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Affective Empowerment: Transnational Connections of Early LGB Activists in Finland (1960s–1980s)

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ABSTRACT

Recently, there has been a growing interest in the history of the gay and lesbian movement in the Nordic countries, Finland included. In this history, the role of transnational connections has proved important—not only with the widely influential US, but also within the Nordic countries themselves. This article focuses on early lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) activists in Finland from the late 1960s to the 1980s, examining how transnational connections appeared in their narratives and how these connections emotionally moved and motivated the activists. Theoretically and methodologically, the study draws from queer oral history and affect theory. The analysis focuses on the narratives of four Finnish and one Swedish LGB activists, as well as archival material from Finnish and Swedish archives of LGB associations. The article argues that transnational flows of attitudes, atmospheres, and personal relationships supported early LGB activists in Finland by offering them affective empowerment.

KEYWORDS

Affect theory; LGB activism; Nordic countries; transnational connections; queer history; Finland

Introduction

The development of sexual minority activism has always been transnational, but the transnational angle has often been overlooked in historiography (Edelberg, 2024a; Nyegaard et al., 2022; Põldsam & Taavetti, 2024). Building on queer oral history and affect theory, I ask how transnational connections appeared in the narratives of early Finnish lesbian, gay, and bisexual activists (later LGB activists) from the late 1960s to the 1980s, and how these connections emotionally moved and motivated the activists. As suggested by Edelberg, transnationality in LGB activism appears in "the flow of people, ideas, and lines of communication" (Edelberg, 2024a, p. 514). I argue that there were indeed transnational flows of attitudes, atmospheres, and personal relationships in the narratives of early LGB activists in Finland. I suggest that being in connection with other Western countries—Sweden and the US, in particular—offered Finnish activists new perspectives in terms of sexual rights. Often, yet not always, transnationality

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offered them glimpses into societies where LGB lives were more liberated than in Finland at the time. These connections affectively empowered the activists: they provided them with hope for change, allowed them to distance themselves from their lives at home, offered them possibilities to build personal relationships with LGB people from other countries, and shaped their perceptions of their home country.

The timeframe of this study starts from the late 1960s, when LGB activists started organizing in Finland. I analyze oral history interviews and autobiographical writings of four Finnish activists, who were members of SETA (*Seksuaalinen tasavertaisuus*, Sexual Equality) in the 1970s and 1980s. Some of them were inspired toward activism already in the 1960s. I have interviewed two of the activists, Olli Stålström and Lisa Byland. The two others, Martti Kaipiainen and Ritva Kurki, have already passed away, but left behind a published memoir and a diary discussing their activist experiences. To deepen the analysis, I have also interviewed a Swedish activist of the same era, Axel Brattberg, who had collaborated with Finnish activists. The activists and their roles are introduced in greater detail later on in this article.

The activist narratives are my primary source material, but I will further contextualize them with the help of archives of Finnish and Swedish LGB associations. The archival materials include, e.g., letters, association documents, and magazines. To gain a broader perspective on transnationality during the studied era, I visited the Finnish Labor Museum Werstas in Tampere, Finland, to explore *96* and *SETA* magazines published by Finnish LGB associations Psyke (*Keskusteluseura Psyke*, Discussion club Psyke) and SETA. As noted by Juvonen (2024), these magazines have recorded transnational collaboration. To deepen the Swedish perspective, I visited Folk Movement Archive in Uppsala, Sweden. Uppsala is located near Stockholm, the capital of Sweden, and it had active LGB associations in the 1970s and 1980s, including UFH (*Uppsala förening för homosexuella*, Uppsala association for homosexuals) and EKHO Uppsala (*Ekumeniska grupperna för kristna hbtq-personer*, Ecumenical groups for Christian LGBTQ persons). The materials used in this study are produced in Finnish, Swedish, and English; the English translations are my own.

The US has been influential for LGB activists globally, and its transnational importance hardly needs explanation (Altman, 2013). However, for the Finnish activists, Sweden was another important country to look up to. Being neighbors and having a shared history, Finland and Sweden have a special relationship among the Nordic countries.[1] During the timeframe of this study, Sweden had more permissive legislation and attitudes toward homosexuality than Finland. When LGB organizing started in Sweden in the early 1950s, homosexuality was still criminalized in Finland and Finnish media scandalized homosexuality by mockingly calling it “a Swedish disease” (Juvonen, 2024). While being derogatory, the phrase also upheld the belief of Sweden as a more liberal society toward homosexuals. Many Finnish homosexuals emigrated to Sweden up until the

1980s in the hopes of finding a more liberal society (Löfström, 2000). Emigration was facilitated by the fact that the Swedish language is taught in Finnish schools, due to a Swedish-speaking minority in Finland, and by an active ferry traffic crossing the Baltic Sea that separates the two countries. With this complex background, the transnational connections between Finnish and Swedish LGB activism are obvious but rather one-sided: Sweden has been far more influential on Finland than vice versa. These activist connections have not yet been extensively studied (Juvonen, 2024, p. 92).

This article grew out of a project exploring the affective history of LGB activism targeting the homophobic attitudes of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Finland from the late 1960s onward (Alasuutari, 2025). This focus has affected the choice of interviewees, autobiographical narratives, archives, and the theoretical background. Nevertheless, I believe this material and approach can speak for the LGB activism in Finland and its transnationality also more broadly. Although the activists in question often fought against the homophobic attitudes of the Finnish church, this was not the only focus of their activism. Furthermore, I claim the chosen materials and my theoretical approach allow me to contribute to research on transnationality in Nordic LGB activism in many essential ways. First, the focus on Finland offers a fresh empirical perspective, as research on Nordic queer history has often been, in fact, research on Scandinavian queer history, focusing only on historical developments in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark (Edelberg, 2024a).[2] Second, the use of activist narratives as well as archival material from smaller LGB associations outside the capital of Sweden, including the Christian LGB groups often ignored in LGB activist research, deepens earlier research on Nordic transnationality. For instance, Edelberg (2024b, p. 10) has argued that Swedish activists were peculiarly isolated from international collaboration in the 1970s. His argument is based on archival materials of RFSL (*Riksförbundet för Sexuellt Likaberättigande*, National Association for Sexual Equality) centering on Stockholm, Sweden, and the Scandinavian perspective, excluding Finland. Thus, including the less-analyzed Uppsalian archives and the narratives of Finnish activists into the analysis brings new insights into transnationality across the Baltic Sea. And third, via its theoretical focus on affects and emotions, the article contributes to the study of affective queer histories, which is a growing perspective in Nordic queer history (e.g. Alasuutari et al., 2023; Vilhjálmsson & Ellenberger, 2025).

