

Reflecting the Queer Me

Memories of Finnish Queer Youth from the 1950s Onwards

THIS ARTICLE EXPLORES the construction of Finnish queer youth in a collection of life writings.¹ Writers with diverse queer identifications told their memories about growing up queer in a society that is characterised by heteronormativity and gender normativity. They also shared their reflections on their queerness when they found the public queer figures and available identity labels hard to identify with.

Although this study deploys written accounts, it is part of the Finnish oral history tradition. Finnish oral historians often work not only with interviews and oral testimonies, but also with written accounts that have been collected and studied for generations. One productive way to gather research material on memories has been organising writing competitions or collection campaigns (see e.g. Fingerroos and Haanpää 2012; Savolainen forthcoming). My current focus is on the collection titled *Rainbow Youth Present and Past [Sateenkaarinuorena nyt ja ennen]*,² which I will use to analyse memories of queerness from the 1950s to the 2000s.

I apply a thematic analysis to determine how writers in the collection reflect on their queerness in terms of diverse identity labels and the public conceptions of queer. I am interested in the interplay between collective understandings of queerness and their individual interpretations in the writings. This type of interconnectedness between personal and shared experiences can be regarded as a characteristic of queer life writing³ (Royster 2011, vi). The writers reflect on their own experiences

and feelings with the help of the queer identifications available to them. As the writers have also responded to a public call for life writings, they are participating in the construction of the very same conceptions of queerness as they use.

I suggest that even though writers of different ages discuss their queerness differently, there are no clear-cut generational differences, but rather important similarities in the writings by authors of different ages. In my previous study (Taavetti 2014a), I have discussed the Finnish generations of sexuality described by Elina Haavio-Mannila and Osmo Kontula (2002, joint research with Anna Rotkirch⁴). Haavio-Mannila and Kontula depict a gradual sexual liberation in Finland that occurs generation-by-generation, from the time of World War II. I have claimed that the rare glimpses of queer youth that I observed in a collection of youth life writings contrast with this generational model. By analysing this current collection of life writings that focuses on queer youth in particular, I will contest this progress narrative and determine how queer youth life writings also convey negative and outdated glimpses of queerness to reflect the writers' experiences (for a similar perspective on queer biographies and queer pasts, see e.g. Love 2007; Boyd 2012; Minich 2015).

By the word queer, I refer to all types of sexualities and genders that are in some way considered to fall outside of, or be in opposition to, the norms governing sexuality and gender. Many writers reported that during their youth, it was unclear for them what to name their sexual or gender identification, and for some, it was a major personal discovery to realise that there were others they could identify with. On the other hand, some writers do not feel the need to define themselves, or they actively oppose the all-embracing tendency to categorise. The concept of queer has also not been easy to translate into the Finnish context (see Mizielinska 2006). The English word *queer*, although used for self-identification, has somewhat academic connotations. When gathering the Rainbow Youth Present and Past collection, the writers were addressed with the word *sateenkaari* [rainbow], which is sometimes used in Finland as an umbrella term for the people, identifications, and prac-

tices that lie outside of the cis-gendered heterosexual norm. While I am aware that not all of the writers I discuss here would be comfortable with the word queer, I adopt it as a practical tool to analyse the diversity of experiences. I use it to emphasise the constructed and blurred nature of identities and to relate my work to the queer theoretical understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality (see e.g. Boyd 2008, 177).

Besides the term queer, the concept of youth is constructed in the writings (cf. Gordon 1999). Often, the writers describe youth as constituting the events that occur from very early age on, or at least beginning in their first school years. Some of the writers ponder the end of their youth. For instance, a 25-year-old writer wonders whether or not she is still young (306–309), and a 39-year-old writer states that when he turns 40, he will become an adult (158–158). In addition to age, youth can be defined by life events and by the changes in one's body and mind. The author of the next text recalls that his homosexual experiences occurred primarily during hitchhiking trips and contemplates when his youth ended:

I can't even now, at the age of 50 something, say exactly when my youth ended. I first realised it when the hitchhiking culture ended. Even after that, I could maintain the illusion for a while, but now the biophysical signs in my body tell the truth. Today, my state of mind is also more serious. The end of youth it is.⁵ (251–255)

In this article, I first discuss the meaning of life writings for constructing queerness and relate this meaning to the opportunities for telling the queer self that are offered by the Finnish institutions that collect and research personal narratives and life writings. Within this context, I present the method that was adopted to collect the Rainbow Youth Present and Past stories. Secondly, I discuss interpretations of the queerness in the collection, and analyse the types of writings it attracted. Thirdly, I address how the writers reflect on the queer self in relation to naming the queer self and queer public visibility. To conclude, I then return to the questions of what kind of stories can now be told about a queer youth lived in a heteronormative and gender normative society.

Telling and Writing the Queer Me

The telling of queer life has its genealogy particularly in the field of medicine. Michel Foucault observes (1978, 61–7) that confessions pertaining to sexuality became medicalised in the 19th century. Matt D. Reed (2001, 14–21) argues that for a medical understanding of homosexuality, it was therefore essential that “the inverted” remembered, told, and repeated their life story. Some traces of these medical procedures of telling the queer self still survive. As a case in point, when transgender people in Finland are examined during their process of gender reassignment, in order to be formally diagnosed as transgendered, they are expected to produce a personal life story of a proper transgendered person (Kondelin 2014, 57–61).

