

How I Found Myself in Finland: A Mediated Essay

Elizabeth Whitney

Do you, the observer, stay behind the lens of the camera, switch on the tape recorder, keep pen in hand? Are there limits—of respect, piety, pathos—that should not be crossed, even to leave a record?

—Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart* 1996

... queering autoethnography is an offer to difference, to disorienting and disrupting, to impermanence and change, to expansion, to disruption, and to new ontologies.

—Stacy Holman Jones and Anne M. Harris, *Queering Autoethnography* 2018

Who What When Where Why

Notes: August 1, 2015

These are some of the questions I have been asked by friends and family in the US, regarding my upcoming year in Finland:

Isn't it a homogenous culture? Isn't everyone there white?

Do they speak English?

Do a lot of people drive cars?

Is everyone wearing parkas all the time?

Finland, where is that, exactly?

Is it okay to be gay there?

They drink a lot, right?

Isn't there a period of six months where the sun doesn't shine? And then the rest of the time the sun shines all the time?

How will you do your laundry?

Are you afraid of falling through a hole in the ice?

During the 2015-2016 academic year I was a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Turku in Finland, researching arts funding and freedom of expression. I had not previously traveled to Finland, and it was only through the happy accident of reading a Vice News article about a queer feminist porn magazine being

published there, and then being connected to a professor of Gender Studies who generously wrote me a letter of invitation, that I found my way. This was the beginning of an ongoing relationship with Finland that on paper is now about an expanding research agenda, but in practice is unfairly confined to a publication plan. Finland has become an important part of my scholarly identity, and expanded my personal and professional worldview.

Since returning to the US in August 2016, I have traveled to Finland multiple times ~~because I love it so much~~ for research, with a focus on how queer and feminist artist and activist communities sustain themselves. My initial research question for my Fulbright work was this: How do Finnish artists experience freedom of expression in relation to securing funding for their work? I was interested in this question because of my own research on historical battles over public arts funding in the US, where a pervasive conservative morality has erased much of our previously existing public funding.

After a year of meeting artists and cultural workers from around the Finland, I wrote a grant to return, focusing on my interest in queer and feminist performance. I then returned for three summers ~~because I love it so much~~ to continue my research with queer and feminist performance communities and artists who organize for the annual pride festival and related performance events.

This mediated essay draws on the first three years of my research on queer and feminist artists and activists in Finland, from 2015-2018. I consider intersecting themes that include nationalism, gender identity, and public performances of queerness. I offer observations via autoethnographic methodologies, including images, video, and my personal notes, as a way to think through what is most valuable about viewing this work through a queer feminist autoethnographic lens. I also attempt to address the question as to why I keep going back to Finland, which is of no small importance given how much the desire to return has influenced me as a researcher.

During the pandemic I wasn't sure that I would ever be able to return to Finland, because it seemed like the world was ending, and it certainly did, for many. I also wasn't sure about the relevance of my research anymore, because what did anything I had to say about artists in Finland have to offer a world in chaos? As I reviewed my research materials, I wondered if there might be

Elizabeth Whitney is an Associate Professor in Speech, Communication, and Theatre Arts at the Borough of Manhattan Community College in the City University of New York, and a Visiting Researcher in the Department of Cultures at University of Helsinki. Research for this article was supported by funding from the CUNY Research Foundation and a BMCC Faculty Development Grant. This article was written with support from many friends and colleagues, with special thanks to feedback from the Cultural Studies Research Seminar at University of Helsinki.

something valuable in it, after all. I had spent so much time learning about the public and private funding systems, meeting artists, attending events, visiting museums, and struggling with the humiliating exercise of trying to learn Finnish. Surely there was something useful to say, at the very least, about the process of my research.

I was able to return during a sabbatical that took place after a year and a half of remote learning, so I was somewhat disoriented. With the help of my colleague who invited me to be a visiting scholar at University of Helsinki, I managed to negotiate the bureaucracy of securing a residence permit, made especially complicated by new travel restrictions.

Initially I was worried that too much time had gone by, because I'm looking at this material now with insights that only hindsight can allow. I've spent too much time in Finland to be as fresh as I once was, so I am purposefully noting the passage of time. "Remembering is never a completely personal cognition, but structured by the public understanding of what can be remembered and how," write Kaisa Ilmonen and Tuula Juvonen in the introduction to a special issue of *SQS* on the queer politics of memory (vii). My work is shaped as much by the memories afforded me by my field notes, as it is by the Finnish friends, communities, and institutions I have interacted with over the last seven years. Thus, I write with the caveat that I am both in the present and past. I am thinking through my methods of documentation, as well as the time that has passed since I documented these events. What was it I thought was so important about these particular things, and how does that resonate now, years later?

Finland showed up in my life out of nowhere. I could not have predicted it. It was an entirely unexpected relationship, like a chance meeting in a bookstore (I need to believe that people still meet in bookstores). Or, maybe Finland was more like a friend of a friend you run into on the street, and decide to have coffee, and then dinner, and find yourself slowly wondering why you did not get to know them sooner.

