SK, and what transgender people here are exposed to. In this way, a politicisation of the topic is neatly circumvented, and the status quo can, by and large, continue.

Beyond politicising and disrupting the power relations in the system, activists also insisted that trans knowledge is expertise, and referenced more acknowledged trans knowledges such as those circulated by TGEU and the international Standards of Care of the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH). Queer activist, trans scholar and sociologist Ruth Pearce (2018, p. 188) similarly finds that trans activists in the UK succeeded in slightly improving treatment protocols through repeating ‘authoritative’ trans knowledges.

A communique written by TPF (Pedersen-Nielsen and Magnild, 2014) rehearses this in several ways:

As a trans person, you must undergo a comprehensive and lengthy diagnosing process with the purpose of assessing whether you are transgender in their eyes and thus entitled to treatment. But we do not believe that SK (or any other institution) should decide over our bodies – we believe that we should decide over our bodies. We are the experts, and we decide.

Their critique repeats trans knowledges and highlights how access to TSH relies on the ability to conform to medicalised notions of ‘real trans’, thus shedding light on the epistemic violence in the treatment regime where clinicians decide ‘whether you are trans’. Instead, TPF insists that trans people are the experts on transness and on our own bodies. Further, TPF establishes lines to (trans)feminist and reproductive justice struggles by repeating

‘my body, my choice’, and to AIDS activism which also relies on critiques of medical paternalism, on actively shifting the positioning from ‘disease victims’ to ‘activist experts’ (Epstein 1996, p. 8; see also Pearce 2018, p. 162), and on coming together collectively through anger (Gould, 2009).

In a direct action outside SK in 2019, the trans coalition *Trans People Against Pathologization* (TPAP) (2019) protested the clinic’s “bioessentialist view through the binary constructs of sex and gender, anchored in a colonial and eurocentric worldview” and stated: “You’ve been gatekeeping the treatment you should provide to many trans/non-binary and other gender minority groups because they don’t fit your narrow perceptions of gender”. TPAP’s analysis thus links the pathologisation and medicalisation of transness to the colonial/modern gender system (Lugones, 2007) which introduced and forcibly assimilates colonised peoples into a hierarchised gender system that simultaneously constitutes racialised-gendersexed embodiments as inferior and as a constitutive outside to the white, bourgeois categories of ‘man’ and ‘woman’, while violently making extinct other practices. Trans, decolonial, queer, multi-cross disciplinary artist, activist and writer Sall Lam Toro shared a similar analysis in a trans activist histories workshop I co-organised in 2019:

the government is trying to exclude for instance queer, like the queer identity, out of this LGBTI. Also, because all these other identities, within the government, seem to be very [fitting] into the binary, into the normative. So, in the sense that you have these very rigid ways of being trans. You’re either trans-masculine or trans-feminine. So, you’re not just like trans as in, you know, this process of several transitions that maybe never ends. It has to have this arrival point of ‘you’re trans-feminine, and that’s all you can be, and you cannot leave this identity or this format’. ... the way that the government is trying to construct these identities is very like rigid and therefore I use the word domestication. And then it’s also excluding People of Colour.

Sall’s analysis of the government’s LGBTI Action Plan (Regeringen, 2018) highlights how gender is configured as stable and fixed throughout life, and how transness is ‘domesticated’ and ‘fitted’ into ‘the binary and normative’ through co-optation into violent administrative systems. This practice is discernible in the current treatment protocol (DHA, 2018, pp. 16, 13), where the assessment entails describing the person’s gender identity, “the duration and nature of the gender dysphoria”, and further cautions:

If the individual has just recently begun exploring their gender identity or if the gender discomfort has just surfaced, appears periodically ... special care should be taken and time for reflection should be recommended.

In the protocol gender and transness are treated as detectable and stable throughout life. Further, it relies on a medical model of 'transsexualism', where narratives such as 'born in the wrong body' and 'having always known' are central to accessing TSH, and where questioning, 'periodic' experiences, 'processual' gender or 'several transitions' are not recognised as 'real trans'.

In the workshop, Fernanda Milán added to Sall's analysis by considering how narrow, medicalised models of transness leak into and are circulated through big, mainstream LGB(T), organisations:

I keep on seeing the LGB“T” organisations ... reproducing this ... and they keep on defining us. You know, like: 'if you are not binary, you can fuck off, you are ruining our fight'. ... they don't know who we are as a community. They don't know me as a woman because I don't want affirming surgeries for example, so I'm weird. And I'm binary as fuck! ... [it is also] the idea that trans is a white thing.

Fernanda's analysis demonstrates how not only the state but also LGB(T) organisations co-opt trans/ness and configure and reinforce it as medicalised, colonial, white and binary. Further, TPAP's, Fernanda's and Sall's analyses demonstrate that the rendering of white, (middleclass), binary, (heterosexual) trans subjects as 'real', legible and deserving of care depends on rendering Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC), gender non-conforming, queer and nonbinary people illegible. Notably, several activists who resist(ed) 'queer' and 'nonbinary' and omitted critiques of binary gender and trans configurations in stakeholder consultation reports (e.g., LGBT Danmark, 2014, 2017) were related to the mainstream LGB(T) organisations.

Becoming a legible, deserving trans subject within medicalised, pathologised models of trans/ness further relies on narrating suffering, self-hatred and, particularly, body-hatred (Holm, 2017; Linander et al., 2019). Further, in medicalised understandings of trans/ness, gender is perceived as individual and located in the body, specifically the genitals. This was scrutinised by various trans coalitions, such as Rådgivning for transpersoner⁹ [Counselling for trans people] (RFT) (Vinther and Miskow Friborg, 2017) and TPAP (2019) who demanded "that our relationship to our body not be used as the framework to verify whether we should be given access to trans-specific healthcare". Similarly, at the 'Trans people out of the psychiatric system!' protest in 2017, the performer, writer, trans activist and Black feminist Moeisha Ali Aden stated the need to dismantle 'born in the wrong body' narratives: "No matter what you are going through and how long your journey is, then you are not born in the wrong body, and you are not sick. What is sick is what meets you in the healthcare system" (cited in Kjølner, 2017). To access TSH, suffering and pathology, however, must not be excessive, as this can be considered a 'contraindication'. In all treatment protocols, assessments

of (undefined) somatic and psychiatric conditions which “contraindicate treatment” are required (DHA, 2018). Following trans knowledges shared across trans coalitions, examples of how practitioners deny access to TSH based on ‘contraindications’ include homelessness, poverty, intersex conditions, consuming drugs, smoking, a variety of psychiatric diagnoses and/or to be fat. In their/our consultation reports, RFT (Vinther and Miskow Friborg, 2017, p. 22) and TPF (2017, pp. 2–3) highlighted how perceiving psychiatric diagnoses as ‘contraindications’ demonstrates the continued configuration of transness as pathological, and a lack of understanding of how anti-trans structures and unattainable access to TSH cause severe mental health problems for trans people. Further, it reflects an ableist, paternalist, infantilising and custodial configuration of mad and neurodivergent people as unable to know ourselves and make decisions about our own lives.

TPF (MONO lydkollektiv, 2015) reflected on the difficulties of coming up against these established cisnormative knowledges, and the state’s medicalisation and pathologisation of transness:

Even after several political parties criticised the draft and ... pointed out that it does not live up to international standards for the treatment of trans people, [DHA and the Minister] chose to ignore the criticism and continue to defend the draft.

Niels, a trans man and activist who was part of Amnesty’s campaign #SickSystem, shares a similar analysis of medical epistemes and the ‘professional guardianship’ of ‘healthcare professionals’:

If you work with the parliament, you can influence the process and get some things pushed. So, it is easier with LGR because it’s legislative. ... But you can’t say anything to the DHA because they always wrap themselves in it being a ‘professional assessment’. And they talk to SK.

The activist’s analyses demonstrate how cisnormative knowledges are positioned “as the appropriate basis for knowledge about trans lives, thereby effectively objectifying and silencing trans voices” (Pearce 2018, p. 33), and how, qua Storm’s research (Holm, 2017, pp. 1,865–1,866), after 100 years, doctors continue to be positioned as experts on transness. Similarly, legal and social justice scholar Chris Dietz (2020) finds that the civil servants’ understanding of separation of jurisdictions and their positioning of doctors at the DHA as “experts” further reinforced the medical episteme and limited the political influence on the 2014 protocol.

Countering symbolic political gestures, Danish exceptionalism and trans liberalism

Despite activist interventions, the TSH protocol was implemented in December 2014. Mobilisations to repeal it continued intensely for three

years, and included letter-writing, petitions, speeches and disruptions at bigger LGBTIAQ+ events, meetings with politicians and trans coalition-building (Pedersen-Nielsen and Magnild, 2015; Tams, 2015). One coalition was built from Amnesty's LGR campaign, as Amnesty was pressured by activists to not replicate the state's dirty trick and abandon struggles for (trans-specific) healthcare (Amnesty International, 2016, p. 10). In 2016, they published a briefing with trans people's testimonies on the (sick) healthcare system and initiated the campaign #SygtSystem [#SickSystem] involving trans people. Elias remembers telling Amnesty's programme director on gender, that TPF "wanted to participate as experts, not as unicorns, not with personal stories", and that TPF "educated the whole of Amnesty on how to deal with trans people". In this labour, activists constantly came up against, challenged and assisted Amnesty, the media and politicians in unlearning narrow, cisheteronormative knowledges by continuing to repeat and insist on trans knowledges. Elias reflects on the meetings with politicians:

First you had to explain them what a trans person is. Then you had to explain the discrimination we experience, and only then can you start to explain what's wrong with the protocol and the diagnosis, and why we want informed consent. It's an almost impossible task.

Elias' analysis demonstrates the narrow space for understanding and speaking on trans issues in a Danish context. He relates how this required reflections on who, when and how to speak, and notes that TPF was: "driven by anger and less focused on being completely truthful ... It mattered less if the maximum someone had been waiting for treatment was seven years or ten years. What mattered was, that this was fucking unjust!" This contrasts the approach of trans woman and activist Tina Thranesen, organiser of the trans archive *Vidensbanken for konsidentitet* [The knowledge bank on gender identity] and formerly with LGBT Danmark, who finds that "proper language, precision and persistence" is key when writing letters and statements. In an oral history interview, she shared an analysis of how this included omitting 'queer' and 'nonbinary':

There might very well be something generational there. I am very particular about and investigate a lot on what is factual and correct. I am less interested in what a relatively small number of people want. ... If someone wants to say 'I'm nonbinary' ... well, that does no harm. But shut up already, don't go on and on about it, and especially not to the authorities because it only makes it more difficult to improve the conditions.

Further, Tina noted that building coalitions requires too many compromises, which is unnecessary for her and fellow activists who: "have the legal expertise ... and as individuals, we have so many connections and are so well-respected among the civil servants, Ministers and in the parliament". In this

approach, improving the conditions of trans people does not encompass *all* trans people. On the contrary, it seems to involve making trans(ness) respectable and trans (struggles) intelligible within white cisheteronormative knowledge regimes by silencing and erasing nonconforming trans people. I think of this approach in line with how trans, queer, Marxist scholar Nat Raha (2017, pp. 633, 640) formulates ‘trans liberalism’ as a liberal trans politics which “harmonizes with global capitalist restructuring”, reaffirms “the stratification of livable trans and gender nonconforming lives along the lines of race, class, gender, dis/ability, nationality and migration status” and “is based on the reform of and assimilation into the structures of neoliberal capitalist society”. To Tina and fellow activists, to whom state recognition, protection and influence is within reach, removing a few obstacles by slightly reforming the system seems enough to ‘improve the conditions’. Such an approach divides trans politics and coalitions, and risks to reaffirm gendered and racialised maldistribution of life chances and lead to conditioned rights and benefits only for those who can be read as legible and deserving at the expense of nonconforming and disenfranchised trans people.

In an oral history interview, Niels retrospectively reflects on the (im)possibilities of nuanced analyses when meeting with politicians. Due to the power imbalance and cisheteronormativity, he notes, there is a constant fear that “no one gets anything”, which prompts activists to go for what is within reach. Niels finds that this “favor[s] those who are already privileged”, and inevitably leaves some people behind. In this context, Niels conveys an intention to: “not turn our backs, we promise to come back”. The danger with such intentions is, of course, that many continue to wait. As the above analysis demonstrated, when tempted to ‘go for what is within reach,’ we must ask: what is within reach *to whom*? Further, unwillingness to take risks must be contextualised by considering who has a lot to lose in terms of possibilities and life chances, and who has the most to gain? So, how can we build trans coalitions that refuse “dividing trans politics along lines of access and capacity to benefit from reforms” (Spade, 2015, pp. 88, 93) and leave behind disenfranchised trans people? In the subsequent sections, I follow how trans activists refuse reforms, concessions, compromise and symbolic changes and demand transformative changes.

From different coalitions, trans activists rehearsed disruptions and trans knowledges to repeal the new treatment protocol. Amnesty’s (2016) briefing amplified and documented trans knowledges on the medicalisation and pathologisation of transness in Denmark, and the dehumanising, traumatising, paternalist, lengthy treatment at SK in a recognisably authoritative manner. The briefing included demands such as removing the diagnosis and reinstating the pre-2012 access to hormones (Amnesty, 2016, pp. 112–113). Elias remembers an internal discussion on having the diagnosis as the goal:

we kept saying, ‘that’s not how we should talk about it at all.’ ... And [the program director] understood that, but we were not allowed, because

she was like, 'well, we have to have [an understandable purpose]' and ... 'we have to work within that framework'.

Elias' analysis highlights how moves towards transformation through demedicalisation, depathologisation and an informed consent model were side-lined by a pressure to be legible within the frameworks of parliamentary democracy and cisheteronormative knowledge systems. Further, it reflects the lack of understanding of the material conditions and scope of gender injustices and anti-trans structures in white, cis-led organisations such as Amnesty that moved towards quick, detectable fixes. Trans activists thus constantly had to contest simplification of trans struggles and insist on shaping political demands from nuanced, collective trans knowledges. Laura Tams (2016a), a trans woman and activist who runs the transfeminist site killjoy.dk, shared a similar analysis when the proposal to remove the diagnosis resurfaced in parliament shortly after:

I know that it is tempting for the major NGOs that have invested in this project to create a focused strategy to change the classification system; it is so easily measurable and therefore easy to brag about afterwards. ... We are facing a huge opportunity for progress. Let's not accept a symbolic political gesture.

Similarly, TPF (2016a) kept contesting these symbolic political gestures:

As long as the discussion of the diagnosis is not followed by direct action on the matter of access to healthcare, this is nothing but a false and misguided celebration of a nation and state politics that, at its best, is symbolic. We as transgender activists are worried. We have seen this before. And we know that when the camera lights has been turned off, the same politicians right now harvesting the fruits of being seen as progressive will continue to view transgender people as we have been for centuries: as someone living a life not worth of protection and recognition. We encourage you to hold your horses before taking part of this celebration and instead continue to demand actual rights instead of symbolic acts.

Both Laura and TPF here refuse giving into concessions and symbolic changes, and instead insist on a deeper analysis and transformative change.

Critiques were also directed at LGBT Danmark for their failure to support trans coalitions pushing for informed consent. When it became known that they had abandoned the demand to remove TSH completely from the psychiatry in favour of co-operating with SK to smooth over transition processes, many activists (Tams, 2016c; TPF, 2016b) highlighted that it undermined agreements among trans coalitions, and that it would enable the clinic to: "claim that they have the support of the trans community"

(Jansen, 2016). Niels (Jansen, 2016) and other activists found the possibilities of a slight improvement of the clinic's approach to be far from the goal:

As long as it is not us who make decisions about who we are and what we want to do with our bodies, then the system is discriminating. ... It's time we put our heels in, stand together, stand up and finally get rid of the system.

Niels notes that there was an agreement among trans coalitions in #SickSystem to "go hard against the DHA", contrary to LGBT Danmark who, in Niels' words: "has a very clear idea about the art of compromise. It's about achieving small results, it's about the persistent work, the long haul ... no big waves, no big changes". LGBT Danmark was called out again when publicly praising the Minister for Health and Elderly Affairs for announcing that she was working to remove the 'transsexualism' diagnosis from the Danish diagnosis system ahead of the WHO (Tams, 2016b). According to both Niels and Laura, this praise meant that a remark on how "transgender people in Denmark should not have to undergo a degrading psychiatric assessment" (Tams, 2016d) was never added to the law proposal. Laura criticised these attempts to "monopolise the political influence of transgender people" (Tams, 2016d) and encouraged trans people to self-organise and break with the guardianship of the clinic as well as the cis-led organisations.

The critiques of LGBT Danmark and the pushes to 'not accept a symbolic political gesture' demonstrate how some trans activists refuse co-optation and compromise. Trans and intersex historian Erika Alm (2021, p. 226) has understood similar efforts by Swedish trans activists as a repoliticisation of the role of the state by insisting on state governance being political and by making the violence of administrative systems noticeable. Alm (2021) notes that as the scope of Scandinavian states are both wide and deep, trans activists interact with the state and hold it accountable in their/our struggles for liberation, redistribution, transformation and improved life chances. Thinking in binary lines of trans activists who seek recognition within and cooperate with the state and those who seek transformation and abandon the state altogether might then be less generative than paying attention to *how* activists interact with the state.

Beyond refusing concessions, TPF, TransAktion and activists from #SickSystem kept insisting on nuances and on broadening the scope to ensure that TSH continued to be covered through the public healthcare system, by destigmatising mental health issues and by fighting for an informed consent model and an end to the monopoly (Magnild et al., 2016; Robotham, 2016; Tams, 2016a). Finally, by the end of June 2016, the minister demanded that the DHA created a new protocol. In July, a draft was published which presented no changes to the psychiatric diagnosing process, gatekeeping or monopoly. After pressure from activists, a stakeholder consultation process was initiated, where a variety of trans coalitions intervened. On January 1, 2017, the 'F64.0 transsexualism' diagnosis was removed from the Danish

Healthcare Classification System and a new diagnosis named 'DZ768E1 contact because of transgeneriness' was created (DHA, 2018). The change was presented globally as a major step towards depathologisation, and Denmark was framed as an 'exceptional' and 'progressive' country pushing LGBT rights forward. Captured in headlines such as "Where transgender is no longer a diagnosis" (Russo, 2017), and in the Minister for Health's presentation of the news: "Denmark ... now moves forward alone in the case – and we can certainly be proud of that" (Kristensen, 2016).

As TPF's (2016a) critical analysis of how politicians 'harvest the fruits' of trans activist labour demonstrated, this hypocrisy did not go unnoticed. Activists disrupted the portrayal of Denmark as a 'first-mover country' and continued holding the state accountable arguing that the 2016 protocol had not brought real change and that the name-change of the diagnosis was superficial and symbolic (Amnesty et al., 2017; Pedersen-Nielsen et al., 2017; Tams, 2017). TPF (Pedersen-Nielsen et al., 2017) intervened that the symbolic changes "do not shift the power balance" and that "we are still forced to go through a degrading and incapacitating assessment". Pushing to remove psychiatric assessments, Laura argued that maintaining a trans-specific diagnosis leads to homogenisation of "people's bodies according to a cisgender ideal" because "all transgender people are expected to want the same treatment: Genital surgery" (Tams, 2016d). Instead, Laura and other activists suggested using already-existing diagnoses frequently used for cis people with the same medical needs, such as Ovarian Age-neiss (DQ500) (LGBT Danmark, 2011; Tams, 2016a). By refusing to eradicate trans-specific diagnoses, the state can continue to deny access to these medical interventions specifically to trans people, hereby administering and distributing life chances. Further, this administrative violence allows the state to mark and manage trans populations and 'fix' transness through assimilation into cis ideals.

The calls among trans coalitions to 'put our heels in' and 'get rid of the system' are examples of how trans activists refuse symbolic political gestures masked as depathologisation and invitations to merely smooth over transition processes and instead insist on transformative change, redistribution and improvement of life chances. Further, the linking of these symbolic political gestures to the portrayal of Denmark as 'a liberal, open, tolerant' and progressive country does the analytical work of considering how trans rights are increasingly incorporated into discourses on Danish exceptionalism, homonationalism and pinkwashing, while the refusals offer glimpses of trans liberation horizons beyond these conditioned and violent frameworks.

Complicating collective trans knowledges, imagining trans care and building coalitions

After months of pressure, in early 2017, the Minister for Health promised to break the monopoly of SK and demanded the DHA to change the treatment protocol. In a large protest outside parliament and in

stakeholder-consultation reports, trans coalitions and activists intervened. Some of the common demands across trans coalitions were to end the requirement of the MDT and to open access to TSH via individually practising doctors (LGBT Danmark, 2017; TPF, 2017; Transkønnedes Interesseorganisation, 2017; Vinther and Miskow Friborg, 2017). Few trans coalitions called for completely abolishing psychiatric assessments, an end to binary and cisheteronormative approaches, a stop to using the anti-fat BMI to block access, pushed for securing access for nonbinary people and for an informed consent model (e.g., Tams, 2017; TPF, 2017; Transkønnedes Interesseorganisation, 2017; Vinther and Miskow Friborg, 2017).

The final treatment protocol was modified incorporating some of the inputs from the consultation reports and has been in place since late 2017. Trans activists however had different experiences of the success of this process. While Tina experienced being listened to by the authorities and found that she could “see many of our recommendations and language directly implemented”, Ro Robotham (Larsen, 2017) from TPF reflected: “[TSH] has been so severe ... we had 13 key points that we wanted to change. Most have not been considered by the DHA in the new treatment protocol”. That the activists working with and from LGBT Danmark experienced being listened to while trans-led coalitions with demands for transformative change and informed consent did not, demonstrates how the white, cis-led organisations were more readily recognised as appropriate experts on trans lives. Further, as their focus on compromise and their ‘small wave’ demands for smoothing over and reforming were less challenging to the upkeep of the violent administrative systems they could be met and thus co-opted and made harmless.

The new treatment protocol gave way for the monopoly to be split to three clinics in 2017–2019, but state gatekeeping continues. Psychiatric assessment has not been eradicated, but slightly rephrased from demanding psychiatric ‘diagnosing’ to ‘assessment’. The MDT is still required and continuously includes a psychiatrist/psychologist who is to assess “the individual’s gender identity including the severity of the gender dysphoria” and contraindications (DHA, 2018, p. 14). Further, no ‘treatment guarantee’ with concrete time limits on treatment initiation was implemented. In February 2019, a political decision to move TSH away from SK to a “new” ‘Center for Gender Identity’ (CKI) was presented as huge progress for trans rights (e.g., Capkan, 2018). However, when it became known that most of the employees at the “new” clinic would be transferred from SK, activists contested this in media entries, a complaint-letter-writing workshop (Tams, 2019) and in a direct action organised by TPAP (2019) outside CKI with banners such as “New Packaging. Same Pathologization”, demands for informed consent, and that “none of the staff from [SK] be employed within CKI”.

In this chapter, I have followed how the complication and circulation of collective trans knowledges are put to use in analysing and resisting medicalisation and pathologisation and in holding the Danish state accountable

to its administrative violence and abandonment of trans people. Further, I have explored how activists counter symbolic political gestures by linking them to Danish exceptionalism and homonationalism, by refusing co-optation and compromise and instead push for transformative change, redistribution and improved life chances of trans people. Some trans activists' insistence on complicating and nuancing the collective trans knowledges they/we centre and circulate in demands and disruptions broaden the scope of how we understand and organise around trans care. These rehearsals stimulate our ability to critically imagine life-affirming worlds beyond conditioned rights and benefits for some, the state's demands for compliance with cisheteronormativity, and the state as a site of security, stability, care and comfort. In disruptions, refusal and insistence, we can find glimpses of collective liberation horizons that enable extending notions of trans care beyond the TSH regime (Fondén, 2020), and position the cultivation of trans care webs and trickle-up trans knowledges as integral to trans survival and thriving.

