Georg Brandes as a Guide to the Necessary Intersectionality of Scandinavian Studies

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In May 1914, the Danish literary critic Georg Brandes made his first and only trip to the United States, where his long-awaited visit was a major event: major newspapers reported on his arrival, invitations to more than 150 banquets poured in, and thousands of disappointed fans had to be turned away from his lectures. The *Chicago Tribune* declared that "the United States have never before had a visit from a guest whose presence has been as stimulating and valuable for the entire society."[1] On May 23, the evening of his arrival in the US, Brandes delivered his first lecture—in English—on Shakespeare at Yale. The next day, he traveled across the country by train to give the same lecture in Chicago's Orchestra Hall, followed by a two-hour lecture on Napoleon in Danish and a gala dinner in the Auditorium hotel on Sunday, May 25. Despite the heat of the day, the hall, reputedly one of the largest in the city, was filled to capacity, containing, as C. W. Hasselris reported in *Politiken,* "the largest Scandinavian audience ever seen in Chicago."[2] On Monday, May 26, Brandes spoke about Goethe in Milwaukee (in German), then on Tuesday and Wednesday at the universities of Minnesota and Chicago, respectively, on the subject of Hamlet, concluding with a lecture in English to American authors and literary critics at the Twentieth Century Club that evening. He gave his final lecture in Chicago, on Goethe, at the Germania Club on June 2, before returning to New York City, where he lectured on the Old Testament to an over-filled hall at the Waldorf Hotel.

[1] C.H.W. Hasselriis, "Georg Brandes blandt sine Landsmænd i Amerika," in *Politiken,* 28 May 1914.

[2] Hasselriis.

As the topics of these lectures illustrate, Brandes was comfortable in the role of the classically-educated literary scholar, holding forth on great authors, from Shakespeare to Goethe. This approach to literary studies, focused on "great men," is familiar, ingrained one, which many Scandinavian Studies programs today still practice, with courses on such canonical authors as Ibsen, Strindberg, HC Andersen, and Søren Kierkegaard. Yet while it may be that the crowds thronging to hear Brandes's literary lectures in three languages were simply a product of a different age that appreciated literature more than people today,

I believe that there is more to the story of how Brandes mediated literature to his listeners and made them care about it. In the face of the relentless downsizing of traditional literature departments, including Scandinavian-focused ones, perhaps we can learn something from Brandes's approach that can help revitalize the academic study of our field and its contributions to the communities in which we live.

As gifted as Brandes was at delving into the formal and philosophical merits of his subject matter, the enthusiastic reception of his talks in cities across the eastern and Midwestern US by farmers, shopkeepers, tradesmen, and the local intelligentsia suggests that he was also able to make literature relevant and interesting to a broad range of people, not just other Danes or other academics. His inclusion of a lecture on Napoleon in his repertoire indicates his ability to tie literature together with other disciplines, in this case history and politics. By underscoring the cultural value of literature and its deep connections to people's political, economic, and social lives, Brandes offered a way out of the kind of self-contained, self-referential discourses that have contributed the marginalization of literary studies in recent years.

To a certain extent, Brandes's approach aligns with the concept of intersectionality first articulated by the Black feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. I don't intend here to detract from Crenshaw's original definition of the term as describing "the various ways race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of black women's employment experiences,"[3] but rather to engage with the broader range of meanings the term has evolved to encompass. In 2005, Leslie McCall defined intersectionality as "the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations,"[4] while in 2008, Kathy Davis explained that it illuminates "the interaction [among] categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power."[5] Both of these framings highlight the complexity of human identities, which cannot be understood on the basis of a single linguistic, racial, social, or political context. People's lives—as lived and as depicted in literature and film—are inextricably connected to the many modalities that shape their subjectivity, whether genetic, ideological, economic, institutional, or national.

While Crenshaw's focus on the particularities of how race and gender have affected black women's employment situations is crucially important to the study of black women's lives, the expansion of the concept of intersectionality to include all social identity structures, including both the "multiplicatively oppressed" (as some members of Nordic societies have been in the past and others continue to be) and the "multiplicatively privileged" (as many other Scandinavians are now),[6] creates an opportunity for looking at Scandinavian Studies in a new light. As Ahir

[3] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," in *Stanford Law Review* 43:6 (1991), p. 1244.

[4] Leslie McCall, "The Complexity of Intersectionality," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30:3 (2005), p. 1771.

[5] Kathy Davis, "Intersectionality as Buzzword: A Sociology of Science Perspectives on What Makes a Feminist Theory Successful," *Feminist Theory* 9:1 (2008), p. 68.

[6] Ahir Gopaldas, "Intersectionality 101," *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* 32 (2013), p. 91.

Gopaldas points out, intersectionality facilitates interdisciplinary approaches that can analyze social phenomena, from domestic violence and labor markets to high fashion and literature, "along multiple axes of identity," by bringing together previously segregated disciplines.[7] McCall goes so far as to describe intersectionality as an "epistemological perspective or research paradigm"[8] that can inform how one approaches a much larger topic, such as, in the case of Scandinavian Studies, the unwieldy task of teaching, researching, and writing about the cultural, social, political, artistic, cinematic, musical, and other production of at least nine distinct national communities (some independent states, others encompassed within other states) over a period of more than a thousand years. By using intersectionality as a lens, the study of the Nordic languages, societies, and cultures can illuminate and engage with the tensions between these categorizations in productive ways.