Although the narrative formations of the queer self predominantly originate from the field of medicine, the traditions of interpreting the self by telling a life story have also developed in other fields. Finland has a long tradition of collecting personal narratives, oral histories, and life writings. This work was promoted in the 19th century as part of the nationalist agenda to find and preserve the disappearing, original, Finnish folk culture (Fingerroos and Haanpää 2012; Heimo 2016). From early on, the collectors of the folk tradition also noted the stories that were considered to be vulgar or unfitting to the image of the appraised Finnishness. For this reason, the Folklore Archive collections of the Finnish Literature Society include descriptions of illegitimate sexuality, but according to research by Jan Löffström (1999), folklore concerning same-sex desire, love or sex is nonetheless relatively rare. In 1993, as a part of Löffström’s research, the Folklore Archives distributed a call for folklore on homosexuality and one hundred writers responded.

In those early years of collecting folklore, the narrator was primarily assumed to be a carrier of tradition and not a primary concern as a focus of research. During the 20th century, however, scholarly interest was directed to those who actually carry and develop the traditions. From the 1960s onward, the main topic of collection work has been the stories of the lives of so-called ordinary people, which has produced massive written collections deployed by oral historians in addition to folklore scholars, ethnologists, and others (Pöysä and Timonen 2004; Fingerroos and

Haanpää 2012; Savolainen forthcoming). These vast collections include collections of life writings by people living in different parts of Finland, working in different professions, coming from diverse backgrounds as well as reminiscence writings and written folklore on multiple topics.

Over the last few decades, the interest in life writings in Finland has increased in various disciplines; life writings have been consulted as research material by sociologists, historians and others, and the methods of interpreting life stories as research material have become increasingly varied. One example of this diversified interest is how sociological research on sexuality over the life course led to the collection of almost 200 sexual life writings as part of the FINSEX research project in 1992 (Haavio-Mannila et al. 2002, 3–6). As a whole, the FINSEX project has focused on the quantitative analyses of Finnish sexual practices and attitudes. Life writings were therefore predominantly used to understand and contextualise the figures that were gathered by the surveys. Even though descriptions of same-sex desire were rather common, the resulting categorisation of sexual life courses was heteronormative (Kaskisaari 1998; Haavio-Mannila et al. 2002, 13).

From a queer perspective, reflecting on one's queer life has become a means to understand oneself and to relate to queer communities. In many Western countries, gay and lesbian movements and other queer activists have gathered and published collections of life writings in order to record their own history (see e.g. Rivers 2012). This process concerns not only the activism of queer movements, but also the changes in history writing, where oral history and history from below have contested the traditional means of writing and researching history (see e.g. Sharpe 2001; about Finland, Fingerroos and Haanpää 2012). For example, in the early 1990s, as a result of the activism of a newly established Finnish network for lesbian studies, an anthology of lesbian autobiographies was collected and published in Finland. This anthology covered stories of becoming a lesbian – stories that, according to the collectors, lesbians told when getting to know each other (Kaarinen et al. 1992, 4–5).

In addition to collecting and publishing collections of life writings, oral history sources have been essential in the research on gay, lesbian,

and queer history (Boyd 2008; Murphy et al. 2016; a Finnish example is Juvonen 2002). A number of oral history projects have produced vast collections of life story interviews as well as other sources used in publications and as research material.⁶ Furthermore, many projects have focused on the representation of queer pasts in museums and archives. Some Nordic examples of these include the Unstraight Museum, founded in 2007 by Swedish museum professionals, and the Norwegian *Skeivt arkiv*. These initiatives not only collect life stories in one form or another, but also photos and objects related to queer living. Similar work is being conducted in Finland by The Finnish Labour Museum Werstas.

In the 2000s, writings that depict queer life have been gathered by Finnish archival institutions. After the new law on civil partnership was passed, a collection on new wedding traditions was gathered by the Folklore Archives in 2002. In 2005, queer life writings were collected by Työväen Muistitietotoimikunta [Labour Oral History Committee], and by queer history scholar Tuula Juvonen (for detailed information on Finnish queer history archives, see Taavetti 2016). Thus, the Rainbow Youth Present and Past collection fits very well into the Finnish continuum of collecting life writings. Rainbow Youth Present and Past is a life story collection with a special interest in stories that have been both marginalised and intimate. The collection was part of the LGBTI Youth Well-Being research project, where I worked as a researcher, conducted in 2012–2015 by the Finnish Youth Research Society and Seta, LGBTI Rights in Finland (on the project, see Taavetti et al. 2015). The collection was organised in cooperation with the Folklore Archives.

The call for writings consisted of a list of seven themes, which included several guiding questions. The suggested themes ranged from the first memories of queerness to discrimination and acceptance, as well as sexual experiences and fantasies. The instructions emphasised that the writers were not obliged to follow the proposed themes, and encouraged participants to write about topics that they considered being the most relevant. Nevertheless, the impact of the suggested themes is evident. (On the influence of the guiding questions in calls for writings, see Suominen 2011.) It was possible to submit one's writing online via

a web form. The form contained the guiding text for the respondents, voluntary fields for contact information and date of birth, and an open space for the writing itself. Other options for respondents were that they could submit their writing as an attached file, and if they had printed or handwritten texts, they could post them to the archive.