Notes

- 1 All quotes from interviews, articles, law texts and treatment protocols are the author's translations except if otherwise indicated.
- 2 I understand trans as movement (Pearce, 2018), while recognising its importance and (sometimes strategic) utilisation as identity category. Here I use 'trans people' or 'people with trans experiences' as broad, undefined terms for people who are not/do not identify with/conform to the gender assigned at birth.
- 3 My ongoing (2019–2024) PhD project is tentatively titled '30 years of queer and trans organising, coalition-building and world-making outside, on the margins of and against the Danish state and Non-profit Industrial Complex'.
- 4 Given that eugenics in Denmark extend back before 1929 and was also enacted against e.g., various racialised groups, disabled people, poor people, gays, lesbians, unmarried women, and sex offenders (Holm, 2017), and taking into consideration how scholars in Black, trans and decolonial studies have analysed sex and gender as racial arrangements (e.g., Gill-Peterson, 2018; Snorton, 2017), further research on the configurations of gendersex in the context of Danish coloniality, eugenics and racialisation is of great relevance.
- 5 It is important to note that while healthcare in Denmark is free, whiteness, class, cisheteronormative structures and ableism generally create in/access to healthcare. Within a variety of areas, including TSH, these structures are exacerbated by treatment protocols and speciality planning.
- 6 SK has documented that the process from referral to approval of surgery was on average 8.1 years for trans-feminine people and 5.9 years for trans-masculine people in 1978–2008 (see Holm, 2017, p. 39).
- 7 Some names in this chapter are anonymised while other activists have chosen to keep their name. Keeping people's names can serve to highlight the often invisibilised activist labour and knowledge. Further, anonymisation is not always possible in such a small context as trans coalitions and organising in Denmark.
- 8 LGBT+ Danmark is the most funded and influential LGB(T) organisation in Denmark. Until 2009 the leadership refused creating platforms for trans struggles and organising.
- 9 Now TransAktion.

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6 **Gayness between nation builders and money makers**

From ideology to new essentialism

Anna-Maria Sörberg

It is the height of summer when Pride time begins in Sweden, which means 22°C in the air and a sky packed with fluffy white clouds. Rainbow flags fly on buses, shops, hotels, outside the castle and municipal buildings. This year's main sponsor of Stockholm Pride, a well-known coffee chain, has distributed thousands of rainbow cups as their "welcome to the capitol."

A month before the nation's prime elections, as a staged act of the Swedish national anthem, the leaders of the major parties in parliament gather at a table draped with the rainbow flag on the main stage of Stockholm's cultural center. All parties are present, with the exception of the openly radical nationalist party, The Sweden Democrats, who were not invited. The applause in the packed theater is affirmative, serving as an endorsement for Stockholm's Pride Week and the absolute power that has entered the stage. The moment can be considered a shift from the not-so-distant past, with the implication that more oppressive times are now behind "us"—whomever that "us" is meant to capture. An important feature on stage, which is reinforced by the long, warm applause, is that there will be no ideological debate among the parties seated at the table. Although they cover a broad spectrum of political perspectives—conservatives, Christian Democrats, liberals, and socialists—the tone around LGBTIQ issues is increasingly one of non-confrontational agreement. While there may be disagreement about specific issues regarding rights in relation to family, reproduction, and medical treatment, the overall message is unanimous: Sweden is or soon will be, as declared by, among others, the leader of the Liberal Party, "the best country for lgbt-people in the world" (Sörberg, 2017, p. 11). In this staged act, the accomplishments, progress, and even the history of the LGBTIQ movement have been appropriated by governmental power as a set of *national* values, represented by the rainbow flag that blankets the political leaders at the table (see also Lentin and Titley, 2011). This appropriation, which implies that oppression based on sexuality or gender identity belongs to the past, leaves activists, whether they are anarchists, socialists, and liberals; moreover, the actual suffering and costs that living a queer life can entail, in the shadows, out of the spotlight. It is a celebration of a gay-friendly diversity. A Pride time that is inscribed in what many scholars have done extensive

research on as a part of a broader Nordic history related to a particular nationalist hymn (Stoltz, 2021, p. 28) a moment in Sweden that dates back to the insertion of the 1970s' welfare programs and policies with an effort to overcome gender inequalities. Theorists, feminist scholars, detect this particular nationalism as one that brought many consequences in the complex history of power relations—parts of the feminist movements worked in close relations with the Swedish state. Extensive research works have also looked into the phenomenon of national branding and the growing importance for nation states to create diversity and feminism as a national value. I argue that *gay-friendliness* can be linked to this development. To portray a country as a superpower of gender equality is never an objective or neutral act but a result of political agency imbued with potent symbolic value, write Eirinn Larsen, Sigrun Marie Moss, and Inger Skjaelsbek in their anthology, *Gender Equality and Nation Branding in the Nordic Region* (2021). A growing affirmation in the Swedish public on LGBTQI issues has taken place in the past decade. Major leaders from conservative, liberal, and social democratic parties have acknowledged the importance of LGBTQI rights in speeches and Pride parades, and the rainbow flag has become the symbol and visual proof of a nation that stands behind the LGBTQI community, built in as a natural and national core value. Even the contemporary nationalistic party leader Jimmie Åkesson¹ used the rainbow flag next to the Swedish flag on stage in his political speech in Almedalen without any mentioning of what it means for the party.

The fact that trans people were subjected to forced sterilization as a condition for receiving sex reassignment surgery up until 2013, and the so-called chain of rights, including same sex marriage and insemination, a result of a very recent past disappears into a history, a past, far away.

In this chapter, I will—with the help of theorist and politicians I have met and read over the years—explore the instrumentalization of gay culture in contemporary politics and the use of gay rights in shaping national identity, expanding markets, and renewed essentialism. In a dialogue with books, people, and personal reflections from three decades of queer activism, I look for factual and potential answers to a few basic questions: When did gay friendliness become crucial for positioning a nation or a culture as modern? Where have gay rights become an utilized asset in the mobilization of a cultural “we”, and what are the consequences of this political endeavor? How are particular notions of gay rights linked to ideas of progress, future, and freedom? Some scholars talk about “sexularism” and a “post-progressive” society—what do they mean? If there is a “new gay political agenda”, how could it be met and tackled?

A 20-minute subway ride from the main central stage of Stockholm Pride is Järva, a predominantly migrant area of 90,000 inhabitants and considered

a deeply segregated area and a constant projection of the so-called failed consequences of multiculturalism of Sweden. For two consecutive summers, the area has been swept up in a media frenzy in relation to Sweden's annual Pride celebration with the rainbow flag in a starring role of a cultural conflict that has put the organizer, the former editor-in-chief of *Samtiden*, a magazine owned by Sweden Democrats, in the middle of a perceived cultural conflict or even cultural war. It's a well-known script—a reproduced story with a life of its own—familiar from similar marches in European cities like London, Paris, and Amsterdam.

In the middle of a main square with clouds piling up in the sky, a group of 20 people are standing close to each other. They draw visual attention being draped in full body rainbow-flags and colorful wigs in pink, orange and green. More than a Pride parade, it looks like clowns gathering in front of a circus. A portable speaker plays gay classics on repeat as YMCA and Pet Shop Boys from the 1980s and 1990s.

Curious habitants and a growing number of journalists are stopping by. The group consists of politically active radical nationalists—some from openly neo-Nazi groups and others who are sympathetic to, or members of, The Sweden Democrats—that has designated Järva fertile ground for manufacturing a culture war. In an opportunistic act of provocation, they begin their march toward a two-hour walk through Järva protected by a massive police presence, which further implies that the small colorful group in favor of LGBTIQ pride would be in need of protection against Järva's inhabitants. With their video footage already pumped into a vast, viral, transnational ecosystem of internet trolls on social media and streaming channels like YouTube, the message is already out. Even though the Järva march (media stunt) occurred without incident—many people waved in support of their perceived cause—the false message that this Pride march is a threat to, and met with strong resistance from, the people of Järva still circulates across the internet. Moreover, the frenzied media coverage not only in Sweden but throughout Europe provided precisely the sort of bullhorn these rainbow-flagged “protesters” sought to advance their real agenda: a designated protest under the assumption that the rainbow flag would be deemed unwelcome or threatening. It's a constructed clash that forces LGBTIQ activism into the background, while populists and radical nationalists deploy the cause in the service of their anti-immigration agenda. It is a broadcast (via the ensuing media frenzy) which contains the belief that there is an irresolvable clash between people with migrant backgrounds and those captured in the category of “us” implied by the politicians on the stage in the center of Stockholm blanketed by the rainbow flag.

Benjamin Dousa is a politician for the local conservative party in the district committee of Rinkeby-Kista, a part of Järva, where he grew up. Dousa belongs to an aspiring and young conservative political movement and is also the head of Moderaterna's (The Conservative Party) youth wing since 2016. Given that the march in the area was organized by people sympathetic

to The Sweden Democrats and other radical right-wing movements, he dislikes the attention, though he does not necessarily disagree with the message. “After all,” he claims, “we are making progress when it comes to LGBT-issues.” Dousa and his political colleagues responded to the march by what he calls the “best and only way”: flying more and additional rainbow flags around the municipality building because, as he explains, this is “the way to reclaim the flag from the radical nationalists.” Dousa’s political views are heavily inspired by his grandfather, who came to Sweden from Czechoslovakia with experiences of communist oppression and a strong conviction that only through ownership and freedom of choice can people fight the forces of totalitarianism, which he noted is “a policy that has come to characterize [his] whole family, [himself] included.” Dousa and I met at the central café in Husby, next to the subway, where the price of coffee is half of that in central Stockholm and cookies are available in 25 shapes, including classic Swedish and baklava varieties. “I have been active in the Conservative Party for a long time, and I’ve noticed that it is, increasingly, almost more normal to be gay or bi these days,” Dousa said with a smile. Politicians like Dousa and other young conservatives convinced that freedom is something gained through private ownership, consider it a strength that a symbol like the rainbow flag has transformed so fundamentally that it has become an important part of Sweden’s national values. To Dousa, the fact that it has been normalized as a symbol of tolerance at the same time as financial streams have become more global than ever is a sign of success—a success that to him and many others is inspiration “to work hard, effect change and achieve better lives.”

The millions of rainbow-colored coffee cups spread across the city are, according to Dousa, not only a symbol of freedom but they are also important moral indicators. He recounted a scene he witnessed while waiting for his coffee at the gas station, where two men who spoke Arabic were in line in front of him. When the cashier handed them their rainbow-colored coffee mugs, they refused to take them. Dousa speculated that perhaps the rainbow colors made the men uneasy but, he argued, “We can’t accept this. We can’t forbid people to have an opinion in their homes, but on the street and in public areas, we have to stand united when we see signs of intolerance.” Dousa believes that there might be a point in making compromises in deeply segregated areas like Järva. The Arab language could be allowed more space on street signs, for example. People should be allowed to decide for themselves which holidays they choose to celebrate and, Dousa argued, halal is just a slaughtering technique, not a specific cultural expression that needs to be prohibited. Likewise, Dousa holds that the rainbow flag as a symbol is enough to separate tolerance from intolerance. In other words, those who walked through the suburb stoking cultural conflict under the banner of Pride might have the same basic idea, he said, but, while their parade was held for the wrong reasons, it was not wrong in its use of the rainbow flag as a symbol.

Recently, we placed the rainbow flag on the cover of the publication that contains documents for our youth wing's conference. It was large; it took up the whole cover. The rainbow stands for something positive. It stands for joy, love, and celebration,

he explained, adding that The Social Democrat's youth wing chose to do the same by putting the image of the rainbow flag in a central place on their political program. No detailed explanation of what it denotes was included, since there is the assumption that no further political argument is necessary: "This combination of colors represents an important symbol of freedom that everybody owns," Dousa² declared.

"The men sitting here have just realized that they won't die," H said as he pointed to the newly furnished room with seven differently colored chairs in the packed coffee shop, where the floor-to-ceiling windows gave it an airy feeling. This was not just any coffee shop; this was the new hotspot in Chelsea, New York City's most rapidly growing gay ghetto in the late 1990s.

I arrived in New York in 1996 at the height of Chelsea's gay boom; high on the civil partnership law that had just been passed in Sweden, I stepped immediately into an enthusiastic, intense gay moment beginning to gain ground. An evolution manifested in a vision of a "New Tomorrow," which was meant to be uplifting and in stark contrast to the shame and death from the trauma of AIDS that had been materialized in vivid images by political activists in groups like ACT UP. This neighborhood on Manhattan's West Side provided a promising infrastructure, where everyone seemed to be part of a round-the-clock affirmation of an aspiring gay life. Rainbow gyms, gay real estate agencies, vitamin shops, and a new emergent figure of the "Chelsea fag." This figure appeared in the form of mannequins in the stocked clothing stores and was seen roaming the streets and patronizing local cafés; he seemed to be rising out of the ashes toward Fire Island beaches and gay parties, taking an increasingly homogenous, cloned form, with his perfectly balanced body mass. He wore straw hats, plaid shorts, and Hush Puppies, and used just enough drugs so as not to (ever) forget tomorrow. The New Tomorrow had open windows in every direction. Like many people at the time, H reached out to Alcoholics Anonymous and nearly immediately had made it a habit to stop at the cafe between the therapist and the gym. The long, traumatic period following the AIDS epidemic would come to an end. With AZT and functioning HIV meds for the first time on their way, everything and nothing seemed to vibrate in the air. H sipped his last drink slowly. This was before he realized that the pain from a bleeding ulcer in the making is not mitigated just by drinking a cocktail with a straw. Now that he had a dog and established a new, sober life, he found the area a bit boring—there were nevertheless worse places to be.

At the time assimilationists, radical liberals, and queer activists alike busied themselves by analyzing contemporary events as they unfolded, “When Did Gays Get So Straight? How Queer Culture Lost Its Edge” was the cover headline that attracted an enormous amount of attention when published in *New York Magazine* (Mendelson, 1996). In the window of the gay bookshop, titles such as *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture*—an intellectual review of how commercial power risks destroying gay culture—sat side by side with political thoughts emanating from an expanding radical *queer* research field, Queer Theory, arguing for a new progressive left-wing movement that could fight the prevailing system with its narrow categories like gay, woman, and man entangled in a heteronormative system. At the end of the 1990s, an American gay right-wing movement with ties to the Republican Party was still seen as odd, although it, too, was growing. Their platform was based on the idea of forging a “gay mainstream” and was one of the stronger among a new conservative political initiative. The think-tank, Independent Gay Forum (IGF), formulated a ten-point-program to target and overturn what they called the “leftist liberal agenda” that had dominated gay activism since the 1960s, with a central critique aimed at the economic system and heteronormative power. To them, anarchist grassroots organizations such as ACT UP were examples of an ideological extremism that should henceforth be replaced by a pragmatic, isolated, rights agenda. The rights to marry and serve in the military became designated as two of the most important issues. The platform redefined the struggle as having a beginning and an end, as the writer and IGF founder Andrew Sullivan anticipated in his manifesto *Virtually Normal: An Argument about Homosexuality* (Sullivan, 1995)—a post-political era awaited that would occur *after* a quick embrace of the politics of rights.

On 8th Avenue, above my and H’s heads, hovered a giant rainbow-colored coffee cup. The menu with all its varieties of coffee seemed endless in terms of flavorings and toppings. The morning light stretched out across the cafe while we chatted, and it projected the shadows of the little group of hunched-over, elderly men that passed by the windows. They had just stepped out onto the street after the morning’s last cocktail at the corner bar. This bar was one of the oldest in the neighborhood, which, just like the men passing by, appeared increasingly deserted—as if it were slowly becoming empty, the curtains gradually being shut, and the boards that were nailed across the windows getting discarded bit by bit. At the gift shop further down the avenue, Tom peddled rainbow kitsch merchandise to enthusiastic gay newcomers. With a shaved head, a gray stubble beard, sideburns, and now reading glasses, paired with his black leather vest, camo pants, and military boots, he seemed to embody a part of gay history. His, as well as many others’, unimaginable recent experiences were amplified by his directness. Without hesitating, he spoke candidly about friends he had lost and how the area had changed over time—evolving from a multicultural mix of various racial and ethnic groups with diverse

socioeconomic backgrounds, to the changes that rapid gentrification of the neighborhood was effecting, and of his plans concerning his inevitable aging. He would continue to live his life; maybe he would retire in Florida together with other gay men, who for the first time in a decade dared to make plans for more time to come. Tom had moved here from Greenwich Village, a few blocks south, looking for a fresh start and new memories after the activist meetings, street actions, and bar collections for hospital bills and funerals grew increasingly scarce. It was a relief for him not to have to walk by the places where his friends and loved ones once lived or to see new couples move into the neighborhood, people who he believed lack both insight and interest in what he and others had gone through. “Did you notice? No one here says *fabulous* or *style* anymore. The foundation of our culture is disappearing,” the writer David Mendelsohn explained when I met him for an interview in relation to his article that continued to draw attention. Mendelsohn was in a personal gripe with Chelsea—the area whose transformation, according to him, was best summarized through the tagline “We’re here, we’re queer, let’s get coffee.”—a sarcastic critique of a gay movement about to lose its political sting, and perhaps, in his view, even its history. While Mendelsohn snarled about the recent closure of a former party palace—where the leather kilts, party drugs, and naked skin of the wee hours were yet again replaced by a daytime café—it was hard to separate nostalgia from real concern in a constantly changing political landscape with its newly awakened interest for the “gay markets” of an urban gayberhood. What might the political consequences and changes imply, where were these “new gay times” heading?

By 1996, about 80,000 people had died of the after-effects of AIDS in New York alone. The city was left shattered, with gaping holes where gay culture once existed. Entire buildings were emptied of people and activism, as Sarah Schulman documents in her important book, *The Gentrification of the Mind* (Schulman, 2012). For queer culture, the post-AIDS period meant a catastrophic shift, writes Schulman; it was a time that coincided with a new gay political agenda and aggressive gentrification (Schulman, 2012, p. 37). Skyrocketing market rents not only affect those who move in and out but also create a fundamental change in how people understand both urbanity and themselves, she argues (p. 29). Many of those who died or fell out of the system as a result of society’s inability to take care of its sick were suddenly erased—not just erased from activist or creative movements, but from history itself. While many close relationships were created or permanently altered, a void appeared, making the post-AIDS period a transitional time during which central parts of a queer history were erased or replaced. This void, however, would soon be filled with a new wave of gay politicians, who saw possible strongholds and, in particular, the formulation of a new political agenda that moved away from the politics typical of those who had demanded the overthrow or redistribution of power. Instead, these new politicians condemned the old politics as extreme and outdated.

In his article “The Future of Queer: A Manifesto,” Fenton Johnson recalls a meeting at New York’s LGBT Community Center where a group of gay white republicans gathered in the sanctuary for the city’s LGBTQI activism. He notes that the fact that this meeting was held at The Center indicated that the conservative agenda had made its impact on the entire LGBTQI movement. With reference to the entrance of antiretrovirals, which transformed the struggle for political power and messaging that the assimilationists would soon win, he noticed how fast the transformation went (Johnson, 2018). Two decades after Johnson’s political, queer writer’s life began, the political agenda had been radically rewritten. The stories that formed the basis of politics and struggle during the AIDS years—the rescue actions, the activism, the experiences of multifaceted relationships during the AIDS panic—all seemed so far away. This new conservative agenda can be read as a micro-study of the consequences of a long decade filled with forced, benevolent diversity policy, according to Lisa Duggan, who called it “the new homonormativity”—a mainstream political order that found its perfect posterboys in a new consumption-driven gay culture (Duggan, 2003). Ten years later, in her book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Jasbir Puar illuminated the central role sexuality plays within the newly drawn strict border between who does and does not belong in Western nations, particularly the US (Puar, 2007). Importantly, with this book, Puar coined the term “homonationalism” to indicate a starting point in the wake of the War on Terror. It was published just prior to the wave of right-wing extremism that provided the basis in the US for the homonationalism Puar diagnosed. And, later or simultaneously, its European rendering emerged, with counter-jihad movements led by politicians such as Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders making their way into the spotlight with ever-present rainbows and gay-friendly airs. Puar later wrote a follow-up article, “Rethinking Homonationalism,” in which she argued that the impact of her book had been enormous, almost shocking: new critical conversations had arisen within institutions and activist movements followed by discussions and demonstrations in the US, France, Sweden, Palestine, and India. Still, she noticed that the most fundamental aspects of the issue always seemed to slip away: *Why* in these times has gay friendliness become so very attractive such that it has become the measure by which, and definition of, what is seen as certain nations’ freedom and success? And why are concepts like tolerance and acceptance so hard to define even when they continue to constitute the ultimate “evidence” that it was “here” that LGBTQI rights were created (Puar, 2013).

“There are three things you can’t avoid when you talk about the development of LGBT rights in the Netherlands,” Paul Mepschen says when I meet him at a local café in central Rotterdam, Amsterdam’s tougher little sister. The first is the neoliberal populist, Pim Fortuyn, the politician who built his career on

his flamboyant queerness and whose political legacy goes under the heading “The Legacy of Pim” in travel guides. The second is the transformation of social democracy, and the third is the significance of religion, or rather, the country’s rapid enforcement of secularization. Mepschen entered the political scene in the 1990s via a socialist queer group that, with growing concern, witnessed the combination of populism and nationalism that accompanied Fortuyn’s increasing hold on public debate. Mepschen decided to organize within a wider left so that he could participate in a stronger resistance. It was a time when the ruling Social Democrats were already experiencing a crisis. Saturation and consensus, rather than ideological dialogue, characterized politics—politics that, during the 1990s, were balancing on the edge between quiet advocacy and pragmatic bureaucracy, with the overall aim of avoiding politicization of important issues that affect minorities. No one wanted to talk about *how* people should live together, or *how* segregation could be countered. With Fortuyn’s constant attacks on an anxious political establishment, the Social Democrats became a natural target. The same political climate that the reformist social democratic left-wing wanted to silence returned with even more radical force, Mepschen argued. Today Mepschen observes these issues from the perspective of being a university researcher. The sun forces its way into the outdoor terrace of the cafe in his hometown. The same town that constituted Fortuyn’s political base prior to what was predicted to be his most successful election, perhaps even giving him the role of prime minister, if he had not been assassinated by an animal rights activist in 2002. It was no coincidence that Fortuyn’s breakthrough into politics happened here, Mepschen said, “He exploited the city’s demographics, where fifty percent of residents have direct or indirect experiences of migration.” Significantly, many are second- or third-generation migrant workers from the country’s former colonies in Morocco or Algeria.

Fortuyn launched himself as an eccentric gay, an entertainer who broke onto the political scene at a time marked by consensus. By making himself the main evidence of the country’s progressive gay friendliness, he laid the groundwork for the immanent conflict he soon made his hallmark. This image was portrayed as if it was under threat from a supposedly “backward” Islamic culture and, above all, the country’s Muslims were singled out and became subject to rhetoric that would continue to echo across Europe. “Unfortunately, many stop there,” Mepschen lamented. The rhetoric that was Fortuyn’s brand may be seen as a normalized part today in an emerging conservatism and gay racism and, further, can be linked to a number of movements where gay men and women joined right-wing populist or radical national movements. This is a narrative that is both dismissed and causes dismay. But it is a much broader issue than one loud, gay man that took the country by storm. It is an ideology where issues of sexuality and gender—in particular, the notion of gay friendliness and an increasing whitening of gay culture—have become distinct markers in a simplified model of tolerance and freedom. It is this phenomenon that requires a deeper analysis, argues Mepschen (2018).

The politicization of Fortuyn's agenda has been normalized since his death by pundits like Ayan Hirsi Ali, Frits Bolkestein and, zealously, by Geert Wilders, the leader of the radical nationalist Party for Freedom. For them, all societal and problems are given an explanatory basis in this presumed cultural conflict. In particular, the blame is placed on "The Other's" culture—those who, according to their rhetoric, never "belonged here in the first place." The development of this political climate is mainly characterized by a rapid transformation from the welfare state to the "lean state," where gay culture has been utilized as one of the key mobilizing components. While these pundits insist upon the acknowledgment of a certain measure of sexual freedom, they move away from other government commitments. Middle-class men—preferably homosexuals of the kind that (commercial) gay culture has come to represent in some parts of the West—are not seen in conflict with the market but rather as strengthening it as Mepschen argues (Mepschen, 2018, p. 23). Or as Fatima El-Tayeb puts it, the commercialization of gay culture presents itself as "a truth" with the perfect dilemma and dichotomy built into the drive behind a modern, urban, and whitened gay community that needs an antithesis: the communities of Others—migrants, people of color—which are assumed to be, by definition, homophobic and heterosexual (El-Tayeb, 2011, p. 125).

