

# Multisexual Kallio: A Queer Social History of One Neighbourhood in Helsinki

*Antu Sorainen (with Arto J. W. Kallioniemi)<sup>1</sup>*

## Introduction

This article focuses on the social history of urban sexualities in Kallio, a well-known working class neighbourhood in Helsinki. We argue that Kallio is an exceptional multisexual urban area when compared to other European working class city spaces. The social history of Kallio makes it a relevant example of multisexual urban developments for future studies in urban social pedagogy.

We approach the multisexual Kallio from a specific research position. We refer to *queer* writings on sexual geographies which suggest that non-metropolitan sites have been elided within studies of sexualities and space. Such studies have typically focused either on sexualized metropolitan areas such as London or Berlin or on sexualized otherness

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such as Africa or the Orient.<sup>2</sup> Much less has been said about other urban areas. First, we will compare the development of urban North European areas with the social history of Kallio. Secondly, we will argue that collective sexual fantasies of white urban middle-class Helsinki have been projected onto inhabitants of Kallio in the present day city life.

## The "other" sexualities of Europe

Barry Langford, a London-based scholar of identity and urban space has suggested that the collective identity groupings around ethnicity and sexuality that had evolved during the 1970s began to erode in the face of an unexpected challenge by the name of the free market in the 1980s London. Langford wrote about the new "suburban desire" in his article *Margins of the city* (2000, 64):

*[A]n instantly familiar vision of suburban spaces and sexualities: spaces defensively, neurotically huddled, outward convention (the peddle-dash) masking private perversion....It is now quiet suburban avenues, not teeming city streets, where one finds the key political battlegrounds in national politics. The decline of the local high street in the face of out-of-town superstores and malls is a much-remarked (and lamented) fact of commercial life.*

Langford's argument might be valid in London and other European metropolitan and big post-industrial cities. In these, the structure of inhabitants in city-centres changed drastically after the World War II. The urban sexual mores was mainly constituted through the rising white middle-class families – that is, married heterosexual families with many children – until the war. In the 1950s, and especially in 1970's and

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Judith Halberstam (2003, 162).

early 1980's, the structure of urban life changed in former colonial states such as the UK, Germany, France and the Netherlands.

The change was caused by the national migrant policies that were marked by the flow of immigrant workers from Turkey, Greece and other poor countries. This change was strongest in London, Amsterdam, Paris and Berlin, but also in Scandinavian metropolitan cities Stockholm, Oslo and Copenhagen. This immigrant policy caused a change in sexual cultures and in the meanings, representations and interpretations of sexualities in urban areas. Before this new immigration politics, the most visible urban sexuality until the mid-20th century had been reproductive, marital, heterosexual and white sexuality.

After the second World War, the streets of city centres became all of the sudden populated by groups of foreign single men, who were seen by the middle-class as dangerous, exotic and potential for uncontrolled sexuality. The sexual and gender system of the migrant workers was differently marked than the white, mainly protestant Northern European urban population. In the deeply Muslim and catholic countries of Turkey, Greece and other countries of origin of the migrant workers, men were seen as the ones who dominated the public sphere such as city streets whereas women were expected to stay invisible in the private sphere – either indoors or, as in many cases, in the home country.

These "other" hierarchies of propriety, or visible sexuality, were seen as dangerous amongst the white middle class families. In the late 1970s, as a consequence of the reaction for this threat of "other" cultures, and new housing politics and rising national economics, white middle class families started to move into suburbs described by Langford above. North-American queer scholars Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (2003, 171) have called this crisis image of immigrants as a racial mirage generated by a white-dominated society, supplying a specific phobia to organize its public. They also call the process of the

collective white memory sanctified not by nostalgia but by mass aversion as the *amnesia archive*: Memory Is the Amnesia You Like.

