Scandinavian Exceptionalisms. Introduction

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In February 2020, shortly before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe, a promotional video from Scandinavian Airlines provoked public debate across Scandinavia. Why the advert’s slogan, »What is truly Scandinavian? – Absolutely nothing«, caused such controversy might be hard to comprehend for someone from the outside. The word ›outside‹ is perhaps the clue. The film juxtaposes images of the items, foods, landscapes, celebrations and lifestyle commonly associated with the societal model, moral values and cultural heritage of the Scandinavian countries, with various kinds of ›evidence‹ demonstrating that their origins lie somewhere else: democracy came from Greece, the credit for parental leave goes to Switzerland, windmills were invented in Persia, rugbrod [dark rye bread] is Turkish, liquorice Chinese, Danish pastries Austrian, midsommar German, and credit for the women’s rights movement should be given to the Americans. In other words, »everything is copied«. But why are there undeniably some things we understand as typically Scandinavian? This is because, the argument goes, it is a »unique Scandinavian thing to bring things from outside, adjust them slightly, adding »colour, innovation and progress« in order to »find the best of our home away from home«. It is clear that while rejecting the idea of anything being quintessential Scandinavian, the advertisement playfully refers to the idea of Scandinavian uniqueness (by the way, it is perhaps a uniquely Scandinavian thing to refer to one’s native land simply as ›home‹).

Anger seemed to dominate among the emotions triggered by the advertisement, especially among national conservative commentators and even politicians (but interestingly also among some on the far left of the political spectrum – for different reasons), who assumed the role of protectors of national values. However, from the perspective of the editors of this book, the most interesting fact is that the idea of Scandinavian exceptionalism, whether contested or defended by voices on the right, left or liberal centre in various media, is vividly present in the collective awareness of Scandinavians. Even the controversy itself, as one commentator sarcastically observed, was deeply, and perhaps uniquely, Scandinavian.
Scandinavian Exceptionalisms

The concept of ›Scandinavian/Nordic Exceptionalism‹ is used in political science to describe the socio-economic organization of the Nordic welfare states as distinct from other welfare models (such as the ›continental‹ or American models). The concept implies a perception of something common to the Nordic countries: a model of society based on a particular arrangement of relations between the individual, family, state and market. During the Cold War period, the Nordic model gained a particular significance as a pragmatic ›third way‹ solution between capitalism and socialism. Furthermore, in terms of foreign policy, the Nordic countries earned a reputation as ›peaceful and rational‹ bridge builders and advocates of internationalist solidarity. In the post-Cold War period this Nordic ›brand‹ has been challenged and undermined by various developments, and several recent studies have pointed to a ›crisis‹ in Nordic identity and a »consequent decline of the pan-Nordic community«. Today, political scientists still speak of a Nordic model of government and the Nordic countries as ›moral superpowers‹. Similarly, within the fields of law and criminology, the idea of exceptionalism is evoked in studies and discussions as to the existence of a distinctively Nordic penal culture characterized by low rates of imprisonment and liberal and humane prison conditions.

Yet, the perception of Scandinavian Exceptionalism(s) also draws on a set of cultural values and discourses related to the idea of a specific kind of modernity in the Scandinavian countries, which manifests itself in phenomena such as sexual liberation, gender equality, environmental awareness, etc. Is Greta Thunberg a truly Scandinavian phenomenon?

This book is about the cultural aspects of the discourse of Scandinavian exceptionalisms. In the 21st century, concepts of Scandinavia and the Nordic countries live on in cultural phenomena such as Scandinavian Design, Scandinavian Crime Fiction and ›Nordic Noir‹, which contribute,
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each in its own way, to the branding of the Nordic countries in a global context. Most recently, a series of popular books in Britain and Germany have been dedicated to the notion of ‘cosiness’ (hygge), celebrated as the very essence of the Scandinavian lifestyle and interior design. Another current example of a discursive construction of Scandinavian Exceptionalism is the annual World Happiness Reports, habitually nominating the inhabitants of the Scandinavian countries as the happiest peoples in the world. As the flip side of this coin, recent scholarship has evoked the notion of ‘Scandinavian Guilt’, pointing to the ambivalent feelings of shame and guilt associated with this image in a world where, through digital news media and the influx of refugees, people are constantly confronted with the misfortune of others.

The articles collected in the book are based on papers delivered at the 2018 IASS Conference Scandinavian Exceptionalisms, held at the University of Copenhagen in August 2018. IASS: International Association of Scandinavian Studies is an organization dedicated to the promotion, development and encouragement through international co-operation of Scandinavian Studies, especially the scholarly study of the literatures of the Scandinavian countries. To further these goals, the association organizes every two years an international conference, which is held alternately in a Scandinavian and non-Scandinavian country.

The book offers an interdisciplinary investigation into how ideas and narratives of ‘the Nordic’ and ‘Scandinavian’ have been developed and negotiated in literature, art and other cultural discourses in the 20th and 21st centuries. How did the concepts of the North, Nordic and Scandinavian emerge historically? In what ways have they been narrated, staged and visualized in various cultural domains – in literature, art, design, architecture and media culture? And how are they being represented and renegotiated today?

