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Sensitivity Reading or *Kokemuslukeminen* as an Ethical-Aesthetic Intervention in Finnish Youth Literature

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ABSTRACT

Sensitivity reading is a specialized editorial practice focused on better representation of historically marginalized groups in literature. While the practice originates from 2010s children's and young adult literature publishing in the United States, it has since also been employed elsewhere around the world. This article focuses on *kokemuslukeminen* ("lived experience reading") – sensitivity reading in the context of Finnish youth literature – as a localized version of a more international practice. Drawing on interviews with three sensitivity readers in Finland, it aims to provide new insight into the practice by broadening the understanding of it beyond the dominant Anglo-American perspective through an analysis of sensitivity readers' accounts in this specific context and in dialogue with relevant feminist discussions. Situating the practice locally, for example in relation to questions of genre and institutional realities, while also acknowledging its roots in long-standing theoretical and political traditions, provides valuable insight into the practice as well as important tools for both its defense and the critique. Indeed, in order to seriously engage

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INTRODUCTION

Sensitivity reading is a specialized editorial practice that originated from recent trends in contemporary children's and young adult literature publishing. In particular, it emerged in the 2010s in the United States in response to the lack of diversity in the publishing industry and amid growing demands for better representation of marginalized groups, especially racialized minorities in the context of youth literature, and has since been employed elsewhere around the world. By providing expert assessment of unpublished manuscripts from an ethical-aesthetical viewpoint, sensitivity reading aims to create more accurate as well as more politically and ethically responsible portrayals of historically marginalized groups in literary texts (Brouillette; Lawrence, "Is Sensitivity Reading a Form of Censorship?"; Lawrence, "Literary versus Nonliterary People"; Leiwo). Sensitivity reading services are usually used when an author writes about an experience that they are not intimately familiar with or about a marginalized group they are not part of with the aim of helping authors avoid pitfalls of representation, such as unnecessary stereotyping, misunderstandings, and inaccuracies. The practitioners, called sensitivity readers, usually belong to the social groups whose portrayals they review and comment on; they provide authors with feedback based on their own experience-based expertise. As E. E. Lawrence has argued, the objective of sensitivity reading is to "serve [...] as a kind of specialized editing in which practitioners review unpublished manuscripts from privileged standpoints that allow them to better detect, critique, and amend aesthetic flaws arising from prejudice and perspectival limitations" ("Is Sensitivity Reading a Form of Censorship?" 31–32). While the term "sensitivity reading" is also used to describe the practice of editing already published texts to appeal to new audiences – for example, by diminishing expressions of racial and other forms of discrimination in them – this article will focus on sensitivity reading as a collaborative editorial practice deployed on new, unpublished manuscripts. The practice of editing already published works, often for commercial reasons, involves a different set of ethical reasoning and consequences that would require and deserve its own analysis.

In English language media and publishing, sensitivity reading has been a highly politicized and controversial practice since 2017, following the publication of two prominent press articles: "There's a New Way for Novelists to Sound Authentic. But at What Cost?" by Everdeen Mason, published in the Washington Post, and "In an Era of Online Outrage, Do Sensitivity Readers Result in Better Books, or Censorship?" by Alexandra Alter, published in the New York Times (Lawrence, "Literary versus Nonliterary People" 127). In this article, I do not engage at length with this debate on the potential censoriousness of the practice, as

that has been done elsewhere by E. E Lawrence ("Is Sensitivity Reading a Form of Censorship?"; "Literary versus Nonliterary People"), among others. Instead, I take a different perspective, focusing on a localized version of the practice in a specific context outside of the United States: Finnish youth literature. Drawing on three in-depth interviews with sensitivity readers in Finland and previous research, the aim of this article is to provide background to and critically contextualize the practice of sensitivity reading in Finnish youth literature publishing, framing it through an examination of the questions of genre, knowledge production, and the concrete realities of Finnish literary publishing.

My examination is informed by interviews with three individuals who have worked as freelance sensitivity readers for youth literature in Finland. The interviewees were recruited through an open call shared on social media and through several mailing lists, and all of them had several years of experience in the field. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2023, recorded, and transcribed with all identifying information removed to ensure participant anonymity. For this same reason, I do not attribute the quotations from the interviews presented in this article to individual interviewees. Despite specific educational backgrounds not being a requirement for participating in the research, all interviewees had also worked in other editorial, creative, and/or academic positions and/or had degrees in literary or gender studies. Two of the three interviewees had assessed manuscripts from the perspective of someone belonging to a gender minority; one identified as a member of a cultural and racial minority in Finland; and all had experienced marginalization based on their sexual orientation, which they draw upon in their work. They have mostly worked as sensitivity readers starting from 2016 with a focus on youth literature, especially speculative fiction. While this is a small sample of participants, it reflects the limited number of people working in the field in Finland – which does not greatly exceed three – and can thus be considered adequate.

This article seeks to provide new insight into the practice of sensitivity reading by broadening our understanding of it beyond the dominant US/UK centric perspective and clarifying its political implications, possibilities, and limitations while simultaneously illustrating the ways in which practices and ideas originating in the Anglo-American literary world travel and are adapted to different cultural and institutional contexts. Indeed, while previous research on sensitivity reading has been done in the context of understanding diversity in Anglo-American youth literature and publishing (Brouillette; Lawrence, "Is Sensitivity Reading a Form of Censorship?"; Lawrence, "Literary versus Nonliterary People"), discussions in the US and UK contexts are not easily translatable to the Nordic context without some adaptation and changes. As Lydia Kokkola and Sara Van Den Bossche argued in 2020, to accurately discuss and successfully promote diversity in Nordic youth literatures, we should "diversify our understandings of diversity" (2) by taking into account the cultural and institutional contexts in which we are located. Despite the hegemonic presence of Anglo-American culture in the contemporary world and the apparent influence it has on Finnish literature and related discussions, the Finnish context significantly differs

from its Anglo-American counterpart, both institutionally and culturally. These differences must be considered when discussing the practice of sensitivity reading in Finland.

