

# New Dimensions of Diversity in Nordic Culture and Society



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Edited by

Jenny Björklund and Ursula Lindqvist

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## EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

JENNY BJÖRKLUND  
AND URSULA LINDQVIST

“Diverse” is arguably not a term one would have used to describe Nordic society and culture prior to the immigration boom of the turn of the millennium. After all, the region’s modern welfare states, built up during the decades following the Second World War, assumed common sets of national values that varied only somewhat within the region as a whole. These include a commitment to social equality (with a particular focus on gender and economic class), political transparency, public support of arts and culture, a fundamental human right to access nature (along with the political, social and individual responsibilities to take care of it), a universal right to education and health care, a universal right to access the labor market (in the form of generous family leave policies, subsidized day care, and job training and placement services), and an expectation that labor unions and corporations cooperate on pay, benefits, and workers’ rights issues (Einhorn and Logue 2003; Rostgaard and Lehto 2005; Christiansen 2006). Under the auspices of the Nordic Council of Ministers in Copenhagen, the five Nordic nation states – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden – have cooperated since 1971 on a wide range of public policy issues, from work permits to sustainability initiatives to funding for artistic and scholarly endeavors.

Furthermore, Nordic-“branded” social democratic values (Browning 2007, Lindqvist 2009) have been reinforced through international recognition of the Nordic countries’ stands on human rights issues, which have bolstered claims of Nordic exceptionalism and moral political leadership. For example, Nordic delegations took early and decisive stands against apartheid in Rhodesia (known today as Zimbabwe) and South Africa and have played roles in negotiating peace in armed conflicts from the Congo to the Balkans to the Middle East (Reddy 1986). Some Nordic countries also have contributed more foreign aid as a percentage of GDP than significantly larger industrial nations. Furthermore, in the decades leading up to the Syrian refugee crisis that began in 2015, Sweden,

Denmark and Norway accepted more refugees per capita than other European nations under the United Nations Refugee Convention (Selbervik 2006, 1; UNHCR 2014; 2015), a move many have credited with destabilizing the Nordic welfare model. The resulting changes to Nordic societies and cultures have arguably rendered visible a significant and longstanding gap that has existed between the Nordic welfare societies' lofty ideals and rhetoric on the one hand and their actual policies and practices on the other (Browning 2007; Lindqvist 2009; Kvist et al. 2012). The Nordic countries have for decades lingered at or near the top of global indexes on human development and gender equality (UN Human Development Reports 2015) – rankings that have attracted immigrants to the Nordic region in record numbers in recent decades. We believe it is this ever-widening gap between the Nordic region's branded ideal and its sociopolitical realities that defines the dimensions of diversity in Nordic culture and society in the opening decades of the new millennium.

This volume's focus on "new dimensions" of diversity does not, therefore, contribute to a mythical account of once-homogenous Northern societies suddenly becoming "multicultural." Indeed, a central premise of this volume is that the Nordic countries not only are remarkably diverse today, but also – Nordic branding aside – they have been so for quite some time. Indeed, for centuries prior to the Nordic region's most recent immigration boom, Finland, Sweden and Norway have been home to thousands of indigenous Sámi, Europe's only indigenous minority recognized by the European Union (see Storfjell, this volume). Similarly, Denmark's colonial relationship with Greenland – an Arctic country located closer to North America than to Europe – dates back to the eighteenth century, bringing Greenlandic Inuit people and culture into the Nordic fold (see Thisted, this volume). The nomadic Romani people's presence in Finland, Sweden and Norway similarly dates back centuries (and has even formed a distinct Norwegian ethnic group), and of course Jews, Walloons, Germans and Finns have long constituted significant ethnic minorities in certain Nordic countries. Language laws in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden have granted official status to historical minority languages spoken in these countries which, in addition to German and Finnish, include Romani chib, Yiddish, Meänkieli (spoken by Tornedalians on the Swedish/Finnish border), Sámi, Faroese (the Faroe Islands remain part of the Danish kingdom), Greenlandic, Kven (a Finnic language spoken by the Kven people in northernmost Norway), Rodi (a.k.a. "Norwegian Traveller") and Sign Language. All told, the Nordic region is home to six official national languages, eleven national minority languages, and dozens of others, a list that continues to expand with

continued migrations to the region. The fact that recent waves of immigration have included many so-called “visible” minorities from far-flung places in the world have finally forced national and regional conversations about the conditions of social and political enfranchisement in the Nordic region that some would argue have been long overdue.