History of LGB activism in Finland

Setting the scene

According to a widely circulated present-day narrative, the Nordic countries are role models for equality and LGBTQ+ rights (Nyegaard et al., 2022). This is

both a positive self-image embraced by the Nordic countries and a progress narrative intentionally reflected outward. However, the realities and histories behind this narrative might not be quite as rose-tinted. As critiqued by Dahl (2011, p. 145), the simplified progress narrative of the Nordics needs to be problematized by paying attention to the historical, cultural, linguistic, and societal differences within the Nordic region. Despite their celebratory reputation, the Nordic countries are not a monolith: they have internal variation and differing histories. Finland, in particular, has been historically slower than its Nordic neighbors to improve LGBTQ+ rights (Mustola, 2007a, 2007b).

This slowness shows up both in the decriminalization of homosexuality and the formation of LGB associations. Homosexuality was decriminalized in Finland in 1971. The first Finnish LGB groups and associations were formed slightly before and soon after. This was decades later than in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. In comparison, homosexuality was decriminalized in Denmark already in the 1930s and in Sweden and Iceland in the 1940s (Rydström, 2007, p. 20). Depending on the interpretation, Norway was either the first or the last of the Nordic countries to do so: in 1905, homosexuality was criminalized in Norway "only when public interest so demands," limiting the scope of the law; and in 1972, it was decriminalized officially (Halsos, 2007, pp. 91–93). The first Nordic LGB association, called Forbundet af 1948 (Association of 1948), was formed in Denmark in 1948. In 1950, local sub-associations were formed in Sweden and Norway (Edelberg, 2024a). As noted by Mustola (2007a, p. 21), gay men in Finland were inspired by these Nordic examples already in the 1950s, but in fear of police arrests, they did not dare to share their names or addresses to form an association. Hagman (2014, pp. 198–202) further argues that the atmosphere of the postwar Finland was "highly moralistic," and the police control on sex between men was tightened particularly in the parks and toilets of Helsinki, the capital. This shows in increased convictions of "same-sex fornication," peaking in 1952.

In the mid-1960s, public discussion on sexual politics started in Finland by liberal medical students. As Hagman argues, in these discussions, Finland followed Sweden's lead with a few years' delay. While the debate focused on sexual morals in general, it also addressed homosexuality (Hagman, 2014, pp. 221–222). In this changing landscape, the first Finnish gay rights association, *Toisen säteen ryhmä* (The Group of the Second Ray), was formed in 1967. It was a radical yet short-lived association that remained unregistered, because the registration office was suspicious of its legality. A new association, Psyke, was formed in 1968. This time, the aims of the association were obscured to pass the registration (Mustola, 2007a, p. 23; Rydström, 2007, p. 34). After decriminalization in 1971, a new association called SETA was founded in 1974. Psyke and SETA coexisted until the late 1980s. The two associations had differing focuses: after decriminalization, Psyke focused more on internal community-building, whereas SETA was more interested in changing society. In

many ways, SETA adopted the discourse and strategies of gay liberation circulating in the US. For instance, they acclaimed the importance of coming out and included symbolic actions, like demonstrations and marches, in their activist repertoire (Mustola, 2007a, pp. 25–27; cf. Stein, 2012; Weeks, 2016). Within SETA, there was also a group for Christian homosexuals, called Malkus.

Introducing the activists

Within my study on the affective history of LGB activism targeting the church in Finland, I interviewed activists from both Psyke and SETA in 2021–2023. As coming out and appearing in public was part of SETA's strategies at the time, it was easier to find and reach out to them decades later. Because of the passing time and activists getting older, there were also more activists to be reached from SETA. Additionally, two of the activists in SETA, who had already passed away, had published autobiographical writings of their activist experiences. Analyzing the narratives, I noticed it was indeed those activists who were part of SETA who brought up transnational connections in their narratives. This is why my analysis in this article focuses on them.

Olli Stålström, a young gay man at the time, joined SETA soon after its foundation in 1974. He was a board member of SETA's first board and a visible figure in SETA during its early decades. Martti Kaipiainen, a married bisexual man in his fifties, was recruited to SETA in 1974 by SETA's founders after he had supported homosexuals in public. Living in Eastern Finland and not in Helsinki, the capital, where SETA had its office, Kaipiainen did his activism more on the sidelines, yet remained devoted to SETA for decades—and recorded his experiences in a memoir (Kaipiainen, 1989/2003). Ritva Kurki and her partner Lisa Byland, a lesbian couple, joined SETA in the late 1970s, and Kurki became the leader of the Christian group Malkus in 1980. In the interview, Byland described herself as more of a supporter of activists than an activist in her own right. However, as Kurki's posthumously published diary indicates, Byland's supporter role was equally important (Kurki, 2019). Therefore, the activists whose narratives are analyzed here form a heterogenous group, describing different sides to activism within SETA in this era.

When planning this article, I wanted to deepen my focus on Sweden. On a research visit to Uppsala University, I managed to get the contact details of a Swedish gay activist from the same era, Axel Brattberg, from my Swedish colleague. While this was much of a chance encounter, this interview proved very fruitful for this study, as Brattberg, who had joined UFH in the late 1960s and been an active participant in Swedish LGB activism also in the 1970s and 1980s, had met Stålström and other Finnish activists and knew the Swedish activists mentioned in Kurki's

diary. His interview, therefore, complements the Finnish narratives in important ways.

