

## Queer Personal Lives, Inheritance Perspectives, and Small Places

**QUEERS DO NOT** always need bright lights to make their own "lightning" (Herring 2010, xiii, 10). For some lesbians, gays, trans\*, and other queer folks the metropolis does not present the only or ideal site in which all human creativity would be maximized, in the sense Georg Simmel (1950) once dreamed it to be. In his postwar sociological analysis of the individual personality in the context of modern, metropolitan life, Simmel contrasted the social forces and structures of urban life with those of rural or small places, locating the urban setting as both more constraining and more liberating. In the 1960s, situationists took this idea further in their dreams of the city; for them, the city would be inimical to daydream, to the degree that it would do away with the need for it, redissolving fantasy back into play (Debord 1992; Dart 2010, 91). Queer urban idealizations, on their part, rely on the grand queer narrative describing the compulsory migration to metropolis. The small place has conventionally been presented as a site offering very limited possibilities for queer political organizing or the pursuit of queer happiness. Complicating these kinds of theoretical and social fantasies of the metropolis, in this article I will argue that ethnographic analysis on queer personal lives provides more depth for queering the cultural binary between met-

ropolitan and regional sites than a mere analysis of structure, a utopian approach or popular presentations can offer. Through investigating how lesbians live in a small city, I will look how inheritance perspectives influence their personal lives.

### **Theoretical Framework**

I have chosen *personal life*<sup>1</sup> as my core analytical concept to open up space to think about queer support relations. The term is elastic enough for my purposes to aerate links between queer lives, care, and kinship because it recognizes not only the importance of cultural and personal memory, but also of generation. As a concept, "personal life" designates areas of life that are impacting closely on individuals and mean much to them. The term does not presume an autonomous individual who makes free choices and exercises unfettered agency (Smart 2007, 28–9). Hence, it is productive here in reworking the narrative describing queer flight, which does not fully recognize the fact that the choice between a big city and a small place is always bound to wider socioeconomic realities. My second important analytical term, "cultural memory," highlights an alert attitude to the extent to which queer people are embedded in both the social structures and the cultural imaginary, both as resources and as limiters. It insinuates that personal lives are rooted in the wider (queer) history, which is processed as "choice" through personal experience, social possibility, and dominant cultural narratives. The historical context of particular national cultural memory has an impact on personal choices, as it is often part of the process of creating (imaginary) identities. For instance, historical and gendered ideas about the rural and the urban in specific nation-state context play a role in understanding the specificities of Nordic queer rural and urban migration and the choices people make about where to live.<sup>2</sup>

These two concepts – personal life and cultural memory – allow me to include queer intimacies, reconfigured kinship networks, and non-conventional friendships in the analysis of how inheritance perspectives influence the ways in which small town queer women imagine and act out their support relations, in order to look at alternative paths to mean-

ingful queer lives, not only the one promised by an odyssey away from a small place. They also allow me to look at wider questions of social possibility and cultural change as my unique data offers rich and nuanced material gained through deep interviews and observations.

In this article, I focus on how two women in their forties, Maria and Scull, design their personal lives in situations that demand intensified participation in blood kin responsibilities, such as their parents' ageing and death. This offers me an opportunity to explore how to study that which is beyond a narrative cohesion in queer self-presentations in the neoliberal regime that puts a growing stress on individual ethos. Personal lives are lived also in relation to the wider queer imaginary, and to gender and class positions. As contemporary queer subjects, Maria and Scull parade through different imaginaries, moving in and between divergent queer iconographies, social expectations, idealized selves, and the changing landscape of legal and cultural definitions of the "normal" state of relations. Because class and gender are also reflexive positions (Smart 2007, 26–8), every investment they want to make in confirming their belonging to any of these spheres needs to be constantly reworked and renegotiated in complicated ways.

### **Cultural Memory Background: Lesbian Walden**

To better understand the queer cultural memory context of Maria and Scull's personal lives, it is necessary to elucidate here some profound narratives for lesbian and gay imaginaries. The Great Gay Migration is the Western origin story of lesbian and gay identity politics and political community, and stands out as a main social fantasy producing queer urban idealizations. It was named by the US anthropologist Kath Weston, who used the term to describe how countless lesbians and gay men moved to San Francisco and other major urban areas across the United States in the 1970s and 1980s. Big cities offered the possibility to create and experience a community (Weston 1998, 38, 55).<sup>3</sup>

From the start, this narrative was disrupted and complicated by queer urban failure narratives and nonmetropolitan success stories – those that Weston calls the experiences of antiidentification. For many, the

urban queer scenes were too incestuous, too scary or too normative, and the happiness that the flight story promised was not within everyone's reach; a large portion of the homeless young people in US cities is queer. Further, the narrative usually takes the form of *Bildungsroman* in research and popular literature, and it may have, arguably, deprived many queer youth "growing up in an identifiable city of a recognizable identity" as Scott Herring (2010, 15) puts it. The link between cultural fantasies produced in the United States, social change in the Nordic sphere, and personal choices in Finland is, however, highly complicated.

