

Constructing Queer History in Finnish Memory Activism

ABSTRACT

This essay addresses the construction of queer memory and queer history in Finnish memory activism in the late 2010s and early 2020s. It describes how the work on making queer pasts visible has started and addresses the organizations and activists behind this work as well as the funding and institutional support the work has received. The essay discusses the terms used in this activism, focusing in particular on *sateenkaari*, rainbow, a local umbrella term for LGBTIQ+ and the effects of the terminological choice between history and memory.

Keywords: Memory activism, queer memory, queer history, Finland

THE YEAR 2021 was an exceptional moment for remembering Finnish queer history. The year marked several milestones – fifty years since the decriminalization of homosexual acts in 1971, forty years since the declassification of homosexuality as an illness in 1981 and ten years since the declassification of transvestism and fetishism as illnesses in 2011. During this year, several memory institutions organized exhibitions on queer history themes or otherwise marked the year through their activities. These initiatives were brought together by Friends of Queer History (*Sateenkaarihistorian ystävät* in Finnish, *Queerhistoriens*

vänner in Swedish), an association established just one year before with the sole focus of promoting and making visible queer history, for which it had received project funding from the Kone Foundation. In addition to distributing information about initiatives by others, the association organized two main events of its own. Both events addressed past injustices against queer people, one focusing on medicalization and the other on criminalization. The association also arranged an opportunity for schools to invite researchers specializing in queer history to visit classes and published a series of expert articles online. While queer history during 2021 was more visible than ever before, the scale of the Finnish activities was minor in comparison to Norway's commemoration of the decriminalization of homosexual acts in 2022 (see Jordåen in this issue).

In this text, I discuss the development of Finnish queer memory activism in the years leading up to this commemorative year. My own position in addressing the topic is twofold: I am a queer historian and scholar interested in uses of the past in the present, but I have also been involved with Friends of Queer History since its launch (see also Ellenberger in this issue, on similar positionality). This text opens with a description of how queer pasts emerged as a topic of public discussion in the decade preceding the commemorative year of 2021, as well as the memory activism that has contributed to this process. The particular choices of terms used in this process are then addressed. Specifically, I analyse how the Finnish word used in queer memory activism and the queer activism field in general – *sateenkaari*, meaning rainbow – functions in this discussion. Further, while this type of activism is commonly addressed as memory activism (e.g., Gutman & Wüstenberg 2023), the term used in Finnish activism is more often *history*, not *memory*. Drawing on discussions surrounding the relationship between queer history and queer memory (e.g., Doan 2017), I analyse the significance of this choice. The text concludes with a short evaluation of the aftermath of the commemorative year of 2021 and reflections on the future of queer history and memory in Finland.

The development of queer memory activism

During the 2010s, queer history became visible in new ways in Finland. The change started in fiction literature, where several novels addressed queer pasts, and was crystallized by literary scholar Katri Kivilaakso in an interview in 2015: “Right now it is interesting how gay and lesbian figures are written in texts taking place in the past. As if a history would be written afterwards for the minorities” (Ahola 2015). After novels, films followed suit; in particular, the biographical films on Tom of Finland (Helsinki-Filmi 2017, directed by Dome Karukoski) and Tove Jansson (Helsinki-Filmi 2020, directed by Zaida Bergroth) made queer history a topic for the mainstream public (on the Tom of Finland film and its reception, see Taavetti 2018 and Taavetti, Hafsteinsdóttir & Koivunen 2025).

The emergence of queer memory can be seen as part of an international trend wherein many European countries’ queer histories have become present in new ways in fiction, films and TV series in particular (e.g., Horvat 2021). This trend connects to the political debates on LGB-TIQ+ rights, first and foremost those on marriage equality. In these discussions, the depictions of local queer pasts have served as an argument against historical erasure (e.g., Gowing 2018) and as a reminder that queer people are not a recent phenomenon in any country, even if the current way of understanding queer rights as human rights is rather new. Also in Finland, the citizens’ initiative for the Equal Marriage Act launched in 2013 made queer rights a topic of public attention in an unforeseen way (see Järviö 2018). This public attention and the acceleration of queer activism – exemplified by the yearly Helsinki Pride marches, which have rapidly grown into mass events attracting over 100,000 participants – have also sparked growing interest in what ‘our’ pasts have been like. This includes both ‘our’ history as queer people but also as Finland, a country that now embraces this visible diversity.

