

10. Yours in Struggle: Baltic Dialogues

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Baltic battles

The Baltic Battle-party has taken place every year since 1978. The first one was organised as the official opening of the – at that time – new clubrooms in the Old Town and was a joint venture with MSC Finland. Because our Finnish brothers would travel across the Baltic, the party was named The Battle of the Baltic Sea (in Swedish) with the English translation Baltic Battle added.

From the very first party, in August 1978, it was a big success. It included a boat trip around the southern neighbourhood island and the main party took of course place in the new premises. Tom of Finland was specially invited and showed how his drawings were created, these who later become world famous. MSC Finland brought a jumping leather jack toy as a gift, which is framed behind acrylic glass in our current clubhouse.¹

As the above story drawn from Baltic gay male leather culture suggests, queers have met and formed affinities and relations across the Baltic Sea since before homosexuality was declassified as an illness in Sweden in 1979 and Finland in 1981.² Indeed, the party described above, organised by and for leather men, points to a queer history of regional interconnectedness, one that is also reflected in decades of migration and centuries of changing national borders and rule around the sea. It also points to how (queer) affinity is not only constituted in reproduction but that “brotherhood” can also be made in “battle”, and kinship ties formed through (sex) partying, including before the so-called fall of the Iron Curtain. Approaching the Baltic Sea as a body (of water)

¹ <https://www.balticbattle.se/>; last accessed 2022/01/04

² For more discussion about the history of homosexuality in Finland, see Moring this volume.

that both separates and joins us, it is clear that gender and sexual politics remain at the centre of both affinities and politics.

While queers continue to travel and migrate across the sea for love, labour and livelihood, there is also a long and complex Baltic legacy around reproductive sexual politics. Swedish women travelled to Poland for abortions in the 1960s when the Polish law was more “liberal” than the Swedish one. Today, as Polish women take to the streets to defend the right to abortion, Swedish feminists advocate welcoming Polish women to Sweden. Swedish women travel to Finland and the Baltic states to achieve pregnancy and acquire donated gametes and both Swedish and Polish women travel to Denmark to obtain donated sperm, while growing numbers of sperm donors in Denmark are reportedly recruited among students from Baltic and Eastern European nations.

If the Baltic battle described above points to a transnational queer community of sexual outlaws and gender transgressors, to a certain kind of visibility politics and to a geopolitically defined sense of kinship between queer men, *Queer(y)ing Kinship in the Baltic Region* as a research project not only built on this kind of shared and divergent history, it also aimed to depart from and create a differently related form of Baltic interconnectedness, namely that between four differently situated queer feminist researchers (that is, a Swedish queer fem(me)inist ethnographer trained in the US with a focus on intersectional analysis of queer family making and critical approaches to the biopolitics of assisted reproduction (Ulrika), a Polish interdisciplinary queer scholar with deep roots in and commitment to the lived experiences of LGBT people in Poland and a commitment to decentring Western theoretical hegemonies (Joanna), a Finnish anarchist and queer anthropologist with a long term interest in the historical dimensions of queer relationalities and legal systems, in how heteronormative kinship structures inheritance, and in how queer forms of will-writing reflects alternative forms of kinship (Antu), and an Estonian sociologist and gender studies scholar with a core commitment to rethinking practices of care and closeness in the context of Estonian neoliberal precarity (Raili). For nearly a decade now, and with a broad shared orientation, this team has navigated and

discussed everyday challenges and dilemmas of doing research in communities to which we also belong in different ways. Departing from different geotemporalities, we have navigated in politically tumultuous times, where LGBTQ+ issues, including queer kinship and family-making have often been central to what can only be described as a conservative turn both within and between our different nations that we have both experienced and analysed differently.

Arguably, this broader conservative turn is most visible in Poland, where the ruling Law and Justice party has advocated a decidedly anti-LGBTQ+ agenda and built its nationalist-conservative discourse around casting LGBTQ+ families as a threat to the traditional Polish family and to the nation (Graff & Korulczuk 2021). In a speech at the party convention in Katowice in 2019, leader Jarosław Kaczyński insinuated that same-sex couples want the right to adopt children because of their desire for sexual gratification and stated that his party would never agree to marriage and adoption by same-sex couples. Commenting on the prohibition of sex education in schools, Kaczyński declared that “this has nothing to do with tolerance, but the affirmation of same-sex couples to whom we say no, especially when it comes to children. Hands off our children!”³

Meanwhile in Estonia, a nation that only a few years ago was the first post-Soviet state to propose a same-sex partnership law, members of the populist Estonian Conservative People’s Party have instead called for a referendum on marriage and keeping it as a union between a man and a woman. Speaking to *Deutsche Welle* in 2020, interior minister and a deputy party leader Mart Helme said in response to a question about whether the partnership law would flood the Estonian nation with gays: “Let them run to Sweden. Everyone is there, everyone looks at them more politely,”⁴ and stated that he personally had a decidedly unfriendly look on gays.