I like Finland. It is a place where I enjoy spending time as a researcher—I find that people are open to discussion and interested in my questions, because research is considered a valuable pursuit. Unlike the United States, large percentages of people with Ph.D.s are not living below the poverty line and sleeping in their cars. The social safety net is vast and impressive. It is also a place where I enjoy spending time personally, in the embodied sense of being a researcher who lives in a human body. It is beautiful and quiet, the food is fresh, and there are endless forests to walk in and lakes to swim in--lakes so clean you can drink out of some of them. Interesting things are happening in Finland with regard to creative community responses to the sorts of nationalism and related social ills that are also increasingly present in the US.

Of course, Finland is not perfect, because no place is perfect, but more on that soon.

I *like* Finland. Sometimes I *love* Finland. How do I talk about my *feelings* about Finland in my academic work; the affective result of my academic labors (Cowan & Rault; Ahmed 2004)? The best way I know to approach the stickiness of having feelings in academia, is to employ a queer feminist lens and use autoethnographic methods to address personal experience in research. While ethnography is a well-established method in a wide range of disciplines, autoethnography still carries mystique for many researchers outside of limited areas in the humanities. It is an ‘other’ among methods, and in this way, it lends itself to queer scholarship (Adams & Bolen; Eguchi; Gingrich-Philbrook; Henningham; Jones & Harris; LeMaster, et. al.; Rodriguez-Dorans).

Autoethnography purposefully privileges relationality and subjectivity. In their article, “Living Autoethnography: Connecting Life and Research,” authors Faith Wambura Ngunjiri, Kathy-Ann C. Hernandez, and Heewon Change explain that, “Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that utilizes data about self and its context to gain an understanding of the connectivity between self and others within the same context.” The emphasis on the relational element in autoethnography offers me a valuable method for thinking about international research as an intercultural practice.

By foregrounding relationality, autoethnography offers unique insights for queer feminist studies in intercultural contexts. Researchers Tony Adams and Jimmie Manning describe autoethnography as a method that foregrounds “a researcher’s subjectivity, reflexivity, and personal experience (auto-) in an attempt to represent (-graphy) cultural experiences (ethno-).” They go on to cite the anthology *Contemporary British Autoethnography*, noting that “autoethnography developed in response to social research that privileges “objectivity,” “researcher neutrality,” and “stable meanings” (351). What I am working to articulate here certainly includes, though also moves beyond, these traditional academic explanations, because it requires considering both my personal and academic subjectivity as I move across international and intercultural contexts.

Being in transit as a researcher is to be motivated by movement—in the case of my research, it is movement between nations, and between and among subcultures within these nations. In other words, in this research, I am an insider/outsider (Acker; Dwyer and Buckle; Meriam, et. al.; Mullings; Hendrix; Opayemi; Whitney) and I move between and among cultures to which I both do and don’t belong. While I am queer-identified and a feminist, of course these are not monolithic categories. The cultural markers associated with queerness and feminism vary greatly between (and within) the United States and Finland, and thus, my participation in these communities shifts in each context.

I use autoethnography as a queer feminist methodology to take up the question of knowledge formation. What I mean is, I am thinking about what a queer feminist autoethnographic research process look like, and how I can creatively document it for publication. In a talk I saw Sarah Ahmed give at NYU some years ago on her writing process for *Living a Feminist Life*, she joked that

rolling your eyes is equal to feminist pedagogy, and raising your eyebrows is equal to lesbian feminist pedagogy.

What gesture could I make to signify a queer feminist pedagogy, I wonder?
These are some of the questions that keep me up at night:

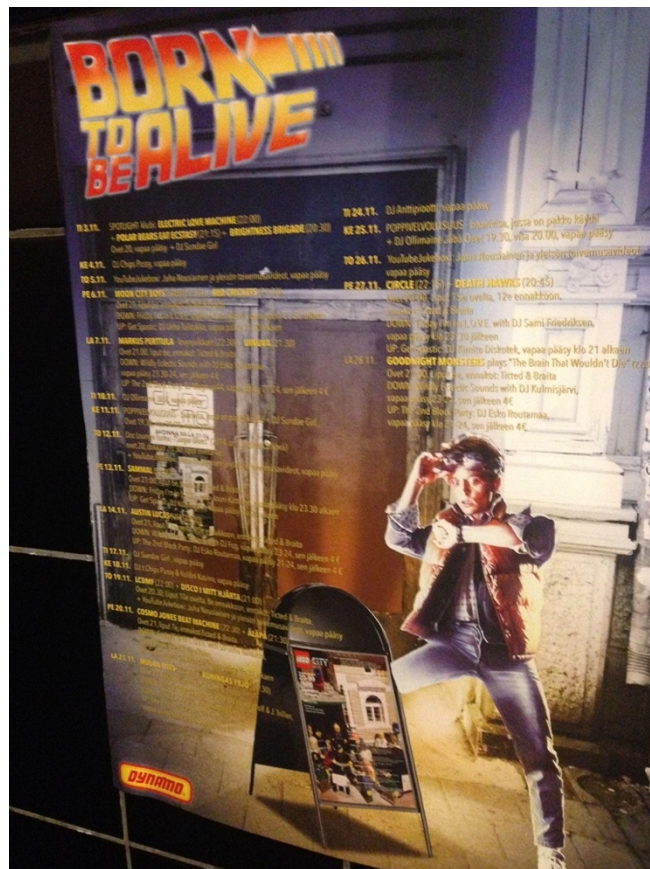
- What is the authenticity/authority of the autoethnographic gaze in queer feminist research?
- How does my positioning as an insider/outsider in the communities I write about effect my work?
- How do both the being-in-a-place and the documenting-being-in-a-place shape my research?
- What is my relationship as a queer feminist to the (often) colonizing practice of ethnography?
- What creative methodologies can I employ when preparing this work for publication (curated field notes, digital storytelling, photographic essay)?

I'm looking for the best ways to qualify the *embodied experience* of my research practice. In other words, I want to get academically romantic, or perhaps, romantically academic, about this work. After all, the life of the mind is lived in the places where the body takes us, and the affective result of my research is that I am in a long distance relationship with a country.

I am haunted by the ubiquitous academic questions, Why this research? Why now? BECAUSE I FEEL LIKE IT, IS WHY, I scream silently inside my head. Instead, I make lists of what I think are official sounding reasons and hope they will suffice:

1. As a queer feminist researcher I am interested in the cultural conditions that make it possible for Finnish queer and feminist activists and artists to operate efficaciously in public space. Funding and other cultural support means that a wide public is not only not suspicious of, but actually knowledgeable about and engaged in arts and activism.
2. Finland is enigmatically positioned between East and West: a moderating presence, if you will, for political tensions between the US and Russia, which is a point of great interest for US audiences—even if we aren't always aware of this being one of the reasons for our mythological fascination with Finland. Finland has hosted summits between the US and Russia, acting as a kind of mediating force.

3. We in the US are intrigued by Finland—a country with a small population and an impressive collective energy. There is a long history of immigration from Finland to the US, from established Finnish-American communities in the upper midwest to more recent and continuing movement to places like South Florida and Arizona. Finland is often in the US news because of its high rankings in education and quality of life, consideration of climate change, and consistent ranking for the past five years as “the happiest country in the world.” Finland knows how to manage itself as a country, and Finnish residents have agency in that management.
4. Finland is equally as intrigued by the US, as evidenced by the vast amount of US popular culture present in Finland. Consider, for example, this advertisement that plays on the classic US film, *Back to the Future* (1989). While the text is for something entirely different, the font design and image of the character from the film are unmistakable.



Club poster, Turku, Finland 2016

It is common to go into a business or turn on the radio and hear US music. US hip-hop is a common soundtrack in bars and restaurants, and US popular culture references are ubiquitous. English-language films from the US are shown regularly in theatres. English words have made their way into the Finnish language, like *biitsi* (beach), *faksi* (fax), and *jenkki* (Yankee). In fact, one of the most popular flavors of gum in Finland is called *Jenkki*, and takes its name from the soldiers who gave gum to children during World War II. Because of the close relationship between our countries, some Finns have an unwavering belief that the US is finally going to get itself together.

Notes, May 15 2016:

A friend was visiting from the U.S. and we went to one of my favorite bars in Turku that is housed in an old apteeki (apothecary). All of the original wood cabinets with drawers are in there, they have an impressive craft beer and whiskey selection, and the bartender will tell you the history of the building. We were sitting in a room in the back of the bar (Finnish bars often tend to have multiple rooms, which gives them an old club feeling), and a woman who had heard us speaking English introduced herself, asking where we were from. She was an artist who used to work for the university, and was really interested in the fact that we were from New York. She also wanted to assure us that she knew that there was no way the US would be foolish enough to vote Donald Trump into office. "I don't have faith in God," she said, "but I have faith in the American people."

My feeling for Finland quite literally moves me, both geographically, and emotionally. There are many ways to be moved. One can be moved forcefully, or one can be moved by a mere suggestion, internal or external, that one should move. In this case, I am moved by desire for place. As an autoethnographer, I am concerned with how I move *through* my research, and how I am moved *by* my research. As a queer feminist autoethnographer, I am concerned with the romantic force of that movement.

Ethnographic research presumes preparation: a research question. In my case there was the official question about freedom of expression, and then my subtextual question regarding what sort of queer and feminist performance work was happening in Finland. Also, I just generally wanted to know what queer life was like there, because I had no idea, other than having read the article online about the queer feminist porn magazine.