With this book, we wish to encourage a renewed discussion of the cultural geographies and mental demarcations, and of the phantasms and myths that have served as the basis for shifting discourses of the North and Scandinavia. Who is the ‘Other’ used as a counter-image in order to define the North and Scandinavia? If Scandinavia is an exception or a

8 See Malene Breunig’s contribution to this volume.
9 See Oxfeldt: 2016.
deviation – then, from what? Where are the borders of Scandinavia? Which internal differences and experiences might be ignored or marginalized when speaking of the North or Scandinavia as a common entity? Which internal borders, differences and counter-images may be identified among Scandinavian cultures? What role might Nordic communities, real or imagined, play in a world characterized by political and regional tensions, a climate crisis, growing nationalism, and most recently, the global pandemic? These are some of the questions and topics addressed in the articles in the book.

Nordic Identities

Ideas of the North played an important role in the construction of the Nordic nation states in the 19th century. The Swedish national anthem »Du gamla, du fria« was originally written as a hymn not to Sweden but to the North. Around the same time, H.C. Andersen declared: »We are one people, we are called Scandinavians«, in a song he himself characterized as a Nordic anthem. The pan-Scandinavianism of the romantic era was encouraged by the philological rediscovery of Old Norse and Icelandic literature, including the Eddas and the Sagas, which offered a fascinating point of reference for ideas of a common past or Nordic ›Golden Age‹. Old Norse literature was celebrated as expressions of the prehistory and spirit of the Nordic peoples, while also being appropriated as instruments for constructing new national identities – not only in the Nordic countries, but also in Germany and Britain.

The first section of the book deals with the cultural dimensions of Nordic identity and the construction of a Nordic or Scandinavian ›we‹ in opposition to more local or more international communities, whether organized or imaginary. The question »what is Nordic?« is posed, not in terms of specific developments, but in accordance with the words of Øystein Sørensen and Bo Stråth, in relation to »an experienced transnational community based on identity«. The contributions do so by highlighting central concepts, narratives and practices that have served or

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21 See *Hemstad*, *Møller* and *Thorkildsen*: 2018; *Hillström* and *Sanders*: 2017.
23 *Sørensen* and *Stråth*: 1997, 20.
continue to serve as regional identity markers, adding the uniqueness ascribed to the North.

Nordic relations have moved between the touchstones of confrontation, cooperation and dreams of unification. In his contribution, Poul Houe deals with key examples of discussions of Scandinavianism/Nordism, both academic and essayistic, from the aftermath of the climax in the mid-19th century, where the idea of a shared union state was heavily propagated (e.g., Fredrik Bajer’s *Nordens politiske Digting 1789–1804*, 1878), all the way up to today (e.g., Hemstad et al. (eds.): *Skandinavismen. Vision og virkning, 2018*). By addressing and highlighting what the Swedish Nobel laureate Kirsten Ekman has called »the fog and haze rhetoric that has developed round Norden as a concept during the last 150 years«,[14] the examples show that neither modern Scandinavianism/Nordism nor its harshest critics have hit a home-run, whereby the designations of ›Norden‹ and ›Nordic‹ as well as the historical sense of a Northern community remain unclear or ambivalent for the inhabitants of this North European periphery. However, as Houe concludes, the ambiguity and lingering tensions between different conceptual readings are fuel for the movement’s mental history as well as perhaps a transnational counterpoint or alternative to current nationalistic discourses.

In Malene Breunig’s contribution, we move from the (meta)history of Scandinavianism to an analysis of the contemporary framing of a specific cultural concept, ›hygge‹. In 2016 a popular vote orchestrated by the Danish Ministry for Cultural Affairs, canonized ›hygge‹ as one out of ten Danish ›core values‹, while, at the same time, the concept has been heavily promoted as a regional brand and commodity. The same year, no less than ten English-language books on the subject were published: *The Little Book of Hygge* (by Meik Weiking), *The Book of Hygge. The Danish Art of Living Well* (by Louisa Thomson Brits), *The Cosy Life. Rediscover the Joy of the Simple Things Through the Danish Concept of Hygge* (by Pia Edberg), etc. By analysing the aesthetic design and discursive self-representation of the Stockholm townhouse-hotel Ett Hem and the refurbished Copenhagen Noma restaurant, Breunig comes to a definition of *hygge* as a unique marker of identity, which reinterprets principles and ideals embodied in early and mid-20th century Scandinavian interior design. By pointing out the historical boundaries of the concept, Breunig

demonstrates how historical thinking and sentiments, including nostalgia, are a basic element of the cultural construction of the North. Hereby, however, the modern definition of ›hygge‹ is no longer geographically limited to Denmark, let alone Scandinavia, but to the Nordic region as a whole, while, socially, its middle-class affiliation has lost out to a cosmopolitan, wealthy and culturally self-conscious elite. ›Hygge‹ is a lifestyle that the whole world can buy into.

Contrasting this illumination of contemporary ›conspicuous consumption‹ (to borrow a concept from the American economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen) connected to a Scandinavian concept, is the account of hunger and poverty in Nordic self-representation by Frederike Felcht. Drawing on literary evidence from the mid-19th (Runeberg and Bjørnsson) to the early 20th century (Tavaststjerna and Nexø), Felcht argues for the existence of a Nordic exceptionalism, in which the struggle with tough social conditions forms the foundation of a particular form of social community. Reflecting 19th century social and political transformations, the discourse of poverty changes: from an idealization (seen in the Finnish national anthem, written by Runeberg in 1848: »Our country is poor […] but this country we love«) to a social-criticism with effects on both policymaking and identity-construction, not least through a common Nordic emphasis on peasant ideals, often regarded as prerequisites of the welfare states of the 20th century.

