

## RETHINKING SEXUALITY IN NORDIC AND POST-SOVIET CONTEXTS

A symposium at Södertörn University, September 29-30, 2022

### ABSTRACTS (in the order of the presenters)

**Michal Pitoňák** (independent scholar in the field of geographies of sexualities and a chair of the Prague based NGO Queer Geography)

#### **“Crossroads of insights: Uneasy stalemate of LGBT+ activism in Central and Eastern Europe”**

This contribution draws from my recently completed book chapter, in which I aim to develop a more nuanced understanding of the current condition and challenges of the LGBT+ movement in Czechia as well as in the broader region of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). I describe the situation of Czechia and show that the local context is embedded in an often overlooked longer historical and transnational development. Importantly, I will show that the current situation in Czechia needs not to be viewed as rigid but rather having a form of a stalemate with eddies and tensions playing out between queer activists and the broader political opposition that has been mobilized and glued internationally by various anti-gender or anti-LGBT sentiments. I discuss these nascent oppositional movements and illiberal mobilizations and stress that they represent a vast set of overlooked problems that require more of our attention and critical thought. Lastly, I underscore that scholars who pursue queer, sexuality, and feminist thought in the region of CEE are not shielded from these populist and illiberal sentiments. They, too, work within particular institutions and operate under specific conditions in which academic work is evaluated and finds multiple dilemmas bringing potentially conflicting situations that may not be easily reconcilable by those who care for their community but at the same time need to sustain their living.

**Laura Saarenmaa** (Senior Lecturer, Media Studies, University of Turku)

#### **“From fantasies to reality: Enabling Nordic Sex Tourism”**

In 1976, Finnish airline company Finnair began direct flights from Helsinki to Bangkok. At first, the route was used to enhance Finnish trade relations in Asia. By the early 1980s, Bangkok Airport became more and more famous as a transit point to the beaches and brothels of Pattaya. By the turn of the 1990s Thailand had turned to a center of global mass sex tourism. In my earlier studies I have shown how 1970s Finnish sex magazines encouraged Finnish male readers to envision themselves as white westerns, entitled to enjoy sexual services provided by foreign women representing the ethnic Other. In this talk I wish to turn from fantasies to reality, to the actual sex travels abroad organized by the Finnish sex magazines Jallu, Kalle and Ratto for their readers. The main program of the reader travels to Canary Islands and Thailand consisted of guided visits to sex bars, massages and brothels, where the participants were given hands-on education on the proper use of sexual services. Team spirit between participants was raised through team tee shirts and playful competitions between teams. The travels were reported in the magazines with joyful texts and generous illustration. The faces of the travelers were blurred in the pictures, unlike the faces and bodies of the encountered sex workers. In my talk I wish to raise questions of research ethic, methodology and materials for studying the early phases of Nordic sex tourism as trans-Nordic, economic historical phenomenon.

**Mariah Larsson** (Professor of Film Studies, Linnaeus University)

**“Pornography and Transnationality: The Case of Hälle, Sweden in the 1970s”**

Already before the legalization of pornography in Sweden in 1971, there was a boom in sexual entertainment and commerce. Porn stores and sex clubs opened in the larger cities – Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö – and the publication of porn magazines increased rapidly. Because pornography was prohibited in many countries, material was smuggled across borders by shady small-time entrepreneurs or by truck drivers making some extra money on the side. At the same time, there was also legal export and import of pornographic material in various forms. Pornography travelled, in both licit and illicit ways. However, pornography also caused *people* to travel across borders, in order to buy or consume pornographic material. One such crossing was at the Swedish-Norwegian border at Svinesund, by Idefjorden, which separates Sweden from Norway. Here, Norwegians travelled to Sweden for candy, tobacco and alcohol, and, until 2006 when Norway legalized pornography, for sexually explicit material. In this presentation, I will address this particular aspect of border commerce, with a focus on the tiny town of Hälle outside of Svinesund.

