

Queering Moominland: The Problems of Translating Queer Theory Into a Non-American Context¹

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I do not believe in chances, but even if I did, I would have to mention in this text that my first visit to Finland in 2004 coincided with my first reading of the whole series of books by Tove Jansson. The more I read them the more overwhelmed I was by the type of family she created while at the same time I experienced the warmth and hospitality of Finnish people in my daily life. Falling in love with the books I fell in love with the country and its people. I felt peaceful and quiet there as if I were in the Moominvalley created by Jansson and belonged to the community which was queer and academic at the same time.

I came to Finland to do research on the problems of translating queer theory into different cultural contexts. I was interested in how queer theory, deprived of its roots, functions there. While we all face the same new style of gay movement around the globe, what kind of differences emerge? How has the emergence of queer theory and practice changed the context and, conversely, how has queer theory itself been changed by the context? Those were just some of my initial research questions which later on became the leading motive of my study in Finland and which I will try to answer in the article that follows.

Before coming to Finland I did not quite foresee the revolutionary element of my project. First, it was revolution-

There is some irony in the fact that while homosexual rights have progressed much further in the countries of northern Europe, the U.S. remains the dominant cultural model for the rest of the world.

Dennis Altman, *Global Sex* (2001, 86)

ary in the sense of the reversal of roles. It is usually the Western, most commonly the American, scholar who comes to conduct such studies in obscure countries, which at that particular moment become a center of interest of the first world. Second, my coming from a country which, unlike the U.S., does not pretend to be a universal example of the LGBT movement allowed me to see the particularity of the Finnish context in a full light². Since I did not have a universal scale of measurement, I was more aware of the importance of differences. Through other eyes I saw the importance of my research, in which I had sometimes doubted myself. I was encouraged by the fact that my Finnish hosts believed in the sense of my work, whereas in Poland the need of queer research is recognized by few.

In Finland I conducted interviews with those who are

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perceived as Finnish queer scholars. I started my study by asking scholars whom they would recommend that I talk to. With few exceptions I was given the same list of names. Of course one can say that the Finnish queer academic circle is small to begin with, but the consistency of the responses surprised me. Within one month I had a list of approximately twenty five names from which I interviewed nineteen people³.

Methodologically, I adapted the narrative interview that uses the flexible topic guide or questionnaire organized in thematic fields which were identified after the first stage of my research, a textual analysis of written texts available in English. In the narrative interview I used open-ended questions which allowed the interviewees to talk freely about certain issues and follow their own associations. My main focus was the self-perception of queer scholars in Finland, in other words, how they define themselves and how they are defined by others; how they are perceived in academia or in the broader context of LGBT activism; how they justify their interest in queer studies; and what problems or obstacles they face as queer scholars.

In this article I will focus on a limited set of issues covered in my extensive research. First, I will attempt to answer the questions: How does “queer” function in the Finnish language and reality? Does it have its equivalent translation? And if it remains un-translated, what does it mean or what does it mask? How does it change when it is introduced in the Finnish context? Does it capture something in the Finnish reality that had not been noticed before? In the second part of this essay, I will consider the

American character of queer theory and to what extent it can be transposed into different cultural contexts in general, and into the Finnish context in particular. This reflection will be developed towards the end of the paper, where I will focus on the possibility of a global and local queerhood and discuss its pros and cons.

Queer wor(l)d and queer translation

It is almost banal to say that there is no such a thing as a Finnish or Polish reality which waits to be discovered by some queer mothers or fathers who just developed the right optic instrument to see its inner truth. On the contrary, queer theorists themselves have created a reality, after acknowledging that we have lost our innocence. Queer theory, just like feminism(s) in the past, has given us lenses through which we can see the world in a different way. And as “seeing is believing”, seeing is also creating. Richard Rorty writes that before feminism there were no women (Rorty 1998). Perhaps the same can be said about queer theory. We certainly cannot ignore its presence and the changes it has brought to our understanding of sexual identity and the homo/hetero binary opposition.

What, then, is it exactly that queer theory does or what queer as a concept does in the world? Or to repeat Tuija Pulkkinen’s questions which were strongly inspired by postmodern thinking: “What does queer do? What is its performative power?” (Pulkkinen 2003, 139). If words do things, what does queer do in Finnish?

Queer does not mean the same things in other languages

as it does in English. Retaining an English term can be questioned as being a very sophisticated but empty gesture. In Finnish, the word queer remains most often untranslatable. The reasons I was given for its untranslatability varied from very rational, through pragmatic, to rather peculiar. My own experience connected with the Polish context, where the term is also left untranslated, was that the accommodation of the English word worked against the aim of queer theory, masking its associations with non-normative sexuality instead of throwing sexuality in one's face.