Challenging the queer metropolitan canon poses a critique not only for queer epistemologies as Judith Halberstam (2003) has pointed out, but also to the wider, idealized antiurbanism genre in the West. It goes back to Henry Thoreau's book *Walden, or, Life in the Woods* (1854), in which the ultimate explorer of autonomous individuality is the white, masculine man. The Thoreauvian type of atomistic individualism is often rooted in troubling ways in queer thinking. A utopian vision of individual liberation in the wilderness (which, in *Walden*, ultimately fails) might pose a danger in terms of depoliticizing the queer struggle. It runs a risk of leading us to assume that politics is merely about individual resistance or individual contestation of the system, disregarding the state apparatus with its institutions, laws, and other mechanisms through which it operates (Kornak 2015, 23).

A certain romanticizing of the antiurban and hyperindividual connects lesbian cultures to the *Walden*-genre, as a long tradition of political resentment of the lesbian social network exists in lesbian history.<sup>4</sup> Lesbian versions of political community *outside* the polis, a step out of the patriarchy and heterosexual order somewhere in the wilderness – most noteworthy, in the 1970s lesbian lands and lesbian separatism – are strongly embedded in the lesbian imaginaries both in the Nordic countries and in the wider Western context.<sup>5</sup>

Popular representations of tragic rural queer lives strengthen the dominance of the queer dystopia as in the "middle of nowhere" (notwithstanding the lesbian romance with wilderness, and the gay male romance with the Mediterranean and Levant), which, in the US and

British queer literature, tends to be any place except some major urban area. Rurality itself is, however, a contested concept in the Nordic context.<sup>6</sup> Nordic regional policy of the postwar period has been described as periphery policy, with no clear English equivalent. Finland, Norway, and Sweden have vast areas with low population densities. Accordingly, the rural perspective and rural values have played a significant role in how people live their lives and want to live their lives, as the countryside and (historically) the peasantry have had deep cultural meaning in the building of the national identity in these countries. The rural way of living has been, and still is, regarded as the norm for the quality of (family) life in Nordic societies, and this has had a strong impact on regional politics and research (Haugen and Lysgård 2006). This has been particularly true for Finland where the urban culture is just only forming, and the biggest cities are smaller than many rural towns in the United States or in neighboring Russia. The recent neoliberal turn in politics is targeting the provincial area by reducing health care, public transportation, and social services. This makes life increasingly difficult anywhere but in the major cities, in particular for those whose lives are not supported by private wealth and/or extensive care networks, often provided through family and kinship ties.

The vision of a lonely and isolated life outside of a supportive (or political) community was the origin point of Western small city queers' coming-out narratives in the 1970s and 1980s. Before the Internet era, access to queer imaginary outside of major cities was often limited to popular representations; in most cases, the odd queer figure was presented in heterosexual context, bereft of other queer people or successful sexual relations (Weston 1998, 31, 38). The current online world has challenged this implication of residency; one does not need to take a train and leave the heterosexual family home in remote place in order to reach a community anymore, as the social media offers ample possibilities to socialize and to find virtual partners no matter where one lives.

Then again, the recent era is marked by "the decline of the queer public sphere"; queers worldwide are now able to connect without the aid of public venues (Halperin 2012). Also in Helsinki, gentrification has

recently closed down some venues catering for lesbians, trans\*, and non-scene gays (Sorainen 2014a; 2014b). While Helsinki has less to offer its queer citizens and social media offers ways to reach out for a community also from small places, the urbanizing trend in the neoliberal decision making makes alternative everyday life less affordable and sustainable both in Helsinki city center and in provinces.

In my larger research, I have investigated will-writing and inheritance practices in sexually marginalized groups in Finland.<sup>7</sup> This is a crucial topic for queer kinship studies because inheritance legislation is largely based on a cultural model of marriage and heteronormative generational succession that does not fit the lives and kinship configurations of most queer people. Therefore, in this article, I seek to illustrate in which ways inheritance perspectives may be significant for queers, as a group of people, economically invisible to the state and often neglected as caretakers and carereceivers by the wider society. While I am critical of the inheritance system as such, it is obvious that it has often offered means to develop alternative, creative, and sustainable lives that challenge the dominant cultural and legal forms and norms of kinship, family, and relationships. Therefore, while it is crucial to imagine other – more progressive and just – systems, it is of a great importance to study how queer people attach themselves to the existing inheritance practices.