The contributors to this volume were also asked to grapple with and provide new interpretations for the concept of “diversity” itself. Since the 1980s, “diversity” in the Nordic region has connoted ethnicity and national origin. However, discussions of diversity also have come to evoke race in the Nordic countries, where popular belief has long held that “race” and “racism” were phenomena that existed outside the borders of the region (Keskinen et al. 2009; Loftsdóttir and Jensen 2014; McEachrane 2014). This is in large part due to the ways in which radical nationalist political parties in these countries have conflated the categories of race and nation in ways not seen since the 1930s (e.g., the Danish People’s Party, the Sweden Democrats, the True Finns, and The Progress Party in Norway; see Jungar and Jupskås 2014). When such insider/outsider binaries prevail, “race” also becomes conflated with “culture” (Ehn, Frykman and Löfgren 1993; Pred 2000; 2004; Habel 2002). As a result, the popular Scandinavian term for “diversity,” *mangfoldighed / mangfold / mångfald*, is sometimes erroneously subsumed within the perimeters of “multiculturalism,” a politically fraught term that arguably confines diversity to the domain of ethnicity, race and national origin. This has also been the case in Nordic research on diversity. For example, two fine anthologies devoted to the study of diversity in Nordic culture and society, *Litteraturens gränsland: Invandrar- och minoritetslitteratur i nordiskt perspektiv* [*Literature’s Borderland: Immigrant and Minority Literatures from a Nordic Perspective*], edited by Satu Gröndahl (2002) and *Diversity, Inclusion and Citizenship in Scandinavia*, edited by Bo Bengtsson, Per Strömblad and Ann-Helén Bay (2010), assume “diversity” to apply narrowly to race, ethnicity, and national origin.

We understand diversity to encompass a much broader – and richer – category in the social and cultural context of the Nordic region, one that necessarily demands intersectional approaches that also take into account, for example, gender, sexuality, citizenship status/statelessness, age, religion, language, (dis)ability, family structures, and last but certainly not least, socioeconomic class. The concept of intersectionality originates from the field of women, gender and sexuality studies, and it illuminates how distinct structures of power and privilege intersect in the formation of identities and identity categories. American scholars who introduced the concept used it to highlight how gender and race were intertwined in the

marginalization of women of color (hooks 1984; Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2000). Intersectional approaches have spread rapidly in the Nordic countries, where their importance for Nordic gender and diversity studies are undeniable. When Nina Lykke (2003, 49) introduced the concept of intersectionality in the Swedish gender studies journal *Kvinnovetenskaplig tidskrift* in 2003, an Internet search for the English term resulted in 2,090 hits, while a search for the Scandinavian translation of the term, “interseksjonalitet,” resulted in only seven. More than a decade later, a Google search in June 2015 generated 566,000 hits for the English term and 88,900 for the Scandinavian. Nordic gender scholars initially used intersectionality within a postcolonial theoretical framework to analyze how identity categories such as gender, ethnicity, and class intersect in the marginalization of immigrants (e.g. Reyes, Molina and Mulinari 2002; Mørck 2003; Staunæs 2003; Reyes and Martinsson 2005; Reyes and Mulinari 2005; Loftsdóttir and Jensen 2012), but the concept has also been developed beyond this postcolonial framework to examine the intersection of other identity categories and/or to challenge the concept’s theoretical foundations (Lykke 2003; 2005; 2006; 2007; *Kvinnovetenskaplig tidskrift* 2005; Søndergaard 2005; *Kvinder, køn & forskning* 2006; Reyes and Grøndahl 2007; Gressgård 2008; Jensen and Elg 2010; Mattsson 2010; Hearn 2011).

We believe that such intersectional approaches allow for nuanced readings of major developments that have been transforming the Nordic societies in recent decades. Among these are feminist and LGBTQ movements, the global indigenous rights movement, the increasing visibility of Islam as a minority religion in Europe, linguistic innovation and “global” slang alongside English incursions, global adoptions, new expectations for mediating family and work obligations, and the increased mobility of people, goods, and information (digital culture). Finland, whose history as part of the Swedish realm for hundreds of years caused it to codify the rights of its Swedish-language minority at the nation’s founding in 1918, has begun to consider the place of new minorities (as well as some established ones, such as the Roma and the Sámi) in a political climate that has given rise to the radical populist True Finns party. In 2009, Iceland elected the world’s first openly gay head of state – an act that was a non-event to Icelanders but made headlines globally, as many countries grapple with codifying a greatly expanded array of legal protections for sexual minorities. And of course – just as elsewhere in Europe, including the European Parliament – populist politicians hostile to immigrants, ethnic minorities, LGBTQ people, the European Union and globalization in general have been voted into the parliaments of Denmark,

