Olivia Gunn: I love teaching it, I feel like I'm in the zone when I'm teaching these topics—queer topics, about sexuality, about feminism. I can say that when I showed them sex ed clips that are readily available online on sex education websites from Norway and Sweden, that there was a lot of giggling [*laughs*] and some very surprised-looking, you know, open eyes in response to openness about the body. It's not necessarily sex, right, that surprises American students. It's like, “Woah, we're supposed to look at naked people?” So that openness about the body is very, very different. My favorite thing about Swedish sex ed is a new way in which—I mean, I think it's relatively new—in which they're emphasizing similarities between the sexes when it comes to external sex organs, rather than differences. We read some curriculum planning from the 1960s in Sweden, which really emphasized, “Boys and girls are different, and here's how they're different. Because they're gonna grow up and girls are gonna be mothers and boys are going to be fathers, and let's talk all about the differences.” So they started ideologically from this place of difference, and that kind of went all the way down to the way they describe genitalia as, “Boys have a thing, like a finger, and girls have an opening.” So we talked a little bit about the implications there, you know, a “thing” and a “nothing,” and how they're supposed to go together, but it was from this point of difference. And then today, they're really emphasizing and looking at, when they discuss external genitalia, they're saying, “Actually, they're very similar, function-wise.” And they talked about, like, erectile tissue or the processes of excitation, and how they're the same, actually. Or ejaculation is possible in both sexes. And not only do they emphasize similarities, but [*dramatic voice*] they start with female genitalia. Like, that's the standard. Like, “Let me show you all the things that happen in the external genitalia when someone gets excited.” And they're using also, like, not-scientific language. They're using, like, kät, which means “horny,” right? So they're using the language the kids would use. And they start it all with female genitalia, which is like, “What?” That has not been done traditionally, right? The norm, everything about sex ed, is generally penis-centric, all about the condom, and all about reproduction and biology, and they're talking also about feelings, and they're just sort of switching things around, which is super fascinating. And if you say to a group of American students, “They're emphasizing similarities between male and female genitalia,” you see some faces like, “Say what?”

[*Intro music starts*]

Colin Gioia Connors: Welcome to Crossing North: a podcast where we learn from Nordic and Baltic artists, scholars, and community members to better understand our world, our communities, and ourselves. Coming to you from the Scandinavia Studies Department and Baltic Studies Program at the University of Washington in Seattle, I'm your host Colin Gioia Connors.
Olivia Gunn is an assistant professor of Scandinavian Studies at the University of Washington and her research focuses on how reproduction, parenthood, and the child are depicted in Norwegian literature and understood in Norwegian society. This year she took over a course called “Sexuality and Scandinavia” after its creator, Senior lecturer Lea DuBois, retired. I’m joined again by Visiting Lecturer of Danish Kristian Næsby who leads our interview with Olivia about the process of redeveloping a course about sexuality in Scandinavia today. Assistant Professor Olivia Gunn starts us out.

Olivia: If I'm just gonna tell a personal story about, like, how I came to teaching these issues, it would be through the first course that I taught here. One of them was called “Norwegian Reproduction,” and the inspiration behind that course was…[*pauses for dramatic effect*] because I got pregnant in Norway. And so I had to have— I had to have [*laughs*], I got to have maternal care there, or, prenatal care in Norway, and it was such a fascinating experience for a variety of reasons. One was, you know, it was care that felt like care, so that was one of the very positive and interesting things about it, because medical care never feels like medical care in the United States.

Colin: What do you mean by that?

Olivia: Well, so, I go to this weird facility which is like a non-place, maybe it's a hospital, I don't know. You know, you wait for way too long and then the doctor sees you for ten minutes and it's just weird, and you feel more like you're being processed in a factory than being cared for. So having prenatal care in Norway involved a lot more personal interactions, a lot more questions, I got to know my midwife who was actually Swedish because I had to have a private midwife because I'm not a citizen of Norway, and she loved our get-togethers because it gave her an opportunity to complain Norwegians, actually.

