

Queer Encounters with Death

Alasuutari, Varpu. 2020. *Death at the End of the Rainbow: Rethinking Queer Kinship, Rituals of Remembrance and the Finnish Culture of Death*. PhD dissertation. University of Turku: School of History, Culture and Arts Studies. (278 pages)

VARPU ALASUUTARI'S DOCTORAL dissertation, *Death at the End of the Rainbow: Rethinking Queer Kinship, Rituals of Remembrance and the Finnish Culture of Death*, addresses a little researched but very topical and intriguing theme: Finnish LGBTQ people's experiences of the death of their meaningful others. With this topic, the study addresses the substantial interplay between marginalized positions and prevailing cultures, but also engages with the customs related to death in Finland and scrutinises the connections between kinship and death.

Alasuutari's study is interdisciplinary and situated in gender studies, and it combines approaches from queer and trans studies, death studies, social sciences and anthropology. The work engages with feminist affect theories and queer theoretical discussions of grief and melancholia to cover grief, rituals, remembering and the inequalities tied to them. Alasuutari also develops new, more complex, nuanced thinking on the experiences of loss and grief. The study addresses both the affective construction of family and the emotional complexity of kinship bonds. Methodologically, the dissertation is based on in-depth interviews with Finnish LGBTQ people who have lost someone close to them, analysis of the interviewees' written narratives of loss and data on Finnish

death cultures gathered with scavenger methodology inspired by Jack Halberstam's work.

Alasuutari presents her methodological choices in a reflexive manner and she is open and self-critical in addressing the changing scope during the course of the study and the surprises encountered along the way. Alasuutari is especially thorough and transparent in presenting how she conducted the in-depth interviews and how she places them within the field of feminist methodology. The particularities of the written narratives are, however, discussed to a lesser degree. Alasuutari describes the analysis in detail, which further adds to the transparency and credibility of the work. In addition, the work is well balanced in that it finds common themes in the narrated experiences, such as the feelings of exclusion or difficulties in finding help, but does not reduce the differences to a single narrative of death and grief. In fact, Alasuutari is careful in highlighting how different ways of being queer or trans intersect with age, gender, social class and the particularities of who the interviewee has lost.

The results of the study are presented in four chapters, the first of which addresses closets, silences and repeated experiences of coming out, both before and after the loss. Alasuutari carefully describes the complexity of the seemingly dichotomous question of being in or out of the closet. She further shows the different ways in which silence can work to hide difficult issues, but how it can also be a means to strategic non-communication and a way to protect oneself. Moreover, the chapter demonstrates the power of rituals in making queer and trans lives visible. This very thorough discussion continues in the next chapter, which addresses the rituals following the death of a meaningful other. An important contribution of the work – that goes beyond the topic of bereavement in queer and trans lives – is that it shows the power of rituals, and the enduring importance of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, even in the rather secularised Finland.

The last two chapters of the analysis address questions of living with grief and queer remembering. First, Alasuutari demonstrates how different forms of inequalities intersect and make receiving support at

the time of grief difficult for marginalised people. This chapter also addresses questions of personal resilience, or as Alasuutari refers to it, enduring. The last chapter of the analysis touches on both the theoretical discussions of queer afterlife and the realm of cultural remembering. Here, Alasuutari also utilises the analysis of events that deal with death in Finnish LGBTQ communities to discuss the possibilities of addressing grief on a community level. This allows her to address the omissions in the interviews and analyse why some themes, such as the role of LGBTQ communities at the time of grief, were not brought up by the interviewees. The chapter makes important and even surprising theoretical contributions. In particular, Alasuutari's discussion on not wishing to leave a physical grave monument and thus embrace the prospect of being forgotten offers thought-provoking contributions to the debates on queer futurity.

All in all, Alasuutari's dissertation makes exciting contributions by engaging with theories of melancholy and combining this theoretical discussion with an analysis of narratives of living with grief. Alasuutari is careful and critical in her discussion on the core concepts of the study. That said, what the study could have engaged with a bit more are the concept of experience as well as queer and trans as theoretical concepts. It might however be regarded as a sign of theoretical maturity of the field that a dissertation in queer studies just builds on the existing work, without dwelling on the concepts of the field. The dissertation also offers important contributions to feminist methodology and provides exciting connections between diverse streams of queer theorisation. It widens the discussion on different forms of normativities and the instances where LGBTQ people do not challenge the norms. As Alasuutari writes, the affective promises attached to following the norms may make people want to stick to them even when they are excluding. Towards the end of the study, Alasuutari offers an extremely valuable discussion on the critique of antinormativity with the help of feminist affect theories.

Alasuutari's dissertation complements the emerging literature on Finnish LGBTQ lives by directing our attention to the end of life and

even beyond it for those left behind, or those envisioning how they themselves would like to be remembered. The study encompasses the affective, personal and interpersonal, as well as the theoretical and political meaning of loss in queer and trans lives. It offers important contributions to the discussion on the complexity of and differences in how people experience grief and how they remember the deceased. The study demonstrates that death is by no means a marginal topic in LGBTQ people's lives. Quite the contrary, by studying death, one can learn much about living. Alasutari's dissertation is an essential contribution to the emerging field of queer death studies and a valuable addition to queer and trans studies and death and bereavement studies more generally.

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