

TRANSGENDER AFFECT

Rage and Joy or Something Else?

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On a snowy Thursday morning in Tampere, a group of researchers, students, and activists donned their hot pink name tags, with preferred pronouns included, and gathered for the 8th Nordic Trans Studies Conference, titled *From Transgender Rage to Trans Joy: Trans Studies through Affective Lens*.¹ The conference was held at Tampere University, Finland, and it ran from February 23rd to 25th 2023. As implied by “8th”, it was a part of a series of conferences and symposiums organised by the Nordic Trans Studies Network, which was formed in 2009 at the *Transgender Studies and Theories: Building up the Field in a Nordic Context* conference at Linköping University, Sweden. Since then, there have been six Nordic Trans Studies conferences or symposiums at irregular intervals, organised by whomever had the time and funding to do so. The previous two were both in 2019, in Trondheim, Norway, and Lund, Sweden, respectively. This time, the conference was organised by the research project *Affective Activism: Sites of Queer and Trans World-Making*, led by university lecturer Tuula Juvonen and funded by the Academy of Finland. With approximately 120 participants, this iteration of the Nordic Trans Studies Conference was the largest thus far, as well as the largest trans studies conference ever organised in Europe.

¹ <https://events.tuni.fi/nordictransstudies23/>

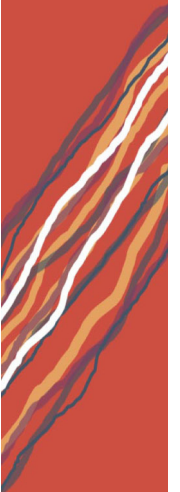
The theme of the conference, as the title implies, was affect. As I am not particularly familiar with affect theory, I was a bit concerned that I would be out of my depth, but fortunately, that was not the case. While many presentations touched on affect and the titular subjects of trans rage and trans joy were discussed at length, the conference themes allowed for a wide variety of topics and perspectives, not all of them directly related to affect. A presenter I spoke to mentioned that the topic of their presentation had veered quite far from affect after submitting their abstract, but this was a non-issue at the conference, and their presentation fit in just as well as the others in that session.

The two keynote speakers at the conference approached the subject of affect in very different ways. Dr. YV Nay from the Zürich University of Applied Sciences discussed *The Affective Life of Trans Studies as a Political Field in Academia and Activism*. In an information-packed keynote, they recounted the dehumanising and pathologizing history of transgender in academia and posited that the promise of trans studies to desubjugate trans people was not met, because the paradigm shift to human rights builds on a universal image of transgender. This benefits some, but further masks the existence of others in racialised and normative ways. Nay proposed critical trans studies, rooted in Black trans studies, as a solution, and suggested that

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in order to de-centre trans studies, multiple formations of power should be considered. This very academic and factual presentation was contrasted by the second keynote from Hil Malatino from Penn State University, titled *Weathering: Slow Arts of Trans Endurance*. Malatino's keynote occupied a space somewhere between academic writing and prose, and it was mesmerising to listen to. He spoke of holding environments, psychological spaces in which one is comfortable and safe from the hostilities of the world, where the broader antagonistic world is digested, and how these environments can become oppressive when the world is so antagonistic that the holding environment becomes saturated with it. Malatino also brought up the competing trans discourses alluded to in the title of the conference – the joy and the suffering – and attempted to complicate their relationship and to understand them as simultaneous. Negative affect saturates trans lives, and the only way out of it is through, but not in a way that makes experiencing joy impossible. I found this evocative and engaging essay very compelling, and I wish there was more space in Finnish academia for this kind of semi-creative writing.

This conference was the first in the series of Nordic Trans Studies Network conferences large enough to warrant parallel sessions. These 12 sessions allowed the participants to break off into smaller groups based on what most interested us, which was a great way to encourage discussion and facilitate networking between participants with similar interests, academic or otherwise. The drawback of simultaneous sessions, of course, is that there were many interesting presentations and discussions that I was not able to be present for, and therefore cannot report on beyond listing what they were: Institutions and Ethnographies, Community Care, Larp and Gaming, TransNatures, Affective Residues of the Trans History of Sexology, Art/Culture/Research, Transing and the Politized Body, and Politics and Belongings. I heard great things about many of these sessions from my fellow conference attendees, and more information about individual

presentations in each session is available on the conference website. The four parallel sessions I did attend were Nonbinary Expressions, Trans Childhood/Youth, Performing Rage, and Trans Pleasure and Joy. In what follows, I will describe them in detail, amidst my thoughts on the non-academic events of the conference.

Nonbinary Expressions was chaired by Varpu Alasuutari and it clearly drew a very nonbinary crowd: almost everyone in the room had 'they/them' on their nametag. First, doctoral researcher Vilja Jaaksi from the University of Turku gave an excellent presentation on nonbinary androgyny on social media. At least in certain settings, nonbinary gender is becoming intelligible, meaning that there are certain gender expressions that can be recognised not as male or female but as nonbinary. However, this image of the nonbinary is based on a very specific standard of (white, thin, abled) androgyny, and nonbinary people report feeling increasingly pressured to present in a specific way in order to be perceived as they wish to be perceived. Next, we heard from another doctoral researcher from Turku, Sade Kondelin, who with the help of visual aids introduced us to Karelian folk clothing, *ruutat*, and discussed several different options for how traditionally gendered folk clothing can be adapted for the nonbinary wearer, so that one does not have to choose between presenting as Karelian and presenting as nonbinary.

