

Introduction: Affective Histories of Queer and Trans Activism

Varpu Alasuutari, Merlin Sophie Bootsman, Barbara Dynda, Orlando Meier-Brix & Ivo Zender

This special issue, titled *Affective Histories of Queer and Trans Activism*, builds on an international workshop with the same title, organized in May 2022 at Tampere University, Finland. The workshop was part of the activities of the research project *Affective Activism: Sites of Queer and Trans World-Making* (funded by the Research Council of Finland) and it aimed at exploring the role of affects and emotions both in the study of queer and trans history and queer and trans activism. Following the workshop, one of the workshop organizers, Varpu Alasuutari, and four of the workshop participants, Merlin Sophie Bootsman, Barbara Dynda, Orlando Meier-Brix, and Ivo Zender, teamed up to edit a special issue on these important and timely topics.¹

Our aim was to leave a record of (and to develop further) the work discussed in the workshop, but also to open the call for others working on similar research themes. Moreover, we ended up recording also another related event taking place at Tampere University in February 2023: the 8th Nordic Trans Studies Conference, bearing the title *From Transgender Rage to Trans Joy: Trans Studies through Affective Lens* (likewise organized by

¹ Because of its origin in a shared workshop, some of the editors are also authors in this special issue. In such cases, the authors have been recused from the editorial and decision-making processes of their own articles, to ensure ethical editorial practice.

the *Affective Activism* research project). The result is an impressive double issue consisting of articles, essays, book reviews, conference reports, and a keynote lecture discussing affects, emotions, history, and activism in queer and trans studies in multiple ways.

The affective and emotional turn

In recent decades, affects and emotions have become more and more popular research topics across many fields in humanities and social sciences. This development has been described as the “affective turn” by Patricia Ticineto Clough (2007), whereas social movement studies and historiography have focused more on emotions and the “emotional turn” (Nagy 2018; Gould 2009). In queer and trans studies, both affect and emotion have been essential concepts in theorizing and exploring the histories of queer and trans lives (e.g. Gammerl 2016; Love 2007; Malatino 2022; Nunn 2023; Stryker 1994) and the causes and effects of queer and trans activism (e.g. Alasuutari 2023; Gould 2009; Juvonen et al. 2022; Vähäpassi 2021).

As argued by Deborah Gould (2010, 32), who has studied the history of AIDS activism in ACT UP, affect is “the key force in social change”. Adding

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an “affective curve into the emotional turn” of social movement studies, Gould makes a strong argument for focusing on the affective/emotional states to understand activism and its political horizons (Gould 2009, 23). As argued by Tuula Juvonen and colleagues (2022), affects indeed matter in queer and trans activism: they may inspire activism, produce a change in the social world, and affect the activists themselves in a variety of ways. As editors of this special issue, we thus argue that analyzing the histories of queer and trans activism through an affective lens not only makes sense but is also an essential perspective in exploring such histories.

In the SQS journal, affects and affectivity have previously been discussed in a special issue on *Queer Affects* (1–2/2016) and queer history in a special issue on *Queer History Month* (1–2/2020). Our special issue builds on the same fields of research, focusing on and combining them with the study of activism. In our collection of texts, activism is approached as a wide category consisting of actions that aim at changing the world for the better.

Affect and emotion – theoretical differences?

Research on affects, emotions, and feelings has been conducted with a variety of differing and sometimes overlapping methodologies. Especially the controversial question of whether to differentiate between affect, emotion, and feeling – and if so, how – has already been addressed elsewhere (e.g. Ahmed and Schmitz 2014; Gorton 2007). For our purposes, it is sufficient to note that the most frequently made distinction is one between affect as an embodied and relational intensity and emotion as its socially mediated expression. Gould, for example, separates affect as a “bodily, sensory, inarticulate, nonconscious experience” (Gould 2009, 19–20) from emotion as a “personal expression of what one is feeling in a given moment, an expression that is structured by social convention, by culture” (ibid., 20–21). Gould also uses feeling as “an overarching term that

encapsulates the entire phenomenon of affect and emotions”, and notes that in practice, all these phenomena coexist and can thus be difficult to separate from one another (ibid., 22).