In Finland, as I was told, there have been attempts to translate queer as "pervo" and the term was used in some contexts by some researchers. However, even people who use the Finnish neologism "pervo" expressed their doubts about it and use it only in some contexts. A good example are the titles of two recent queer conferences in Turku in 2004 called Pervo Pidot (Queer Symposium) and 2005 called Pervo Puheet (Queer Talk) in which I took part. Also, many of my respondents said that they had not yet found the right Finnish term. Therefore, they prefer to stick to an English one instead of using the wrong translation.

For many Finnish speakers "pervo" seems too offensive whereas queer is not, which is not true for English speakers if we look at the genealogy of the term queer⁴. Some respondents also noticed that "queer" in Finnish does not immediately connote sexuality so it can be considered as a concealing term for its users:

"On the other hand, I think using the word 'queer' in Finnish somehow neutralises the concept; for Finnish speakers 'queer' does

not evoke a similar history as it does for English speakers - first as a term of insult and then as a reclaimed term of identification and defiance." (#17)

"But it is true that sometimes you can be closeted as a scholar if you call yourself a queer researcher, because the mainstream audience does not necessarily know what 'queer' means, but everybody knows what 'pervo' means for sure." (#16)

Taking the above declaration literally, it would seem that those who try to use "pervo" could be perceived as more brave while trying to do exactly what has been done with the word queer in English, re-claiming the word, reworking it, and reestablishing its subversive power. Of course one can question whether in order to use a certain theory we need the same history of the concept, the same re-appropriation of an offensive term. However, that re-appropriation has been co-opted, for instance when "queer" was used to advertise new TV series such as "Queer as Folk" or "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy"⁵. Yet the older generation of English speakers has problems with the term, remembering its previous offensiveness.

Let us now return to the initial question: What happens if we use the English term instead of a native one? Almost all my Finnish respondents who preferred to use the English word surprisingly presented a long list of arguments against this use, starting with the fact that in Finnish "queer" is difficult to pronounce and ending with the criticism of the dominance of the English language in general.

"I would like to avoid using an English word because I do see it

as a problem how this American tradition is imported and how it focuses our minds on problems that are central features of American culture and I am a bit critical about that. So the translation would be a good way to signal that this is a different version, this is not the same thing anymore if you import it into Finland. You have to modify the theory or the framework. Because I am not quite happy with the translation I am sort of doing both things.“ (#4)

When asked whether the use of the English term masks something important, whether ordinary people understand what queer is really about, most of my respondents said that it is known in the academic circles and students understand it. According to them, even mainstream people would have a vague idea what queer refers to through the popularization of such shows and TV series as “Queer as Folk” or “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy” which were shown on Finnish TV with subtitles, though the English title also appeared on the screen, sometimes in brackets. However, I discovered that the existence of this knowledge may be merely wishful thinking. During the discussion after my presentation at the University of Tampere queer studies class the argument that queer sometimes works as an empty signifier kept coming back. For instance, all the students agreed that they would rather attend a queer course than a pervo course because this label allows them to reveal its content according to the audience. One student said that even her mother did not understand the word queer although she is an English teacher and was only familiar with its less sexual connotations as weird or strange. It therefore seems that queer works for students as a safer word than “pervo” even in academic circles. Some of my

respondents agree for slightly different reasons:

”Perhaps, now when I think of it, it might have a little bit of what you were suggesting but I don’t think it is the main reason. I think that in academic circles queer has this element of credibility which comes from the fact that out in the world, in Britain, in the U.S., it has somehow been established already. (#2)

“Queer” sounds better. In Finnish culture everything that sounds English or foreign has more value and prestige. And, as I said, it looks better in your CV if you have like ten articles which are about queer theory – that’s better because it gives you this ... somehow... and also in the media somehow it seems that it is easier for the media to use this word.“ (#12)

Apparently the use of the English term makes queer theory look a bit “safer” and more respectable in an academic context. Thus the reason why Finnish scholars prefer to use the English word lies less in self-defense than it does in Poland, where using the English word is a way to avoid homophobia within and outside the academia, and where it sometimes even creates the condition which enables conducting this kind of research at all. Finnish queer scholars’ choice is more closely connected with their own academic career and credibility. Using the English word made the courses sound better, more sophisticated, and international. Taking this into account it is not surprising that one of my respondents speaking about the revolutionary power of words perceived “lesbian” as more challenging:

”I think it is easier for women’s studies departments which, in general, are under suspicion as to whether they have scientific courses, to list courses which have names such as queer when I

think about it. In my own department I was for keeping the name “lesbo” in the name of areas of interests. So I have opted for the name lesbian and queer theory.” (#5)⁶