Kristian Næsby: [*laughs*]

Olivia: So she would sit down and she'd talk Swedish, and I'd speak Norwegian, and then she'd just complain about Norwegians for about twenty minutes before we got started, so I felt like there was also time just to have an interaction. So that was one of the amazing things about it. One of the surprising things about it was that I couldn't have genetic testing, which I wasn't prepared for. I grew up with a mom who specialized in teaching Down Syndrome kids at the elementary level, and she had amniocentesis in the 1970s with my sister and I, and I just grew up with this, like, “You have genetic testing when you're pregnant so you can make the choice of how you want to live and how you want to parent,” and then I get to Norway and they're like, “Oh no, you can't have that done. We don't do that for people your age.” So there's a variety of complicated laws around genetic testing in Norway, but if you're thirty—I was thirty at the time—you can't just have genetic testing, it's not an option. The reason that they do that is not for—one might think it was for religious reasons, for example—but it's actually one of the legacies of World War II, and kind of a response to, “We don't want to have”—they call it a sorteringssamfunn— “a society that sorts, you know, that picks and chooses people, tries to make designer babies”. So there's all kinds of philosophies in Norway around genetic testing that are pretty fascinating, but personally it was just like, “Oh. Fascinating. I'm here, I don't have that choice, I can't do this thing that I always thought I would do.” But that whole process was so fascinating to me that I then took up in my own research, what is the history of motherhood in Norway? What is the history of maternal care in Norway, and how has this been represented in literature and film?

Kristian: Take us through that process, what do you do when you are remaking or redoing a class like this? How do you come up with the things that you want to put in the syllabus?

Olivia: So it's, you know, taking some things from—some inspiration from—Ia's existing syllabus, adding some things in that I've done...
research on, like the Norwegian, the first Norwegian sound film, *The Great Christening*, which I included in a unit on fatherhood in the course. And it has probably the first stay-at-home dad in all of cinema.

**Colin:** What year was this?

**Olivia:** 1931. So it's the first sound film in Norway. I don't know that for sure, but I'm guessing that that's the first stay-at-home dad, and that's like forty years before stay-at-home dads, or at least dads on parental leave, became common in the Scandinavian context. So it's a comedy that touches on a very serious subject, which is women getting pregnant out of wedlock when they come from the working class. So the main idea is that, if you get pregnant and you're not married, you're gonna have to give the baby up. And that was most common, right? Because you had to go to back to work. You couldn't afford to take the time off. So the film itself offers us a glimpse of a history, because things haven't always been the way they are in Scandinavia, right? So there hasn't always been maternal leave or paternal leave. So I guess that the film—one of the things that the film tells us is that motherhood is classed. The history of motherhood is not the same for middle-class women, and it's not the same for working class women, and it depends—it's a historical phenomenon, not a natural phenomenon. Even though we have a tendency to think, "Oh, it's just biological, everybody has sex the same way, everybody gives birth the same way." But actually there's all kinds of historical differences and class differences, material differences, that matter for that experience. So what it means to give birth today is not what it meant if you were a member of the working class in Oslo in 1931.

**Kristian:** Maybe we can shift the conversation from Oslo in 1931 to Oslo in 2015, or around that time, because I noticed that you taught the TV show, the phenomenon, in Scandinavia, *SKAM*, or, "Shame."