Notwithstanding the terminological variety within affect studies, there exists a broad agreement that affects, emotions, and/or feelings are part of relational, social, cultural, and political practices. For Sara Ahmed, emotions “produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside” (Ahmed 2004, 10). Ann Cvetkovich highlights that specifically queer and trans communities emerge around shared experiences and feelings (Cvetkovich 2003, 7, 11). Gould notes that feelings are fundamental to political life insofar as movements “authorize selected feelings and actions while downplaying and even invalidating others” (Gould 2009, 28). As Heather Love emphasizes, especially negatively perceived affects and “the intransigent difficulties of making feeling the basis for politics” (Love 2007, 14) still need to be considered further.

The texts exploring affective histories of queer and trans activism in this special issue approach these issues and terminologies differently. Each author has chosen their theoretical vocabulary based on the theories and concepts most suitable to their topics and theoretical and methodological approaches. As a result, many authors of this special issue make not only empirical arguments in their articles and essays but also theoretical and methodological ones.

Researching queer and trans activism

Similarly to the different conceptualizations of affects, emotions, and feelings, each of the articles published in the special issue theorizes activism in a different way which, at the same time, reflects the comprehensiveness

of activism research. Apart from the aforementioned role of the affective dimension of politics, an important context here is the resistance of feminist, queer, and trans bodies in public space. Whether in the form of a strike, protest, literature, or visual art, the authors consider these affective and bodily expressions as acts of collective and/or individual activist action, allowing readers to get a glimpse of activist politics that are diverse in terms of time and space. Interspersed emotions, art, bodies, and desires, thus, become the lens through which we can look at activism in both the public and intimate spheres.

This understanding of activism has a long tradition and history in feminist, queer, and trans studies. For example, the examination of public protests such as general strikes and direct actions is an important aspect of 20th-century feminism, particularly in the context of anarchist politics (Luxemburg 1906 [2021]; Goldman 1917 [2019]). During the last decades, queer and trans studies have continued discussions on affective gathering and artistic expression in public spaces in order to manifest political opposition and build communities (e.g. Berlant & Warner 1998). While Judith Butler pays attention to social movements, public assemblies, and the vulnerabilities of bodies within theories on politics and power (e.g. Butler 2011; Butler 2015; Butler, Gambetti & Sabsay 2016), other academics explore the potential of bodily resistance to institutionalized cis- and heteronormative oppression within art, literature, film, and other cultural productions (e.g. Ahmed 2017; Cvetkovich 2003; Cvetkovich 2012; Halberstam 2011; Preciado 2013; among many others).

In recent years, scholars have also started to study research practices themselves as forms of activism. The tradition of activist archiving developed by Elspeth Brown and Myrl Beam is of particular relevance to the topic of our issue (Brown 2020; Brown & Beam 2022). Using the method of oral history to explore and produce a history of queer and

trans-specific experiences can be seen as a type of activism. As Brown and Beam suggest, through engaging in radical archiving, which entails emotional labor and a caring approach, as queer and trans researchers, we can contribute to community-based solidarity (Brown & Beam 2022).

Affect-oriented literary studies, in turn, center the affective relationship between the text and its readers and, depending on their orientation, highlight the importance of narrative and literary activism as practices of queer and trans worldmaking for marginalized groups of people. “Narratives”, Schiltermandl and colleagues (2022, 18) point out, “can do a variety of cultural and political work, all centered around different affective responses: empathy, disgust, guilt, hope, and many more”. By foregrounding queer and trans people as readers, these narratives have the potential to challenge hegemonic narratives and “invite readers into alternative worlds in which their own identities are affirmed, accepted, and appreciated” (ibid., 21).

Introducing the contributions

The authors contributing to this special issue draw on the various theoretical approaches described above, highlighting specific affects and emotions in their study of the history of queer and trans activism or developing their own original affective methodology.

In their article *The Fears of Gay Teachers and the Collectivizing Effects of Emotion Work*, Merlin Sophie Bootsmann, Greta Hülsmann, and Andrea Rottmann analyze how fear influenced the formation of the Working Group of Homosexual Teachers and Educators in West Berlin in the 1970s. The authors argue that the group instrumentalized gay teachers’ fears (to be outed, to be fired etc.) to mobilize their members, hence developing affects and narratives of fear into a conscious strategy of collective emotion work.

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Here, Bootsmann, Hülsmann, and Rottmann differentiate between affects as reactive and emotions as conscious states of feeling while emphasizing the analytical nature of this separation. As they show, affects and emotions are inseparably linked in the teachers' efforts to pursue historical change through emotion work.