I am also aware that there are other attempts to translate the word queer than “pervo” such as the adjective “vino” or as the verb “kummastella”, to mention a few. Whereas in Poland we have almost given up the translational work, the Finnish creativeness in this respect is impressive. However, all the translations I was told about were based mostly on the non-sexual meaning, referring to “weird” or “strange” as their root. For instance, in a recent issue of *Naistutkimus–Kvinnoforskning* (a Finnish women’s studies journal), Annamari Vänskä in her article titled “Woman, Food, Home: Pirjetta Brander’s and Heidi Romo’s works as restive representations of femininity” also discusses how the term queer has been translated into Finnish. She notes that within visual culture the most common translation pervo has not gained ground. Instead, visual culture researchers use the term “counter gaze” or emphasize the uncanniness of queer. Vänskä also proposes the new term “refraction” (“restivity”) which in her opinion “refers to the dialogue between the researcher and visual images in meaning production. It emphasizes the performative power of images to resist the binding of meanings in one. Refraction brings forth the heteronormativity of art history and the ways in which it strives to closet non-normative representations of gender and sexuality” (Vänskä 2005, 28). However, it seems that the term only has such connotations when used in specific contexts. If left without explanation it seems to be completely empty of the performative power that Vänskä writes about. It is,

therefore, possible that the translation has the opposite effect to that intended by its users: instead of questioning normative sexuality it may strengthen it by erasing sexuality from the discourse altogether.

One of the most common answers I was given when I asked about the usefulness of queer theory in the Finnish context was that queer theory gives us a theoretical tool to approach and criticize heteronormativity. However, a theory cannot be adopted without some reflection on its genealogy and the genealogy of its naming. If we agree that new concepts create a new reality, it is important to take a serious look at their history of re-appropriation. Before queer theory appeared, the main focus within gay and lesbian studies was not on heteronormativity *per se* but on the question of homo and hetero identity perceived as stable, ahistorical and natural. The binary opposition itself was not put into question; moreover, there was a need for an identity politics based on such concepts. When I shared my doubts concerning the fact that queer theory is rooted in a very particular model of activism and very particular stages of development I was told by some of my Finnish colleagues that for them queer is not about the critique of the identity movement. I could agree with this statement to a certain extent. Yet in the U.S., the questioning of hetero and homo identity, which previously had been taken for granted or even strengthened and produced through the movement’s political activism, has from the very beginning been the reference and starting point for queer theorizing. Thus the question remains: when translating theories, can we take what we want and forget about

the rest? And by doing so, do we have a chance to be understood?

Perhaps in countries with a different history of the gay and lesbian movement one cannot find a similar term for a theory because there is a lack of reality/experience? Through which it would become meaningful? This problem connects the question of translating the theory and the concepts that it is grounded on. As Cindy Patton rightly observes in her discussion on transposing queer theory into Taiwanese culture, where several forms of queer theory emerged as prior to rather than in reaction to a civil rights and identity movement, queer theory cannot function there in the same way as in the U.S. for two reasons: first, the lack of public space as a performance venue and second, the lack of a liberationist-style identity against which to register anti-identitarian politics (Patton 2002, 198). Thus, “even if different types of oppression are experienced as ‘the same’ by victims, the techniques of oppression arise from and are maintained through structurally and historically distinct mechanisms. Thus, gains by one minority do not quickly and logically translate into gains of other groups” (Patton 2002, 197). Patton notes that taken-for-granted and ostensibly “neutral” concepts such as civil rights are deeply rooted in the history of the U.S. as a nation. Its adoption by Taiwanese authorities as a way to make Taiwan a modern nation can have conservative consequences. This brings us back to the problem of translation in a much broader sense.

In cases like that of Taiwan discussed by Patton, concepts such as “queer” or “civil rights” have luggage attached to them and cannot be applied innocently: “*Jet-lagged and, having crossed*

the international dateline, confused even about what day it is, American-style queer theory does not know how to behave: it arrived not to harass extant, but in advance of, mainstreamed gay civil rights discourse. And however well ‘queer’ works in Taiwan [or anywhere else? JM], American activists must not be self-congratulatory about the apparent globalization of their sexual politics. As avant-garde as queer politics in the United States imagines itself to be, it must stay anti-universalist. Other queers are not a local deviation from a Queer. Any queering politics must always be critical of the extent to which it hangs on the elements from the identity politics it believes it has archly opposed. Western activists find it hard to imagine politics without rights, if only as the fall guy to more radical claims. Thus, it takes Westerners some time to see that queer in Taiwan is not about quickly disposing of identity politics, but might be orthogonal to something else” (Patton 2002, 199).

Summing up, it seems that the non-translation of the word queer works partly in a similar way as in Poland, namely, masking something important. However, the reason for this masquerade might be quite different. “*The very unreadability, in the Polish context, of the sexual connotations of the English ‘queer’ is keeping (people) out of trouble” (Sikora, Ferens, Basiuk 2002, 19).* However, queer scholars in Finland do not face such open and violent homophobia within academia which would require a cover. When asked about obstacles they encounter in their work, most expressed satisfaction or even said that their interest in queer theory helps them in their academic career⁷. The women’s studies departments and centers where most queer classes take place are, as I was told, open to those

issues⁸, so the non-translation has less to do with self-defense and more with academic credibility and sophistication and, in some cases, with concern for the students and their records. Also some attempts to translate the word, as mentioned above, work only within a certain context; when decontextualized the terms often do not connote the cultural constructedness of genders nor of sexualities. The effect is de-sexualization, as in the case of the non-translation of queer. It seems that applied this way queer loses at least some of its power. It becomes “tamed” in order to be accepted by academia at all. Instead of queering academia, we witness the “academization” of queer and part of the politically subversive power of queer theory is lost in the process of appropriation.