On terminology

Activism supporting the rights of homosexuals and other sexual minorities has often been periodized into different activist generations, based on their aims and strategies. Much of this naming originates from the US, where homophile activism of the 1940s and 1950s was followed by gay liberation of the 1960s and 1970s, which was followed by AIDS activism of the 1980s and LGBT rights activism and queer activism of the 1990s (e.g. Plummer, 2016). As stated above, the kind of activism in Finland that I am studying falls most closely under *gay liberation*. However, it is important to note that the development of LGB activism in the Nordics does not follow the US periodization unproblematically. Its aims, strategies, and timelines have differed depending on national and temporal contexts (Edelberg, 2024a, 2024b). Thus, instead of gay liberation, I choose to write more broadly about LGB activism. By avoiding generational terms, I aim to emphasize that the division between activist generations and their goals and strategies is not clear-cut but rather an ongoing flow of change.

Furthermore, by calling the activists LGB activists, my aim is to acknowledge the existence of bisexuals within the lesbian and gay movement, to fight against the erasure of bisexual histories, and to better reflect the identities of the activists I focus on in this article. Moreover, while trans and transvestite activist groups also began forming in Finland during these same decades—and trans and transvestite activists were part of the early Finnish LGB associations (see e.g. Saloheimo, 2025)—the activists analyzed in this article focused on sexual minority rights. Therefore, I'm using the acronym LGB instead of LGBT, as it better reflects the aims of their activism. Yet, I warmly recommend more research to be done on Finnish trans activist history and its transnationality in future.

Affective atmospheres and encounters

Theoretically, my analysis is inspired by the concepts of affective atmosphere (Anderson, 2009; Macón, 2023) and affective encounters (Seigworth, 2005). I suggest that encountering and being exposed to atmospheres that were different—and often, yet not always, more liberal—from the atmosphere in Finland was often inspiring for the activists under study. The argument of the influential effects of being exposed to more liberal atmospheres has been made in queer historical research before (e.g. Altman, 2013), but my detailed analytical focus on affects and emotions helps to understand how this happens.

Moreover, I aim for a nuanced analysis, in which the strict dichotomy between liberal and conservative is challenged.

As described by Anderson (2009, pp. 77–79), affective atmospheres are guided by ambiguity; they are never static, but always in the form of creation, reformation, and disappearance. To him, affective atmospheres are "the shared ground" from which the feelings emerge. Macón (2023, p. 351) has further suggested that affective atmospheres move and touch feeling bodies, making feelings collectively embodied and contagious. The idea of affective atmospheres is in line with Seigworth's (2005, p. 164) notion of life forming by "a steady accumulation of affective encounters." As noted by Bradway (2018), these encounters do not always have to be physical: for example, reading literature can also function as a conduit of affect and foster affective relations. Thus, affective atmospheres are formed by complex entanglements and encounters of people, places, and literature, but also events and material objects.

Both of these concepts stem from affect theory. In the varied world of affect theory, the uses and definitions of affect come in many forms. I follow the definition provided by Gould (2009), who sees affect as a nonconscious emotional intensity that has the potential to affect the person experiencing it, and emotion as its more conscious and verbalized form. As argued by Gould, we need emotions to be able to speak (in verbal and conscious approximations) about the affective intensities we experience (Gould, 2009, pp. 19–22). I claim that this is particularly true when studying affective atmospheres and encounters in history, as the source materials are inevitably available only in a verbalized form, either spoken in an oral history interview or written down in a memoir, diary, letter, or other type of text. Therefore, separating affects entirely from emotions is not a relevant theoretical separation in this kind of study. Hence, my focus is not on differentiating the unconscious affect from the more conscious emotion per se, but rather on analyzing how the activists were emotionally moved and motivated by such atmospheres and encounters and how they reported feeling in them.

Methodological and ethical reflections

My focus on affects and emotions of individual activists deepens earlier research on transnationality in Nordic LGB activism, which has been more focused on transnationality between LGB associations (see e.g. Edelberg, 2024a; Rydström, 2007). As Paternotte and Seckinelgin (2016, p. 217) point out, in addition to formal activist organizations and their transnational operations, "More informal kinds of horizontal solidarities also happen" transnationally. Moreover, Hagman (2014) has argued in favor of small-scale analysis and focus on individuals, because such an approach may reveal previously unknown factors in queer history. My focus is made possible by unique activist

narratives, in which the perspectives of individual activists are discussed in depth.

When analyzing oral history interviews and autobiographical material, I am working with a subjective and constructed vision of reality (see e.g. Murphy et al., 2016). In terms of interviews, it is also a recollected vision, as the interviewees recalled events from decades ago. Moreover, as suggested by Boyd, queer oral histories are always ”articulated around what the narrator thinks the researcher wants to hear, always structured around a certain historical desire for gay and lesbian political visibility” (Boyd, 2008, p. 189). The same is true also for queer life writing intended to record current or past events for future generations. Bearing this in mind, I want to emphasize that I am not so much interested in proving ”what really happened” but rather exploring how the activists reported feeling about and being moved by transnational connections. With such a focus, personal narratives are the most useful type of material to analyze. Following Murphy et al. (2016), I suggest that the subjective and constructed nature of queer oral histories and queer life writing is, in fact, what makes them particularly valuable in exploring phenomena, like affects/emotions, that are subjective in their own right. That said, I also aim to contextualize the narratives with sources that do not depend on subjective memories or narrative choices, by complementing them with archival materials.

As noted by Roque Ramírez and Boyd, stories of queer history are not always safely recorded in archives, and therefore, researchers of these histories have to “start from scratch” and collect them (Roque Ramírez & Boyd, 2012, p. 5). This also means that with a different group of interviewees and pieces of autobiographical writing, the story might end up different. Hence, I do not claim I am able to paint an all-encompassing picture of transnationality in Finnish LGB activism of this era. Rather, I aim to offer a unique window into this topic through the activist narratives and archival materials available to me as a researcher. The availability may also have been positively affected by my positionality as a queer-identified Finnish scholar who has specialized in queer studies, making me trustworthy in the eyes of the interviewees.

Methodologically, my analysis is based on the method of close reading informed by affect theory—a combination that Berg and colleagues (Berg et al., 2019) have called “reading for affect.” With my materials, I have looked for moments of transnationality where affectivity or emotionality pours through the words. In praxis, I have paid attention to direct verbalizations of affect/emotion (e.g. describing something as “horrible,” “encouraging”, or “amusing,” daring or not daring to do something, caring or not caring about something), moments were the narrative gets more focused on atmospheric details, and other textual markers that can be read as affective/emotional, like exclamation marks. Sometimes, my attention has also been caught by a lack of emotion in descriptions of transnationality.