Last in the session, Swedish filmmaker Ester Martin Bergsmark's presentation in its meandering and poetic style was interesting but a little bit difficult for me to follow. Bergsmark discussed representing transfeminine and nonbinary experiences through filmmaking, and the purpose of the queer sex film as finding joy in your body by focusing on the tactile rather than normative ideas of what specific genitalia are or do. The presentation was illustrated by stills from the film *Instinct*, which was screened at the conference later that afternoon but which I was,

unfortunately, unable to attend. When I asked around the next day, the film was described to me as erotic but not pornographic and interesting but a little strange to watch in an academic setting. One person mentioned that having seen the film, they understood what the presenter meant by the closeups creating the nonbinary body: zoom in close enough and the body becomes unidentifiable and thus un-genderable.

Alongside academic discussion and discovery, the conference provided artistic explorations of transness. On Thursday, in addition to the film screening, we were able to view some visual art by Marie Andersen, Aimé Dabbadie and Frej Haar in the Linna lobby in between sessions. We also experienced a thought-provoking performance by Mar Fjell and Malin Arnell, titled *Whatever (you need)*, which consisted of the performers moving furniture and various object around the performance space while interacting with each other and the audience. One of the purposes of art is to evoke an emotional response, and this performance certainly achieved that, aptly for a conference centring affect. Based on the reactions of the people around me, the predominant affect of the audience was fascination and amusement. I, unfortunately, primarily experienced discomfort, and frankly would have left after five minutes had I not committed to reporting on all parts of the conference to the best of my ability. I found myself wondering whether it might be appropriate to include some kind of content warning in the conference programme about this type of performance. As the conference was quite vocal about following policies for a safer space, it felt somewhat contradictory to invite participants to a performance that included a deeply unpleasant soundscape and interactions with random members of the audience with no forewarning. It is often the intention of art, particularly performance art, to shock and disrupt, and there is perhaps a conversation to be had about finding a balance between that and the safety and comfort of participants.

The second session I attended, titled Trans Childhood/Youth, was the one I was personally most looking forward to, as it pertained to the topics of my own research, and it did not disappoint. Chaired by Tobias Raun, this Friday morning session included many fascinating presentations with different perspectives to research into trans children and youth. In their talk about the medical treatment of trans youth in Danish media, Tobias Raun and Mons Bissenbakker presented their upcoming article, which describes a pseudo-feminist criticism of the increasing number of trans boys wanting to transition. Instead of opposing medical transition based on concerns for trans individuals, the discourse in Denmark has now turned to a concern that trans boys' desire to transition is a direct result of the way society devalues women and femininity, and that by transitioning they are attempting to take some kind of shortcut out of patriarchy. The presenters were interested in this shift in discourse and the way in which medical professionals now act as gatekeepers to the "authentic" desire to transition.

Next, Kristiina Tyni, Anna Bratt and Matt (Matilda) Wurm presented their research, in which they interviewed Swedish gender-creative children (ages 4-12) about their gender identities and experiences. Based on these interviews, it is clear that even small children can have a strong internal sense of gender – "I felt it inside", as the title of the presentation quoted a participant – and they are surprisingly adept at articulating these experiences when given the space to do so. Isak Auran's PhD plan for the Swedish School of Sport and Health Sciences explored movement, meaning all bodily motion and active bodily involvement, as a perspective into the experiences of trans youth, particularly in the context of school.

Finally, Irina Schmitt's presentation discussed how Swedish trans and nonbinary young people navigate gender norms at school. Cisnormativity at school puts a lot of pressure and stress on trans students and is inherently linked to other categories of oppression, like race and body-shaming. It

isn't always clear whose responsibility it is to address these issues, but the presenter encouraged teachers to become activists. My only complaint about this session as a whole was that I wish that there had been more time for discussion. I look forward to citing the research presented in my own work.

In the third session on Friday afternoon, chaired by Luca Tainio, we heard perspectives on the subject of Performing Rage. Eli Ståhl, who is originally from Denmark but placed in London, spoke to us about affective solidarity and transgender rage. They introduced us to a UK protest and a US sculpture, both protesting policies that would limit trans people's access to public bathrooms, and both expressing rage via the medium of urine – hence the title of the presentation: Pissed Off. The second presentation of the session was from Kaarna Tuomenvirta, who first introduced us to their PhD research at the University of Helsinki, where they explore healing from the experiences of Finnish trans clinics and the compulsory psychiatric evaluation process through poetry, and then read some of their poetry for us. We were warned that the poems described the traumatic and dehumanising process of medical transition in Finland, and I somewhat wished I had heeded that warning, as they were difficult to hear, but they were also beautiful and powerful and unquestionably a tool for healing and recovery. As there were only two presentations in this session, we had plenty of time for a discussion about who gets to access and express rage in the trans community, and how rage is received and interpreted depending on things like gender presentation and race.