**Olivia:** Mhm.

**Kristian:** Why did you choose to include that show in the class?

**Olivia:** So towards the last unit in the class was “queer Scandinavia.” And we looked at a variety of sources to show the diversity of what one might call “queer Scandinavia,” and one of those was the television show *SKAM*, or “shame.” And I picked it—I guess I could start by saying that I picked it because students love it. I had even students responding, “Oh, that show made me laugh, it made me cry, now I have to watch the whole thing.” So the third season is about, I would say the whole season is really about coming out. And the main character Isak, or Isaac, he comes out in that season, but he—the television show shows us that coming out doesn't just happen once. It happens again and again and again, and it's a social process. And it shows us how complicated it is. So I picked that show to be able to talk about queer Scandinavia, to be able to do it through a character that my students could relate to in some way, and also for the ways in which it attaches to a lot of fascinating issues around queer rights and queer lives in Scandinavia today and what that even means. So I guess one of the things I really like to say about that is that there's three definite “coming out” moments, and in one of them, Isaac is choosing to come out to his friend. In one of them, his roommate is sort of leading him to come out, somewhat impatiently. And in another one, this girl that he's been dating is like, “It's 2017, Isaac”—or 2016, I can't remember—“Come out of the closet already.” Which I saw reflected everywhere in Norwegian television about coming out—there's other television shows about coming out in Norway, a documentary-style series. This question of like, [“sighs”] Why is it so hard to be queer in Norway in 2017? Do we really need a television show about this? Today? Like, when there are no more problems about being gay here?" So there was, like, a very strong normative idea, “We have good laws, we have good policies, and therefore, what's your problem? Why can't you come out already?” And that's echoed in this character Emma's voice when she's like, “It's 2017. You're a jerk because you pretended to be straight. How come you're making the fact that you are into guys my problem?” And that was one thing about the show that's incredibly nuanced, right? That it can show us how the process of coming out is very social and maybe forced sometimes—you're forced to come out of the closet, or you're shamed for not coming out of the closet early enough or soon enough.
and making problems for us. That was pretty fascinating, but at the same time it also— the big message seems to be, when he finally comes out to his friends willingly, they kind of...don't know what to say. That's made explicit, that they're like, his friend says, “Yeah he's a, he's a cute guy, I guess,” when he comes out, and Isaac is like, “Pff, what?” [*laughs*] And his friends says, “I don't know what to say,” and Isaac says, “I don't know what to say, either.” So that's very brilliant that it shows how people don't necessarily have a language for it or a skill set to do this. At the same time, the response— they don't know what to say, but they also don't care, his friends, right? And there's something that's nice about that, because it's like, “Oh, we don't care that you're gay, it's not a big deal,” and a total inability to understand why it would be a struggle. Because no one cares. So why are you—it makes it look like it's his personal problem, that he's all wrapped up in these issues, in these struggles, and it's just his personal neuroses or his personal issues, because the society is ready for him to come out. It wasn't that simple, because he also has a very religious mother who he's worried will reject him. There are other ways in which the show shows that homophobia exists in Norway and in Oslo today, but that was in tension with this idea, this normative majority idea, that this isn't an issue, so why are you making it an issue? In Epistemology of the Closet by Eve Sedgwick, she says that, you know, coming out is— the process of coming out is never over. And just because you come out doesn't mean that you don't have a— think she uses the word “turbulently”—you still have a turbulent relationship to the closet, including the closet of other people. So that that's not a process that can kind of end. And so I guess in a way, that show does a good job of showing how turbulent that process can be and how difficult it can be, and at the same time maybe persists—or supports a little bit—this broader idea that, “This is such a great place! Why should this be hard? Why do we need shows about coming out? Like, why do we— why is it so hard to be queer in Norway in 2017?” And that is a real kind of confusion for people, so it kind of supports both that majoritarian idea in these friends who just don't really care that he's gay, honestly, but also maybe can't understand how hard it was for him to come out.

Colin: Right, because it's always an endless barrage of questions of how the straight community does not understand the LGBTQ community, and, “Well, when did you first know that you were gay?” And so the response to that, which is brilliant, is always, “Well, how old were you when you first knew that you were straight?”

Olivia: Yes. Yeah.

Colin: And that those questions are not ones that straight people are continuing to have to define and explain and defend.

Olivia: Mhm. Exactly. Yeah because these— that's what happens, basically, is his friends first are like, “OK, whatever. As long as you're a nice person, we don't care. Because you've been being a jerk in your anxiety and your tension.” And then the next thing is, “Oh, but, how do you do this?” And like, “How do you”— Then it becomes this situation in which, OK, now it's your job to educate us about that, or now you have a new role, which is explaining same-sex desire and practice to us.

Colin: Like what you hear? Be sure to subscribe to Crossing North wherever you get your podcasts. Crossing North is sponsored by the Scandinavian Studies Department and Baltic Studies Program at the University of Washington in Seattle, and we need your help to grow our podcast. Consider donating to one of the many funds that help support the department's mission to “discover, preserve, and transmit fundamental knowledge about the languages, literature, history, politics, and cultures of the” Scandinavian, Nordic, and Baltic countries. A gift to the Friends of Scandinavian Languages and Literature fund will be especially helpful to production of Crossing North. Go to scandinavian.washington.edu to learn more. Once again, that's scandinavian.washington.edu.