In his contribution, Ivars Orehovs focuses on Scandinavian participation at the Olympic Games, specifically the arts competitions, Concours d'Art, during its early years, from 1912 to 1948 (involving the fields of architecture, painting, sculpture, music, and literature). At Sweden's initiative, the first arts competitions took place at the Fifth Olympic Games in Stockholm in 1912. The article emphasizes an important dimension of the negotiations of Nordic identity and its exceptionality or exemplarity. They necessarily involve comparison (a ›we‹ requires an opposing ›they‹) or, even, as highlighted by Orehovs, competition.

Nordic Dystopias

Whereas the concepts of ›hygge‹ and social equality each in their way encapsulate some of the positive values and discourses associated with modern Scandinavian culture and societies, the Nordic model of welfare has also given rise to a tradition of counter-images, criticism and dystopi-
an thinking in art, literature and cultural criticism, both inside and outside the Scandinavian countries. A canonical example of dystopian welfare criticism in Scandinavian literature is Gunnar Ekelöf’s poem »Till de folkhemske« from the collection Non serviam (1945). In this poem Ekelöf puts forward a harsh satire of the painstaking social engineering and functionalistic standardization of the early Swedish ›folkhem‹ thus reversing the metaphor of the home (›hem‹) into its opposite: an alienated society where phantasy has no place. To pinpoint his criticism of the tendency towards conformism in the emerging ›folkhem‹, Ekelöf crafted a new word in the Swedish language, ›folkhemsk‹, which turns the familiar metaphor of home into something strange and uncanny, echoing Freud’s notion of ›das Unheimliche‹. The second section of this book deals with other examples of Nordic dystopias and future scenarios, from the 1950s to present, within various cultural domains, including literature, philosophy and contemporary TV-series.

In the first article of the section, Krzysztof Bak investigates an important current in post-war criticism of the Scandinavian welfare state, originating in the ideas of the French philosopher Emmanuel Mounier. Primarily known as the founding father of the philosophical movement ›personalism‹, conceived as a synthesis of catholic Christianity and modern socialism, Mounier was also one of the first thinkers to address the issue of the ›Scandinavian model‹, being the topic of his long essay, »Notes scandinaves ou du bonheur« (Notes on Scandinavia or on Happiness), published in 1950. In his article Bak outlines the main elements in Mounier’s philosophical and religiously oriented criticism of the Scandinavian welfare model in order to trace its influence on fictional works by two Swedish novelists, Elsa Trotzig and Sara Stridsberg. Drawing on examples from Trotzig’s novels Sjukdomen [The Decease] (1972) and Dykungens dotter [The Mud King’s Daughter] (1989) and Stridsberg’s novel Beckomberga (2014) Bak emphasizes a recurrent pattern in the way all three authors depict the Swedish ›folkhem‹ as a utopian-eschatological project aimed at the creation of a paradise-like realm of happiness. In all three cases, the Swedish utopia is depicted as a failure, a dystopian society, characterized by depersonalization, loss of freedom and human suffering. Along the lines of Ekelöf’s poem, the Scandinavian welfare state is

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15 See AHBÄCK and LATHINEN: 2019.
16 See MOUNIER: 1950.
described as a »death machine of happiness«, which deprives man of his freedom, will and the transcendental dimensions of life.

A similar kind of criticism of the Nordic welfare state is examined in Jørgen Veisland’s article, which includes a reading of the Icelandic author Einar Mar Gudmundsson’s 1993 novel Englar alheimsins [Angels of the Universe]. Gudmundsson’s novel stages a poetic psychodrama weaving Shakespeare’s characters of Richard III and Macbeth into the lives of the protagonist and first-person narrator Paul and his friend Viktor, who are undergoing intensive drug treatment at the Klepp hospital in Reykjavik. The novel renders a dystopian vision and critique of the major institutions and politics of the Nordic welfare state as exemplified by Iceland in the 1950s and 1960s. Yet, drawing on a formulation from Wallace Stevens, Veisland argues that the narrative form of the novel may also be read as counter response to ideological and institutional violence and oppression, »a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality«.

With Sophie Wennerscheid’s contribution, we move outside the scope of the dystopian genre and criticism of the welfare state in the narrow sense. Her article discusses a new subgenre in contemporary Swedish science-fiction, which she terms »speculative-posthuman robot-fiction«. Using the Swedish science fiction TV series Äkta människor [Real Humans] (2012) and Sam Ghazi’s 2014 novel Sången ur det kinesiska rummet [The Song from the Chinese Room] as her main examples, Wennerscheid explores the main characteristics of this new genre and its distinctive features vis-à-vis science-fiction. Speculative-posthuman robot-fiction presents fictional worlds in which humanoid robots programmed with humanlike capabilities have entered ordinary people’s lives. Another key element of the genre is that the stories take place in a social-realistic set-up, in a future society very similar to ours. What makes Äkta människor stand out in an international context is its verisimilitude and its focus on family matters and workplace problems. Instead of creating lavish special effects and action sequences, otherwise typical of science fiction, the series displays a strong interest in the social lives of its characters, thus providing a space for ethical reflections on a series of topics, including gender roles, non-conventional sexual preferences and ethical discrimination in present-day Scandinavia. In a similar manner, Sam Ghazi’s Sången ur det kinesiska rummet highlights moral questions about the effects of digitization on our society and the relation between man and
machine. In her analysis, Wennerscheid proposes seeing both works in the philosophical context of posthumanism. Speculative posthuman robot-fiction raises the difficult question of how to deal with new technology when we encounter it in the form of intelligent and sentient robots, almost indistinguishable from humans.