Will-writing has a great potentiality as a queer act – even for those who do not own property. However, except for the work of the British legal scholar Daniel Monk (2011; 2014), who has shown that will-writing can function as an symbolical queer act, little research has been done on inheritance, wills, and queers. Monk's pioneering research goes productively beyond "equality" and "the couple" as frameworks of analysis in order to make potential differences more visible. Monk's work deals mainly with the British legal culture, where "testamentary freedom" and the public recording of wills are key legal features. In the Nordic context, the statutory share of inheritance frames the role of will-writing quite differently than in the United Kingdom, as both the legislative framework and the "inheritance culture" are different; for instance, in Finland, biological children are always entitled to half of the

estate, as a rule. Further, the fact that wills in Finland are semi-private documents, merely parts of tax documentation, makes research on queer will-writing methodologically rather challenging. Therefore, a study on queer inheritance perspectives and wills may greatly benefit of empirical research on what people actually do, particularly if it is put in a dialogue with broader theoretical debates. As Monk (2011) has shown, in this way research on inheritance and will-writing may reveal new aspects about queer understandings of "family" and "kinship" as it broadens the focus to foreground the inherent, albeit frequently masked, political and cultural dimensions underlying assumptions about the crucial importance of queer friendship and chosen family bonds. In the emerging British research on queer wills, it has come to the fore that lesbians and gays do not often include their chosen kin or friends in their wills, contrary to what has often been assumed. These initial research findings complicate queer discussions about the "chosen kin" and the meaning of friendship for queer care and support.<sup>8</sup> These empirical research results need also to be verified in the Nordic context, probably mainly through interview techniques; hence the importance in this article of observing closely two women's personal lives. Further, the methodological challenge set by the legal landscape lies also in the fact that queer and lesbian experiences of being "outside of the law" for a long time suggests that individual and cultural assumptions about legal protection, legal aid, and the social legitimacy of breaking the bloodline norm are far less likely than in heterosexual context.

### **Methodological and Ethical Considerations**

As an example of the impact of the inheritance system on queer lives, I will here investigate how two queer women created and maintained their support relations in a small Finnish city. The aim here is to deepen our understanding of nonmetropolitan *queer personal lives* in the implicit background context of the current privatization of care in the rapidly declining Nordic welfare states. I will do this by an in-depth reading of the lives of Maria and Scull.<sup>9</sup> In this way, I will introduce a few instances of how to raise new ways to think about the social possibility

of queer lives, in shedding light on the everyday social calculations of vulnerable people. I interviewed these two women – who self-identify as “moving” in the queer field – on two occasions in January and September 2014, in order to find out what social and cultural conditions or obstacles inheritance perspectives set for their personal lives in a small city. They come from middle class family backgrounds, and their present occupation is not easily defined in classic class terms; it may be best termed as borderline professional, home-owning creative freelancer. They were not in conventional relationships but had extensive support networks of former lovers, on/off lovers, and friends.

In investigating queer lesbian personal lives, I was inspired by ethnographic approaches to *our own community* and *intimate economies*, developed in the field of queer anthropology (Wilson 2004; Dahl 2011). These helped me to tackle productively with the cultural, social, and political links between queerness and personal choices. As both Maria and Scull socialize in queer lesbian circles and have intimate relations mainly with women, their identifications are necessarily embedded in, and lived out in, relation to lesbian and queer imaginaries and realities. It needs to be added that they live in my native city, which made it easier for me to understand some aspects of their stories. I have background information of many places, people, and social realities and could verify their data and gain their trust – in terms of getting more information about their activities – in ways I probably could not have done if I did not know the city. But my knowledge is more historical than current, as I moved away thirty years ago. The industrial, working class city with a discrete social elite and a strong rock scene of my youth has transformed into a postindustrial consumers’ city, with a high unemployment rate but also significantly low housing and living costs, and a vibrant art world. The city is predominantly white and Finnish speaking with an immigrant population of only 0,5 percent; most of them white Russians. There are long-standing Finnish Roma and Swedish speaking communities, but these minorities are rather invisible in the daily buzz of the city.