**Kristina Birk-Vellemaa** (MA, Ethnology, Folkloristics and Applied Anthropology, University of Tartu)

**“A girl became a woman: Experiences of sex education and its effect on sexual self-determination in the narratives of Estonian women born 1971-1981”**

Sexuality is an integral part of the human experience. Although people interpret, experience and express sexuality differently, sexual experiences affect us all. Sexual wellbeing has different components and sexual assertiveness is a critical one among them (Yoshioka 2000, Morokoff 2000, Loshek and Terrell 2017, Lopez Alvarado et al. 2020). Various factors influence sexual assertiveness, such as agency, body image, sense of power, but sexuality education is seen as a critical enabler of assertiveness. I came to my master's thesis through my everyday work as a sexuality educator and counsellor. My purpose was to contribute to sexuality research in Estonia, linking sexuality research with cultural studies.

In my paper I analyse if and how Estonian women from my generation experienced the discourse of sexuality in their childhood and teen years in the end of the Soviet period and in the beginning of the transformative period. Reflecting on 22 in-depth and group interviews with Estonian women, I discuss if and how interviewees associate their sexual assertiveness with sexuality education from their childhood and their most active formation period. I also discuss what enables or hinders their experience of sexual pleasure now. The fieldwork was based on a phenomenological method, emphasising experiences and memories, which were analysed through the method of narrative analysis. In order to reveal the discourse of sexuality and gender during the active period of formation of the interviewees, I also analysed the health education print materials published for teenagers in Estonia in the late Soviet period.

**Ulrika Dahl** (Professor of Gender Studies, Uppsala University)

**“Sex or babies but never both? Reflections on geographies of sex and kinship among queer parents and scholars”**

This exploratory paper draws on a near decade of scholarly work in queer studies and ethnographic work among queer parents and kin-makers in Sweden and elsewhere to

consider the place of sex/uality within contemporary queer studies and communities. Through a provocative and speculative set of vignettes drawn from research and academic work, it asks what sex/uality has to do with queer kinship in the 21st century in places where formal LGBTQ+ rights have been achieved. Secondly, it considers how in the past two decades, procreation and parenting has replaced sex as a unifying marker of lesbian scholarship and identity and what this has to do with what can arguably be called a conservative turn in gender and sexual politics. Lastly, it asks what it would mean for (queer) studies of sexuality if we rethink desire, sexual practices and procreation in different ways.

**Rebeka Põldsam** (PhD student, Department of Ethnology, University of Tartu) & **Riikka Taavetti** (Senior Lecturer, Gender Studies, University of Turku)

**“I never was this theoretical lesbian type”: Memories and experiences of Estonian-Finnish lesbian community from the early 1990s**

Due to geographical and linguistic proximity, the connections between Estonia and Finland have always been active. While there are traces of earlier transnational queer networks between these countries, a well-documented and vividly remembered period in these connections occurred during the perestroika years of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the restoration of Estonian independence in the early 1990s. In particular, there were active networks and cross-border movement of lesbian women between Estonia and Finland. In spring 1990, when the first conference on homosexuality in the whole Soviet Union was organized in Tallinn and Tartu, was attended by group of Finnish activist, large majority of whom were women. The conference led to establishing the first lesbian association in Estonia. The development of this association was closely followed in Finland, as the connections between Estonian and Finnish women were active during the first years of the 1990s.

In this presentation, we analyze these Estonian-Finnish lesbian communities both as experienced during the time as they were described in lesbian and gay press and other documentation, and as remembered in ethnographic interviews. We combine oral histories from both countries and experiment with different interview methods. We will pay particular attention to the different meanings given to these communities and ask how these connections shaped the identifications and activism in these countries and how the connections and relationships endured over time.

**Tuula Juvonen** (Associate Professor of Gender Studies, Tampere University)

**“Positioning Finnish homosexuality in transnational contexts”**

In my paper, I will present two vignettes from Finnish lesbian and gay history. The first of them discuss the shifting role of Sweden in the matters concerning heightened public visibility of homosexuality, and how Swedishness was used to build a particular national imaginary about a properly heterosexual Finland from the 1950s to 1960s. Here my reading is based on Finnish scandal press and films, which were Helsinki based, yet had a national circulation. The second vignette addresses the public (in)visibility of lesbians. I address the tension between the hypersexualization and visibility of lesbians in mainstream pornography on the one hand and lesbians’ gradually increasing presence on their own terms in lesbian and gay platforms on the other hand. The sources I analyze stem both from the lesbian and gay press and the oral history interviews I have conducted. Here my focus is

local, as I look at lesbians' increasing presence as they started to form networks of sexual self-expression and belonging in the lesbian and gay venues of Tampere from the 1970s to the 1990s.