**Scandinavian Postcolonialism**

The third section of the book is devoted to an area of studies in which perceptions of Scandinavian exceptionalism have received particular attention within recent years. Throughout the last decade, postcolonialism has developed into one of the most dynamic fields of Scandinavian studies, as witnessed by a series of publications, seminars and research projects dedicated to the history and colonial heritage of the Scandinavian countries.\(^7\) In the Danish context, renewed interest in colonial history has manifested itself in the publication of an in-depth five-volume account of Denmark’s history as a colonial power.\(^8\) This work came out as part of the 2017 centennial commemoration of the transfer of the former Danish West Indies, today’s the US Virgin Islands, to the United States, and has been followed by a sometimes heated public debate on the reach and specificity of Denmark’s role as a colonial power in comparison with other European colonial powers. Furthermore, postcolonial theories and approaches have been applied to studies on the histories and cultures of the countries of the North Atlantic region: Greenland, Iceland and the Faroe Islands and their common history and experience with the Danish empire.\(^9\) On the basis of these, it would seem futile to claim that the Nordic region’s colonial past and heritage has been subject to repression in the cultural memory; and yet the character of the colonial past as well as its importance and acknowledgment in the self-images of the Scandinavian countries is a question that still needs to be examined. This is where the question of Scandinavian exceptionalism comes into the picture.

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\(^7\) **Naum** and **Nordin**: 2015; **Loftsdóttir** and **Jensen**: 2012.

\(^8\) **PederSEN**: 2017.

In fact, as Lill-Ann Körber shows in the opening article of the section, perceptions of the Scandinavian countries’ colonial past have been guided by a strong notion of exceptionalism: a perception of the unique smallness and innocence of the Scandinavian countries in terms of colonialism. While not neglecting the fact that Denmark-Norway and Sweden did take part in colonial activities, including the transatlantic slave trade, this position claims that, compared to the major European imperial powers, the Scandinavian role in colonization was marginal and without significant effects. Furthermore, Lill-Ann Körber identifies two other elements in the self-image of the Scandinavian countries that hinder an acknowledgement of their colonial past: a conviction of the countries’ exceptional goodness or benevolence, as expressed in humanitarian aid programs and so-called «ex-colony tourism», and the perception of the ethnic homogeneity among «white» Scandinavian peoples. According to Körber, these ideas have produced a Scandinavian «colourblindness» which neglects the relevance of race and racism in a Scandinavian context. In her article, Körber analyses how this attitude of «innocent ignorance» is expressed in the Danish case of the permanent exhibition »Tea Time. The First Globalisation« at the Maritime Museum of Denmark, which offers a purely mercantilistic and «white» narrative of the Danish slave trade, detached from all black people's experience. As a possible counter-narrative, Körber argues for a more inclusive, »non-exceptionalist« approach to Scandinavian colonial history, one which embraces the perspective of the abducted, the enslaved, and those who simply go about their daily lives with visible traces of Scandinavian colonialism in Caribbean and African cities. Such a rewriting of history means accepting those «with experience from the slave trade» into the body of the nation. To support such a revision of history, Körber proposes the term «entanglements» as a mode for approaching the transnational and transregional encounters produced by Scandinavian colonialism. To de-exceptionalize the history of Scandinavian colonialism, Körber concludes, is to de-colonize.

The fault-lines of Scandinavian exceptionalism with regard to the Scandinavian countries’ colonial past is also the point-of-departure of Neena Ghandi’s article in this volume. In the first part of her article, Ghandi offers a critical reexamination of Scandinavian colonialism, focusing on the participation of Scandinavian countries in the African slave trade. Ghandi’s argument is that although Scandinavian countries like
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Denmark and Sweden benefitted greatly from the colonial enterprise, the self-image of these same countries as »the good westerners« has camouflaged their colonial past. In the second part of her article, Ghandi analyses the discussions surrounding the Danish author Karen Blixen's work *Out of Africa*, published in 1937. The discussion of Karen Blixen emphasizes the dissonance present in the works of many colonialist authors – when the author is both the product of an ideology and a critic of it. Ghandi concludes that the dismissal of the postcolonial criticism directed at Blixen is particularly worrying because Scandinavian countries have not been exposed to a critique of colonialism, and it is essential that this dialogue is not closed before it has even started.

