

Introduction

Queering National Histories

WHAT IS IT like to live a queer life in the fringes of the Nordic region? While the Nordic countries are frequently characterized as progressive and LGBTQ+-affirming societies, those with insider perspectives recognize the substantial historical and contemporary disparities between metropolitan centres such as Copenhagen or Stockholm and the peripheral regions throughout the area. Despite geographical variations, queer lives and histories in Finland, Iceland, and Norway share significant commonalities: our historical narratives are constructed off-centre.

The genesis of this special issue can be traced to the summer of 2018, when the 12th Nordic Women's and Gender History Conference was held in Oulu, Finland. During the conference, three Finnish and three Icelandic scholars organized a panel funded by Opstart entitled "Queer History on the Margins of the Nordic Region." This panel examined Nordic queer history from Finnish and Icelandic perspectives to account for the diverse experiences and developments across different Nordic countries. The participants included the editors of this special issue, Elsi Hyttinen and Íris Ellenberger, along with contributing authors Ásta Kristín Benediktsdóttir, Hafdís Erla Hafsteinsdóttir, Riikka Taavetti, and Tuula Juvonen. That same year, Tone Hellesund organized a session on lesbian history in the Nordic countries at the 34th Nordic Ethnology Conference in Uppsala, with participation from Íris Ellenberger and Tuula Juvonen.

Funding from the research hub Reimagining Norden in an Evolving World (ReNEW) subsequently enabled the continuation of this scholarly dialogue in Reykjavík in September 2019, where the Finnish and Icelandic scholars organized a workshop and an open seminar on queer history. During these meetings, it became evident that Finland's and Iceland's queer histories share numerous characteristics due to their marginal positions within the Nordic region, despite being on the region's opposite ends. To explore these similarities and differences further, the group expanded to include Tone Hellesund from the University of Bergen and Elisabet Lund Engebretsen from the University of Stavanger, thereby incorporating a Norwegian dimension to the examination of Nordic peripheries.

In spring 2020, the research group successfully secured a NOS-HS networking grant from the Finnish Academy (now Nordplus) for a project titled "Queering National Histories." Central to this project was a collaboration among scholars from Iceland, Finland, and Norway that utilized marginality as an analytical lens to investigate how history is deployed in contemporary national narratives, discourses, and memory institutions. A significant concern among the researchers was that existing scholarship on Nordic queer history is predominantly produced within national interpretive frameworks, thereby susceptible to methodological nationalism. While acknowledging nationally specific historical developments, we argued that examining Nordic queer history from diverse marginal perspectives could illuminate which aspects of these histories and their contemporary representations are nation-specific and which transcend national boundaries.

Between spring 2022 and fall 2023, the research group organized three seminars addressing the project's central themes: "Sources for Queer History Writing" (Tampere), "Modes of Queer Analysis of the Past" (Reykjavík), and "Queering National Histories" (Turku/Helsinki). The latter theme also constitutes the focus of this special issue, particularly in its examination of queer history's representation in museums and commemorative events, as well as case studies on queering established narratives of queer history. The collective scholarly objective is

to challenge the heteronormative underpinnings of the conventional progress narrative – from a repressive past toward an enlightened present – which often remains unquestioned in both public discourse and historical research. Furthermore, the researchers aim to expose and contest the mechanisms that perpetuate an understanding of national pasts as inherently and exclusively heterosexual.

Throughout our network's collaborative efforts, we consistently returned to the realization that engaging with queer history constitutes an active intellectual intervention: One must develop methodological approaches to disrupt hegemonic national narratives that recognize only binary gender configurations and a single heteronormative sexuality. To this end, our primary analytical focus centres on the narrativization of historical knowledge. Concurrently, it is imperative to identify new archival sources and generate novel frameworks that recover marginalized narratives overlooked by conventional historiography. Furthermore, we must deploy memory studies methodologies to preserve oral histories currently accessible to researchers and future generations. Significantly, however, traces of queer history are not exclusively confined to obscure repositories. Ásta Benediktsdóttir's contribution to this special issue demonstrates that queer historical material sometimes exists "in plain sight," embedded within canonical national literary traditions. This requires developing nuanced approaches that provide contextual frameworks for phenomena previously rendered unintelligible or deliberately unnamed.

The special issue commences with Benediktsdóttir's article, "Woman in Pants: Salka Valka and Halldór Laxness' Queer Modernism." This study examines the novel *Salka Valka* by the internationally acclaimed Icelandic author and Nobel laureate Halldór Laxness, alongside his unfinished Hollywood screenplay, analysing the discursive formations of sexuality and agency embodied by the character Salka Valka. The investigation interrogates which textual and cultural resources were available during Laxness's historical context that enabled the creation of a character who functions simultaneously as a compelling literary heroine – venerated by Icelanders for nearly a century – and as a significant subject of contemporary queer theoretical inquiry.

