

A Conference Report from Queer Tentacles – Theory, Arts and Activism Seminar

Sofia Bister



Queer Tentacles – Theory, Arts and Activism Seminar 23.–24.9.2022

<https://www.jyu.fi/hytk/fi/laitokset/mutku/tutkimus/konferenssit-seminaarit/queer-tentacles/programme>

The Society of Queer Studies in Finland together with the Department of Music, Art and Culture Studies in the University of Jyväskylä arranged a multidisciplinary seminar Queer Tentacles – Theory, Arts and Activism. The event took place from Friday to Saturday 23–24 September 2022. Researchers and students gathered to the historic campus of Seminaarinmäki to discuss various queer tentacles in contemporary critical practices. The seminar explored queer connections in arts, theory and

activism, questions of culture and temporality as well as affectivity and language. The metaphor of the tentacle also highlighted the resilience of queer themes and the ways queerness, just like a squid's tentacle, regrows to take new shapes and dimensions. In addition to workshops and keynotes, the participants had the opportunity to attend an art exhibition opening by Harri Kalha, titled 'Ambivalenssin vetovoima' ('The Appeal of Ambivalence') in Soihtu expedition centre.

On Friday, Sam McBean, Senior Lecturer in Gender, Sexuality and Contemporary Culture from Queen Mary University of London, held a moving and intriguing keynote 'Notes on Queer Grief.' McBean addressed the intersections of care work and queer grief, reflecting on her own experiences in training to become a queer death doula. She talked about the differences and varied positions people and communities have regarding death and grief; differences, which frequently get avoided under false universalism that conceals the discrimination and violence LGBTQ individuals encounter in healthcare. She stated that, while it is often forgotten within the prevailing narrative, people are in fact 'differently located in relation to loss.' But what if we recognized these different positions and meanings that loss can encase? What kind of grieving would finally gain space and become visible in our societies? McBean pointed out that queer lives have not been given the space to be grieved. She challenged

the ways in which grief is considered to be a universal, individual feeling, and brought to discussion the intersectionality and communality related to grief as well. To McBean, the questions of queer loss, grief and dying are ‘always also about queer life’, about sexual subjectivity, about identity and lived experiences. The keynote evoked keen discussion about the established cultural forms and narrative practices of grieving, as well as questions about who gets to tell these narratives in the first place. What we collectively see as grievable constructs the social norms of what is important, what counts as grief-worthy.

The formal programme on Friday ended with a poetry reading titled ‘What Poetry Wants’ by the second keynote speaker Jericho Brown, a Pulitzer Prize winning poet and Professor of English and Creative Writing in Emory University, Atlanta. He read poems from his books *Please* (2008), *The New Testament* (2014) and *The Tradition* (2019). The powerful reading held the listener on the edge of their seat, wanting to hear more. Brown’s raw and honest poetry as well as his sincere personality moved the audience and brought art, theory, and activism together in practice. The author then answered audience questions about his poetics and discussed earlier authors who have contributed to finding his own style and voice.

Between the keynotes on Friday, the participants of the seminar took part in smaller workshops discussing specific themes. Workshop 1, led by the chair Joonas Sääntti, was built around the topic of queer(ing) concepts and literary and linguistic innovations. The first two papers shared similar topics, such as the use of pronouns and the world-making potential of language as exercised by writers of fiction. Kate Sotajeff-Wilson discussed queer translation studies and the possibilities of imagining new, queer ways of thinking through translations of Finnish and Polish to English. Juha-Pekka Kilpiö presented his remarks on queer narratology and unnatural narration in Juliana Spahr’s novel *The Transformation* (2007), pointing

out that the study of experimental narrative forms can contribute to queer thematics. Miranda Geust talked about her research on queer characters and spaces in two of Tove Jansson’s novels for adults. She suggested the term ‘skev’ could capture features in Jansson’s work that ‘queer’ does not encompass. Lastly, Hanna Sarsa discussed the writings of Audre Lorde, Rebecca Solnit, and Federico Campagna calling for the erotic and poetic to empower the fight against apathy and inaction inside capitalist discourse. The workshop ended with a conversation about language, especially the Finnish word ‘muu’ and its potential to offer a way out of othering, since ‘muu’ could mean solely ‘something else,’ not necessarily ‘something second.’ The discussion ended in the powerful notion rising from the workshop that right language, in fact, ‘feels like home.’

Workshop 2 concentrated on queer politics of non-human relations. Kuu Aholainen analysed the non-human queering process in Erkki Ahonen’s novel *Tietokone lapsi* (‘The Computer Child’, 1972), suggesting that a genderless persona can be read as creating new, specific gender categories, while it also has the potential to question and oppose fixed notions about identities. Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, who was also the chair of the workshop, discussed radical compassion, vegan poetics and queer kinships through her process of writing with a companion animal, more specifically cat-writing. Lastly, Freja Högback addressed the role of queer theory within the rising field of vegan studies. She emphasized that the base of meat-eating as the norm lies in white hetero-patriarchy, and that veganism and queer theory both challenge dualisms and call for a more complex worldview. Similarly, Koistinen claimed that writing with a companion animal contributes to creating radical compassion and opens a possibility of understanding the suffering of others. Both latter presentations offered veganism and queer theory as means to look over the boundaries that othering creates.

