

Queering Close Relationships in Contemporary Estonia

Uibo, Raili. 2021. *“And I don’t know who we really are to each other.” Queers Doing Close Relationships in Estonia*. PhD Diss. Södertörn University: Södertörn Doctoral Dissertations. (287 pages)

RAILI UIBO’S DOCTORAL dissertation is focused on narratives and practices of close relationships of queers in Estonia. The chosen title – “And I don’t know who we really are to each other” – points the reader to the centrality of relationality, self-determination, subjectivity, locally grounded vocabulary, and the knowing-by-doing, that will remain important threads in the narratives and practices analysed throughout the thesis. The main objective of Uibo’s work is to explore the ways in which queers understand and practice close relationships in the political, economic and cultural circumstances of contemporary Estonia. The book is divided into seven chapters. Each chapter begins with an interlude – a short ethnographical reflection, described by the author as “a way of grounding the research even further in ethnographic data” (55).

Sitting at the intersection of gender studies and queer and kinship studies, the thesis embraces a poststructuralist approach to identities, self and power. Inspired by the works of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Lisa Duggan and Jack Halberstam, Uibo deploys her use of queer as both a noun and a verb, hence an analytical tool adequate for considering both identities and practices. Reflecting on issues of translation and,

inspired by Ulrika Dahl, questioning the territorialisation of ideas (32), the author holds on to the dynamic and transformational character of ideas reshaped by different cultural settings.

Methodologically, the work relies on triangulation of qualitative data, mostly face-to-face, but also online. Between 2016 and 2017, Uibo sustained 5 months of ethnographic engagement, conducted 19 interviews, during which she elicited the drawing of relational maps, and gathered over 300 responses to a qualitative online survey. In addition, media reports, as well as documents related to the legal and social policy framework of contemporary Estonia, were used to inform the analysis. Overall, the analysis relies on a constructivist grounded theory approach, with codes emerging from data as much as from theory. One of the strengths of the methodology section is the way in which the author engages in thoughtful critical reflection about her fieldwork and the interpretative and relational nature of ethnography, which she posits as a “ground-level method” and a “general sensibility for research” (59). Here, the reader is drawn into the messiness of fieldwork, the daily challenges of negotiating access and building rapport, and the acknowledgement that researchers may choose their participants to some extent, but – perhaps more importantly – are chosen by participants (invited to a community party; chosen as trusted listeners and interpretive rapporteurs of participants’ life stories, etc.). In this regard, Uibo’s located positionality as both an insider and an outsider (neither nomad, nor native, following Braidotti), a typical liminal space that is home to the diasporic researcher, plays a role in relation to which Uibo offers insightful comments.

Theoretically, the author skilfully engages with the work of Joanna Mizielinska, Jacqui Gabb, Sasha Roseneil, Sara Ahmed and others. Importantly, she explains her choice to depart from the concept “close ones” instead of alternatives such as “queer families”, which she considered but found too constraining to the actual understanding and practice of meaningful relationships of queers in Estonia. According to Uibo, “close ones” should in her thesis be understood “as a practice in constant motion and negotiation, [...] something you ‘do’ rather than something you ‘are’” (25).

The analytical chapters offer a fundamental overview of the context in which the research is produced and contain a sophisticated analysis of the original empirical material. Notably, Chapter 4 examines at close the meanings and practices of close relationships, taking the relationship maps drawn by the participants as the analytical starting point. The author innovatively discusses those relationships that would have remained invisible or unspoken if the language of families instead of that of close relationships had been used. Drawing on Gunnarsson Payne's work, Uibo moves on to articulate her own take on a kinship grammar of biological relatedness on the one hand, and a kinship grammar of choice, on the other. Here, precarity becomes a fundamental lens through which relatedness and choice are further investigated.

In the following chapter, the author builds on these findings to highlight the importance of grounding theory in the local lived realities of queer subjects. In particular, the notion of the closet is unpacked and critically reshaped, bearing in mind the idea of queer opacity. Significant to Uibo's discussion is the centrality of speech, knowledge and practice in making and un-making queer (in-)visibilities, including tacit agreements of "don't ask, don't tell", to protect close relationships and the negotiations around public displays of intimacy.

Next, Uibo examines care as the driving force in close relationships, the theme of Chapter 6. Here, practices and temporalities of care as part of the making and breaking of close relationships are in focus. Issues of precarity, expectations and different forms of temporal-related normativities are used to analyse the data, with a particular emphasis on chrononormativity. Taking into account the negative side of care provision in the context of close relationships, including issues of dependency, control and failure, Uibo frames her analysis in the context of fragile state provision. Equally significant, she poses the question of whether ethnography, at least sometimes, can itself be considered a form of care work (215).

To conclude this review, I wish to add that the work produced by Uibo is exemplary in format, structure and content, well-balanced, well-designed and beautifully written – something which can only be achieved

through hard work and commitment. But the thesis is also a product of pain and attachment, permeated as much by affect as by strong objectivity – the only type of objectivity that can ever exist in scientific inputs. This requires that the researcher acknowledges their own situated experience, which Uibo does with great skill. In the prologue she writes:

What is closest to you, seems to hurt you the most. Somehow, I bear the actual political blows in Sweden better than this monster trope of Estonia that I have created in my head. Is this a sign of attachment after all, a more intimate one that I would prefer not to acknowledge? Can a rejection be a sign of love, an act of care? I can claim so with certainty about my mother's discontent at my return. But can my utter rejection of (the construct of) Estonia also signify love? I still do not know the answer, but in this thesis I try to confront my own fantasies about Estonia, a (queer) community and my place within them. (21)

In the end, I cannot be sure whether the author will ever be able to respond to the questions she has so bravely put to herself. But of this Uibo can rest assured: if knowledge production can be framed as an act of care and love, her work certainly meets that crucial ethical criterion of doing research with – and not about – individuals.

**ANA CRISTINA SANTOS,
CENTRE FOR SOCIAL STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF COIMBRA**