An important endeavour that connected the first wave of cultural products addressing queer history to a more organized approach to public queer history was the first large-scale queer memory project, “Finland 100 – In Rainbow Colors”. The year 2017 marked the centennial of

Finnish national independence, a milestone celebrated with diverse celebrations and acts of memory politics (for a general overview of the year, see e.g., Sakki & Hakoköngäs 2020). Also project “Finland 100 – In Rainbow Colors” received funding from the centennial year celebration programme. The project worked for the inclusion of queer memories into national narratives of the past and was organized by Culture for All, a service dedicated to promoting diversity and accessibility in the cultural sector.

The project report offers a comprehensive view of how this project understood its scope. In the report, the designation *queer* encompasses either the LGBTIQ+ community as a whole or gays and lesbians, and the differences between the diverse marginalized positions under this umbrella are not directly addressed. That said, the project report focuses on other forms of internal diversity or forms of double marginalization, as it addresses Swedish-speaking, Roma, Sámi, migrant, as well as disabled queer people. From a queer memory perspective, however, it is notable that most of these perspectives are addressed in relation to the present rather than the past. Apart from the Swedish-speaking language minority – whose role has always been essential in Finnish history – there was, at that time, too little available knowledge to meaningfully incorporate other queer minority pasts in Finland.

The first Finnish Queer History Month was organized a year after the 2017 centennial celebrations, running from late October to late November 2018. Following the example of similar initiatives in other countries, it has since brought together various events and exhibitions in this field. After the first year, November was chosen as the month for the event. The first two Queer History Months were organized through a collaboration between Culture for All, Seta – LGBTIQ Rights in Finland, and other organizations, but in early 2020, a specialized association was formed. The need to form a registered association speaks to how Finnish civil society functions; an association is the organizational form that is most easily recognized by other actors and also by funders. Indeed, in late 2020, Friends of Queer History received a Kone Foundation grant for a project aimed at promoting the visibility of queer history.

The new association initially directed its activities towards organizing a commemorative year in 2021. While the year also marked the tenth anniversary of the classification of transvestism and fetishism as illnesses, the primary focus was on homosexuality, with events centred on the themes of decriminalization and demedicalization. However, forms of the medicalization of queer people other than those connected to homosexuality were also addressed.

In addition, following the tone set by the “Finland 100 – In Rainbow Colors” project, the events emphasized diversity, which was reflected in the choice of speakers and the strong focus on accessibility. Several of the speeches delivered at the events remain available on the Friends of Queer History website with subtitles in Finnish, Swedish and English, as well as Finnish Sign Language interpretation.

Although the initiatives described above were supported with project funding from both the state (for the centennial celebrations) and a private foundation (for the Friends of Queer History activities), queer memory activism has largely relied on voluntary work based on the engagement of individual activists and professionals. It has been characterized by collaborations among scholars, museum and archive professionals, as well as NGOs and independent activists.

The core of the activism has involved just a handful of people, meaning that the focus and expertise of individual actors have shaped the forms of activism. For example, Rita Paqvalén, the Executive Director of Culture for All, played a dual role as the leader of the “Finland 100 – In Rainbow Colors” project and a key figure in establishing Friends of Queer History. Similarly, Tuula Juvonen’s contributions – both as an academic and as an activist – have been essential, particularly in encouraging museums and other memory institutions to incorporate queer perspectives into their work.

Beyond these initiatives, activists have collaborated with museums and archives for the inclusion of LGBTIQ+ pasts in their collection and exhibition policies (see e.g., Juvonen in this issue). Efforts to represent queer pasts in museums have primarily taken the form of guided and self-guided tours (Juvonen 2021a). In the broader field of memory insti-

tutions, queer aspects have often been addressed as part of wider diversity issues, such as in addition ethnic minorities' or disabled people's pasts.

Since the early 2000s, the Labour Archives (Työväen Arkisto, Helsinki) and Labour Museum Werstas (Työväenmuseum Werstas, Tampere) have had the national responsibility for collecting and preserving documents and artefacts related to queer history (see Taavetti 2016). Additionally, several collection campaigns for queer life stories and memories have been conducted by the Labour Archives and the Finnish Literature Society (Taavetti 2021).