Is queer always already American?

Although I strongly believe in the future potential of queer theory, the more I study it the more aware I am of the dominance of American scholarship. It is, in fact, amazing how dependent we are on it, how seduced, how influenced by debates on the American history of sexuality. I can see an analogy here with the words of Karin Widerberg who, when discussing problems with translating gender concepts into different contexts, writes about Americanization and its mental monopoly in the following words: “Here we must bear in mind that even European post-structuralist thinking comes to us from the U.S. As a rule, it is not until European theorizing has made a hit in the U.S. that we in Scandinavia get translations into English or more rarely into native languages. So the U.S. influence decides which

European influences are to be valid” (Widerberg 1998, 135). It may be worth saying that even though Michel Foucault’s writing refers mostly to the history of sexuality in Europe, it has been used within queer studies in a way which best exemplifies the development of the LGBT movement in the U.S. Scott Bravmann suggests in his book *Queer Fictions of the Past* that therefore all analysis and critique that follows is decidedly and purposely U.S.-centred (Bravmann 1997). To support his arguments he quotes John D’Emilio claim that “of all national histories being investigated, that of the United States most clearly confirms the argument of [Jeffrey] Weeks and [Michel] Foucault concerning the emergence of distinctive gay identity” (D’Emilio 1992, 103).

My stay at the University of Helsinki led to my growing awareness of local differences and of the difficulty of getting rid of certain preconceptions about LGBT development around the world. “We” all name American tools, concepts and challenges as “ours”⁹. But are they truly ours? What do they obscure and what do they silence within different histories of sexuality? Maybe they actually repudiate differences under the figures of normalization, substitution and containment? This particular problem has been noticed and described in the collection of essays discussing tropes of globalization discourse titled *Queer Globalisation: Citizenship and Afterlife of Colonialism* (2002). Although this collection concentrates on post-colonial countries, we may see similar problems with transposing queer theory into other cultural contexts, including the narrative of teleological development, analogy that erases differences, and translation where

“West and Western culture and English language stand in as an origin of cultural exchange and non-Western societies occupy the discursive position of ‘targets’ of such exchanges” (Cruz-Malave & Manalansan IV 2002, 6).

This raises the question about means of opposing this hegemony in theory and avoidance of the patronizing tendencies. Why do “we” often “buy” the teleological developmental history of the LGBT movement, expecting that it will follow the same path everywhere, having its starting point in Stonewall or some other symbolic space and time? Notice that even the Gay Pride Parade is celebrated in Europe because of what happened in the U.S. and this event is referred to as the moment of the awakening of the LGBT people in general. Perhaps the American way, instead of being the ONE, could be seen as contingent and accidental? What if we changed the perspective and saw this model not as general but rather marginal, not as something that must happen everywhere in a similar way but rather as the exception to the rule?¹⁰ Or to repeat Widerberg’s question, which she asked with reference to the feminist movement but which signals a more general problem: “Can U.S. domination be fruitfully confronted by ‘miming’, that is, placing them in the position of ‘other’?” (Widerberg 1998, 133.)

This is not to be seen as a new version of an old question “can the subaltern speak?” because it seems that even the awareness of “subaltern(ism)” comes from the U.S. Scholars in the U.S. decide who is included in this category, and there seem to be countries that consist of areas of interest for the American or English audience, either as the origin of their

ethnic minorities or due to economic interests in the past or in the present, or because scholars who lecture at U.S. institutions refer to their countries of origin. Therefore, it is not surprising that when preparing the course about “Queer from the Central and Eastern European perspective” which I gave at the Christina Institute in Helsinki, I hardly found anything about this region in the books discussing the global LGBT (or queer) movement. The main points of reference, if the books were not exclusively about the U.S. model, are usually Asia and South America. This, of course, leads us to the question about hierarchy of cultures and numeration of the world(s). We have the First world and the Third. Does this make Eastern and Central Europe the Second? And what about such small countries as Finland: where do they fit in, if at all?