The study follows the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity, according to which no ethical pre-evaluation is required when studying public materials and adults who have given their informed consent for participation (TENK, 2019, p. 20). I address the activists with their full names, following the informed consent of the interviewees. In terms of those who have already passed away and whose names appear in public materials, the chosen naming practice acknowledges the public nature of their activism. The lack of anonymization respects the agency of the activists to be open about their identities, which has been an essential part of their activism in the past (cf. Alasuutari, 2025). This practice follows the principles of fighting against queer historical erasure and preserving queer memories, essential in queer oral history and queer archiving (e.g. Chenier, 2015; Taavetti, 2021).

Atmospheric inspirations: Marching on the streets of the US

Most tangibly, transnational connections emerged in the activist narratives as visits abroad, most often to the US and Sweden. As pointed out by Altman (2013, p. 6), the United States was the source of both "intellectual and cultural inspiration" for the burgeoning LGB activism in other Western countries. Much of this influence is centered on the Stonewall riots of 1969. Yet, as Edelberg (2024b, pp. 3–4) has argued, Stonewall had only a marginal impact in the Nordics, where LGB activism had its own histories, aims, and directives. In the narratives I studied, spending time in the US was significant for Finnish activists both in the pre- and post-Stonewall era.

Traveling abroad—especially as far as the US—was a privilege limited by class differences and language skills (cf. Sorainen, 2014, p. 216). Indeed, the activists in my study who had traveled to the US, Olli Stålström and Martti Kaipiainen, had social capital not everyone in the early Finnish LGB activist circles had. Stålström came from a relatively affluent family. His father was an English teacher, ensuring that Stålström himself learned the language early on. The family could also afford to send him to the US as an exchange student twice in the 1960s. Kaipiainen, in turn, was a high school teacher by profession. He spoke multiple languages, earned a steady income, and had family ties to the US.

In both Stålström's and Kaipiainen's narratives, the visits to the US in the late 1960s and early 1970s had seemingly nothing to do with activism. In fact, they were not even activists yet. As their narratives unfold, however, it becomes clear that these visits had encouraging effects on them that would later benefit their activism.

In an interview, Stålström recalled his experiences as an exchange student in New York in 1962–1963 and 1969. Although this was pre-Stonewall era, homophile groups already existed in the US (Plummer, 2016), as well as gay bars. When asked about the local atmosphere in comparison to Finland at the

time, Stålström described it as "quite horrible," due to the Mafia owning gay bars (cf. Siodmak, 2018) and a "McCarthian wave of persecution" still existing, referring to the repercussions of the Lavender Scare (cf. Johnson, 2004). According to Stålström, "The atmosphere was even more awful than in Finland. Here in Finland, we didn't have the Mafia, after all."

Thus, Stålström felt—rather surprisingly—that the atmosphere in the US was actually worse off for gays than in Finland, where homosexuality remained illegal and no organized LGB activism, nor gay bars, existed in the early 1960s. Yet, as noted by Mustola, gay men in Finland had already started claiming space for themselves in straight bars. Moreover, she argues that reading the Danish and Swedish gay magazines "contributed to a homophile self-awareness among Finnish homosexuals" (Mustola, 2007b, pp. 233–234). Therefore, sexual liberation had already started simmering under criminalization.

In Stålström's case, it was not a liberal but an activist atmosphere that had been meaningful for his activist awakening in the US in the 1960s. As he describes, experiencing the protests against the Vietnam War and the famous "I Have a Dream" speech by Martin Luther King had been widely influential for him:

> Olli Stålström: I am sometimes amused by the fact that although I come from a bourgeois family, I have adopted the leftist ideologies from the streets of New York. [. . .] But also, Martin Luther King. His actions I admired greatly. He dared and was able to bring people together for peaceful, courageous protests. Even though he was subjected to outright violence from the conservatives. So yes, that has affected my worldview and actions the most, marching on the streets of New York, with left-wing activists. *laughter* (O. Stålström, personal communication, September 30, 2021).

Witnessing an activist orientation in the US showed him that changing the world by protesting might be possible. That said, the civil rights movement in the US at this time could display very homophobic attitudes, and while it aimed to end racism, it did not fight for sexual liberation.[3] Therefore, whilst Stålström was inspired toward activism, the atmosphere could also have had opposite effects on other LGB people of the time. As noted by Gould (2010, p. 31), affects are not deterministic but contingent: people may be affected by and oriented toward certain atmospheres and encounters differently from another, often in unpredictable ways.

Martti Kaipiainen, in turn, traveled to the US for the first time in 1970, to visit relatives in Atlantic City. He mentions the trip in his activist memoir because it offered him a glimpse of a world where a gay bookstore could exist. Such a thing would have been unheard of in Finland until 1993, when the first Finnish gay and lesbian bookstore, Baffin Books, was opened in Helsinki (Mustola, 2007a, p. 36). In the memoir,

Kaipiainen notes his excitement—and caution—at the face of this discovery:

> When wandering in the city, I happened to find a gay bookstore! I did not dare to buy any "souvenirs" though, because my sons would have surely found them among the luggage. But you may guess that my thoughts started wandering in this feature [homosexuality] more and more often. (Kaipiainen, 1989/2003, p. 11.)

The excited tone in Kaipiainen's narrative underlines the affirmative nature of his encounter with the bookstore, echoing Bradway's (2018) ideas about how encounters with literature may be affective, too. In 1970, Kaipiainen had not yet come out as a bisexual to his family nor started his activism in SETA, which would be founded only a few years later. However, as Kaipiainen notes above, this encounter with the bookstore in the US strengthened the hidden curiosity and interest in homosexuality that was already growing within him.