For this reason, examining the Finnish version of sensitivity reading offers a new perspective on the practice as a whole. In this article, I home in on the Finnish practice as a locally specific version of a broader practice with its own historical, aesthetical, and political context and emphasis that can, however, inform us about the practice of sensitivity reading, its possibilities, and limitations more broadly. To highlight this local specificity, I use the Finnish concept *kokemuslukeminen* (Finnish for "lived experience reading") when discussing sensitivity reading in the Finnish context. In the first section of this article, I give a brief introduction to the Finnish context in which sensitivity reading first emerged in the 2010s: the cultural environment, institutional structures in the Finnish publishing industry, and the genre of Finnish youth literature. I also look closely into the differences between the Finnish and English terms used to refer to sensitivity reading. In the following section, I explore the Finnish practice as described by the interviewed *kokemuslukijat* and analyze their accounts through the framework of feminist debates on the authority of lived experience in knowledge production. In the third section, I focus on the recurrent ideas of 'good' representation in the discussions with the *kokemuslukijat,* connecting their views to the critical feminist discussions on the politics of representation. The aim is to contextualize sensitivity reading as an ethical-aesthetic intervention forcing the literary field to discuss and challenge its own understanding of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics of literature in Finnish youth literature. Finally, I discuss critiques of sensitivity reading expressed in the interviews and previous research to conclude that, in order to seriously evaluate sensitivity reading as a practice, we must acknowledge not only its possibilities but also its ideological and institutional limitations.

CONTEXTUALIZING *KOKEMUSLUKEMINEN*: SENSITIVITY READING IN FINLAND

The Finnish language publishing field is relatively small, as there are approximately 5 million Finnish speakers compared to the nearly 2 billion people who speak English as their first or second language. In the last five years, the number of unique fiction titles categorized as youth literature published annually in Finnish has varied from 75 titles in 2021 to 131 titles in 2024 (Tiitinen). While not insignificant, this is a very small number compared to English language publishing; in the 2010s, the number of unique young adult titles published in the United Kingdom alone was more than 500 each year (Ramdarshan Bold 8). Similar to the US and UK where large publishing conglomerates control the publishing market, a few major publishing houses dominate the market in Finland (Arminen et al. 26–27), most of them owned by multinational companies, such as Bonnier Books. There are also a few small independent publishers, some of whom focus particularly on children's and youth literature. The market driven neoliberal order and the consequent monopolization of the publishing industry in Finland is relatively new, and, to this day, the

field functions as a combination of welfare state cultural politics and neoliberal market capitalism (Sevänen 23). Even though the remnants of the welfare state structures are being dismantled rapidly, their effect is still visible in the logic of the Finnish publishing industry, particularly in authors' reliance on state funding and the important revenue generated by public library lending compensation. This system makes it still possible, to some extent, to bypass profit-oriented publishing.

In Finland, "youth literature" (*nuortenkirjallisuus*) is used to refer to literature aimed at teenaged audiences. Historically, Finnish youth literature has included genres such as the youth novel (*nuorisoromaani*), boys' books (*poikakirjat*), and girls' books (*tyttökirjat*) (see Lappalainen). However, over the last decades, these genre categorizations have given way to new ones. Today, youth literature is understood to include both young adult literature (*nuorten aikuisten kirjallisuus*) and what can be considered middle-grade literature (*varhaisnuortenkirjallisuus*), but it excludes literature aimed at younger children. While the genre enjoys a long literary tradition, including adventure novels, coming-of-age novels (*Bildungsromane*), novels of development (*Entwicklungsromane*), school stories and guidebooks or conduct books for women (Aerila 156; Voipio, "Negotiating Emancipation and Nationalism" 25; Voipio, "Minuuden kirjallisia rakennuspalikoita" 82–83), the establishment of Finnish youth literature as an independent genre dates back to the mid-19th century and the Fennophile movement, a national movement promoting Finnish language and culture as part of Finland's struggle to gain independence from Russian control.[1] Indeed, literature for children and youth (in both Finnish and Swedish) has actively played a role in the nation-building project since the very beginning (Merivirta 33; Voipio, "Negotiating Emancipation and Nationalism" 27), and there is no doubt that this history has left its mark on the genre.

At the same time, Finnish translations of foreign children's and youth literature have been strikingly popular in Finland since the 19th century. It is safe to say that, since its emergence, Finnish youth literature has been strongly shaped by the Finnish national context, on the one hand, and the continuing influence of other literatures – especially Anglo-American – on the other. In fact, in the second half of the 19th century, approximately 80% of the literature for adolescent audiences published as books or in magazines was translations from other languages (Kuivasmäki 280). The influence of English language literature, specifically, on the development of Finnish children's and youth literature has been understood lately to be even more remarkable than previously thought (Kuivasmäki 294; Merivirta 33–34; Voipio, "Negotiating Emancipation and Nationalism" 26). From the mid-20th century, Finnish literature has been increasingly influenced by US literature, a consequence of US cultural imperialism and the dominance of US popular culture globally. From the late 1990s onward, the defining influence of the Anglo-American works of young adult literature, such as *Harry Potter* and the later hypercanon of YA literature[2] on Finnish youth literature has become undeniable.[3]

[1] Finland was part of the Swedish Empire from 1150 to 1808 and an autonomous Grand Duchy of Russia from 1809 to 1917.