Let us consider several examples which reflect the hegemonic thinking of North American scholarship. While looking for materials for my course I came across a book titled *The Global Emergence of Gay and Lesbian Politics: National Imprints of a Worldwide Movement* where I unexpectedly found one article about Central Europe: a very well written comparative study by Scott Long about the Czech Republic, Hungary and Romania. All articles collected there are approximately 20 pages long except for the one about the U.S., which has 61 pages. At the end of the book, where the editors try to compare all countries represented in their collection, they do not reflect upon the model of their comparison. In fact, the book is about the universal American movement, which is seen as a model for other national variations perceived to be at different

stages of development. Other examples of such U.S.-centrism are connected with the Polish context and the annual queer studies conferences which have been organized there since 2000. Among the participants of the 5th conference in 2004 there was a young American scholar whom I met later that year in Helsinki where he gave a lecture. I invited him to my welcoming party to the Christina Institute, where he very generously gave advice to queer and feminist scholars there about how to organize queer studies and about the magazine they were planning to publish. According to him it had to be in English. At the end, he spoke about the necessity to “finally have an international queer conference”, somehow forgetting that he had participated in one quite recently in Wrocław, and ignoring the fact that he was speaking to people who also traveled and have taken part in different international queer conferences in Europe and other parts of the world. But, very tellingly, for him “international” meant American.

While being in the U.S., I and many Eastern European scholars experienced an attitude that we should reproduce queer theory, not contribute to it, and that we should prove the rightness of American thinking. This experience is succinctly described by Renata Salecl in her book *The Spoils of Freedom: Psychoanalysis and Feminism after the Fall of Socialism*: “What does a feminist intellectual from Eastern Europe have to say about the issues addressed by contemporary critical theory? Could such an intellectual speak from a purely theoretical position, or must his or her position be marked by the course of events that happened in his or her own country? [- -] Whenever I was invited to speak at a Western university I was always expected to speak about what

was going on in Eastern Europe. Even the most abstract theoretical paper I delivered provoking questions such as ‘How are things for women in Eastern Europe?’ In a way, there is a special kind of prejudice at work in this attitude of Western intellectuals. If, for example, Western feminists speak about feminism, they can discuss such abstract issues as ‘women in film noir’, ‘the notion of the phallus in feminist theory’, etc.; but someone coming from Eastern Europe must speak about the situation of women in her own country” (Salecl 1994, 1–2).

In the interviews that I conducted with recognized Finnish queer academics I asked about the domination of the field of queer studies by American scholars. My respondents described many instances which proved that even within queer studies the dominance of the American experience leaves little space for other experiences. For example, during conferences they were asked to give more universal (meaning American) examples. Also, some of their ideas were not heard unless they were “re-invented” by American scholars, which of course leads us back to the problem of power relations in the production of the knowledge. For instance, one of my interviewees referred to her paper given in the U.S. in 1994, where she presented some ideas from her Ph.D. dissertation in progress:

“I was saying that it is a different thing to look at [town X] because of the size and scale of the place and because of the absence of gay and lesbian culture, and because of the absence of a big community, so you have to approach Finland differently than you have approached Buffalo or NYC. And I had a feeling

I was looked at very very strangely and I didn't feel empowered after that presentation. And now when I look at the books that come out some 10 years later, I see that those approaches have entered the mainstream and I am really pleased and happy about it. But I also noted that the guy who wrote that book was doing the research in Mississippi, and my first encounter of the idea that you really have to take size and scale and context seriously came from Kirsten Plotz, the German woman who did her MA thesis about lesbian life in Hannover sometime in the late '80s. So what sometimes pisses me off is that kind of americocentric ignorance that is so persistent in queer studies as well.” (#13)

There are other difficulties in functioning within the bigger international forums that the interviewees mentioned very often. While the interest in the local context is somehow still preserved during conferences, in the process of publishing it disappears altogether. My respondents were very critical not only of the dominance of American culture and the hierarchy of cultures but also of the English language, starting with the lack of adequate Finnish translation of English term queer. In their eyes the dominance of the language reflects the dominance of the culture and vice versa. As one of my respondents put it:

“So to a certain extent people are interested, but then when it comes to publishing, seriously publishing, it sometimes feels like:” well, how interesting are those Finnish examples anyway”, “why can't you use materials which everybody knows”, “how can we discuss because we don't know your cultural example”. Sometimes you confront such views? And it is so funny how the notion of what is international varies and how, basically, what is international is British and American. It can be a problem because in Finnish

academia you are supposed to publish elsewhere as well. The things you publish here on the domestic market and for the Finnish audience are not as highly valued as English-language publications. So the status of the English language as a sort of lingua franca of academia is highly problematic. And also hierarchy of culture and cultural phenomena is rather strict - which is pathetic if you think how for instance inside feminist theory we have been talking for so long about breaking down the hierarchies, and where it comes to our own practice, they are there.” (#9)

Sometimes the ignorance that northern and eastern European scholars experience leads to an understandable irritation when American scholars do not see a difference between what has been done in the U.S. and what has been (or has not been) done in the other cultural contexts. By assuming that what has been done in the U.S. is applicable to all other countries they undermine the need for local research:

“When I was talking about my new research topic I got the response from a rather distinguished American scholar who said that the other aspects are more interesting and new and that the sexualization piece has been done. It has been done in American research and I think it might be a significant difference in the Finnish media but he just didn't think about that. That person I think has been incorporating me into American global thinking a little bit too easily. I have not been comfortable with that at all. So that's happened. It is partly our own fault because we haven't defined our own position, we haven't theorized enough and made the differences explicit. And that is really the contribution we can make to the international debates.” (#4)