"The closing party was the bomb, better than anything I've ever experienced," the young guy enthusiastically tells his girlfriend at the adjacent table as the busy lunch restaurant along one of Amsterdam's canals fills up. This is a perfect, almost clichéd, illustration of modern, urban life waking up the morning after its Pride celebrations have ended. An intense week of partying is over and the finale—the world's only Pride parade on water, gliding through the city in a canal carnival with thousands of boat floats—has once again triumphed. Another attendance record is broken in "the country that founded gay rights," as the city's tourist brochures proudly declares. It has been more than two decades since the "new morning" of Chelsea urban life and, since then, the era that followed has grown into a flood of new versions of LGBTQI-friendly neighborhoods. A stone's throw from the restaurant, the line to the Anne Frank Museum, is long, winding past the so-called Homomonument: the world's "first and only monument" commemorating those persecuted for their sexuality and gender expression by the Nazi regime. Nowhere is LGBTQI culture as intensely integrated in the cityscape as it is in Amsterdam. The city established itself as a symbol of freedom, gay friendliness, and liberal values, strongly manifested through an emerging gay white middle-class culture that has evolved through its embeddedness in the construction of "Dutchness." A rarely defined, but nonetheless present, *gayness* is fundamental to what is today considered natural and progressive. This story goes hand in hand with, and is constructed at the expense of,

the narrative of the immigrant—in particular, Muslims—as a reactionary antithesis. The young men whose parents or grandparents once came to this hyper-modern, secularized, fantastically free country are now a relentless target of projections of conservatism and homophobia. This linkage between middle-class, white gayness and national identity, El-Tayeb argues, “completely erases class as an analytical category and instead replaces it with the understanding of culture” (El-Tayeb, 2011, p. 33). Some scholars call this European version of gay-friendly politics a post-progressive society, where society has nearly achieved complete freedom from oppression with respect to issues of sexuality. Paul Mepschen builds on Joan Scott’s concept “sexularism,” where secularism is increasingly presented as something that permeates society and is realized once and for all—as if the mere fact that certain forms of sexual expression are allowed by law would automatically stop, for example, the oppression of women. In Scott’s “sexular” society, authorities that have previously assumed the right to decide for example what women should wear seem to have disappeared. This society instead prides itself on being a place filled with free individuals who possess agency and the power to create their own destinies, who treat (all) other people as autonomous individuals and respect their freedom and personal rights.

While white gay culture is considered free from oppression, those who reach the West through migration are described as constantly in need of liberation, which leads to increased focus on making homosexuality in minority cultural groups visible. However, this is impossible work, since it is presented as a cultural issue linked to an already assumed, immutable homophobia that is presumed to be in constant need of supervision. It is akin to the rainbow flag flying in an already segregated, poor neighborhood of people with migrant experience, where nuanced socio economic and geopolitical issues are abandoned in favor of a never-ending cultural clash based on essentialized and predetermined ideas of “us and them.” Moreover, the presumed and unquestioned cultural clash serves to hide the development of a nation state that has abandoned or put ideas of a welfare state in the background in favor of privatization and individualism. Gay friendliness in combination with the new neoliberal state, thus, becomes a marriage.

As I hold the rainbow-colored paper cup in my hand from another Pride summer—witnessing politicians and corporations fight for the limelight by holding seminars at Pride and in the public arena, reading reports that the event has again set new attendance records—fundamental questions remain unanswered: what does standing behind the rainbow flag, *gay friendliness*, and tolerance *really* mean for the contemporary LGBTQI movement? Who is doing the work to critically examine the already-accepted concepts to which politicians, conservatives, radicals, liberals, and nationalists refer? And, finally, is there a way to get beyond the essentialism contained in the

contemporary concept of “gayness” that emerged through the powerful commercialization of LGBTQI cultures in parts of Europe and the US?

The chosen places in this essay—Sweden, Netherlands, and the US—are all different in terms of history, including the operation state and in what ways race, sexuality, and gender are intertwined in their powers. But they all build on a particular notion of a gay rights politics that is linked to progress and modernity that is built although conditioned on a gay or LGBTQI culture, a notion that has inscribed itself in a historical shift that theorist Jasbir Puar and others mark as the moment where some homosexual bodies have gained certain protection while others (refugees, migrant, nonwhite bodies) are left behind.

I would argue that in order to return critically to the complexities of sexuality and gender expression, it is necessary to combine both a re-envisioning of the future and a reevaluation of history.

Almost 30 years of rainbow romance have passed since I roamed that American gay ghetto with its new, conservative gay agenda looming on the horizon. However, many of those who, today, emphasize their support for queer issues have not participated in the historical struggles that preceded that moment of transition, nor are they directly affected by them. This might explain the sense of detachment that many of us experience today in relation to the complex work and multi-faceted processes that laid the foundation for contemporary sexually progressive movements. Moreover, the flood of critical thinking about both the present and those times that have been relegated to history is more intense than ever. Postcolonial feminists, women of color, writers, and activists are increasingly abandoning the idea of a triumphant gay revolution in favor of returning to a long, often violent history, and its attendant shame and grief, to the realm of political life (see, Muñoz, 1999). As Heather Love writes, it is a shared knowledge that constitutes our lives, our history and our present (2007, p. 126). It is also an acknowledgment that a history shared by queer lives is far from over, thus providing a place in the present for all the bodies once considered savage, unmodern, violent, diseased, and death bearing in addition to those that are today (still) considered outcast.

A few years before the affirmative politics appeared in full force, queer theorist and poet Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argued for a vision that both haunts and inspires:

there is no unthreatened, unthreatening conceptual home for the concept of gay origins. We have all the more reason, then, to keep our understanding of gay origin, of gay cultural and material reproduction, plural, multi-capillared, argus-eyed, respectful, and endlessly cherished.

(Sedgwick, 1990, pp. 43–44)

This seems important to remember during this period in which new polarizations, or new iterations of historically familiar polarizations, seems

to grow every day around issues of sexuality and gender. Maintaining multiple perspectives by looking back to history and ahead to the future is vital.

Notes

- 1 Jimmie Åkesson used the rainbow flag on stage in his Almedalen speech 2019—a political annual event that takes place in summer on the Swedish island Gotland.
- 2 It should be noted that Benjamin Dousa left party politics in 2020 and is at the time of writing, the executive director of Timbro, a leading think tank that works on ideas and policies related to the free market in the Nordic countries. It is located in Stockholm, Sweden.

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7 (Not) in the name of gender equality

Migrant women, empowerment, employment, and minority women's organizations

Christel Stormhøj

Introduction

Since the 1960s, the Nordic welfare states have stimulated women's paid work in the name of gender equality and established female economic independence as an ideal (Siim and Borchorst 2017). In recent debates on the malfunctioning of integration, migrant (especially Muslim) women's lacking in equality in wage-work has become an urgent political problem associated with patriarchal relations (Martinsson et al. 2017; Nygren et al. 2018) and cast as an economic burden.¹ To enhance their labour market participation, Nordic state and inter-state agencies have introduced integration programmes (Brochmann and Hagelund 2012) and contracted with women's organizations. Traditionally, offering advocacy to promote women's equality (Thun 2014), these organizations have relied on a strategy of collective empowerment and group solidarity aiming to enable women to determine their own daily lives, achieve economic independence, and influence politics (Siim 2004). Yet, within the present context of neoliberal Nordic welfare states, three major shifts influence women's organizations performing integration projects: (i) integration centres on employment (Bjerre et al. 2020), and state-initiated empowerment serves merely as a tool to reach this goal according to principles of economic growth and competitiveness (Andersen 2005). (ii) The relationship between market, state, and women's organizations changes, which both constrains the political work of these organizations and enables new partnerships that may increase their agency (Kantola and Squires 2012). (iii) Racist right-wing populist parties promoting anti-immigration sentiments are progressing (Meret and Siim 2013). Arguably, both right-wing populism, which articulates gender equality as a national value separating 'us' from 'them', and neoliberalism that instrumentalizes it to foster economic growth, abuse women's equality for racist projects (Stormhøj 2021). Thereby, both jeopardize the collective and participatory-democratic empowerment agenda of women's organizations.

My main research questions are how migrant women are governed through state-defined empowerment programmes, and how women's organizations

navigate a terrain, where empowerment from ‘above’ and from ‘below’ overlap, entangle or clash. I focus on the Danish context.² Yet, the findings have relevance for understanding the state/women’s organization nexus in the wider context of neoliberal Nordic welfare states. The main theoretical inspiration is drawn from governmentality literature that allows me to conceptualize empowerment from ‘above’ and ‘below’ as different government modalities. Empirically, the chapter is based on policy documents and studies of central women’s organizations. I make two arguments: (i) state agencies and women’s organizations are mutually dependent when implementing integration policy. Their interaction is a perpetual battle pervaded by tensions and contestations³; and (ii) women’s organizations both comply with state agendas, because they become entangled with state and market logics to survive, and contest them by pursuing their own.

Nordic research on the involvement of minority women’s organizations in migrant women’s labour market participation is still lacking. By providing new empirical knowledge, I fill this void, and by offering a governmentality lens, focusing on the power game between empowerment from ‘above’ and ‘below’, I make a novel contribution. In developing my arguments, I have a dialogue with particularly three strands of Nordic scholarship concerned with migrant women’s (i) political participation, (ii) labour market integration and policies to increase it, and (iii) state/women’s organizations relations. I briefly summarize key results.

Nyhagen Predelli (2003) and Togeby (2003) point to migrant women’s political powerlessness as a general trend, linking it with lack of political resources and social rights. In contrast, by focusing on particular political entrepreneurs among migrant women, Siim (2004) shows how the interplay between the Nordic tradition of mobilization ‘from below’ and the presence of political agency actually empowers these women. Siim and Skjeie (2008) and Nyhagen Predelli and Halsaa (2012) identify separate organizing of majority and minority women and distinct agendas.

de los Reyes (2014) and Mulinari (2018) researching migrant women’s labour market participation show how they are constructed as a specific cheap, disposable, and exploitable labour force, and how institutionalized racism plays into that production. Hvenegård-Lassen (2007), Jørgensen and Thomsen (2016), and Bjerre et al. (2020), who are concerned with policies to enhance migrant women’s employability, testify that integrations policies make employment compulsory, operate through economic incitements and sanctions, and stigmatize migrant women.

Sen and Pace (2019) and Bontenbal and Lillie (2019) demonstrate the plural roles of civil society organizations (CSOs) in enhancing the labour market integration of migrants. Yet, none of them focuses on women’s organizations or female migrants in particular. In terms of state/women’s organizations relations, Liinason (2018) concludes, focusing on majority organizations’ struggles for women’s equality rights in the context of neoliberalism, that the relationship is fluid and traversed by power struggles, and

that it is both enabling and constraining for the organizations. Examining the effects of a shift towards neoliberal governance, including changing funding structures, on minority and majority organizations' claim-making, Thun (2014) shows that minority organizations' reliance on project funding encourages an implementation role and prevents a strong advocacy role.

Theorizing the governing of migrant women's labour market participation

Different bodies of literature inspire my approach. Governmentality studies offer the concept of neoliberal governmentality (Foucault 2008), which focuses on current means and logics involved in governing a population that is composed of free individuals. Marketization (Pedersen 2011) and responsabilization of CSOs and individuals for ruling are key principles (Rose 2008). Importantly, neoliberal governmentality operates through self-government in the pursuit of state-defined objectives (Sharma 2008). Particularly, in terms of enhancing migrant women's employment activity rate, they are urged to cast off their (ascribed) status as victims of 'bad' patriarchy and actively participate in changing their conditions. Workfare schemes (Jørgensen and Thomsen 2016),⁴ norms of gender equality in employment, and a combination of disciplinary, morally coercive, and therapeutic techniques (Hvenegård-Lassen 2007) push them towards these goals. Improving migrant women's labour market integration involves state agencies, companies, and CSOs, which all increasingly use empowerment strategies. I focus on state agencies and minority women's organizations as empowerment agents, which operate from 'above' and 'below' with different, sometimes overlapping, sometimes clashing agendas (Newman 2012). Notably, I use the concept of empowerment in two different ways: as a political-administrative strategy defined by state agencies using the norm of equality in employment as a disciplinary tool and endorsing a logic of economic efficiency for investing in migrant women and providing them with skills and training so that they could achieve stable employment. Within this logic, empowerment is entirely individualistic, associated with an agenda of attitudinal, behavioural, and emotional changes, which is imposed on migrant women from 'above'. In contrast, for women's organizations empowerment is a strategy of personal and collective empowerment, based on group solidarity, collective action, and mobilization from 'below'. Empowerment is undertaken with and for women. Embedded in a democratic logic of participation and claims for equality and rights, the goal is to capacitate women to determine their own daily lives, engage in paid work, and influence politics. Within this logic, empowerment is about changing structural conditions of inequality and subordination.

Feminist scholarship informs my approach to the nexus between state and women's bodies during neoliberal rule, which is both constraining and enabling for these organizations. The relationship is a power game marked

by struggles and tensions (Newman 2012). With the emergence of new roles (from advocacy to service provision), funding structures (from long-term and permanent funding for core programmes to short-term funding for specific projects), ideals (from democratic participation to economic efficiency) and new control mechanisms (accountability), and competition for funding intensifies, organizations are forced to become professionalized and cost-effective, and the advocacy role is at risk. Such trends may inhibit organizations' political function, and turn them into mere extensions of the state (Ewig and Ferree 2013; Kantola and Squires 2012). Yet, the changed relationship also fuels new partnerships and divisions of labour and responsibilities that may empower women's organizations, financially and organizationally (Newman 2012). By providing policy-relevant knowledge or having access to target groups, they may increase their authority and agency (Ewig and Ferree 2013; Kantola and Squires 2012). Focusing on the nexus, I highlight both constraints and possibilities, or what I call room for manoeuvring, for women's bodies. Arguably, the outcome of the power game between them depends on their separate resources and strategies.

The governing of migrant populations in terms of both policies and self-organization depends on categorizations related to race, ethnicity, and nationality. A concept of racism as defined by the postcolonial approach of Anthais and Yuval-Davis (1992: 12–14) helps to conceptualize the negative effects of such categorizations: racism involves producing certain groups of people as inferior according to racial markers, or cultural, religious, and national signs, alongside the practice of their exclusion or assimilation. Racism is differently distributed, depending on contextual factors. Currently, migrants from mainly the Middle East and North Africa (Muslims) are the main target group of racism in Denmark. Moreover, by supplementing with a Marxist approach, I highlight how racist notions are engrained in workfare policies, operating to direct certain groups of migrant women towards specific sectors in the political economy, as argued by Farris (2017).

Methods and data

Analysing empowerment from 'above' and 'below' as two modalities of governmentality, I establish an analytical strategy based on five dimensions (Dean 1999: 30–33; Sharma 2008: 3). (i) Characteristic ways of seeing and perceiving that transform problems and target groups into a set of specific representations. (ii) Specific ways of intervening and directing, made up of political-administrative 'know-how' or organizational expertise and relying upon specific techniques and technologies. (iii) Characteristic ways of thinking derived from various human and social sciences. (iv) Distinctive ways of forming subject-citizens through the identities offered by governing agencies in order to transform migrant women; (v) Particular ends sought.

My primary data are two reports evaluating the outcomes of governmental programmes to promote migrant women's labour market integration

(abbreviated AR 2011⁵ and SIRI 2020), and case studies of minority women's organizations, which have received funding from state bodies. The AR report maps programmes that ran throughout the 2000s, whereas the SIRI analysis covers projects, including inter-Nordic projects, running in the 2010s.⁶ Combined the reports provide a comprehensive overview of the official policy on the issue.

Municipalities are the main agencies responsible for implementing labour market integration policies in Denmark. Yet, consultancies and women's organizations are increasingly included as providers of integration services, because of their sought after resources.

I conducted the case studies of two central minority women's organizations between 2016 and 2020. The data include documents and individual and focus group interviews with volunteers and founders. Due to ethical concerns, organizations are given pseudonyms (IWC and WWIDEN). IWC was founded in the late 2000s, aiming to advocate for the equal rights of migrant women, i.e. women's rights and ethnic minority rights. It gathers and speaks for several minority women's associations (member organizations), with the latter including women from different nationalities and linguistic backgrounds, yet with a dominance of Muslims. Collaboration with other women's organizations, nationally and internationally, is crucial in mobilizing resources. IWC is a formalized and semi-professionalized body with a board, annual general assembly, rules, and work teams with individual responsibilities (counselling, outreach, communication, fund raising, lobbying, etc.). Volunteers, including migrant and non-migrant women, carry out most work. One migrant woman serving as coordinator is paid. IWC receives different funding: basic public funding as a CSO on an annual basis; project funding from both private and public agencies to provide integration services; and dues from member organizations. Its budget is quite limited. In addition to providing advocacy, IWC engages in social protest, organizes cultural events and performs integration work.⁷

WWIDEN was established in the mid-2000s, and similarly pursues a women's equality agenda. Its members are mainly Asians, Eastern Europeans, and women from the former Soviet republics, in addition to Muslim and non-migrant women. It is also a formalized and semi-professionalized body with a board, general assembly, rules, and various activities, both internal and external. The former includes various classes and self-help circles organized to assist women in the process of integration, including language training, social, legal and administrative counselling, job search, and mentorship. Externally, a few board members appearing as entrepreneurs offer integration services on demand, such as counselling, courses in job searching and interview, communication and intercultural knowledge. One woman has been employed by local authorities to coordinate activities and integrations projects carried out by CSOs, including the organization itself. WWIDEN operates as a platform for career building, self-employment and

paid work for an absolute minority. WWIDEN receives funding from the same four sources as IWC does, including both basic and project funding. Financially, its resources are scarce. It combines lobbying, advocacy, and the arrangement of cultural activities with the provision of integration services. Based on my five dimensional analytical strategy, firstly, I outline state agencies' governing of migrant women's labour market integration. Secondly, I analyse aspects of the interaction between these bodies and the two women's organizations by focusing on selected analytical dimensions.

Empowering migrant women from 'above': shaping the will to work

State bodies perceive migrant women, particularly Muslims, as a specific target group marked by their poor labour market participation (SIRI 2020: 5). This deficit is partly racialized, linked with complex culturally and/or religiously rooted problems, such as 'other' notions of illness and related health problems they fail to cope with; poor mastery of the Danish language and lacking in labour market experiences due to patriarchal gender roles and confinement to the home (AR 2011: 36–42; SIRI 2020: 12–22). Combined these conditions prevent the women from developing solid identities as workers and being employable (AR 2011: 54). Constructing the women as dependent outsiders and victims warrants the role of governmental authorities as gatekeepers of reformed ways of life. Building on practical 'know-how', so-called overall solutions, which combine various techniques, frame typical interventions (SIRI 2020: 4, 6, 9). These techniques include information about women's rights, duties, and gender roles in Denmark; information about the Danish labour market and about illness and health as perceived in Denmark, in addition to language training, enrolment in education and/or learning skills. With neoliberal rule operating through appeals to individuals' capacities for agency and self-responsibility, state agencies urge migrant women to actively participate in changing their conditions, and 'build up personal will in combination with professional skills' (AR 2011: 42). Migrant women are perceived as in need of developing self-esteem and self-agency with the assistance of empowerment agents, who help by 'focusing on the resources of the individual woman' and by 'seeing her as offering valuable contributions to the labour market', including 'informal qualifications linked with her role and responsibility as homemaker and mother' (SIRI 2020: 10). When empowering migrant women from 'above', agents (case-workers or coaches), informed by knowledge from behavioural sciences, merge support and control and encouragement and coercion (AR 2011: 38, 43; SIRI 2020: 10), thereby combining disciplinary, morally coercive, and therapeutic techniques (Hvenegård-Lassen 2007). Rather than identifying as homemakers and depending on male breadwinners, migrant women are

offered identities as autonomous individuals, workers, and responsible citizens, who contribute to the nation and their families economically (AR 2011: 43). In doing so, they demonstrate compliance with the moral ‘duty to work’, cast as a cornerstone in Denmark (AR 2011: 42).

State-initiated empowerment serves merely as a tool to capacitate migrant women for increased self-sufficiency through attitudinal and behavioural corrections. Ultimately, their employment serves to increase national prosperity and reduce welfare benefits. By their funding practices, state agencies define the form and content of labour market integration projects, which contractors are to carry out. The mapping of project funding identifies some projects as particularly economic efficient. They include women’s entrepreneurship, which I return to later, and a reward model that combines trainee, teaching, and language courses. Typically, the trainee positions are found in sectors lacking in unskilled labour power: ‘typical women’s jobs’, such as service and cleaning, hotel and restaurant, and public health and social care (AR 2011: 43–44; SIRI 2020: 12–14). Two factors are important for the success of the model: it feeds on women’s skills as homemakers; and, by rewarding personal achievements by guaranteeing employment after the end of the traineeship period, it encourages the will to work. In the name of gender equality, the state is freed from ‘draining’ migrant women, who are pushed into low-wage and conjecture-sensitive jobs, and contractors are made to comply with the narrow goals of empowerment programmes that inevitably bring some closure to the agendas of women’s organizations. I suggest, adding to the arguments of Farris (2017), that the Danish state helps produce a specific gendered, racialized (and classed) labour force and warrant racism through empowerment from ‘above’.

Entanglements of state agencies and women’s organizations

How do IWC and WWIDEN act on state agendas, while also following their own participatory-democratic agendas, and what are their room for manoeuvring? Discussing aspects of this interaction, I focus on the first analytical dimension (representation of target group and problem), and the fifth one (goals). I highlight the power game between the two sides, and how it is pervaded by tensions.

Struggling for the dignity of Muslim women

Though on different grounds, both organizations object to the dominant victim role of Muslims as found in contemporary Danish integration policies. Yet, they also comply with dominant representations because of economic dependence, or discursive entanglement. IWC, which constituencies are the main targets of integration policies, represents Muslim women in different ways and as a heterogeneous group. In an interview, the volunteers said:

Some ethnic women are like other [Danish] women. They are employed. In IWC, we are special teachers, doctors, social workers, in addition to skilled and unskilled workers. We attend to our work (...). We're strong and active women. Others are, though all ethnic women have resources, invisible women, who often suffer from male violence and dominance. They can't benefit from their resources, because they come from such harsh backgrounds. (...) We attempt to help these women.

While the IWC volunteers break up the uniformity of the dominant representation of the Muslim woman by demonstrating differences, they also strongly object to how the root causes of the problem (low employment activity rate) are perceived. Certainly, some Muslim women suffer from patriarchal control, preventing them from engaging in wage-work outside the home, but other causes are equally important: Rather than grounding problems in culture, religion, and/or race, they perceive them as socio-economic, linking them with poor working and living conditions. They also point to structural causes in Danish society, including how integration policies and laws produce racial differences and inequalities in terms of rights, which make the citizenship status of migrants insecure, and which, in turn, produce stress and malfunctioning. Another cause is found in institutionalized racism at the labour market, where Muslim women wearing scarves experience systemic discrimination (interview with IWC women). However, to help other migrant women to become independent, which is an enactment of solidarity, and to survive economically as an organization, IWC 'follows the money'. Most funding goes to projects targeting Muslim women who state agencies perceive as the most difficult to integrate. Because of this priority, it is easier for IWC than it is for WWIDEN to obtain funding. Yet, by following the money, the organization risks entanglement with the dominant, racist representation of the oppressed Muslim woman. Nevertheless, the frame of victimhood provides an opportunity for IWC to make state agencies invest in the outreach IWC volunteers carry out to establish contact with the most isolated (Muslim) women. Such contact is urgent to make these women employable in the first place.

In terms of the power game between state and women's bodies, proximity to migrant communities places women's organizations in an advantageous position, as also documented by previous research (Siim 2004; Nyhagen Predelli and Halsaa 2012). Yet, their economic dependence shifts the power balance in favour of state actors, with important consequences for the activities of women's bodies. During the interview, the IWC volunteers repeatedly complained about the time and energy they have to invest in writing applications, drawing up budgets, documenting the demands for the services they offer, and how IWC offers solutions to social problems, and talking to funding agencies (interview with IWC women). These complains testify that IWC is forced to make its organization, daily routines, and accounts more professional to succeed in obtaining funding from state agencies,

which operate according to ideals of cost-efficacy and control mechanisms of accountability, audit, and budget discipline (Kantola and Squires 2012).

Migrant women need to do it themselves

While Muslim women suffer from being rendered over-visible and mis-recognized as ‘victims’ and as extremely difficult to make employable by the dominant representation, other migrant women experience being ignored by state agencies. In an interview, the founder of WWIDEN explains:

Politicians only have an eye for two types of migrant women: victims or model migrants [particularly successful migrants who have assimilated into Danish norms and social practices. My comment]. Between these categories, there are many other women, normal migrant women, like us (...). We are strong women with resources, who take initiatives (...). We are subjects, not objects to pity and rescue (...). We also need help to learn the Danish language, the informal rules at the labour market, or to become familiar with the health services. We never get any help from society. They see us as self-reliant.