Finland, Norway and Sweden, a development that came as a shock to established social democratic parties which had dominated the region's politics for most of the twentieth century. In July 2011, the entire region was deeply shaken by a terror attack in Norway by a Norwegian extremist who wanted to "save Europe from multiculturalism" (see Teitelbaum, this volume). The attack resulted in the deaths of seventy-seven people, and most horrifying was the fact that sixty-seven of them were youth members of Norway's Labor Party attending an annual summer camp on the tranquil island of Utøya. The teenagers represented a rising generation of political leadership that included quite a few Norwegian-born children of immigrants to Norway. Questions of inclusion and integration have thus not been limited to new immigrants but, rather, continue on to subsequent generations. Another recent example of this is in Sweden, where police were accused of practicing racial profiling through an initiative called Project REVA, begun in 2009, which tasked police with finding and apprehending those who were in Sweden illegally. In 2013, their tactics came under severe scrutiny when they began stopping people of certain ethnic appearance in the Stockholm subways and asking for identification (mirroring similarly controversial policing practices in the U.S. state of Arizona that allegedly targeted Latinos). When then-Minister of Justice Beatrice Ask defended the practice, award-winning Swedish author Jonas Hassen Khemiri, who was born in Stockholm to a Swedish mother and a Tunisian father, wrote Ask an open letter inviting her to "trade skin" for a day (2013a). Khemiri's letter, published in Sweden's daily newspaper with the largest circulation, *Dagens Nyheter*, broke the newspaper's all-time record of the most shared article on the day of publication. His letter was subsequently translated into English and published, in truncated form, in the opinion pages of the *New York Times* (Khemiri 2013b). We are pleased to provide in this volume the full-length English translation of Khemiri's open letter, "Dear Beatrice Ask," along with an original interview with the author by his translator, Rachel Willson-Broyles, in which Khemiri reflects on the letter's impact and legacy.

Recent decades have also seen the rise of an underemployed suburban underclass in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, where this development takes concrete, spatio-symbolic form. From 1965 to 1974, the Swedish Social Democratic government built more than a million new housing units, in new apartment complexes located in commuting distance from major urban centers, as part of an ambitious initiative called *miljonprogrammet* [the million program]. The immediate goals were to improve the overall standard of living and to alleviate pressure on the housing market, which was struggling to absorb new waves of workers –

many from outside Sweden – who were migrating to Sweden’s work centers during the economic boom of the postwar period. Another, loftier goal was that of social integration: to bring together people of diverse backgrounds to share equitable urban living spaces. By the turn of the twenty-first century, however, these apartment complexes had become symbols of the disenfranchisement of the suburban underclass. Those whose economic circumstances improved moved out of the housing developments and were often replaced by immigrants who faced many barriers to the Swedish labor market. A few famous examples of such neighborhoods include Husby, on the outskirts of Stockholm (where the riots that broke out in May 2013 spread across Stockholm suburbs and became world news), Hammarkullen in Gothenburg, and Rosengård in Malmö, Sweden’s third-largest city. Similar housing polarization has occurred in and around other Nordic urban centers with substantial immigrant populations, such as Nørrebro in Copenhagen, Alna and Søndre Nordstrand in Oslo, and Espoo and Vantaa outside Helsinki. But as the essays in this volume by Amanda Doxtater, Magnus Nilsson and Anna Williams show us, we cannot limit our critical readings of such important social spaces to ethnicity, race and national origin. To begin to apprehend the politics at work, we must also read the narratives that emerge from such spaces as stories about class and the economic anxieties that inform and construct social identities in today’s Nordic region.

Many of the chapters in this volume grew out of a two-day panel stream at the Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Study (SASS) Annual Meeting in Salt Lake City, Utah, in May, 2012. The original call for papers explicitly invited contributions that not only took new approaches to studying well-known aspects of diversity in Nordic culture and society but also tackled dimensions of diversity that have been hiding in plain sight, so to speak. One example is LGBTQ issues, on which the Nordic countries are seen as progressive and proactive – and to a great extent, rightfully so. They have been in the political forefront in granting rights to gay people, for instance by introducing registered partnership laws and securing access to reproductive rights. This, too, has become part of the Nordic progressive “brand.” As Jens Rydström (2011, 21) has argued, while “[t]he integrated homosexual couple has become a symbol for the majority’s tolerance,” latent homophobia still thrives in the Nordic countries, and pro-gay politics often becomes intertwined with xenophobia in Nordic nationalist discourses. These tensions also merit exploration within the context of diversity in the Nordic region, as addressed in Timothy Warburton’s chapter in this volume (see also Björklund 2014). Queer theory had a somewhat early breakthrough in the Nordic region;

indeed, the first major overview of queer theory appeared in 1996: the introduction to the Nordic academic journal *lambda nordica*'s special issue on queer theory (Kulick 1996). As Swedish gender scholar Ulrika Dahl (2011), among others, has documented, queer theory quickly established its home within women's and gender studies in the Nordic countries, and the field has grown rapidly, especially in Sweden.

