

Queer Cultures as Sites of Becoming

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One cannot think of queer theory as separate from queer culture. Many of the perspectives that scholars later pick up in their work are first articulated precisely through culture, and therefore the current special issue of *SQS – Journal of Queer Studies in Finland* focuses on queer cultures and queering cultures. The articles included in this issue seek to understand the means by which different cultural forms participate in the processes of queer mutations.

The queer, and the possibility of queering, are always present in mainstream culture. This was certainly the case in the new art form of the turn of the twentieth century: postcards. The social media of their day, postcards started to outline “a world which did not officially exist”. In the journal’s gallery section, Harri Kalha presents European postcard pictures of desires and genders that positioned themselves differently from heteronormative mainstream culture and challenged its conventions. Although the queer subcultural formations did not yet have established names, they were, nevertheless, seeking strategic expressions and shapes through visual practices.

Visuality is clearly a key element in pornography, which Susanna Paasonen has examined as a form of visual culture in her book *Pornosta [About Porn]*. As Jenny Kangasvuo states in her review, porn is made interesting and

exciting due to its relation to cultural norms, which it both embraces and abandons, simultaneously twisting the mainstream – features that also characterize queer culture. However, as the forms of porn culture shift, features of sexuality that used to be considered porn enter the mainstream, clearing the path for new sexual norms.

Like visual media, literature is a form of cultural production in which the queer has sought space for itself. In the *lectio praecursoria* for her doctoral dissertation *Possibilities of Silence: The Publishing and Reception of Queer Topics in Finland during the Interwar Years (and Beyond)*, Alexandra Stang describes how spaces for Otherness were carved out in the literature published in Finland during the 1920s and 1930s. Such “unwelcoming subjects” can be observed through a queer reading: during this period, gender and sexual ambiguity – even of a covert nature – often faced objection. Similarly, even today queer scholars face difficulties when trying to get their work published in the mainstream world of academia.

Challenging heterosexist society in a more open manner only became possible in Finland in the 1980s. In their discussion piece, Iris Lehto and Anni Rannikko scrutinize a lesbian camp that took place in the small North Karelian village of Voimakoski in 1982. Lehto and Rannikko regard the camp as a subcultural experience framed by in-betweenness:

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the meanings of a lesbian subculture were reproduced while being intertwined with peripheral North Karelian countryside scenery of a lakeside and a village (Lehto and Rannikko 2015, 20). The subcultural space of in-betweenness provided by the camp redirected the participants' experiences of marginalization towards new possibilities. Lehto and Rannikko suggest that the camp enabled the participants to create a new lesbian consciousness; consequently, it marked a turning point in Finnish lesbian culture.

The queer is, of course, a concept utilized to mark resistance in the United States in the 1980s. In the *lectio praecursoria* of his gender studies dissertation, *Queer as a Political Concept*, Jacek Kornak details how activists appropriated the insulting and derogatory concept "queer" and gave it new meanings within political discourses. Thus, he shows how derogatory names carry the seeds for new meanings and uses. While naming makes things existent, it opens them for appropriation and also starts to create borders around them for policing. Hence "queer" was used not only to show anarchist withdrawal into opposition, but also as a means to rearticulate existing conditions in a radically different way.

Queer attitude has inspired not only activism, but also cultural production. In her discussion piece, Laine Zisman Newman describes *Dirty Plötz*, a subcultural cabaret show presented by queer women in Canada, which explores a variety of women's queer embodiments on stage. The show questions the conventions of how women are represented in the theatre by exploring the dimensions of Othered bodies and by re-figuring women differently, in a "wonky" manner.

Leena Romu also focuses on representations of women, yet her objects of study are two dimensional. She presents the oeuvre of the comic artist Anukka Leppänen. As Romu shows, Leppänen takes an ironic and carnivalesque stance towards the everyday life of lesbians in her work, while

playing with categories and inviting her readers to join in her unruly "what if..." speculations.

Such "what if..." speculations are often characterized as utopias. In his article, Piotr Sobolczyk outlines his dismay with the concept of utopia, however. He deconstructs the binary utopia–dystopia model by returning to canonical queer theoretical texts from the United States with the tools provided by Herbert Marcuse and Melanie Klein. In his rereading, he proposes – in place of utopia and dystopia – a futuristic concept of queer atopia, and discusses what this means as a cultural practice.

As the queer is increasingly included in mainstream culture, it is obvious that a previously exclusive heterosexual norm is about to fall apart. This shift is also evident among religions. Throughout Malin Fredriksson's review of *Queering Religion, Religious Queers* (edited by Yvette Taylor and Ria Snowdon), we are reminded that even religious beliefs can be challenged and queered. Questioning religious norms creates space for new identities and actions that change our preconceptions about religions.

In addition to religion, another mainstream field in which cultural change has become visible is politics. As Anna Moring, in her review of Tuula Juvonen's book *Kaapista kaapin päälle. Homoseksuaaliset ihmiset ja heidän oikeutensa edustuksellisessa politiikassa* [*Out and Elected: Homosexual People and their Rights in Parliamentary Politics*] reminds us, the number of successful out lesbian and gay politicians has increased since the beginning of the century. This fact allows Moring to raise a justified question: what will the ideally respectable life be like when the following of a norm no longer requires a heterosexual subject?