The evening event on Friday, QUEER RAGE, was certainly the most memorable part of the conference for me. We gathered at the local restaurant and event space Laterna for an evening of conversation, dancing, drinks and performances. I had many interesting conversations with fellow conference attendees, learned about what was discussed in some of the

parallel sessions I missed, and built some much-needed networks as a new doctoral researcher. As for the performances, I saw my first ever live drag performances and they were excellent, but I particularly enjoyed the stand-up performances from Josephine Baird and Jamie McDonald, which were genuinely hilarious and well-tailored for the crowd of trans and queer academics. As the former mentioned in the following morning's session, finding humour in difficult or traumatic trans experiences and sharing them with a community works as a release for pain.

The fourth and final session I attended took place on Saturday morning. Despite the somewhat subdued and weary atmosphere after two long days, this session titled Trans Pleasure and Joy, chaired by Tuula Juvonen, included four interesting and engaging presentations. First, we heard from Tais B. Terletskaja from the University of Copenhagen, who discussed pleasure as a political issue in trans and queer cultural production. The presentation brought up many interesting points about a necessary turn from damage and suffering to pleasure in trans and queer theory, as well as the need to work through difficult affect without letting it destroy us. The presentation ended with a slideshow of queer artworks in various media that explored in some way the relationship between pleasure and suffering as a part of queer existence.

Dannie Milve from Södertörn University gave us a fascinating presentation about sextech, its claims of disruption and innovation, and its potential to actually inspire meaningful change in a queer context, should they move from platitudes about diversity and inclusivity to an actual radical reimagining of human sexuality. Representing the Queer Psychology in Sweden research group, Theodor Mejias Nihlén and Matt (Matilda) Wurm introduced us to their research regarding minority joy and the positive aspects of the trans experience. They presented a model of minority stress and proposed a counterpart describing minority joy and its effects

on health and well-being, and identified several different categories of minority joy expressed by their interviewees, such as an increased sense of authenticity and the unique insights provided by having lived in two genders.

The final presentation of the session was pre-recorded, as the presenter shawndeez lives in California and could not attend remotely due to the 10-hour time difference. Shawndeez presented their PhD research into the spiritual explorations of queer/trans Iranian Americans. They had discovered that many interviewees felt good in their expressions of queer love which, I felt, was a beautiful note to end the session and the academic portion of the conference on.

The conference finished off with a tour of Del LaGrace Volcano's photography exhibition *Bodies of Resistance* in Tampere Art Museum, organised in collaboration with the Trans*Creative project (led by senior researcher Lotta Kähkönen and funded by KONE Foundation) and co-curated by doctoral researcher Luca Tainio. Volcano's portraits of queer people display bodies and gender expressions that are not traditionally or often seen in art. I was particularly struck by the Transgenital Landscape series, which depicts transmasculine genitalia. The artist mentioned in their description of this series that non-trans people are often curious about what genitalia trans people have, but I believe that curiosity extends to trans people as well – we want to know what people like us look like, or what we might look like ourselves at a future point in transition. While Volcano's portraits ostensibly explore bodies and gender expressions that are considered taboo or perverse, and while the artist made several compelling points about diversity throughout the conference, it was interesting to realise that the subjects of the photographs were predominantly white, and more importantly, inhabited bodies that were thin, attractive and at least seemingly abled. Specifically, the people who

were pictured undressed, or in photos evoking the sexual or erotic, were thin and attractive and white – displaying precisely the kind of socially and culturally recognisable androgyny that Vilja Jaaksi discussed in their talk in the Nonbinary Expressions session.

I walked back from the museum with a colleague from Estonia and, in the cold wintery sunshine, we discussed our experiences of the conference. I expressed how exhausted I felt both after and during the conference. Attending a trans studies conference as a trans academic is cognitively, emotionally and physically exhausting because you cannot play the role of the detached observer even for a moment. As my new friend eloquently put it, when we are doing trans studies, we are both the subject and the object. Your body, your fears, your hope, your pain – they are all part of every discussion and the topic of every presentation. Everything is personal just as much as it is academic or political, and it becomes impossible to separate yourself from the work. It was difficult for me to analyse or fully appreciate the poetry of Kaarna Tuomenvirta in the Performing Rage session, for example, because it was terrifying to hear the kind of experiences I have to look forward to at Finnish trans clinics – the kind of trauma that I, too, will someday have to heal from. Processing these kinds of emotions while maintaining the outward appearance of academic professionalism is enormously taxing for all of us. In the negotiations between trans rage and trans joy, I found myself drawn, both as an academic and as a trans person, to a secret third option: trans exhaustion. Perhaps that is something to explore further next time, whenever that may be. None of this is to say that I did not enjoy the conference or that the work that we do as trans academics is not worth it, only that we should acknowledge just how difficult it is to do what we do – and to give credit to ourselves and each other for doing it regardless.