I tried to overcome potential misrecognitions in my interpretations through multimethodology, using not only interviews and observations



but also kinship charts as the basis of my analysis.<sup>10</sup> I asked both women to draw an A4 size picture visualizing their most important care and support relations, in which concrete and/or financial support takes place. These drawings, as a visual presentations of their relations, shed light on some aspects on the role of the kinship in their lives, and what language with its hegemonic apparatus of recognition – through its heteronormative power hierarchies and lexicon – hides even from their own view. As a different form, drawings sometimes expressed different things, or differently, about their queer relations than their interview stories did. Together with the interview data (their articulations) and my notes (textual interpretations of my observations), kinship charts added to the multidimensionality in the analysis their personal lives. My visits to their respective homes linked a fourth prism to this methodology. Queer home lives provide rich material for the understanding of conflicts, overlaps, and intersections of different identifications, relationships, and desires, relating especially to gender, class, nationality, and ethnicity (Cook 2014). Both my interviewees welcomed this idea and kindly gave me a tour in their home. In the following, I will describe their personal lives in more detail, starting with Maria, and then moving to Scull.

### **Inheritance and Intimate Economies: Maria (39)**

Maria spent her childhood with her mother in the 1970s' Helsinki, and created a self-image of "coming from a different family." She learned from media about another family of two women, that of the Finnish Moomin author Tove Jansson and her spouse Tuulikki Pietilä. This culturally available example of alternative family form helped her to appreciate her own situation. She spent her early adult years in folk high schools [*folkhögskolor*] around Finland, but finally took a university degree. She had moved to the small city after both of her (divorced) parents died and left her a number of properties. She had lived four years in the small city, but was thinking about moving back to Helsinki, as she was totally exhausted after the two complicated inheritance procedures. She lives in a flat she inherited from her mother, a spacey four-room apartment in a historical stone house. It is meticulously decorated with

rural gentry antique, cloth rugs, chandeliers, books, old family photographs, kinship tableaux, and belongings predating her mother's family evacuation from Karelia. This decorative choice of living amidst of her mother's kinship memento is Maria's way to negotiate her own past and future selves. By opting for a queer life in a live-in-shrine of her maternal (heterosexual) family in a small city, Maria is an example of how queers often "live kinship out" in between queer desire and social constraint. The selection of products is one way to support and perform an identity; things that one chooses to surround oneself with do not always say what "we might expect them to say," and their capacity to act as alternative reservoirs of meaning can highlight conflicts and tensions in one's personal life, and "fail to align" with normative expectations (Graham 2010, 65). Maria's choice to build a home museum for her maternal bloodline and to live a queer life in it challenges the conventional assumption of a rational unitary individual – on which much of research on relationality and intimacy is based (Roseneil 2006).

From her father, Maria had inherited (together with her brother and stepmother) a number of farms in the nearby county, and several flats in Helsinki and other cities. She is waiting for the division of the estate to "break free": "Maybe I will sell the estate, and not keep it in the family like I was raised to think – maybe I could use it to create my own life, after all these years that the bio-kin has been absorbing me with the maintenance duties of the family wealth." The future possibility to cut off the forced tie with her stepmother, a troublemaker in the inheritance process, makes her very happy. She also confronted her brother who assumed that his children could freely use Maria's share of the inherited property. This clash was welcomed as it offered a legitimate way for Maria to distance herself from her biological relatives and the maintenance responsibilities of the estate. Maria's days had been filled with hard manual work at family farms. To top this, she also helped to herd sheep at her ex-girlfriend's farm and studied to become a professional surveyor. In the school, Maria felt as an outsider. "One cannot enter a culture just by walking in," she said. As a devoted animal protector, Maria suffered from the school's "how, when and what to kill" heterosexual

macho culture. To sum up, these strenuous challenges in the small city sphere made her Helsinki friends, former and on/off lovers (all women) more important to her. This support network circle consisted mainly of middle class, well-educated lesbians in their forties, mostly white (but also of some Sami and Swedish-speaking lesbians who count as double minorities in Finland).

Maria has written her will twice; the first will she wrote at the age of 27, after her other brother had died from cancer, and another one between our two interviews. She is going to write a new will every time her personal life and relations will change, because she wants to be sure that her estate will not go to her married heterosexual brother's hands: "He has enough." At the time of our first interview, animals and animal protection were the most important potential heirs for her. During this study, she became more interested in adding human beings into her will, but worried about putting her friends in a difficult economic position. This is a legitimate concern, because her "chosen kin" would be subjected for a much higher inheritance tax than her brother would be. Legal categories privileging bloodline and/or marriage failed to recognize the actualities of Maria's personal life, the "chosen heirs" of her queer care network. Further, Maria suffers from a guilty conscience because, apparently, her grandfather, the original collector of the family wealth, had not intended that a granddaughter should inherit. Legal order and family order seemed thus as two different spheres for Maria: "The law does not know the tradition of the family."

