

Queer Readings/ Reading the Queer

EACH SEMESTER I teach a class on “queer readings” to my gender studies students. It should be right up my alley as a literary scholar, and, of course, in many ways it is. But every time I also struggle with a number of crucial questions: Is there really such a thing as a “queer reading,” in the sense that there is a particular kind of queer reading practice I can teach my students? And, if so, what happened to the idea that the concept “queer” should not be tied to a singular definition – was it not supposed to be a dynamic concept, in order to keep its critical potential? Also, when I teach queer readings at Uppsala University, I wonder whether queer reading practices have in fact become part of the institutions they set out to critique less than three decades ago? And what does a queer reading entail anyway? Is it the same thing in 2018 as it was in 1990? This special issue has departed from my wish to come to terms with some of these questions – to put it simple: What is the status of queer readings today?

The practice of “queer readings” originated around 1990, with groundbreaking works like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Between Men* (1985) and Alexander Doty’s *Making Things Perfectly Queer* (1993). In the 1990s and early 2000s queer readings grew alongside and as part of the development of queer theory and quickly became a buzzword among scholars interested in the subversive potential of texts – in a broad sense: queer readings

have never been limited only to literary works but have been used to discover queerness in all kinds of cultural representations. Early queer readings were influenced by classic feminist methods of resistant readings (see e.g., Fetterley 1978; Millett 2000), which focused on reading “counter” to texts by male authors in order to reveal their inherent sexism. While feminist resistant readings challenged sexism, queer readings challenged heteronormativity, and they often did so by searching for cracks and fissures in supposedly heteronormative surfaces, which revealed subversive queer connotations (see e.g., Sedgwick 1985; Doty 1993; Rosenberg 2002, 119–28). Following Sedgwick (1985), who revealed queer desires in male-authored English literary classics, early queer readers often directed their attention to hegemonic literary history in order to “queer the literary canon.” In the Nordic context, two early examples are Dag Heede’s (2003) queer readings of Herman Bang’s work, and Ann-Sofie Lönngren’s dissertation (2007), which, following Sedgwick, explores erotic triangles and queer desires in August Strindberg’s work.

What these queer readings had in common was a subversive purpose: they focused on undermining the hegemony of heterosexuality. Because of their focus on queering the canon, queer reading practices, at least in the beginning, tended to become associated with reading counter to canonized texts to reveal queer “leakages” (Rosenberg 2002). But queer readings can also involve readings of explicitly queer texts, and in fact, to point out manifest queer themes in a text can be just as subversive, especially since such themes are often ignored by straight audiences. For instance, when the Swedish movie *Show Me Love* [*Fucking Åmål*] premiered in 1998, most critics chose not to mention the plot – a lesbian love story and the obstacles the characters face – and instead focused on the film’s setting in a small town where nothing ever happens (Rosenberg 2002, 106–15; Björklund 2010). In a Nordic context, Rita Paqvalén (2007) has used queer theory in her readings of Agnes von Krusenstjerna’s *Fröknarna von Pahlen* (1930–1935), a book series that is full of queer desires, cross-dressing and other queer themes.

The queer reading practices I have discussed so far rely on an idea of texts as having depth – that they consist of a structure of semantic layers,

which can be uncovered by a literary critic. This so-called symptomatic tradition, or “hermeneutics of suspicion,” has been criticized for assuming that the true meaning of a text is always hidden rather than visible: when literary critics focus on revealing what is behind the text they may miss what the text conveys on its surface. In this tradition Sedgwick (2002) argues for readings that are less “paranoid” and more “reparative,” while others, like Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus (2009), use “surface readings” to describe a reading practice that pays attention to the surface of the text, rather than what is behind or underneath it. The reparative reading tradition in turn has been criticized for leaning too heavily on an opposition between symptomatic and reparative readings (see e.g., Weed 2012; Stacey 2014; Wiegman 2014), but there is no doubt that “the reparative turn” has influenced queer literary scholarship, often combined with perspectives from another turn, “the material.” For instance, in a Nordic context Maria Margareta Österholm (2012), in her study of queer girlhood in contemporary Swedish literature, draws on Sedgwick’s concept of reparative readings, arguing that the texts she studies cannot be analyzed with a symptomatic reading approach since their queerness is not hiding behind the surface; it is right there on the surface. Following Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, and Ulrika Dahl, Österholm also uses the concept figuration to understand queer girlhood in its materiality, thus combining perspectives from the reparative and material turns in her queer readings.