Ethnographers prepare in a multitude of ways, negotiating what Brie Plump and Patricia Geist-Martin call our "interpersonal liminality," which is the space of deciding how we will identify and interact with others in our research context. This is the challenge that Ruth Behar presents to engaged researchers in the epigraph with which I began this essay. Behar's question challenges my

interpersonal liminality, by asking me to consider the limits of my engagement with my research context. I find this question useful, because the concept of engagement gives me a framework to think past the binary of researcher/subject. When I am engaged in an activity, or engaged with a community, it becomes very difficult to maintain an illusion of objectivity. This is good, because I don't want objectivity, I want engaged scholarship.

Ethnographic researchers are taught that we must inhabit and experience our surroundings for minimum periods of time in order to develop enough expertise to write about them--iconically illustrated, for example, by Dwight Conquergood's work on the bonds among Chicago gang members, or his research on Hmong people living in refugee camps (1992; 1988). While ethnography necessitates an objective distance between researcher and research subject, autoethnography encourages researchers to blur or even erase distinctions between who is conducting the research and who or what is being researched. This slippage allows autoethnographic researchers to complicate the concept of "other" by understanding it as a changeable subjectivity. In order to avoid solipsism, autoethnographic researchers ask: through what subject position do I enter the space and the conversation? Joni L. Jones refers to this as "the self as other" and Tami Spry invites the practice of "unsettling the I" by asking the question, "who are we?"

Subjectivity and time become intertwined in the slippage of self and other. The more time spent in a place, the more the researcher's understanding of the space changes--and the space changes the researcher. Even though our initial observations give way to what we perceive as more layered and complex understandings of our cultural context, there is also something valuable about first impressions. In other words, those first feelings and images risk sensory disappearance, even if they are recorded in notes. While the fleeting moments of initial engagement are sometimes devalued in a traditional academic context, they can be revelatory when seen through a queer feminist lens.

In what follows, I consider five excerpts from my field notes that exemplify my embodied experience of doing research in Finland. My aim is to challenge my own academic positioning--the one that assumes, even demands that we must dwell in the space of knowing at all times. What happens when, upon arrival, I must say, *en tiedä?*¹

1. The Feeling of Arriving

During my very first week in Finland, I wandered around the small city of Turku in which I had landed, trying to understand new social codes. I had learned how to say three things in Finnish: "Hei" (hello), "Tervetuloa," (welcome), and "Turku on kaunis kaupunki" (Turku is a beautiful city). While

¹ I don't know.

it is true that most people speak English in Finland, they do not speak it to each other, so I was lost in a swirl of unfamiliar conversations. There was a pleasure in this for me, as I was freed from participating directly in what was happening around me. Of course, this also meant that most of the time I had no idea what was going on, and was left to my own assumptions.

Notes: September 4, 2015

One of the things that initially strikes me is a street in between my apartment and the bus station. I call it the sex street, because there are so many massage places. I asked a new feminist Finnish scholar friend about these businesses, called hieronta (masseuse). One of the most notable offered 'lesboshow,' although I guessed that these were not for lesbians, but performances of lesbian fantasies for heterosexual men.

"Is this something particular to our city or is it more about the sex industry in Finland?" I asked her over Finnish lager and tiny fried herrings at a neighborhood bar.

"Interesting question," she said, "after living here for a while I quit noticing, but yes I think it is more about Finland. And it's definitely not for lesbians."

"Write these things down immediately," she urged me, "Write down everything you observe when first arriving, because after even a month all of your impressions will fade and everything will look different to you."

There is much to say about the prevalence of these businesses in many cities in Finland, and so much of which I was unaware. I wondered about the circumstances of the people who work there, and the customers who spend time there. What sort of cultural conditions would make this possible in Finland, this sign that looks like it belongs in 1970s Times Square in New York City? The only clues in the sign were that they were appealing to some sort of fantasy about how lesbians might behave in a private space, and that there could be massage involved.

As my friend and colleague pointed out in the above excerpt from my field notes, there is something valuable in the initial glance at a new environment. It is a glance, because I am moving—the above notes are bound by the time constraints of one week. It's true that after spending much more time here, I do not notice these signs anymore when I pass them, and if I do notice them, they have become a normal part of the urban landscape.



Sweet Ladies, Turku, Finland 2016

The autoethnographic glance is quick. It is not immersive in a lingering, contemplative way, which is not to say that it is not engaged or that it is superficial, or cannot be trusted. It is meaningful precisely because it is impressionistic. In order to find value in these first impressions I must be willing to do three things: challenge any so-called authenticity related to ethnographic research, trust myself as an observer who employs a subjective authority, and recognize the significance of meaning in first impressions, allowing the impermanence of it to lead me to the next step in the research.