Nordic transgender studies, in contrast, is a small but growing field, and recent research has addressed lived experiences and cultural representations as well as theoretical questions (e.g., Wickman 2001; Gårdfeldt 2005; Alm 2006; Bergström 2007; Kroon 2007; Berg 2008; Westerling 2008; Engdahl 2010; Bremer 2011; Raun 2012; *lambda nordica* 2013; Sørli 2013; Olovsson 2014). Transgender studies is an interdisciplinary research field that focuses on phenomena that disrupt the connections generally assumed to exist between biological sex on the one hand and gender on the other, the latter which gender and sexuality studies scholars argue is socially and culturally constructed. Examples of such "transgender" phenomena include transsexualism, intersexuality, cross-dressing, intergender and gender diversity in general (Stryker 2006, 3). Transgender studies thus challenge the gender binary as well as the perceived *cis* norm (*cis* is Latin for "on the same side"), which prescribes that a person's legal gender, biological sex, gender identity and gender expression should coincide, or be "on the same side" of the gender binary. The rights of transgender people have become a pressing political issue in the Nordic countries, which – as Tobias Raun documents in his chapter for this volume – have been far less progressive in this area than widely assumed. Another interdisciplinary field of utmost importance for any study of diversity is (dis)ability studies; within this field, an emerging body of so-called "crip theory" challenges the norm of able-bodiedness. As a field, Nordic (dis)ability studies has been concerned with empirical research as well as more theoretical approaches (e.g., Vehmas 2002, Kristiansen and Traustadóttir 2004, Malmberg and Färm 2008, *lambda nordica* 2012). While this field is rapidly gaining importance in academia worldwide, the number of Nordic scholars is, sadly, still limited, as exemplified by the fact that our vigorous efforts to find a Nordic disability studies scholar who was able to contribute to this volume ultimately failed.

All of these categories need to be taken into account when we analyze diversity in Nordic culture and society. This is particularly important since different categories are sometimes played against each other in nationalist discourses. For example, assimilationist and homonormative representations of homosexuality are often included in narratives of the liberal and progressive Nordic countries, but these narratives rest upon an

exclusion of an ethnic Other, which is posed as a threat to modern and tolerant “Nordic-ness” (Nebeling Petersen 2012). Another example is the fraught position of people of Kurdish or Palestinian origin, who are expected to demonstrate political fealty to the Nordic nation where they live even while imagining and advocating for a politically independent Kurdistan or Palestine. An intersectional approach to studying diversity is needed in order to account for these kinds of tensions. In the new millennium, categories of identity have become particularly destabilized with the emergence of a new generation of people in the Nordic region who demand more dynamic and fluid identities. The chapters in this volume, accordingly, reinvestigate the tired concept of “diversity” to make room for new realities as well as the ample new questions to which they give rise. Moreover, we believe the scholarship on diversity in the Nordic region tends to suffer from disciplinary segregation (e.g., political scientists writing for other political scientists), thus limiting the method(s) of analysis. The contributors to this volume are trained in a variety of fields, among them literary and cultural studies, film studies, ethnomusicology, anthropology, indigenous methodologies, gender and sexuality studies, history and folklore; we are connected through our common affiliation with the broad field of Nordic or Scandinavian area studies. The volume brings together examples from the region as a whole and from a variety of disciplinary perspectives and interrelated fields to contribute to important conversations about diversity today.

Finally, this volume assumes diversity to be a fundamental feature of Nordic modernity. Given that the Nordic countries consistently rank among the world’s wealthiest, most educated, and most egalitarian, the case studies in the following chapters provide important counter-narratives to prevailing local and global discourses of “Nordic-ness.” Our expert contributors not only interrogate historical categories of diversity in a Nordic context, including gender, sex and class (Raun, Williams, Nilsson) and ethnicity and race (Andreassen, Khemiri and Willson-Broyles, Doxtater, Loftsdóttir); they also show how these categories intersect. They examine new forms of, and platforms for, diverse ideas and creative expression, including fluid masculinities, digital cultures, new media, and fashion (Warburton, Andreassen, Minganti and Österlind, Malmio, Raun, Gjellstad). They question the terms on which the Nordic region’s indigenous peoples, the Sámi and the Greenlandic Inuit, as well as stateless people such as the Kurds, are brought into Nordic discussions of diversity, citizenship, and agency (Storfjell, Thisted, Eliassi). And they analyze the implications of nationalist and patriarchal discourses that have emerged since the turn of this century (Andreassen, Teitelbaum). It is our

hope that this rich – and indeed, diverse – collection of scholarly essays will spark productive and critical conversations, both in the classroom and among scholars, stakeholders and all who are interested in the national and regional cultures, subcultures and social dynamics that inform modern life in the Nordic region.

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# **I. DIVERSITY IN NEW MEDIA AND POPULAR CULTURE**

# CULTURAL AMNESIA AND AIDS: BREAKING THE SILENCE IN SWEDEN

TIMOTHY RYAN WARBURTON

In the January 2008<sup>1</sup> issue of *QX* magazine, Sweden's largest gay publication, openly gay Swedish pop star Andreas Lundstedt (Öhrman 2008, 16) confirmed media rumors that he was indeed HIV-positive. A member of the pop music group Alcazar and a frequent participant in *Melodifestivalen*,<sup>2</sup> Lundstedt was the first public figure in Sweden to come out as HIV-positive since fashion designer Sighsten Herrgård did so in 1987. Although Lundstedt has described that through his "coming out" he hoped to end the silence around HIV/AIDS in Sweden, the rhetoric of his coming out campaign is one that, ironically, also promotes an image of wellness. Lundstedt's confession of his HIV-positive status not only highlights certain homophobias that still exist concerning HIV/AIDS in Sweden but also illuminates the ways in which contemporary gay political discourses have either obfuscated or purposefully ignored this profoundly significant period in history until very recently.