The year 2021 marked a turning point, prompting memory institutions more broadly to consider their collections from a queer perspective and to develop not only guided tours but also exhibitions on queer pasts. In particular, online exhibitions such as the Police Museum's exhibition on the decriminalization of homosexuality or Finnish Literature Society's exhibition on queer themes in their archive collections extended the visibility of queer memory themes to new audiences.

Queer memory – rainbow history

The Finnish word for rainbow, *sateenkaari*, is used in Finnish queer memory activism to describe the focus of its advocacy. Adopted as an umbrella term in Finnish LGBTIQ+ activism since the late 1990s, its precise terminological evolution has not been documented. The word was first used when discussing “rainbow families” – families in which at least one parent identifies as LGBTIQ+. Since then, terms beginning with the word *sateenkaari*, have been applied to diverse topics.

The word *sateenkaari* serves as a handy umbrella term to avoid the need for cumbersome and ever-expanding acronyms that risk being exclusionary. It can also be utilized as an adjective, *sateenkaareva*, to emphasize that it does not refer to a combination of well-defined groups but rather signifies a perspective or an inclusive approach. In this sense, it aligns closely with how the word *queer* is used, although it does not carry a similar pejorative history.

While the word *sateenkaari* is sometimes translated into English directly as *rainbow*, its usage in an English-language text may be con-

fusing (see e.g., Sotejeff-Wilson 2023). Terms with the word *rainbow* at the beginning do not have such wide usage in English as in Finnish. The term *rainbow family* has recently been applied to LGBTIQ+ families in addition to its older, counter-cultural meaning. However, other terms that include the word are much less common in English than in Finnish. Due to the fact that direct translation is not always accurate, it is more common to replace the word *sateenkaari* with the word *queer* when describing related topics in English. Further underlining how direct translations are often impossible, the word *queer* does not have a Finnish translation, and especially in academic texts, it is typically used in its English form (e.g., Mizielińska 2006).

Scholars have made productive use of varied translations of the word *queer*, depending on the aspects they wish to highlight (see also Kekki 2006). With the word *sateenkaari*, however, similarly nuanced applications are no longer visible, and the word risks becoming simply an umbrella term for current identity-based positions without a connection to queer theory's identity-critical contributions. That said, it seems that whereas the inclusion of trans within *queer* has long been debated (e.g., Stryker 2004), *sateenkaari* includes both the diversity of gender and sexuality equally.

In my own work, I have also criticized the word *sateenkaari* for potentially hiding the darker or more painful sides of queerness (Taavetti 2015). Because of the positive connotations of the word, it is easy to talk about “rainbow youth”, but it might not be possible to talk about “rainbow violence”, for example. However, combining the word *sateenkaari* with history has not prevented addressing painful pasts, as suggested by the discussions on criminalization and medicalization above. It seems that when used to address LGBTIQ+ issues, the word's literal meaning has somewhat faded, allowing it to be paired with topics that are less bright and colourful. Moreover, given that queer pasts are often filled with violence, exclusion and discrimination, choosing a term that encourages the recognition of more positive aspects can have empowering effects.

Finnish queer history activism is clearly a form of memory activism

in that it aims to bring forward aspects of the past perceived as forgotten or hidden. At the same time, it has emphasized a focus on the present by asking how queer pasts affect us now. For example, in the events organized by Friends of Queer History in 2021, this emphasis was already present in event names that referred to the *wounds* of medicalization (“Medikalisaatioon haavat”) or *shadows* of criminalization (“Kriminalisoinnin varjot”). However, the term that such activism utilizes is *history*, not *memory*, as is also the case with queer history months internationally.

Laura Doan (2017) has criticized how a focus on memory when addressing the queer past may render it too intelligible from the present while preventing perceiving this past on its own terms – which might sometimes mean that the past remains incomprehensible to us in the present. Indeed, the present inevitably shapes how we remember and construct the past in memory activism, but according to my observations of Finnish queer memory activism, how this process occurs is not straightforward. Not all present-day phenomena receive similar treatment, and at times, present diversity is sought in the past in vain – either because such diversity simply did not exist or because we lack the knowledge to identify it. For example, while non-binary experiences have become increasingly visible in Finland – and there is even a domestic term adopted by some non-binary people, *muunsukupuolinen* (Juvonen 2019) – they have been absent from queer memory activism. Thus far, there have simply been no studies or other documentation that could be used to imagine past non-binary experiences.