2. Clowns Against Nationalism

In order to connect with artists and activists in Finland, I published a letter inviting participation in my project. The letter was on my website, and colleagues helped me by circulating it to arts organizations and artists they knew personally. In a country with a population of just under five million people, with most concentrated in the Southern half, word spread quickly and I was in touch with many people within a few months.

One of the most enjoyable moments of this year was my connection with a group of clowns called the [LOLdiers of Odin](#). The LOLdiers of Odin are a parodic take on The Soldiers of Odin, a self-appointed citizen watchdog group who patrol the streets of various Finnish cities, profiling those who they think are refugees—which amounts to anyone they do not perceive as white or native Finns or Finnish citizens. While the Soldiers of Odin claim Odin as their

namesake—a Norse mythological figure who is also embraced by white supremacist movements in the U.S.—the Loldiers of Odin push back by using the well-known internet acronym “lol,” most commonly meaning “laugh out loud.”

In their article about anti-racist demonstrations in Finland, Anna Rastas and Elina Seye explain that, “The Loldiers of Odin’s main anti-racist strategy was to break down the threatening image of the Soldiers of Odin by embarrassing them and their aggressive masculinity” (599). While the Soldiers fancy themselves vigilante fighters in a war of their own making, the Loldiers ask us to laugh in the face of toxic White masculinity. The practice of clowning projects absurdity onto the soldiers, as well as using humor to de-escalate a potentially violent situation.



Loldiers of Odin picnic, Tampere, Finland 2016

Like all of Europe and the UK, Finland is struggling with nationalist sentiment, and The LOLDiers began their spontaneous clowning protests in response to growing anti-immigration and anti-refugee sentiment (Cox; Ferguson; Sundén & Paasonen). Between 2015 and 2017 the number of asylum seekers in Finland rose dramatically, and both the Soldiers and the LOLDiers are indicative of political polarization around this issue. For some, the LOLDiers were an affirmation of a diversifying Finland, and for others, “their performance

reinforced solidarity among like-minded individuals [. . .]” (Laaksonen, et. al). Their protest tactics were even featured in the New York Times, in an article aptly titled, “A Three Ring Circus in Finland.” The main photo featuring a picture of the Soldiers of Odin vigilante patrol shows them only from the back. They are wearing matching black jackets, embroidered with the Soldiers of Odin insignia, like a scene from the 1970s film *The Warriors*.



Loldiers of Odin picnic, Tampere, Finland 2016

The LOLdiers relied heavily on Facebook to promote their appearances. Social networks were invaluable in my Finnish research, and helped immensely in allowing me to connect with artists all around the country, and so I started by following the Loldiers on Facebook. I sent them a message, and then we began corresponding by email and I invited them to participate in my project via a formal interview. They responded, in multiple and playful sizes of fonts, that they could not do a formal interview because this was a project for humans, and they were clowns—was there another way that they could participate?

Dearestmost Whtn Lzbth Dr,

Very much thank you very much for your kindest invitation. But. We are a bunch of clowns. Artistic as we are, this invitation invites humans, not clowns.

Never-the-less, researchery is a clown's-heart-warming activity. Maybe You Can Find Out Another Way For Collaboration? aWay more suitable for clowns!

Bestest
a Loldier

As with their activism, the Loldiers utilized play in our correspondences. Like other performance protest groups who use laughter and play to address serious issues — The Guerilla Girls and The Yes Men, for example — the Loldiers always appear in costume and never break character.

The clowns are having the TIME of their LIVES as always!!!
Plkniccing have we been only disguised as hu-mans - clever, huh? but did you take notice, WE the LOLDIERS got an AWARD of the BEST CLOWN in a CLOWN FEST in HELSINKI?!? How 'bout that!

You dear can be ab-so-lute-ly certain that we WILL invite you to join us whenever we are out again! Maybe on a beach - the other patrol could be there toO!

The LOLDiers playfulness reminds me that research can be playful, too. This was especially important when I lost all of the video I had from the day of the snow picnic. I made the following digital story as an homage to my missing footage:

[Visit liminalities.net/18-4/finland.html to watch the digital story, “LOL”]

3. Performing Pride

I attended events at Pride during 2017 and 2018. Helsinki Pride has grown exponentially in the last ten years, and now has around 100,000 people attending. The day of Pride features a march and an enormous picnic in the park with food and music. It is important to note that this is a march, and not a parade, as is common in the US. While the point of Pride in both countries is political awareness, Pride in Finland tends toward political activism and protest.



Karhupuisto (Bear Park) annual drag race, Helsinki, Finland 2018

Suomi, the most widely spoken language in Finland, which is known in English as Finnish, has only one pronoun. To clarify: the pronoun “hän” is used regardless of a person’s gender. The fact that this is a given in the Finnish language negates any argument ever used by an editor of an English language publication that “they” is confusing to readers as a singular pronoun. “This is Finland,” a promotional agency funded by The Ministry for Foreign Affairs, developed the following posters which continue to be featured on [a Hän website](#). The website includes historical information about the use of the pronoun, and even a short film about equality and opportunity in Finland. In the posters, there is a knowing wink aimed in the direction of English language speakers who continue to resist the use of “they.”