Since Lundstedt's 2008 interview, he has published a memoir titled *Mitt positiva liv* [*My Positive Life*] in 2012. In 2012 and 2013, Swedish comedian Jonas Gardell began publishing a trilogy of novels, *Torka aldrig tårar utan handskar* [*Never Dry Tears Without Gloves*], that chronicle the difficult lives of a group of gay men in Stockholm during the late 1980s, when AIDS first appeared in Sweden. This trilogy also aired as a miniseries for a record 1.2 million viewers on Swedish television in 2012 (Voss 2012). This trilogy has sparked a widespread cultural debate about this moment in Sweden's history, and Gardell, one of Sweden's best-known gay public figures, was named *Årets homo* [*Gay Person of the Year*] at the *QX* 2013 Gaygala, an award presented to Gardell by none other than the Swedish Crown Princess Victoria (Sveriges kungahus 2013). This trilogy has begun to interrupt the contemporary narrative of dominant gay cultural representations by emphasizing aspects of pre-AIDS gay male sexual culture that were essential to forging a gay community and have brought the important conversation initiated by Lundstedt to a wider audience. One of the most significant questions raised by the discourse

surrounding Gardell's trilogy is why Swedes today, queer or not, are so ignorant of this history and so shocked by the homophobia of 1980s Sweden. In my forthcoming analysis of Lundstedt's coming out as HIV-positive, I claim that this shock is due to the active cultural amnesia perpetuated by gay rights discourses on the one hand, and Sweden's unique legislation surrounding HIV/AIDS on the other – a legislation informed by public health concerns rather than the religious and moral panic of the AIDS crisis in the United States.

Lundstedt's interview references a number of historical realities yet also emphasizes two key factors that inform gay identity politics in Sweden today by refuting commonly held misconceptions about HIV/AIDS. The first is Lundstedt's affirmation of his health and wellness. When asked by the interviewer how he is feeling, Lundstedt (Öhrman 2008, 17) responded enthusiastically: "I feel great. This isn't anything that affects my daily life."<sup>3</sup> This appears to be a direct response to a lingering image in Western cultural memory of the diseased sodomite who indulges in promiscuous, anonymous sex in public spaces, who represents a threat to collective public health. This image has been informed by AIDS crisis political rhetoric, *Bastuklubbslagen* [the Bathhouse Law], which forcibly closed all Swedish gay saunas, as well as the stipulations of forced disclosure under *Smittskyddslagen* [the Infectious Diseases Law], both of which I examine later in this chapter. While there are millions of heterosexual people worldwide who are HIV-positive, there persists in Sweden, as elsewhere, a seemingly irrevocable cultural association between male homosexuality and public sex and HIV/AIDS, despite the fact that just under one quarter of all HIV cases diagnosed in Sweden are the result of homosexual contact (Folkhälsomyndigheten 2014).<sup>4</sup> This misinformed association is confirmed through Lundstedt's addressing a gay public in *QX*. The media discourse upon his "coming out" with HIV, coupled with his status as an openly gay public figure in Sweden, reveals that the association of male homosexuality and AIDS still persists. At the same time, Lundstedt stresses that much misinformation and ignorance still surrounds HIV/AIDS in Sweden. In addition to emphasizing his wellness, he has also expressed in interviews that many are under the misconception that having HIV/AIDS means that you are going to die from the virus (Backlund 2008).

The second misconception that Lundstedt refutes is the stigmatization of illness. He asserts:

I want to show that you don't need to look sick when you have this infection. You can look great and be successful, and I hope I can inspire others to have the courage to speak about it. (Öhrman 2008, 16)<sup>5</sup>

Lundstedt directly challenges the identity of a “diseased individual” that AIDS crisis rhetoric has furnished in Sweden by being a successful and healthy-looking public figure. In the above excerpt, it appears as if Lundstedt purposefully uses the word *infektion* [infection] rather than *sjukdom* [disease] (Öhrman 2008,17). “Disease” implies death and contagiousness, and it incites fear and panic, a curious rhetoric that Susan Sontag examined in *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989). This distinction has become common in the U.S. healthcare system, which now describes venereal diseases, formerly known as “sexually transmitted diseases” (STDs), as sexually transmitted infections (STIs). In Sweden, Venhälsan, a clinic for men who have sex with men (MSM) that was established at Södersjukhuset, a public hospital in south Stockholm, at the dawn of the AIDS crisis, likewise has begun using terminology that lessens the stigmatization of STIs and HIV/AIDS. While a statement of confidentiality is provided for Venhälsan patients, the statement also acknowledges that HIV/AIDS information must be recorded on the patient’s documents (Södersjukhuset 2015). Lundstedt’s interview explicitly addresses ignorance around HIV/AIDS, demonstrating that knowledge about the virus is either lacking or forgotten entirely in dominant cultural discourses.

