

The State(s) We're in:

European Freedom Zones and Pan-Nordic Collaboration on LGBTIQ+ Rights

AS WE ARE writing this editorial, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to demand considerable energy and attention. In a time of overbearing workloads and considerable social and political turmoil, many may have missed the news that several potentially significant government-level initiatives to set strategic standards for and improve LGBTIQ+ rights across the Nordic and EU regions have been launched. This action is timely as ILGA-Europe has just launched its 2021 Rainbow Europe Map and Index that reveals “widespread and almost complete stagnation” on LGBTIQ+ rights and equality (ILGA-EUROPE 2021). Against this worrying situation, the EU and government-level initiatives are likely to have consequences for research, policy, welfare and broad-based knowledge production in the years to come.

In early March, the EU Parliament declared the EU an “LGBTIQ Freedom Zone”. This was most directly in response to the establishment of over one hundred “LGBTIQ-free zones” in Poland and a documented increase in discrimination and attacks against LGBTIQ+ people there. But the European Parliament also highlighted the broader context of growing attacks on and violence towards gender and sexual minorities, and the corresponding backsliding of LGBTIQ+ rights, across the EU, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and in doing so mentioned the deteriorating situation in Hungary in particular (European Parliament 2021).

This declaration comes soon after the first-ever EU Strategy for LGBTIQ equality was launched in November last year in response to growing evidence that anti-LGBTIQ+ discrimination and violence are rising. This five-year strategy (2020–2025) thus complements already existing strategic frameworks, including EU Action Plan against racism, the Victim’s Rights Strategy, and the Gender Equality Strategy, to promote EU’s wide-reaching ambition of being a “Union of Equality” for all. The four key objectives are listed as tackling discrimination, ensuring safety, building inclusive societies and leading the call for equality globally (European Commission 2020; see also Ayoub & Paternotte 2019).

Turning the gaze to the Nordic region, we note that pan-Nordic collaborative engagements to strengthen LGBTIQ+ rights and equality were announced in 2019 and began in earnest in 2020 under the Danish Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers (Norden 2019). In conjunction with this, the LGBTI Fund has now been established, in cooperation with NIKK – Nordic Information on Gender. Undoubtedly of interest to many of our readers, the LGBTI Fund will issue its first call for funding proposals in autumn 2021. It will award “funding to projects in which at least three organisations, from at least three Nordic countries, work together to promote gender equality and work for equal rights, treatment and opportunities for LGBTI people in the Nordic countries” (NIKK n.d.).

As an additional part of this pan-Nordic collaborative initiative, The Nordic Council of Ministers ran a series of debates last autumn, with participants sharing their experiences, knowledge, and views of how to make improvements. The findings were recently published in a report authored by Norwegian gay journalist Gisle Agledal, titled *Seven Challenges to LGBTI Equality – and How the Nordic Cooperation can Solve Them* (Agledal 2021). One of the key points raised in the report is the growing organized opposition to LGBTIQ+ people, rights and equity across the Nordic region and beyond. Saïd Þorbjörg Þorvaldsdóttir, head of Samtökin ’78, the National Queer Organisation of Iceland:

Fascism, homophobia and especially anti-trans rhetoric is on the rise across the continent. This is not the time to ignore LGBTI rights or to pretend that our relatively secure position in society can last forever. We cannot face this storm without the right anchoring. Our legal rights must be secured. (Agledal 2021, section: “Challenge #2: Not everyone bears us good will”)

The report concludes that pan-Nordic cooperation on LGBTIQ+ equality has the potential to make the Nordic countries “become the safest place to live a queer life” and in so doing, “become a beacon of hope – or a rainbow, if you will – in a world where progress in this area unfortunately can no longer be taken for granted” (Agledal 2021, section “The way forward”).

There are undoubtedly many perspectives and questions fit to be debated in light of these Nordic and EU strategic initiatives, and *lambda nordica* welcomes research articles based on critical queer analysis of the aims, methods and implications of the framing and implementation of them. In closing, we would like to highlight a few areas of immediate critical concern:

Whereas the EU strategic initiative specifically addresses governments that curtail human rights and actively bolster hate speech and violence against sexual and gender minorities, gender and queer studies, and gender equality, the pan-Nordic collaborative initiative remains silent about the fact that there are political parties with populist, right-wing agendas in several of the Nordic governments and parliaments, whose politics actively contribute to hate and discrimination of many minorities, including LGBTIQ+ people. In the name of free speech and democracy, public debate across the Nordic countries is marred by severe racist, anti-gender, and especially anti-trans sentiments, a development which is de facto protected by national governments. So, the question remains: in what capacity, if any, can state-based initiatives realize the objective of justice and equity for all?