It's hard to talk about SKAM without talking about just how popular the show became. Not only was the show a success in Norway, where an estimated one in three Norwegians watched, but it also developed a devoted fanbase worldwide. Fans in different countries illegally subtitled and reposted SKAM episodes online, and in China, some episodes received over 180 million views. SKAM inspired over 4,000 fan fictions and officially licensed remakes in France, Germany, Italy, and the United States, where “SKAM Austin” aired on Facebook Watch in 2018.
What made the show so popular? To start, it didn’t air like traditional television. Executives at NRK, Norway’s public broadcasting network, knew they were losing teenage viewers to online platforms like Youtube and Netflix, so they, led by SKAM creator Julie Andem, developed a new strategy. Each episode was divided into its individual scenes, each 3-12 minutes long, and was posted directly to social media platforms in “real time.” So if the character Isak took an online quiz at 3am on a Monday night, then the clip would drop at 3am on a Monday night. At the end of the week, the clips were stitched together and aired as a full episode on NRK TV. But the videos were only half the experience. Andem created Instagram accounts for each character, which fans could follow to see what each character was doing in between video clips. The characters, in essence, became real people that were part of their fan’s social media networks. And like social media, SKAM proved to be very, very addictive.

Olivia: The reason that she did that is because they had kind of given up on teenagers as a group of people who will watch TV, who you can successfully sell TV to, advertise TV to. And this was her model for how she could kind of get to teenagers looped back into watching a show.

Kristian: And it really worked. I can tell that because I was teaching in Denmark during when Season 2 and Season 3 came out, and when one of those clips dropped in Norway, I would have to stop my classes in Denmark, because there— I was not— no one was listening to me for the, like, three to eight to twelve minutes that that clip would last. And everybody would be on their Instagram profiles, looking what the characters were then texting to each other, looking at their profiles and stuff. And in Denmark, some of the language from the show, Norwegian words, are now incorporated in new Danish. Young people are— have simply adopted new language from the show. And the high school in Oslo have had to stop for Danish visitors wanting to go take pictures of the window sill where they’re sitting looking out over the courtyard of the school. And it’s become so iconic. Yeah.

Olivia: Yeah. That’s one of the other supercool aspects of the show, is because she was making it— it wasn’t really in real-time, right? So she had made the clip and then it streamed and appeared as if it was in real-time. But she was making it in an ongoing way. So it wasn’t just all finished and then it aired, you know? She would air a clip and then she would keep working on the show, and one of the things that enabled her to do is bring in fan art and respond to what fans were saying online. So she had an example of a drawing done of the characters by a fan in South Korea, she saw that, she thought it was good, and she put that, basically, that tableau vivant, in the show. So that— she put the characters standing in the same position, wearing similar clothes and colors. She was able to respond to fans as she made the television show. Another thing, I guess, is, she’s really into slow motion, and her fans were complaining about that: “OK, that’s enough slow motion, it’s so cheesy.” People were talking about it online. And her response to that was to make a clip where the characters were in slow motion for a really long time, with a Kanye West song in the background that actually keeps repeatedly using the word “slow motion.” So she was really having a conversation— there she was resisting fans, right?

Kristian: Right

Olivia: But she was having a conversation with them using online platforms and using post-television, and of course they respond to that, I mean, I think there’s a lot of ways in which we watch television differently now, even when you are an old lady like me.

Kristian: But you’re talking about fans of all ages engaging with the show, but if you look at the official mission statement Andem and her team have produced, it says that the show wants to “help sixteen-year-old girls strengthen their self esteem by breaking taboos, make them aware of interpersonal mechanisms, and demonstrate the reward of confronting fear.” That is very, very narrow. Like, the group that the show is aimed at is sixteen-year-old Norwegian girls. How come, then, everybody loves it? Or like— like, what’s going on?

Olivia: Yeah. So, I heard Andem remake that claim when I saw her speak publically, that this is about letting people self-ironize, see
themselves from a distance, you know, and she did mention specifically young women. But there's a lot of other features of the show that I've read about, like, I mentioned the 90s pop cultural references, like Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet* is referenced in a scene in which Isaac and his love interest Even kiss underwater in a pool. If you're my age, if you were born in 1979 or around there, you remember *Romeo and Juliet* from 1996, it was a big deal in the theatre. So there's those pop cultural references. I've also read that the fact that the show has no adult characters makes it appealing to everyone, because adult viewers, or viewers who, you know, aren't in their twenties or aren't teenagers, can still identify with the characters, because they don't feel split. They don't feel like, “Oh, well I'm seeing myself represented as the parent there, so now how am I supposed to identify with this teenager?” So that that feature, actually, that there are no adult characters, and that some of the kids—or most of the main kids—live in a collective apartment, they live altogether in an apartment separate from their parents in Oslo, that that's appealing to young people and appealing to people of various generations. I think it's just, like, a love story, too. It's like pretty, in some ways, generic.