The Nordic countries and Sweden in particular often have been touted as pioneers of gay rights (Hekma 2006). However, the historical circumstances and the realities that have allowed sexual equality legislation to be implemented reveal a more complex causal relationship than Nordic societies’ emphasis on human rights as a central cultural value or an increasingly secularized welfare state. In this chapter I seek to accomplish two things: First, to engage Lundstedt’s coming out as HIV-positive as a point of departure that allows us to frame the AIDS crisis as a historical phenomenon, which has played a key role in the formation of contemporary gay rights discourses. Secondly, I wish to investigate the nebulous cultural memory of Sweden’s experience of the AIDS crisis and the unique legislation concerning HIV/AIDS in Sweden that persists as a legacy of this period.

### **The AIDS Crisis as a Historical Phenomenon**

But first, what was the initial impetus for this phenomenon of Western cultural amnesia as it pertains to the AIDS crisis? Marita Sturken (1997, 16–7) was the first to use this term specifically in the context of AIDS, characterizing our postmodern condition as “a context in which all sense of history is lost, amnesia reigns, and the past is vandalized by the pastiche

forms of the present”. Sturken’s idea of “pastiche” is an important point of departure, as the cultural memory of AIDS has made ubiquitous such objects like the AIDS quilt and the red ribbon while, at the same time, having erased the memory of 1980s widespread homophobia for example. There is a previous phenomenon that facilitated this, a direct result of AIDS activism conducted largely via visual media. Much of the goal of later AIDS activism in the late 1980s and 1990s promoted the idea that AIDS is a disease that can affect anyone, regardless of sexuality, race or class (an idea that truly gained momentum in the United States with basketball superstar Magic Johnson’s admission in 1992 that he is HIV-positive, as well as Ryan White, Kimberly Bergalis and a few other heterosexual public figures). British scholar Gabrielle Griffin (2000) notes, however, that this idea that anybody can be infected began to have the opposite of its intended effects for those actually living with HIV/AIDS. It is true that positive tangible effects of this cultural shift came about, such as increased funding for AIDS research, healthcare clinics targeted specifically for MSM, and anti-discrimination legislation. However, in an effort to spread the word that HIV can infect anyone, Griffin describes that a cultural “complacency” has developed:

[We] have learnt to live with HIV/AIDS in the sense that it is no longer “new” and therefore “noteworthy” to us. HIV/AIDS remains fraught with uncertainties but these have not affected white western heterosexual populations. (Griffin 2000, 193)

Instead, she notes, “the image of the person with HIV/AIDS remains firmly other” (Griffin 2000, 193). Griffin (2000, 179) continues that “this initial locating of HIV/AIDS in the gay community and the so-called Third World” has led to an “‘othering’ of HIV/AIDS among those affected,” a phenomenon, which has never been “superseded.” This idea is firmly supported by the demographics of HIV infection today, in which “the other” in Western society is still at greatest risk for infection (even at increasing rates), such as black women and MSM, and “the other” in a global context, namely sub-Saharan Africans.<sup>6</sup>

In the Western context, particularly in the case of the United States, government institutions were remarkably silent on the epidemic (the Reagan administration’s egregious neglect was described in the Oscar-nominated ACT UP documentary *How to Survive A Plague* [2012]). Griffin (2000, 178) notes that specifically in the context of the United Kingdom, the gap between those directly affected by and fighting with HIV/AIDS and those whose information about HIV/AIDS is “derived solely from the mass media, has grown immeasurably since the early

1990s. HIV/AIDS remains a major catastrophe for millions of people but the 'general public' is largely unaware of this." Griffin (2000, 179) also asserts that this idea of AIDS as a "fringe" concern was brought about by the volunteer and philanthropic organizations that sought to address the crisis, which in turn thus generated a sense that AIDS is "taken care of," a sentiment compounded by "the 'failure' of HIV/AIDS to take hold in mainstream communities as initially predicted." It is quite easy to see how the average Swede might also consider HIV/AIDS to be "taken care of," as sexual health and contraception have been handled and funded by the welfare state since 1933.