The call received 142 submissions, of which 129 describe of queer youth lived by the writers themselves and the age of the writer can be approximated. The total number of pages in the collection is 403, and the length of the writings varies greatly. Many of the texts are less than one page long or consist only of a single paragraph – most of these writings were submitted directly through the web form. The length of some submissions is up to ten or twenty pages, and usually these were sent as an attachment. One writer even sent her self-published book, which is not solely about her youth, but concerns lesbian life in general. The writers range in age from 15 to over 70 years old, although the age distribution is very uneven. The writers’ years of birth are divided by decade, as in Table 1:

Table 1 Writers’ Years of Birth

Year of birth	Number of writings	Percentage of all writings
1940–1950	1	1%
1951–1960	2	2%
1961–1970	8	6%
1971–1980	15	11%
1981–1990	38	29%
1991–1999	65	51%
Total	129	100%

The collection also includes eight texts for which the decade of birth cannot be inferred, and five writings by four writers that are not related to personal experiences of queer youth.

As is evident from the table, most of the writers were young. About one-third of them defined themselves as men either directly or indirectly, such as by referring to “other boys.” Only a slightly larger proportion identified themselves as women. One of the underlying reasons for both the gender and age distribution of the writers might be that the call for writings was distributed online, on Facebook and queer communities’ web forums, and on *Quiser*, which is a Nordic online community preferred by relatively young gay and bisexual men.

Reading Queer Youth in Life Writings

Personal narratives and life writings combine intimate and public writing. On the one hand, writing about one’s own life is very personal (Kaskisaari 2000, 75–9). On the other, as writers decide to respond to a call for writings, they also make their stories available to others and let them become part of a collective image of the phenomena they describe and produce in writing (Latvala 2014, 120–1). Furthermore, writing one’s queer self is dependent on the cultural existence of queer identities to which one can relate. Tuija Pulkkinen (2000, 165) describes how interpreting oneself as lesbian utilises the cultural figures of the lesbian and, at the same time, the various individual accounts of telling a lesbian life construct the lesbian cultural and social existence. In fact, according to Judith Butler (2005, 62–3), the whole act of telling one’s story relies on the web of relations and language that allow the construction of the self.

Participating in a collection of life writings may sometimes be the first chance, or even the only chance, to recount one’s experiences that are otherwise kept well concealed (see e.g. Kontula and Haavio-Mannila 1995, 344–5). The participant’s anonymity constitutes an interesting combination of both keeping and sharing a secret, which is sometimes directly addressed in the writings. The oldest participant in the *Rainbow Youth Present and Past* collection, a woman born in 1940, wrote that she will carry her secret desire for women to her grave – and at the same time, she was thankful for the opportunity offered by the campaign to tell her story (328–329). Still, the opportunity to share one’s story anonymously does not necessarily mean that life writings reveal

everything about the queer life the writers have lived. The writers always choose what to write and what to leave out. One aspect that may affect their choices is the writer's impression of the institutions or researchers organising the call (see e.g. Latvala 2014, 120). In the case of the Rainbow Youth Present and Past collection, Seta was probably the most well known of the organisers. This most likely encouraged the authors to write within the frames of Seta's activities and stances.

Even though oral historians work with written accounts, the distinction between written sources and oral forms of life stories needs to be considered in research. Writing is a private, even an intimate activity, which is directed by the writers' own associations and the connections that they make between different themes (e.g. Pöysä 2006, 228–31; Savolainen forthcoming). This may emphasise the significance of public images that the writer can convey, as these, in addition to what was requested in the call for writings, are guiding the process of writing. While the products of an oral history project are often transcribed and stored in an archive in written form – and thus may become written sources for research (D'Emilio 2012, 276) – written accounts collected by an archive are archived sources from the very beginning. Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio Rogue Ramírez (2012) describe the bodily knowledge and the physical presence of the researcher and narrator in the same space as an important aspect of oral history in general, but queer oral history in particular. While the dialogue between an archive distributing a call for writings and the writer may be perceived as being rather similar to the relationship between an interviewer and a narrator (Savolainen forthcoming), these bodily aspects of the interaction are obviously not present when working with written sources.

Participants for the Rainbow Youth Present and Past collection were recruited through an open call. As disclosing any personal information was voluntary, this meant that even complete anonymity was possible, which was perhaps further ensured by the fact that a vast majority of the writings were sent via a web form (Sundevall and Fredholm 2013, 90). As the writings were not collected to be published in an anthology, but to be used in research, one evident motivation for participation was the will to

contribute with a life story to the common understanding of queer youth.

Even though the motivation for the call was to gain insight into the invisible past of queer youth, it can also be connected to the questionable traditions of collecting and cataloguing the personal lives of those not considered normal within society. Likewise, many queer people have felt an obligation to tell their stories to help others to find something to identify with. One of the writers, born in the mid-1980s, commented on his role as a public trans figure:

And I'm tired of venting and telling and sharing my story, myself. It is hard. Because they don't want your ideas, your political analyses, your thoughts on gender and the gender system. They want you. Your feelings, experiences, life history, relationships, the more intimate the better.⁷
(136–157)

This apolitical approach to life stories was also expressed in the call for writings. All the questions in the call concerned the respondent's personal life and aimed at eliciting intimate life histories. Fortunately, many writers took this opportunity to convey their political engagements and the injustices they had experienced. On the other hand, many writers had longed for a chance to tell their stories, and providing a chance to reflect on a queer life may be interpreted as a political act. A bisexual writer born in 1986 wrote the following:

Nowadays I'm comfortable with myself and I answer honestly if somebody happens to bring up the topic. Few people have, which I think is really surprising, as my appearance is definitely not that of a stereotypical straight man. Sometimes I secretly hope that someone would ask about it, so that I could share my experiences of being a bisexual man in Finland in the 2000s.⁸ (206–207)

A willingness to share one's story is likely related to experiences of marginalisation and minoritisation. As the writer cited above ostensibly leads a heterosexual life, he can rather freely decide to whom he discloses

es his bisexuality. Moreover, bisexuality in the 2000s is rarely a cause for severe discrimination. Many transgendered writers, on the contrary, tell of exclusion, and they may have felt a strong pressure to recount their story to help others.