Because the constituencies of WWIDEN are seen as ordinary migrant women able to manage themselves, members are often left to find their own ways, and the organization has difficulties in obtaining funding. However, lately WWIDEN has been involved in a Nordic-funded project, revolving around migrant women’s entrepreneurship. Its engagement depends on as a combination of factors, including the need to survive economically; assisting members to become independent; solid international networks; WWIDEN’s enterprising culture that inculcates values of personal achievement, the assumption of personal responsibility and practices related to competition and commodification (Diochon and Anderson 2011); and leading volunteers’ professional experiences with entrepreneurship as the basis for self-employment (interview with founder of WWIDEN; WWIDEN homepage 2020). The aim of the project is to support women in small businesses in the creative sector in the Nordic region and the Baltic Sea area. WWIDEN’s responsibility is to identify experts on female entrepreneurship in Denmark and arrange meetings with women who are already self-employed. Profiting from their experiences, leading volunteers are paid for carrying out these tasks: setting up platforms for the formation of networks, knowledge dissemination, and counselling to stimulate migrant women to become entrepreneurs.

One leading empowerment strategy from ‘above’ has been to fund projects that encourage entrepreneurship among unemployed migrant women in Denmark and across the Nordic region. This strategy feeds on the facts that migrant women have a higher score of self-employment compared with native-born Danish women, and that many migrant women are perceived

as full of enterprise. It ties in with the general observations of Apitzsch and Kontos (2007), arguing that governments see migrant women as subjects of unrecognized resources for self-employment. Often, minority groups find niche markets exploiting them for profit by setting up small businesses when other routes to employment are blocked or because of habits. Promoting migrant women's entrepreneurship takes advantage of 'female' skills, such as cooking, and 'ethnic' competences, like cultural knowledge or translation.

Probably because of a combination of urgency, or even a need to survive, and already-present entrepreneurial experiences, the perception of many migrant women as self-sufficient, entrepreneurial, and competitive individuals fits several members of WWIDEN, for whom participation may pave the way for self-employment. Later on, I discuss issues of overlapping or clashing goals between WWIDEN and state bodies in the context of this project.

Importantly, WWIDEN points to a number of reasons why its members and the wider groups of migrant women, the organization attempts to represent have difficulties in finding jobs. Not only do they experience a lack of help with becoming familiar with society on a daily basis, but they also enumerate others obstacles found in Danish society: a common intolerance among native-Danes, including employers, towards migrants due to their poor Danish proficiency; lack of inclusivity of migrants at the labour market; harsh competition with highly educated native-Danish women on attractive jobs; cuts to vital language courses; and, the impact of increasingly stricter integration policies on the integration of migrants, legally, economically, politically, and emotionally. Rather than blaming migrant women for not achieving the results, including permanent employment, state agencies deem to be signs of integration, WWIDEN like IWC points to wider structural and interactional impediments that hinder migrant women from being included in society, and that are not taken into account.

Overlapping or clashing goals

In terms of increasing migrant women's labour market participation, the goals of state agencies and the two organizations are overlapping, though their rationales differ. The former is concerned with economic growth, including directing migrant women towards sectors lacking in unskilled labour power, with the consequence of exploiting them in precarious jobs, and reducing welfare costs. The organizations give priority to women's self-determination and economic independence, to which paid work paves the way. Yet, women's economic self-sufficiency is but part of a wider participatory-democratic agenda, an agenda of political empowerment that supports gender equality and women's agency in both public and private spheres. The narrow goal of empowerment from 'above': producing and increasing the market value of migrant women, often comes into tension

with the wider aim of empowerment from 'below'. The latter entails helping migrant women, both individually and collectively, to become full and equal citizens.

In what follows, I provide examples of these tensions nested within the power struggle between women's bodies and state agencies, and of the risks the former face when engaging in partnerships.

While helping members to become economically autonomous through self-employment, yet, the Nordic-funded entrepreneurship project that WWIDEN has been involved in makes, in the name of gender equality, the organization to comply with what Kantola and Squires (2012) call 'market feminism' (feminism's embrace of marketization), and helps reproduce intersecting inequalities of race and gender at the labour market. Moreover, with women's entrepreneurship policy becoming rearticulated within a neoliberal framework, a displacement takes place (Berglund et al. 2018). Whilst such policy initially gave precedence to a feminist discourse that called for women's economic independence through collective struggles, this has been replaced by a neoliberal discourse that encourages individual women to assume an entrepreneurial self, start their own business, and compete in the marketplace. With the individualization of change, structural problems, and solutions, as well as women's collective actions are rendered irrelevant (Berglund et al. 2018: 28). In improving migrant women's social position, competition comes into tension with cooperation, and personal achievement seems to outweigh collective struggle.

Obviously, these are some of the tensions and associated risks that women's organizations face when becoming contractors. An apparent danger is serving as a handmaiden for neoliberal capitalism with one's organization reduced to the role as a market-oriented stakeholder in employment projects and partnerships for growth (Schierup and Ålund 2011: 49). While the state depends on the insider-knowledge and networks of WWIDEN to reach the women, the organization functions as a tool in implementing the policy because of economic dependence and entanglement in the neoliberal language and social practice of entrepreneurial and competitive subjects. To optimize the possibility of receiving future funding, WWIDEN flags this project as a success, as it testifies to its competitiveness (WWIDEN homepage 2020).

However, the power game is not entirely in favour of state agencies. Adding more complexities to the analysis of the mutual interdependence between state bodies and women's organizations, WWIDEN takes advantage of the partnership and reach self-defined goals. In parallel with the 'official' labour market integration agenda, it builds up and consolidates ties of solidarity and alliances with other women's organizations involved as partners. Such resources are indispensable for future mobilization and claim making, including promoting an agenda of gender equality (Nyhagen Predelli and Halsaa 2012). Based on principles of collectivism and self-help

of the women's movement, WWIDEN also pursues goals of migrant women's collective self-determination and solidarity as ways of thinking and practicing empowerment, even though it provides services within the context of this particular entrepreneurship project. In enacting solidarity with its 'own kind', WWIDEN both provides paid work for some of its members and assist others to become entrepreneurs, when it carries out the project. Put together, there is some room for manoeuvring in promoting a wider participatory-democratic form of empowerment aiming to serve women's collective political mobilization and influence.

The primary organizational identity of IWC is that of a CSO serving as a vehicle for advocacy, interest representation, and collective action. By empowering migrant women from below, building group solidarity across national and ethnic differences, and speaking on behalf of migrant women, IWC aims to influence politics. It is also concerned with assisting migrant women in setting up and running their own associations, which is crucial for political mobilization and struggles for migrant women's political citizenship. However, the participatory-democratic agenda associated with political empowerment from 'below' sometimes clashes with the one of state agencies, which solely focuses on employability. Often, such conflicts turn into hard dilemmas for the organization and make it difficult to make priorities. Whilst IWC has a strategic interest in retaining on good terms with local authorities serving as regular funders, yet this dependence entails providing services and often unpaid work in contexts entirely defined by them. One effect is a lack of volunteer labour power in achieving the goal of political empowerment that supports gender equality and women's agency in both public and private spheres (interview with IWC women).

Conclusion

This chapter has analysed state-defined empowerment-based labour market integration programmes targeting migrant, particularly Muslim, women, and aspects of the interaction between minority women's organizations and state agencies within the context of the neoliberal Danish welfare state. The main conclusions are: in tackling the difficulties of integrating migrant women into the labour market, state agencies and minority women's organizations are dependent on one another, with their interaction conceptualized as a power game. Under the banner of gender equality, and because of their indispensable resources plus cost-efficacy, state agencies use these bodies, due to their economic dependence, as mere instruments in reaching state-defined goals. Triggered by solidarity and aiming at political empowerment, women's organizations, which help migrant women to become economic independent through partnerships with state agencies, risk, however, becoming entangled with neoliberal values and social practices, and contributing to racialized and gendered inequalities and racism. Yet, collaborating

with state agencies is also enabling for women's organizations, allowing them to pursue their own agendas, including building up ties of solidarity, networking, and achieving legitimacy and access to interest representation as advocacy bodies.

Tensions arise between the wider participatory-democratic agenda of political empowerment and struggles for migrant women full and equal citizenship, and organizations' roles in state-defined projects, which solely focus on increasing migrant women's labour market participation within an agenda of welfare cuts and economic growth. Yet, taking advantage of state support, profiting from wider networks of women's organizations, and the commitment and expertise of many volunteers, allows the organizations to have some room for agency in promoting their own agendas: struggling for minority women's equal rights, recognition, and voices. While engagement in paid work testifies to some overlap between the goals of state agencies and women's bodies, the political empowerment ambitions of the latter go far beyond. Building on a strategy of collective empowerment and group solidarity, the aim is to capacitate migrant women for self-determination and participation in power. Yet, realizing these goals require structural changes, including changing racist value patterns, facilitating access to citizenship and promoting inclusivity at the labour market.

Notes

- 1 As shorthand for the main target group of integration policies, 'Muslim migrant women', I use the term 'migrant women'.
- 2 See Stormhøj (2021) for further elaboration.
- 3 Obviously, in terms of capacities, scope, authority and range of institutionalization, the state (assemblages of ways of governing among state agencies) vastly surpasses the comparable resources and power of women's organizations.
- 4 Workfare refers to the subordination of social policy to economic demands for greater labour market flexibility and lower public social expenditure.
- 5 The report is made by the independent research agency, Als Research, on behalf of Ministry of Equality.
- 6 While the AR report is based on a systematic mapping of all labour market integration programmes financed by the state and contracted by women's organizations until 2009, I have made a parallel mapping for projects running in the 2010s.
- 7 See Minkoff's (1999) distinction between social protest, advocacy, service provision, and cultural activities in terms of CSOs' activities.

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8 ‘Home is where the cat is’

The here-there of queer (un) belonging

Ramona Dima and Simona Dumitriu

Introduction

This contribution revolves around our experiences within the queer and feminist framework in constructing solidarities, transforming them, and sometimes watching them fade or reconfigure. Our histories are interconnected, since we are both activists, and beyond other more personal identifications, we both identify as lesbian, and queer. Simona’s activities consisted of, among other, art teaching at the National University of the Arts in Bucharest and in less formal contexts, organising contemporary art spaces and groups (Platforma Space, FemCAV), events such as workshops, performances, exhibitions and talks opening the discussions on relevant social themes, while Ramona was navigating different feminist and queer groups (both informal and NGOs), in search of belonging and ways to self-educate on issues that never passed through the Romanian education filters and later on include these “new” dimensions in her incipient research. Due to our age difference and to the fact that, within queer temporalities, ten years represent, from a generational standpoint, a generation of activism and political transformations, we do think of ourselves, in a sense, as being formed—as queer persons starting to get awareness of our surroundings—within different generational spans. In short, and for the sake of simplification, these generations could be formulated in terms of the *pre-2001* and *post-2001* context¹ in Romania, 2001 being the year that saw the repeal of article 200 from the Romanian Criminal Code, in preparation of Romania’s coming inclusion into NATO and process to join the European Union. While all public LGBTQAI+ activism could only be developed locally after 2001, the years prior come back to Simona’s memory through deep layers of stigma, secrecy and random discoveries.

Feminist and queer organising was sporadically present in the interval 2001–2010, and we would argue that 2010–2011 was the most visible turning point for Bucharest-based activism in terms of groups and collectives being formed, public spaces becoming available for the presentation of queer cultural products (Dumitriu, 2020), as well through a rise in official NGO activity, a subtle rise in number of queer events and their public. We were

both active in different contexts during this turning point, and, unbeknown to each other, we had started a process of education and self-education, within local, Romanian activist circles, or in academic and international contexts (mostly Western-centred). While we had glimpses of each other over the years, our work and life partnership started in 2014, and it often functioned between the realms of the private and the public (through public performances, or through our involvement in academia or transnational networks developing specific projects, queer workshops, feminist meetings, conferences, etc.). Very briefly described above, we consider our activities, as well as our interactions as partners in life and thought, as building stones for site-specific activist selves, constructed in a very specific, often stigma-laden local environment which led to, in our case and the case of other persons around us, a need to search for, build, cling to and value safe spaces and groups that would comfort and offer a counteracting environment of respite, education and radical strength.

We are now positioning ourselves at a turn of our activist identities, triggered by our relocation in Sweden in February 2018. Apart from economic reasons, our move to Sweden had another dimension based on a vague, indescribable desire to experience “queer freedom”, in a country that our parents, then ourselves, mythologised as a socialist, queer utopia.

Sweden and other Nordic countries seem *exceptionally* good at creating the image of a safe queer land, although this image nonetheless hides other struggles: those of queer asylum seekers who must *prove* their sexuality (see Akin, 2019), those of queer people of colour that are tokenised in various projects depicting inclusivity and diversity, those of poor queers that are made invisible by the State, for example. This homotolerant image of the Nordic states is one of the mechanisms for advancing homonationalist and racist discourses (Liinason, 2020: 115) in line with the current tendencies of right-wing policies and parties which are on the rise across Europe. Nordic exceptionalism can thus be analysed through the concept of homonationalism which is seen by Puar as a way in which nation-states redefine their positions as protectors of queerness, of “(some) homosexual bodies”, in a shift of the connections between capitalism, the very notion of state and different sexualities (Puar, 2013, 2017). In this way, homonationalism deepens the existent forms of exclusion (e.g., the “progressive” West vs. other spaces), also contributing to the institutionalisation of sexualities (see how categories of non-normative sexualities are constructed and defined by states in asylum seeker cases) and ways to exercise the power relationships between nation-states and individuals.

A little over four years into our adventure, we experience something quite different: the loss of an activist self, an acute feeling of un-belonging as our ties to our own queer community, back in Romania, slowly dissolve, and as we feel less and less that we have the right to get our voice heard in the struggles we left behind, while realising that we still have to belong somewhere in the new surroundings. Yet, we feel estranged from the queer history of

Sweden. We feel solidarity with fights that LGBTQAI+ persons are leading within other diasporas, and in this feeling, we also realise that our experience and the history of our own bodies may find a place, but the process is a slow one, of careful learning and continuous repositioning of privilege.

Belonging, in essence, can be measured in terms of affection, topological certainty, and language. We exist the most in the realm of our *lägenhet* (transl. apartment), as the poster stating “*Home is where the cat is*” is the last object we move every time we move from one place to the next, together with our cat.

We exist in Romanian at home and with a few good friends, over the phone with our mothers, in English and Swedish at work. As English is still our main language to express our soul to friends that do not speak Romanian, and Swedish will probably never be more than a vehicle for work, the O Horizon² of each new friendship is hard rock, rather than easy soil, with nuances and emotions being hard to convey. Within that, the Romanian diaspora is a “little Romania”³ in which traditions and the sanctity of family become walls of separation from Swedish homonationalism (Puar, 2013, 2017).

All these questions

Bearing this in mind, we are asking ourselves (and not only) how does one transition from an activist *locus* to another and how could this function within two very different systems in terms of history, identities construction and types of solidarity? How to transmute our criticism and positionality as we practiced it in Bucharest to Sweden, and to the city of Malmö? Moreover, how can we imagine another kind of feminist, queer movements within the Western and Nordic contexts that could be both critical and engaging without obviously setting aside history and differences whenever these traits might become inconvenient for the neo-liberal sense of diversity?

We will respond to these questions in a vignette-like manner, as this contribution is primarily built on continuous discussions, snippets of life and reinterpretations of moments that affected us and shaped our understandings regarding solidarity, humanity, belonging and *lagom*-ness (where *lagom* means *moderate*). This is done through an (auto-)reflexive methodology, an autoethnography which combines our dialogues and memories (retrosexuality) on past situations which reverberate in our commonly lived present.

Theoretical background

This contribution draws from transnationalism as the central theory; more specifically, we closely follow the lines of transnational feminisms, which interrogate the hierarchies existing both within a particular national frame

and an international one (Chowdhury, 2009: 53). Direct experiences with how hegemonic Western academia and “peripheral” academia and the way feminisms, queerness and solidarities are constructed, discussed and reconstructed with relation to the nation-state and the East/West divide is one of the meanings we attach to the term “transnational”. While being aware of the critique of power relations between the West and “the rest” (Hall, 1992), we function within both frames of reference: as Eastern European scholars, artists, activists and as migrants, academics, artists in the European North.

Through our work, we seek to rescale our personal and local experiences and add them to the collective memory reformulated through the lenses of transnationalism, i.e.: “not as a horizontal spread or as points or regions on a map but as a dynamic operating at multiple, interlocking scales and involving conduits, intersections, circuits, and articulations” (De Cesari & Rigney, 2014: 6).

“Who are these persons, De Cesari, Rigney?” Simona asked. “Why are you referencing them? The transnationalism thing is tricky, look closer: [sending a link to Transnational Feminism article by Asha Nadkarni]”.

Because we are aware that transnational discourses from the Global South are usually erased from mainstream global feminist discourses thus maintaining the hegemonic relationship between Western and Euro-centric academia (Chowdhury, 2009: 72), we have developed a practice in which we try to read, self-educate and reference bodies of work coming, as much as possible, from outside the Western/North American contexts.

As Patton and Sánchez-Eppler argue, when related to queer identities construction with regard to diasporic experiences, the focus is shifting from this constant process of construction or failure of construction to how the queer bodies reinvent and renegotiate themselves between the new and old “homes” thus making movement, translocation, theoretically relevant for sexualities studies (Patton & Sánchez-Eppler, 2000: 2–3).

Queer sexualities function, in this case, as a mediator between “homes”, the diasporas and the nation-states and offer an opportunity to connect different scholars, activists (all diasporic subjects) and their discourses, in attempts to question and reinterpret nationalism and the construction of identities in different contexts (Cruz-Malavé & Manalansan, 2002: 2). The relationship between national/local and regional or global queer communities is essential when discussing the way solidarity takes shape both within and outside designed borders. In this light, our personal intervention subscribes to this framework as it aims to address the commonalities and the identities of activist and artistic groups we have been a part of, through intersections between Romania and Sweden, between East and West, across what *seems* to be the unified idea of solidarity.

Methodology

Our contribution is based on dialogues and the way we work in our artistic practice: a constant back and forth, an exchange of self-reflections and thoughts on our positions triggered by our relationship with the outside world, be it through the form of its institutions, persons, bureaucratic systems, academia or different groups and movements. This approach led us to use autoethnography in this study as well. It is for the first time when we use it in an academic piece.

While searching for a method that could better fit this contribution, we kept in mind the fact that queer autoethnography was formed as a reaction to existing mainstream oppressive knowledge that also functions in the same oppressive manner when it comes to research methodologies (Jones & Harris, 2018: 4). We decided to use our own experiences as data and transfer them into the form of vignettes, trying to make sense of how *movement* affected our activist selves.

This process, for us, and following Halberstam's arguments inspired by Foucault, also means that we work by avoiding external measurements for the specificities of our experiences (Halberstam, 2011: 12). Another dimension that we avoid is perpetuation of the hegemonic practices towards queerness that are mainly constructed within and by the neoliberal framework. In their introduction to *Queer Futures: Reconsidering Ethics, Activism, and the Political*, the editors highlight the importance of addressing the exclusionary practices not only with regards to queer theory but also to the products themselves (Yekani et al., 2013: 10), be it artistic interventions, academic articles or publications and other mediums in which the authors construct their arguments in a self-reflective manner.

By making use of vignettes as a way for constructing this contribution, we are offering a glimpse into the *exclusionary moments* some queer migrants might face. This concept usually refers to an intersection of marginalised identities and how these function for migrants excluded by their families or their sending societies, for example, as well as how these persons manage to negotiate their identities within the receiving societies (Guðmundsdóttir, 2018: 37).

Starting from this idea, we propose another look, stemming from our retrospective thoughts and experiences, this time through another nuanced mechanism: while apparently these short snippets of our lives show the openness of Swedish society concerning queerness and creating a false impression of belonging, this is, in fact, a way of under-representing the core issues of the liberal model transposed to queerness. The exclusionary moments at place in those examples were the ones left in the background: using queerness as a tool for gentrification, for furthering socio-economic disparities, for rainbow-washing, etc. In other words, while some queers may be involved in different projects and types of work, some of their peers are left behind, sometimes silenced and deemed invisible by the same

projects and work, as if being *too* critical might hurt the *progressiveness* and the *positivity* required to achieve the “safe” and “good” way of liberal life.

These exclusionary moments were sometimes initiated by us, in a form of self-exclusion. In this respect, at some points, we choose to opt out; *opting out* is another concept at work in this contribution and we borrow it from Mari Ruti (2017). Through our journey together, we could not help but to observe and react to the double standards and the positivity pushed by institutions and groups dealing with queer issues that had the role to advance a “false cheerfulness” (Ruti, 2017: 2) that deems any critical attitudes as undesirable and leaves aside any issue that might bring up “negativity” into question.

Consensus and non-confrontational attitudes are key elements of success, at least in the mainstream discourses, yet we often choose to reject these attitudes as being superficial and sometimes dangerous for other persons left behind. The opting out is a strategy of defeating *cruel optimism*, that is: “the hope that our relentless efforts (say, our efforts to fit into neoliberal society) will bring us the love, intimacy, success, security, harmony, or financial reward—in sum, the good life—we crave even when they are extremely unlikely to do so” (Ruti, 2017: 29).

Looking back, or as Shahani (2011) calls it, making use of “*queer retrosexuality*”, is our preferred way of work, facilitating both understanding and drawing meaningful (political) reflections while offering time to step back and reorganise our feelings and thoughts over the emotionally charged situations we refer to. Our failures and nostalgia, as well as some achievements, are rethought and reconsidered with the help of the presented vignettes that offer only a glimpse into what belonging and (un)belonging feel or felt at particular moments on time in our shared experiences.

Context(s)

Romania

I remember Stonewall, but not my sister’s story

– a saying we wrote a few years ago, and keep repeating to this day, while living in a country with a different experience of its queer activist past.

Our activist story in Romania starts from us knowing, through social positioning, what tasks we could perform as part of a queer or LGBTQAI+ movement which was not devoid of its problems.

Belonging was clear and phenomenological: we belonged to certain well-known geographies, to specific groups with which kinship was possible as such, we felt we had the support to start building spaces that were queer,

or queer moments in the academia, or to act out our presence for events supporting specific queer or LGBTQAI+ causes. We had our paths through our city of residence, we were informed of and in contact with groups and persons active in various other CEE (Central and Eastern European) countries and the Balkans or organising in other bigger Romanian cities.

We also found ourselves, at times, to be critical towards more mainstream feminist or LGBTQ initiatives, although it is quite difficult to completely consider mainstream even such bigger NGOs, as they are comparatively small, *niche* fighting against the much stronger winds of Romanian politics. Even the few established Romanian LGBTQ NGOs are fragile institutions in the public realm. Unfortunately, their usual strategy of counteracting public fragility is to fit into heteronormative frames, discouraging or not promoting activist presences that would steer them away from a heteronormative conventionality. This is a standard critique that can be brought forth globally to organisations mainstreaming LGBTQ rights, but one that, although applicable in Romania's case, needs to be nuanced by the local postcolonial, homophobic context.

Our standpoint, as activists and as queer bodies in a hyper religious, homophobic and racist peripheral-European country characterised by poverty, corruption and by the aftereffects of overlapping imperialist systems, was to search for or contribute to building safer spaces that were an alternative to both mainstream NGOs and to the daily grind.

The in/visibility of our queer or lesbian identity in Romania is multi-layered. Many persons there, ourselves included, practice *visibility*, or the trope of *being out* in a fragmented manner: while being visible in activist circles, or in some of our work circles, or becoming *visibilised* in public sphere (see Gopinath, 2002: 151–152) through cultural products or due to various behavioural or appearance cues—always with a certain degree of negative consequences—we, as queer cisgender women, slipped in and out of visibility with regards to our families, and with regard to having a weighty enough voice and presence in the small mainstream activist world. Thus, we have positioned most of our implications in public activism within the already-classical area of *killjoy* dissonance (Ahmed, 2017), focusing in an often separatist way on activities made by and centred on persons identifying themselves as women or as non-binary.

In Bucharest, we frequented a small group of queer women who met weekly around cooking and separatist women and transgender only reading circles.⁴ As part of their strength and importance for grassroots activism in Romania, they delimited themselves often from the mainstream activist world. Progressively, fragments of their speech, knowledge and practices got nevertheless swallowed and appropriated by newer, stronger queer-leftist organisations.

Before deciding to move from Bucharest to Malmö, our position had become that of *opting out* of many of these new initiatives, just as we had *opted out* from the more mainstream ones. Not because we saw ourselves as

paragons of virtue but simply because we had lost friends in activist conflicts, or we had witnessed the silencing of persons we had respect towards. Our *opting out* was an invisible gesture, a form of symbolic absence, one of retreat into personal experience.