One reason for adopting the word *history* rather than *memory* may indeed stem from the need to create an impetus in the present to study queer history. The Finnish academic queer history field has been small compared, for example, to other Nordic countries, and much of the work on queer themes of the past has been conducted outside history disciplines (for an overview of the Nordic field, see e.g., Nyegaard, Heede & Rydström 2022). As Tuula Juvonen (2021b, 2021c) has pointed out, articles published in *Historiallinen Aikakauskirja* (the *Finnish History Journal*), the leading journal in the history discipline, have failed to

consider aspects related to homosexuality. Furthermore, Juvonen argues that historians have often failed to fully engage with work conducted in other disciplines concerning queer pasts. As a result, Finnish academic history discussions have not been in as much dialogue with the queer memory field as might otherwise be possible. Thus, the use of the word *history* in queer memory activism likely serves a dual purpose: to publicize work conducted thus far on queer history and to underscore that more work needs to be done.

Futures of queer pasts in Finland

While Finnish queer memory activism and efforts to make queer pasts visible have gained momentum in recent years, they remain relatively small-scale. For instance, compared to Norway – where the dedicated queer history archive, Skeivt Arkiv, receives permanent state funding, and where the year 2022, which celebrated the decriminalisation of homosexuality fifty years earlier, was designated as a national queer history year – Finnish activism relies on a small number of volunteers with little funding. That said, as in Norway, the commemorative year of 2021 in Finland did succeed in enhancing the visibility of queer pasts in a new way, and it seems to have spurred a longer-term change in how memory institutions approach queer pasts. However, the Finnish field of queer memory activism remains very vulnerable and relies too heavily on the efforts of a handful of activists to ensure sustainability in the long term.

That said, in the wake of 2021, various initiatives have broadened the Finnish queer memory scene. In late 2023, the Finnish public broadcasting company Yle published a six-part documentary series *Suomi on queer* (Finland is queer – note that the series decided not to use the domestic term rainbow). In the series, numerous activists and scholars addressed Finnish queer pasts from diverse perspectives. In addition, in June 2024, a special issue on the history of sexuality was published in *Historiallinen Aikakauskirja* – the same journal that Tuula Juvonen criticized just a couple of years earlier for ignoring queer history topics. This was the first special issue on the theme in any Finnish history journal, and while not

all of the articles address queer history, the history of same-sex desires is well represented in works by historians writing on the issue. Finally, also in June 2024, Friends of Queer History was among the recipients of State Awards for Public Information for its work in promoting and making queer history accessible. These examples provide reasons for optimism for a more diverse and vibrant future for queer history in Finland.

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NOTES

1. See association's introduction at <https://sateenkaarihistoria.fi/en/>.
2. For a description in English of the activities during 2021, see <https://sateenkaarihistoria.fi/en/events-page/queer-history-commemorative-year-2021/>.
3. "Juuri nyt on kiinnostavaa, miten homoseksuaalisia henkilöitä kirjoitetaan menneeseen sijoittuviin teksteihin. On kuin vähemmistölle kirjoitettaisiin historiaa jälkeensä." See https://www.kulttuuriakaille.fi/about_us
4. Suomi 100 – Sateenkaaren väreissä -hankkeen loppuraportti. https://kulttuuriakaille.fi/doc/tutkimukset_ja_raportit/SUOMI-100_Sateenkaaren-vreis_oppuraortti_270218.pdf.
5. The recordings are available at <https://sateenkaarihistoria.fi/en/events-page/queer-history-commemorative-year-2021/>.
6. The exhibition is titled "Crime and love", Rikos ja rakkaus <https://rikosjarakkaus.poliisimuseo.fi/>.
7. The exhibition is titled "Loud silence", Äänekäs hiljaisuus <https://www.finlit.fi/aineistomme-verkossa/verkkonayttelyt/aaekas-hiljaisuus/>.
8. See International Committee on LGBTQ+ History Months: <http://www.internationallgbtqh.com/>.
9. The series is available online with subtitles in Finnish, Swedish, English and Sámi: <https://areena.yle.fi/1-66699923>.
10. The special issue is available online in open access: <https://journal.fi/haik/issue/view/11184>
11. Press release by Committee for Public Information: <https://tjnk.fi/en/news/state-awards-public-information-go-astute-and-fearless-debaters>.