Later in 1982, Kaipiainen visited the US again for family reasons. By this time, he had become an activist in SETA and come out to his wife, children, and workplace as a married bisexual man. During his second US visit, Kaipiainen actively searched for opportunities to experience the atmosphere of the local gay life. He went to San Francisco on his own, free to explore what the city had to offer. On a city tour, he learned that on Castro Street "every third [person] is a homosexual" and was immediately intrigued by the area. In his memoir, he describes the street with an attention to detail:

> In the evening, I found my way to Castro Street. I walked south on one side and then north on the other. I stepped into a store. Here one could see quite many "boy couples" who were shopping and carrying big paper bags back home, as they do in the US, if the apartment is close enough. Then I noted that there was a line in front of a movie theater. I went to see the movie, *Making Love*, directed by Arthur Hiller; I had seen ads on Market Street, the main street. It described male homosexuality in a quite beautiful way, I think. I saw the movie second time in Helsinki half a year later. (Kaipiainen, 1989/2003, p. 65)

Kaipiainen's manner of paying attention to the simple queer domesticity of the gay couples in grocery stores implies that this was something one could not witness in Finland in the early 1980s. Yet, the notion of the movie by Hiller proves that Finland was not entirely cut off from the US gay culture: it was possible to see the same gay movie seen on Castro Street again in the capital of Finland, only half a year later.

During his second trip to the US, Kaipiainen arranged a visit to the Christopher Street Liberation Day March in New York. As Kaipiainen's family already knew about—and were supportive of—his bisexuality and activism, he no longer needed to hide this side of his life from his children. Kaipiainen's daughter, who was living in the US at the time, gave him a ride to join the march. Again, Kaipiainen details his experience in the memoir:

> The Sunday 27th of June I had reserved for the gay demonstration, as I happened for once in my life to be in New York on this day. It was 13 years since gays in New York had spontaneously begun to fight against their oppression, and this started on Christopher Street. [My daughter] and her family gave me a ride to the Manhattan Ferry, and from the southern tip of Manhattan, I took the subway to Sheridan Square where Christopher Street crosses with 7th Avenue. [...] I wandered and looked around to see in which group I could join. Then I found it! In a large piece of fabric, it read: Gay Teachers's Association. I asked if I could join and told them where I was from. They welcomed me! (Kaipiainen, 1989/2003, p. 67)

The Christopher Street Liberation Day March in New York in 1982 must have been quite an experience for Kaipiainen, with tens of thousands of participants (Freedman, 1982). In his memoir, Kaipiainen reports how the march in the hot summer weather took 3 hours. Being a teacher himself, he reports feeling belonging with the group of gay teachers.[4] The streets were buzzing with onlookers who applauded the marchers and the gay teachers' group, in particular (Kaipiainen, 1989/2003, p. 67).

In Finland, SETA had organized the first public gay rights demonstration in Helsinki in 1974. After that, they organized a demonstration on the steps of the Parliament House every year on SETA's anniversary. The first Liberation Day March in Finland was organized in 1981, replacing the demonstration as an annual tradition. In the first march, fewer than a hundred people attended. Supporting gay rights in public was not a simple matter in Finland in the early 1980s: photographs of the early demonstrations and marches showed some participants wearing paper bags covering their heads (Mustola, 2007a, p. 26; Nordfors, 1980, p. 39). As noted by Mustola (2007a, p. 27), this was to hide their identities and shelter them from the homophobic attitudes of the family and workplace. Kaipiainen recounts in the memoir that he preferred other activist strategies, but when he attended demonstrations, he was not among those who covered their heads; on the contrary, in 1980, he was one of the public speakers (Kaipiainen, 1989/2003, p. 57; Nordfors, 1980, p. 37).

When compared to the US, the Finnish history of gay rights demonstrations and marches was much smaller-scale. However, in his description of the Christopher Street Liberation Day March in 1982, Kaipiainen accounts not only an atmosphere that is more liberal than the one in Finland. His narrative also shows ambiguities in defining what counts as liberal, by pointing out how, in some parts of the US, the atmosphere was in fact much more conservative than in Finland at the time:

> I sat in the Central Park with the teachers for a while longer and talked to some of them. What particularly stuck in my mind was a man from Arkansas, who told me that homosexuality is still criminalized there, and therefore he must stay firmly in hiding. Perhaps this march was unusually refreshing to him, allowing him to be among his kind and talk to them. I wanted to ask for a name and address, but I did not do it, thinking that I would not put him in danger, not even by correspondence. (Kaipiainen, 1989/2003, p. 67)

Here, the contrast between the US and Finland is turned around in an interesting way: compared to the worrisome situation of the man from Arkansas, Kaipiainen was living a very open life in a small town in Eastern Finland with no sense of threat, for example, of losing his job or going to prison. It is Kaipiainen who needs to consider whether correspondence would put the man from the US in danger, not the other way around. Moreover, Kaipiainen considered the atmosphere of the march to be particularly refreshing for the man from Arkansas, not for himself. Being an active member of SETA, it can be expected that for Kaipiainen the feeling of being "among his kind" was not affectively unique, even if the magnitude of the Liberation Day March in New York was something he could not experience in Finland. Thus, his narrative shows how liberal atmospheres are not static nor self-evident, but rather ambiguous and context-bound (cf. Anderson, 2009). It is noteworthy that, besides mentioning how the man from Arkansas "particularly stuck in [his] mind," Kaipiainen does not show signs of surprise in his narrative. It might be that the ambiguities between liberal and conservative, even in the US, were something that he already knew to expect.

I read the transnational encounters narrated by Stålström and Kaipiainen as affective encounters with atmospheres that were decisively different—and often, yet not always, more liberal—than the atmosphere prevailing in Finland at the time. I suggest that experiencing such atmospheres firsthand could be empowering in ways that exceed conscious thinking and are thus felt affectively. While it is evident how witnessing more liberal atmospheres can give hope, the affective reactions to witnessing more conservative atmospheres are trickier to analyze. I propose that such encounters showed Stålström and Kaipiainen that Finland was not just a conservative Nordic periphery, but a country where steps toward sexual liberation had already been taken. Thus, transnational encounters may have given Stålström and Kaipiainen glimpses into more liberal societies, but also, depending on the situation, made their perceptions of their own country more positive in comparison.