Even if some of our paths diverged slowly some years ago, many of the persons from the reading circle still feel like chosen family, like a distant bond impossible to break. When thinking around *imagined communities* (see Browne & Ferreira, 2018), this is what we imagine, perhaps, finding again, or building again: a momentum of commonality, a group committed to each other and to a certain cause, strength in critical positioning, while also having the capacity to work in a project-building manner, in wider networks, in collaboration with other like-minded groups or organisations.

Life goes on, as we have now become observers, switching the “here” and “there” in our mind, and still trying to find a correct, ethical methodological frame for our possible involvement in our current “here”—and from our current “here” to our former “here”, which is becoming a “here-there”. How can we interact back in our Romanian queer and transgender community, a very concrete, not imagined one, made of people in Romania and people in the diaspora? Why do we feel that we “ran from our responsibility” to look for a somewhat better situation, and where lies the legitimacy, when it comes to us intervening into the situations “there”, “at home”? Will we ever find answers to these questions, as we look for models and possible inspiration in other diasporic activists? How stuck are we in the meantime and how does this affect our attempts at contributing to the *imagined community* from “here”?

Vignettes

The recipe for lentil stew

After we had an art residency at MuseumsQuartier Vienna during which we met one of the financiers, Ramona decided to apply for funding to organise what would become the first openly queer and feminist conference hosted by the University of Bucharest (Queer Feminist SEE⁵ International Conference, November 17–19, 2017). Since the grant was small, we decided that all our project management and implementation efforts will be not remunerated so that the funds will be directed to paying the visa fees, accommodation and transportation for the participants who needed them (over 30 persons).

Catering options were expensive (and not tasty), therefore we also decided to cook for the three days lunches and dinners, having our mothers and friends from activist circles (but not exclusively) help us with buying, transporting, and cooking the food. This whole process, in which people worked voluntarily, was indeed a clear sign and example of solidarity that might be less understood in the larger Western context where if not remunerated, at least the prestige of an event or a university might be the main factor

in deciding to lend a hand in an event or another. The lentil stew and the smoked eggplant salad were some of the stars of the menu—and the secret in the lentils was indeed sumac.

But the process of securing a conference room was more time and (mental) resource consuming than the actual cooking. After an initial (cautious) expression of support before finding out that the project was granted financing, a back-and-forth with the director of Ramona's Doctoral school followed: Ramona was told that since she is in the last year of her PhD studies, she should concentrate on the thesis and not on organising conferences. She was then offered advice on transforming the three days conference into a few hours' colloquium; the decisions of not asking for a conference fee and that of paying for some transportation costs were criticised, since "prestigious events" would never offer travel grants for participants.

Although Ramona only requested a conference room in her Faculty (Journalism and Communication Studies) and no other logistical help, in the end, the request was refused, as the Doctoral school director decided that they cannot be involved with organising the event, invoking the lack of human resources and logistics. We finally managed to secure a conference room and a kitchen in the Faculty of Sociology's building, but the covert homophobia of the previous situation continued to linger as an after taste for a while.

Of toilet rolls and silencing

This story is only partially ours to tell, and it needs to begin with its poetic end, or rather with the conclusion that love, and solidarity, are expressed in toilet rolls sometimes. Some years ago, in Bucharest, Platforma Space hosted two months of political theatre, a festival organised by a leftist, socially driven theatre NGO that became stronger each year. Indeed, such theatre is needed in the world, yet artists often speak for or instead of the under-represented, often in well-praised plays that tackle topics such as work, migration, poverty or racism. We learned to take such projects with a grain of salt.

Three of Platforma's collective at that time, namely Simona and artists Ileana Faur and Marian Dumitru, were the ones spending time to keep the space open during production, rehearsals and performances, making sure there will always be clean water to drink, tea and coffee to brew, and toilet paper, amenities always bought from their own pockets, as is the custom in some self-sustained spaces. Somehow, in Simona's mind, the group had equally meagre means to sustain themselves—which she believed until one day when someone else said only: *oh, you are so naïve, they have received (insert considerable amount by local standards) as support from (insert national cultural funding authority) and (insert second, a bit smaller amount) from (yet another funding authority)*. She came back to dusty Platforma, where, with just a few more performances, the political theatre season was

nearing its end, and checked the funding authorities' websites. Marian and Ileana were there too. They looked at each other and said: *well, they had all this money all along. At least they could have bought some supplies of toilet paper, instead of eating up ours all the time.* The toilet paper thus became a symbol by which the members of the collective would measure solidarity. While it is, of course, a cheap and necessary good, at the same time, given the precarious situation of Platforma and the fact that a well-funded NGO had access to the space, and its resources free of charge, without sharing anything in return, helped the humble toilet paper to achieve this symbolical status. It also became a symbol of economic precarity edging on poverty, as the collective kept the doors to the space open to other initiatives, even when their own economic resources were nearing the end.

As a side note, the same political theatre group, later that year, silenced a now well-known Romanian Roma stage and film actress, by speaking up instead of her within the scopes of a play she had written, that dealt with her own life experiences, which lead to one of the least mendable wounds in recent Romanian intersectional activism.

Fast forward seven years after, the birthday celebration of a queer friend in a studio/gallery space in Malmö, with someone requesting on Facebook a supply of toilet paper for the party. To close a loop, as a symbolic gesture, although our finances in Sweden were still relatively scarce, we arrived at the party with a substantial pack of the best paper sold by the closest supermarket. Jokingly, one of our friend's friends commented: wow, there is so much toilet paper now from everyone! Is this a white people's thing, to bring so much toilet paper, or a corona thing? The times, and the context, had indeed changed.

Sweden

How to transmute our criticism and positionality as we practiced it in Bucharest to Sweden, and to the city of Malmö?

After moving to Malmö, *queerness*, or *transnational symbols of queerness* (Klapeer & Laskar, 2018), have been anchor points for our journey here: from meeting, confiding and trying to live and work with and around persons from the queer, transgender and enby spectrum, either Swedish or belonging to various diasporas. Our chosen extended family here in Sweden includes us and a friend, also Romanian, and transgender. He was our point of entry into Swedish society from before we even moved to our current home in Sweden. We met our chosen relative through a common friend living in Romania. That friend, also an activist, put us all in contact and we have tried to be a system of support for each other ever since.

In Malmö, we (together or separately) got invited to speak a few times by institutions curious about our queer experience "back home", in a very clear attempt at a pedagogical/ going through the motions, inclusion of diversity in their programming, then never heard from said institutions again after the

talks. We also emailed several times the Malmö office of the main Swedish LGBTQ rights organisation, which boasted a programme of welcoming newly arrived queer persons, without ever getting an answer in return.

Fortunately, we found a few groups of activists, a local library and a small local bookshop where we could look in, with respect and composure, at the work that is being done by QTBPPOC for themselves, often in a separatist manner, at the work done by fat queers, Muslim queers and so on. We further looked for, and never found, dedicated queer places or spaces of gathering beyond a large array of parties that function as networking devices, and often as places of developing activism or cultural projects. As we are not party goers, where should we go, in this post-queer society?

We also learned that “here” things do not have the truth to matter simplicity usually found “back home”, where homophobia and transphobia, racism and nationalist-religious feelings melt together in the public realm, in an obvious manner, while various groups that are discriminated against usually perpetuate the other types of discrimination against each other. “Here” is shrouded in all the right words, but the feelings behind public space politics and behaviours are never clear to our means of interpretation, never decipherable with the keys we have amassed so far from our readings, personal and joint experience, to the point where to us, it may look like they are non-existent. These *right words* are the most up-to-date terms in activism which stem from grassroots experiences and are soon after used by large Pride NGOs in their discourses around Pride. For instance, when the city of Malmö organises different talks in the frame of Pride month, relevant topics are usually touched: the marginalisation of different groups, critiques about the participation of the police in the Pride march, anti-capitalist critiques about the commodification of Pride, or discussions about how the initial meaning of these events was lost. At the same time, all the critiqued elements co-exist with their critique, which may be seen as a paradox of the right to free speech: for instance in 2021, in a small, corona-regulated, march at Malmö Stadion, a group of QTPOC literally “ambushed” the police by walking in front of them with banners denouncing police violence towards people of colour, yet this did not convince the City, nor Pride organisers, to refuse the presence of the Police in the 2022 march. On the contrary, apart from police employees, a group of prison employees (Kriminalvården) also joined the 2022 march. Even when it comes to self-defined radical organisations such as Malmö’s *Rosa/Svart*, things remain within the paradox sphere. Instead of creating alternative movements, these groups are still present in the march, ending the Pride parade with their van blasting some antifascist songs between a flood of latest pop hits.

As per the adage *better with the evil you know than with the one you don’t*, we counter-intuitively think, sometimes, that old, well charted hatred may just be better than blankly staring into an abyss that may consist, under its shiny surface, of any unimaginable kind of hatred or instrumentalisation. Better for what? Unclear, yet this needed mentioning.

We even crossed the bridge and went to Copenhagen Pride, where we experienced our first taste of a huge, mostly corporate, slow moving, over-boozed street spectacle that felt strange, in the absence of history. A pride-separatist alternative, Nørrebro Pride, was taking place at other dates and on other routes than the city-organised Copenhagen pride. It centres on the experience of BPOC queers, and offers an ethical response to the bigger corporate event. In Malmö, we are lending our voice to some of the fights queer persons in the city can be in solidarity with—such as anti-deportation work, no borders work, anti-racism work. We are also lending our body to the overall head count of official pride.

At the same time, we started to understand the emotional support of living within a diaspora, as many of our closer friends are indeed Romanian persons living in Malmö. Worldwide, the Romanian diaspora is a political force able to change—and changing—politics internally. Several million people have left the country to work and have taken as much as possible of their homes with them, from Christian orthodox churches to Romanian shops selling familiar name brands, to bus routes connecting like a lifeline the home country to the country of residence, bringing in and out relatives, goods, packages from home. We receive such packages from our mothers every few months and each time we open them, full of unnecessary goods and food laboured with love, *distance* blurs a little.

Evidently, diasporas move their beliefs and class differences with them to their countries of residence, where these sets of beliefs and statuses get confronted and transformed by factors pertaining to the new social context they encounter. Within the Romanian diaspora in Sweden, for instance, queer and transgender visibility are conditioned, as the risks of hypervisibility in a smaller community are harder to assess. On the other hand, queer or transgender members of the Romanian diaspora are a direct extension of home, and as such, become our strongest connections in the new land, as we bridge for each other the distance from “here” to “there”. These elements could very well be at the core of an “alternative construction of diaspora” as Gayatri Gopinath (2005: 194) proposes, where the whole concept of diaspora is centred on the queer sexualities dismissed by nationalist diasporas or states.

And so it is that we have extended our chosen family in the queer Romanian diaspora to include us, our cat, our transgender Romanian friend based in Malmö, and his cat.

Vignettes

The rainbow flag

We were encountering the rainbow flag everywhere in the city, for Pride week, even since 2017, then again after our definitive move to Malmö. At first, seeing the rainbow, or more rarely, transgender flag, randomly in the

city, hanging from windows or balconies, did have on us a special effect, giving us the sense that we *belong* to an unknown, uncharted, *imagined community*. This was not a sight that was familiar to us; in Bucharest, that would be a most rare and exquisite demonstration of bravery, to keep the rainbow or transgender flags visible at one's window, something that would lift one's heart to unimaginable heights but also marking the living space of someone that we knew in real life, a friend or fellow activist.

Or Ramona hanging the rainbow flag out of the windows of the main university building in Bucharest, while sitting on the windowsill, smoking and talking to some colleagues, during the times smoking indoors was allowed but the flag not quite. As long as the university brings into discussion *objectivity* towards issues and values, the flag will not be anchored and all that is deemed acceptable will remain in the form of annual Christmas trees and reminders of Orthodox saints' celebrations on the institution's social media.

Whilst in Malmö, seeing various flags in various places seemed a more *casual transnational marking of queerness* (Klapeer & Laskar, 2018: 526), while also charting our paths through the city that we were discovering. To a large extent, a few years into our move, this *imagined community* remains unknown and uncharted to us. If, by moving to Sweden, we were envisaging us, perhaps with an ease which pertains to our privilege as white peripheral Europeans, almost as if moving directly to a *queer nation* (Ibid.: 529), one which had progressed beyond recognition towards a space of safety which extended to its territorial borders, we were in fact moving to a handbook case of homonationalism.

Luck, activism, or maybe just the rules

We moved to Malmö after Simona received a contract to work for two years as a curator at a local gallery. The work contract was by no means generous, at only 40% employment, yet we took the chance that was offered, as a fortunate event, were lucky enough to find a second-hand rental with the help of an acquaintance and decided to move. Immediately after arriving in Malmö, we applied to Skatteverket (the Swedish Tax Agency) for what is essential for existing in Sweden: a Swedish personal number. In our application, we argued that Ramona had moved as a *sambo*, a live-in partner, as we had lived together for two years prior to moving and were able to prove it with a document issued in that sense by the administration of our apartment building in Bucharest.

We feared the worst: we hadn't lied by any means but were doubtful that any Swedish authority would take into consideration a document coming from Romania, even if legally translated. The only way Ramona could have started a life "here" was by getting a personal number, a real, not temporary one, recognising her as Simona's partner. And surely enough, our proof of

cohabitation was considered sufficient by our case worker whom we never met and both of us received personal numbers.

Nonetheless, to our close friend from the queer Romanian diaspora, the fact of us getting our personal numbers with such simplicity was nothing short of a miracle: many de facto cohabiting heterosexual couples, coming from Romania, had been subjected to rejections upon rejections, sometimes taking years. Was it not the same for us simply because we had the more proper documents, or was it that the case worker, let's even imagine a queer person themselves, understood somehow our difficulty, our need for a moment of peace, and decided to go beyond any eventual (and often present) xenophobia-based beaurocratisation and grant us, as EU citizens, the much-needed figures? Or was it merely another example of homonationalism at work?

Was it perhaps a decision based on class, as Simona was coming as a middle-class, cultural worker, while others perhaps did not? With just a simple exercise of imagination, especially after learning about the grinding that everyone else was subjected to with even the best documents in hand, we could picture ourselves as a possible success story of homonormativity, the nice, middle class-y lesbian couple that people in more "advanced" societies can easily be lenient towards even if more xenophobic clichés could point otherwise.

With relative ease, which was to be dismantled quite soon in the years to come, we had found our *imagined community* in a person whom we were never to meet, our case worker. Did they have a rainbow flag on their window? Or were they simply a correct office worker and nothing else had learnt in our favour or against?

"Looking for more women and non-binaries"

The above was heard by one of us during a meeting with a Swedish gentrifier. At one moment in early 2019, one of us, together with a performance artist (who happened to be queer and not born in Sweden) got an appointment with a city employee who also runs a cultural NGO famous for driving a well-known one-day street festival in Malmö. We were, at that point, together with a small group of artists, looking for a possible space to rent for multiple cultural uses, and the performance artist had heard of this blonde Swedish cisgender man in his 50s, who apparently was a sort of middle person between a large company which owns land and industrial buildings in semi-central Malmö and the eventual cultural and artist groups looking for cheaper rental spaces for their activities. Prior to our meeting, we did not look too much into who the man was, simply because we had considered him a real estate agent, or a representative of this large Malmö-operating company. Our purpose was to ask what kind of buildings were there to rent, what would be the price per square metre, and if we could perhaps visit the

buildings and see what was available, while also being aware, and wary of the fact that the area we were looking into, situated between the Rosengård and Persborg train stations, was planned to undergo heavy gentrification soon. In brief, we were mostly curious to see what was on offer.

The man received us and quite fast established himself as the deciding factor of whether we would have access or not to any building in that industrial area and to which building. He was by no means an estate agent, but a cultural agent who informed us that we would have to submit a cultural proposal to him, and then he would decide if we would get any space from the ones available, at what monthly rent, and under which conditions. He boasted himself as a factor of progress and praised the intentional gentrification behind his actions: he had already established several Malmö independent cultural initiatives in the area (all with a visible queer component) with the same method and was looking for more “women and non-binaries” to, as he said, counteract the fact that there were so many men in the area. Besides one big, dominant factory and its various adjoining buildings, that area has many car wash and repair businesses owned by non-European migrants, several Muslim and Christian prayer houses, and is generally inhabited by racialised persons.

To us, this was a crystal-clear example of how rainbow-washing and gentrification can join in discriminative actions and to this day our interaction with the man is a shocking display of how so-called cultures of inclusiveness can function. In a sense, this vignette is a cautionary tale, if there ever was one: we learned to *opt out* once more, obviously. But we also learned that projects with radical intentions can befriend the devil if that grants them access to space and lowers the rent.

A conversation at work

This happened to one of us: I speak Swedish moderately, enough to get by in most interactions, with an accent that travels from Paris to Iași in the span of a minute. So, it is obvious that I am “not from here”. Which makes people curious sometimes—although for the many white Swedes I work with curiosity is manifested in truly queer ways. And one person was so curious as to start the following dialogue:

– *So, were you born in Sweden? (???what?)*

Me: *Well, from my random Swedish you would guess no, right?*

– *Well, you can't know... So, where do you come from?*

Me: (states country)

– *Oh... (face gets a bit shrivelled) I had many from your country when I was teaching SFI.⁶*

Me: ...

– *And do you think you'll be staying here?*

Me: (apologetic, explanatory, timid) *Well, I think so, since I work here and have my family here, and so on...*

– Oh (says person who does not know me), yes, do stay, it would be so cool to have you!
(Thanks?)

Concluding remarks

Through this contribution, we showed a few of the similarities and the differences between our subjectivities and activist selves in Romania and Sweden. We have also inquired on how Romanian queer diaspora might be constructed within the new surroundings and acceptances of queerness. While the struggles differ because of the contexts and country-specifics, we could find some connections between the queer Romanian scene and the Swedish one: in/visibility functions in both cases but on different levels (there is still a tendency of leaving other voices behind), the commoditisation of queer related events and issues is more pregnant in the more neoliberal scene (Nordic/Western area) but other areas are rapidly reaching this stage, the *inclusive* discourses can sometimes be a code name for something else (gentrification, choosing the “desirable migrant”, dismissing a group as “too radical” in relation to the mainstream, etc.).

We are yet to draw more conclusions, as our stories keep intersecting and many were left outside this contribution for varying reasons (too close to us, too specific, too harsh, and ongoing).

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Notes

- 1 In 2001, Article 200 from the Criminal Code which made illegal same-sex relationships was repealed.
- 2 The layer of loose leaves and organic debris at the surface of soil¹.
- 3 Romania is a post-imperialist country, as an Eastern European state put together after the transformation of the Austro-Hungarian, Habsburg, Ottoman, and Russian empires that ruled over portions of land called, up till the end of the First World War, *principalities*. It became a state under German influence (with German kings who decided to reinvent Byzantium for a while), had its share of fascist governments, constructed Communism under different rulers and even made it work for a short while, enslaved Roma persons for 500 years, is the fourth top nation that sent persons to Nazi camps during Holocaust, or directly to their deaths. It boasts an independent Christian Orthodox church which is extremely rich, tax-exempt and outspoken on matters of “normality” and Christendom. Romania did not ever truly begin to question its national queer & trans bashing, racism and ethnic discrimination, and violence against women besides some window legislation passed to gain integration in the EU which was granted in

view of its NATO and US-strategic role against Russia, or in other words to act as a bumper between the *old* and the *new empires*.

4 See: <https://fia.pimienta.org/>

5 South Eastern Europeⁿ

6 Svenska för invandrare/Swedish for immigrants.

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9 The poetics of climate change and politics of pain

Sámi social media activist critique of the Swedish state

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Sámi advocacy for environmental justice and human rights stretches back for centuries (Cocq and Dubois, 2020; Ramnarine, 2009; Svendsen, 2021). More recently, social media technologies have given Indigenous peoples and communities new “opportunities to powerfully resist, refute, and reject” settler colonial oppression (Carlson and Frazer, 2020, p. 1). One principal role of digital activism and social media communication is to shape connections between Indigenous protest movements and their joint resistances to powerful global leaders on the unfolding global ecological crisis. This is illustrated by the well-known Standing Rock protests (aka #NoDAPL).¹ The #NoDAPL protest took place in North Dakota, United States, between April 2016 and February 2017, and is recognised as the largest North American Indigenous protest of recent decades, where media usage contributed significantly to forging global connections, support, and outreach. The #NoDAPL protests emerged against a planned pipeline that would transport oil just north of Standing Rock Sioux Tribe reservations’ boundaries and below the Missouri River (Johnson and Kraft, 2018). Circulation of filmed videos and pictures from the protests on social media reached a wide audience and Indigenous community support. Interestingly, images of the welcoming ceremony for three Sámi women later appeared in the news in Sápmi, on their Facebook pages, as well as in a TV series about Sofia Jannok that was televised in Sweden and Norway. Moreover, numerous Indigenous groups created online communities to show solidarity by uploading videos on YouTube – “We – people X – Stand with Standing Rock”. Another widely cited event took place in October 2016, when approximately one million Facebook users checked into the Standing Rock camps to mislead the police, who were rumoured to be tracking protestors on social media (Johnson and Kraft, 2018). These events exemplify how social and digital media play a significant role in forging connections, demonstrating solidarity, and enacting Indigenous agency and activism.

A longstanding issue in Sápmi territory, and hence topic for Sámi activism, is state-owned and multinational companies’ persistent efforts to establish mines or drill for iron ore in landscapes vital to Sámi livelihoods. The Swedish state has generally supported the investment of

mining companies by implementing “pro-mining policies, low mineral taxation, and investments in mining-related infrastructure”, therefore Sámi activists expose the destruction of the land and the disavowal of the Sámi rights (Ojala and Nordin, 2015). However, by the time of writing, Sweden has not yet signed the ILO convention on Indigenous and Tribal people, hence the Sámi lack full legal ownership over their land (Rosamond, 2020).

During the Gállok protests in Sápmi in 2013, that broke out as a response to British company Beowulf Mining initiating exploratory drillings for iron ore near the UNESCO world heritage site of Laponia and adjacent Sámi villages, social media platforms Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook were used extensively to communicate about the events on site (Lindgren and Cocq, 2017; Rosamond, 2020). The Sámi are Europe’s only recognised Indigenous population, whose traditional land traverses Arctic regions of present-day Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Russia Kola Peninsula (Hilder, 2012). Gállok is one of the most high-profile conflicts and it has gained a strong symbolic meaning for the struggle of Sámi self-determination in Sweden, compared with the Altá conflict in Norway in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Ojala and Nordin, 2015). Locals and activists set up a camp in July 2013 and occupied it until the end of September 2013. Occupations, art installations, and demonstrations took place on site, and several times the police were ordered to evict the protestors. However, the national media did not cover the events until August, and when they did, Indigenous perspectives were largely marginalised. Hence, during the protests and their aftermath, social media were prominent channels to enable the Indigenous voices being heard and develop connections and further collaborations with other activist and Indigenous movements (Lindgren and Cocq, 2017).

It is clear that the usage of diverse media in Sámi contexts has contributed to addressing linguistic and cultural erasure, articulating the rights of self-determination and engaging in larger debates about Sámi culture (Bladow, 2019; Carlson and Frazer, 2020; Cocq and Dubois, 2020). The first periodicals and newspapers in Sámi languages appeared already in the late 1800s and early 1900s. In their works, authors such as Johan Turi and Elsa Laula Renberg addressed minority-majority relationships and the injustices that affected the Sámi people (Cocq and Dubois, 2020). In Sweden, the presence of the Sámi, who were traditionally known by the derogatory Lapp category, was significant in defining Sweden’s racial identity (Mattson, 2014). Swedish scientists defined Sweden as modern and European by making a distinction between Swedes and Sámi. Starting in 1913, the Swedish state introduced the policies that forbade Sámi people to settle, required that they work in reindeer herding, and intermarriage with Swedes was prohibited (Mattson, 2014). Throughout the 1930s and the beginning of the 1940s, Sweden practised racialised eugenics, for instance by measuring Sámi facial features and heads to scientifically prove their genetic inferiority (Rosamond, 2020).

After World War II, a strong Sámi resistance movement emerged as a response to the mentioned political and cultural suppression. The Sámi began imagining the transnational Sápmi community via the territories that traversed the Arctic regions of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Russian Kola Peninsula (Hilder, 2012). Along with literature and visual art, Sámi musical performance has been vital to the revival of Sámi culture. Joik has emerged as a Sámi national song in the late 1960s, and it has become a tool to communicate and articulate the Sámi indigeneity. Music festivals and performances have been significant for Sámi cultural and political revival and sovereignty (Hilder, 2012). More recently, the intensification of publications go hand in hand with access to technologies, and development of Sámi media. Radio broadcasts, television shows, and the use of the internet and digital networks as tools for activism provide opportunities to express Indigenous concerns and resist state politics.