In view of the changes noted above, are we already living in a real queer utopia in the West? One might believe so when looking at HBO's *Looking*, which has worked its way into the mainstream. In this television series,

a group of gay men in San Francisco are looking for and finding sex. But as Nicholas Manganas suggests in his discussion piece, even this utopia come-true doesn't seem to satisfy the men, since the queer in the series has already become normative and turned into the ordinary and banal. Consequently, the men seem to be still looking for "something else". Thus, Manganas suggests that novel queer potential lies in the name of the series: queer potential continues to be inherent in the actual process of looking.

This process of looking illustrates the challenges included in the articulations of the new, of "something else". If queer is in the state of non-lingual becoming, it must constantly search for means of appearance that are other than lingual – and these means are to be found in queer culture, as displayed in the writings of this current issue of SQS.

In all the discussions of this issue, we can perceive queer culture's yearning towards "something else". This "something else" may be conceptualized as a space of becoming emerging out of the encounters of norms and borders – reminding us of the ideas found in Chicana-feminist Gloria Anzaldúa's ground-breaking *Borderland/La Frontera, The New Mestiza*. In this book – which was published already in 1987, much before the academic rise of the queer studies – Anzaldúa emphasizes the connections between the discussions of queer-consciousness and ethnicity, cultural borders, and historical and political positions. In envisioning a new kind of border-consciousness, she utilizes the feminine perspective in her idea of *mestiza consciousness*, which is depicted as an anti-identity unfit for traditional identity positions.

In Anzaldúa's texts, both multicultural border-identities and the queer become entangled, catalyzing the emergence of mestiza/queer consciousness. This new mestiza is unsuited for existing cultural positions, and she appears as a liminal atrocity. Anzaldúa's mestiza/queer consciousness raises the issue of boundaries established as invisible and

natural, and the policing of the atrocities, these dwellers of the borderlands. She examines the processes of producing and sustaining these borders, while asking whose interests these borders protect. Anzaldúa envisions the new mestiza as a dynamic non-identity able to move from position to position, prone to change and becoming. For Anzaldúa, the new mestiza's first step is "a conscious rupture with all oppressive traditions of all cultures and religions. She communicates that rupture, documents the struggle. She reinterprets history, and using new symbols, she shapes new myths" (Anzaldúa 1987, 82).

Anzaldúa's *La Frontera* is a kind of territory for the potentiality of new meanings, a territory of becoming, the potential evolution of atrocities, *los atravesados*. To people occupying positions approved by the norm, the dwellers of the borderland are dreadful and abnormal figures that mark the boundary between "us" and "them":

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half-dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the "normal". (Anzaldúa 1987, 3)

Queer cultural production may also be considered a territory of becoming, a place where *los atravesados* seek forms of articulation.

However, queer spatiality cannot be thought of without queer temporality. In his article "Mestiza Metaphysics" (2011), Mikko Tuhkanen considers Anzaldúa's theories in the frames of ontology, temporality, and becoming.



Tuhkanen interprets the new mestiza as being “an alien metaphysical figure. She is a queer hybrid, ‘a product of crossbreeding’” (Tuhkanen 2011, 270, Anzaldúa 1987, 81). The new mestiza includes an ethos of futurity; she enables an evolutionary leap towards something else, something new. For Tuhkanen, her strength is “her susceptibility to future conditions, to becoming”, and she is a border, an interface that names the space of her process and change (Tuhkanen 2011, 272). In Anzaldúa’s writings, the queer is closely connected to the new mestiza consciousness. The queer is an interface between bodies, the site of dialogue, but also, as Tuhkanen explains, “their mutual undoing” (Tuhkanen 2011, 271). He concludes that Anzaldúa “locates in the queer interface the promise of a future uncontained in the repertoire of present possibilities” (Tuhkanen 2011, 271). This unpredictability of the queer interface is, we suggest, the modality of queer cultural forms.

In as much as unexpectedness is inherent in queer potential, we can also think that after some event or phenomenon has been named queer, it loses its queer potential of becoming. Therefore, potential queer futurity has already gone when “something else” has been defined as queer. However, as the discussions in this issue illustrate, through queer studies we are able to show how culture continually – albeit reluctantly – gives room for un/well/come themes. The very space, named here as queer culture, is a processual space where the blank spot of discourse, the non-lingual, begins to materialize. It is a point in the spatio-temporal continuum where the un/well/come begins to take the form of well/come.

Queer culture, in the constant state of becoming, constitutes the process of the queer taking its shape. While queer culture wants to remember the past anew – to dis-remember – it refuses to consider the future a threat: it takes the liberty of envisioning other kinds of futures. Even though queer studies always lags behind queer culture, it has the tools to conceptualize

the phenomena it examines – phenomena which otherwise would be impossible to grasp.

More than twenty years ago, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick wrote in her book, *Tendencies*, that in childhood “the ability to attach intensively to a few cultural objects, objects of high or popular culture, or both, objects whose meaning seemed mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us, became a prime resource for survival. We needed there to be sites where the meaning didn’t line up tidily with each other, and we learned to invest those sites with fascination and love.” (1994, 3.) We suggest that queer culture could be such site: it is a place where meanings don’t line up tidily and where the queer becoming, however mysterious or fascinating, can be seen, felt, experienced, and believed. The texts considering queer cultures in our theme issue of *SQS* conceptualize this very process of queer becoming. Enjoy!

Woks cited

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