Another example of the relevance and the critical potentialities of a postcolonial approach to Danish culture and literary history is emphasized in Bergur Moberg’s article. The article discusses how the Faroe Islands have been described in works by Faroese authors writing in the Danish language and how the same narratives of the »exceptional« geography and nature of the Faroe Islands resonate in the discourses of the present-day Faroese tourism industry. Traditionally, the image of the Faroe Islands has been constructed through various kinds of exoticism and self-exoticism, yet in his article Moberg also shows how modern Faroese literature has responded to such narratives with a conscious mimicry of colonial and continental discourses of the Faroe Islands. Through a comparison of two Faroese novels, Jørgen Falk Rønne’s *Mens Nordhavet bruser. Roman fra Færøerne* [While the North Sea is Swelling. A Novel from the Faroe Islands] (1928) and William Heinesen’s *De farvandte Spillemand* [The Lost Musicians] (1950), the article points out a significant change in the literary perception of the Faroe Islands. Whereas Rønne’s novel offers an exotic depiction of the Faroe Islands as an isolated Island of »wild nature«, Heinesen’s novel introduces a more subtle and anthropological description of the Faroe Islands as a modern urban society tangled up with continental European culture.

The relevance of postcolonial criticism with regard to the history and culture of the North Atlantic region is furthermore emphasized in Vera Knútsdóttir’s concluding contribution to the section. This article analyses two series of photographs by the artist Ólöf Nordal, both of which use material from physical anthropological examinations performed on Icelanders at two different moments in history. The first example, *Musée Islandique*, is a collection produced by French scientists in 1856, includ-
ing plaster casts of the body parts of Icelanders from different social classes. The second, *Das Experiment Island*, was an examination made by the Icelandic but German-based anthropologist Dr. Jens Pálsson in 1872 which measured the head shapes of Icelanders and took biological samples of them, such as locks of hair. Departing from Jacques Derrida's concept of the archive as an instrument of power, Knútsdóttir describes *Musée Islandique* as an archive typical of 19th-century colonial discourses, whereas *Das Experiment Island* reveals uncanny connotations related to the visual cultures of the Holocaust. The two series point to the complicated and contradictory position of Icelanders in the Scandinavian and European mental map; while Iceland, in light of its legacy of Sagas and Eddas, has been conceptualized as a Germanic utopia, Icelanders were also seen as barbarians to be colonized and civilized.

**Scandinavian Places and Landscapes**

Mental mapping is the main focus of the fourth section, Scandinavian Places and Landscapes, which includes four articles focusing on various aspects of the Scandinavian / Nordic spatial imaginary – a vital ingredient in national and regional (self-)constructions. The authors in this section analyse contemporary works of literature, a television drama and academic discourses that express critical views of exceptionalist self-conceptions expressed through uniquely Nordic locations, nature and climates, as well as the Nordic people's relation to nature, conceived as 'better' (read: 'greener') than that of the rest of the world. Investigating how real places – various areas of the North – are imagined and re-imagined against hegemonic exceptionalist constructions of the 'North' and distinct national discourses, the contributions are theoretically embedded in impulses brought about by the spatial turn in the humanities. The authors emphasise ecocritical, postcolonial and geocritical aspects of the analysed works, demonstrating how they enter into dialogues with the most pressing issues of today and with topics that belong to these burgeoning fields of Scandinavian Studies,\(^\text{20}\) such as the role of the local within the global, anthropogenic climate change and regional identities' positioning within homogenising national narratives.

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\(^{20}\) See e.g. Henning, Jonasson and Degerman: 2018.
Zsófia Domsa’s article opening this section examines the construction of the West Norwegian fjord landscapes in Jon Fosse’s dramas. Domsa uses the concept of ›landscape dialogues‹ to investigate interactions between people and landscapes in Fosse’s _Nokon kjem til å komme. Ein sommars dag_ and _Eg er vinden_. As Domsa argues, Fosse’s landscapes become detached from the national frame, the local being instead entangled with the global and existential. The author of the article demonstrates that in Fosse’s dramas, the unparalleled coastal landscape and unique Norwegian nature – which belong to both the exceptionalist self-image and hetero-image of Scandinavia as well as Norway – become an archetypical ›ikkje-stad‹, a term Jon Fosse (1994) himself uses to describe his understanding of literary places. Very unlike the concept of ›non-place‹, introduced by the French anthropologist Marc Augé to describe the anonymous spaces of transience characterising the era of supermodernity, Fosse’s landscapes may rather be compared to what Augé calls ›antropological places‹ or places of memory. Neither subordinated to national or regional identity constructions nor purposefully challenging them, Fosse’s West Norwegian landscapes combine the touch of the local with a universal human perspective.

A subversive take on Scandinavian exceptionalism as expressed through the incorporation of ›nature‹ into national discourses is offered by Maria Hansson. Her article examines the ecocritical dimension embedded in the successful Swedish television series _Jordskott_, arguing that the rich borrowings from Scandinavian folklore inserted into the convention of the socially critical ›Nordic noir‹, subvert the Swedish national – and exceptionalist – self-conception as ›nature people‹, as well as the idea of the welfare state, the Swedish ›folkhem‹. Evocations of magical forest mythology in _Jordskott_, and the insertion of figures such as trolls and sprites into a socially realistic universe, confront the national and broader regional imagination with present ecological devastations, such as vast deforestations and the wood industry. At the same time, by combining Scandinavian fantasy with the popular genre of the Scandinavian crime story, the series has a strong international appeal, beyond the narrow national context.