Life writings can be regarded as a compositional genre, in which writers use the forms, genres, and topics available to them from both literary and oral cultures. In fact, heterogeneity can even be seen as a defining quality in the genre of reminiscence and life writing (Savolainen forthcoming; see also Pöysä 2006, 231–3). However, during the process of gathering and researching life writings or personal narratives, the documentary nature of the writings is often prioritised, while the possible fictional qualities of the writings are regarded as a hindrance. Researchers of life writings can also select the texts they study based on length, form or content. Previously, I have suggested (Taavetti 2014b) that excluding texts based on form might not be harmless when documenting queer life. It may well be easier to write about the experiences of not fitting into the conventional course of life in a way that seems less conventional. The *Rainbow Youth Present and Past* collection included writers who composed poems. Some contributors only submitted poems, while others sent in poems and other written materials. Still others offered their life stories as a description of a single event. As an illustration, a writer of unknown age presents an account of queer youth as a short story: “On that June morning, I came out as myself” (199–199). I consider this writing as constituting a close description of a key event in discovering one’s queer desire.

Even considering the multiplicity of queernesses portrayed and the variety of the forms of description, there were five texts in the collection that I could not interpret as writings on queer youth life. One of these was by a writer who at the very beginning defined herself as straight, but wanted to tell about her gay friends. Another writer offered his views on the current debate on queer issues. In addition, one writer discussed his youth, not including questioning gender or sexuality and the absence of gays and lesbians in his surroundings. These texts are interesting examples of how the call for writings can be either ignored or interpreted according to the writer’s own purposes (see Latvala 2014).

Furthermore, the limits of what constitutes “rainbow youth” were tested in the writings. For example, one writer criticised the call for leaving out voluntarily childlessness, even though the decision not to have children could be interpreted as challenging the norms concerning sexuality and gender (162–162). Moreover, some writers wrote about the definition of queer youth. One example is a writer born in 1968 who stated that it was not until he reached the age of 29 that he could admit to himself “what he was,” and thus he never lived a “rainbow youth” (300–301). Some also suggested that remembering one’s youth might be difficult if it was traumatic, and therefore there might be very little to divulge (e.g. 014–023). In research, this may contribute to the visibility of less traumatic stories. Only those who have survived can write, and some of the worst memories might not have been mentioned.

Naming the Queer Self

The enduring associations between male homosexuality and femininity (see e.g. Herzog 2011, 31–5; about Finland, Hagman 2016, 218) are clearly visible in the writings. The gay male writers reflect on their youth and childhood memories regarding the expectations they have faced, where “being different” is by nature gendered (e.g. 291–291). Some writers recall childhood memories of not being like the other boys and preferring the company of girls (e.g. 158–158). Another important point is that the concepts of queer sexuality and gender have been mixed. For instance, one gay male writer tells about his coming-out during a walk with his mother in the mid-1990s:

I beat around the bush for a while and after we had reached the church hill in my home village – what a sense of drama – I told her that I was gay. My mother said, alarmed, “What?” I repeated what I had said and things started rolling. I explained the subject further, and my mother was relieved. She had thought that being gay was the same thing as being a transvestite. “I thought I’d have to buy you size 11 heels for your graduation party!”¹⁰ (314–327)

Since telling about queer youth also involves a process of rendering the current queer adulthood intelligible, stories that do not convey the feeling of being a gender outsider might not be perceived as worth mentioning. According to Susan Talburt (2004, 30–1), stories such as those of femme girls might be excluded from lesbian life stories because a girly girl's memories would not help to explain the lesbianism in adulthood. In the current call for writing, the questions concerning sexuality and gender were not separated, which presumably strengthened the connection between sexual queerness and gendered norm bending.

Although discussing gender is relevant in many writings, it carries special meaning in the texts by transgendered writers. The oldest writer who defines herself as transgendered was born in the late 1960s (208–209). During her school years in the 1980s, she spent time with the other girls in her class. This posed problems in the gendered spaces of the school, as a male-looking pupil in the girls' restroom aroused suspicions. While she had a very strong understanding of being one of the girls from an early age, she did not have a name for this identification and no adult around her knew how to help a transgendered girl. Yet, much later during her gender reassignment process, she discovered that her teenage medical files contained a mention of her being transgendered, so the concept was not completely unfamiliar in her youth.