This critical attitude towards “American imperialism” in

the field of queer theory was sometimes connected with the criticism of the theory's applicability to the local context. While all referred to queer theory as a useful tool, mostly in terms of its applicability to the study of heteronormativity and gender performance, they also noted the fact that sometimes even they themselves were misled by queer theory's preoccupation with certain issues that are specific to the U.S., yet are distant from the Finnish experience. One prime example is the particular history of gender relations and notion of equality in Finland, which is completely different than in the U.S. This fact, according to some of my interviewees, should be more carefully examined when queer theory is applied in the Finnish context:

"For example, I think that gender sociologists have in the 1990s taken too much for granted that gender antagonism, masculinity against femininity, has had the kind of acuity as a problem in Finnish society as it has in the USA or Britain. I don't believe that the gender war has been as strong and serious in Finland as there. As for the concept 'queer' and how it can be used, I realize that it can be a risk that some of the things that very easily come together with the queer perspective, presumptions concerning the gender system, gender order, all those Butlerian things, gender matrix, they might be too easily adopted or applied to the Finnish context. I would advise queer scholars to remember to pose the question whether American queer theorists in their interpretations and arguments have some underlying assumptions concerning society and culture which are OK in Britain and the States but which don't apply, very easily at least, to the Finnish context." (#2)

Another example that was given was Finland's almost non-

existent ethnic minorities. My respondents noticed that this fact has not been acknowledged in its full extent by some of Finnish queer scholars and that the "blindness" towards this difference may influence the way queer theory is being taught and introduced in Finland:

"I think we easily end up swallowing it [queer theory] and taking it all at once and not paying enough attention to the differences. For example the idea of the performativity of gender. Obviously this is an idea which works here as well, but I think it is something that may be more accented in the very image-concerned and -centred American culture, and we should be aware perhaps more than we are of the slightest differences that there are, the differences of degree and of emphasis of how different phenomena that queer theory brought, how they really do show themselves in the different shape in Finnish culture. And also queer theory makes us sort of look at things that perhaps are not so central in Finland. For instance in American theory in general you have to pay a lot of attention to class and race. I mean race? We have immensely small immigration and there are immigrant populations that have been in Finland perhaps since the '80s. When it comes to race in terms of color of skin we obviously have the Romani minority which is very small. Obviously we have to take those people into account but I still think that the issues of race and ethnicity are completely different issues here than in America, where you have big minorities that express their demands for their rights on their own terms in a completely different way than a small Romani population in Finland." (#4)

It seems that my respondents were concerned that by focusing on issues less relevant for Finnish culture one might lose sight of more important issues. Moreover,

different ethnic, race or gender relations and their dynamic might need a different approach and measurement which will never appear if those differences are not acknowledged in the theory or if theory is not applied with the awareness that it has gaps. I will return to that point in the following part of my article.

Global and local queerhood?

Another of my main concerns while doing this research was whether we can see a common pattern of adaptation of queer theory. What bothered me was whether queer theory can be perceived as being a part of globalized knowledge and if so, what are the consequences? My impression was that queer theory had started to be very popular around the world at more or less the same time. And I probably asked a naive question, “Why was that so?” One of the answers I was given was that it happened because queer theory offered people new explanations. It allowed people to see their lives in a new way, naming some of their feelings, fears or experiences. As one of my respondents put it:

“Well, as I told you I didn’t choose it as my perspective. I just got names for things that I felt from queer theory. So first it was my perspective and then I found the wording for it. So maybe there are people who feel in a similar way and it is popular because it is how people feel.” (#14)

In the novelty which queer theory brought into academia, a novelty which, as my respondents said, was long yearned for, there also lie many problems. Queer theory, sold as a ready product, cannot be used everywhere in the same way.

Sometimes, people apply it too automatically without being aware of local differences. Therefore, like other theories transposed from the U.S., queer theory may be accused of cultural imperialism. This provokes questions such as: Whose voice matters? Whose is left out? It is not accidental that only those of my respondents who study American popular culture did not complain about the extensive Americanization of the field. They used “universal” examples in their work which refer to the reality which “everybody” knows, and on this condition they were accepted and listened to. But others were very critical of those colonizing attempts and expressed the need to be more sensitive to the context. They clearly noticed that by importing Western identities into different cultural contexts without acknowledging differences, one can do more harm than good, so they opted very strongly for a local character of political discourse:

“Politics should always be local. The solutions, strategies, and tactics that also the LGBT people are using in South America, Africa, Asia, they should somehow be constructed upon their own traditions, upon their own social structures, practices and so on. So that’s for the dangers. And as for promises of globalization of LGBT politics, the advantage is no doubt also for those LGBT activists in South America and Africa. It can be somehow encouraging to think that we are part of a big global community, movement.” (#2)