³ Onet.pl. 2019. ‘Jarosław Kaczyński: Wara Od Naszych Dzieci. Fala Komentarzy – Wiadomości’. 2019. <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/kraj/jaroslaw-kaczynski-wara-od-naszych-dzieci-fala-komentarzy/tyx6hq5>; last accessed 2022-10-01.

⁴ <https://estonianworld.com/life/estonias-interior-minister-let-our-gays-run-to-sweden/>; last accessed 2022-01-04.

While prime minister Jüri Ratas denounced Helme's statements, the threat that queers and queer relationalities seemingly pose to the Estonian nation is noteworthy, as is the need to clearly distinguish Estonia from the nation across the Baltic Sea.

In Finland, although the legal landscape on queer kinship issues has been even cutting edge in recent years (see Moring, in this book) the increasing popularity of True Finns and other right-wing conservative voices amongst the voters has made the proper establishment of Trans Law politically very difficult.

At the same time in Sweden, like in the Nordic region as a whole, the last decade has not only seen progress for LGBTQ+ people, but also an overall conservative turn in gender politics, the anti-immigration and staunchly family-conservative party Sweden Democrats becoming the 2nd largest party in the latest election in 2022 (see also Möser et al. 2022). Material inequalities have grown exponentially, in great part thanks to the continued privatisation of the welfare state, most notably healthcare and including reproductive medicine. While not quite oligarchy, it is certainly problematic that taxpayers are now contributing to filling the pockets of the elite. At the moment of writing, it is unclear what "progressive" LGBTQ+ politics actually means in the different nations around the sea, but undoubtedly, questions of (gay) marriage and family have, in the words of Judith Butler (2002, 21) "become sites of intense displacement for other political fears, fears about technology, about new demographics, and about the very unity and transmissibility of the nation, fears that feminism, in its insistence on childcare, has effectively opened up kinship outside the family, opened it to strangers."

As participants, we have worked around and with these challenging times, while simultaneously bringing in a range of understandings of the core concepts of family and kinship, and how we are to understand the ways that queers live and make family and what it means to this project. Perhaps it is not so much a battle but a series of productive tensions in this project, where the queer geopolitics of knowledge production has animated our work. At the same time, our own bodies, working conditions, and personal lives have been differentially impacted by the times in which we

live. In order to capture some of the core tensions and the lessons from them, this closing chapter is a dialogue between Joanna Mizelińska (JM) and Ulrika Dahl (UD) that explores rather than seeks to solve some of the core epistemological and geopolitical differences between us, in order to see how they have come to matter in this project and to the contributions and interventions we have sought to make.⁵

The conversation is divided into thematic sections. We begin by discussing how we arrived at studying queer kinship in this constellation and the context in which we began the research. In the following section we discuss what we mean by queer kinship. This is followed by the central section where we explore questions of temporality and geopolitics and how our own distinct positions, both intellectually and geopolitically, matter for what we do. The chapter ends with a brief discussion about what we have learned during this project and where we want to go next.

Arriving at queer kinship as a research question

UD: As Sara Ahmed (2012, 2) puts it, “[e]very research project has a story, which is the story of an arrival.” Kinship is at the heart of gender, sexuality, race and nation, a kind of organising metaphor, and to ask questions about kinship thus involves asking core questions of identity, belonging and affinity. Perhaps we can start with how we arrived at researching *queer* kinship and family making or cross- and intergenerational intimacies more broadly?

JM: I started to think about a project on queer kinship in Poland around 2010. At that time, there was no research on this topic at all, no books, no articles except those that mostly translated Western findings into Polish. When I presented some of my pilot studies based on interviews with lesbian mothers I was treated with disbelief and ignorance because queer families and parenthood

⁵ The dialogue began as a set of questions circulated to all four members via email but because Uibo was completing a doctoral thesis and beginning postdoctoral life, and due to Sorainen being on medical leave, it ended up being completed as a dialogue between Mizelińska and Dahl. All project members have however provided feedback on this version.

were perceived as something that did not exist in Poland, only in the “rotten West.” At that time, complex, mixed and multi-method research was urgently needed in order to also undermine the heteronormative Polish vision of the traditional family (see Mizieleńska 2022; Mizieleńska & Stasińska 2020b).