Discovering that there is a possibility of not belonging to the gender one was assigned at birth is important in many of the stories by transgender or otherwise non-gender conforming writers. A transmasculine writer, born in the mid-1980s, writes about how his teenage years would have been a hundred times easier, had he been told even once that not all girls grow up to be women (136–157). Some of the difficulties he faced, however, were caused by the gender normative definition of being transgendered. Unlike the female writer discussed above, who clearly belonged to the group of girls, some of the younger writers are very ambivalent about their gender. They have had trouble identifying themselves even as they heard about trans existence, as they do not feel that they belong to the “opposite gender.” These younger writers reflect on the normativities within the trans communities that they have engaged

with, which also indicates that they have had a community in their life to relate to.

Boyd (2012, 114) notes that narrators in queer oral history projects might challenge the simplified identity-based categories offered to them by researchers. My material demonstrates that the names and labels that the writers use for their identity are increasingly more varied among the younger writers. Furthermore, it seems that the politics of naming vary according to the writers' ages. For instance, in the texts by the older writers, it is common not to label oneself, but to be labelled by others. This may occur rather directly, as a lesbian woman born in the late 1950s expresses in the following excerpt:

It happened that I had noticed an attractive woman in the school hall and I feasted my eyes on her whenever possible... okay, maybe my behaviour was even a little bit “stalkerish” because all of a sudden, after six months of eyeing her, the woman grabbed me by the collar and demanded an explanation for my constant staring. As she shouted in a rage, “Do you stare at me ‘cause I’m a lesbian?!!,” I could hear the old-fashioned, clichéd, “CLICK” and I just realised how things are. It was as if someone had turned on the lights in a dark room.¹¹ (374–374)

While the writer does not name her desire to continue staring at the woman, she does not appear reluctant to label herself as a lesbian once another woman uses the identification. It is as if the feelings she – and other writers like her – harbour are something that are not easily reclaimed as an identity. In contrast, some of the youngest writers clearly object to compulsory labelling and categorisation. A woman born in the early 1990s expresses this as follows:

Now I’m engaged to a woman. We are about to register our relationship and we live together. I have never felt that I belonged to any minority or pigeonhole. I don’t want to think of myself as straight, gay, bi or anything else. I’ve never participated in Seta’s activities, as I think that Seta pigeonholes too much in all their equality. Everybody should be able to

be part of the colours of the rainbow without having to choose which colour they are.¹² (368–369)

Being able to oppose categorisations can be interpreted as a sign of fractures in heteronormativity. These writers have available identity labels, which they can decide to reject. They are also able to make themselves intelligible to others, such as having their partnership recognised, without compulsory labelling. Thus, an ability to decline labelling oneself can be interpreted as a sign of relative privilege. Many queer lives do not have this type of recognition, and for some, labelling is unavoidable, such as for the trans people who seek gender reassignment.

From Queer Glimpses to Public Gays

In the writings, one of the topics that has most evidently changed over the course of time is the public visibility of queer issues. The oldest writer, a woman born in 1940, states that in her youth, the possibility of being anything but heterosexual was non-existent. She writes:

I wonder how much suffering has been caused by the fact that at the time when people of my age were forming relationships, only marriage between partners of opposite gender was possible. Only as they get older do many women and men dare to recognise their homosexuality, but breaking up a marriage or a family at that point is difficult.¹³ (328–329)

This complete absence of queer issues changed rather rapidly, at least for some. In direct contrast to the invisible female same-sex intimacy, the more scandalous nature of male homosexuality made it a more frequent topic of rumours in the press. A male writer born in the early 1950s describes how he, in his quest for information in the Finnish countryside in the 1960s, resorted to reading a Finnish gossip magazine:

I longed for knowledge and often sat in the library trying to find information in books. There were no such books. I remember a piece written

by a psychiatrist, in which homosexuality was branded as a disease and paedophilia. *Hymy* magazine was the only source of information in the sixties and the seventies. *Hymy* wrote about the adventures of Monsieur Mosse. He was on honeymoon with his Pepe in Amsterdam in the middle of millions of tulips, or he was somewhere else... I secretly read these articles from *Hymy*, and I hated Monsieur Mosse!¹⁴ (294–295)

The concurrent disgust and interest towards the figure of Monsieur Mosse, (1932–1992, a make-up artist, hairdresser, and an early openly gay celebrity), convey how difficult it was to understand one's own queerness when the only public gay figures did not seem identifiable. In the 1970s, there were already publications by the Finnish gay organisations Psyke and later, Seta (Kangasvuo 2014, 149–60), but these would hardly have been accessible to a teenage boy in the countryside. Juvonen (2002, 105–14) has observed that *Hymy* magazine was, in all its scandalous nature, one of the few sources of stories that depicted homosexuality in the 1960s. One of the reasons for the lack of public sources addressing homosexuality can be found in the legislation. After homosexual sex was decriminalised in Finland in 1971, it was made illegal to “publicly exhort” homosexuality. Although this law was not enforced, it nevertheless furthered self-censorship concerning positive or even neutral public discussions on homosexuality in the 1970s and the 1980s. Officially, that law was in effect until 1999 (Stålström 1997, 252–8; Hagman 2016, 270).