Queer reading practices have tended to center on the hegemony of heterosexuality, that is, analyzing the construction of gender and sexuality in texts. But they can be just as useful in analyses of how other norms are produced in texts and how gender and sexuality intersect with other power dimensions. For instance, in this issue, two contributions integrate queer theory and postcolonial theory to challenge whiteness norms. Tara Atluri points to how also the field of queer readings has been dominated by norms of whiteness and argues that it needs to be challenged with perspectives from postcolonial theory. Mara Lee Gerdén shows how queer reading tools can be used in critical readings of well-established literary tropes that are premised

on the exclusion of non-white bodies. These examples show how the subversive character of queer readings – how they challenge taken-for-granted norms and power structures – can be useful in many contexts. The intersectional potential of queer readings has been discovered by some queer readers, but I believe it will be used to a larger extent in future scholarship.

I am aware that this attempt to outline a development of queer readings¹ makes the development seem linear, starting with queering the canon readings in the early 1990s, which coexisted with readings of explicit queer themes during the 1990s and 2000s, eventually to be replaced by reparative readings and surface readings combined with new materialist and/or intersectional perspectives. However, to depict a linear development is not my intention and would be a too simplistic approach – queer readings are way too queer to fit neatly into categories and linear developments. Different reading practices exist side by side and are combined in complex ways, and this is not the least visible in this issue, which displays a variety of different queer approaches to literature and texts: queering the canon (Gullette), queering new genres (Hynynen), queering national literary histories (Dima), uses of queer fiction (Kukka), intersectional perspectives (Atluri, Lee Gerdén), materialist perspectives (Lee Gerdén, Myren-Svelstad), queer and crip readings (Myren-Svelstad), and trans readings (Holmqvist). The contributors focus on different genres – for instance, critically acclaimed and canonized texts, crime fiction, novels, poetry, slash fiction – and texts from different time periods, which further underscores the usefulness of queer readings.

In the first article, Andrea Hynynen contributes to the small field of queer readings of crime fiction by discussing four crime novels published in French. She argues that the genre conventions of crime fiction need to be taken into account in queer readings. Traditionally, the reader's ignorance of a character's non-normative gender or sexual identity has been used in the crime narrative to create surprise, and these characters are often criminals. Hynynen shows how this convention still exists in 21st century French crime fiction, but that there are also other,

more affirming, ways of depicting queer gender and sexuality, as well as subversive critique of heteronormative society.

Christian Gullette expands the field of queer readings of August Strindberg's works by turning to the collections of short stories *Giftas I-II*. Gullette focuses particularly on the short story "Den brottliga naturen" and reads it through a Platonic lens and contemporary queer theory, showing how queerness can disrupt heteronormative marital conventions. Same-sex attraction ultimately fails in this story, but the disruptive potential of queerness can be read as a way toward Strindberg's goal of a "spiritual union" that transcends bourgeois marriage conventions built on gender binaries.

Per Esben Myren-Svelstad contributes to Scandinavian queer literary history by exploring the male homosexual in two Norwegian novels from the 1930s, Nini Roll Anker's *Enken* (1932) and Magnhild Haalke's *Allis sønn* (1935). During the Norwegian 1930s homosexuality was understood, partly in line with Freudian psychoanalysis, as a contagious deviation from "normal" sexual development and as a threat to a healthy nation. Drawing on insights from crip theory and theories of queer temporality, Myren-Svelstad demonstrates how the male homosexual is connected to disability and asynchrony in these novels, but he also suggests that crip theory can be useful to literary studies in general.

Silja Kukka argues that the writing of slash fiction should be seen as a kind of political activity where queer young people deconstruct mainstream media stories and take a more active role in their media consumption. Emphasizing the agency of the authors, Kukka uses sexual identity formation theories in her readings of three slash texts from three different fandoms. She demonstrates how this approach can lead to more nuanced readings of slash fiction and points to how the authors discuss and problematize queer themes and the formation of sexual identities in new ways.