One of the Finnish specificities of transposing queer theory which I appreciated was precisely such an awareness of the local. I often heard very self-critical comments about not paying enough attention to local differences. There are

excellent examples of work being done in Finland which combine this awareness with the critical use of queer theory as a tool for approaching the Finnish experience (e.g. the Ph.D. dissertations by Jan Wickman, Tuula Juvonen, and Antu Sorainen, and works by Leena-Maija Rossi, to mention just a few). What is also very important is not only the awareness of locality within Finland, the awareness that things can be seen and experienced differently in big cities like Helsinki and small villages in Lapland, but also of locality outside the Finnish context. This awareness heightens the sensitivity to tools that are applied. One must be very much aware that such tools work differently in different contexts, in order to help people instead of harming them. For instance, one of the respondents referred to his prevention work:

"I think there have been problems, for instance with this AIDS activism and there has been lots of research in areas like Indonesia, Philippines and anywhere where there are totally different gender structures, different global cultures and identities. So in this context Western ideas like gay and lesbian categories are not adopted very easily. But they are used in totally new ways, they are not the same as in the U.S. And that's really interesting and of course there have always been influences from abroad. It is not such a horrible thing. So culture changes. But in this AIDS campaign it is good that you know something about the culture, and you don't just adopt Western strategies because then it is bad HIV prevention work. My approach is quite practical in this context of what helps people." (#6)

Another respondent pointed out the problem with translating or even imposing concepts such as queer theory

because it has its roots in an American and European cultures and can be completely meaningless in a different culture with its different genealogy and definition of gender and sexual categories or a different approach to gender binarism. In this view, one should first of all try to know the context better and see how it conceptualizes and treats different sexualities and genders before naming something as queer or non-queer.

"I would be very careful in speaking of queer theory in relation to anything other than European or American culture at this point because I think it might be considered a colonizing move to, say, go to India or Africa and try to queer them. I have seen some very unfortunate attempts to queer the Caribbean sexuality which have resulted in a political mess. But then I would say that the queer perspective could be used in a very different context if you are just familiar enough and careful enough with the context. And I think in the recent history of queer theory, people have been so excited by this new concept that they forgot to be careful how to use it, and they have come up with some interesting research projects whose results were disappointing. As a trend within globalization, I think it has something to do with this as well. And I think in this sense queer is a very volatile concept as well. It is really easy to misuse it if you are not careful, like everything that has this tendency to avoid the definition and opens up various possibilities of use. So I would be very careful in using it in the context that I wouldn't know." (#11)

My respondents pinpointed a number of disadvantages of globalizing the LGBT movement in general and queer theory in particular, including the Americanization and the risk of cultural imperialism, the assumption that every

country will go through exactly the same stages of “development”, and the false picture of gay life being presented in TV series produced to make money for multinational corporations. Yet the same respondents also noticed positive aspects of this globalization. Some of them included images of broader visibility of LGBT people, more publications about non-normative sexualities and more opportunities not only for queer scholars but also for ordinary people. Talking about globalization, one of my respondents also expressed the following hope which, in my opinion, suggests that globalizing human rights instead of specific lifestyles could make our world more human, tolerant and better:

”Depends on how it will continue. If the same continues. I enjoy TV series like “Queer Eye” but I see it as very problematic. I can enjoy it because I know how reality is but if this is the only window to the gay world or to the life of minorities, then that’s highly problematic. And if you take “Queer Eye” to Sudan and try to solve human rights problems with it, then it is more than problematic. But I don’t believe in that kind of globalization that... Well, the effect of the media is of course something that we can’t really control that well but I hope that the globalization of human rights comes first.” (#14)

Conclusion

The above discussion of critical attitudes towards the cultural colonizing impulses of the U.S. and the awareness of the fact that what is American is not always general, makes one wonder: how artificially constructed is the field of LGBT or queer studies around the world? In order to answer this question one can reach for any recently

published book on queer theory, starting with the famous introduction to queer theory by Annamarie Jagose (1996), through *A Genealogy of Queer Theory* by William B. Turner (2000) to Nickie Sullivan’s *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (2003). Queer theory barely touches cultures outside the U.S. and the U.K., and if it concerns itself with other cultures, it either uses them as a token example or collects essays from randomly chosen usually postcolonial countries under the name “global” or “transnational”. For instance, *Queer Theories* by Donald E. Hall (2003) is characterized by a limited scope and Anglo-American bias but in a short piece called “Queery” (three pages long) Hall does mention several books on sexualities in different cultures (though he only gives the titles and short descriptions), finishing with a very meaningful statement: “While such works are (unfortunately, but inevitably) peripheral to the present study because of its focus on British and American literature and applications of critical theory, they are provocative and commendable. Read them when you have time” (Hall 2003, 50).