Jan Dlask’s article is devoted to the idea of the exceptional North within the North itself – and, more precisely, to the construction of North Finland in Finnish literary historical writing. Dlask examines _Pohjois-Suomen kirjallisuushistoria_ [The History of North Finland Literature]
(2010) as an example of the current trend to challenge the writing of unified national literary histories and concentrate on hitherto neglected or marginalized areas, which in this case means rewriting national literary history from a regional point of view. Dlask analyses this publication in dialogue with, on the one hand, a Czech volume of translations of Finnish literary texts depicting North Finland and, on the other, Finland’s literary canon. Pinpointing the complexities of defining North Finland and a North Finnish author, Dlask suggests that the literature of the region has been less marginalized in the Finnish literary canon than the authors of *Pohjois-Suomen kirjallisuushistoria* claim – or, in other ways than they claim. Rather than “marginalization”, the concept of “colonization” is perhaps more appropriate in order to understand the intricacies of regional representation in national literary histories.

Finally, Kristina Malmio examines the construction of the Arctic archipelago of Svalbard in a poem titled » assemblage (Svalbard)« from the collection *Wunderhammer* by Finland-Swedish author Ralf Andtbacka. The geocritical perspective adopted by Malmio, focusing on the relations between fictionally produced spatiality and reality, serves as a fruitful tool to discuss the network of global places and ready-made objects referred to in *Wunderhammer*, situated by Malmio in the tradition of “polar avant-garde” and “postmodern spatiality”. With these contexts in focus, Malmio examines Andtbacka’s construction of Svalbard – the utmost geographical periphery of the North – asking how it relates to the idea of Nordic exceptionalism. As she shows, Svalbard’s exceptionalist position on the map as well as its perception as an exotic, unknown and peripheral “Northern” object of colonialist discovery journeys, are deconstructed in the poem. Svalbard is here just one of many ready-mades, put together in an assemblage with other places, found materials and references to multiple phenomena in the world.

›Folkhem‹ and Working-Class Literature

This section is entirely devoted to early and mid-20th century Swedish working-class literature. In terms of the Scandinavian and Nordic perspectives of the book, the ramifications of this literature are only seemingly provincial and parochial. In the 20th century, »the idea of modernity
replaced God with society», the French sociologist Alain Touraine has noted. Correspondingly, 20th-century concepts of the ›Nordic‹ or ›Scandinavian‹ often seem closely attached to the political and the social, rather than to history and mythology, in the form of political engineering, thinking and aesthetics, as well as to specific societal ideas and models, such as the (Swedish) ›folkhem‹ or the overlapping and -arching (Nordic) ›Welfare State‹, often referred to as the ›Nordic Model‹. In this, a focus on the social structure and fabric became an integral part of literature and aesthetics. With its viewpoint from below, working-class literature is particularly important in this regard, due to its sheer volume, but also due to its famous representatives (Ivar Lo-Johansson, Moa Martinsson, Vilhelm Moberg, Martin Andersen Nexø, Johan Falkberget and Väinö Linna among others). But what is working-class literature? What is particularly Swedish vis-à-vis Nordic about working-class literature? How does it relate to the ideas behind the models of the Swedish ›folkhem‹ and the Nordic Welfare State? To what extent did proletarian ideas overlap with contemporary nationalistic thinking? And what was the role of women in the modern Nordic nation? These are some of the questions this section of the book raises.

In 1986 the French Professor Philippe Bouquet framed the Swedish proletarian novel as »an outstanding phenomenon«. According to Bouquet, the exceptional development and status of the genre in Sweden can be explained sociologically by the fact that it has been recognized as part of an important literary tradition, unlike in France and elsewhere, where proletarian novels and working-class literature have been neglected as fields of study or looked down upon as parts of a political rather than an aesthetical program. This notion of Swedish exceptionality in regard to the development of a working-class literature is the starting point of Magnus Nilsson’s conceptual considerations on this particular branch of 20th-century literature. This idea of uniqueness has long been commonplace in Swedish literary historiography and working-class literature studies, especially linked to the remarkable generation of novelists dominating Swedish literature from of the 1950s: Ivar Lo-Johansson, Moa Martinsson, Vilhelm Moberg, Eyvind Johnson and Harry Martinson, among others. In recent years, working-class literature studies have been integrated

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22 TOURNAINE: 1995, 144.
23 BOUQUET: 1986, 8.
in a Nordic context (not least through conferences and publications within The Nordic Network for Research on Working-Class Literature) as well as subject to comparative investigations (for instance, John Lennon and Magnus Nilsson’s edited volume on *Working-Class Literature(s): Historical and International Perspectives* from 2007). This internationalization of the field has both strengthened and challenged Swedish exceptionality, Nilsson argues. Analogical developments between the different Nordic literatures as well as border-crossing networking among proletarian writers have been documented in recent scholarship. However, the fact that in Sweden, unlike in neighbouring Nordic countries, working-class literature was not a marginal phenomenon is not affected. Nilsson goes on to propose a dialectical conceptualization of the subject of study, which can function as an umbrella term and accommodate the heterogeneity found in working-class literature(s).