Íris Ellenberger's article, "Hanging by a Thread: A Critical Assessment of a Queer Intervention into the Narratives and Practices of the National Museum of Iceland," provides a methodologically rigorous and analytically insightful examination of researcher-activist endeavours to challenge heteronormative historiography within Iceland's premier national heritage institution. Ellenberger spearheaded a collaborative researcher-activist initiative that developed a queer guide for the museum's permanent exhibition, implemented in both textual and audio formats. "The Rainbow Thread" rendered visible the epistemological junctures where national historical narratives systematically elide alternative perspectives and demonstrated how heteronormative interpretative frameworks frequently generate analytical conclusions about historical artifacts that do not inherently substantiate contemporary heterosexuality as a dominant organizational paradigm.

Drawing methodological inspiration from the National Museum of Iceland's "Rainbow Thread," Tuula Juvonen implemented a comparable intervention in Finland. In her article, "Interpreting Queer Heritage: The Maritime Museum's Rainbow Trail," Juvonen systematically documents her curatorial decisions, interpretative strategies, and collaborative methodologies with institutional staff, which culminated in the development of the "Rainbow Trail" guide for the Kotka Maritime Museum in Finland. Both Juvonen and Ellenberger emphasize the significance of museum-based activism in rendering queer heritage visible and establishing its legitimacy as an integral component of national historical narratives.

The international perception of Nordic countries frequently incorporates a characterization of the region as an exemplary space of LGBTQ+ inclusion, where sexual and gender diversity is purportedly accepted and socially integrated. In her article, "When the State Owes You Happiness: The AIDS Crisis in Iceland 1983–1994 and the Making of New and Reformed Homosexual Citizens," Hafdís Erla Hafsteinsdóttir critically interrogates the limitations of such national mythologies. Through a case study examining Iceland's responses to the global AIDS epidemic that emerged in the 1980s, Hafsteinsdóttir demonstrates the stringent

regulatory frameworks that governed homosexual subjects within Nordic welfare state narratives.

This special issue additionally includes two non-peer-reviewed essays examining queer historical activism across Nordic contexts, both addressing the significance and inherent limitations of commemorative events as catalysts for queer historiography and activism. Runar Jordåen's contribution, "Some Reflections on the Norwegian Queer Year of Culture 2022," offers a critical examination of Norway's 2022 national commemoration of queer history, which marked the semicentennial anniversary of the 1971 decriminalization of consensual homosexual relations between adult males. From his institutional position as a historian affiliated with the Norwegian Queer Archive (Skeivt arkiv) at the University of Bergen Library, Jordåen analyses the commemorative year's substantive contributions to the documentation, scholarly research, and public dissemination of queer historical narratives.

Riikka Taavetti's essay, "Constructing Queer History in Finnish Memory Activism," investigates Finnish queer memory activism associated with the year 2021, which constituted an exceptional moment for commemorating Finnish queer historical trajectories. The year coincided with multiple significant anniversaries – the semicentennial of the 1971 decriminalization of homosexual acts, the forty-year anniversary of the 1981 declassification of homosexuality as a pathological condition, and the decennial of the 2011 declassification of transvestism and fetishism as mental disorders. Throughout this commemorative period, numerous memory institutions curated exhibitions focused on queer historical themes or otherwise incorporated these anniversaries into their activities.

We anticipate that readers will find value in this collection of articles examining queer lives and histories situated within political, power-relational, and cartographical peripheries. Our objective is to present methodological exemplars for the queering of national literary canons and national mythologies through queer historical research, while analysing recent institutional initiatives to reframe national historical narratives from the perspectives of sexual and gender minorities through

memory institutions and commemorative events in Finland, Iceland, and Norway. We aspire for this special issue to constitute a meaningful contribution to queer historiography in national contexts where such scholarship has been notably limited, and to provide critical insights into how national histories can be queered not only at the discursive and narrative levels but through queer practices.

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ÍRIS ELLENBERGER is a historian and an associate professor of social studies at the University of Iceland. Her research has focused on migration and transcultural history, queer history and queer pedagogy. Her recent academic projects include “From Sexual Outlaws to Model Citizens” (funded by the Icelandic Centre for Research) and the NOS-HS-project “Queering National Histories” (funded by Nordforsk).