**Kristian:** Yeah?

**Olivia:** Visually, it's appealing, the way it plays with texting and contemporary culture, contemporary fashion, those are all exciting things, but it's also, like, the same old love story.

**Kristian:** There's also talk about how the show was never advertised, that, especially the young viewers, the sixteen-year-olds, had to find the show themselves. And the idea is that no one, no sixteen-year-old would want to watch a show that their parents had recommended to them, right?

**Olivia:** Yes. Exactly. So it was like a stealth launch.

**Kristian:** Yeah.

**Olivia:** And they did the same thing when they launched it here, I believe.

**Kristian:** Oh?

**Olivia:** Yeah, it was a stealth launch because they just, they couldn't tell—they had to be able to find out about it on their own through social media, for example, rather than seeing it advertised on the TV or, God forbid, their parents saying, “I heard about this new show, *SKAM.*” Yeah that was purposeful, and that was one of the modes that they used to make it popular was, you know, being stealth.

**Kristian:** Yeah.

**Olivia:** Not saying anything about it, because it can't be cool if it's over-advertised.

**Colin:** I think that also changes the viewing experience a lot, that if you're not—if it's not being broadcast on a television, then you don't have to go into a room that your parents own and probably are sitting in, in order to watch a story about—a love story about young people with kissing and sex and excitement and all those things that you maybe don't want to have a conversation with your parents about, but you can just pull out your phone and continue with the story.

**Olivia:** Yeah.

**Kristian:** Do you want to say a little bit about the research that went into the show? And maybe especially with Season 4 and Sana as well?
Olivia: Yeah, so I don't know much about that. I do know that Andem insists that the show is realistic in many ways. And a couple of features of that realism or of those realistic aspects are that she did a lot of research with young people, asked them, you know, their opinion about the language that was being used at the point where they got to writing, asked them about how they lived, asked them about what they do, what they think. She said, when I heard her speak she said, “This is a realistic depiction of how young Norwegians from this part of Oslo live. How much sex they have, how much they party, how much drinking and drugs they do.” She really stood behind that and was like, “This is realistic.” Another realistic feature, or a feature that makes it feel closer to real life, is that she casts teenagers and not professional actors. So she cast, you know, if you’re seventeen, you’re played by a seventeen-year-old instead of typical, or maybe, teenager-television that we’re more familiar with where, you know, seventeen-year-olds are being played by thirty-year-olds or something. So they're non-actors and they are the actual age that they're playing, and that makes it feel more realistic. I was noticing the last time I watched it, too, that their skin is, like, not flawless, right? You can see if they have blemishes, you can— you can see them, which I think is not a feature in a lot of American television or any kind of like, I don't know, photographs, any kind of like, public production of the American body tends to look like it's got a filter on it. And interestingly enough, given that this is produced online, it doesn't look like it has a filter on it.

Colin: Can you tell us about the music in the show?

Olivia: So I mentioned earlier that one of the students in the early part of the class when I said, “Any myths? Do you know any myths, or do you have any assumptions about cultures of sexuality in Scandinavia?” One student wrote, “It’s probably implicitly white.” And I was like, “Yup.” So one of the things I’d really like to do moving forward with the class is work more with that, and work more against that. The only place in the course where you begin to see people of color represented are in, like, contemporary sex ed videos and websites, carefully placed people of color in contemporary television shows, for example. In the show SKAM, she uses a lot of hip-hop, a lot of American hip-hop, and also some Norwegian hip-hop, and one of the things you have repeatedly, over and over and over again in the music, then, is the n-word on that show. And when I was re-watching it, like, leading up to teaching it—I’ve taught it in other classes before—I was like, “Urggh, I just— I’m making the students listen to that word.” And I thought, “There’s an opportunity to talk, maybe, about cultural differences and expectations, both around language, but also maybe to get critical of the show.” Like, it is a show that features— not only white students, it does feature students of color, but in a particular place in Oslo, in a particular class context, and a racializing one.