[2] What Rebekah Fitzsimmons and Casey Alane Wilson call the "hypercanon" of young adult fiction consists of ultra-popular titles, such as Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight Saga* (2005-2008), Suzanne Collins'

Similarly, the Finnish literary field is increasingly engaging with conversations that are being had in the US/UK cultural sphere. In the Anglo-American context, the emergence of sensitivity reading is often traced back to the founding of the grassroots organization We Need Diverse Books (WNDB) (https://www.diversebooks.org/) in 2015. In Finland, discussions on the politics and ethics of representing marginalized groups in literature gained mainstream attention the following year. In 2016, Koko Hubara, a Finnish-Yemeni Jewish writer and the founder of *Ruskeat Tytöt* collective[4] published a blog post titled "Othe(i)ron" (Hubara), in which she criticized author Laura Lindsted's portrayal of a Yemeni Jewish character in her novel, *Oneiron* (2015), after it won the Finlandia prize, the most prestigious literary prize in Finland. The post, focusing on the question of "cultural appropriation" (Hubara), led to a cultural debate in Finnish media and literary field that has later been described as the only literary polemic in the 2010s Finland that came close to constituting a culture war (Riihinen). The reactions to Hubara's critique were, at the time, mostly cautious or openly hostile, arguing for the right of an author to imagine and write freely about experiences they are not familiar with even if it leads to stereotypical portrayals (Määttä 147–48). Nonetheless, in the following years, the politics and ethics of (mis)representation of racially marginalized groups in Finnish literature, the racial homogeneity of Finnish authors, and the question about who has the authority to write marginalized characters became reoccurring themes in Finnish popular media and the literary field, paving the way for the later emergence of *kokemuslukeminen*.

Indeed, the mid-2010s saw an increase in discussions about (the lack of) diversity in literature, including but not limited to works for children, both in Finland and internationally. However, these concerns are not new, especially in the Anglo-American context. In the US, race and racism in children's and youth literature have long been the focus of attention for educators, parents, and public figures. In 1965, educator and author Nancy Larrick questioned "the all-white world of children's books", provoking broader public discussions about the portrayal of Black children in the children's literature published in the US. The Civil Rights Movement, the 1970–1980 feminist movement, and more recent movements, such as Black Lives Matter, have further fueled calls for racial justice, often including or inspiring demands for more and better representation of people of color in education, literature, and culture in the Anglo-American world.

The Finnish book industry has not faced the same political pressure to produce more diverse children's and youth literature until recently, as Finnish society has been considered fairly monocultural. Though several different cultural and racial groups have lived in Finland, including the Indigenous Sámi people, the Finnish Roma or Kale people, and small communities of Russians, Estonians, and Jews, the nationalist illusion of cultural homogeneity remained largely unchallenged until the increase in immigration in the late

The Hunger Games series (2008-2010), and Veronica Roth's *Divergent* series (2011-2013). The *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007) by J.K. Rowling is also often counted as part of the hypercanon.

[3] This trend is noticeable in many small languages' literatures for young people, such as in Hungarian literature (see Tisza).

[4] "Brown girls", Finland's first cultural media centering people of color.

20th century. Today, the multiculturalism of Finnish society is an accepted fact. However, this cultural transformation has still had surprisingly little impact on Finnish children's and youth literature (Aerila and Kokkola 45). The numbers are revealing: of the adolescent novels published in Finland between 1990 and 2007, only 15 had (vaguely defined) "multicultural themes or incorporate[d] characters with foreign backgrounds" (Aerila and Kokkola 45). The first Finnish teenage novel with an immigrant protagonist, *Kahden mailman tyttö* (*The Girl of Two Worlds*), was not published until 2011, and it was written by a white Finnish author, Marja-Leena Tiainen. As of 2013, "Finland ha[d] yet to produce its first authentic multicultural children's novel", meaning a youth novel by a non-white or immigrant author (Aerila and Kokkola 46). Today, in 2025, only three authors of color have published youth novels in Finland: Mintie Das, who writes in English; Adile Sevimli, who has co-authored one book with Oona Pohjolainen; and Eveliina Mulenga, who has self-published three novels aimed at teenagers. This illustrates well the extent to which non-white authors and stories remain severely marginalized in Finnish youth literature.

The emergence of *kokemuslukeminen* in the late 2010s is a continuation of these ongoing discussions in Finland and elsewhere and one attempt to address the evident lack of diverse stories in Finnish literature publishing. Today, *kokemuslukija* services in Finland are offered through two associations, Sateenkaarikynä ry and the Mixed Finns (Ahola), and by individual people; they can be requested either by individual authors or by publishers. Information on the practice is lacking but drawing on the interviews conducted for this research, there are some consistent elements in how it is organized. For instance, the work is not always paid; while all interviewees had received compensation for their services at some point, two of them mentioned having read and commented on texts without remuneration. The work experience of the interviewees varies: one of them said they had only worked as a *kokemuslukija* for young adult literature or youth literature, while the others mentioned having worked with other genres as well. However, those with broader genre experience also agreed that the vast majority of manuscripts are youth literature. While the manuscripts they worked on were mostly prose, specifically novels, two of the interviewees had also occasionally done sensitivity readings of drama, comics, and non-fiction texts. Speculative young adult fiction was prominent among the manuscripts the interviewees worked with, and none of them had experience with reviewing children's literature.

While there has been some interest in discussing sensitivity reading in the Finnish publishing industry in recent years,[5] the practice is still mostly unknown to the public. The first mention of it in Finnish popular media took place in 2021 when the Finnish translation of Black poet Amanda Gorman's book, *The Hill We Climb*, was sensitivity read before publishing, following the request of the author's agent (Kanerva). However, the emergence of wider media interest on the practice happened only from 2023 onward (Ahola; "Kuka Saa

[5] In 2023, Suomen Kirjailijaliitto (The Union of Finnish Writers) organized a panel discussion on the topic at the Helsinki Book Fair, and in 2024, Suomen Kustannusyhdistys (Finnish Publishers Association) organized a seminar on it for Finnish publishing professionals.