The first AIDS case in Sweden was reported at Roslagstull hospital in Stockholm in 1982 (Svéd 2000, 229). Although the AIDS crisis broke the silence about a lively gay subculture in larger Scandinavian cities like Stockholm, the cultural visibility that gay people, particularly gay men, consequently began receiving was anything but positive (Sörberg 2008, 48). A "healthy" nation with universal healthcare for its citizens as a cornerstone of its *folkhem*<sup>7</sup> agenda, Sweden initially responded to the AIDS crisis as a public health concern and continues to do so today. The Swedish gay rights group RFSL, Riksförbundet för sexuellt likaberättigande [The Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights] was the first to respond to what was referred to as "the new plague"<sup>8</sup> in cooperation with various Swedish government organizations like Aidsdelegationen [the National Delegation on AIDS], formed in 1985 and headed by the Swedish Minister of Health, Gertrud Sigurdson (Svéd 2000, 232). During Sigurdson's time as Minister of Health, two significant pieces of legislation came into effect. The first was the inclusion of HIV under the Infectious Diseases Law, which mandates that HIV- positive persons must regularly report sexual encounters and partners to a physician and may even be imprisoned if the physician suspects the patient will not inform sexual partners of his or her status and abide by safe-sex practices. The second was the Bathhouse Law, which forcibly closed all bathhouses designed to facilitate sexual contact in Sweden in 1987. The latter was repealed in 2004, but since then bathhouses have had little success in Sweden. A longtime Nordic cultural fixture, as well as a social space associated with health and vitality, critique of this law has focused on the fact that *only* spaces where men had sex with men were targeted by police, while heterosexual swingers' parties and BDSM clubs were not (Jonsson 2001).

George Svéd (2000) describes that this culture of panic blamed promiscuous homosexual sex as the culprit, and those who visited bathhouses were themselves considered "morally soiled" people who,

without consideration, would spread AIDS “to innocent, unknowing, married and bisexual men thus infecting their wives and children. That’s why homosexuals were [seen as] a threat to the general public” (Svéd 2000, 239).<sup>9</sup> This medical and cultural panic unequivocally informed the Bathhouse Law as well the inclusion of HIV under the Infectious Diseases Law, which remains in effect today. Svéd also notes in a later interview that at this time:

[It was] easy to sacrifice this group’s rights on some sort of sacrificial public health altar. It was perceived as a safety measure that came at no cost to the heterosexual community. (Andersen 2008)<sup>10</sup>

While the closing of bathhouses during the early years of the AIDS crisis was certainly not specific to Sweden, the criminal laws surrounding infection and disclosure were unique. Today it is impossible to keep one’s HIV/AIDS status private in Sweden. And as mentioned above, physicians are legally required to report a positive status to healthcare authorities, and those who test positive are required to report sexual encounters and partners regularly to a doctor. Incarceration is even possible without a trial in the case that a doctor believes an HIV-positive patient is unwilling to inform his or her sexual partners of his or her status (Kulick 2004, 208).

Because the National Delegation on AIDS responded relatively quickly first to focus on MSM as the most vulnerable demographic, this allowed the discourse to quickly shift once a number of measures had been taken that specifically targeted MSM. These measures included the distribution of information about the disease for MSM, but also specialized health clinics targeted toward MSM, and the recommendation that MSMs refrain from donating blood. And although the Bathhouse Law (passed in 1987) clearly targeted this demographic, David Thorsén (2013) describes that by 1985 in Sweden:

[Homosexual] men were no longer at the center of the public debate and political interest. Instead the drug addict – and particularly the young female drug-using prostitute – was targeted as the main vehicle for the spread of the virus. (Thorsén 2013, 473)

The junkie and the prostitute still remained “the other” in many ways in Sweden, but this shift away from gay and bisexual men, who were the initial target audience of the National Delegation on AIDS’ focus and resources were, at least in dominant cultural discourses, considered to be “taken care of.” This phenomenon in which the general public thought of

AIDS as “taken care of” was also occurring on a larger Western scale as I described above.

Despite the initial measures that the National Delegation on AIDS took to address this disease that infected a disproportionate number of Swedish MSM, the fear, panic, homophobia, and ignorance disseminated by the American discourse still dominated the discourse in Sweden. Thorsén (2013) describes that during the 1990s, AIDS began to grow as a media and popular cultural phenomenon, one which became increasingly Americanized to the point that “the American experiences through the press, science and popular culture often set the tone or acted as a reference point in even other countries’ perceptions of the epidemic” (Thorsén 2013, 18).<sup>11</sup> However, he also notes that the Swedish experience is unique among its European neighbors and the United States in that the public debate shifted away quite early from a focus on gay and bisexual men, as a number of measures were taken to initially respond to the disproportionate number of gay men that had been infected. Instead, Thorsén (2013, 468) describes that the prostitute and the junkie soon became the threat to the general public. Thorsén (2013, 473) observes that this shift had already occurred by the time the crisis had entered what he delineated as its second period, from 1985 to 1989.