Sámi activism is marked by an increased attention towards the recognition of Indigenous rights, and which exists alongside a continued or even intensified industrial push to exploit the resources on Indigenous lands due to globalisation and neoliberal economic agreements (Cocq and Dubois, 2020). The reality of climate change is more present than ever and due to the rapidly changing weather patterns and shrinking access to lands, resource-based practices are difficult to maintain. Moreover, many Indigenous people live in poorer socio-economic conditions as a result of colonial histories (Whyte, 2016). The Sámi are strongly affected by the disturbing changes in weather patterns and state-supported policies that render grazing land useless, such as the exploitation of hydropower, forest roads, logging operations, and tourist resorts (Furberg et al., 2011). Many of Sweden's mineral-rich areas are geographically located in Sámi territory and there are a lot of disputes about the extraction of natural resources in the North of the country. The mining industry plays a significant role in Sweden's economic development, leading to new jobs, tax revenues, and the revival of unpopulated areas.

Despite the opposition of environmentalists and local Sámi populations, Sweden continues to support mining projects. In March 2022, the Swedish government awarded a licence to a British company Beowulf Mining to proceed with an iron ore mine in Gállok (Johnson, 2022). Since the protests in 2013, the Sámi opposed the plans for the mine as the open pit mine will endanger the ecosystem and reindeer migration. Prior to the decision making, the UN Human Rights advisors urged Sweden to stop the mine project, arguing that large amounts of dust with heavy metals will be produced in an open pit mine, and the water sources will be impacted by the deposit of the toxic waste (Ahlander, 2022). However, the Swedish government approved a mining project, claiming that the company would have to meet a set of environmental conditions.

Due to growing access to digital products and networks, Indigenous activists make use of the internet to draw attention to Indigenous issues

and mount protests. The trend can be seen among the Indigenous activists in Sápmi, Greenland, the United States, Mexico, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and elsewhere in the world (Cocq and Dubois, 2020). In the Nordic context, there has been a growing body of work analysing Nordic colonial complicity (Jensen and Loftsdóttir 2012; Keskinen et al., 2009). Compared to other colonial contexts, “colonial processes were typically more insidious, gradual and less *physically* violent in Scandinavia” (Kuokkanen, 2019, p. 8). For example, in Sweden, the erasure and assimilation of Sámi histories goes hand in hand with the refusal to regard Swedish history as imperial (Tlostanova et al., 2019). However, what lies at the centre of this discourse is the historical and on-going dispossession of Sámi people of their land in the name of (settler) nation-building and industrial development (Tlostanova et al., 2019). Scandinavian settler colonialism aimed at weakening the self-determination of the Sámi and interfered with their lifestyle by imposing taxes, closing borders, and implementing assimilation policies. Furthermore, in contemporary Nordic governments’ climate mitigation policies, promoting renewable energy and increase of technology continue the colonial dispossession of Sámi lands and threaten traditional Sámi livelihoods (see Liboiron, 2021; Normann, 2020). For example, industrial scale wind turbines have a disastrous effect on reindeer herding, due to the infrastructure required to build and maintain the turbines. Hence, what is framed as an environmentally friendly solution against climate change endangers sustainable ways of Sámi livelihoods. The recent Sámi parliament’s President Aili Keskitalo referred to these paradoxes as “green colonialism”, where the Sámi practices and needs are compromised to promote greener policies and ideologies (Arctic Circle, 2020).

Increasingly, and much because of historically lacking direct means of meaningful political participation, Indigenous activists and artists raise issues of environmental destruction and human rights violations through the means of digital technology (Carlson and Frazer, 2021; Duarte, 2017). Social media platforms offer possibilities to oppose and refuse colonial violence and racist, white supremacist ideology, to forge transnational bonds of solidarity and resource-sharing amongst Indigenous communities, and thereby work towards collective imagining and realising a future otherwise (Carlson and Frazer, 2020). This chapter builds on these insights, and specifically considers some such moments and movements by prolific Sámi artist Sofia Jannok (b. 1982, in Sápmi, Sweden). Jannok has released five albums, is twice nominated for the Swedish Grammy Award, and received the World Music Award (Sweden) in 2014 (Rosamond, 2020). Jannok played a part in the TV series *Midnight Sun* (aired in 2016), and she featured in the documentary series *The World’s Sofia Jannok* broadcast on Swedish state television SVT. She sings in Sámi, Swedish, and English, and combines jazz, popular music, and joik. Since her initial debut in the early 2000s, she has adopted a more direct and openly activist stance in her music performances (Cocq and Dubois, 2020). Jannok was active and performed during the 2013

Gállok protests, and was among the Sámi supporters of The Standing Rock protests in the United States. Jannok has emphasised in her public advocacy that in being an artist speaking out on Sámi and Indigenous issues, she is continuing the legacies of her familial and local traditions: her great uncle was an influential Sámi poet Paulus Utsi, and the area where she grew up, Luokta-Mávas Sámeby, has produced important contemporary Sámi leaders, such as Israel Roung and Lars Anders Baer (Cocq and Dubois, 2020).

Considerations of methodology, materials, and ethics

Three well-known and oft-shared online videos with Sofia Jannok have been selected as data material, to illustrate the connections between Indigenous activism, the politics of pain, and settler state injuries. The analysis presented here is derived from Akvilė Buitvydaitė's Master dissertation (Buitvydaite, 2020), which utilised Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) (Machin and Mayr, 2012), a method that combines Critical Discourse Analysis and visual semiotics, analysing texts and visual materials together. This approach combines central tools in critical discourse analysis with semiotics (Hall, 1997). It emphasises the analysis of linguistic choices to reveal assumptions and taken-for-granted ideologies in diverse types of texts, such as images, graphics, and spoken and written words. This approach to the selected videos allows for a close reading and analysis in context of the different data displayed in the videos, political contexts, and relevant scholarship. The analysis is built on the premise that social media offer possibilities to have influence over information, representation, and knowledge, and have more potential than traditional media to question and challenge structural power relations (Bruns 2008; Fuchs 2010; Morozov 2011 as cited in Cocq and Dubois, 2020; Rainie et al., 2012).

As two non-Indigenous, Nordic-based settler researchers, we acknowledge that our positionalities pose ethical concerns. As we do not draw on personally lived experiences of the injustices we discuss here, it is necessary to reflect openly on our reasoning. The decision to include this chapter is based on our view that a Sámi perspective will add pertinent nuance to this anthology's critical analyses of Nordic exceptionalism, given that Sápmi colonisation is a central premise and effect of it, in the past, in the present, and in hegemonic imaginaries about Nordic futurities. We have learned greatly from colleagues in the three project workshops, especially the two keynotes in the second workshop on Nordic exceptionalism: Palestinian artist Rana Bishara who spoke on de/colonising territorial land occupation and tactics of resistance, and scholar Paola Bacchetta, on decolonial Indigenous and feminist and queer of colour theory (see Bacchetta et al., 2015; Bishara, 2011). In addition, we have been in dialogue about the ethics of authorship with workshop participant Kris Clarke, who has long-term experience co-researching and -writing with an Indigenous colleague (Clarke and Yellowbird, 2020). Overall, and as elaborated on in greater context in the Introduction chapter

of this book, we all felt strongly about the importance of including Sámi perspectives in this anthology and therefore elaborating the workshop presentation and the discussions that accompanied it, into this chapter.

Finally, we note that in this chapter, ‘Sámi’ is appropriated as a general term, a collective marker of Indigenous identity, experience, and community set in contrast to Sweden as a colonising nation-state. This approximation does of course not account for the multiplicity within the Sámi population – there are at least ten different Sámi languages and dialects, and the Sápmi region stretches across Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia. Consequently, the political, linguistic, and historical contexts of various Sámi groups differ (Ojala and Nordin, 2015).

“It hit me like an arrow”: the politics of pain and the urgency of climate change

In the TEDx Talk *Our Rights to Earth and Freedom* (Jannok, 2012), Jannok speaks against the environmental destruction of Sámi territory that Swedish mining companies are responsible for and raises awareness on Sámi issues more broadly for a mainstream audience (the talk took place in Mumbai, India). On stage, she is dressed in traditional Sámi clothing, performs joik in the beginning and at the end of the talk, and displays photographs on a large screen in the background to illustrate her arguments. Jannok begins her talk by asking the audience about the blockbuster movie *Avatar* (2009):

Have you seen the movie *Avatar*? That big Hollywood production with spectacular 3D effects and blue people ... I saw it last year and it hit me like an arrow towards my chest ... It is about the human race in the future where they have destroyed mother earth, emptied her of all resources, and started to find other planets to invade. A big mining company finds valuable resources on a paradise planet full of life, so now they want to invade it. The problem is that on this planet, there are already living other inhabitants. Blue skinned people are living there in perfect harmony with animals and nature but the company shows no mercy. The natives have to be moved or destroyed. When I saw this movie, I cried throughout the whole story because it was so familiar. To me it was like a painful documentary of a present life, my life. This is how it is for my people, if not so say all Indigenous people all over the world.

(Jannok, 2012, 2:30)

Here, Jannok recounts the painful experience of watching the movie using affective personal language: she “cried throughout the whole story” because the plot line was painfully, intimately familiar to her. Watching the destruction of mother earth and emptying of her resources by the mining company in *Avatar* reminds Jannok of a very similar situation in Sápmi, where

economic policies facilitated by the Swedish nation-state harm the land, interfere with traditional Sámi practices, and compromise the possibility for Sámi sustainable livelihoods. Twelve of Sweden's 15 active mineral mines and a vast majority of the value of mineral extraction are located within the traditional Sámi territory. Given that the Swedish government aims to strengthen its position as a leading mining state within the EU, it recently launched actions to facilitate iron ore extraction by making the process of granting mining permissions faster and smoother (Raitio et al., 2020).

In this section, we show the connections between intimately felt pain, collective politics of pain, and global ecological crisis from the distinct perspective of Sámi experiences. Drawing on feminist writer and independent scholar Sara Ahmed's analysis of the cultural politics of emotion (Ahmed, 2004), we argue that emotional events such as the one described by Jannok here must be contextualised in relation to a collective cultural politics of world-making. The power dynamics involved in this event has the potential to shape surfaces of individual bodies and collective imaginary and concrete worlds, and importantly: it also marks and retains boundaries. Argues Ahmed:

So emotions are not simply something 'I' or 'we' have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the 'I' and the 'we' are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others.

(Ahmed, 2004, p. 10)

Through her talk, we learn that the painful sensation in Jannok's body arises as a response to the plot of a fictional story that resembles her own reality: A big mining company removing and destroying natives for the sake of extracting natural resources reminds Jannok of Sweden's mining policies in Sápmi, which come into conflict with Sámi reindeer herders that depend on having access to various open pastures and ecosystems. Reindeer herding is a traditional, nomadic, collective livelihood and cultural intergenerational practice of the Sámi people and in Sweden is currently organised into 51 reindeer herding communities (*sameby* in Swedish) (Raitio et al., 2020). However, reindeer herding is disrupted due to shrinking lands, damages done due to dams, power lines, noise, and dust from the blasting from the mining industries together with increasing wind energy, infrastructure development, forestry, etc.; a fact that strengthens the "green colonialism" critique (Normann, 2020; Raitio et al., 2020).

To meaningfully communicate the ways in which the coloniser states through mining companies appropriate Sápmi land and inflict pain on Indigenous communities through the accompanied environmental destruction, Jannok applies emotive linguistic and visual effects. References to the plot of blockbuster movie *Avatar* to underscore Sápmi realities for a mainstream, global audience result in recognition and perhaps also affect – 'the

company shows no mercy and the natives have to be moved or destroyed'. The familiarity between the fictional world of Pandora depicted in *Avatar* and Sápmi realities brought Jannok to tears, she tells the audience: Argues Ahmed, "In the sense that the process of *recognition* (of this feeling, or that feeling) is bound up with what we *already know*" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 25, italics in the original). The violent extraction of natural resources in Northern Sweden is an already-known reality that Jannok recognises and articulates through words and images in her talk by way of a more commonly known mainstream cultural product, the *Avatar* movie: "People have come,... they dug wounds in the mountains.... Some big companies, driven by people whose goal is money, invade our home, force us to move or simply get rid of us" (Jannok, 2012, 3:50). Histories of violence are embedded in Jannok's tears, her "*pain is the bodily life of that history*" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 34 italics in the original). Prior to watching *Avatar*, Jannok had already experienced and witnessed the pervasive Swedish colonial destruction of the Sápmi landscape, through mining and logging industries, water management, and through political, educational, and cultural exclusions. Concludes Jannok: "Whether you eliminate people by actually killing them or by killing the conditions for life in freedom, it pretty much makes the same harm" (Jannok, 2012, 4:04).

In her talk, Jannok makes a clear distinction between 'we' (the Sámi) and 'they' – the mining companies and the Swedish nation-state. This polarised division is used to convey certain ideas and create the collective other (Machin and Mayr, 2012, p. 84). Placing 'them' in a group makes them more 'homogenised', as if they are meant to look/act like one another, creating an impression that has a negative connotation (Machin and Mayr, 2012, pp. 100–101). Jannok also refers to 'some big companies, driven by people whose goal is money', 'a mining company', 'they will dig' as a collective body, using such words as 'invade', 'forces to move', 'gets rid of us', 'killing', 'harm', 'stole the mountains', 'destroy'.

The photographs accompanying her talk further support her argument that mining companies destroy the landscape, disrupting the livelihoods of Sámi reindeer herders. The visual effect is considerable: one photograph shows an aerial view of the mining area, with large pits in the landscape clearly visible. The 'wounds in the mountains' that Jannok refers to in her talk seem to confirm the visual communication, indicating that the mountains are injured and feeling pain. Another photograph shows of a dead reindeer, lying on the snow. Showing the death of a reindeer is meant to demonstrate the connection between the injured landscape and its effects on the reindeer herding practice, a most vital economy for the Sámi, and a unique way of life that is now at the frontier of the climate crisis (Ojala et al., 2021).

The linguistic and visual choices attributed to the Swedish nation-state and the mining industry are in contrast with the individualised portrayal of the Sámi, where Jannok tells stories about her grandfather, mother, and

father, and uses lexical choices of ‘our home’, ‘my friend’s reindeer society’. A black and white photograph of her grandfather appears in the background when Jannok talks about the Sámi population and shares personal stories about her family. In the photograph, her grandfather stands in the centre, with a calm, satisfied facial expression, and holds two reindeer by lassos by his side. There is a mountain in the background, and the reindeer with horns are as tall as him. Jannok also draws on the intergenerational knowledge, passed from her grandfather to her mother, and from her parents to her: “we borrow our home from earth, we can’t own it, we don’t possess it ... Because when we go, our children will need a home, and their children yet to come will need a home” (Jannok, 2012, 6:58). Hence, the depiction of the Sámi is in stark contrast with the portrayal of the agents behind the mining industry. Such contrast between collectivised ‘they’ and individualised ‘we’ creates an impression of the individualised Sámi group as being more humanised (Machin and Mayr, 2012, p. 80), hence somebody in the audience is likely to feel more empathy with. It has been noted how, in colonial discourse, it was the colonised subject that was portrayed as the – implicitly inferior – ‘other’ in relation to that of the coloniser (Ashcroft et al., 2000, p. 169). However, Jannok here poignantly reverses this violent dynamic by humanising the Sámi (through personalisation) and in using visual and lexical choices to convey the connection between her personal, painful reaction to *Avatar* specifically, and a response concerned with a collective, existential context of environmental and livelihoods destruction faced by all Sámi.

As mentioned, in her TEDx Talk, Jannok articulates the many ways in which watching *Avatar* feels like a painful documentary of the lives of Indigenous people worldwide. For many of them, climate change is experienced as a déjà vu caused by the ongoing institutional dismissal of Indigenous sovereignty and facilitation of carbon-intensive economic activities (Whyte, 2016). Indigenous people and communities are among the most vulnerable populations who are affected by the destruction of their land and by the severe changes in weather patterns, making resource-based livelihoods difficult to maintain (Furberg et al., 2011). Moreover, many Indigenous people live in poorer socio-economic conditions as a result of colonial histories, hence making them less resilient to impacts of climate change (Whyte, 2016).

In *The Cultural Politics of Pain*, Ahmed advocates for a reading of pain in politics as different forms of injury that may have happened due to an uneven and antagonistic history (Carl Gutiérrez-Jones, 2001, as cited in Ahmed, 2004, p. 33). Understanding the ‘uneven and antagonistic’ historical context of Jannok’s painful reaction, by closely reading what she says, shows, and their contexts on stage as well in history, demonstrates how – for the Sámi – the past is existentially embedded in the present and how climate change is violently connected to Swedish colonial history and Sámi injury: “The colonization started about 400 years ago and what is worse, it still has not stopped” (Jannok, 2012, 5:04). The wounds caused by the mining

industries are a continuation of the injuries that have been caused to the Sámi community during past Swedish colonialism. Jannok's reference to the colonial past and its ongoing legacies demonstrate how climate change as it is unfolding today needs to be examined in a broader historical and political context of continued colonial dispossession and its relevance for mitigating climate change (Liboiron, 2021).

Past Swedish discriminatory policies regarding Sápmi have been lumped under the term 'integration' or 'internal colonisation' but historians have been reluctant to use the term 'colonialism' (Lindmark, 2013, as cited in Ojala and Nordin, 2015, p. 10). However, since the 16th century, the Swedish Crown increased its domination over the region by implementing economic, cultural, and political policies aiming at undermining Sámi communities (Mattson, 2014; Ojala and Nordin, 2015; Rosamond, 2020). Therefore, Jannok's description of the current situation in Sápmi as a colonisation that has not stopped argues that present-day conflicts over land and cultural rights date back to the Swedish discrimination policies and domination over the region. Sweden's current interests in promoting industrial development through extraction of natural resources come in conflict with reindeer herding practices. But it is not new. The contemporary dispute over land rights is an extension of historic Swedish colonising of Sápmi territory and must be understood as a continuous renunciation of Indigenous rights. This argument is supported by the fact that the Swedish Sámi Parliament, established in 1992, has no law-making function (Raitio et al., 2020). Hence, the reading of Jannok's painful reaction to *Avatar* demonstrates that climate change is intrinsically linked with the history of colonialism and the emergence of capitalism. The destruction of the landscape by the mining companies is intrinsically connected to the settler state's historical dismissal of Sámi's rights and world views, and ongoing dispossession of Indigenous lands.

“This is my land”: anger, injury, and structural injustice

Following on from the analysis in the previous section, this part of the chapter considers two more videos by Jannok: *We Are still Here* (2016c) and *This Is My Land* (2016a), both available on YouTube. We aim to show how spoken word, song, and visual content in these videos can be understood as a response to the state's discourse that tries to undermine Sámi rights and deny historical colonial policies.

Both videos begin with the audio excerpts from the state attorney's intervention during the hearing of the course case between the small Sámi reindeer herding community, Girjas, and the Swedish state. To contextualise, in 2009, Girjas filed a legal action against the Swedish state, where they demanded exclusive hunting and fishing rights and the community's complete authority over these rights (Allard and Brännström, 2021). In January 2020, Girjas won a historical victory, affirming the community's demands, and mapping a unique case in Nordic history in the battle for Indigenous

rights. However, during the court case, the state representatives explored all possible arguments against the Sámi demands and persisted in using the offensive old term “Laps” instead of the preferred “Sámi” (Allard and Brännström, 2021). A voice recording of attorney Hans Forsell was made during a May 2015 court case, and excerpts from this recording appear in both videos. Another Sámi musician and joik performer Jörgen Stenberg in cooperation with activist Tor Tourda then uploaded a revised video of the song “Vuortjis” on August 28, 2015, where they used footages of Stenberg’s live performances, footage of Gállok protests, and excerpts from Forsell’s court statements. On his Facebook wall, posted the same day, Stenberg writes: “Gállok och Alta. Rasforskning och småviltsjakt. Oavsett hur överheten talar sitt maktspråk är kulturen mitt vapen, jojken mitt spjut” (Gállok and Alta. Race biology and small game hunting. Regardless of the language of power employed by the government, my weapon is culture, and joik my spear) (Stenberg, 2015b as cited in Cocq and Dubois, 2020, p. 161). As noted, Indigenous communities and activists now use platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter to connect with each other through using various hashtags. Jannok, alongside other Sámi musicians such as a rapper SlinCraze (Nils Rune Utsi) and Maxida Mäarak, uses Indigenous targeted hashtags in their posts, to reach like-minded audiences (Fuller, 2020). Moreover, the usage of hashtags links art pieces to other contexts, contextualising them in specific ways and allowing the work to be part of a bigger movement (Berg and Lundgren, 2021). The videos *We Are still Here* and *This Is My Land* continue the tradition of digital Sámi activism by exposing the unwillingness of the state to acknowledge Sweden’s colonial history and recognise Sámi sovereignty.

In both videos, Jannok also uses the audio excerpts of the attorney’s speech to illustrate the court’s insistence on undermining Sámi demands and deny historical discrimination policies. The audio excerpts of Forsell’s court statements feature in the beginning of both videos. The recordings are in Swedish; however, Jannok provides a written English translation in the description of the videos on YouTube to make it accessible to her global audiences. In *We Are still Here*, the audio recording of Forsell begins thus:

From the onset on, it is of most importance to state that: the Sámi have not been subjected to the discrimination by the State. The state consistently disputes the claim that the Sámi have been present in the area on a large-scale basis ... before the 17th century.

(Jannok, 2016c, 0:04)

In *This Is My Land*, the attorney elaborates:

The state is of the opinion that the claim put forward by the Sámi reindeer herding community with regards to their long tradition of being

engaged in reindeer husbandry, hunting and fishing in the area is of irrelevance to the case. In order to be eligible to claim immemorial prescription, said claim has to be based on ninety years use of an area. Any additional use for a longer period of time is of irrelevance to the legality of the claim. Because of the claim that it is of importance that the Sámi have been using this area, the state is of the opinion that it is of utmost importance to define what is meant by the term Sámi, and how specific such a definition really is. This is what the following material is meant to do.

(Jannok, 2016b, 0:11)

We Are still Here is a collaboration between Sofia Jannok and Anders Suna, a Sámi artist whose several works explicitly address Swedish colonialism and abuse of the Sámi people (Heith, 2015). Although Suna also works with more traditional forms of art, he is mostly known for his street art, where he addresses the topics of colonialism, racism, and exploitation of natural resources, among the few. He is known for his art aesthetics that connect with the notions of protest. For example, in some of his works, the Sámi characters are presented as rebellious with allusions to Pussy Riot hats, other times a stencilled image of a Sámi person is portrayed with a bomb in his raised left hand (Berg and Lundgren, 2021). On social media, Suna frequently uses hashtags such as #sápmistreetart (collecting photos of Sámi related street art), #indigenousart (tagging photos of Indigenous produced art worldwide), and #contemporaryart (collecting photos of broader art pieces) to situate his works as part of large movements (Berg and Lundgren, 2021).

The Jannok/Suna video illustrates how digital spaces are used for articulation for Indigenous activism. In addition to the video hashtags – #girjasmotstaten (in English: #girjasagainstthestate) and #wearestillhere, the video has been viewed more than 130,000 times on YouTube at the time of writing. In the video itself, Suna is shown to make his artwork on a transparent film wrapped around the trees in the forest. In the beginning of the video, while the voice of the attorney claims that the Sámi have not been discriminated against by the state, the viewer sees Jannok and Suna wrapping a transparent film around the trees in the woods covered by snow. Several reindeer are running around further in the background. Throughout the video, Suna is working on the artwork on the transparent film between the trees. Elsewhere, Berg and Lundgren (2021) discuss how protest street art is usually associated with urban environments; however, the context of a forest with trees, animals, and snow becomes a part of both motif and message of the video. Moreover, the filming of the artwork itself, to have it available on YouTube, allows the larger audience of viewers to have access to it. Without the availability on YouTube, the forest space itself will unlikely attract many viewers, therefore sharing on digital media may be specifically necessary for protests happening in peripheries.