In her contribution, Beata Agrell focuses on early working-class literature of the so-called ›Pioneer age‹ (pionjärtpiren) in the first decades of the 20th century. Agrell investigates how proletarian – and by ideological, socialist default: internationalistic – literature came to terms with the patriotic, and even nationalistic, currents of the time by bringing together (rather than juxtaposing) national sentiments and the struggle for welfare for all. Around 1900, a discourse of national uniqueness and duty was dominant in Swedish politics and culture. Working-class literature of the time was also affected. The socialist internationalism was combined with affection for the home soil, one’s own village, and proletarian work ethics, all of which were put forward as a heritage to be protected and developed by the young working class. In one of the literary examples put forward by Agrell, Erik the protagonist of Maria Sandel’s novel *Vortex* (1923) is blacklisted for his union work, but he rejects the suggestion of fleeing to America, as Sweden is his land through birth and work: »With the right of the blood as well as the sweat«. According to Agrell, this example reflects how Sweden’s pre-industrial agrarian society turned into a proletarian class society, whereby Swedishness did not exclude internationalism.

Much in parallel to Agrell, though not set before, but rather in the early days of the modern welfare state, and with a specific focus on female working-class writers and the role of women, Therese Hellberg investigates the negotiations of particular Swedishness in novels and journalistic chronicles from the 1940s and 1950s. By focusing on the relationship be-
between notions, or myths, of Swedish national character and morals and the living conditions of women, Hellberg throws light upon how the »folkhem project« was discussed by female writers (Kjerstin Göransson-Ljungman, Gertrud Lilja, and Ingegerd Stadener). Whereas Stadener pro-creates the state ideology, which dictates that all able women are to have babies, Görtansson-Ljungman lets her protagonist Ingrid in En dotter född [A Daughter Born] (1942) resist the nationalistic agenda of reproduction. So does Lilja in her chronicles in the journal Idun, but in a more activist fashion, by addressing her female readership with an appeal to reflect on their own role as agents upholding the sexist power structures of the »folkhem«.

Finally, the contribution by Per-Olof Mattsson is a case-study of the Swedish working-class writer and Nobel laureate Eyvind Johnson. More specifically, it deals with the socialist author’s reflections on and reactions to the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact of August 23, 1939, which shook Europe’s radical left. Yesterday’s enemy, Hitler, had suddenly become a friend. Johnson, too, was left in disbelief; however, his Nordic identity came to a rescue. According to Matsson, Johnson’s answer to the crisis of anti-fascism stands out as an interesting example of how the radical ideas of Scandinavia and the Nordic could form a genuine alternative. As a substitute for the Soviet Union as a bastion for resistance to fascism, he developed a theory of the Nordic as an antidote to fascism. With a history marked by a strong popular influence, the Nordic region seemed as an island of freedom in a sea of reaction and fascism. In 1941, in an interview with a Danish journalist, Johnson defined »the Nordic mankind« as the »free Nordic worker«, building on »many, many years of freedom and culture«, while also downplaying national differences between the Nordic countries. So, around 1939, and seen from the left, the idea of the Nordic countries as historical exceptions and of Nordic exceptionalism made perfectly sense.

Translating Scandinavian Exceptionalisms

The last section of the book, Translating Scandinavian Exceptionalisms, proposes understanding translation both literally, as translation between languages and texts, and in a broader sense, as the interpretation of phenomena from one cultural context to another. The first three articles deal with translations of Scandinavian texts and cultural phenomena along
North-East and North-South axes, that is, in relation to Poland (Drozdpowska), the Czech Republic (Humpál) and Italy (Finco). The three authors foreground the non-Scandinavian perspective on ›exceptional‹ attitudes to sex and religion in Scandinavia. The final article by Marcus Axelsson offers an investigation of the mechanisms employed in translating literature from the relatively peripheral Scandinavian languages to other European languages and literary systems, pointing at various »degrees of centrality«. As the contributions to this section demonstrate, the perception of Scandinavia as an exceptional Northern ›Other‹ is closely tied to the cultural net of references in which the perceiving ›Self‹ is embedded.

In the first article of the section, Karolina Drozdowska presents a number of challenges posed by translating a Norwegian book on female sexuality into Polish. The case study – Drozdowska and Malgorzata Rost’s translation of Gleden med skjeden by Nina Brochmann and Ellen Stokken Dahl – focuses on challenges related to vocabulary choice, cover design and reader reception, demonstrating that attitudes towards gender and sexuality, understood as social and cultural phenomena, differ greatly in Norway and Poland. This is proved by the controversy and heated debate in social media and newspapers following the Polish edition of the book. For many groups in Polish society, speaking directly about sex and bodily organs is taboo. In Norway, on the other hand, these subjects – and the language used to deal with them – are approached much more directly and without shame. The author argues for the crucial role of translators in securing that such differences are tackled in ways bringing cultures closer to each other rather than increasing existing distances.