During the 1980s, however, some openly gay individuals began to appear in the mainstream Finnish media. A writer born in 1968, who simultaneously felt pleasure and shame for his homosexual feelings and chose to display a very neutral appearance in his teenage years, describes his disidentification with the first public gay figures:

Later, in the early 1980s, I read an article in *Suomen Kuvalehti* [a respectable weekly magazine, RT] on two homosexual men. They seemed weird somehow in their openness, and their looks arose nothing in me. At least I could not be gay.¹⁵ (300–301)

It is only in the writings that describe the early 1990s that more versatile and frequent queer visibility is mentioned. A female bisexual writer remembers discovering her identity when reading about bisexuality in the mid-1990s in letters sent to the advice column of the Finnish youth magazine *Suosikki* (159–160). In the late 1990s, gays and lesbians were already rather frequent in the mainstream media, for example in the Finnish soap opera *Salatut elämät*. The character of Kalle, a boy-next-door type in the show, is mentioned as a source of comfort by a gay male writer born in 1982 as he was about to begin his military service (339–347) (on the figure of Kalle, see Kekki 2000). Additionally, those born in the late 1980s and early 1990s mention actual queer-themed films and television programmes, such as the lesbian drama series *The L Word* (306–309), or Lucas Moodysson's *Fucking Åmål* (285–289).

However, not everyone is happy with the current gay visibility. A gay man from northern Finland, born in the mid-1980s, comments on this topic in a manner that closely resembles the commentary on gays in the 1980s media. Here, it seems that the gay male figures presented in the media are too extraordinary to be identifiable when one's own gayness is commonplace:

It should be visible in the media that you can be gay without having it stamped on your forehead so that others notice it right away. Sexuality is something that is inside you, it doesn't need to be immediately visible. We are not all "marko paananens" [an interior designer and TV celebrity, RT], although he is a cool guy.¹⁶ (367–367)

All in all, partly due to its more public role in the media, gay male visibility is mentioned in the texts considerably more frequently than lesbian visibility. This was noted by a writer who discusses gender inequality in the media representation of homosexuality in the 1990s (377–382; see also Juvonen 2006, 53). Gay male public figures are recognised by female writers, and it is possible in the texts to reflect on one's bisexuality with references to gay or lesbian public figures. In contrast, those with transgender or otherwise gender non-conformative identifications do not have

stories of celebrity identifications to share, nor do these writers refer to gay or lesbian public figures. The only transgendered public figure mentioned in their writings is Marja-Sisko Aalto, who publicly discussed her gender reassignment in 2008. She is mentioned by one writer as being a source of amazement and incomprehension among his acquaintances (136–157).

The singer of Queen, Freddie Mercury, is mentioned by two writers who were both born towards the end of the 1970s and at the beginning of the 1980s, and both identify themselves as female bisexuals. Mercury can be regarded as a symbol of the persistent connection between homosexuality and illness, reinforced by the 1980s AIDS crisis (see e.g. Herzog 2011, 177–83; about Finland, Nikkanen and Järvi 2014). Homosexuality was declassified as an illness in Finland in 1981, but the impression of homosexuality as a disease was enduring (Stålström 1997). Especially those who searched for information on homosexuality in books in the 1980s were bound to find outdated descriptions of disease and perversion (e.g. 241–242). A queer writer born in the late 1980s reports encountering these descriptions:

My teacher in elementary school once said during class that homosexuality is very unfortunate and nasty illness. Fifteen years later, I still remember those words as if I heard them yesterday. Afterwards, I have thought about how different my history could have been, had I got as my teacher, instead of this ancient Boy Scout, the open-minded female teacher from a parallel class. I doubt it would have ever crossed her mind to speak such hideous things in the 90s, especially in front of children.¹⁷ (273–275)

Indeed, old-fashioned attitudes persisted for decades. Besides the conceptualisation of homosexuality as an illness, many writers, even those born at the beginning of the 1990s, remember hearing homosexuality referred to as being only a passing phase during adolescence (e.g. 296–297). In the 1990s, it was still a matter of coincidence whether one was supported in growing up queer or if one only faced obstacles. Another writer recalls that during her school years in the 1990s, there

was even material by Seta available in the classroom (377–382). In addition to the outdated, but persistent understandings of queerness, the few positive sources of information available have been utilised for a long time. The first Finnish nonfiction book on homosexuality, *Rakkauden monet kasvot* [*The Many Faces of Love*], (Sievers and Stålström 1984) continued to be influential in the mid-1990s, ten years after its publication (314–327).

During the 1990s, the Internet made contacts abroad more frequent and accessible, allowing the development of information sites accessible from anywhere as well as peer support networks independent of geographical distances. This helped finding others to relate to and provided words for self-identification. Therefore, those who constructed their queerness from the mid-1990s onwards were not, to the same degree as the older writers, at the mercy of the alienating or infrequent queer glimpses in the media. An asexual writer born in 1990 describes his discovery after a friend had suggested that he might be asexual: “At the earliest opportunity, I looked at a Wikipedia article on the topic. I soon realised that I was reading about myself.”⁷¹⁸ (276–279) In this writing, the discovery of a possible word for self-identification is similar to the instant “click,” described in the previous section by a considerably older writer when referring to her discovery of her lesbian identification.

Conclusions

This article has studied the memories of queer youth in the Rainbow Youth Past and Present collection. I have contextualised the collection within the Finnish traditions of life writing research, interpreting oneself as queer, and reading and studying queer memories. I have analysed how the writers reflect on their queer self with the help of diversifying identity labels as well as public queer figures and discussions of queer topics.