Activist collaboration: Visiting the Nordic neighbor

Visits to Sweden reported in the narratives were more intentionally guided by activist collaboration. Archives reveal that in Finland, *96* and *SETA* magazines actively followed and reported developments in other countries, Sweden included (see also Juvonen, 2024). Transnational collaboration between Finnish and Swedish LGB associations began early on: In 1970, 96 reported aiming for collaboration with Nordic and Western gay magazines (Hans-Pjotr, 1970). Soon after, the magazine started translating its editorials and articles into Swedish, for a Nordic readership. In Sweden, UFH's annual reports and archived letters show that they had contacted Psyke in 1971 and SETA in 1975 (UFH, 1971, 1975a). Moreover, as documented in the archived letters between Swedish and Finnish LGB

associations, Finnish activists started inviting Swedes to participate in Finnish gay liberation demonstrations in 1975, soon after the foundation of SETA (UFH, 1975b).

From the Swedish perspective, the oppression of homosexuals was considered worse in Finland than in Sweden. In a letter from UFH to SETA in 1979, Axel Brattberg states: "We know that you have to fight for yourselves in a climate that is significantly tougher than ours. We admire your fighting spirit and want to support your struggle in every way." (UFH, 1979). In an interview, Brattberg described fondly the collaboration with the Finns:

> Axel Brattberg: It was very positive to meet other people who were thinking another way, living in another type of society, [. . .] they are like me but not like me. *laughter* I think that's very inspirational, to be with people like that. I think they were quite nice people. [. . .] I also liked this idea that we have connections with Nordic and Scandinavian countries. We are, we have very much in common. We differ quite a lot from each other. *laughter* (A. Brattberg, personal communication, November 21, 2022.)

Here, Brattberg's description of Finland is polite, highlighting both similarities and differences with Sweden, and not directly stating that Finland was considered more conservative. Yet, elsewhere in the interview, Brattberg reveals thinking that "sometimes Finland is twenty years behind Sweden." When asked more about this, he continued: "I think this is a prejudice in many respects, but you hear it from time to time, and maybe sometimes it is true." While it might show a glimpse of a collective Swedish prejudice over Finland, the idea of Finland being more conservative was shared with the Finns, too (Juvonen, 2024).

Among the activist narratives studied here, connections to Sweden emerged particularly in Ritva Kurki's diary. Kurki describes how she and her partner Lisa Byland visited Sweden repeatedly in the early 1980s. At the time, Kurki was the leader of Malkus. These trips were intended to foster connections with Swedish LGB activist associations and their Christian groups. Their first visit to Sweden in spring 1981 is mentioned in Kurki's diary only briefly, not reporting any details of the atmosphere of the visit, apart from this small but revealing note: "We visited the EKHO in Stockholm at the turn of the month, and from there we got new eagerness and courage." Next, Kurki turns to report how she and Byland, with this newly found encouragement, had marched proudly in the first Liberation Day March in Helsinki: "Lisa had a placard: "I am a lesbian and happily in the hand of God," mine read: 'God, I'm gay, I'm yours" (Kurki, [May 27, 1981] 2019, p. 119.). While eagerness and courage are not elaborated on in Kurki's narrative, marching publicly as Christian lesbians in Finland at the time required both. As Kurki further notes, the march itself had 93 participants, and only five of them marched among the Christian homosexuals. Later, a photograph was published in a Finnish newspaper, making their attendance an even more public—and brave—event (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Ritva Kurki and Lisa Byland on the Liberation Day March in Helsinki, Finland, in 1981. The third person, with a sign in Swedish saying: "I believe in God and know that he loves gays," is their co-member in Malkus. Malkus also had Swedish-speaking Finns as members. © The Finnish Labour Museum Werstas. All rights reserved. Reproduced with permission.

Kurki's and Byland's visits to Sweden became more personally motivated after they met a Swedish lesbian activist couple, Barbro K. Gustafsson and Kerstin Hammarsten, active in UFH and EKHO Uppsala, with whom they became friends. This friendship is recorded in Kurki's diary, but also in the archived postcards sent from Gustafsson to EKHO Uppsala describing her visits to Finland to meet Kurki and Byland (e.g. EKHO Uppsala, 1984, 1985). In the case of these two lesbian activist couples, the habit of transnational visitation was thus mutual.

Later in 1981, Kurki and Byland returned to Sweden to attend the Liberation Day March in Stockholm and spend time with their new friends. The archives reveal that Kurki and Byland also visited EKHO Uppsala during their visit to Sweden in September 1981, giving them an account of the "Finnish equivalent of EKHO groups and the situation of homosexuals in Finland" (EKHO Uppsala, 1981). Both cities, Stockholm and Uppsala, were easily visited from southern Finland by a ferry crossing the Baltic Sea.

At this time, Kurki had recently lost her mother, and a lot was happening in her life. When reporting the events in Sweden in her diary, her narrative is rather rushed and emotionless, written with a sense of urgency to note down the recent events:

> It is quite impossible to give an orderly account of what has happened since my mother's funeral. We are now sitting on the lawn of a summer cottage on the island of Lusterö outside Stockholm, Lisa, Barbro K. Gustafsson, and myself. The summer cottage is owned by Kerstin Hammarsten, a cousin of Tove Jansson.[5] Kerstin went for a swim after mowing the lawn.
>
> We stayed with them during the Stockholm Liberation Days and marched in the demonstration together with the EKHO group. About 4300 homosexuals took part in the demonstration. The pious newspapers were outraged because we sang spiritual songs and hymns as we marched. (Kurki, [September 5, 1981] 2019, p. 122)

Although the Liberation Day March in Stockholm was considerably smaller than the one in the US described earlier, it was impressive in size in comparison to Finland. Moreover, the number of Christian homosexuals was greater. Compared to the five marchers in Helsinki, in Stockholm, there were so many that they managed to anger Christian newspapers with their religious singing. According to the archive of EKHO Uppsala, a hundred people marched behind the Christian banner in Stockholm in 1981 (EKHO Uppsala, 1982).

From Sweden, Kurki and Byland continued their trip to Norway, Finland's other Nordic neighbor, to meet Kim Friele, a leading figure in the Norwegian LGB movement. The trip was guided by the intention of widening activist connections, but the visit was orchestrated more by Gustafsson than by Kurki and Byland themselves. While Kurki seems hesitant about the visit in her diary, she acknowledges that such Nordic visits had been important for them in the form of activist encouragement:

> On Monday morning, we left for Oslo. Barbro had arranged with Kim Friele that we would go straight from the train to the Norwegian Gay Association office to meet her. I don't know why. But these meetings have proved to be important – if for nothing else, as an encouragement to us. (Kurki, [September 5, 1981] 2019, p. 122)

Although Kurki's narrative is often straightforward and not very emotional when she writes about transnationality, her repeated mentions of courage and encouragement are noteworthy.

