

NORDIC

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THE QUESTION “CAN ‘the Nordic’ be queered?” interpellates an impossibility in so far as “the Nordic” indexes an imaginary, fixed in heteronormative nationalisms, coupled with homonationalisms that glorify Nordic exceptionalism and portray Nordic welfare states as icons of tolerance, humanism, and equality. Images of the Nordic countries as queer heavens pervade the region’s official discourses, celebrating openly gay ministers who bring their same-sex partners to New Years receptions with royal families, or coming-out stories of celebrities, such as elite ice hockey players.

When discourses such as these dominate mainstream media, it may look as an impossible task to radically queer “the Nordic.” How to undo deep-seated heteronormative, and gender binary structures and imaginaries in the region against the background of a massive contemporary annexing of homonationalism to national identities (Puar 2007; Nebeling Pedersen 2012)? Homonationalism has in recent years become widespread in the region, implying a white modern “we,” who distinguishes itself from a backwards “they” (embodied e.g. by Muslims and people, descending from countries where Islam is the main religion), cast as not sexually liberated and not as tolerant as “us.” As demonstrated by activist support groups for queer asylum seekers, and critically queer migration research (e.g. Mühleisen et al. 2012; Akin 2017; Lunau 2019), such homonationalist “we/they”-constructions are, for example, mobilized by Nordic authorities in order to decide

whether or not queer asylum seekers are to be assessed as “true queers” in a white, “liberated” Nordic sense, and as such judged as in need of protection.

In spite of odds working against a radical queering of “the Nordic,” queer activists, artists, and academics in the region, have established queer initiatives, carved out alternative spaces, and, in multiple ways, challenged the hegemonies of heteronormativity. In recent years, trans* activism, art, and academic research have also gained ground, materializing, among others, in claims to rights and recognition, and in struggles to challenge unreflected use of pronouns, which reproduce the gender binary. It is also important to note that research, focusing on overarching historical reflections on LGBTQ movements in the region has recently been granted funding (Rydström 2019), and that overview articles, such as Ulrika Dahl (2011) and Kaisa Ilmonen and colleagues (2017), have mapped a multiplicity of queer/feminist and trans* initiatives in the Nordic countries.

However, as part of these mapping exercises, the issue of territorialization of movements and ideas, which sticks to the concept of “the Nordic,” has also been critically addressed. This includes critiques of its way of naturalizing national borders and hegemonic geopolitical positions, instead of deconstructing methodologically nationalist approaches (Dahl 2011, 154–5). Following up on these critiques, I consider it important not only to pinpoint the wealth of queer activities, mushrooming in the region, but also to align myself with the critique. Firstly, I shall, therefore, underline the importance of critically-affirmative, “post-misery” directions in queer analysis of “the Nordic,” articulated by Ilmonen and colleagues (2017), looking for hope, rather than staying within a mirror hall of criticism (Sedgwick 2003; Liinason and Cuesta 2016). Secondly, in line with Dahl (2011), I shall emphasize that a queering of “the Nordic,” which profoundly undoes foundations for homo/nationalism will have to deal with the entangled post/colonial and capitalist matrices of gendered and sexuated power, which historically have re/produced Nordic-centric identifications, as subsections of Euro-centric and modern white Western-centric identities.

The need to look for hope, while resisting such identifications, leads me to take stock of efforts to queer “the Nordic” as entangled with intersectional, decolonial, translocal, anti-capitalist and posthumanist theorizing and politics. Tracing such entanglements in the region’s queer theory production, I note critiques of queer liberalism and homonationalism (Nebeling Petersen 2012; Sörberg 2017), queer post-colonial critiques (Dahl 2017), queer anti-capitalist critiques (Nielsen 2010), queer, trans* and posthuman ecological critiques (Straube 2019), and queer death studies (Radomska et al. 2019). But to transgress the regionalist/nationalist framework, sticking to the concept of “the Nordic,” the latter needs, in particular, to be queered in a sense which unpacks naturalized implications of methodologically nationalist and regionalist approaches, and which works from consequently intersectional perspectives, based in non-identitarian understandings. As queer scholar Macarena Gómez-Barris (2018) has demonstrated in her analysis of translocal, queer, femme, feminist, trans*, indigenous, decolonial, class-based, anti-racist movements in South America, this does not exclude a focus on local activities. However, in Gómez-Barris’ (2018) optics, these activities are not seen as icons of nation or region, but rather as “undercurrents,” which, in their local materializations and histories, are part of broader translocal and intersectional movements for global change toward social and environmental justice. Queering the concept of “the Nordic” from this perspective, would mean not only to redefine it, but to shift the onto-epistemological grounds of analysis altogether toward a geo- and corpolitically questioning of the historical construction of “the Nordic” as part of colonial and capitalist matrices of power, out of which the European nation states, including the Nordic ones have grown. This would require historical and contemporary reflections on the latter’s specific social-democratic class struggle-based, and union-influenced building of welfare states with specific white-centric, heteronormative gender and sexuality regimes, and scrutiny of intertwined processes of queer assimilations and queer resistances.

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