I argue that these reflections cannot be divided along generational lines, but that there are in fact differences as well as similarities in the texts by writers of different ages. Due to the marginality of queer experiences, narrating a queer self can often be dependent on the tiny slivers

and glimpses of knowledge, something that can lead to an overvaluation of old and outdated conceptualisations. For instance, the persistent idea of homosexuality as a disease or as a passing phase emerges repeatedly in the writings of queer people of different ages. Therefore, the reflections of queer youth challenge the progress narratives of liberated sexuality and expose stories where the construction of the queer self is dependent on stigmatised and unidentifiable sources.

Nevertheless, there are essential differences in the texts by the writers of different ages. The ways of naming the queer self have become more varied, and there is reluctance among the younger writers to use identity-based labels. They have queer identity labels available, but it is possible for them to reject them and still be intelligible to others. It is thus possible to claim equal rights as a queer person – and feel betrayed when these claims are not met. It must be emphasised, however, that not everyone shares this normalisation of queer experiences. For example, some transgendered writers discuss the normativities they have encountered not only in mainstream communities, but in queer and feminist communities as well. In general, many young gay, lesbian, and bisexual writers express their longing for a normative life characterised by marriage and children, and on the other hand, by attaining the possibility of not labelling oneself as being queer. In the submissions by transgendered writers, neither of these privileges is visible.

These writings describe the experiences of queer youth between the 1950s and the 2000s. They discuss diversified labels, identifiable media figures, and the completely novel opportunities offered by the Internet to reflect on and share their experiences with others. The collection discussed here, *Rainbow Youth Past and Present*, was a project to collect life writings that attracted scholarly interest as well as to serve an online opportunity for any queer person to contribute to the common understanding of queer lives.

Collecting these memories now that queer lives are being publicly discussed has created more opportunities for reflection on experiences in light of the current understanding of what it means, or has meant, to be “a rainbow youth.” Experiences that in the past may have been undif-

ferentiated or unnameable can now be named. Even so, some labels can now be resisted, and the writers claim the right to be identifiable as their queer selves, “without choosing which colour they are.”

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NOTES

1. This research has been supported by Academy of Finland and is associated with ERA.Net Plus RUS programme research project LivingMemories (WPS1294292).
2. I refer to the writings with a six-digit code, such as 001–013. The first three numbers indicate the page from which the writing begins in the Finnish Literature Society's Folklore Archives collection, and the last three indicate the end of the writing. To protect the writers' anonymity, I sometimes refrain from referring to the exact year of birth even if they have provided the precise year. Furthermore, I use the personal pronouns that I assume the writers would accept based on their own descriptions of their gender identification. All translations of the excerpts from the writings are mine.
3. There is no shared English term for the texts produced in Finnish collection campaigns. Ulla Savolainen (forthcoming) refers to her material as *reminiscence writings*. As Savolainen argues, there is a blurred line between reminiscence writings and autobiographies. Reminiscence writings would be a perfectly suitable term

for my material, but I decided in favour of *life writings*. Even though the writings depicting queer youth are thematic, they do not discuss a single theme and usually describe a longer period. Furthermore, by referring to them as life writings, I am better able to connect my work to the international discussion on queer life writings.

4. The findings were originally published in Finnish in Kontula and Haavio-Mannila (1995).
5. En osaa jo yli 50-vuotiaanakaan sanoa tarkasti, milloin nuoruuteni päättyi. Ensimmäisen kerran havahtuin siihen, kun liftaamiskulttuuri päättyi. Sain vielä jonkin aikaa pidettyä illuusiota yllä senkin jälkeen, mutta nyt kehossa olevat biofysiset merkit kertovat totuuden. Tänä päivänä myös mielialani on vakavoituneempi. Nuoruuden loppu se.
6. An overview of several projects predominately from the USA is presented in Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio Roque Ramírez (2012). In addition, see Murphy et al. (2016).
7. Ja olen väsynyt purkamaan ja kertomaan ja jakamaan omaa tarinaani, omaa itseäni. Se on raskasta. Koska ne ei halua sun käsityksiä, sun poliittista analyysia, sun pohdintaa sukupuolesta ja sukupuolijärjestelmästä. Ne haluaa sut. Sun tunteet kokemukset, elämänhistorian, ihmissuhteet, mitä intiimimpää sen parempaa.
8. Nykyisin olen kuitenkin sinut oman itseni kanssa ja vastaan rehellisesti, jos joku aiheesta sattuu kysymään. Harvempi on kysellyt, mitä pidän suoranaisena ihmeenä, sillä en todellakaan ole habitukseltani stereotyyppinen heteromies. Välillä jopa salaa toivon, että joku kysyisi ja saisin jakaa kokemuksiani siitä, millaista on olla biseksuaali mies 2000-luvun Suomessa.
9. Sinä kesäkuisena aamuna minä tulin ulos itsenäni.
10. Kiertelin ja kaartelin aikani, ja päästyämme kotipitäjäni kirkonmäelle – mikä draaman taju – kerroin, että olen homo. Äiti sanoi hätäntyteenä: “Mitä?” Toistin sanomani, ja vyyhti lähti purkautumaan. Selitin asiaa tarkemmin, ja äiti oli huojentunut. Hän oli nimittäin ajatellut, että homous on samaa kuin transvestismi. “Mä kun ajattelin, että pitääkö mun hankkia sulle ylioppilasjuhliin 45-numeron korkkarit!”
11. Se tapahtui siten että olin oppilaitoksen käytävällä huomannut ihastuttavan naisen jota aina katselin kun se oli mahdollista...okei, ehkä käytökseni oli jopa “stalkkaamista” sillä ihan yhtäkkiä, noin ½ vuoden pälistelyn jälkeen, samainen nainen otti minua kraiveleista kiinni ja vaati selitystä ainaiselle pälistelylleni. Kun hän raivona huusi että “..tölläätsä mua siks ku oon lesbo?!” niin kuului se vanhanaikainen kliseinen “KLICK” ja ikäänkuin tajusin miten asiat on. Oli kuin joku olisi laittanut valot päälle pimeässä huoneessa.
12. Nykyään olen kihloissa naisen kanssa. Olemme rekisteröimässä parisuhteemme ja asumme yhdessä. En ole koskaan kokenut kuuluvani mihinkään vähemmistöön