The cultural divergences mentioned above look quite different when we turn to the Czech Republic, as Martin Humpál’s article shows. Humpál investigates the Czech reception of Nordic literary works dealing with religious themes, more specifically Pietism, and particularly the movement’s conception of God as relentless and unforgiving. As Humpál argues, this kind of radical religiousness finds no resonance in the highly irreligious or even »religiously analphabetic« Czech society. Analysing Pietistic motives in three plays by Henrik Ibsen – Brand, Gengangere and Rosmerholm – Humpál shows why these dramas have never found audience resonance in the Czech Republic, and how themes related to religion contribute to the perception of Scandinavia – and Scandinavian literature – as exceptionally ›dark‹, ›difficult‹, ›dull‹, and not fully comprehensible to Czechs.
Along similar lines, Davide Finco examines the difficulties of translating cultural phenomena, such as attitudes to religion, sex and gender, between two very different cultural regions, in this case the Catholic and morally conservative Italy of the 1960s and the Scandinavian societies, which at that time, were already known for being exceptionally liberated in terms of sexual habits and gender equality, and thus largely freed from the impositions of Christian religion and morality. Analysing the Italian comedy *Il diavolo [To Bed or Not to Bed]* (dir. Gian Luigi Polidoro, 1965), depicting the journey to Sweden of an Italian merchant, a (stereo)typical Latin lover wanting to meet emancipated Swedish women, Finco’s article proves how one’s own cultural and social belonging determines perceptions of others, and how intercultural encounters can make us aware of the cultural provenance of our own attitudes and limitations. As Finco shows, the film – perhaps owing to its comedy genre – is not entirely free from stereotypes about Sweden circulating at that time in Italy. However, this makes it an even more interesting object of study in terms of discursive constructions of ›Scandinavia‹.

Similarly to Drozdowska’s contribution, the last article in the current section approaches translation literally. Marcus Axelsson focuses from the perspective of translation sociology on the popularity of Norwegian children’s books in a number of Western countries. Axelsson’s case study is the *oeuvre* of the Norwegian writer Maria Parr. Axelsson analyses the transmission of these books from a peripheral literary system (Norway) to central literary systems, that is, German, French and Anglo-American. Adopting Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of ›consecration‹ (cultural recognition), Axelsson examines factors such as the specificity of the Norwegian literary model, publishers’ marketing strategies and the length of temporal intervals between the publication of the source-text and target-text, as well as the degree of centrality of the respective literary systems. The article provides insight into a number of marketing devices and consecration mechanisms that helped determine the international success of Parr’s books and Scandinavian children’s literature more generally.

* Again, »what is truly Scandinavian?« Nothing particular, according to the essentialist anti-essentialism of the region’s major airline carrier – except perhaps for travel and mobility, the exact practices to which SAS owes its existence and revenues. The airline’s commercial was pulled a
few weeks after it first aired, following the previously mentioned controversy, thus leaving the question an open one.Shortly afterward, COVID-19 came and spread like wildfire all over Europe. Besides the catastrophic consequences for human lives and livelihoods, the virus has been a blow to a transnational region like Scandinavia, both practically and mentally. Parallel to the measures of social distancing, a sort of ›national distancing‹ has developed. Travel and entry bans have affected not only external, but also internal borders, effectively suspending the Nordic travel zone (i.e. a Passport Union from 1957, antedating the Schengen Agreement by decades), which allows citizens of the Nordic countries to travel and reside in another Nordic country. Moreover, differences between the various Nordic strategies for coping with the pandemic and diverging COVID-related statistics have gained attention, both in the Nordic countries and internationally. Sweden’s comparatively high death tolls and relatively lax approach to the virus (choosing not to mandate the use of face masks or close its borders, schools or shops), in particular, stands out. The issue has not been one of ›Scandinavian‹, but rather of ›Swedish Exceptionalism‹. So, despite the striking similarities between the Nordic societies, the pandemic has resulted in an analytical splitting up of the Scandinavian/Nordic region into its national elements. Furthermore, as evidenced in a morbid, media-driven discourse of national comparisons and competition in terms of who got it right, the different COVID scenarios across the region have given rise to a sort of »negative solidarity« (with a term coined by the sociologist Emile Durkheim being adapted to the present situation by Peter Holley). In other words, Nordic co-operation and understanding are now being put to the test, together with notions of Scandinavian/Nordic exceptionalism, be it ›cosmopolitanism‹, ›solidarity‹ or some of the suggestions touched upon in the articles below.

So, while editing this book, symptoms of a crisis within the pan-Nordic community have become more evident, part of larger and complex developments with global ramifications, in which international institutions, governance bodies and people’s mentalities are being contested by closed-border-policies, statism and nationalism. However, an encour-

24 Examples are the seminar Explaining Swedish Exceptionalism on COVID-19 Nordic Perspectives, University of Oslo, May 28, 2020, and Finnish philosopher Johan Strang’s essay »Why do the Nordic countries react differently to the covid-19 crisis?« (Strang: 2020).
aging sign is definitely the fact that a border-crossing and interdisciplinary academic discussion on the more or less exceptional status of our object of study continues, and does so by adding new historical, critical, and theoretical perspectives to it.

Of no less importance to understanding and reflecting upon what we are doing and where we are going is considering viewpoints from outside, both in terms of academic field and geographical place, in order to avoid »methodological nationalism«. David Janson has recently compared the exceptionalism of the economic/cultural/military superpower of the U.S. vis-à-vis the moral superpower of Sweden, and pointed to the »ignorance, denial and projection« of racial, social etc. problems connected to both forms of nation-building. To take a step back and consider the peculiar premises of the discourse of exceptionalism is also what Neena Gandhi suggests in her contribution to this book. »Scandinavian countries rely on a perception of «exceptionalism» as a pivotal part of their national identities«, she claims. »What is truly Scandinavian?«. The question itself is perhaps part of the answer.

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26 See Wimmer and Schiller: 2002.
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