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# Sex at the Borders

## A Special Issue Introduction

**THE WORK WITH** this special issue was initiated at the symposium “Rethinking Sexuality in Nordic and Post-Soviet contexts”, hosted at Södertörn University, September 29–30, 2022. This event brought to a close the collaborative research project “Rethinking sexuality: A geopolitics of digital sexual cultures in Estonia, Sweden and Finland” funded by the Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies, involving Jenny Sundén (Södertörn University), Susanna Paasonen (University of Turku) and Katrin Tiidenberg (Tallinn University).

The symposium gathered more than a dozen scholars in gender and sexuality studies from the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Poland, Sweden and the UK and initiated conversations at the intersection of media studies, human geography and history. It was organized around a number of thematic sessions: “Sex across borders”, “Sex education and reproduction”, “Transnational lesbian imaginaries” and “Queer communities in crisis times”. While differing in disciplinary belonging, the contributions all firmly emphasized transnational perspectives on sexuality, both past and present.

For the special issue at hand, we have gathered together the historically oriented contributions to the conference. In research on histories of sexuality, much work has focused on national contexts. With the aim of contributing to the field of transnational histories of sexuality, these

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articles rather explore the movements and relations within and between Estonia, Finland, Sweden and Norway. In this work, we take inspiration from Łukasz Szulc (2017) and refuse to submit to what he calls “methodological nationalism”, rather tracing a transnational, multi-scalar approach to the study of sexuality appreciative of leaky boundaries and promiscuous traffic in cultural references, sexual partners, and commodities alike. Following Szulc, we move between the national and the “non-national” as a not-quite-cosmopolitan means of weaving between the subnational (such as a city), the national, and the supranational. In Szulc’s work on transnational homosexuality in communist Poland, the supranational comprises the “Eastern bloc”, whereas for us it rather involves connections and overlaps between Nordic and Baltic contexts, challenging any neat divisions between “East” and “West”, problematizing the idea of sexuality and sexual identity as secured or contained by the geographical and legislative borders of nation states.

A transnational approach to histories of sexuality focuses on contacts, encounters and movements that transgress national borders and, in so doing, construct new relations and connections. By tuning in on how flows of bodies, goods, imaginaries, fantasies and desires continuously traverse borders, this perspective also affords a consideration of how the edges of nations are established and, in the process, to some extent reinforced. In order to consider local sexual histories as by necessity translocal, this special issue moves across the Finnish Gulf between Estonia and Finland (Pöldsam & Taavetti), further across the Gulf of Bothnia between Finland and Sweden (Juvonen), then across the Sweden–Norway border at Hälle on European route E6 (Larsson) and finally circles back to Finland (Paasonen & Pajala).

In their article “Sisters Across the Gulf: Transnational Connections and Frictions in Estonian–Finnish Lesbian Networks of the Early 1990s”, Rebeka Pöldsam and Riikka Taavetti explore the significance of a translocal lesbian community, which during a number of years played integral part in the formation of the respective national communities. Despite obvious economic differences between these contexts, the transnational network braiding together the local and the national pro-

vided a relatively equal space for relationships and activities, shuttling across the Gulf of Finland. The authors focus on both the challenges and tensions emerging from the national differences in understandings of lesbian lives and identities, and on strengthening encounters and connections that emerged when similarities of desire cut across or diminished the friction of differences.

By building on the concept of translocality, Pöldsam and Taavetti add to studies of queer organizing which emphasize movement across different scales in so far as queer communities take shape on a local level (here primarily in Tallinn and Helsinki, respectively), while also extending through transnational networks allowing for news and information to travel (see Gonsalves & Velasco 2022; Grundy & Smith 2005). The notion of translocality helps them to grasp how, in the early 1990s, Estonian and Finnish lesbian communities became entwined through regular group trips in ways that extended them through an emergent in-between community – one located neither here, nor there. Building on Peter Edelberg’s (2022, 2023) work on transnational LGBT+ Scandinavian relations, they also engage with the transnational dimensions of the network as yet another way of moving beyond a national lens. But in contrast to research on transnational LGBT movements and modes of mobilizing, and by considering how transnational connections shaped what happened nationally, they address a more organic network, less politically driven yet important for the composition of local lesbian communities.

In yet another trip across a Northern body of water, the Gulf of Bothnia, Tuula Juvonen in her essay “Transnational Connections: Finland’s and Sweden’s Mutually Constructed Homosexuality” carefully delineates “the underground homosexual cultural connections that historically bind these two countries together” by focusing on a period stretching from post-World War II to the 1990s. She explores transnational traffic in images of homosexuality which, since the 1950s, have not only fuelled gay and lesbian cultural production in both Sweden and Finland, but also laid the foundation for how homosexuality (lesbianism included) – and, by extension, national identity – has been understood.

The tracing of such transnational flows between these two countries provides, as Juvonen points out, a novel perspective on the queer cultural history in both national contexts.