There is a poignant moment in *We Are still Here* when we are listening to the state attorney saying: “The state consistently disputes the claim that the Sámi have been present in the area on a large-scale basis ... before the 17th century”. Simultaneously, we are watching Sunna writing on a transparent film in bright-red, capital letters: ‘YOU HAVE NOT BEEN IN THE AREA!’ (Jannok, 2016c, 1:00). In this way, Sunna exposes and protests the state denial of historical discrimination policies by imitating the arguments from the court case. The song lyrics are also a direct reminder of the violence inflicted onto the Sámi and other Indigenous people throughout the history of colonialism, thus demonstrating that arguments from the court case are false. ‘Kill the bison’, ‘dig out the reindeer’s land’, ‘blood on greedy hands’, ‘burn the tipi down’, ‘100 years back in the USA killed my sisters, cut their breasts away’, ‘In Peru my brothers always stayed shot down at home’, ‘steal our mother’. A lexical analysis of the lyrics produces a straightforward narrative of violence inflicted onto the Sámi community through the history of colonialism. Impersonalised referential strategies, visible in lexical choices, define no explicit agent behind the injuries, resulting in portraying these events inevitable, as facts that do not need to be questioned (Machin and Mayr, 2012, p. 85).

In a similar vein, the lyrics of *This Is My Land* also allude to injury and are constructed around the dichotomy of ‘my land’, ‘my country’, ‘I’d be’, ‘I’d take’, ‘my pride, my freedom’, ‘my home’, and the constant use of ‘you’. The subject of injury, the injurer so to speak, is attached to the pronoun ‘you’, which can be understood as indicating the Swedish nation-state, and the industries that destroy the landscape in Sápmi: ‘if you want to ruin it all with big wounds in the mountains’, ‘if you open up your eyes you’ll find someone is lying’ (Jannok, 2016b). From a critical discourse point of view, lyrics of both songs are promoting ideological squaring, which is meant to structure opposing views around the participants (Van Dijk 1998, cited in Machin and Mayr, 2012, p. 40). This means that the participants are not necessarily labelled as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ explicitly, but such a moral-political distinction is very much implied through applying structuring concepts such as here.

Textual choices in both songs contrasted to the audio recordings where the attorney claims that the Sámi have not been discriminated against by the state and questions their historical presence in the area. Ahmed (2004) urges to attend to injury as something that happened in time and place, and to account for asymmetrical power relations. Reading pain and injury in politics uncovers the relationship between the structures that cause injury and the bodies that are injured. The lyrics of the songs evoke suffering and pain, the mountains are ‘wounded’; however, references to the history of colonialism and other Indigenous people (‘100 years back in the USA’; in Peru) demonstrate that the current state policies that facilitate climate change are a continuation of violence and that the Sámi are among other Indigenous people who are affected by the legacies of colonialism. Later in the video of *We Are still Here*, Sunna writes the word ‘LAPP’ ten

times on the transparent film, which could be understood as a reference to the Swedish policy of ‘a Lapp shall remain a Lapp’ (Jannok, 2016c, 4:34). Such policy intended to create a homogenous Swedish nation and the Sámi were perceived as a threat to national purity. The Swedish state practised eugenics to convince that the Sámi were of the inferior race (Mattson, 2014). Hence, the state’s insistence in Girjas court case in denying discriminatory practices against the Sámi but using the derogatory term ‘Lapp’ shows the conflictual nature of the court’s argument, and Sunna is exposing that in the artwork of the video. Similarly, the final verses of *This Is My Land* – ‘someone is lying’ – could be interpreted as a direct reference to the court case proceedings, and a demand for recognition – ‘I’ve always been here welcome to my hoods’ (Jannok, 2016b, 4:58).

Similarly, in *We Are still Here*, Sunna draws several images on the canvas made from transparent film, wrapped around the trees. On one of the canvas, Sunna paints the faces of two women – one is Elsa Laura Renberg (1877–1931) – a South Sámi activist, who was one of the initiators of the first transnational Sámi meeting in Trondheim on February 6, 1917, which since 1993 has become a national Sámi People’s day (Heith, 2018). Another face is of a contemporary young North Sámi (Jannok, 2016c, 3:41). The images evoke the historical and contemporary resistance of the Sámi. According to Sunna, these portraits represent a united consensus both across time and space (Eriksson, 2016, as cited in Berg and Lundgren, 2021). To choose women as prominent figures represents the idea of Sámi culture, and also acknowledges often-unrecognised role of women in protest movements (Jenkins and Rondón, 2015; Sjöstedt-Landén and Fotaki, 2018 as cited in Berg and Lundgren, 2021).

Another image on the canvas portrays a reindeer, dressed in traditional Sámi clothing, that holds a lasso to catch a cat, dressed in a suit with a crown on its head. Due to the potent cultural symbols, such as traditional clothing, reindeer, and the crown, we read this image as the Sámi – represented by the reindeer – trying to expose the state’s discrimination policies via an image of the cat (Machin and Mayr, p. 54). As the lyrics of *This Is My Land* refer to the ‘someone is lying’, the reindeer is also trying ‘to catch the Swedish state’, and to reveal the narratives that the state is circulating in the excerpts from the court case.

In both videos, Sámi people are portrayed as active agents, challenging, and resisting the state discourse and showing solidarity with other Indigenous people. In *This Is My Land*, clips from the Indigenous people’s demonstrations during COP21 meeting in Paris in 2015 appear. A group of Indigenous people are seen standing together, with their raised, clenched fists, uttering slogans and carrying banners and posters (Jannok, 2016b, 1:51). The Sámi flags are visible in the back and various posters and banners are held by the protestors. The slogans, including ‘respect Indigenous rights’, ‘leave it in the ground’, ‘for a climate of peace’, and ‘stop colonialism’, are a demand to respect and listen to Indigenous voices, and the body language of the

crowd signifies frustration, anger, and at the same time determination. The raised, clenched fist has become a symbol for marginalised groups to express their solidarity with each other and to address discriminatory behaviour (Duffield, 2020). Such visual choices represent broader values and identities and are meant to show Indigenous people as active and determined (Machin and Mayr, p. 70). With the images and lyrics of *This Is My Land* (2016) on reclaiming land rights, Jannok calls to a global Indigenous movement, centring Indigenous land rights as a theme but evoking it through Sámi specific cases and attributes of Sáminess (Fuller, 2020).

Conclusion

As shown in this analysis, depicting the Sámi as active subject and using linguistic and visual means to humanise Sámi existence, are consciously set in contrast to state discourse aiming to dismiss the Sámi claims, and by extension erase Sámi existence on their own terms, in past and present. The anger and pain communicated in the videos are reactions to the historical and contemporary injustices that the Sámi, and other Indigenous people, endure daily. “If anger is a form of ‘against-ness’, then it is precisely about the impossibility of moving beyond the history of injuries to a pure or innocent position” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 174). Thus, understanding anger as a response to pain and injury allows us to draw connections between political and economic structures, and their effects on the bodies of the communities. As illustrated with the Girjas case, the Sámi are fighting to institutionalise the Indigenous rights to protect their lands from industries that facilitate climate change. The anger in the clips is ‘a bodily shape of against-ness’ (Ahmed, 2004); it embodies the impossibility to accept discriminatory state policies, and to move beyond the history of colonisation, as its legacies are present today.

By January 2022, Sweden had still not ratified UN ILO Convention No. 169, which supports Indigenous self-determination and lays the means for ways of participating in and negotiating in decision-making processes (Raitio et al., 2020). Thus, reading the emotions in the videos from the Indigenous protests demonstrates that anger is articulation of pain but in a different form. Understanding the injuries that are articulated in Jannok’s videos as created in time and space is a reminder that the wounds of the Sámi community remain open as the state continues to inflict pain in different ways, such as denying Swedish colonial history, undermining the Sámi rights, and supporting the policies that facilitate climate change.

Connecting pain, injury, and anger in music performances shows how legacies of colonialism and climate change are an ongoing source of pain for the Sámi people. In her videos, Jannok uses a distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and attributes emotions to create the dichotomy between the Sámi and Sweden as a nation-state. Depicting the Sámi through the traditional markers such as reindeer herding and traditional clothing might

risk homogenising Sámi identity and excluding voices of other Sámi groups. Similarly, choosing Jannok to represent the Sámi might reproduce the hierarchies within their Indigenous population. However, the focus of the chapter was to show how pain carries histories of violence and how Sweden continues to dismiss Indigenous demands for the sake of industrial development. The urgency of climate change is more present than ever, and Jannok's videos provide possibilities to explore the connections between political decisions, economic policies, and environmental destruction.

Note

- 1 '#NoDAPL' is an acronym for 'No Dakota Access Pipeline' and used with a hashtag on social media. The Dakota Access Pipeline is an underground oil pipeline, stretching from North Dakota to Illinois, through Sioux territory, and is principally controlled by Energy Transfer LP.

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10 Varieties of exceptionalism

A conversation

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Introduction

This conversation emerged from our research collaboration within the project *Spaces of Resistance* where we studied feminist and LGBTI+ activism in three different, yet overlapping, geopolitical contexts, namely Russia, the Scandinavian countries,¹ and Turkey.² Having attended the workshop on Nordic exceptionalism (EXCEPT 2019) in May 2019, we set out to extend the notion of exceptionalism beyond the Scandinavian countries. To us, the Scandinavian countries were notorious for manifesting a form of exceptionalism through hegemonic attempts of being forerunners at a global scale, producing a neocolonial narrative of being “secular, gender-equal and LGBTQI-tolerant,” positioned as role models “for the rest of the world to follow” (Alm et al. 2020: 2; Habel 2012). We wanted to decouple exceptionalism from its attachment to certain national regimes and regional borders and use it as a heuristic device in relation to our research sites. In this chapter, we investigate the utility of exceptionalism as a transnationalising concept that allows us to exceed the boundaries of methodological nationalism as “the assumption that the nation/state/society is the natural social and political form of the modern world” (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002, 302). In our conversation, rather than comparing how feminist and LGBTI+ activists engage with the national state in all three contexts, we look at how they encounter challenges emerging through exceptionalist discourses. Although, as we argue further, the national state sustains the grounds and effects of exceptionalist discourses, it does so in relation to a global world order. We identify the postcolonial dynamics of ‘victims’ and ‘leaders’ in discourses of exceptionalism and explore how these might influence the language in which activists communicate with each other on a transnational arena. Used in this way, the concept of exceptionalism enables an analytical frame that underlines the multiplicity and multi-scalarity of institutions and discourses, including the national state, transnational organisations and donors, and local communities. Applying exceptionalism to contexts such as Russia and Turkey, we admit that their current positioning around secularity and gender equality is in stark contrast to the Scandinavian

model. Yet, in all three contexts, exceptionalism works as a post-imperial and neocolonial discourse aimed at establishing one's regional and global dominance in a post-Cold War multipolar world.

Notes on methodology

This chapter is based on a semi-structured, tape-recorded conversation between three researchers working in different contexts in the same research project. Engaging with the available scholarship on exceptionalism in our respective contexts through the lens of our collaborative research and transnational methodology in *Spaces of resistance*, we designed the conversation around four themes that correspond to four sections in what follows: The first theme regards the dynamics, histories, and relations of exceptionalism in Turkey, Russia, and the Scandinavian countries and serves as an empirical backdrop to the following themes. The second theme offers a discussion on how the operative logics of exceptionalism are entangled with dominant discourses on gender equality in our contexts and transnationally. The third theme concerns how exceptionalism as a concept helps us better understand notions and activist practices of complicity and resistance. The final theme considers possible ways of addressing and going beyond exceptionalism through transnational solidarities in feminist and queer research and activism.

Transcribed into a text document, the recorded conversation was later revised and edited several times under the influence of our internal discussions and reviewers' comments. The introduction, notes on methodology, and conclusion were added later. However, the major line of conversation remains intact. Maintaining the original format of our dialogue, we wish to explicate how we implement a transnational methodology to highlight similarities and differences between respective national contexts that each of us study separately. In our work, we have been inspired by feminist and queer research where collective dialogue as a method of academic knowledge production and presentation of research ideas and findings have been fruitfully implemented (e.g. Brosi and Hooks 2012; Butler and Spivak 2007; Feminist Freedom Warriors Conversations Archive; Mohanty and Carty 2018; Mountz et al. 2015). Browne et al. (2017: 1,382) show that dialogues have a great potential for transnational feminist and queer praxis. They envision the dialogue as not just an object of scholarly analysis but as "analysis and knowledge creation in itself." The dialogue is a way to highlight linkages, parallels, and contradictions between different research contexts and overcome a strict comparative methodology that may reproduce hierarchies between the Global East/West and North/South (Browne et al. 2017). To maintain this strategy, we also apply a multi-scalar perspective on our respective contexts (Çağatay et al. 2022; Roy 2016), showing how exceptionalist discourses are produced at the intersection of activist practises, state-civil society relations, and global geopolitical challenges.

Our vision of exceptionalism in Russia, Turkey, and Scandinavia is informed by our variegated positionalities in relation to these contexts. As a Russian-speaking Belarusian, a subaltern position in relation to the Russian imperial legacy, Olga looks at Russia and the feminist and LGBTI+ activism there as an engaged outsider. While she does not have first-hand experience of living or doing activism in Russia, she shares a lot with her research partners due to their common belonging to feminist and queer struggles in postsocialist geographies, which Russia is a part of (Çağatay et al. 2022; Stella 2015). Selin's research concerns gender politics and equality struggles in Turkey where she focuses on the changing agendas, forms of organising, and political strategies of feminist and LGBTI+ activism from historical and transnational perspectives. Located in Western academia and having a background in feminist activism in Turkey, Selin conducted participatory action research (PAR). Feminist PAR was a most suitable way of involving Selin's fellow activists as participants in her research and incorporating conflicting views and disagreements into processes of collective knowledge production while addressing how differences in power and privilege impact on research relationships (Cahill 2007; Reid and Gillberg 2014). Based in Sweden, a country in which politicians, journalists, teachers, and researchers alike contribute to upholding a myth of gender equality and homotolerance, Mia focuses on the Scandinavian countries both "from the outside in and from the inside out" (Hooks 1984: vii; Martinsson et al. 2016). Mia's positionality is informed by an ambition, anchored in critical race and queer knowledges, to examine the neocolonial, exclusionary, and hierarchical exceptionalisms exercised through such myths, which is not limited to the Swedish context, but stretching across Scandinavia, the wider Nordic region and beyond. Regardless of our different positionalities, our critical engagement with exceptionalist discourses is greatly informed by our conversations with activists themselves. Therefore, rather than treating exceptionalism merely as an analytical concept through which to investigate activist practices, we discuss the ways in which activists resist and/or maintain exceptionalist discourses depending on their agendas, affordances, and positionalities.

Coloniality and the dynamics of exceptionalism in Russia, Scandinavian countries, and Turkey

MIA: I can start with the relevance of exceptionalism for Scandinavian countries.³ The Scandinavian model, which is an internationally established concept, has been used to explain economic policies or a democratic system where equality is declared as a core value (Bergqvist 1999). Based on this, the Scandinavian countries have been described as a cluster of nations characterised by a "harmonious process of modernization" (Dahl et al. 2016: 20) and "development aid, peacebuilding and cooperation" (Keskinen et al. 2009: 16). However, not only are such ideas of being a role

model imperialistic and exclusionary, but they also make struggles against hierarchies and inequalities less recognisable, more easily ignored and at times also demonised (Alm et al. 2020; Habel 2012). Postcolonial scholars critically point at the fact that the Scandinavian countries refrain from recognising that they have been, and still are, part of colonial and imperial processes (Keskinen et al. 2009; Loftsdóttir and Jensen 2016). Yet, they were involved in diverse colonial projects in the Caribbean, West Africa, India, and Greenland (Brimnes 2021), and from the 12th century and onwards, the colonisation of Sápmi resulted in an enforced assimilation into the Norwegian society, while in Sweden, it led to a marginalised form of segregation and an extraction of natural resources by the state (Sametinget 2021). In Denmark, the colonisation of Greenland involved several abuses of the Inuit people, for example in the mid-1900s when the authorities removed children from their Inuit families to become better integrated in Danish society. Throughout history, in the Scandinavian countries, the production of national identities has shaped the basis for exclusionary racisms and forms of subordinated inclusion of indigenous and minority populations and migrants (Hübinette and Lundström 2011; Mulinari and Neergaard 2014). The presence of xenophobic, anti-immigration and extreme right-wing parties in the parliaments of these countries is seen to constitute a structural fracture to the idea of human rights in Scandinavia (Keskinen et al. 2009). These parties and the social movements behind them seriously challenge the paradigmatic image of the Scandinavian countries; it is not viable anymore to refer to these countries as having some kind of particular equality.

OLGA: In Russia the concept of exceptionalism refers to the country's liminal position between East and West without clearly belonging to either of them (Osakanian 2018). On the one hand, Russia has a legacy of the colonial empire. The Russian Empire colonised external territories but also non-Russian lands and people from the peripheries within the country (Etkind 2011). On the other hand, Russia is an orientalised Other for the West, its "mystic and mythic Orient" (Tlostanova 2008: 1). Russia is undeniably part of European modernity, but its eurocentrism is secondary – it both reflects and distorts "the western original in the Russian cultural and mental space" (Ibid.; see also Suchland 2018). The ambiguity of Russia in relation to European modernity can be defined as a "special path" – an idea that is popular in contemporary Russian political discourses (Umland 2012) where the imperial resurgence is clearly on the rise (Etkind 2011).

SELIN: Similar to Russia, Turkey is a successor state to the Ottoman Empire. In the Turkish case, exceptionalist discourses gained popularity through the nationalist struggle that culminated in the formation of the Turkish Republic in 1923. The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire happened through many wars, loss of significant territories in the Balkans and the Middle East, massacres and genocide, and population exchange. The remaining land was called Turkey and the remaining people Turkish; Turkish identity corresponded to what was left when most other ethnic and

religious identities were eradicated and/or forced into assimilation (Ülker 2008; Zürcher 2004). Following World War II, Turkish exceptionalism gained a new dimension as religion and tradition were re-incorporated in nation building processes (Brockett 2011). In the Cold War context, Turkey's national identity as at once secular and Muslim as well as its geopolitical position as bridging Europe and Asia was highlighted. In the current stage of Turkish exceptionalism, shaped by the two decade-long conservative-Islamist leadership, we see an embrace of characteristics such as tolerance and hospitality in relation to Turkey's assumed leadership position within the Muslim world. Yet, the exclusion of certain groups of people from the imagined Turkish community even when they are considered as Muslim such as in the case of Kurds, Syrian migrants or LGBTI+ communities indicate the continuation of nationalist and assimilatory qualities of Turkish exceptionalism.

In terms of foreign policy discourse, Turkish exceptionalism is framed based on a "pax-Ottomana" metaphor where Turkey, through a selective remembrance of history, serves as a middleman between the Middle East and Europe (Nymalm and Plagemann 2019: 28; Yanık 2011: 83, 87). Yet, in the post-9/11 context of war on terror and Islamophobia, Turkey's 'bridging' role goes beyond simply connecting Islam and the West, situating it as a "spokesperson for Islam" (Yanık 2009: 534). What I find interesting is that scholars writing on Turkish exceptionalism (Heper 1988; Mardin 2005; Nymalm and Plagemann 2019) have rarely done so from a postcolonial perspective despite the relevance of a postcolonial lens in understanding the Turkish case. The lack of a critical approach to Turkey's 'uniqueness' in social and historical sciences, Yanık (2009) argues, results in scholarly support for the ways in which policy makers and the media have imagined and employed metaphors that constructed Turkish exceptionalism.

From this part of the conversation, we found that all our contexts share a post-imperial position. As we recognised that exceptionalism is closely tied to nation building and the formation of the modern nation-state, we also noted that exceptionalist myths have deeper, geographical, and historical linkages to the post-imperial contexts that we analyse. For instance, the hybrid quality of exceptionalist discourses in Turkey and Russia are anchored in variegated liminal positions between the East and West, and exceptionalist discourses in Scandinavia carry a geopolitical tension between the core(s) and semi-peripheries of the world system. In all contexts, exceptionalism manifests through exclusionary narratives of imagined shared identity, history, and future, where the violence of assimilation, suppression and eradication of diverse ethnic and religious identities have been normalised, concealed, pushed to the margins or subsumed.

OLGA: Despite the seeming similarity between Turkey and Russia with regard to exceptionalism accompanying the break from the Empire, according to Oskanian (2018), Russia's hybrid exceptionalism has been continuous throughout history. Tracing this idea back to the Romanov

Empire and through the Soviet Union to post-socialist Russia, the author scrutinises the role of Russian Orthodox Christianity. In Tsarist Russia, under the Romanovs, Orthodox Christianity was the discourse that laid the foundation for Russian civilising claims as being superior to the East and yet distinctive from the West due to non-Western denomination (Oskanian 2018: 31). After the October Revolution of 1917 and the dissolution of the Russian Empire, Russia's hybrid exceptionalism was maintained through the ideology of Marxism-Leninism as "a product of the Western Enlightenment, while simultaneously providing an element of radical difference from the capitalist [...] West" (Oskanian 2018: 35). Being part of Western modernity, the ideology of Marxism-Leninism justified Russia's civilising mission in Central Asia. In contemporary Russia, according to Oskanian, hybrid exceptionalism relies on the partial adaptation of Western liberal values such as (neo)liberal economic rationality and international legality, on the one hand, and an explicit anti-Western stance when it comes to the ideological construction of Russia's national identity on the other (Oskanian 2018: 42–43). Today, the strong political presence of anti-gender sentiments and state homophobia maintains Russia's distinctive position from the West, in a context where Western values and approaches dominate in the geopolitical space (Edenborg 2021; Moss 2017).

Conceptualising exceptionalism through discourses of gender equality

MIA: In the Scandinavian countries, the current state of exceptionalism dates to the early 20th century, where the need or willingness to modernise the countries – together with the development of the *Folkhem* (People's home) – became the basis for the Scandinavian welfare states. Equality was made the key concept for the *Folkhem* that would modernise the country; through equal rights and duties, these countries would become modernised and move into the future. The recognition of these countries as having a particular kind of (gender) equality was integrated into the notion of the exceptionality of these countries. As a particular form of equality, based on a binary notion of gender complementarity, gender equality was shaped as a norm in the Scandinavian countries, accommodating many other norms regarding citizenship, sexuality, whiteness, secularity, able-bodiedness, and so on (Martinsson et al. 2016). The ideas around equality and rights are conditioned today and were also historically conditioned on national belonging and a notion of gender difference as complementary. Women and men were given central, but distinct roles for reproducing the nation by caring for the family (women) and protecting the borders of the nation (men) (Eduards 2007). Towards the 1960s, women's emancipation became more strongly tied to paid labour. Due to the increased need of (female) labour power in the expanding public sector, a gender divide became reflected in

the segregated labour market. The historical narrative about women's emancipation through paid labour and the emergence of the Scandinavian welfare state simultaneously marginalised 'Other' actors and contributions. For example, the key role of migrant and working-class women for building the industry that shaped the basis for the wealth of these countries was rarely recognised (Knocke 1981; Kyle 1979). Yet, migrant labour force was imported to the Scandinavian countries, with the first agreements between Sweden and Italy and Hungary in 1947 (Kyle 1979). Migrant women's presence in the industrial sector from the 1950s until the 1980s (Knocke 1981; Salimi 2004) allowed the Scandinavian-born workers to shift to more attractive service jobs (Schierup 2006). As these dynamics continued to emerge, the labour market in these welfare states took up an ethnically segmented, hierarchical character with migrant workers from Finland, Southern Europe, former Yugoslavia, and Turkey in the least attractive divisions of industry and service jobs, like for instance cleaning and in restaurants (Schierup and Ålund 1987).

OLGA: The example of the Scandinavian countries can be useful when understanding and conceptualising exceptionalism as a discursive tool to achieve certain political goals; one draws on exceptionalism for certain political steps, for example, to achieve or maintain a certain level of welfare, as in the case of Sweden where the idea of gender equality as an attribute of Swedishness serves the political purpose of engaging non-Western women in the labour market, or to achieve a certain position in the geopolitical arena, as in the case of Russia's political investments in the international agenda of "traditional values" as a way to claim global anti-Western leadership (Edenborg 2021).

MIA: Yes. When we take a closer look, exceptionalism is characterised by an urgency to act which, in turn, is motivated by an ambition to keep or retain exceptionality itself.