Despite this one-time visit to Norway, the Nordic collaboration emphasized in the narratives of my study is the collaboration with the Swedes. Later, Kurki and Byland, together with the Christian group Malkus, invited EKHO members from Sweden to join the Liberation Day Marches in Helsinki, as is revealed by an archived letter sent to Swedish activists in 1983: "EKHO's participation last year [in 1982] strengthened our courage and enthusiasm. Thank you for that! You are very welcome to join us again this year. We are expecting you!" (EKHO Uppsala, 1983). The tone of the invitation is eager and hopeful, emphasizing the empowering effects of Swedish activists' overseas participation. In light of the letter and the narratives above, it seems that when Finnish activists traveled to Sweden, it was to find empowerment for themselves, and when Swedish activists traveled to Finland, it was likewise to empower activists in Finland.

In 1983, a visit to Sweden got a more personal tone. Kurki reported how she and Byland were planning to visit Sweden again on their 15th anniversary. At the same time, Kurki's brother was getting married in Finland. Kurki preferred to go to Sweden to attend Gustafsson's and Hammarsten's ordination ceremony: they were ordained as priests, even though they were an openly lesbian couple—something that would be completely unheard of in Finland at the time. For Kurki, escaping to Sweden gave an opportunity to celebrate her anniversary with Byland in peace:

> My brother's wedding is in June, but Lisa and I are going to Stockholm right then. It's our 15th anniversary. We met fifteen years ago. We will be in Stockholm for Kerstin and Barbro's ordination ceremony. They are openly lesbian there. My brother and his fiancée's wedding reception is public and accepted by everyone. I hardly dare to say that the reason for our absence from my brother's wedding is our [anniversary] celebration. And I would not dare to suggest that people at the wedding would congratulate us. I would have to look at uneasy faces. Yet, it is about the same thing: I want to live with the person I love. So why is it that only they get the happy publicity? (Kurki, [May 4, 1983] 2019, p. 167)

Here, emotionality pours through Kurki's narrative more clearly, showing resentment toward her brother's wedding that is publicly celebrated, while her long-term relationship with Byland is not met with similarly happy affects, but rather "uneasy faces." Between the lines, one can read a contrast in atmospheres between Finland, where lesbian love cannot be publicly celebrated, and Sweden, where such celebration is possible. Interestingly, the dichotomy between conservative Finland and liberal Sweden appears rather clear-cut in the narratives. This is different from the examples describing the US, which left room for ambiguity.

Private attachments: Foreign friends and lovers

Transnational connections described in the narratives of this study were linked not only to activism itself, but also to private attachments between

LGB people from different countries. Most noticeably, this appeared in transnational friendships and romances, but also in more ephemeral social encounters.

In the case of Kurki and Byland's friendship with Gustafsson and Hammarsten described above, a connection that started via activism grew into a personally meaningful relationship. However, from the Swedish perspective, an interest in Finland and the Finns was not self-evident. Brattberg, an activist colleague of Gustafsson from UFH, explained Gustafsson's interest in Finland by her personal qualities:

> AB: Barbro has, how would I say, she has a personal attachment to Finnish people, and to Finland, and to the Finnish in a way that may have been important also for the contacts. (A. Brattberg, personal communication, November 21, 2022.)

Private sentiments had been an important motivator for Brattberg, too, to maintain connections with Finnish activists, including Stålström: "But there was more, there was more . . . on a personal level, I liked those people we met! *laughter*" Thus, the affective state of liking someone from another country sparked an interest to know more about their conditions of living LGB lives. This benefitted not only activist collaboration but also the formation of border-crossing friendships.

Romantic attachments could also cross borders. As recalled by Stålström, his activist career in SETA was preceded by a romantic relationship with a boyfriend from the US. They had met in the US in the 1960s and visited each other multiple times. For Stålström, the relationship had offered much-needed emotional support before becoming a gay activist, in times when the conditions for gays both in Finland and in the US looked bleak:

> OS: As an exchange student, I had fallen in love with an American high school boy. He came to Finland to meet me in 1971. We were madly in love and sat together in a place that was my favorite spot for thinking. [. . .] We sat there for a long time pondering what would become of this world, as we got beaten like this for just loving each other. That's when I decided that I wanted to get out of this country. And he said, "Come to Washington with me." That's when the enthusiasm began, and altogether I've traveled to the US seven times to visit him. And he has been three times in Finland. We were both very, very broken, but we felt a certain closeness together. [. . .] He has been probably the best peer supporter in my life. Even though it was a long-distance relationship. *laughter* So, we have exchanged letters. (O. Stålström, personal communication, September 30, 2021.)

Although Stålström did not leave Finland for good, this transnational romance —maintained via mutual visits and correspondence—can be considered encouraging in times when the future for homosexuals seemed dark. It showed him that, despite the bleak societal situation, love was still possible. As the relationship started before Stålström joined SETA in 1974, it can be regarded

as one of the encounters that strengthened and supported his gay activist motivation to fight for a more livable future.

Border-crossing romances could also be born from migration. Kurki's partner Byland had migrated to Finland from Switzerland in 1969. Byland recalled in an interview that this personal history—and not yet knowing the Finnish language—made her feel like an outsider in Finnish LGB activism in the 1970s and 1980s. Yet, coming from another country also had a protective effect, which made open participation in activism easier for her:

> Lisa Byland: Being an outsider made it so much easier for me to be open in this country. I had my own country, my own family, my own friends, my own culture, my own history, but it was there far away. I didn't have to think about them, like the Finns who are here at home, really at home. Their family is very nearby, [as well as] friends, and a job. I didn't care so much about the job; I would always find something. The fact is that it made it so much easier for me, that's pretty important. (L. Byland, personal communication, September 24, 2021.)