When I started, I was mostly influenced by the approach of British “new family studies.” Instead of assuming how non-heterosexual people live or taking for granted that they do not build families – a tendency that has been prevalent in every public opinion poll and most of books and publications within the canon of the sociology of family in Poland (Adamski 2002; Tysza 2005) at that time – I wanted to ask the members of such families how *they* define their family, how they construct its composition and meanings through their practices and activities, what they need and in which way they would like to have their relationships recognised (in social or legal terms). Inspired by new family studies (NFS) (Gubrium & Holstein 1999; Levin 1993; Cheal 1993; Bernardes 1997; Gabb 2008) I have focused on the process and practices of doing families (Morgan 1996).

This approach helps to reverse the attention from an essentialist and normative vision of family as a static entity and starting point of research to a landing point allowing to embrace all kinds of human relationalities and intimacies, which was more than needed in the context of Polish family studies at that time. However, as an approach developed within Anglo-American academia, it might be considered as a part of a hegemonic universalist perspective and cannot be applied uncritically. In my analysis I acknowledged its epistemological and geographical situatedness and tried to be very sensitive towards local perspectives and other epistemologies. For instance, what doing and displaying families means in Poland might be completely illegible from the UK perspective where queer families are recognised, legally protected, and have become a part of the social landscape, in terms of their visibility, among other things (Mizieleńska & Stasińska 2018, 2020a). I also reached for concepts and ideas from non-Western contexts, notably coined by academics working in the CEE, such as the “transparent closet” and “family closet”, developed by Slovenian scholars Roman Kuhar and

Alenka Švab (2014), which have been useful for describing a very specific type of reaction that families of origin have to non-heterosexual coming out/disclosure, namely a strategy of passing over this fact, ignoring it (transparent closet) and not mentioning it to other family members and friends (family closet).

In my theoretical inspiration, I also find postcolonial scholarship on marginalised queer families (Acosta 2018; Decena 2011; Moore 2011) useful. In general, in postcolonial works, there is a tendency to question Western dominant explanatory models of queer lives that do not capture the experienced realities of Non-western locations. Many works question the validity of identity categories and coming out imperatives, showing that in other places where the meaning of family is different, people find other ways to negotiate their sexualities. For instance, in Decena's (2011) ethnographic study of Dominican gay men, he presents their tacit negotiations of the closet. In their attempts to sustain kinship bonds that they find particularly significant, they develop tacit ways to express their gayness, rendering redundant the Western coming out imperative.

UD: It is interesting how the cold war rhetoric of "the Rotten West" lives on and acquires new meaning, and it reminds us of the centrality of LGBTQ+ questions to national and European politics in the 21st century. Your story here also points to core questions in the project, namely how to study queer families in their distinct locations without getting caught in rigid comparative frameworks, but also to how some concepts are helpful and others less so as they "travel." To my mind the tradition of "new family studies" or "doing family" (British or not) is an excellent way to capture the meaningful everyday family making practices in which queers engage, their gendered forms of labour if you like, and it is no surprise that it's been very much used to study lesbian families, for instance.

In terms of how I arrived at studying queer kinship, several stories – intellectual, political and personal –intersected and pointed me in that direction. I was trained by feminist anthropologists and science and technology scholars in the US in the nineties, so in a sense kinship and reproduction was at the centre of all my

training. I was early on introduced to Weston's (1991) and Newton's (1979) work on how queers made kinship and gender and to Lewin's ground-breaking (1993) work on lesbian motherhood, and my early work on sexual and reproductive rights had also led me to Strathern's (1992), Haraway's (1997) and Franklin's (1997) work on assisted reproduction. As questions of kinship, family and reproduction are central for theorising and understanding gender, sexuality and race, my training also pushed me to think them as central concepts and organising principles for how we think about (feminist) knowledge. So, in a sense kinship and reproduction have always been at the heart of my thinking.

My arrival at proposing *Queer(y)ing Kinship in the Baltic Region* as a project had much to do with time and place. I had done work on gender equality and regional identity building in the context of Sweden's entry into the EU, on the geopolitics of Nordic gender studies, and on the figure of the queer and lesbian femme and the politics of femininity; all of which involved kinship and reproduction in different ways and I wrote about the new family law and the initial refusal to tackle the question of insemination in 2003 (see Dahl 2003; Nordqvist 2006). Here it also matters that in Sweden there is a tradition of queer scholarship that goes back to at least the mid-nineties, and that moreover LGBTQ+ rights are central to the national self-image, to the extent that it is not impossible to get support and funding for queer research topics.