Tara Atluri argues that mainstream queer communities in the West as well as the field of queer readings are dominated by whiteness and hence need to be challenged by postcolonial theory. In her contribution Atluri reads transgender South Asian Canadian writer Vivek Shraya's

collection of poetry *even this page is white* (2016) as queer anti-colonial politics. She shows how Shraya uses poetry to challenge the whiteness norm of the Canadian queer community and point to the history of oppression and violence. Her poetry exposes the normative whiteness that structures (the readings of) literature as well as (the color-coded readings of) queer bodies.

As an introduction to queer Romanian literature, Ramona Dima's contribution is pioneering work. Representations of queer characters are not common in Romanian literature, and there is virtually no research in this field. Dima's article provides an overview of a selection of gay and lesbian characters from Romanian literature, mainly by heterosexual authors. She explores how the narratives are constructed in relation to gender and socio-political and legal contexts in Romania. She shows how queer male characters tend to be represented in a more nuanced way, while queer female characters are usually depicted within a hetero-normative framework governed by the male gaze.

Mara Lee Gerdén's essay examines the tropes "the night" and "the journey" and shows how processes of othering take place in figurative language. Using examples from writers like Virginia Woolf, Audre Lorde, and Claudia Rankine, as well as postcolonial theory and queer reading tools, Lee Gerdén explores hidden paths, histories, and connections in language that seems neutral at first sight. But a closer examination reveals that it matters who embodies language; certain people are given power and agency through language while others are deprived of those things.

In this issue's *We're Here* essay, Sam Holmqvist explores the meanings and possibilities of trans readings. Literary history contains numerous examples of cross-dressings, non-binary identities and gender variations, and even if they could be difficult to translate into modern-day trans terminology, Holmqvist points out that they are nevertheless important in trans readings. They argue for a broad understanding of trans readings, one that includes readings which focus on themes that can be described as transgender, as this concept is being used today, but also for alliances between trans readings and other reading practices, such as gay and

lesbian readings, queer readings and intersex readings, since categories tend to overlap and be intertwined in various ways.

While being diverse, these contributions have a few things in common. They pay attention to how gender and sexuality are constructed in texts, and they undermine the heterosexual norm – and in some cases, other norms, such as the hegemony of whiteness. Still, the diversity shows that there is not one queer reading practice but many, so, to return to my questions in the beginning, it is clear that there is not one particular queer reading practice that I can teach my students, but rather a wide range of queer approaches to texts. These approaches are subversive in that they question the hegemony of heterosexuality (and other norms) and focus on how gender and sexuality are constructed in texts. This entails that queer readings cannot be tied to a singular definition – it is still a dynamic concept with a critical potential. Since we now teach queer reading practices at universities, queer readings have in a sense become part of the institutions they initially set out to critique, but we have to remember that various forms of power are still at work at the institutional level. As Atluri's and Lee Gerdén's contributions to this issue highlight, queer reading tools can be used to challenge the hegemony of whiteness. The persistence of this hegemony, not the least in academia, convinces me that queer readings needs to continue to critique institutions.

The critical potential of queer readings – to challenge norms and power structures – is of course not limited to queer *readings*, but applies to the field of queer studies as a whole. However, queer readers contribute with their specific focus on texts, and, as Michel Foucault has taught us, language (discourse) is powerful. Texts in various forms shape our understanding on the world, and being able to understand how power and norms are (re)produced through texts can be a way to dismantle power. The world is a deeply unequal place where power operates on different levels in different contexts, and to understand how power works requires diverse approaches and a dynamic concept of queer. This issue shows that queer readings is still a vital field with the potential to discover new ways in which power operates.

Of course, this is also true of the field of queer studies as a whole, and this is something we will explore in upcoming issues. For instance, later this year we will publish a special issue, exploring “What Is New in Nordic Queer Studies?”. As editors, we are always interested in hearing from our readers and contributors: What do you think is new in (Nordic) queer studies? What special issues would you like to read? We look forward to hearing from you, and in the meantime, enjoy this issue and our new queer readings!

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NOTE

1. The discussion of the development of queer readings has emerged in collaboration with Ann-Sofie Lönngren and is based on a longer discussion in a forthcoming article on queer readings, which we are writing together.