Maria entitled her care relations chart as her *piccolo mondo*, with separate sectors for her former lover, on/off lover, her work, her hobby, nature, more animals, and relatives. Originally, she says, she designed her "small world" relationship network to support her decision to take care of her health in the quietness of the small town, to get in better shape in order to get pregnant later. But now she "yearned to return to [her] own sectors in Helsinki, to escape the demanding world of kinship." Maria has a group of supportive people around her, but it offered her contradictory advice in this situation; an on/off lover in Helsinki wanted her to stay in the small city, but her ex-lover encouraged her to move back

to Helsinki. Maria's explanation for this was that her past habitus as a well-educated, urban professional differed sharply from her current provincial appearance of "wellies, woolly, and mittens." Her local ex-lover has seen both these stylistic expressions of Maria's personal life phases, but the Helsinki lover has seen only the latter appearance. Maria finally decided to move back to Helsinki, to return later to the small city to start a nonnormative family there, consisting of herself and a child (and an involved donor living somewhere else). In Finland, a single mother unit is still more socially acknowledged than a rainbow family or other queer forms of family. The cultural understanding in the Nordic countries, according to which rural or small town environment is a good site for children to grow up, probably supported her decision.

### **Queer Cultural Memory Production in a Small Place: Scull (45)**

Scull was born in the small city as the only child of her now retired middle class parents. She works as a low-paid music trainer for young people, and also makes her own music. During her adult life, she has had a dozen of intimate queer relations crossing race, gender, age, class, and cultural boundaries. Scull owns a wooden house in a lower middle class suburb. "Bohemian chaos" is probably the best term in describing her house decoration and the general appearance of the yard – a crack here, an unfinished wall there, clothes on the floor, and a pile of guitars in the corner. The place stands in stark contrast to Maria's bourgeoisie home museum style. Scull offered me raw eco-coffee from a Moomin mug, and wanted to discuss world politics as one crucial dimension of her personal life and support relationships. Her financial situation is vulnerable because of the maintenance costs of the house. For example, the sauna roof of the outbuilding has been damaged in storm, and she has to use the shower she built indoors. This increased her electricity and water bills. While her income, as a performing musician, is sporadic, she is mastering the situation: she saved in renovation expenses by hiring retired carpenters.

Scull has a future prospect of inheriting a rather large estate, consist-

ing of a flat, two summerhouses, and a farm. As her parents are ageing, care responsibilities are growing in her personal life horizon. However, writing a will did not seem an urgent matter, since, in Scull's view, her parents has the "right" to inherit her if she has no child of her own to take care of. Scull's awareness about the fragility of life increased because of the Gaza bombings, the situation in Ukraine, and a serious illness of a friend. While she wants to reinforce her independence she also wants to start a family and share her house with a life companion. Between our two interviews she had improved her financial situation through participating in a reality show, which resulted in a better market to sell her solo gigs. This new income enhanced both her artistic and intimate independency, because she could hire new music partners and reduce her support for her troublesome ex-lover. She was seeking to bond more with local queer artists instead of investing her energy on the "queer/lesbian relationship drama scene." Scull had a "worry perspective" and communicated with her ex-lover on a daily basis. She pointed out that lesbian "exes are like children – one needs to care about them till kingdom come." Therefore, she also transformed her other challenging relationship with another queer lover from a couple form to a "friends with benefits" model. It means that they meet weekly and supported each other's pursuits, have sex sometimes, but with no deep emotions involved. In her chart, Scull sketched herself in the middle with her cat, and attached seven distinct bubbles to this central image: trainees from the youth band, former lovers, on/off lovers, music audience and fans, colleagues, parents, band mates, and "muses" (inspiration sources). Her future personal life vision was to start a family: "A life partner will appear and I am ready to get married." Hence, she wants to create more open space in her life chart by distancing herself from "dramatic" (too queer?) relationships.

### **Queer Survival Strategies**

Scull and Maria both visualized their support relations consisting of seven distinct groups of people, animals, and other entities significant for them. Their charts reveal something important about strategies for

queers in small places, where everyone knows each other but where care relations are conventionally based on blood kin and marriage ties (when the welfare state fades away). Both women left out some of their more unconventional intimate relations in their drawings or stories, and then again referred to them as important – in passing, or “as” a slip of the tongue. This is understandable, because “the individual’s biographical experience of internal psychic conflict, ambivalence, loss and disappointments” is not easily expressed in an interview (Roseneil 2006).

