1 Introduction

Transforming identities in contemporary Europe

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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.

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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, LGBTQI+, 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, LGBTI+ 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 Lapiņa 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, Lapiņa 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, Lapiņa'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 rigorousity of majority knowledge production.

Using a trans for trans methodology, Nico Miskow Friborg's chapter '"It's our bodies, we are the experts!": countering pathologisation, gatekeeping 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 Friborg 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 multiscalarity 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, oftentimes '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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