THANK YOU, ENGLISH

You've given the Finnish language plenty of words, such as:

BAARI
bar

BISNES
business

FLIRTTAILLA
to flirt

MATSI
match

hän
EST. 1543

WORKING TOWARDS
A BIAS-FREE WORLD

Here's one Finnish word in return:

hän
EST. 1543

It's she and he, all at once.
It's the inclusive Finnish personal pronoun for equal opportunity.
finland.fi/hän
[#hän](https://twitter.com/hän) [#thisisfinland](https://twitter.com/thisisfinland)

Hän Poster

☰

THANK YOU, ENGLISH

You've given the Finnish language plenty of words, such as:

TIIMI
team

TAKLATA
to tackle

BLEISERI
blazer

Here's one Finnish word in return:

hän
EST. 1543

It's she and he, all at once.
It's the inclusive Finnish personal pronoun for equal opportunity.
finland.fi/hän
[#hän](https://twitter.com/hän) [#thisisfinland](https://twitter.com/thisisfinland)

WORKING TOWARDS
hän
EST. 1543
A BIAS-FREE WORLD

Hän Poster



Kaupungin Naiset choir concert, Helsinki, Finland 2017

Perhaps no moment more clearly evokes for me the feeling, or, affective result, of doing ethnographic research in queer spaces than hearing the Helsinki choir, Kaupungin Naiset perform their original arrangement of selected text from Adrienne Rich's "Transcendental Etude." Kaupungin Naiset roughly translates to the city women, and they are a queer women's choir, open to a wide range of gender identification.

There is a pervasive melancholy in much of Finnish choral music, and the arrangement of Rich's text beautifully illustrates this aesthetic. The sense of free falling through language both familiar and strange is present as I listen to a classic US feminist text sung with a Finnish sensibility. I am reminded that my own insider-outsider experience as a researcher in an international queer space is sometimes lonely when I understand little of what is going on around me, and at the same time challenges me to engage in the transcendence of cutting away my old ways that Rich is referencing.

Listening to this song, I experience what I would previously have called, "big feelings," meaning, complex and intense. I experience waves of simultaneous desire and nostalgia, enormous joy and deep sadness, and a queer longing for things I have only imagined but that are made to seem real and personal to me in the moment of evocation. And as Sarah Ahmed reminds me,

“Queer feelings may embrace a sense of discomfort [...]” and this is not at all a bad thing, but instead offers us, “[...] an excitement in the face of the uncertainty of where the discomfort may take us” (155). Fortunately, as is often the case, there is actually a single Finnish word that perfectly sums up all I have just described: *filistely*. Or, in the first person I might say, *filistelen*, to mean that I am having these big and complex feelings about this event.

The concert space where Kaupungin Naiset performed as part of the week of Helsinki Pride events was in a beautiful historic building in the Senate Square area of Helsinki. The hall was marked as familiar to me by the luxurious austerity I have begun to recognize in historic Finnish architecture. If luxurious austerity seems a contradiction in terms, it is, and it is also indicative of so much of what I’ve experienced spending time in Finland. So much like the concept of *filistely*, it is a complication of experience that forces me to reconcile contradictions.

Sitting in the historic space of the concert hall, surrounded by hundreds of queers—queers with hair in rainbow colors, queers with shaved heads, queers with children, very young queers and much older queers—I was amazed by what I perceived as the contradictions of the experience. Everyone sat with rapt attention for an hour and a half, with one short intermission, during which most did not leave the room. The silence in the space while the choir performed and the focus of the audience was intense. It sang in my ears along with the music. No one seemed to be moving or even breathing, just listening.

Afterward the Finnish friend with whom I attended spoke to someone she knew in the choir, who said, “that was a wonderful concert, the audience was just so into it and with us the whole time.” And here is one more rich contradiction I experience in Finnish culture—participation can mean many things, including absolute silence, and silence is a fascinating and complicated concept. Silence can be burdensome, beautiful, oppressive, generative, powerful, painful, and strategic. Silence might also be an opportunity, an absence, or a presence. It can be a refusal to engage, a protest, a moment of formation or permeability, an open signifier, and make space for a spiritual moment.

Listening to Adrienne Rich’s text arranged with a Finnish sensibility entirely changes the sound and sometimes the meaning of the English language. Inflection communicates meaning, and shifting syllabic emphasis, vowel shapes, and consonants either more punctuated or faded changes the communication of that meaning. As an example, in this song, the word *disenthral* becomes *disenthral*, *bestow* becomes *bestow*, *choruses* becomes *choruses*.

In the digital story below, the text appears and fades like these pronunciations, illustrating that there is no single way to speak a language. I can listen to the recording of Kaupungen Naiset singing the selection from “Transcendental Etudes” while attempting to follow along with the written text,

or I can simply listen, and hear an entirely different language—one that is hybrid and indicative of the cultural movement I experience in my research.

