

The Queer Public Intellectual and Two Decades of Nordic Queer Studies

A Conversation

IN THIS ISSUE'S "We're Here," Erika Alm and Ulrika Dahl invited Jack Halberstam to an email-based conversation, where we were particularly interested in hearing their impressions of gender/queer studies in the Nordic region and in how their own thinking has changed given the current political moment.

EA: Thanks for agreeing to this virtual conversation, following up from our event back in 2023. This special issue of *lambda nordica* is inspired by – and speaks to – the impact of your work in the Nordic region, and, well, in Sweden in particular. As we note in the introduction, and as is evident in the essays by Rosenberg and Rydström, you have been presenting work, giving courses, and engaging with junior scholars as well as activists for more than two decades now, and you most recently held the Kerstin Hesselgren professorship. Before we delve into your scholarship and our disciplines, do you have any particular memories from those visits you would like to share? What stands out?

JH: That is true, I have been visiting for some time now, and it has been such a pleasure – so many memories, many involving saunas and cold

plunges! But intellectually, I really still think fondly about the first few times I came to Sweden at the invitation of both Tiina Rosenberg and Ulrika Dahl. Back in those days, Stockholm was way less gentrified, and I attended amazing hybrid events – in the 1990s and early 2000s, *hybrid* did not mean online and offline; it meant on and off campus. We had drag king events on campus, talks at off-campus Gay Pride events, and all kinds of meals and gatherings in the long nights of summer and the short days of winter. I have always enjoyed the events I have done at Uppsala – really intellectually engaging – and in Stockholm, the blend of academic and nonacademic audiences.

UD: Yes, I can remember many events and surrounding issues too. One time I recall is a talk you gave on “Going Gaga: On Anarchy and Chaos,” as part of a series curated by Tankeverket at Kägelbanan in Stockholm in 2013. You screened and discussed the video of Jay-Z and Kanye West’s “No Church in the Wild” (2011), and the talk took place during the Husby riots, when young people, objecting to police brutality and socioeconomic injustice, had been rioting for several days. I recall that people were asking questions about how to link your talk about anarchy to current events in Sweden. You often bring your sharp cultural analysis to current events (such as #MeToo), popular culture (mainstream films and television series), or to capturing certain moods, such as on the widely read academic blog *Bully Bloggers*. In *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), you encourage us to take popular culture, the silly, humor, and subculture seriously for what they might teach us – and they do! Could you comment on the degree to which your work travels, and whether there are instances where it does not seem to resonate with what goes on in the contexts in which you speak? And what happens for you in those moments?

JH: Well, of course, much of the material in my “silly” archive is drawn from U.S. popular culture – animated films, for example – and many people have found my readings of these films to be generous, to say the least, and possibly naïve, to say the worst! Why, I have been asked,

would we look to animated movies made by massive, wealthy studios like Pixar for narratives about rebellion? I have answered this by proposing that children's films are obligated to deal with rebellion because childhood is, in part, subjugation to the rule of the parent, and the child is always fighting for liberation from this system. While Pixar and other studios would like us to see rebellion as childish and immature, in fact the early childhood experiences of pushing back against authority can be deeply formative and profoundly important later in life.

As for the example you gave – playing “No Church in the Wild” to audiences in Sweden – well, many different kinds of Black rebellion that emerge in the U.S. do give language to the struggles of immigrants and people of color elsewhere. I stand by that archive and still think with it.

EA: Following up on that theme and moving to the issues that concern *lambda nordica*, could you reflect on how, in your view and experience, queer studies as an interdisciplinary field has developed over the past two decades? Is there anything that strikes you as unique to, or different in, the Nordic region or nations from the U.S. or other places you have been visiting?

JH: Well, yes, a lot is different. I have said this many times and in many different places in Europe, but, honestly, the best intellectual export from the U.S. involves theories of race. Black studies in the U.S. are unparalleled, and I have seen a move toward reading and engaging with scholars of color in recent years in the Nordic region, but in my view, this engagement is still dutiful rather than creative and still tends toward the attitude that race is an issue in the U.S. rather than elsewhere. I think that has changed more recently, and the engagement is now much deeper.

UD: I share these observations, with some significant exceptions, and it has been a bit of an uphill struggle to create conversations in which histories of colonialism, the transatlantic trade in humans, or even histories

of race science are part of discussions about (queer) gender and sexuality. I'm wondering whether you think the moment of queer studies is over now? I'm thinking in particular of the work you've done in the past ten years or so on "rewilding theory." How can we think of queer studies, or of the rewilding of theory, in a moment such as this, when there is so much attack on queer studies, Black studies, and critical work in the humanities more broadly? And how, if at all, do you feel personally impacted by the current political moment?

JH: Of course, I am deeply impacted by the tensions and pressures of this unprecedented moment of global fascism. In the U.S., at least, many of the government-authored attacks are directed at queer studies, Black studies, and postcolonial studies. And so this is not the time to declare any of these fields "over"; rather, we should be insisting on the importance of these modes of knowledge production. Clearly, the insights of studies of settler colonialism in the university have influenced the broad-based support for the Palestinian struggle – the names of Rashid Khalidi and Edward Said are often cited by pro-Palestinian activists. We all need to use the university right now as a place from which to launch bolder and more explicit critiques of governments, settlers, supercapitalists, nationalists, and white supremacists. This is not the time to be quiet, nor the time to give up ground. So, despite the fact that we are being challenged in the classroom, in print, and on campuses, queer scholars and scholars of race and colonialism must insist, with everything that we have, that education should be free, that the regime of property needs to be unmade, and that fascist orders have to be opposed.