Life charts added new dimensions to the thickness and richness of Maria and Scull’s personal lives. Their everyday social life consisted of queer lovers, former lovers, friends, animals, and relatives, and of numerous other people like neighbors, colleagues, pupils, hired hands, and tenants, the list being far from inclusive. What is interesting is that they distinguished their “queer” relations from the buzz of their everyday social encounters. This distinction between “normal” and “private” social life is arguably one form of a queer survival strategy in the small city, but it also has to do with the fact that they *are* queer in their intimate relations. Queer desires, relations, and intimacies are difficult to articulate and hard to classify in terms of conventional, “developmental” language of romantic relationships, which implicates cultural understandings of the individual as a unitary, rational being.

Further, their stories bring forth the unique imprint that Tove Jansson and her Moomins have had on queer and lesbian imaginaries in Finland. The Moomin characters and their friends are a ragtag queer group living in the wood, being less than perfectly sociable. Jansson herself lived large parts of her life on a deserted island but also participated in social circuits in Helsinki – she is a strong role model for how to create a successful queer personal life in both small and metropolitan place. Maria often referred to Moomins when she described her queer outsider-ness. She also countered conventional gender categories in identifying as one of the Moomin figures, Snufkin, a gender-ambiguous, hobo-like character that has an odd on/off relationship with the Moomintroll: “As Snufkin, I am free to come and go as I please.”<sup>11</sup> Also Scull appreciates the Moomin imaginary (for example, she offered me coffee

from a Moomin cup), but her real cultural icon is the German punk star Nina Hagen, a strong woman who expresses radical political views in her music. While Scull's daring wish to start an outspoken queer, two-parent family with a kid in a small city is thus embedded, maybe surprisingly, in the iconography of politically provocative in-your-face punk culture of the 1980s, Maria's vision of a single mother unit, supported by queer friends springs from Tove Jansson's largely bourgeoisie world of the 1950s. Scull's vision reworks the marriage norm as a new "right" for queers, whereas Maria opts for redefining the cultural contours around (biological) motherhood.

A strong immediacy of the lesbian (and queer) community was apparent in their stories and drawings. At the same time, lesbian public sphere is actually narrowing down. Gentrification is making all major Western cities more heterosexual as house prices become less affordable for those who depend on one income, freelance jobs or social benefits. Among these are many single lesbian mothers, low-income activists, noncommercial artists, cultural producers, and other queers living on the margins. In the process, urban centers are becoming more heteronormative, standardized, white, and family oriented places to live in (Schulman 2012, 36; Sorainen 2014a; 2014b). This arguably heightens the social importance of private lesbian circles, and, in turn, tightens social relations among those who share values and resources under the current social condition of "rights" as the ultimate good. Individual "choices" are something that after-equality era lesbians are expected to make, and in this process new values (lesbian decency) are measured against other, "outdated" values (too queer) – that have to be sacrificed to obtain them, to paraphrase Simmel (1950). This easily leads to couples socializing with other couples, house owners with other house owners, and lesbian families with other lesbian families. The desire to belong is creating new exclusions, as the new measures for successful lesbian socializing are the respectable couple and reproduction. Legal equality seems most promising for those who can count on private resources, like good jobs, steady income or inheritance. But the same terms are "mixed" for those unwilling or unable to play by the rules of privacy – people

committed to public sexual cultures” (Henderson 2013, 20).

The increasing socioeconomic gap dividing queer people is a real concern in the context of individualized ethos and the growing privatization of personal lives that the neoliberal political thought values.<sup>12</sup> Obviously, also Maria and Scull designed their queer relations in ways relating to their class background. In Maria’s case, this gets illustrated in that her resentment of both the public lesbian scene and heteronormative kinship are enabled by her class background and inheritance history. While Maria had a range of lesbian ex-lovers, on/off lovers and friends who she met at private farms and flats, dinner parties, and restaurants, Scull socialized with her queer band mates in local music circles, and met other lesbians also in the Berlin queer scene. Scull’s social position in the small city is based on her long music career and creative powers, which she has chosen to invest in queer music making. The world of inherited property is, however, a future prospect, supporting her wish to start a queer family in the small city.

### **Who Belongs to the Queer City?**

The promise of permanent queerness is one of the main attractions of the metropolis; a vast variety of sites to socialize or to meet sexual partners, and liberation from given social roles or biological kinship. In research literature, nonmetropolitan queers are often represented in complementary, supplementary or ancillary way, as out-and-out marginal to the historical development of the urban queer settlement (Herring 2010, 10).<sup>13</sup> Numerous people have countered this pervasive politics of cultural misrecognition in their personal lives. Contrary to the normalizing narrative according to which only those who *cannot choose* otherwise are unfortunate enough to stay in small places, many queer-identifying people prefer to deurbanize themselves.<sup>14</sup> Often personal flight narratives imply that the promise of the metropolitan anonymity, which was supposed to open up a space for sexual freedom and thus for a better life has appeared spurious, especially for those who have grown up in these cities, and also, often after some time, for those who have immigrated (Weston 1998, 47). Many – like Scull – may never have really migrated



or relocated but often visited or passed through the metropolitan life to explore cultural influences, to create sexual contacts, and to expand their network of relationships. Others – like Maria – have become disillusioned of the metropolitan queer life on their search for people “like me,” sexual freedom, partners or liberation from social surveillance.