[7] Gopaldas, p. 91.

[8] Gopaldas, p. 91.

It makes sense, given the multiple social identity structures that defined and determined Brandes's own life as a secular, progressive Danish Jewish author, that he was able to conceptualize and apply an intersectional approach (though he would not of course have used that term) to his work on not only literary giants such as Shakespeare and Goethe and his own innovative contemporaries, from Ibsen to J. P. Jacobsen to John Stuart Mill, but also to pivotal historical figures he designated as "geniuses," including Benjamin Disraeli, Julius Caesar, and Jesus. In her 2003 dissertation on Brandes in dialogue with Hippolyte Taine, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Søren Kierkegaard, and the literary institutions of nineteenth-century Denmark, Anne Mette Lundtofte sketches out the intersectional nature of Brandes's own positionality:

> A critic of many contradictions - he was an atheist Jew, an academic scholar and a public intellectual, an exile and a worldwide famous lecturer, a founder of the comparative studies of European "minority literatures" and a biographical portraitist of the Great Men of "World Literature" - Brandes's work takes up a position between institutions (of the academy and the press) and between discourses (of aesthetics and politics, culture and critique). Reading the competing narratives and conflicting discourses that mark Brandes's texts as a symptom of the "external resistance" to his literary criticism, … Brandes's attempt to unify the divided position he takes up between cultures and between institutions makes him stand out as a crucial 19th-century European figure who incorporates and anticipates many of the concerns of literary studies today: the transgression of (institutional, national) boundaries, the construction of nationhood, the question of exile and exilic consciousness, the relation of aesthetics and ideology, of critique and culture, and the notion of a transcultural *Weltliteratur*.[9]

[9] Anne Mette Lundtofte, "The Case of Georg Brandes: Brandes Between Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Goethe—and the Institutions of Literature in 19th-century Denmark," unpublished dissertation, New York University, 2003, p. iv.

Brandes's refusal, perhaps even inability, to conform to a single paradigm in his life and works enabled him to see his own world differently than his contemporaries did and to bring together public and private, Jewish and

Christian, Danish and non-Danish, politics and culture in unexpectedly productive ways. The intersection of his multiple axes of identity opened new doors for the movement of Nordic literature throughout Europe and into the rest of the world. This, I suggest, is how we need to approach Scandinavian Studies in our modern context, in order to combat the general lack of knowledge about the Nordic region in most parts of the world and the fairly widespread perception, both outside and inside the Nordic countries, that teaching and scholarship in Scandinavian Studies is esoteric or irrelevant.

Due to the longstanding, ongoing crisis in the study of the humanities, it is crucial to explore how intersectional approaches to Scandinavian Studies can benefit our students, our communities, and the field. As a professor of Scandinavian Studies at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah and as the current president of the US-based Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Study (SASS), I have a vested interest in the success of Scandinavian Studies as an academic discipline, but I also believe passionately in its relevance to our students and our communities. The orientation of the field has changed over time—in the US, university-level Scandinavian Studies began in the 1860s with a young Norwegian American Quaker named Rasmus Bjørn Anderson teaching Norwegian on the side at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and grew to support several small Midwestern seminaries dedicated to the training of Lutheran pastors—and it will continue to change as our societies do, but we need to be involved in shaping those changes, not just reacting to adverse circumstances and clinging to archaic paradigms. I believe that the key to helping Scandinavian Studies remain relevant and viable as a field of study and research is through paying heightened attention to intersectionality. Considering the overlap between social identity constructions such as race, class, and gender, including but not limited to the development of systems of discrimination or disadvantage, as they apply to Scandinavian societies and cultural production enables Scandinavian Studies scholars and teachers to do more than shout themselves hoarse about how wonderful and important Bellman's songs or Amalie Skram's prose texts or Holberg's dramas are, to name just a few random examples. Instead, intersectionally-aware Scandinavian Studies programs and practitioners can help their listeners and readers discover why such texts, canonical or not, matter by demonstrating their engagement with questions of gender, class, race, migration, political ideology, religious practice, etc. not only in the Nordic countries themselves, but also worldwide.

In the United States, Scandinavian Studies is generally approached in a comparative way, at least at the university level, in concert with general education requirements, that lends itself to intersectionality. In their language study, students generally focus on a single Nordic langu-

age, but the rest of the courses in the curriculum tend to draw freely on texts from across the Nordic region, putting Strindberg in conversation with Holberg and Lagerlöf with Oehlenschläger, as it were. An intersectional approach can address even the enrollment issues created by the relative scarcity of students studying Scandinavian languages. Since few departments can offer more than a handful of courses taught in Scandinavian languages, many Scandinavian literature and culture courses are taught in English and cross-listed with other departments, such as Literature in Translation, Comparative Literature, or Folklore, that enables them to attract students from many different disciplines. I've had students in my Scandinavian literature and history courses from all kinds of majors, from exercise science to physics to business. It can be tempting to dismiss these students as a burden, since they rarely have either the language ability or competency in literary analysis that our majors do and consequently need more assistance in such areas as close reading and persuasive writing, but they make another kind of comparative approach necessary, one that makes connections between the literary texts and the world the students know. My point here is not to suggest that we should "make Scandinavian Studies great again" by following the example of North American universities trying to get "butts in seats," but simply to point out some of the serendipities that can result from adapting to constrained circumstances.