This is evident in the Scandinavian discussion of gender equality. The type of gender equality that is carried forward through exceptionalist discourses sustains several cross-cutting hierarchies between women. In this discussion, gender equality is made to something particularly Scandinavian, as a specific national trait of these countries, which also in all these countries is produced as a national value. While gender equality as political tool shapes normalisation processes based on certain notions of gender and sexuality, a hierarchically differentiating discourse emerges, within which differences between groups of women, for example in terms of ethnic, national, or religious belonging, allow hegemonic subjects to exercise a kind of moral authority over non-Scandinavian and/or non-secular women, i.e. migrant, racialised, religious, and/or non-Western subjects whose voices or experiences lack legitimacy because they are not born and raised in the Scandinavian countries, or they do not reinforce the type of gender equality promoted in these countries. This perpetuates an exclusionary form of gender equality based on secular, ethnic/racial, and national belonging.

One example is the rescue narrative produced by established women's organisations in these countries, about the need to 'save' practising religious or veiled women, who are seen as victims of an oppressive religion or culture (Liinason 2017). Yet, at a closer look, these narratives serve to sustain specific notions about equality, freedom, and oppression, typically promoted by these women's organisations and the Scandinavian governments.

SELIN: Listening to how differences between women are maintained through discourses of gender equality in the Scandinavian context; this is very similar to how Kemalist women – who have been the dominant group in gender equality activism in Turkey – dealt with differences between women for many decades. At the same time, I relate a lot to what you say about the Russian context, Olga. "We in Turkey are not fully Western," Kemalist women thought; "but there are a lot of authentically good things about us that the West doesn't have" (Çağatay 2017). Kemalist modernisers embraced gender equality as a founding principle of Turkish modernisation. By inventing gender equality as an authentically 'Turkish' tradition (Gökalp 1976), they have included women as active participants in nation-building processes while governing differences and hierarchies between women in novel ways. Kemalist women assumed the role of educating and thereby de-traditionalising various groups of women such as Kurdish women or pious women with headscarves to include them in the modern public sphere. Today, the Kemalist hegemony in Turkey has been replaced by that of Turkish-Sunni Islamism, but the 'modernising mission' of middle-class women continues alongside local and global inequalities. Islamist women, previously the targets of Kemalists' modernising mission but now part of the ruling class, employ similar strategies of public inclusion towards migrant women from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iran, while contributing to the ethnic segmentation of the labour market, similar to the case in Scandinavia, where migrant workers disproportionately take up precarious and informal jobs (Sevinin 2022).

MIA: Indeed, when we approach exceptionalism from such a postcolonial and multi-scalar lens, one thing is that, in modernisation processes where gender equality is made a tool to modernise the population, linkages and connections are drawn between the idea of gender equality and a political project of producing the nation. Categories like 'us' and 'them' are shaped as a result of such efforts. For example, in the Scandinavian countries today, gender equality is seen to realise a particular national value. Simultaneously, on a supra-national level, beyond the national borders, a discourse about these countries as having a particular kind of equality serves to sustain geopolitical power hierarchies since gender equality is promoted as the way forward by various international actors and supranational organs, locating these countries at the forefront of global development. However, on sub-national levels, the exceptionalist discourse of gender equality obscures the various ways in which the everyday lives of people in these countries are experienced.

OLGA: Yes, I agree with this. Speaking of gender equality and how it became instrumentalised in geopolitical struggles, I think it plays a very tricky role in so-called non-Western societies or – as Russia is described – societies that are placed outside of “the consensus on normalcy” because they are not part of the hegemonic West (Osakanian 2018: 41). I think this perception overshadows local struggles and achievements in gender equality. It has its roots not only in the political discourse that constructs patriarchal values as traditionally Russian but also in how gender studies and grassroots feminist activism has been developing in Russia after the Cold War (e.g. Hemment 2007). Western academia and Western donors played a very important role in this process, solidifying the strong association between feminism and the West (Cope et al. 2017; Gapova 2016). Local histories of feminist struggles before and after the October Revolution in 1917 remained under-explored and under-recognised outside of the professional academic circles. Recently, however, there is increased awareness about and interest in the history of struggles for gender equality and sexual liberties in Russia among activists and academics (Klots 2018; Roldugina 2018; Vasiakina et al. 2020).

Ambivalences of exceptionalism in activist practises

SELIN: The point you make about local histories of feminist struggles, Olga, links to the issue of selective remembering of the past, which looks like a logic inscribed in exceptionalist modes of thinking passed on from one hegemonic bloc to another in a given national context. In the Turkish case, even though the political groups that governed the country, i.e. Kemalist and Islamists, have been at odds with each other, when it comes to the denial of past violences done to non-Turkish and non-Sunni Muslim communities throughout (and prior to) the republican period, the discourses of these groups overlap. This makes me think that exceptionalism has to do with state formation and regime formation, and therefore it might be very difficult to challenge and transform for historically marginalised groups.

OLGA: This opens another dimension of our conversation – how do research participants in our *Spaces of Resistance* project, feminist and LGBTI+ activists from Russia, Turkey and Scandinavian countries, deal with exceptionalism? How does exceptionalism shape activists’ work in our respective contexts?

MIA: Given that Scandinavian exceptionalism is created through hierarchically differentiating discourses of equality based on national, ethnic/racial, and secular belongings, certain discourses can be deployed by actors to inscribe themselves into this national exceptionalist idea to become part of it and become more credible and trustworthy subjects. As an example, I am thinking of LGBTI+ visibility. Existing research (Akin 2017; Shakhsari 2014) shows that some LGBTI+ asylum seekers fight for becoming not only legible but also desirable prospective citizens who will benefit the

host society in the long run. For example in Norway, scholars illuminate, notions of “the genuine LGBTI+ refugee” (Akin 2018) frames mobilisation around LGBTI+ refugees as stigmatised or vulnerable, genuinely in need of protection.⁴ In such a way, LGBTI+ refugees can add credibility to their claims of asylum by referring to what is understood in the context of ‘authentic’ or ‘proper’ forms of gender and sexuality, that is, expressions that harmonise with the ideals of gender equality and homotolerance, meanwhile a deeply problematic discourse around the ‘right kind of queer’ emerges (Kehl 2018). Within these dynamics, it is crucial to recognise the powerful and problematic role of the state, as LGBTI+ asylum seekers in these contexts are more or less coerced by the state(s) to present themselves in such a way (Shakhsari 2014), creating a certain condition of vulnerability, which is important to attend carefully.

I also think of the theoretical consequences of this. For me, it shows that exceptionalism works not only as a prohibiting but also as an enabling discourse, understood within a conception of a Foucauldian productive power (Foucault 1978). It demonstrates how discourses of exceptionalism facilitate the biopolitical governance of the population as an economic and political possibility for the governing group (Foucault 2008). It can also be deployed as a possibility for people to take advantage of, in complex and problematic ways. This means that marginalised groups can pick up exceptionalist discourses as a tactic to become part of the mainstream. This might look like complicity at a first glance. However, if we problematise the complicity vs. resistance binary, such acts can be perceived as tactics of resistance, as an ambivalent engagement with regulatory discourses for opening possibilities of life chances. For example, I am thinking of the strategic deployments of homonationalism among queer and gender activists in the Global South and East, whose engagement with the “‘requirements’ and ‘languages’” of development institutions in the Global North expresses a challenge of the asymmetrical logics of development and a critique of Nordic/Western normativities, as brought to light by Christine M. Klapeer (2017: 43). Such dynamics highlight the complex politics involved in inhabiting the impossible position of not being able to “not want rights” (Rao 2020), shedding light on the agentive experience of marginalised and less powerful actors whose tactics of resistance may otherwise remain unrecognised (Liinason 2022). It also reminds us that resistance is not universal but context-specific, that it depends on, adjusts to, and reproduces existing relations of power (Abu-Lughod 1990), bringing attention to the relevance of a multi-scalar analysis of resistance which acknowledges that resistance occurs on various levels.

SELIN: I want to expand on this last thesis. Within the framework of *Spaces of resistance*, I worked with activists who were marginalised by the Turkish state. They were, at the same time, quite aware of anti-gender mobilisations as a global phenomenon and that their experience with the state was not unique to Turkey. This facilitated various forms of collaboration with activists located elsewhere who, similar to the ones in Turkey, were interested

in de-exceptionalising their respective contexts and building transnational solidarity. For activists who participated in my research, Turkish exceptionalism did not function as an enabling discourse. Yet, this should be understood as a contingent strategy. Some 15–20 years ago, one could come across similar groups of activists participating in lobbying and decision-making processes in the state and thus subscribing to exceptionalist discourses to become part of the mainstream as in the Scandinavian context. For example, in the early 2000s, during the time of the EU accession-oriented legal reform period (Müftüler-Baç 2012), different activist groups appealed to the idea of Turkey being ‘the only Muslim country with secular law’ to lobby for gender egalitarian legislation, instrumentalising Turkish exceptionalism to achieve their goal. This means that what kind of exceptionalism you subscribe to, if at all, also depends on where you stand in relation to the state and other sources of power.

MIA: The point about positionality in relation to the state is important. Being vulnerable in relation to the state, LGBTI+ asylum seekers may use exceptionalism as a tactic of survival. Yet, depending on positionality, certain LGBTI+ actors may be able to challenge the expectation from the nation on narratives that reproduce such exceptional identity, for example by refusing to play into mainstream agendas. I could see examples of dissident action as you describe, Selin, in my research too, in cases where an instrumentalisation of exceptionalist discourses entangled with intersections of race, ethnicity, age, and gender (Liinason 2022). For example, within Scandinavian contexts of homonationalism, the promotion of trans and gay rights as national projects remains double-edged. On the one hand, such discourses may result in obstacles for trans or queer people, who refuse to reiterate these exclusionary tropes and experience difficulties in mobilising attention from the ‘trans- or gay-friendly’ state (Ticktin 2008). On the other hand, when gender and sexuality are made key elements to guard the borders of the modern nation of the Global North, homonationalist discourses of gender and sexuality may be used to redraw the “material and symbolic belongings” to the nation-state (Bracke 2011).

OLGA: We also try to unpack here how activists working on a grassroots level are affected by exceptionalist thinking. When I entered this field in 2017, it was a moment when Russia appeared in international media as a state hostile to sexual rights and gender equality. On March 8, 2017, the police acted brutally against participants of the March 8 demonstration in St. Petersburg. Around the same time, the story of brutal violence against LGBTI+ people in Chechnya also started unfolding in international media (Brock and Edenborg 2021; Smirnova 2020). There was a wave of transnational support of LGBTI+ community in Russia (Çağatay et al. 2022) but simultaneously such hypervisibility (Brock and Edenborg 2021) contributed to orientalisating discourses in relation to Russia and especially the North Caucasus to where Chechnya belongs (Neufeld and Wiedlack 2020). I see two challenges here which Russian activists had to deal with in their work.

On the one hand, they worked in an environment where homophobia was sanctioned by the state in its aspiration to promote Russia's "special path" and "traditional values." Their resources to combat this reality often came from outside of the country, i.e. from donors, international organisations, and foreign NGOs. To attract these resources, they describe the situation in Russia as unbearable and violent, unintentionally contributing to orientalisation of Russia (or particular, non-Russian, regions of the Russian Federation such as Chechnya) as exceptionally abnormal.

In the situation when activists need to act urgently, they rely on discursive resources that are available to them even though such discursive resources may reinforce an exceptionalist stance. You either think of a communication strategy or act immediately to help people in need without considering symbolic implications of your actions. Thus, the circumstances and timing of when particular exceptionalist discourses are produced also matter. However, when this time of emergency passes, there is a need to evaluate the results and consequences of transnational support.

There is an important critique in activist circles in relation to Nordic/Western solidarity in the Chechnya case – that this solidarity was often symbolic and discursive, but it did not transform into important political actions such as providing persecuted people with asylum protection. I think this example raises the question of how solidarity is shaped by discourses of exceptionalism. Symbolic solidarity in (social) media is indeed important but it may have negative consequences especially if it requires a high level of visibility (Neufeld and Wiedlack 2020). So, I am thinking how urgent circumstances influence the way activists instrumentalise exceptionalism but also the consequences that this instrumentalisation has for their position in the transnational civil society (see Çağatay et al. 2022: 177). In a group interview with two regional LGBTI+ organisations who worked in the same region and in close collaboration with each other, interview participants were quite critical about the objectification of their position and focus of transnational organisations on the negative aspects of LGBTI+ lives in Russia. As they reflected, the consequence of such exceptionalist thinking was that Russian LGBTI+ activists were not perceived as agentive subjects and fully capable partners but rather as people-in-need, i.e. recipients of donor help who, in turn, can dictate the focus and instruments of activist work.

MIA: I wonder how this works in relation to what kind of exceptionalism activists reproduce. Is the suffering under Russian exceptionalism reproduced while simultaneously contributing to exceptionalist narratives of other countries?

OLGA: Yes, the power imbalance between Russian activists and Western donors may also unwittingly contribute to other sorts of exceptionalism, strengthening the positive national and geopolitical identity of countries who promote themselves as more gender equal, more democratic and, generally, more advanced than Russia. At the same time, I found that not

many activists were aware of Scandinavian exceptionalist discourses and did not relate their work to other countries or how they are seen outside of Russia all the time. I think this is also important; to analyse how these different exceptionalisms (Russian, Turkish, Scandinavian/Nordic) overlap or interact with each other. What kind of subjectivities are produced in these interactions?

SELIN: This brings us to the idea of a global co-construction of ‘leaders’ and ‘victims,’ which might be one of the most significant aspects of problematising exceptionalism for our collaborative work. We question in our own contexts what kind of exceptionalist discourses our research partners refer to and whether we find parallels or complimentary arguments between our respective contexts in terms of ‘leaders’ in gender equality and gender-based victimhood. I am thinking of activists who look for funding to develop integration-oriented programmes for Syrian refugees, for example. I don’t necessarily see those activists separating their realities from their discursive strategies; in this case they overlap. But in other cases, activists might use exceptionalism as a discursive strategy to gain access to the resources they need without necessarily considering themselves as exceptionally oppressed. For example, one of the groups I worked with wanted to organise a large-scale women’s gathering but did not have the necessary financial means to do so. Group members decided to apply for funding provided by a foreign donor, but they had to frame their aim as an urgent action against a threat of human rights’ violation. And so, they did! This isn’t to say that women’s human rights are not under attack in Turkey; they indeed are, but in the case of this funding application, the ‘urgency’ was rather a discursive strategy of activists who temporarily positioned themselves as the target group of the foreign donor.

Does transnational solidarity challenge exceptionalist modes of thinking?

MIA: At this point, I want to turn to the relations between transnational solidarity and exceptionalism. Questioning the production of new inequalities between ‘victims’ and ‘leaders’ through exceptionalism would be a way of problematising transnational solidarity.

OLGA: From my discussions with research partners, I found that there is a growing understanding that there are things people/activists share, notwithstanding their location or national belonging. Scholars (Ayoub and Paternotte 2014; Liinason 2021) tend to criticise international organisations such as ILGA, for example, for reproducing global hierarchies between activists but at the same time ILGA does provide a space where people can come together and learn from each other and see that there are similarities in what they encounter. These encounters allow activists to see that certain conditions of their work are transnational and not just an attribute of their particularly repressive national context. I can see this change during the last

ten years in Russia, and I also think that digital technologies play a very big role here.

SELIN: I wonder, in this regard, if activist circles in Russia are interested in hosting transnational gatherings, i.e. inviting other people from abroad instead of participating in an event organised elsewhere? I think it is very important in the context of transnational solidarity as a way beyond exceptionalism – what positions different activists occupy in transnational mobilisation; how agentive their position is. Activists who previously have been in the position of ‘recipients’ (of knowledge, money, or assistance) in the Turkish context now consider themselves more as equal constituents and are more invested in transnational dialogue. For example, upon Turkey’s withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in 2021, activists in Turkey organised many, online and offline, gatherings that brought together activists from countries where the Convention was contested by governments in power. Do you, Olga, observe such a tendency in the Russian context?

OLGA: Yes, in one group interview that I have already referred to above, this is a very proclaimed topic – what Russian activists can teach others. They talk about different programmes which allow them to travel to Prague or other European cities, but they also ask why no one is supporting the travel to their organisations in remote areas of Russia because they can also teach people innovative and thought-provoking activist practises. I think this example shows that activists begin to understand that they are not obliged to accept things as they are in their collaboration with foreign partners, donors, and politicians, and that they can do more than just receive help, they can also offer something in return or initiate something. But the current tendency is also to stress the importance of solidarity and collaboration within Russian which is a diverse, geographically spread, and heterogeneous country. So, I’d say they currently prioritise their internal collaborations over transnational encounters.

MIA: There are also many different positions in relation to exceptionalism in the Scandinavian context. The main divider, I think, is positionality in relation to the state that we have discussed before. Activists who depend on this relationship do tap into or support the exceptionalist stance because it’s useful for them. They can draw on Scandinavian exceptionalism to expand women’s rights or LGBTI+ rights, whereas other groups cannot because they are the Other of this exceptionalist narrative who need to change to fit in. The question about who learns from whom is relevant in this context. For example, we spoke about ILGA before. In an interview with a staff member of ILGA Europe, I asked whether they learn something in the exchange with others. And the reaction was: “What do you mean?” The person could not give any meaningful example of mutuality in their exchange. It was quite remarkable – Who is the producer of exceptionalism? Who is producing the exceptionalist stance?

OLGA: Some transnational organisations do acknowledge that this exchange could be more egalitarian, based on mutuality. Especially when

employees of such organisations originate from the post-Soviet region and have first-hand experience of grassroots activism there before being employed in a transnational organisation, as it is the case with some of my research partners. When such people start working in a donor organisation, they can be more sensitive and perceptive of local activists' needs and concerns. Yet, such individual interventions do not automatically lead to structural changes if the proper organisational support, which would allow the transformation of individual reflections into a policy, is absent. One of my research partners with a long experience of working with transnational organisations providing support to Russian LGBTI+ activists felt quite disappointed about her lack of potential to change the established practices.

SELIN: Going beyond exceptionalism therefore is not necessarily liberating because you can go beyond exceptionalism at one level and still maintain unequal power relations, internalised inequalities at another level. Being globally connected opens the possibility of transforming exceptionalist modes of thinking but does not guarantee overthrowing power relations. In this sense, one should avoid jumping to the easy conclusion that increased connectivity and technological possibilities of learning from other contexts automatically dismantle exceptionalisms.

OLGA: Another important question is whether investments in transnational collaborations are always beneficial for the communities that activists represent/work with. While Russian activists may start occupying more agentive positions in their relations with international donors and partners, to which extent does their agency extend to those people whom they represent? I see these concerns in some interviews when research partners ask self-reflexive questions about their own position and their activist practices; to which extent and how transnational human rights discourses and approaches they learn from their international partners benefit their own community in Russia. As a solution, some organisations search for alternative modes of funding that come from the community itself or from initiatives/organisations/philanthropists located within the country (see Çağatay et al. 2022: Ch. 3).

Conclusion

This conversation has offered exceptionalism as a concept to think with in transnational feminist and queer research and activism. Problematising exceptionalist modes of thinking in three research contexts – Russia, Turkey, and the Scandinavian countries – we have shown that this sort of intervention can be useful in framing conceptually contextual differences embedded in past and present geopolitics but also linkages and connections determined by the globalisation of gender equality and sexual rights agendas. As we decoupled exceptionalism from its attachment to particular national and regional regimes, in this chapter, we approached exceptionalism as a heuristic device and a transnationalising concept in relation to our research sites.

As such, the concept allowed us to exceed national boundaries and gave us a possibility to discuss the systemic dynamics involved without missing the points that make our cases historically specific. It enabled us to keep a balance between national specificities and the global embeddedness of the activist practises we investigate, as well as to pay attention to regional variation within national contexts. Thus, we consider exceptionalism as a fruitful analytical tool for transnational feminist theorising that helps researchers to develop methodologies alternative to methodological nationalism. Using dialogue as a knowledge production method, we also aspired to reveal how transnational research based on empirical data from three different contexts could work in practice.

By situating our points of departure in the dynamics, histories, and relations of exceptionalism in Russia, Turkey, and Scandinavian countries, our conversation illuminated the powerful stance of exceptionalism in all these contexts in overlapping and different ways. While the attempts at linking gender equality to projects of modernisation and nation-building highlighted similarities between Scandinavian and Turkish-Kemalist struggles for gender equality, an idea of exceptionality as imperial legacy seems to have been preserved in both Turkey and Russia, while a denial of imperialism and coloniality is more characteristic of exceptionalism in the Scandinavian countries. The specific ways in which exceptionalism is employed allow all our contexts to occupy a particular positioning in the global world order, either by self-identifying as not entirely the West or the East – but superior to both – in Turkey and Russia, or by presenting oneself as being at the forefront of global development, as in the Scandinavian countries.

Through our conversation, it was clear how exceptionalism is entangled with colonisation, coloniality, with the notion of empire in post- and neo-imperial contexts and the formation of the modern nation-state. With this, our conversation moved to explore how the logics of exceptionalism are entangled with dominant discourses on gender equality in our contexts and transnationally. It showed that exceptionalism produces very contradictory outcomes, depending on where and how it is exercised. Indeed, while in one context – in our conversation, the Scandinavian countries – exceptionalism can work to locate gender equality in a particular place, in another context – in our discussion, Russia – such exceptional discourses may overshadow historical achievements of gender equality. Clearly, to have such a powerful function in shaping different discourses geopolitically, exceptionalism is no coherent or unified discourse but should rather be seen as ambiguous, hybrid, and varied.

As we considered various ways to go beyond exceptionalism through transnational solidarities in feminist and queer research and activism, in the final section, we identified several important questions for further research. One of these was to analyse how different exceptionalisms overlap or interact with each other, and what kind of subjectivities are produced in these interactions. This question emerged from our insights into how our

problematisation of exceptionalism through a transnational, multi-scalar lens brought to light a global co-construction of ‘leaders’ and ‘victims’ in discourses of gender equality and women’s and LGBTI+ rights. Some questions to address in this area could be: How may urgent circumstances influence the ways in which activists instrumentalise such exceptionalist discourses? What is the space for manoeuvre within such discourses? What kind of subjects are allowed to take up a critical stance in relation to exceptionalism? And for whom would such a critical stance influence the recognition of them as legitimate rights-claimants? What type of claims would such critical stances consist of? These questions, we suggest, may help feminist and queer researchers to address whether and how transnational solidarities can challenge, reproduce, or dismantle exceptionalist modes of thinking that are often deeply inscribed in many activist settings.

Notes

- 1 Geographically, the term Scandinavia is used to cover Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. The Nordic, in contrast, covers a wider geo-political area and includes Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, the Faroes and Greenland (former colony of Denmark, self-governing since 2009), and Åland, a self-governing part of the Finnish Republic. Sápmi, the territory of the indigenous Sami population, stretches across the north of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and north-east Russia. While we understand the Scandinavian countries as distinct and diverse, we also recognise that these countries share significant features in relation to gender equality and LGBTI+ rights, as they are all keen to position themselves at the forefront of global progress for women and LGBTI+ people (Keskinen et al. 2009; Liinason 2018). To highlight the existence of shared features across national borders, we refer to the Scandinavian context when similar phenomena appear in all three countries. In return, when a phenomenon takes place in only one of these countries, we refer to that single country.
- 2 *Spaces of resistance* was a collaborative research project that united four researchers – Mia Liinason (PI), Hülya Arik, Selin Çağatay and Olga Sasunkevich who conducted ethnographic research feminist and LGBTI+ activists in Russia (Olga), Scandinavian countries (Mia) and Turkey (Hülya and Selin) during 2016–2021. We included in our research different activist groups – from large-scale and well-established transnational and national organisations to grassroots initiatives and artistic collectives. We analysed their work through transnational lenses looking at differences but also overlaps across the three contexts (Arik et al. 2022; Çağatay et al. 2022). This conversation is largely informed by our empirical material and theoretical work within this project. More information about the project is available at: <https://sites.google.com/view/spacesofresistance/project-description?authuser=0>.
- 3 For a presentation of how we approach the Scandinavian countries as geography and terminology, see note 1. Scholars have questioned whether the Scandinavian countries represent a distinctive development at all. For example, Mary Hilson argues that the traits of these countries are “typical of wider patterns in contemporary Europe” (2008: 75). Nonetheless, although there is nothing distinctive about the Scandinavian countries, the region takes shape as an imagined community, providing its citizens with another layer of belonging in addition to their specific national belongings. Yet, this is not a harmonious or conflict-free

relationship. Scholars have also shown how exclusionary notions of normality were central for the modernising projects of these countries (Fahlgren et al. 2011).

- 4 Notably, this is not only the case with LGBTI+ asylum seekers but emerges as a more general aspect for people who migrate to countries in the global north, as identified by migration scholars (Anderson et al. 2011; Ticktin 2011).

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