This suburbanization of white middle-class familial sexuality can be seen as one sort of privatization. Middle-class heterosexuality became invisible, and, as it secretly wished, untouchable by the "other". The family form functioned as a mediator and metaphor of national existence. (Berlant and Warner 2003, 171; Tani 2005, 15–16). From the late 1970s and early 1980s forward, into the empty premises of the city centres moved new cultures and social groups. Students, prostitutes, striptease clubs, trendy heterosexual youth discothèques, lesbian and gay bars, singles' societies, ethnic shops and restaurants took over the former bourgeois urban places, apartments and commercial spaces.<sup>3</sup>

## Urban fantasies in Helsinki

In Finland, the history of immigration policy differs from the other Northern European and Scandinavian states. In the 1970s, because of the national economical crisis and late urbanization, the flow of immigrant workers was *from* Finland – specifically to Sweden – not *to* Finland. As a consequence of the late development of the welfare state and social security in Finland, the amount of immigrant workers is very low even today.

In the history of Helsinki, there have existed two multisexual urban villages. The area known as *Punavuori* once heard the urban sexual fantasies that have now been projected onto Kallio. Punavuori is located near by the harbour. Until the 1980s, it had a dangerous sexual reputation for its many bordellos, seedy bars and "tea rooms" for men with same-sex sexual practices.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Gilfoyle (1996) on the sexual social history of Times Square in New York; Chancey (1994; 2002) on New York; Tani (2005) on Manchester.

## Spectacle in Punavuori

In the mid-1980's young and rich yuppies – as well homosexual as heterosexual – invested lots of money in the Punavuori area and invented a new urban sexual mentality they called *the city culture*. Guy Debord (2005), a French art historian, has analyzed the contemporary western society as a *society of spectacle*. Debord suggests that the fantasised shared community that the spectacle manifests unveils the class division that the capitalist production is really based on. What brings together people freed of their former repressions also draws them apart, because the fantasy of the abstract power always also creates a lack of power.

The dual nature of this capitalist *spectacle* was experienced in Punavuori in the 1980s and 1990s. More the money and design boutiques appeared in the streets, the more the spectacle and the reputation of an untamed and dangerous sexual urban district disappeared from there. In the *amnesia archive* of Helsinki, sexuality moved into Kallio. In there, the capitalist system had historically penetrated the working-class peoples' lives in a very repressive manner, but it had also created effective resistance to it in a form of something that might be called multisexual Kallio mentality.

## Kallio: the control laboratory of social policy

Kallio has a long social history as the working class area of Helsinki. That fore the Finnish social policy has its roots in Kallio. In fact, Kallio has acted as a live-laboratory for the Finnish social policy. Finnish Deaconry, Salvatory Army, philanthropical work, children's care' and social care all have their roots in Kallio.<sup>4</sup> For example, abortion clinics, motherhood advice clinics, and other social hygienic or

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Heiskanen & Santakari (2004, 122–125).

governmental attempts to control the working class women's sexualities were first tried out in Kallio.

*Geography of otherness*

Even in geographical sense, the Kallio area has been divided from the other parts of the city by the famous bridge, the Long Bridge (Pitkäsilta). The flats in Kallio are small, typically one room with a kitchenette and approximately less than 30 square meters of living space. Until the 1960's, these small flats were usually inhabited by more than one family, with lots of children and tenants sleeping at the floor at nights. More than half of the flats had no bathroom or toilet. A working-class historian Martta Salmela-Järvinen in her memoirs (1965; 1966; 1967; 1968) and a working-class author Lassi Sinkkonen (1971) in his novel Solveig's Song (*Solveigin laulu*) have vividly described what the lack of privacy and bathroom facilities meant for the construction of young girls's sexualities. On the other hand, the memoirs of police officers and research on man as sex offenders in the 1950s tell about the construction of masculine sexualities often from the point of view of uncontrolled or violent representations.<sup>5</sup>

Kallio has always had a strong dominance of women. Until the 1917, men were absent from this urban milieu. They were forced to look for work outside of Kallio for example builders of the rail route system from Finland to Russia. In the 1917, however, the red light was lit in the tower of the Labor House. Now the women had to wait their husbands to return from the Civil War, and after the war from the concentration camps of Hennala and other places.<sup>6</sup> Almost half of the men

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Anttila (1956); Hietaniemi (1992); Lauhakangas & Vuoristo (1991).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example the memoirs of Martta Salmela-Järvinen (1966; 1967) on the life of a "red wife" in Kallio before and during the Civil War. See Hentilä (2005) and Lähteenmäki (1995) on Salmela-Järvinen as a working-class women's history writer.

never returned back alive. A remarkable number of working-class women were also executed as red rebel soldiers during and after the Civil War.