Esiintyä Vähemmistön Nimissä?"; Lippu), after it was revealed that Yle, the Finnish Public Service Media Company, had occasionally used 'diversity experts' in their creative content production, which led to speculations about 'woke censorship' in the Finnish publicly funded media (see for example Mattila). Since then, public cultural discourse on *kokemuslukeminen* has largely focused on the potential censoriousness of the practice, following the Anglo-American discourse described in the introduction.

The framework of censorship is (often purposefully) misleading, as the *kokemuslukija* essentially has no power to censor the manuscripts they comment on. Instead, as Lawrence argues, the practice is best understood as an editorial one: a practice with a "pedagogical and dialogical character" ("Literary versus Nonliterary People" 131) which, instead of absolute demands, generates critical feedback and open discussion. This characterization has been popular among the proponents of the practice in Finnish media. They have claimed that kokemuslukeminen is not a political project but first and foremost an expert service aiming for harm mitigation through constructive discussion, in a cultural context where the publishing industry is very homogenous, especially racially (Correa and Zambrano). This dialogical characterization of kokemuslukeminen was also emphasized by all interviewees who described the process as voluntary and based on discussion and collaboration. Finnish authors Tommi Kinnunen and Anniina Mikama, who have both used kokemuslukeminen services regularly, have given similar accounts, notably highlighting the practice's similarity to other kinds of background research authors do while writing fiction (Kuosmanen).

While it is important to talk about the practicalities of sensitivity reading, as they undoubtedly function as a strong case for the non-censoriousness of the practice, sensitivity reading, as an editorial practice, is not primarily characterized by its process but its ethical-political goal – "the formation of a better cultural universe" as Brouillette (301) has put it – and the aesthetical means used to advance it. However, despite the common objective, sensitivity reading is not a monolithic practice. As Lawrence has argued, it "is and can be practiced in many different ways and to (sometimes subtly) different ends" ("Literary versus Nonliterary People" 128). In the interviews, I have recognized two of these distinct, yet connected, ways in which *kokemuslukeminen* is used. All the interviewees described the practice through a certain double focus: on the one hand, *kokemuslukeminen* is about securing a *sensitive approach* in literature about difficult topics, such as violence or mental illness. On the other, the practice aims for a certain *credibility* of literary representations in a work, which can be achieved through making the representations reflect the lived experiences of the people represented. These two foci, sensitivity on one hand and credibility of the portrayal on the other, often work to serve the same ethical-political goal of harm mitigation or even positive social impact through more politically and socially responsible representations of historically marginalized groups. Despite that, they are not one and the same and, in practice, can even contradict each other.

To illustrate this double focus, it is helpful to examine the difference between the emphasis of the English (as used in the UK and the US) and Finnish concepts: "sensitivity

reading" and "*kokemuslukeminen*" ("lived experience reading"), respectively. In English, "sensitivity reading" is an established term for the practice, and while some alternatives have been presented – such as diversity reading, cultural consultancy, authenticity reading, or targeted beta reading – they have not gained similar popularity. The term "sensitivity" is seen as approachable, as it is often used to refer to cultural or diversity sensitivity in the liberal framework of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), a popular framework for promoting diversity and eliminating discrimination in organizational and corporate environments, including in Finland. While DEI has lately been politically contested from the Right, especially in the US, the relative popularity of it in the past has been reliant on its diluted and non-threatening politics of multiculturality and inclusion which do not pose any radical challenge to social oppression. Indeed, the issues in texts approached from a sensitivity perspective are often either cosmetic (e.g. vocabulary) or normative (e.g. age appropriateness). One of the interviewees explains:

> [I] would personally intervene in [the manuscripts] on things like slurs, like derogatory words. Of course, it depends on the perspective, like if it's in a bullying situation, but even then, I might say that it could be a bad choice from the perspective of marginalized readers, especially in youth literature.

The mention of the (intended) audience is important here. As Brouillette (293) has acknowledged, the emphasis on the word "sensitivity" in "sensitivity reading" has an often-pejorative association with the perceived excessive sensitivity of the intended audience. While this association often stems from a more general opposition to the practice, it has some truth to it. Heavy focus on sensitivity might in fact lead to, or be based on, incorrect and infantilizing assumptions about the intended audience of the literature, i.e. young readers. This understanding of sensitivity and sensitivity reading is problematic, since it shifts the discussion from sensitivity reading as, first and foremost, an editorial practice to an argument for or against regulating reading materials for specific audiences. As Lawrence has described, understanding sensitivity reading as acceptable only in literature for children and youth reinforces "stereotypes that children [as readers] lack the intellectual and affective resources to either discern or resist" what is offered to them ("Literary versus Nonliterary People" 136) and promotes a paternalistic view of the practice, thus putting it in the normative realm instead of viewing it as a dialogical, critical tool for the authors to work with.

In Finnish, the concept used for the practice has notably different connotations. While the direct translation for sensitivity reading, "sensitiivisyyslukeminen", is used occasionally, the most widely used term in the media and the literary field is *kokemuslukeminen*, translated directly to "lived experience reading" – a term that is not used in English. All the people I interviewed used the concept *kokemuslukeminen*, and two of them stated they clearly preferred the Finnish concept to the English one as they think it better describes what the practice is about:

> [S]ensitivity is a bit of an unclear concept, and *kokemuslukeminen* better describes what the practice is about. I read the text based on my own

> experiences, I have an experience of belonging to a marginalized group, and I share that experience with the author. I'm not just evaluating the sensitivity of [the work], like whether it's written in a respectful way.