Queer “niches” in big cities can prove to be anything but anonymous or “free” of social, gendered, and cultural constraints (Summerskill 2012). In the process, individuals often have found themselves asking: “Am I them?” (Weston 1998, 49–56). Scull resented the Helsinki lesbian life as too commercialized: “In the late 1980s and early 1990s it was much more exciting and atmospheric because of the pioneering spirit; the wider society was just only opening up for more liberal trends. The current standardization of the scene – ladygagaism and list music played in clubs instead of live bands and indie music – is not interesting at all.”<sup>15</sup> Maria expressed an equally strong dislike of Helsinki lesbian bars, in slightly different terms: “These places seek to define me and assume something about my preferences, about why I am there, and what I am looking for. For me, the whole business about sexual identity is repulsive, it is so human-centred.” As she had visited Helsinki lesbian bars only once or twice, her resentment may have to do with the general cultural transmission which constitutes a certain “impossibility” of public lesbian life as lesbians, as women – however perverted – are not thought to be looking for sex or drinking in public neither by the mainstream nor by many lesbians themselves (Summerskill 2012).

### **Concluding Remarks: Personal Lives as Queer Critique**

Personal lives of Maria and Scull confirm “the power of participation in sexual imaginary even at the very moments they dispute its existence,” sometimes even culminating in antiidentification declarations (Weston 1998, 49). They both find their greatest satisfaction in the social privacy offered by the small city, which disrupts the queer metanarrative of the small place as a solemn site for an agonizing social control. Cracks in this master story can be spotted in individual stories of queer personal lives that often complicate the metropolitan/small place binary. Secondly,

queer cultural memory needs redescriptions; for example, Maria's arrangements of her posthumous intimate economies (will-writing) will influence the lives of many lesbians surviving her; and Scull's political nostalgia for the past community life as better, provides her with tools for a political critique of the present and gives her courage to vision an openly queer family in a small city. Third, as we do not know enough about the social outcomes and possible new exclusions created by the new legislative moves, we profit from research on personal lives, on how queers actually design alternative social possibilities and creative responses (Harding 2014; Jakobsen 2014). Studying queer personal lives offers data for analyzing the effects of cultural memory and social possibility for alternative relationality, hence a site for a powerful form of queer critique.

Maria and Scull's queer personal lives were analyzed here as an example of how social possibility for queer support networks is always connected to the cultural form of social resources. While the narratives discussed do not fully adhere to "good gayness" in the way they vision motherhood (Maria) and the marriage form (Scull) as the most promising models for their future care relationships, their vision to voluntarily subordinate their social life as lesbians to the strictures of family nurturance could be seen also as a new kind of social choice for queers (or even as "new queer maturity"); investment in queer parenting may be both intimately connected to the family form and very queer (Monk 2014, 205, 212). In Finland, the cultural closet was actually cracked for good not by popular queer presentations, but by lesbians in their fight for family rights. In this struggle, the lesbian and gay intimate relations that had been interpreted as "private" in the wider culture entered the field of public negotiations in the form of family rights (Kuosmanen 2007, vi).

Inheritance, or the future perspective of it, affects queer choices in many ways – in Maria and Scull's case, it made the blood kin a big part of their life stories and choices, but it also allowed them to do unconventional or progressive things.<sup>16</sup> Inherited wealth, or the growing inheritance expectation, changed their lives in that the actualization of their queer desires, aspirations, and values were in many ways closely attached

to the duties that the blood kin ties demanded of them. Therefore, it was appropriate here to analyze not only their personal lives in the small place but also their redesigned lives after inheritance perspectives had impacted their life charts. As this was an initial study, it becomes clear that the Nordic inheritance system and "inheritance culture" needs to be studied much further in order to understand what are the deeper connections between queer metanarratives, cultural memory, queer personal lives, and the declining welfare state.