### *Return of Men*

Between the 1917 and 1922 the state economics in Finland went drastically down. This crisis was heavily experienced in Kallio, as the state started a strict control of the minimum number of tenants in the small flats. Further, working-class men started to return from the prison camps. This meant that the flats and streets that had been inhabited by women mainly, started to get crowded with men also, not only with the returned husbands, but also new tenants from the country side who were looking for jobs in factories.

In 1939, men became absent again because they had to take part in the second World War. For a short while, Kallio became almost an all-female district again. Soon after the break of the war, war refugees from Carelia were settled in thousands in Kallio district. As a result of this, in the 1940s the number of inhabitants of Kallio rose higher than never before or again. Despite of the flow of war refugees and other immigrants, new flats were not built. When the men came back from the war, a baby boom took place. In the 1950s, the little flats became more crowded than ever. In 1955 there were about 1,8 inhabitants for every room in Kallio (Heiskanen & Santakari 2004, 119). Men were more visible in the streets and every day life in Kallio than they ever had been. Amongst the returned husbands and small children were invalided war veterans and refugee men from Carelia.

### *Rural meets the Urban*

The pace of the everyday life took a new course in Kallio. Until the 1950s, the agrarian Finland, with its kin-owned farmhouses, had been the nutritional and economical resource for working-class mothers and other women in Kallio. In the 1960s and 1970s traditional kinship and family

ties were broken. A fast and thorough structural change took place in the Finnish society. The nation decided to switch from the agrarian phase to the urban phase at a one go. Because of the change in the national politics, new incomers from rural areas found their way into Kallio in search for paid work and social security in the after-war society.

At this point, Kallio opened up for new sexual cultures. Until the 1970s, the representations of the working class live in Kallio were dominantly heterosexual and reproductive. From the mid-1980's, the image of Kallio changed. Even though a similar kind of capitalistic spectacle could have feared to happen as in Punavuori, the development in Kallio took a different route. When Punavuori lost its spectacular appeal and excitement because of the capitalist investments, the collective fantasy of uncontrolled urban sexualities was transformed to Kallio. Even though new social groups arrived and new sexual cultures became visible in the Kallio streets, the big capital and the spectacle stayed away.

#### *Sexuality moved to Kallio*

In the collective imaginary of Helsinki, the dangerous and uncontrolled sex moved to Kallio in the 1990s. In the fantasies of the elite and middle class people, sex had actually always already been there, because the working class sexuality was always perceived as dangerous and as something that should be controlled.

Today, there are multiple sexual cultures in/visible in their diversity in Kallio. The heterosexual lads' culture is very noisy. However, different ethnic cultures and the modern out&pride lesbian and gay culture seems to be able to live in intertwined peace as well with this heterosexual culture as well as with those men who have sex with men (gay sauna) and the traditional culture of strong and self-standing working class women, as well as with the flourishing sex business and industry.

In today's Kallio, the concept of *intersectionality*<sup>7</sup> has been embodied. This means that the simultaneous impact of such various social factors as class, age, ethnicity, gender, status and age are intertwined with each other and provide a positive record of the complex interactions of and resistance to such institutional and cultural factors as poverty, racism, homophobia, philanthropic movement, Christian social work, diacony and state controlled social work. In this perspective, sexuality is not seen as an autonomous field on its own right, but as an always-already constitutive element of all social and cultural institutions that have been constructed in and by these institutions.

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<sup>7</sup> The critical concept of intersectionality has gained weight especially in gender and queer studies and cultural studies since the turn of the 21st century. See, for example, Ilmonen 2005, 40.

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