EA & UD: This speaks to the role of a public intellectual that you have taken on for decades, as is evident in this special issue, as well as in your many talks and frequent features in mainstream press, your commentaries over the years on the *Bully Bloggers* site, and so on. That is, you have a long history of being interpellated by, and engaging with, activist communities (for better or worse), and you have been willing to speak to, and be represented in, the media. Why is this public engagement important?

What is the significance of such work, and how is it best done in the contemporary moment of renewed and fierce attacks on queer and trans folks and on our fields?

JH: Honestly, the biggest change in recent years – and even months – within academia has involved the emergence of new protocols around speech. Academics are now regularly punished for speaking out on Palestine, trans issues, and so on, and it has become increasingly dangerous to say what you think about the university, the government, the right wing, Zionism, and related matters. I am not sure we quite know yet how to counteract the disastrous political climate within which we all find ourselves. Our usual methods of protest have been shut down by armed police. Our usual sense of speaking out with impunity has been curtailed, and in the meantime, we are watching a vicious war on trans people, immigrants, and families of color unfold. We need to be very creative right now in building new modes of opposition and in learning how to speak, and when to speak, and on what topics. I feel frustrated and, yes, scared.

UD: We understand this fear, and we are watching the developments in the U.S. very closely, as the rhetoric is frequently taken up here as well. For instance, former Swedish Minister of Education Mats Persson, instantly took up the rhetoric of “woke” and “cancel culture,” and, fueled by right-wing columnists and writers, launched an investigation into how what he called “identity politics” threatened academic freedom, only to have the investigation conclude that, in fact, the biggest threats were right-wing attacks and his own government’s politics. But to return to the question of protest and building new modes of opposition: how do you envision that happening? Are wild and anarchistic modes advisable at this moment? Do you think that the ways in which what we, with David Eng, might call queer neoliberalism has shattered collectivity and fostered divisive practices around, for example, “trigger warnings” and centering individuals’ traumas – topics that you have offered sharp and incisive critiques of – are partly to blame for the seeming paralysis of the so-called left in the U.S.?

JH: As I said in response to your earlier question, we have to be much more creative about protest and activism now. I want to see us dig into an anarchist imperative, oppose governance as it currently exists, refuse real estate capitalism, and work very hard to imagine futures that do not revolve around notions of freedom that are deeply entwined with the property regime. My new book, *Anarchitecture After Everything: A Trans Manifesto* (MIT Press 2026), offers an alternative vocabulary for change in terms of unbuilding, dismantling, tearing down, collapsing, and undoing.

EA: Continuing along the track of the contemporary political moment, what do you, as someone who has engaged with and commented on masculinity (*Female Masculinity*, “Dude, Where’s My Gender, *Gaga Feminism*) in different ways over the years, make of the current order, in which billionaires like Musk, Zuckerberg, and Bezos are very publicly engaging in politics, and, in particular, gender and sexual politics? How did tech nerds become so powerful? Is there a trajectory that can be traced?

JH: You know, I have been one of those people who have, perhaps foolishly, announced that patriarchy is over and that we have just been experiencing its death throes. But I have been wrong. The new consolidation of capital in the bank accounts of a few powerful men around the world has launched a new phase of patriarchy, and toxic masculinity, and has pushed us far back in relation to gender and sexual politics. We are electing fascists who have long histories of misogyny and who are openly racist. We are ignoring sexual harassment in favor of punishing speech against Israel. DEI (diversity, equality, and inclusion) has been dismantled in the U.S., and we are all being pushed back decades. The best account of how this has all come to pass in recent years appears in Judith Butler’s stunning book *Who’s Afraid of Gender?* and in Alberto Toscano’s prescient book *Late Fascism*.

UD: Given what you say here, what do you see as urgent theoretical and empirical issues now, given the current political moment and the rolling

back of, or attacks against, many of the critical fields we are in, including critical race theory, postcolonial theory, queer theory, and, of course, LGBTQI+ issues overall?

JH: The most urgent issue right now concerns the consolidation of wealth among authoritarian groups and individuals. Because money and wealth have become the only metric of value in the worlds we inhabit, a small percentage of extremely wealthy people (mostly white men) are making decisions on behalf of vast, uneducated swathes of the population. I think we need to work fast, in small groups, to provide free education to people, to create podcasts and other media channels, and to push as far left as we can possibly go.

UD: Given what you say here, how are we to make sense of what has happened at universities like Columbia, as well as at Harvard, Brown, and others in recent months. Why is the current administration targeting universities like yours, and what does it mean for you and your colleagues in an everyday sense? Are there, do you think, any pedagogical lessons for us as teachers and students here? How are we to imagine the future of education and its content?

JH: The right wing is trying to destroy higher education in this country, and university administrators are helping them to do it. Because administrators, like those on the board of trustees at universities, are safeguarding their own salaries, endowments, and the business of education in general, they are somewhat sympathetic to the government war on “campus radicals.” Those who run the university do not want radicals on campus because they see their faculty as employees, their students as clients, and education as a business. Using the smokescreen of antisemitism, these groups are all working in tandem to make radical thought on campus impossible. The university, like the prison, like the school, like the law, like medicine, wants high-paying, compliant customers, not anarchist critics of the system as a whole. As the university becomes a bank, we need to take learning elsewhere.