On a more personal note, I also belong to the first generation of LGBTQ+ people who have had marriage and reproductive rights in fertile age and for whom having children was imaginable. Following the changes in family law and access to assisted reproduction in Sweden in the early 2000s (see Dahl, this volume), there was a literal baby boom in my own queer generation and community, and with that came new research, especially on lesbian parents (Ryan-Flood 2005; Nordqvist 2006; Malmqvist 2015). I was fascinated by the many different paths, rationales and struggles queer people went through and described around me, and above all, by the stories of relatedness that emerged. To some, known donors were important, whereas to others, anonymous donors were favoured and they were of no importance to the family (Polski

2013), and at the same time, the Swedish state made clear that only registered and approved donors who could be found would be approved. While some actively chose multi-parent models, others struggled to re-make motherhood through rethinking biology and care. It seemed that at the intersection of an increasingly privatised public health sector and a growing global fertility industry, there were many possible paths, and yet, each came with its own set of legal conditions, and far from all were able to achieve their dreams. At the same time, people made their own sense of the new legal and technological possibilities and found very different models of family, often in relation to their own complex family stories. In some respects, the queer families around me (with or without children) were similar to Weston's (1991) insofar as people both seemed to "choose" and make complex families, often involving friends, exes, co-parents, and at the same time, the legal frameworks seemed also to increasingly define and constrict what counted as family and kinship. I found that increasing numbers desired having "their own" children and were entangled with their biogenetic families.

My own queer politics and personal disinterest in reproducing myself made me ambivalent about both the assimilationist tendencies of the law (that is, the state's investment in creating a normative order in a queer chaos of reinventing relatedness) and about how the law increasingly seemed to create and structure power relations between parents (see also Nordqvist 2006). What is really queer about queer reproduction, I wondered. What is being reproduced in queer reproduction? In some ways it seemed that queers were being coerced into reproducing normative national values.

I was both interested in how the law reinscribed biogenetic and heteronormative kinship and the importance of fathers (and thus the regulation of donor-conceived families) and also struck by how often the queer dream of family "failed" (Dahl 2014); that is, getting married and having children, did not quite provide the "happy ever after" it was expected to do with many getting divorced. For some, this led to even more complex queer families, and for others to quite challenging battles around defining parenthood; all of which

pointed to the complex and often contradictory workings of understandings of kinship that blood and law provide. Considering all these issues, I was also struck by how much of the emergent scholarship tended to focus on the white majoritarian population and their struggles with heteronormativity. Focusing on queers of colour in Sweden, I wanted to contribute to what Acosta (2018, 407) has called “queerer intersectional family scholarship” that “attends to how race, gender, class, and sexuality shape material reality rather than relying only on the experiences of the White middle-class to build family theory.”

Like you, I have found a lot of the work on queer families conducted within the sociological tradition of “doing family” helpful and this work also echoes with how (queer) anthropologists have challenged conventional kinship models; even if for anthropologists the question of what it means to care for others also centrally includes questions of what it means to be related. I too draw on queer of colour scholarship, including the work of Eng (2010), Acosta (2011, 2018), Rodriguez (2014) and others, both because it points to the limits of those queer kinship studies that focus on and depart from white middle class subjects’ experiences and because of the great need to attend to how legacies of colonialism and histories of race relations shape categories and experiences of gender, sexuality and family and for intersectional analysis and critical analysis of the nation state as a framework. So maybe what you mean by “Western” here is actually white hegemony?

JM: Not really. What I mean by Western is more complicated than that. It is true that most of the time it means Anglo-American because there are differences within “the West” to which we need to pay attention. But I speak from a very particular position that is neither West nor East. I speak from the periphery and this periphery has different power dynamics too, with its own exclusionary practices, and its own underdogs and scapegoats. On the other hand, it is important to note regarding your point about whiteness that there is a certain hierarchy here too. Some scholars aim to prove the use of racist language in relation to CEE and argue that “Eastern Europe might appear as being functionally on the side of the colonial and racial Other” (Melegh 2006, 39). Melegh, for