In Workshop 3, the presenters considered the theme of affective barriers in queer research and activism. The chair of the workshop was Varpu Alasuutari. Opening the important discussion, Armi Mustosmäki looked at the in/visibility of regretting motherhood through affect and queer theories in search of a deeper understanding of the topic. The presentation addressed how mothers navigate their regret, when these difficult feelings are often socially required to be kept invisible. Aira Huttunen presented their research on different affective information barriers transgender people face in the much-criticised Finnish healthcare system. They approached the topic through the concept of affective atmosphere to highlight the role affect has in information sharing. Inka Söderström in turn examined the boundaries that place white, Western heterosexuality in the centre of social work, and called for decolonizing and queering social work. Finally, Dilara Asardag discussed a queer, intersectional feminist framework which can be applied to analyse online and offline activism against gender-based violence in Turkey.

In Workshop 4, titled 'Queer and trans temporalities,' discussion was guided by the chair Kari Silvola. First, Kaarna Tuomenvirta analysed Camille Auer's artwork 'Monument for the Excluded' considering trans temporality, time of undiagnosis, and healing. They proposed that there is a need to be healed from the anticipation time, and asked the powerful question of whether transgender time of healing requires the disruption of the violent systems that made healing needed in the first place, and if healing could be the thing that disrupts these systems. Elizabeth Whitney viewed the queer city of Tallahassee, North Florida through archival documents and her own memories from growing up there. With an autoethnographic point of view, she discussed the lesbian herstory of the city as well as mapping as a possibility to bring places and the lived experiences of people together. Tuula Juvonen turned towards queer past and histories as well, addressing the lives of Amos Anderson and Emil

Cedercreutz through their material homes, asking what we could learn from their lives through their house museums.

Saturday brought the participants together in Workshop 5 that revolved around the intertwining tentacles of language, society, gender, and sexuality. Laura Hekanaho discussed attitudes towards gendered and gender neutral language. Hekanaho claimed that even though many people find gender neutral language as a way to increase equality, gender neutral alternatives to gendered words are still often considered 'clumsy' or even 'unnecessary' by many. Following the discussion on gender neutral language, Jarmo Harri Jantunen addressed the socio-spatial segregation of sexual and gender minorities and presented a research that aims to map out minorities' experiences of living in certain cities or areas and their reasoning behind choices of hometown. Meri Lindeman discussed how genderfluid speakers experience their gender identity influences their speech in different situations and contexts. The presentation evoked discussion on whether queer communities could be more conscious on how language constructs gender. Maybe they would have to be, because questions of social language norms come forth more frequently and violently for anyone challenging these norms. Lastly, Pekka Posio, who also led the workshop as the chairperson, spoke about linguistic stereotypes in Mexico and Spain, presenting results from a survey on what kind of language is considered typical for different genders and sexualities, and how gender stereotypes affect language norms. Discussion in the workshop ended up addressing even the linguistic norms and stereotypes in academic world, in which language considered 'manly' can often be rewarded as somehow 'more qualified.'

On Saturday, the Society of Queer Studies in Finland awarded Jukka Lehtonen for his long and impactful research career, especially his research among LGBTQIA+ children and on the effects of the pandemic on these

minorities. The new *SQS journal* (16)1 was also presented in honor of Professor Leena-Maija Rossi. The seminar then ended with a warm and intriguing panel discussion ‘Pervot puristit’. Panelists Sanna Karkulehto, Leena-Maija Rossi, Harri Kalha, and Annamari Vänskä discussed the contradictions between the Finnish term ‘pervo’ and puritanism, addressing – among other subjects – representation, cultural appropriation, making images, and imagining. The central question, ‘can you do queer studies and be a puritan?’ was considered from many diverse angles. Also, the question of whether ‘pervo’ still works for the new generation of queer researchers, generated discussion between the panellists as well as comments from the audience. Have the connotations of ‘pervo’ and ‘queer’ changed over time? Does the current emphasizing of ‘queer’ over the Finnish words ‘pervo’, ‘vino,’ or ‘kumma’ threaten the position of research done in Finnish? Can you use the term ‘queer’ to cover individuals or identities as well? Rossi pointed out that the questions in queer studies are always sensitive, and that universities have an important role to play by offering analytic tools to discuss these questions, thus enabling us to be in the world as a society and as a species. The seminar ended on a powerful statement that the field of queer studies has always been a place for thinking differently, giving and taking space, and creating new possible worlds – and continues to be just that and more.