One interviewee, in particular, discussed at length the problems of placing too much emphasis on sensitivity. During the interview, they brought up several times that if the choice is between maintaining the narrative's credibility and ensuring the sensitivity of its portrayal or language, an author should always privilege the former. According to them, the internal logic and consistency of a narrative are the most important aspects of literature: in a good book, "the characters must remain coherent" regardless of the "sensitivity" of the portrayal. For example, "if there is a character who would say something ugly, and then they don't, it creates a false note in the story". Similarly, minimizing depictions of bullying or creating implausible "fairy tale endings" for the sake of "sensitivity" is, according to them, not a good choice, even in books for young readers. Indeed, drawing on the interviews, it appears that *kokemuslukeminen* does not put a strong emphasis on the intended audience's perceived reactions or qualities. Instead, its focus is on the basis on which the work is done, namely, the intimate expertise of the reader, cultivated through personal experience. It often centers aesthetic-ethical concerns, such as depth of literary characters, factual issues in portrayal (e.g. cultural (in)authenticity), and the relationship between a representation (e.g. specific character or narrative) and culturally recognizable stereotypes.

The separation between the different foci of the practice is not absolute. Most often, there appears to be an element of both – promoting sensitivity and enhancing the credibility of representation – in *kokemuslukeminen,* as is also the case in the Anglo-American practice of sensitivity reading. However, drawing attention to this dual focus is a helpful way to characterize the practice and understand its political connections and potential that are not necessarily limited to the liberal framework of sensitivity, as reflected in the English term. Indeed, in the next section, I illustrate that while *kokemuslukeminen* is often connected to the same liberal political frameworks associated with sensitivity reading in the US and UK, its strong emphasis on experience also links it closely to traditions of experience-based expertise widely utilized in Finnish society, especially in the contexts of health care and social welfare (Meriluoto 300) and more importantly, to the feminist debates on the authority of lived experience. Through the latter, I argue, the framework of lived experience carries a more radical political potential than the framework of sensitivity, discussed before.

KOKEMUSLUKIJAT AS "EXPERTS-BY-EXPERIENCE"

Expert-by-experience, in Finnish *kokemusasiantuntija,* is "a term used to refer to people who have undergone problematic experiences in their past and have then been invited to act as experts based on those experiences" (Meriluoto 120, 123). Experiential expertise has solidified its role in Finnish health and welfare sector since the early 2000s, and today, it is used regularly in decision-making and developing services. In experience-based expertise, what is central is that the knowledge is not based solely on scientific understanding but also

on personal experience (Kuosmanen et al.; Rissanen 14–19, 22). While not all the interviewees in this research used the concept of "expert-by-experience" to refer to themselves, there are significant similarities between the ways they conceptualize their work and how expertise-by-experience is defined.[6] Similarly, while only two of the interviewees characterized their work as explicitly "feminist", the way they reflected on the practice of *kokemuslukeminen* resonates with different feminist positions on lived experience and knowledge.

The politics of the authority of lived experience have long been discussed by feminist, queer, critical race, and disability theorists (Intemann 265). The tradition of standpoint theories has often been an important starting point in most feminist discussions on the issue. Developed originally by Nancy Hartsock in the 1980s and based on the Marxist theorist Georg Lukacs' idea of a "standpoint", feminist standpoint theory is an epistemological view in which marginalized viewpoints are understood as epistemologically superior. This is relevant here since all the interviewed *kokemuslukijat* emphasized the uniqueness of lived experience as a base for knowledge. As one of them stated:

> [E]ven if I studied African studies for fifteen years, I wouldn't want to do sensitivity readings of characters of African background or Afro-Finnish characters as a white person. I would say that the practice is about the lived experience, specifically.

However, an epistemic standpoint is not based on individual experience alone, as it also requires critical analysis and collective reflection of the experience (Intemann 265). Again, a similar idea is expressed by the *kokemuslukijat* in this research:

> I'm not just saying that I know these things about my own identities, I feel like there's more to it [...] I would define sensitivity reading in a way that it would involve some knowledge of literature and even some social knowledge, so it's not just the experience of any individual person.

One interviewee shared that they have done sensitivity readings of characters from the marginalized groups that they are part of but also of racialized and homosexual characters with whom they do not share the same background, but who are described in the manuscript as experiencing similar discrimination to them as a homosexual person not racialized as white in Finland. In a similar way, other interviewees also mentioned that they have provided "general queer perspectives" to the manuscripts they have reviewed, based on their experiences in the LGBTQ+ community. The social and collective construction of knowledge was therefore emphasized in all the interviews: the knowledge that the *kokemuslukijas* deploy in their work is grounded in their self-understanding as members of communities, through which they cultivate special insight into their lived experiences.

The critiques of and further developments of Hartsock's standpoint theory provide an interesting framework for thinking about the ways that *kokemuslukijat* both position lived experience as central to knowledge production and challenge the authority of experience-

[6] Moreover, the term *kokemuslukija* as a word is directly connected to the Finnish word for "expert-by-experience," *kokemusasiantuntija* and possibly originates from it, which would explain the difference between the Finnish concept for the practice and its English counterpart.

based knowledge. One important critique of epistemological authority has been posed by Jijian Voronka. Drawing on Joan Scott's famous critique of the epistemological authority of individual experience (Scott), Voronka frames the politics of "people with lived experience" as a form of strategic essentialism, that is, a practice organizing heterogenous people with heterogenous identities and lived experiences into a cohesive category that reifies difference and unifies the ways of making meaning for political gain (190). Voronka argues that using lived experience as a universalizing subject-position to authorize knowledge has both benefits and drawbacks: mobilizing around the idea of universal experiences for political and practical purposes can be advantageous, she agrees; yet at the same time, "[w]hen we move to obscure the wide differences among us through universalized notions of 'lived experience', we risk erasing fundamental differences among us that matter" (192). These are the very issues that *kokemuslukijat* face and must negotiate in their work and that feminists have been engaging with for decades.