instance, shows how racist language and racist scaling appear in the contemporary discourse on the East-West slope. Others show rather racial ambiguity towards CEE and talk about functionalist and cultural racism in operation. They point out that already in the 19th century, the founders of scientific racism perceived Eastern and Central Europeans as racially inferior and in need of being governed (Boatcă 2006; Kulawik & Kravchenko 2020; Melegh 2006). In her study on German colonialism, Kristin Kopp demonstrates that popular and scientific discourses presented Polish Eastern provinces of Prussia as a colonial space. There were no differences in the concepts used to describe the colonised lands in Africa and the Poles (Kopp 2011). Also, the Nazi politics were rooted in the classification of both Jewish and Slavic people as members of inferior races. More recent work on post-Yugoslavia shows the whole region as deeply embedded in the transnational formation of race (Baker 2018).

UD: Yes, it is entirely true that histories of race are central to the making of European enlightenment and also that the history of racial science is full of hierarchies of whiteness that also at times map onto persistent “East” - “West” rhetoric (something that Brexit made very clear). I think for me the point is that questions of race (at times masked as nationality) are central to reproduction and kinship, as the literature on third party assisted reproduction and the global fertility market makes clear. Privileged white Westerners frequently make use of donated eggs and surrogate arrangements in the former East (including the Baltic States and Ukraine) where treatments and arrangements are “cheaper”, while at the same time creating and drawing on racialised ideas of likeness and difference and yet again while encountering homophobia. We may also add the gendered politics of labour migration here, with significant numbers of care workers in Western Europe from CEE countries.

What is queer about queer kinship?

UD: As we outline in the introduction, we all had stakes in decentring the Western, Anglo-American dominance of feminist and queer kinship studies as they relate to national identity, com-

munity making and social life, and ambitiously, we have aimed to intervene not only with empirical insights from different national contexts, but also on the level of theory. In some ways, this is about how we understand the different questions, methods, literatures and discussions we locate our work in. As we glean from our arrival stories above, a crucial question for us in the project, like in the field at large, has been how to think about what is queer about queer kinship; a theme that you, Joanna, have become a leading scholar of in recent years.

JM: In some way kinship is always already queer or at least it carries a queer potentiality because people always transgress the rules and norms of kinship in some ways or others. They do not live according to kinship norms either. However, their hegemony influences ways of thinking about kinship and its right forms. For me, queer in queer kinship is something that always questions the normative ways of forming relationships and living one's life; it is about opening a range of possibilities. But what is queer depends on the context – its gender, sexual and relational norms that govern people's decisions about the right (and wrong?) types of relationships. Queer is about subverting these norms, but this subversion does not need to be overt, quite the contrary it could be very subtle, tacit even. Again, depending on the context. In one context holding (or even touching) a hand of a loved one in a public space might be a queer gesture, in others it is just a normal way to express one's intimacy (Stasińska 2020). Queer in kinship also means something very obvious – transgressing the heteronormativity and its norms regarding the right family/kin forms with strict gender roles.

UD: I agree that in a way everything and nothing is queer about kinship, at least on a conceptual level. If kinship is always already queer because kinship is ultimately rules and norms that concern positions and relations, and that never quite define how people live and practice relations, then (heteronormative) kinship, like the genders and sexualities it organises and is organised by, is perhaps an ideal that we aspire towards but never quite live up to. We are all imposters in kinship, if you like. Add to that the way that assisted reproduction as such certainly queers heterosexual reproduction, while same-sex love also queers the core kinship symbol (inter-

course) and we have ourselves a clearly queer phenomenon. At the same time, the growing legal regulation of “same-sex” kinship in Sweden illuminates the limits of “queering” kinship insofar as it also reinscribes an emphasis on knowledge about biological origins as in the best interest of the child.

Indeed, the pull of kinship as a theme or phenomenon to study, I think, has to do with its significance for regulating and organising the population through human reproduction and thereby also gender and sexuality, and by extension, identity. As you say, kinship is a kind of cultural terminology, a set of names for positions (wife, mother, sister, daughter, niece, etc) that define relations and that as such always have to be narrated, upheld in stories. As rules these kinship positions (derived from heterosexual reproduction) are powerful (and hegemonic); they are both the basis for laws and logics and are defined by those. A cultural logic where heterosexual reproduction is understood as the basis for “real” kinship and other forms, including “adoptive,” “social,” and “bonus” kin always refers to this allegedly universal original. At the same time, the nuclear heterosexual family is obviously a modern historical invention. In Sweden, the emphasis on (biological) fatherhood is relatively recent; it was not until the 1930s, when it became in the interest of the state to ensure that (biological) fathers supported children financially that an idea of knowledge about biological heritage began to be emphasised. Ironically, this also led to heightened stigmatisation of single mothers in the 1950s (Nordqvist 2006).