Of course it can be said that we should make more efforts to publish articles about our part of the world and change this situation. But how can we do this if in order to be heard and published at all we are expected to reproduce the same theory and find the right examples to support it? At the same time, by doing this, we very often obscure the fact that what we buy as the ONE is just one of many. Being expected only to interpret our reality through the “original” concepts we often do not recognize differences and do not build theories that are more attuned to those differences. The LGBT movements in Finland, Poland, Russia, or

Slovenia, to mention a few, are different movements which, in the process of developing, have probably had to take into account some of the previous exclusionary mistakes made within the American movement. As a consequence, they might by definition be more sensitive to differences. Therefore, the debate about exclusions within the movement which dominated the American scene in the 1980s and 1990s might turn out to be less relevant.

While I was interviewing a representative of SETA, the national LGBT organization in Finland, she told me that in her opinion LGBT organizations from Central and Eastern Europe are among the most sensitive, open, and queer even if we might think otherwise. It is important to note that the movement there started in the early 1990s, at a time when queer politics had already made a big impact on both the theory and practice of LGBT people. This probably also made the LGBT movement more aware of its own strategies. In addition, she mentioned that the Finnish LGBT movement has been strongly influenced by queer studies, being more inclusive not only in terms of its naming. However, for practical reasons those changes are more visible inside than outside the movement, in its political agenda:

“For me the reality is much more queer than the human rights politics or identity politics make it appear. But you have to work in

both fields and kind of very softly integrate the so-called queer view or ways of thinking into the political work but I think it is very important not to stop trying. I can see people around me in the organization who very nicely try to combine what the politicians are waiting for us to say and what our academic backgrounds tell us to say. I don't think it is a mission impossible.” (#14)

Summing up, I think too little effort has been made to question the U.S. model of the LGBT movement and the theories which refer to it. Applying and developing such theories should be done with much more local awareness. Altman's question posed in the epigraph are worth restating here: Why, even in those European countries where there is much more progressive legislation regarding the rights of sexual minorities (and Finland is one of them), does the U.S. cultural model still remain predominant? I think that it is a high time to work towards full recognition of a separate history of the LGBT movement and different histories of sexualities in different countries in Europe because the one borrowed from the U.S. is too narrow. Challenging U.S. domination can be done by the reversal or inversion of perspective and seeing the U.S. model as an accidental one which does not constitute the general and universal pattern of how the movement everywhere should grow. Perhaps if we do these things we will be able to build a theory which is better suited to our practice.

Notes

1. I would like to express my gratitude to all the Finnish friends who helped me to complete my research.
2. The U.S. hegemonic and universalistic perspective has recently been strongly criticized and undermined. See for example Arnaldo Cruz-Malave and Martin F. Manalansan IV (eds.) *Queer Globalizations. Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism* (2002) or an article by Jasbir Puar titled *Global Circuits: Transnational Identities and Trinidad* (2001). I also recommend recently published Aleksandar Stulhofer and Theo Sandfort (eds.) *Sexuality and Gender in Postcommunist Eastern Europe and Russia* (2005).
3. The interviews were conducted in what Tuula Juvonen in her comments on my article aptly called queer theory's lingua franca, English.
4. I do agree that "queer" in English can be offensive in a different way because it has much broader connotations than the Finnish neologism.
5. One of my readers in her comments on my article rightly pointed out the different history of the title, *Queer as Folk*. The title of the original British series comes from an old Yorkshire saying "There's nawt' so queer as folk" meaning "There nothing as weird as people". Thus, the word queer in the title refers, first of all, to the old meaning of the word as weird and strange. Yet it might as well refer to sexuality and although both *Queer as Folk* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* were aired on national television in Finland, this was not the case in the U.S. The North American remake was shown on a cable channel, Showtime and *Queer eye for the Straight Guy* is a product of a cable channel, Bravo.
6. It must be added, however, that in this case, too, my respondent focuses only on the power of the word "lesbian", forgetting its rather narrow and exclusive content which has been widely criticized. See for instance Judith Butler 1993a; Kathleen Chapman & Michael Du Plessis 1997, Joan Nestle 1992 and Shane Phelan 1994.
7. One must note the generational difference concerning this matter. The older generation was much less "privileged".
8. However, this openness is highly dependent on people who come and leave and therefore almost all my interviewees noticed the need

for the further institutionalization of queer studies. One example of those concerns is the newly established Queer association SQS. Also the institutional support which women's studies give to queer theorists has created an imbalance in terms of gender. Since men mostly lack this kind of support in Finland there are fewer men than women who do queer studies.

9. I am fully aware of the misuse or even abuse of the word "we" in this text. It is probably as imaginary as "I". However, we are all victims or prisoners of language and sometimes it is impossible not to use even the most dubious words if one wants to say something meaningful at all. See for instance Michel Foucault (1982), Judith Butler (1992) or Diane Elam (1994) on this topic.

10. Laurie Essig raises similar questions in her book *Queer in Russia* (1999).

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