Indeed, since the late 1980s and early 90s, this question of difference has been conceptualized in feminist politics and theory, particularly through the concept and theories of intersectionality. Intersectionality refers to the ways of understanding the multifaceted nature of oppression developed within the context of Black feminism (Cooper 387–389), and it is both a political and theoretical instrument. The questions of multifaceted oppression and difference were discussed at length in the interviews with *kokemuslukijat*. It is understood that although a *kokemuslukija* may have the ability to give feedback on portrayals of specific marginalized social groups they do not belong to when the basis of marginalization is the same, several overlapping marginalizations complicate the question. For example, one *kokemuslukija* argued that, with certain limitations, a lesbian woman might be able to provide a sensitivity reading of a bisexual character. However, a white transgender Finnish person may not necessarily understand the experience of a transgender person from different cultural and/or racial background, as a white transgender *kokemuslukija* highlighted, concluding that "[i]f someone who works as a sensitivity reader as a white person tries to tell what it's like for Black people in this world, it shows in the fact that the sensitivity reading won't be very good". They also explained that despite their own transgender identity, they would not "feel comfortable commenting on trans women characters" because they "don't see nearly all the things related to it". It is clear, here, that an intersectional understanding of lived experience poses an inherent challenge to any politics or practice that requires viewing any experience as universal.

For this reason, as an alternative to a strict standpoint epistemology, some feminist theorists have offered the notion of situated knowledges. The situated knowledge epistemology does not assume any universally shared experience; instead, they assume partiality and see different knowledges, produced from different positions, as adding to others (Code 317). As Patricia Hill Collins writes, these theories are based on the idea that:

> Each group speaks from its own standpoint and shares its own partial, situated knowledge. But because each group perceives its own truth as partial, its knowledge is unfinished. Each group becomes better able to consider other groups' standpoints without relinquishing the uniqueness

> of its own standpoint or suppressing other groups' partial perspectives. (270)

This complementary idea of knowledge is echoed by the *kokemuslukijat*. They emphasized that, while they believe experience-based knowledge holds a special epistemic status, no experience can be generalized to all people belonging to a particular marginalized group. One interviewee, in particular, commented on this repeatedly: "I can't say, 'I read the book, and if I correct something [about the transgender representation] then all trans people agree with it', no way". However, this is not seen as an obstacle or problematic to *kokemuslukeminen* but simply as a part of the practice. The interviewees understand their views as partial, even when well-informed, and emphasize that, as is the case with all expert knowledge, the expertise provided by the *kokemuslukijat* can also be questioned and supplemented. For example, one of them reflected that "someone who has studied history might be able to talk more about transgender issues in 1920s Germany" than they could, as a transgender person living in contemporary times.

Indeed, as bell hooks (89) has noted in the context of pedagogy, in an ideal situation, experiential and analytical ways of knowing do not exclude but complement each other. The idea that a *kokemuslukija* is one source of knowledge among many was prominent throughout the discussions. As one interviewee put it:

> I don't see a difference from the perspective of writing, whether it's a doctor advising how to break a character's hand and what happens next or whether it's someone whose identity and experiences aren't familiar to me, telling me "I have this experience."

However, while acknowledging similarities between experience-based expertise and other types of expertise, *kokemuslukijat* also recognize important differences between them. Experience-based expertise involves different personal and emotional but also political commitments compared to other types of expert work. First, sensitivity reading can be "an emotionally demanding process", as Sarah Brouillette, who has studied sensitivity reading in the framework of "emotional labour", notes (295). Indeed, gathering information about concrete professional practices is one thing; asking someone to share details about their intimate private life is quite another. As one interviewee put it: "[I]f you write about everyday life on a horse farm, you can just call and ask if you can come by, but you can't just visit a transgender person's life like that". The emotional toll of the work is evident in all the accounts by *kokemuslukijat*. One of them, for instance, shared that they had stopped actively advertising their services as a sensitivity reader because they "can't stand explaining these things over and over again", referring to the exhaustion of repeatedly having to explain the consequences of racism and homophobia. Second, however, *kokemuslukeminen* is also a political project. The comparison of sensitivity reading to other expert work can be deployed strategically to bring the practice from the realm of politics and ethics to the realm of aesthetics and consequently depoliticize it. This might help popularize the practice and avoid some of the accusations of censorship, following Kokkola and Van den Bossche's suggestion that discussions of diversity in Nordic youth literature would benefit from "non-political" approaches (2). But while this "aestheticizing" of sensitivity reading (Lawrence,

"Literary versus Nonliterary People" 150) by framing it first and foremost as an aesthetic practice can be used to strategically justify its use in the publishing industry, at the end of the day, the goal of "the formation of a better cultural universe" (Brouillette 301) through better representation of marginalized people is an inherently political one.