Whereas Kurki had to face discriminatory attitudes of her family after they started appearing in Finnish media as a lesbian activist couple in the early 1980s, Byland's family never read Finnish newspapers or saw their interviews on television. Thus, the physical, cultural, and linguistic distance protected Byland from the personal burdens of activism that LGB activists in Finland otherwise had to encounter. Byland's presence and support, as well as their relationship, were pivotal for Kurki in bearing the emotional burdens of activism, as can be read from the pages of her diary: "Lisa and I are happy together. Sometimes I think, seriously, how wonderful it would be to shut our eyes and ears from the outside world and just be happy in our own hideaway" (Kurki, [January 29, 1982] 2019, p. 131).

Sometimes, the private transnational attachments described in the narratives were much more fleeting. However, even small social or intimate encounters could feel important to those experiencing them. This was particularly true for Kaipiainen, who, as a married bisexual man, was less free to explore romantic or intimate connections.[6] Nevertheless, his memoir shows how he appreciated connecting socially with other gay or bisexual men abroad. He reminisces about these meetings and chance encounters with fondness. One such example is Kaipiainen's encounter with the Liberation Day marchers in New York described above. Kaipiainen also writes about recurrent trips to Sweden, often to meet Finnish gay people who had emigrated to Sweden. Sometimes he met other Finns in Sweden by chance. For instance, Kaipiainen recounts how, after retiring in 1986, he traveled to Sweden to attend the summer party of RFSL in Stockholm. There he would, to his surprise, meet one of his former students from more than 30 years ago; apparently, yet another gay migrant choosing Sweden

over Finland. In Kaipiainen's memoir, the encounter is described only briefly, but with a deeply intimate tone:

> On the last night at the hotel, he came to talk to me. And when a suitably slow song started playing, he said: "Let's dance." I will remember that dance for the rest of my life. (Kaipiainen, 1989/2003, p. 77)

This encounter shows a glimpse of the emotional side of Kaipiainen's activist life. Regardless of the ephemerality of the encounter, Kaipiainen considered it worthy of being recorded in his activist memoir, indicating that it had emotional value to him. I suggest that these transnational romances, friendships, and fleeting intimate encounters were meaningful to Finnish activists in offering intimacy, support, and emotional connection. They may have also given them something to fight for.

The affective importance of transnational connections

Altman (2013, p. 5) has argued that "even local stories have to be told through an awareness of the wider world." The focus on the wider transnational context indeed brings to the fore new aspects of local histories of LGB activism. The analysis above shows that Finnish LGB activists from the late 1960s to the 1980s were connected to the wider Western world: they traveled abroad, searched for international literature on homosexuality, created border-crossing activist collaborations, and formed personal relationships with LGB people from other countries. In the activist narratives studied here, connections to Sweden, but also to the US, were most strongly emphasized. Based on my analysis, I claim that transnationality—as constructed in the activist narratives—supported early LGB activists in Finland by offering them affective empowerment.

Political activism, LGB activism included, is about collective action but also about personal empowerment (Deveaux, 1994). What I call affective empowerment consisted of encouragement, eagerness and enthusiasm, as well as love, friendship, and support. All this appeared in the narratives of transnationality and provided Finnish activists with hope for change. Moreover, transnationality allowed them to distance themselves from their lives at home, offered them possibilities to build personal relationships with LGB people from other countries, and shaped their perceptions of their home country. Often, transnationality made them encounter atmospheres that were more liberal than in Finland. And sometimes, understanding that Finland was more liberal in comparison may have made them to look at their home country more positively.

Much of the research done on LGBTQ+ activism and its affects focuses on the productive power of the negative (Gould, 2009). My previous work on Finnish activists of this era has also centered on negativity, including

frustration, hopelessness, and a lack of belonging (Alasuutari, 2025). Yet, activism is also fueled by utopian thinking and hope for a better future (Muñoz, 2009). I suggest that transnational connections were important for Finnish activists to feel and foster such a hope for a more liberated queer futurity in Finland. By bringing forth positive affects of transnational activism, my intention is not to claim that activism only creates or is powered by positive affects. Rather, this empirical finding complements my earlier work, suggesting that there were also more positive affects at play in the narratives of the early Finnish LGB activists, and often, they were linked to transnationality.

My analysis presents detailed insights into how transnationality emerged in the narratives of four Finnish activists of this era, and how they were emotionally moved and motivated by it. Since my analysis has focused on affects and emotions, using individual activist narratives as its main source material, the answers my analysis can offer are indeed centered on affects/emotions and narratives. For an all-encompassing historical account on transnationality and its tangible, material, and collective effects on the Finnish LGB movement, a different kind of analysis is needed. In that regard, a deeper analysis of the archives that have recorded evidence of transnationality might be beneficial. Nevertheless, by analyzing unique oral history and autobiographical narratives, Finnish gay and lesbian magazines, and Swedish archival materials of UFH and EKHO Uppsala, the article deepens research on the transnational connections of Nordic LGB activism. Finally, the article expands earlier research by offering an affect-theoretical perspective on the history of transnationality.

Notes

1. The region known today as Finland was part of Sweden until 1809, being its Eastern periphery, and then part of the Russian Empire, before gaining independence in 1917.
2. This may be due to a language barrier separating Finland from the Scandinavian countries. People in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark speak Scandinavian languages and can, to some extent and with certain limitations, understand each other, making it easier for Scandinavian researchers to do transnational research within this region. Finnish, in turn, belongs to the Finno-Ugric languages, making Finnish materials less researchable for Scandinavian scholars. Similarly, Iceland is linguistically separated from the Scandinavian countries, even if their languages have shared roots.
3. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for this critique.
4. Gay teachers are known to have formed activist assemblies in countries such as the US and Germany in the 1970s and 1980s (see e.g. Bootsmann et al., 2023; Smith-Silvermann, 2020). However, such organizing is not known in Finland from this era.
5. Tove Jansson (1914–2001) is a renowned Finnish author and painter, known for her Moomin books and queer/lesbian relationships. In addition to Kurki and Byland, it was also Jansson who connected Gustafsson and Hammarsten to Finland.

6. I have written about Kaipiainen and his marriage elsewhere, noting that it may have allowed him some physical intimacy with men, although the extent of this intimacy remains speculative (Alasuutari, 2024).

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