The public health concerns surrounding the transmission of HIV are valid and arguably warrant state intervention to a certain extent. Yet Michel Foucault’s theories of bio-power and confession complicate this assertion and the relationship between the individual and the state with regard to the policing of sexuality. Foucault poses that:

[T]he individual is not a pre-given entity which is seized on by the exercise of power. The individual, with his identity and characteristics, is the product of a relation of power exercised over bodies, multiplicities, movements, desires, forces. (Foucault (1990, 74)

Consider this assertion in the context of Sweden. The cultural and political rhetoric of *folkhemmet*, informed by texts like Gunnar and Alva Myrdal’s *Kris i befolkningsfrågan* (1934) [*Nation and Family*], authored a Swedish national identity of strong, healthy individuals representing the secure future of the nation through responsible family planning and sexual hygiene. In their book, the Myrdals offered possible solutions to the declining Swedish birthrate, and they were influential in the discourse that established the Swedish welfare state. The book also marks an important sociopolitical moment in which the Swedish state became actively invested in sex and reproduction. This period in which the state, as an institution, became invested in statistics like birth rates and public health,

is what Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality* (1990), refers to as the era of “bio-power,” one of the Western state’s “numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations” (Foucault 1990, 140). In addition, Swedish artists at the time invested in the vitalist movement – Eugène Jansson, for example – arguably located this concept of healthy national productivity particularly on the white, working-class male body. Swedish art historian Patrik Steorn (2006, 67) notes that although the white heterosexual male body became coded as universal, images of the homosexual male body also began to circulate within this discourse. This exertion of bio-power in Sweden at this time, through institutions such as RFSU<sup>12</sup> (which implemented enterprises such as family planning), thus produced this idea of the individual Swedish citizen as an active agent in this state-mandated project.

Foucault’s idea that individuals are produced by institutions offers some explanation for the legislative and cultural response to AIDS in Sweden described above. The “sick” individual represents a blatant threat to the commonly shared identity of healthy Swedish nation builders. Homosexuality was first legalized in Sweden in 1944, but Socialstyrelsen [the National Board of Health and Welfare], considered it a psychological disease until 1979. In the early 1980s, although homosexuality was no longer officially considered a mental illness, the arrival of AIDS in Sweden offered the general public a way to pathologize homosexuality as a physical manifestation. The discourse of the institutions described above, including the Swedish legal system, the National Delegation on AIDS, and the Swedish healthcare system, produced a discursive identity for subjects infected with HIV/AIDS within Foucault’s framework in which identities are understood through institutional mandates. Through the implementation of a law that affected bathhouses frequented exclusively by men, Riksdagen, Sweden’s parliament, thus defined such bathhouses as sites of public homosexual sex and asserted that they were spaces where HIV was transmitted. The state thus endorsed a public health policy that perpetuated homophobia and gave Swedes with little or no access to homosexual people or gay culture an entire vocabulary to ascribe to homosexual men, their (allegedly public) sex lives, the dangers they pose, and the ways in which they are a threat to Swedish society. Through the closing of bathhouses, the Swedish healthcare authorities pathologized the figure of the homosexual male as someone who threatened the well-being of others. And through the infectious diseases law that effectively eliminated medical privacy for those infected, the Swedish state has pathologized individuals with HIV/AIDS as criminals who transmit HIV.

These “bio-political” forces, as Foucault describes, specifically the healthcare authorities in Sweden, exert their power and influence on people living with HIV/AIDS in Sweden in elusive and profound ways. Foucault (1990,140) describes that statistics and records kept of the imagined realities of populations of people are “joined at the level of a speculative discourse, but in the form of concrete arrangements.” Therefore complicated and nebulous realities of male homosexuality and living with HIV/AIDS are filed neatly under politically authored identities like “gay,” and “HIV-positive.” In the case of AIDS in twenty-first century Sweden, the more “concrete arrangements” like “gay” and “HIV-positive” additionally act upon subjects within their discourse, as those that exist *within* those realities inhabit those spaces to a number of ends, including community building, relationships, sexual partners, and political clout. In the case of HIV/AIDS in Sweden, it is the recording, counting, and registering of Swedes infected with the virus that allows this distribution and maintenance of bio-power. The mandated disclosure of sexual partners and acts under the Infectious Diseases Law exerts power over subjects in direct and obvious ways, but it also results in more diffuse effects, such as the choosing of sexual partners and the specific sex acts in which one chooses to engage, as oral/anal sexual acts are assigned greater risk according to medical and public health discourses.

Although Foucault originally referred to a shift from clerical to medical authority, in this discussion about Lundstedt the power and ubiquity of media as producers of knowledge appear also to serve this function, demonstrated by the talk show or the one-on-one interview format in which confessions often are elicited and sensationalized today. Lundstedt’s coming out as having HIV, admitting this secret that he has held for many years from the public, can also be described as a confession. Foucault (1990, 61) traces the ritual of confession as one that originated with Christian penance and continues today as a “privileged form of confession.” He explains that “the transformation of sex into a discourse” and “the dissemination and reinforcement of heterogeneous sexual identities” are two ways that are “linked together with the help of the central element of a confession that compels individuals to articulate their sexual peculiarity” (Foucault 1990, 61). Therefore Foucault’s expanding the commonly understood idea of religious confession is key here. Because unlike religious confession, the confession of sexual acts to a medical professional not only has ostensible criminal repercussions, but also the public health process of collecting and analyzing data thus influences the ways in which the patient will ultimately be handled within this discourse. Using the early years of the AIDS crisis as an example, confessions by