As scholars and editors of queer research situated in the Nordic region, we are reminded that the conditions for feminist, gender and

queer research, and theorists and researchers, are under targeted attack at many Nordic universities at this very moment. Such targeted attacks are not something that only happen elsewhere, in Hungary and Poland for example. Thus, the pan-Nordic state-sponsored idea that this region can be singled out as a global beacon against the troubled Rest of the World, seems at the very best a naïve supposition, and could well be argued to be a part of a long-established Nordic homonationalist ideology of exceptionalism (see f.ex. Stoltz 2020).

At a time when global crises are generated and amplified by COVID-19, political and military conflicts, and climate change, it is vital to remember that research has shown that preexisting inequalities tend to deepen during crises. With this in mind, the current naming of LGBTIQ+ rights and equality as an important sector for EU-based, national and regional collaborative bodies to work on, is a strategic endeavor, a political positioning, that urgently needs close and sustained scrutiny and critical engagements. *lambda nordica* aims to provide a platform for just that, together with our readers and authors.

This issue

This open issue includes research articles on hook-up app research, kink memes in digital fandom cultures, and how youth health clinics in Sweden approach clients with vulvar pain. The *We're Here* contribution focuses on the political significance of breathing. Five reviews of recently published PhD dissertations and books conclude this issue. The cover art is by Norway-based artist Ahmed Umar, who also presents his work and vision in a short section titled *Cover Art*. This new section – giving the word to artists – is a way to present visual art in context, and an editorial move that stems from an awareness of the politics of art's receptive potential across our readership. All in all, we are excited to see the international span of contributing authors and interdisciplinary reach of the texts that make up this issue, and we hope our readers agree. Enjoy. Reflect. Share. Cite.

Paul Byron and Kristian Møller offer an intriguing methodological exploration of friendship and flirting in hook-up app research as examples

of everyday intimacies. Drawing on Lauren Berlant and Kane Race in particular, the authors ask what it means to *research with intimacy* in its everyday forms. Using examples from their research on and use of gay (male) apps, the authors argue that paying attention to intimate communication between researcher and research participants may provide valuable methodological insights and have the potential to queer the knowledge gained as a result. Furthermore, Byron and Møller encourage more transparency as to the multiple affective relationships with the media platforms that researchers use in their professional and personal lives.

The digital sphere and ways to communicate and position selves and others are also of central concern in Silja Kukka's article on kink meme communities. Drawing on an online survey of participants who frequent kink meme communities, Kukka discusses the role of kink meme communities in the lives of the respondents and connects them to a broader context of other online communities dedicated to authoring, sharing and responding to erotic and pornographic material. Through sharing narrative material from her survey and linking her findings to porn and fan fiction scholarship, Kukka argues that kink meme communities can be understood as spaces where queer sexualities and preferences can be explored, through expansive writing and a politics of ethics.

Renita Sörensdotter addresses the complex material and social discourses of the Foucauldian will to know expressed in the concept of coital pain, as used by staff at youth health clinics. Sörensdotter shows how a particular type of sexual practice, namely vaginal intercourse, is hegemonic in the understanding of both the pain that youth seek care for, and the horizon of their future sexual practice. Departing from a queer critic of the heteronormative framework of coital pain, Sörensdotter argues for a decentering of vaginal intercourse in our understanding of vulvar pain.

Magdalena Górska's text for *We're here*, "Why breathing is political", explores how the biopolitics and necropolitics of breathing can highlight not only the relationship between embodiment, subjectivity and environment, but also the need for an analysis of breathing as differential in its non/proximity to environmental and social toxicity. Bringing

together different examples of respiratory crises, the stratifying impacts of COVID-19 and police violence aimed at black people and people of color, Górska points to the local and global effects of institutionalized racism and rampant capitalism on the ability to breathe.

In closing, the *Reviews* section contains review essays of two PhD dissertations that focus on transgender people in Iran and disability activism in Sweden; followed by reviews of three recently published books - on Henrik Ibsen's late plays, an anthology that focuses on anthropologist Marilyn Strathern, and a Girlhood Studies project.

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