tai lokeroon. En halua ajatella olevani hetero, homo, bi tai mikään muukaan. En ole ikinä ollut setan toiminnassa, koska koen että seta lokeroi liikaa kaikessa tasa-arvoisuudessaan. Kaikkien pitäisi saada kuulua sateenkaaren väreihin ilman, että pitää valita minkä värinen on.

13. Kuinkahan paljon kärsimystä on aiheutunut siitä, että aikana, jolloin minun ikäiseni olivat parisuhdeikässä, ajatus vain eri sukupuolta olevien avioliitosta oli mahdollinen. Vasta varttuneempana moni nainen tai mies uskaltaa tunnistaa itsessään homoseksuaalisuuden, mutta avioliiton ja perheen rikkominen siinä vaiheessa on vaikeaa.
14. Itse jänosin tietoa ja istuin usein kirjastossa ja yritin etsiä tietoa kirjoista. Ei sellaisia kirjoja löytynyt. Jonkun psykiarin kirjoituksen muista jossa homoseksuaalisuus leimattiin sairaudeksi ja pedofiiliaksi. *Hymy*-lehti oli ainoa tiedonlähde 60- ja -70- luvulla. *Hymy* kirjoitti usein artikkeleita Monsiur Mossen sekkailuista. Milloin Mosse oli häämatkalla Pepensä kansa Amsterdmissa miljoonien tulppanien keskellä milloin jossan muualla ... Luin salaa näitä artikkeleita *Hymystä* ja inhosin Monsiur Mossea!
15. Myöhemmin 1980-luvun alkupuolella luin jutun *Suomen Kuvalehdestä* kahdesta homoseksuaalisesta miehestä. He tuntuivat jotenkin kummallisilta avoimuudessaan ja heidän ulkonäkönsä ei herättänyt minua. Enhän minä ainakaan homo voinut olla.
16. Mediassa pitäisi näkyä, että homo voi olla ilman että sitä lukee otassa, eli että sen huomaa toinen heti. seksuaalisuus on sisällä sen ei tarvitse näkyä ihmisestä heti ulospäin. Me kaikki ei olla "marko paanasia" vaikka huippi tyyppi hän onki.
17. Ala-asteen aikainen opettajani sanoi kerran oppituntia pitäessään, että homoseksuaalisuus on erittäin valitettava ja ikävä sairaus. 15 vuotta myöhemmin, muistan nuo sanat edelleen kuin olisin kuullut ne eilen. Jälkeenpäin olen miettinyt, kuinka erilainen historiani olisikaan voinut olla, jos olisinkin saanut tämän ikivanhan partiojäärän sijasta opettajakseni rinnakkaisluokan avarakatseisen naisopettajan, jolle tuskin olisi tullut mieleenkään 90 -luvulla puhua noin hirveitä, vieläpä lasten kuullen.
18. Seuraavan mahdollisuuden osuttua kohdalle, katsoin Wikipedian artikkelin aiheesta. Pian huomasin lukevani itseäni.

SAMMANFATTNING

Artikeln analyserar queera ungdomars minnen som de kommer till uttryck i en samling levnadsberättelser kallad *Regnbågsungdom nu och då (Sateenkaarinuorena nyt ja ennen)*. Samlingen skapades 2014 och består av 129 levnadsberättelser av författare födda mellan 1940 och det sena 1990-talet som skildrar sina minnen från en queer ungdom. Samlingen och analysen av dessa berättelser sätts i en kontext av såväl finländska forskningstraditioner runt minnen och levnadsberättelser, som av traditionen att konstruera ett queert jag genom att återberätta livshistorier. Skrifterna undersöks tematiskt för att förstå samspelet i dem mellan kollektiva och personliga minnen. Artikeln visar att fast reflektionerna som författare i skilda åldersgrupper gör skiljer sig åt, framträder också tydliga likheter mellan olika generationer av queer ungdom. De tre teman som diskuteras i artikeln är benämningarna av det queera jaget, sammanvävandet av sexualitet och genus, samt skribenternas förhållningssätt till queera personer som förekommer i offentliga sammanhang. Avslutningsvis hävdas att sätten att benämna det queera jaget har blivit alltmer varierande bland de unga skribenterna, samtidigt som de yngre deltagarna ofta uttrycker ett motstånd mot att använda identitetsbaserade beteckningar överhuvudtaget. Queera frågor och individer har blivit synligare, men somliga tycker ändå att den offentliga queera synligheten är ensidig och alienerande.

Keywords: queer, youth, life writings, oral history, Finland, heteronormativity, gender normativity, transgender, gay, lesbian, bisexual