WORKING TOWARDS "GOOD REPRESENTATION"

Since literary descriptions are not separate from the real world but have real consequences, the representation of marginalized people is always a socio-political issue inseparable from questions of power (Dyer, *The Matter of Images*; Hall). In Finnish literary studies, the discussions on the politics of representation have taken place first in the context of *naiskuvakritiikki* – that is, the early feminist critiques of images of women – and later in subsequent studies on women's representation and the field commonly described as representation criticism. These aesthetic-political analyses, particularly "images of" criticism that has overwhelmingly focused on critiquing images that are considered "false" (Launis 29; Moi 59–61), often revolve around two main concerns. They focus, first, on the (lack of) authenticity and, second, on the political and social consequences of certain representations. Central to these discussions is the question of whether there are definable correct and incorrect ways to depict or represent women and, if so, how they are defined and who holds the authority to define them. Notably, the very same questions are also central to the justification of sensitivity reading as a practice. Similarly to "images of" criticism, sensitivity reading requires evaluating different depictions of marginalized groups in literature and demonstrating that one cultural image is in some way "more accurate" than another. The *kokemuslukijat* define "good representation" particularly through the framework of "authenticity", framing it as both an aesthetic and an ethical/political concern. Furthermore, this understanding of literary representation inherently challenges the conventional distinction between ethical/political and aesthetic values in literary evaluation.

The accounts of *kokemuslukijat* on the relationship between literature and the real world are grounded in a constructionist understanding of literary representation. Put simply, what makes literary representation a worthwhile area of struggle for them is the belief that representations have a tangible impact on the real world. When reflecting on what motivates their work, all the *kokemuslukijat* who were interviewed repeatedly referred to the interactive relationship between literature and reality – how "[l]iterature has a really big impact on our real world and the thoughts of real people." It is not coincidental that the discussions on "harmful representation" in youth literature have often focused predominantly on the portrayal of marginalized groups (Cai 67–71). Indeed, as Stuart Hall has pointed out, as the question of representation is a question of power – power to mark, assign, and classify – it becomes particularly important when discussing groups that are already historically and socially marginalized (259). He also argues that stereotyping is an "exercise of symbolic violence" that is strictly connected to "gross inequalities of power" in

society (258–259): whereas people belonging to the so-called majority are most often depicted and treated as individuals and complex human beings, members of marginalized groups are often (mis)represented through simplifications and stereotypes (Dyer, *Gays and Film* 29; Hall 258–59). The *kokemuslukijat* interviewed for this research are aware of this tendency and seek to challenge it by promoting good representation of marginalized groups in literature through authentic portrayals, thus making authenticity a central value informing the practice of sensitivity reading. In the interviews, discussions of authenticity focused on three distinct but overlapping aspects of literary representation: credibility and the multi-dimensionality of characters, the absence of obvious didacticism, and factual accuracy.

First, authenticity was used synonymously with "credibility" and "multidimensionality". According to the *kokemuslukijat,* to constitute "good representation", literary characters belonging to marginalized groups should be credible and "somehow multifaceted, multidimensional". Stereotypical representation was seen as both an aesthetic flaw and an ethical issue. One interviewee illustrated the former by noting that, "[i]f stereotypes are repeated in the work, it's boring to read – it feels like I've already read this story", while the latter was linked to the concern that such portrayals can "influence young readers harmfully". However, according to the interviewees, issues of one-dimensional representation are not limited to stereotypes. While it was repeatedly argued that a "good" depiction of a marginalized group is "one that does not rely on clichés and prejudices" and stereotypical or prejudiced portrayals were generally considered "bad", it was also emphasized that one-dimensional portrayals can be problematic even when they do not rely on culturally identifiable stereotypes. As one of the interviewees explained:

> It is not a good representation of transgender people if the only marginalized character [in a story] is somehow defined by the fact that they are trans, and every conversation they have is related to the fact that they are trans, it keeps coming up all the time, they have no other character traits, they have no other interests than their marginalization.

Indeed, all interviewees emphasized the importance of critically evaluating representations from multiple perspectives by exploring their broader political context and implications instead of focusing solely on culturally recognizable stereotypes.

These discussions particularly highlighted the second aspect of authenticity: according to the interviewees, in addition to avoiding stereotypes, authentic representation requires the absence of overtly didactic narratives. One interviewee offered an illustrative example of the potential clash between didacticism and authenticity in their critical reflection on a current trend in Finnish LGBTQ+ youth literature: in recent years, several authors have published books featuring transgender characters who are portrayed as "very proper, very talented, and absolutely wonderful" – "virtuous role models" rather than multi-dimensional and "fully human". They argued that while this may be a well-meaning choice on the part of the authors, when it becomes a recurring trend, it can be problematic or even dehumanizing.

This question of role models and the possible clash between authenticity and political aspirations was already highlighted in the 1980s by Toril Moi in her criticism of the normative tendency of the early "Images of Women" criticism. According to her, a feminist reader "not only wants to see her own experiences mirrored in fiction, but strives to identify with strong, impressive female characters" (48). While this is an understandable desire, she argues that when it becomes a normative demand, it turns paradoxical since in reality, "quite a few women are 'authentically' weak and unimpressive" (ibid). Today, a very similar discussion continues in the context of Black and queer criticism of respectability narratives. Respectability narratives refer to the strategy by which marginalized groups adopt and reproduce dominant, mainly white and middle-class, social scripts that define acceptable behavior in pursuit of social acceptance, legitimacy, and assimilation (see Banks 3). Especially in Black and queer criticism, this strategy has been argued to be politically counterproductive and, also, in fundamental tension with, or even antithetical to, authenticity (see Foy). Indeed, the question of role models is situated at a charged intersection of aesthetics, didacticism, and politics.

The third aspect of authenticity is factual accuracy. In addition to stereotypical and one-dimensional portrayals of marginalized groups, all three interviewees explained that representation can be both politically problematic and aesthetically flawed if it lacks accuracy and/or conveys the author's ignorance regarding the experiences they are writing about. According to them, removing "unconscious bias", "errors", or "misunderstandings" from a manuscript with the help of a sensitivity reader can, at best, "clarify the internal logic of the text" and make a book better as "it certainly diminishes the reader's experience if they spot those mistakes". One interviewee described having suggested edits to a manuscript, for example, when "the author had an incorrect understanding of how healthcare for transgender people works in Finland" or used "weird" or incorrect vocabulary. Similarly, other interviewees said they often comment when a word used in a manuscript is not one the characters in question would realistically use, such as an unintentional slur or a mistranslation from English. They also recalled intervening when manuscripts have included unnecessary explanations, such as excessive detail about a Black character's skin color or a transgender character's genitals, which might undermine the text's credibility for readers who belong to those groups.