Fear is also the central point of analysis in Henrique Cintra Santos's article "Acting out of Fear": *Queer Resistance During the Military Dictatorship in Brazil* which explores the possibility of writing Queer History of the Brazilian dictatorship by analyzing the first organized queer demonstration in Brazilian history. On June 13th, 1980, one thousand people of the newly formed LGBTQIA+ movement protested in the city of São Paulo against police violence and Operation Cleansing, which especially targeted homosexuals, sex workers, and *travestis*. The study examines fear's role, showcasing how it was used by the regime to control, but also how it fueled collective resistance within the queer community.

Orlando Meier-Brix's article *Reading Transition with Suspicion: An Affective Critique of Umwandlung in N. O. Body's Aus eines Mannes Mädchenjahren and its Reception* analyzes the sexological and autobiographical narrative of *Umwandlung* (gender/sex transition) in Karl M. Baer's memoir, one of the earliest self-authored accounts by an intersex individual. Meier-Brix challenges the prevailing medical interpretation of Baer's transition and reintroduces suspicion as an affective methodology for critically engaging with trans and intersex narratives. The article argues for de-medicalizing *Umwandlung* as an early 20th-century concept of transition and proposes a more nuanced perspective that also offers alternatives to contemporary medicalizing concepts.

In *Desire for Trans Ancestors: An Affective Reading of Jordy Rosenberg's Confessions of the Fox*, Ivo Zender explores the potential for affective activism within the reading, writing, and editing of contemporary fictional

trans literature. In his novel *Confessions of the Fox* (2018), Rosenberg proposes both a (self-)critical and playful approach towards the desire for trans history by letting his trans protagonist Dr. Voth discover a mysterious manuscript about the 18th-century infamous thief and jailbreaker Jack Sheppard while reimagining Sheppard as trans. Zender uses the theoretical framework of textual desire to analyze the tension between a desire to categorize and possess and a desire for community and connection.

Kate Sotejeff-Wilson's essay *Erikoissuomalaiset: Queer New Finns, Oral History, Affective Activism* employs a qualitative approach to the affective histories of queer New Finns in Finland. Accounting for the intersections of gender/sexuality with race and class, the author coins the term *erikoissuomalaiset* ('extraordinary Finns') as an intervention against the anti-immigration, anti-LGBTQIA+ party *Perussuomalaiset* (meaning basic, ordinary, or sometimes 'true' Finns). Engaging these queer New Finns in writing their stories, the research aims to challenge and rewrite the national history of Finland by "integrating minority perspectives into the majority cultural heritage story".

In his essay *Tunteiden kuvaus vaikuttamisen keinona transmaskuliinisuutta käsittelevässä nuortenkirjallisuudessa* [The Description of Emotions as a Means of Influence in Youth Literature on Transmasculinity], Pyry Aarnio explores the emotion of shame in three Finnish young adult novels: Siri Kolu's *Kesän jälkeen kaikki on toisin* [After the Summer Everything Will Be Different] (2016), Riina Mattila's *Järistyksiä* [Trembles] (2018), and Marja Björk's *Poika* [Boy] (2013). The transmasculine protagonists and narrators experience shame as a result of challenging societal norms because of their transness, leading them to withdraw socially. Aarnio weaves together shame, anger, and grief, revealing the intricate tapestry of emotions that emerge in the act of negotiating the constricting boundaries of heteronormativity and cisnormativity. Ultimately, the novels depict

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empowerment through the exploration of identity, the discovery of supportive communities, and the transformative experiences of desire, touch, and self-acceptance.

YV E. Nay's *The Affective Life of Trans Studies as a Political Field in Academia and Activism* intervenes in the field of trans studies starting with its formation rooted in sexology. In the text, which is a shortened version of their keynote speech presented at the 8th Nordic Trans Studies Conference at Tampere University in February 2023, Nay proposes the approach of critical trans studies. Scholars who critically approach trans studies recognize and dismantle the colonial, white, and US-centered entanglements of their field. Nay does not only call for a disciplinary turn regarding the theoretical and historical foundations of trans studies. In the end, they call for critical intervention in trans studies for the sake of transformative justice for trans people at large.

In *Transgender Affect: Rage and Joy or Something Else?*, Liekki Valaskivi provides a detailed report of the 8th Nordic Trans Studies Conference as a doctoral researcher attending the conference. Approximately 120 participants gathered at Tampere University to discuss affect in the field of trans studies. Valaskivi allows us to relive various academic and artistic contributions of the conference through their eyes and ends with contemplating the complex personal and emotional entanglements of trans scholars with their research.