For many practitioners and scholars of Scandinavian Studies, the value of an intersectional approach is self-evident, but that has not always been the case either in terms of the way we frame the discipline or how we interact with other scholars and scholarly disciplines. We can do more to illuminate intersectional connections. Like any well-established community, Scandinavian Studies can be hidebound and clannish, but that needs to change. Insularity will ensure our obsolescence, while foregrounding intersectionality in our research, teaching, and networking has the potential to ensure the long-term survival of the field. A few examples of recent intersectionally-oriented projects that demonstrate the success of this approach include the ScandBlackAtlantic blog launched by Lill-Ann Körber at the NordEuropa Institute at the Humboldt University in Berlin in 2015, which sought to connect Scandinavian art and literary texts to the historical and political contexts of the slave- and sugar trade that underpinned the financial prosperity of the society that produced them; Anna Stenport and Scott MacKenzie's work on transnational Arctic environmental studies and Arctic cinema; and the Cargill Foundation-funded "Sustaining Scandinavian Folk Arts in the Upper Midwest" project at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, which hosted a hands-on workshop/symposium in conjunction with the 2019 annual meeting of the Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Study, to bring scholars of Scandinavian cultures together with practitioners

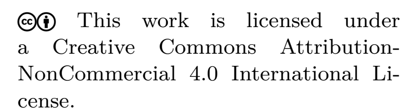
and devotees of it. The same is true for professional organizations, like SASS, which need to do more to cooperate with other disciplinary societies, in order to maximize the crossover appeal of Scandinavian Studies for scholars in fields such as architecture, art history, economics, linguistics, gender studies, film studies, and religious studies, to name just a few. The SASS conference on "Postcolonial Entanglements," which was to be held in Puerto Rico in 2020 and has been rescheduled for 2022 due to the pandemic, aims to foreground intersectionality in the ways we talk about Scandinavian cultural production and social identity, in particular with regard to the multifarious legacies of slavery and colonialism, not least by partnering with local scholars and artists to ensure that the stories we tell reflect the multifaceted, sometimes conflicting views of different stakeholders.

In order for Scandinavian Studies to hold on to the modest place it has carved out for itself in the world—at universities, in publishing houses, theaters, and more, it needs to be able to demonstrate its relevance to that world. Exploring, to cite a few examples from recent conference presentations I've attended, how Swedish migrant literature is putting a sympathetic face on undocumented migrants or how translations of Scandinavian texts into Dutch in the late nineteenth century served as a vehicle for the feminist activism of aspiring female translators or how Georg Brandes's Jewish identity shaped the reception of his literary ideas or how multilingual poetry challenges our ability to parse the meaning of poetry are all valuable ways of foregrounding the intersectionality of Scandinavian Studies. While we don't necessarily have to dumb down our subject matter to the level of the dozens of guides to "hygge" and Norwegian wood-stacking that have become bestsellers in the US and UK in recent years (unless we want to make a lot of money), the wave of interest in Nordic noir and Nordic hygge alike grows, to a certain extent at least, out of a popular realization that the Nordic world can offer both intriguing questions (e.g. What makes a borderline autistic Swedish woman such a good police officer? What do these kinds of violent, psychopathic crimes suggest about the social and psychological costs of the Nordic model? Where did Sarah Lund get her sweater?) and potential answers (though the mantra "all you need for personal fulfillment is fuzzy socks, a candle, and cozy chairs arranged in a circle" falls short of existential philosophy) that transcend their specific linguistic, geographic, and cultural contexts.

In her much-viewed 2009 TED talk, Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Aidichie warns of the danger of the "single story,"[10] which creates stereotypes that may not always be untrue but which are always incomplete. This applies indisputably to Scandinavian Studies as well. The canonical texts we teach are important as representative of a particular angle on the Nordic world, but they are not and cannot be sufficient

[10] Chimamanda Ngozi Aidchie, "The Danger of a Single Story," TEDGlobal talk, July 2009, https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en.

on their own to convey the diversity of experiences and identities in the region. The tumultuous life and outspoken work of the Danish Palestinian poet Yahya Hassan (1995-2020) exemplify how the intersection of nationality, ethnicity, gender, language, religion, politics, and geography created a unique, eloquent, troubled story that is just as true as older, whiter, more conventional ones. Each of us is made up of many stories, many identities, many loves and loyalties, and we are defined by our membership and participation in different, sometimes competing groups. Instead of ignoring or erasing those tensions and complexities, the key to the future of our field and the health of our communities lies in embracing the multiplicity of stories that Scandinavian Studies can tell and exploring how the intersections between modalities reflects and respects the uniqueness and complexity of human identity.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