As Lawrence has pointed out, in the practice of sensitivity reading, the "aesthetic imperative (i.e. to help develop 'well rounded, fleshed-out characters') merges with its moral one (i.e. to ensure more accurate and dignity-preserving representations of marginalized persons in literature)" in a way that makes separating aesthetics from politics and ethics impossible ("Is Sensitivity Reading a Form of Censorship?" 34). Indeed, the understanding of the *kokemuslukijat* regarding authenticity, consisting of the three aspects described above, is undeniably an aesthetic but also an ethical and political question. This entanglement of different value systems in literature has been previously discussed by children's literature scholar Claudia Mills as no less than a genre trait of children's and youth literature (8). According to her, because of the didactic expectations attached to children's literature as a genre, the moral values a work presents cannot ulti-

mately be separated from its aesthetic value: what a work says is at least as important to its aesthetic evaluation as how it says it. However, while this interconnectedness between aesthetics and ethics/politics may be especially visible in literature for young readers, it is not unique to children's literature.[7] As Maria Nikolajeva has argued, youth literature is not exceptional in its didacticism, for at the end of the day, all literature is both "an art form and a didactic, or rather ideological vehicle" (6–7). While she concedes that "[p]erhaps the ideological, or pedagogical intention is often more explicit in children's literature", she emphasizes that "it is a matter of grade, not of nature" (ibid). Therefore, Mills' notion of ethical aesthetics can be understood as relevant to the analysis of any literature. Similarly, the interviewees in this research, while themselves focusing mainly on youth literature, did not view sensitivity reading as a practice for regulating reading materials for specific audiences, but rather as an ethical-aesthetic intervention aimed at achieving good representation. This practice, rooted in questions of authenticity, is not only relevant in children's and youth literature but can also be applied in literature published for adults.

CONCLUSION

In the context of US #OwnVoices literature, Gabrielle Owen has emphasized the importance of re-focusing the discussion of the literary representation of marginalized groups from the question of "who is allowed" to write about something to how writers can address existing power imbalances responsibly in their work (2). This urgent need to move away from ultimatums toward a more nuanced understanding of the politics of representation is also evident in the interviews with the *kokemuslukijat*. The aim of this article has been to contribute to these discussions by analyzing the Finnish practice of *kokemuslukeminen,* a localized version of the broader international phenomenon of sensitivity reading and, through the analysis, offer new perspectives on the practice in general. I have shown that although sensitivity reading is a relatively new practice both in Finland and in the Anglo-American literary world, it is rooted in long-standing local and international discussions on diversity. In addition, the practice can be meaningfully analyzed through or in relation to feminist debates concerning the authority of lived experience and the politics of representation that go back half a century.

Recognizing sensitivity reading as part of longer traditions can both illuminate its political and aesthetic possibilities and provide tools for the defense and the critique of the practice. While sensitivity reading is not the censorious threat it has often been portrayed as in both Anglo-American and Finnish media, it can and should be approached critically. While the *kokemuslukijat* interviewed for this research saw their work primarily in a positive light, they all mentioned that because of the institutional reality of literary publishing in

[7] This entangled relationship between aesthetics, politics, and other kinds of values has also been recognized in the field of feminist aesthetics, where it has been explored in relation to various forms of art and media, including, but not limited to, children's literature (see Eaton, "Feminist Aesthetics"; Eaton, "Feminist Standpoint Aesthetics"; Roelofs; Taylor).

Finland, especially the increasing role of market logic in publishing decisions and the persistent homogeneity of authors and publishing staff, sensitivity reading can easily become empty exercise in "diversity box ticking" or a "marketing tactic to promote books as offense-proof", especially if used for mercenary reasons. The neoliberal capitalist world order is incredibly capable of co-opting and diverting different projects for equality and justice, as critics of DEI initiatives have pointed out (see, for example, Ahmed; Saha and Van Lente; Leong); sensitivity reading is not an exception. Instead, if (supposed) diversity becomes more economically lucrative, sensitivity reading might become one more optic, creating an illusion of change instead of actual change. After all, the practice is currently being deployed in the publishing industry at a time when, for example, in the UK, the number of books featuring characters of color has been increasing, at least until most recently. However, many of these characters are still being written by white authors, while authors of color remain severely underrepresented in publishing (Ramdarshan Bold 22). The same is certainly true in Finland, where a Finnish-language youth novel by a non-white author published through a traditional publishing house has yet to be released.

So, is the diversity achieved through sensitivity reading real progress or little more than an illusion within an industry that remains predominantly white, cisgender, and non-disabled? While sensitivity reading as a practice has some political potential and can certainly be an important tool for authors, under current conditions, it should not be understood as an institutional solution. At best, it is an editorial practice aimed at supporting authors in their efforts to write literature about marginalized groups they do not belong to that is better, both ethically and aesthetically. In this sense, it functions as a band-aid measure, patching up the glaring lack of diverse representation in youth literature. Anyone who has grown up with little-to-no media or literary representation of people like themselves knows that representation matters, a fact repeatedly demonstrated by initiatives such as We Need Diverse Books. However, the deeper, necessary struggle for "better cultural universes" (Brouillette 301) cannot be won through band-aid solutions. Real change can only be achieved through a radical, systemic transformation of literary publishing.

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