In addition to presenting the cases themselves, I seek to explore the historically shifting transnational connections – or the lack thereof – in building an understanding of the meanings attached to homosexuality and lesbians in Finland in the second half of the 20th century. Moreover, I ask how that historical past may affect the current state and positioning of Finnish homosexuality today.

**Łukasz Szulc** (Lecturer in Digital Media and Society, Department of Sociological Studies, University of Sheffield)

**“Queer migrants making sense of Brexit”**

Where is Central Eastern Europe (CEE) and what is it like? Of course, I am not naively searching for a precise geographical location of CEE, nor am I trying to determine CEE's 'true' essence. Instead, I am interested in geopolitical imaginations; CEE—but also other geopolitical entities such as Poland or Europe—as a social construct that guides perceptions, wins loyalties and delivers judgements. Turning to the queer, the migrant and the digital is useful when asking existential questions about CEE: What is CEE like for queers when it is presented as a stronghold of anti-LGBTQ discrimination? What is it like for migrants who routinely cruise between east and west? And where is CEE on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter? I will shed light on these questions focusing on Polish LGBTQs in the UK who got caught up in a specific moment of history; a moment that challenged and redefined diverse geopolitical imaginations, identifications and loyalties for many of them. In 2016, the UK decided to leave the European Union in the Brexit referendum, which constituted a key moment of geopolitical reckoning for queer migrants to the UK. Drawing on 767 survey responses and 30 in-depth interviews with a diverse group of Polish LGBTQs in the UK, I will discuss how this group was making sense of Brexit and what the role of social media was in that process. I will also show how Brexit influenced this group's geopolitical loyalties at multiple scales, including the national and the regional.

**Michael Nebeling Petersen** (Associate Professor at the Center for Gender, Sexuality, and Difference, University of Copenhagen)

**“Visualizing AIDS: Affective histories of the AIDS epidemic in Denmark”**

The Danish and Scandinavian histories of the AIDS-epidemic is quite different than the ones from the US, that still dominate our knowledge and understanding of the cultural history of AIDS. In this presentation, I am to explore the particularities of the AIDS-epidemic in Denmark to broaden our understanding of the epidemic's cultural signification and material effects, and how it came to form, frame and modulate queer identification, identities and “moments of community” (Cook, 2016). I am especially interested in how the epidemic emerged as both a serious medical condition and ‘an epidemic of meanings and signification’ (Treichler, 1999) and I foreground the AIDS archive as one of feelings (Cvetkovich, 2003; Gould, 2009; Berlant 2011; Cook 2016). Thus, in this presentation, I will present our initial theoretical and analytical framework of analyzing the cultural and affective histories of AIDS in Denmark and I will present our initial archival work to discuss how the virus and its (sexualized and racialized) victims were visualized, signified, and affectively mobilized in campaigns against AIDS from both queer activists and from national

authorities in 1980es and early 1990es.

**Kristian Møller** (Assistant Professor, Department of Communication and Arts, Roskilde University)

**“Safe space and harm reduction in club culture: A transnational study”**

Intersectional analysis is at the heart of much contemporary queer activism (Crenshaw, 1991). The concept has brought about a complex understanding of how society due to various forms of discrimination distribute “privilege” unevenly, depending on the intersection of racial, gendered, and other markers a body carries. For sexual experimentation in queer clubs, which is the focus of this paper, this raises the question of who is afforded the comfort of sexual liberty without any interventions (Ahmed, 2004), and in turn, which interventions are needed to approach sexual justice. The idea of “safer space” offer one model for activist intervention, as it seeks to balance questions of access and privilege, with the purposes of sustaining resistance, mobilisation, and care (Deller, 2019: 222).

In light of this, the paper surveys how safer space is used as a framing device in promotion for queer clubs worldwide. From data spanning Instagram posts from 81 techno club and festivals in 23 countries, with an emphasis on Denmark, I compare how sexual pleasure and risk is articulated, what kinds of rights are put in place, as well as who is imagined to bear the responsibility of the upholding of such rights. As the paper identifies different materialisations of safer space discourse, it hones in on transnational similarities and differences, drawing in legal considerations on cosmopolitan flows and politics as well as national differences in legalisation and criminalisation of sexual activity and drug use.