[Visit liminalities.net/18-4/finland.html to watch the digital story, “Transcendaental Etude”]

4. Road Trip

August of 2018 was my third trip to Finland, and I learned the expression, “kolmas kerta toden sanoo,” which is equivalent to an expression I grew up with in the US, “the third time is the charm.” In suomi it translates more closely as, “the third time tells the truth.” Perhaps because of my superstitious southern upbringing, I have romantic feelings about the rule of threes.

Three trips to Finland, three years into my research, and three different interactions with a place that was continuing to evolve for me as a site of auto/ethnographic inquiry. True to the Finnish expression, my third visit to Finland was the charm. The cultural complexities of a country were slowly being revealed to me. I understood differently because I was experiencing differently. At times Finland’s landscape seemed to be rapidly shifting, moving toward financial austerity and political conservatism, particularly with regard to increasing cultural diversification. And then I would be surprised by the election of an all female governing body, and election polls that include environmentally progressive questions like, Should meat be taxed at higher rates, and, Should fossil fuel burning cars be illegal?

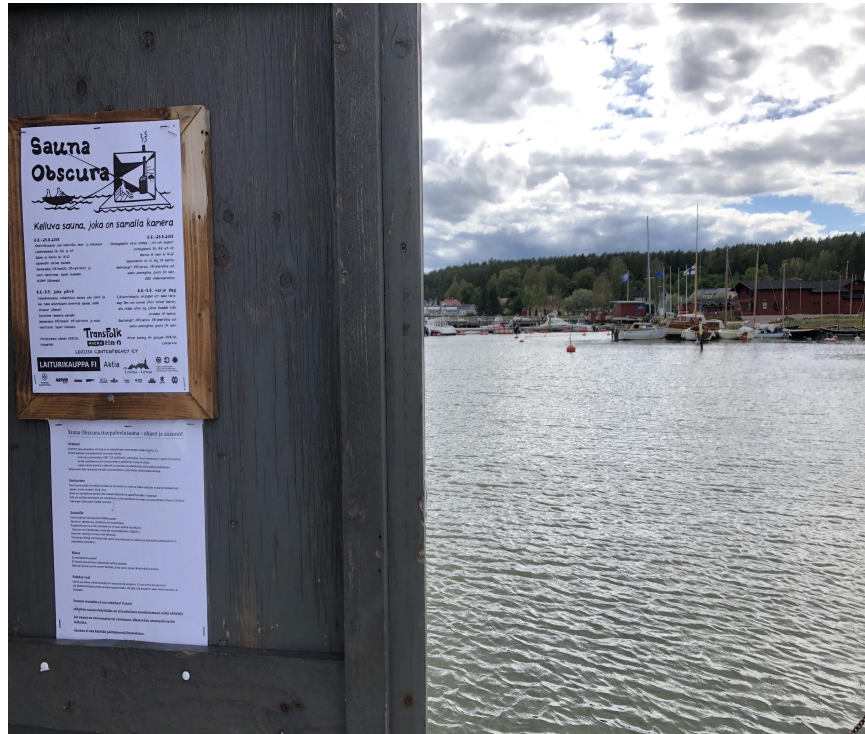
My friend Johanna offered to take me on a five-day road trip through Eastern Finland, where she grew up, and I jumped at this opportunity. I hadn’t spent as much time in that part of the country, and she organized our route and booked rooms at various cottages along the way. We ate smoked fish and rye bread for breakfast, and swam in a crystal clear, sandy-bottomed lake after a morning sauna.

We went to a clearance/odd lots store on the Russian border, and bought plastic things we didn’t need. She took me to her family’s house in the countryside and we had salmon soup for lunch while her parents and the neighbors chatted in their regional dialect and I smiled and nodded. Her mother showed me how to salt salmon with dill, so that it could be sliced after it was preserved, and then we rode our bikes down a dirt road to her family’s sauna cottage on a small lake.

Because it was summer, there was a pride-related art exhibit in a city we would be passing on the way back home. [Heidi Lunnaba](#), an artist I met previously during my research, created an interactive sauna installation in Loviisa, which is a city about an hour east of Helsinki. I made the following digital story using my notes and original video I filmed on our boat trip to the sauna. The ambient sounds of the oars, water, and wind are amplified by the

silence around us; the creaking of a door as it opens, and the wooden floors beneath our feet.

[Visit liminalities.net/18-4/finland.html to watch the digital story, “Journey to Obscurity”]



Sauna Obscura, an invitational/interactive public art project on trans identity, Loviisa, Finland 2018

5. Against Nationalism, Part Two

While visiting friends in Turku, where I had lived during my Fulbright year, I attended an anti-Nazi march. Nazis were visibly organizing in the city, posting anti-immigrant fliers. This is one of those moments where I know too much, though, because I am unfortunately no longer surprised by blatant Nazi propoganda in Finland. Or the United States, for that matter, where Nazi imagery is openly displayed at marches, and even referenced by elected officials.