In the second report of the same event, titled *Missä mennään, transtutkimus, vuonna 2023?* [Where Are We, Trans Studies, in 2023?], Sari Laurila reflects on the conference from the perspective of a trans activist. Laurila calls for more focus from trans studies scholars on very pressing real-life issues such as minority stress and the violent and sometimes deadly effects of cisnormativity. Moreover, Laurila points out that many trans

people end up involuntarily acting as 'micro activists' simply by living in a cisnormative world.

Our art gallery section features a queer historical comic, titled *Katujen yössä* [In the Night of the Streets], written by Vili von Nissinen and illustrated by Nina Mutik. The comic explores the life and meeting places of a group of feminine gay men, called Siskot [sisters], in the 1960s in Helsinki, Finland. Back then, homosexual acts were still criminalized in Finnish society, which posed challenges for finding like-minded company. The comic draws from queer historical sources, including the book *Puistohomot* [Park Gays] by Valdemar Melanko (2012), the magazine *96* published by the early Finnish gay and lesbian association *Psyke*, and the blog post series *Homohistoriallinen Helsinki* [Gay Historical Helsinki] by blogger Hulivilipoika (2014). The comic also features lyrics of Finnish schlagers from the same era.² With this comic, SQS starts collaboration with a queer history comic collective, which will hopefully lead to many new comic strips in our future issues.

The review section includes four book reviews. In their review of Claire Summerskill's *New Directions in Queer Oral History: Archives of Disruption* (2022), an anthology publishing the work of 19 queer oral historians, Jean Lukkarinen summarizes the articles and manages to show why each contribution is valuable and different from the others. Finally, they argue that the work is an important, unprecedented tool for anyone interested in queer oral history because it provides insight into so many different approaches and methodologies, yet at the same time does not obscure their potential challenges.

2 The songs featured in the comic include *Hyväile, hyväile vaan*, lyrics by Arvo Aallas, *Laulu rakastamisen vaikeudesta*, lyrics by Marja-Leena Mikkola, and *Niin aikaisin*, lyrics by Jukka Kuoppamäki.

Leo Ryczko reviews *You Have Never Seen a Dancer Like VooDoo* (2022) by historian Jens Dobler. The book offers a detailed biography of Willy Pape, a white Berliner who took on the persona of the exotic snake dancer VooDoo during the vibrant 1920s variety show scene. Meticulously covering VooDoo's tours, influences, and later years as a gay bar owner, the book is praised for illuminating forgotten aspects of queer culture. However, Ryczko critiques the book for not fully addressing the colonial, orientalist, and racist undertones of VooDoo's performances and persona, missing an opportunity to connect them to the wider German queer history and colonial past.

Tuula Juvonen, in turn, provides a review of the book *Suomalaisen seksin historia* [The History of Finnish Sex] by Ari Haasio and Markku Mattila. As Juvonen puts it in the title of the review, the book seems to focus on “everything men have always wanted to know about sex” (*Kaikki mitä miehet ovat aina halunneet tietää seksistä*). What is missing from the book, according to Juvonen, is the work that gender studies, queer studies, and cultural studies scholars have done to explore the history of sexuality and its diversity. Juvonen, thus, calls for future historians to focus on the neglected topic of the history of sexuality, and while doing so, to acknowledge the work already done in other fields of study.

How Many Times the Same Story? asks Jay Szpilka while reading Sara Ahmed's *Complaint!* (2021). Written as a complaint about the university system – or rather, as a complaint about the system's ignorance towards her complaints and criticism of sexism, racism, and ableism – the book features Ahmed's as well as students' and established scholars' experiences. As Szpilka shows, *Complaint!* resonates with Ahmed's earlier works, leaving the reader both captivated by the fervent criticism and at the same time insecure about how to deal with the similarity and repetitiveness of the complaints themselves.

Finally, we would like to thank our illustrator Sirpa Varis for the amazing cover image reflecting different forms of activism, many of which are represented on the pages of this special issue.

For all of the readers of SQS, we wish an inspirational and stimulating reading with our various contributions. In light of the current and ongoing struggles of queer and trans individuals as well as communities – recently most prominently affected by the growing anti-gender movement in Europe (e.g. Saresma 2020) and the wave of anti-trans legislation in the US, the latter of which has been appropriately deemed genocidal by the Lemkin Institute for Genocide prevention (2022) – we would like to express our sincerest hope that the histories documented in this special issue can serve as an inspiration to keep fighting for and living queer and trans lives unapologetically. We deserve not only to have our stories told, but most importantly, we deserve to live our lives unharmed and fulfilled.

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