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## NOTES

1. The term was introduced by the British sociologist Carol Smart (2007), seeking to embrace conceptual shifts, as well as empirical changes in social realities, used in contradistinction to "individual."
2. In historical view, the Finnish agrarian gender system shaped gender concepts at the political and juridical levels of the nation-state, and left its mark on the higher political levels of the developing Finnish nation during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In terms of sexuality and sexual desire, women in Finnish agrarian culture were viewed as fundamentally similar to men in that they were sexual actors; while in other Northern European urban and bourgeoisie cultures a decent woman was sexually more passive, with fewer sexual inclinations of her own. "Maleness" and "femaleness" were not as polarized in the Finnish rural concepts and practices as they were in the urban and bourgeoisie cultures of Europe (Löfström 1999; Haugen and Lysgård 2006).
3. Weston's (1998) ethnographic study on queer migration is based on the urban/rural opposition as an analytic tool for classifying persons. Her data has been criticized for a white bias, but it provides a useful indication of the imaginative processes associated with lesbian, gay, and trans\* migration to major cities, in exploring how queer people who ended up in the same city consolidated a varied range of sexual practices and fantasies into a lesbian and gay identity, and how they came to believe that others like "ourselves" existed.
4. A famous example of a lesbian resenting the lesbian community is Willa Cather (1873–1947), a longtime resident of New York, who described oppressed rural, gay male desires in her novels, but shared her life with women. In her will, she forbade all publication of her intimate letters.
5. For example, separatist lesbian camps on Femø Island in Denmark was an important source of identity formation for Finnish lesbians in late 1970s and early 1980s, as the emerging Finnish welfare state enabled lesbians to travel, which, in

- turn, influenced the building of a lesbian community in Helsinki (Sorainen 2014a). Lesbian lands purchased and created in Denmark and elsewhere can be traced back to the wider back-to-the-land movement that emerged out of the 1960s and 1970s politically charged atmosphere in the United States (Burmeister 2013).
6. Academics, politicians, and the general public adopt different meanings of the concept; these different meanings impact on policy formation, research agendas, and everyday life (Haugen and Lysgård 2006).
  7. This article is based on interviews collected for my larger research project "Wills and Inheritance in Sexually Marginalised Groups," funded by Ehrnrooth and Kone Foundations and the Academy of Finland.
  8. These initial research results were discussed in the workshop *Queer Inheritance, Kinship, Law*, at the Birmingham Law School, on December 4, 2014 in papers by Rosie Harding, Daniel Monk, Antu Sorainen, and Sue Westwood. (<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/law/events/2014/queer-inheritance.aspx>).
  9. *Maria* and *Scull* are pseudonyms, aimed to protect the privacy of people around them.
  10. My analysis is based on two sets of drawings portraying their support relations, and on two sets of semi-structured in-depth interviews that lasted from two to six hours, in addition to other meetings, Facebook chats and text messages before and after the interviews. First interviews were made separately in a café, and the second ones at their respective homes.
  11. Also Scull refused to be identified as a woman or a man: "My gender is flexible, it has changed many times during the years, sometimes I am more masculine, other times more feminine. I do not want to highlight it, I want to be left in peace."
  12. Some fear that it is a path leading to the return of the solitary pervert model (Muñoz 2009, 53).
  13. Lesbian *herstory* is still on the margins in this queer canon (Herring 2010).
  14. Migrations, individual or *en masse*, are often dictated by socioeconomic demands – flights have been essential to many queers across sexual history, races, nationalities, and ethnicities (Herring 2010, 15).
  15. See Sorainen (2014a) on the lesbian scene in Helsinki in the 1980s.
  16. To say this is not to advertise middle class prosperity or the inheritance system as such, but to nod to the direction of will-writing as one possible site for queer action; writing queer wills could add for the queer world-making.

## SAMMANFATTNING

Undersökningen granskar de långtgående implikationerna av metanarrationen om queer flykt, och kartlägger några av dess implikationer för queert personligt liv, mot bakgrund av djupgående social processer i den nordiska kulturella och, av "efter-jämlikheten" präglade, rättsliga kontexten. Texten diskuterar en rad komplexa samband mellan queer metanarration, lesbiskt personligt liv, kulturellt minne, välfärdsstaten och den nya forskningen kring queer arv och ärvande utifrån två finska, lesbiska kvinnors omsorgs- och stödnätverk. Med hjälp av nyanserade intervjudata söker artikeln ge en "prognos" över vad förändringarna i de nordiska samhällena medför för lesbiska. Den ger en bild av lesbiska i mindre städer och visar att studiet av queert personligt liv utgör grund för en kraftfull queer kritik. Det finns en omfattande forskning om relationalitet och queer migration, och det är denna litteratur och dessa debatter som undersökningen knyter an till. Genom att studera hur lesbiska lever på mindre orter, granskar artikeln vad som händer när arvsperspektiv läggs till den queera analysen.

**Keywords:** queer inheritance, queer personal lives, lesbian lives in small places, queer flight story, queer critique