Kristian: As a Dane who has lived in Denmark for thirty-three years of my life, hip-hop music is very much out of place in Scandinavia. Because it comes from a completely different culture that is very far from the very white Scandinavia and is hard to understand the roots of. So you do feel very disconnected from the both historical and contemporary struggles that some of these songs talk about or come from.

Olivia: Mhm. Yeah, yeah I’m fully aware that the sort of impact of the words is very different in different places. I had asked Andem when I saw her speaking if she’d had any comments about that, if that had been any of the feedback that she’d received, was about that music or about the place of hip-hop. Because there are hip-hop cultures in the Scandinavian countries, but they might— where they come from, who’s involved with them, when they are coming out of smaller communities, and when they’re being picked up by and taken into the majoritarian community— that story is there in Norway, for example, but not in a way that Andem had to reckon with for producing the show. So they’re just, they’re interesting questions. It’s not a— and they’re interesting questions, and it is about — it’s a good thing to remember that I’m teaching these materials in a classroom at an American university. And that doesn’t mean that the students are all American. But there are people from all over, actually, international students. So the question is, really, just, “What does it mean to— what do I expose them to?” That’s a big question for a sex class in general. I did choose— we did a unit on feminist porn, and I chose not to show any pornography or anything hardcore in the class. Partially that decision was made because I
recently read about feminist responses to pornography in the U.S., and Drucilla Cornell, a feminist philosopher, believes that porn is freedom for some and un-freedom for others. So that was the choice I made this time around, like, I don't need to expose you to pornography or hardcore for us to talk about the history of pornography, or feminist responses to it, or what it might mean in an educational net-era context. So that question also comes up with a show like SKAM, like, what am I— what kind of choices am I making and what are the ethics of making students read certain things or look at certain things or listen to certain things? And how different— it's fascinating how different that is here at an American university than it might be if I were teaching the same class in Norway.

**Kristian:** I think I have one more question. If you were to make, like, a Top 3 of things that you hope that the students got out of this class, what would that be?

**Olivia:** So, I'm always trying to teach against the idea that the Nordic region is homogenous. So, our big truth is that these are the best places in the world to be gay, and the policy is right, everything top-down looks right, so there isn't homophobia there anymore, or, people aren't struggling to come out of the closet, like Isaac in Season 3, and that's not true. So hopefully they walk away— you know, because when you talk about the good things about Scandinavian culture or Nordic cultures, sometimes Americans will be like, “Yeah but everybody's the same over there. It's because they're all— it's all homogenous.” So I really like to push back against that. So I hope that they were able to see all these exceptions to the rule, and also that just because these “big truths” are there and are real, like, Scandinavians in general are more open about the body, that's true, it's not that that's not true, it's just that, that doesn't mean that that's everybody's story. So that's one thing. I would like them to see the Nordic region as a diverse place that's dynamic and dealing with a lot of social problems and complexities. Yeah.

[*Outro music starts*]

**Colin:** Crossing North is a production of the Scandinavian Studies Department and Baltic Studies Program at the University of Washington in Seattle. Today's episode was written, edited, and produced by me, Colin Gioia Connors. Special thanks to Visiting Lecturer of Danish Kristian Næsby. Today's music was used with permission by Kristján Hrannar Pálsson. Links to his music can be found in the show notes for this episode or on our website. Visit scandinavian.washington.edu to learn more about the podcast and other exciting projects hosted by the Scandinavian Studies Department. If you are a current or prospective student, consider taking the course “Sexuality in Scandinavia” or declaring a major. Assistant Professor Olivia Gunn also teaches a number of courses on Norwegian literary and cultural history. You can find complete course listings for the Scandinavian Studies Department and Baltic Studies Program at scandinavian.washington.edu. Once again, that's scandinavian.washington.edu. Alright, that does it for season one. Crossing North will be on summer break for the next few months, but we'll return in the fall with brand new episodes. See you then.

[*Outro music ends*]

**SHOW NOTES**

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This episode was written, edited, and produced by Colin Gioia Connors. Special thanks to Kristian Næsby for leading our interview with Olivia Gunn.

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Department of Scandinavian Studies
University of Washington
318 Raitt Hall
Box 353420
Seattle, WA 98195-3420

Phone: (206) 543-0645
Fax: (206) 685-9173
uwscand@uw.edu

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