Juvonen demonstrates how at heart of this traffic in images and imagination lay the tenacious Finnish idea of homosexuality and Swedishness being intrinsically entangled, an idea propelled by Swedish sex scandals involving under-aged rent boys in the 1950s, which, as Susanna Paasonen puts it (2015, 131), “enabled the articulation of Finnish masculinity as agrarian, healthy and heterosexual” (cf. Juvonen 2002, 157–160; 2006). While in the 1950s the Finnish image of Sweden was in this sense stained by homosexuality, Juvonen also shows how this perception changed in the 1960s. Swedish progressive views on sexuality and liberation provided both inspiration and a destination for Finnish gays and lesbians – a shift which reverberates through decades of exchange and gay and lesbian organizing. Juvonen concludes that it is remarkable how histories of homosexuality in both Finland and Sweden have been “written in such a manner that a connection can be neither seen nor imagined”, cutting off the possibility of acknowledging influences that have moved across borders to sustain lesbian and gay culture and cultural production in both national contexts.

Mariah Larsson’s article “Pornography and Transnationality: The Case of Hälle, Sweden in the 1970s” moves between the current moment and histories half a century old to consider traffic in sexual commodities and sexual entertainment on the micro-level of a specific rural town and its connection to cross-border traffic. Larsson notes that the focus in recent literature on transnational histories of pornography has been on how materials have crossed national borders well beyond means of networked distribution through more or less established and legal channels (e.g., Larsson 2015, 2018; Paasonen & Saarenmaa 2022; Carter 2022). Her article, by contrast, focuses on a different kind of border crossing, one involving the bodies of people consuming porn and sexual entertainment – more specifically, people going to Hälle, a Swedish town of a modest population yet a particular reputation as a site of porn shops and strip shows. Exploring traffic across the Swedish-Norwegian border, the

article shifts the focus of inquiry away from pornographic objects and their representational stakes, towards their distribution and purchase, as well as the mobility of their consumers. This movement transgresses not merely national boundaries, but equally those concerning normative sexual behaviour.

In doing so, the article charts local histories now largely forgotten. Within these histories, the socially appropriate is balanced with minor transgressions, and rural hetero-patriarchal normativity is met with spaces for exploring sexual thrills, arousals and sights. The discussed transgressions are minor, which pushes the scales of inquiry from radical ruptures to quotidian exchanges – as in “porn-hungry” Norwegian customers frequenting Hälle. Larsson further expands her inquiry into sexual histories, from a focus on urbanism to a focus on rural trade, so that the addressed boundary work is expanded to include that between “tradition and modernity, rural countryside and urban space, small time entrepreneurship and big city investors, the social democratic welfare state together with the labor movement and aggressive capitalism”. All this entails traffic across the Swedish-Norwegian border of things considered sinful, and hence to an extent risky – a trend that has continued into present day, albeit in a more domesticated form, as trade in sweets and candy.

Finally, circling back to Sweden’s eastern neighbour, Susanna Paasonen and Mari Pajala explore the public figure of Raimo Jääskeläinen, alias Monsieur Mosse, Finland’s first out gay male celebrity. “Monsieur Mosse: A Bad Gay? Queer Celebrity in Finnish Print Media, from the 1960s to the 1980s” examines Mosse’s public image as a renown gossip, blackmailer and eventually pornographer, asking what the stakes and conditions of gay male celebrity were in a homophobic national culture. The authors show how Mosse’s high public visibility, and notoriety, created frictions with local gay and lesbian rights organizations – political alliances which had little to do with Mosse’s manifestly individualistic and luxury-soaked celebrity image. This image made use of numerous stereotypes of catty, extravagant, shallow and hedonistic male homosexuality, which led to an othering of Mosse in celebrity and gay cultures alike.

Building on extensive historical magazine sources, Paasonen and Pajala chart Mosse's celebrity trajectory, focusing on his collaborations with the sex trade in particular. This opens up questions concerning the porous boundaries of gay and male pornography in a context where periodicals aimed to reach as diverse an audience as possible, while also fighting for visibility in a highly competitive national market. Following examples already set in Sweden (Rydström 2022), "straight" magazines routinely published content classifiable as gay porn. Whether Mosse was posing in the nude, photographing naked Finnish men or exposing details of his (and other people's) love life for popular consumption, his public image embraced shamelessness as a trademark of sorts. While he is certainly no role model, Paasonen and Pajala argue that the case of Mosse helps us understand the sex press as a site of ambiguous sexual publics, as well as the spaces available for gay male celebrity around and after the decriminalization of homosexuality in Finland.

Understanding sexuality as a transnational phenomenon is neither about sweeping, global generalizations, nor about straightforward comparisons between national contexts. Sexuality, as Joanne Meyerowitz (2009, 1274) puts it, "is fundamentally about interconnection, and it is not unusual for sexual actors to transgress the boundaries constructed to constrain them". People have, across time and space, crossed national borders in pursuit of sex, and in transnational histories "sex has appeared and re-appeared as a site of pleasure and exploitation, of vexed and troubling interactions, of simultaneous regulation and unruliness" (ibid.) It continues to do so. This special issue, then, suggests that sexuality offers an intriguing basis for rethinking the connections between the national and the transnational and their connections to libidinal intensities, sexual politics and world-making. Read together, the articles of this issue provide a somewhat unusual map of recent Nordic and Baltic histories of sexuality, one that refuses to stay put. Through constant movement across borders – be they geographic, legislative, moral or desirous – these histories figure and refigure national contexts and their interconnections in partly novel ways.

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