Anti-Nazi March, Turku, Finland 2018

I've talked with colleagues who work in Middle-Eastern and Jewish Studies in Finland, and have been the targets of anti-semitic hate speech. I've seen "White Pride" flyers stapled to trees in Helsinki, and a giant swastika painted on the door of a building in a park. I'm trying my best to write as myself from four years ago, when I was just learning that Nazis were organizing here, but it's hard to unsee what you've seen, especially with regard to fascism.

On the day of the Turku march, there were thousands of people assembled. Turku has a reputation for being an activist city, because of the university, and I met up with friends from the university. As we joined the group of thousands walking up the hill to the beginning of the march, a friend pointed to a small group of people clustered by a tree, next to a group of police officers. They weren't in any sort of matching uniforms like the Soldiers of Odin, just a bunch of angry looking White dudes in hoodies and jeans.

"Are they being kept away from us by the police," I asked, "or being protected by the police?"

"Hard to tell," my friend said, "there have been online forums where police have posted sentiments supporting white supremacy."

I imagine the only people who don't find Nazis terrifying are Nazis. I definitely find them terrifying, which is why I created this short digital story using footage from the march. I imagine time shifting, here, because when I see the use of swastikas I am no longer sure of what year it is. Am I in the present moment, worrying about Nazis in Finland, or Florida, or any number of other places, or am I watching footage from the 1930s and thinking about how scared my Jewish family in Romania, Poland, and New York must have been?

[Visit liminalities.net/18-4/finland.html to watch the digital story,
“Turku Ilman Natseja”]

Reflections

During my first year of living in Finland it seemed Utopian. Especially after ten years in New York City, it was a pleasant opposite world. The first time I heard someone beating a rug in the courtyard outside my building, I had to learn that it was not the sound of gunshots.

“How one listens determines what one hears,” Patrick Santoro reminds me, writing about his process of making autoethnographic performance work (237). In the first article I wrote about my research, I used autoethnographic methods to write about my experiences in queer and feminist spaces in Finland. In particular, I imagined Finland as a queer utopia by examining my fieldnotes and media documentation of events. The point of the essay was not to argue that Finland is in fact a queer utopia, but rather to consider utopian promise in the queer spaces I visited.

When I wrote the article on utopia during the first year of my research, I allowed myself to imagine something that I knew, after time, would likely become impossible for me--because it is inevitable that as we get to know a place, just like a person, we see more of the complications and less of the romance. Three years later, I made the following observations:

Notes, July 21 2018

During my post-utopian research trips to Finland, I have experienced the following:

I spent an hour shaving the hairballs off of a cat belonging to a famous Finnish author for whom I was petsitting

A drunken and sunburned man grabbed my handlebars and screamed at me when I accidentally rode my bike in the pedestrian lane: “THIS IS FORBIDDEN HERE”

My brother and I took the last ferry back from Tallinn and saw in full force the evidence of Finnish alcoholism with people passed out on the floors and sofas and walking into walls

I went to a party where people were drinking themselves incoherent (how are they still standing? I thought)

I went to a party where I heard homophobic jokes

I read a news article about the police in Helsinki stopping people and demanding their passports because they “looked like foreigners.”

I am often asked by people in the US what it is like to spend time in Finland. Of course, Finland is a country populated by humans. Some people are awful and some are wonderful and everyone is complicated. I find it to be a dynamic place committed to innovative solutions to impending global challenges. Climate change and conservation are government priorities. Violent crime is stunningly low. Nature is considered a part of daily life and cities often feel like giant parks. Infrastructure is well funded, public transportation is reliable, and higher education is free for all EU citizens. Like much of the world, Finland also struggles with rising populism, but it is a minority voice and countered by a commitment to diversification as key to a healthy society.

Finland continues to be an important site of inspiration for my research and I am developing grant applications to continue funding future work there. I’m particularly intrigued by the concept of this supposed “happiness” that exists there, and it’s a subject of my next research project. I don’t think happiness is the correct word, though, it’s too ephemeral. People in Finland are generally closer to content than happy. In a tumultuous world, it’s easy to see the high quality of daily life there. In my continued research, I will explore this search for contentment and balance.

I will conclude by sharing a Finnish expression, “oppia ikä kaikki.” It translates directly to mean that our years are full of learning. It’s something like the English expression, “live and learn,” although I recall hearing that as a child as more of a reminder to pay attention. I think the Finnish version reminds us that we learn through life growth.

In the same talk I mentioned earlier by Sarah Ahmed, she said that accepting a system is to stop it from working. I have accepted Finland as a figment of my utopian imagination, and in doing so, I have allowed myself to grow as a researcher. Finland is different because I am different. The relationship is evolving.

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