Does queer kinship, the kinship created by queers, unsettle this logic? I am interested if, how and when queer kinship, understood as a challenge to binary gender relations and reproductive heterosexuality as the origin of culture and the family, might or does unsettle the relationship between family and nation, and by extension in how reproduction is crucially always about race and gender. In other words, to my mind, queer kinship is not only a question about how to make family outside of the gender and sexuality norms or the law, but given the context in which I am working, if and how the existence of queer families actually alters broader societal conceptions of family and kinship. On the one

hand, raising children outside of the idea of mommy-daddy-child unsettles the very idea of how the nation is reproduced. On the other hand, as long as queer families fit into the overall demographics of the population they are tolerated more. As you can see, I am very influenced by Butler's (2002) discussion about the possibilities and limitations of desiring recognition and legitimacy from the state. I am also in a sense less interested in recognition as such and more interested in what difference the (legal and cultural) organisation of kinship makes, to the formations of both subjects and states.

JM: Well, I guess we speak from two very different positions because in my geotemporal locations all queer families are put outside the state imaginary, even worse, they are made into a public enemy, a scapegoat even, by the same nation state to which you refer. So, I am rather speaking about unrecognisable queer kinship. And although I am also inspired by Butler, I am probably more interested in recognition than you are, again because of this difference in location (see Rich 1994). I wonder what it means to live recognisable lives as queer families in countries with inclusive legislation and recognition of queer families and parenthood, as opposed to struggling with one's own invisibility and precariousness as queer families in every step you make, because you want to "lead a good life in a bad life" (Butler 2012). This is precisely why I have used the term "family" in my project despite the debates and doubts about usefulness of the term "family" within Anglo-American queer theory (Roseneil and Budgeon 2004) I was familiar with. Because the term "family" is so mythologised and overloaded with heteronormative assumptions in Poland, I have opted for using it and claim its political importance in given (Polish) circumstances. For instance, when I did presentations and/or gave interviews in Poland the use of the term "family" was often criticised. Introducing my project, I was asked "How many of *that* do we have in Poland?" It was as if the one who asked this question couldn't say the word "family" in the context of non-heterosexual relationships (and he was/is not the only one). This is precisely why I thought it important to retain the term, stick with/to it even. In a country where "family" is strictly reserved for the nuclear model,

and other models are openly refused to be called families daring to reach for such a sacred word, using it in the context of same-sex relational life was in fact a political gesture and aimed to change the mainstream discourse as well as the self-perception of LGBTQ+ communities.

UD: That makes total sense. Indeed, it is clear that geopolitics matter and the question of recognition is of course not irrelevant; perhaps the conceptual point from Butler (2002) here concerns the paradox of recognition itself, where on the one hand living without it causes immense suffering and on the other, achieving recognition inevitably tends to lead to new forms of hierarchies and exclusions. So, it seems that it matters which terminologies we use and we have stakes in those we chose for specific intellectual and political reasons. We are both navigating a kind of borderland, where on the one hand we want to make interventions into the political and scientific contexts in which we work, and on the other hand, we want to make interventions into the broader international field of research. Like you say, each research project needs to specify what makes kinship queer, and that means that work on queer kinship always needs to provide “thick description” (Geertz 1973), including historical and cultural context. I find what Jenny Gunnarsson Payne (2016) calls the grammars of kinship and the ways people tell and retell their stories of relatedness quite fascinating and it’s something I would like to attend more to.

Different temporalities = different positionalities?

UD: *Queer(y)ing Kinship in the Baltic Region* was conceived in a moment of veritable explosion of research on queer kinship and family making, particularly in Euro-American scholarship and from a shared desire to both gather empirical data and to intervene in the debate on the level of theory. Yet, while queer kinship, family-making and reproduction are clearly timely research topics that we as project members have grappled with over time and in different research time arrangements, they are also entangled in multiple temporalities, both personal, historical and geopolitical. How can we unpack the different positions from which we have

understood the field and our own positions? How do we conceptualise geopolitical and geotemporal location as they relate to doing research on queer kinship? Our goal was not “comparison” as such, but rather to think together about different themes that came up in our respective projects, and yet we have frequently ended up comparing our contexts. We do live and work in different nations with different histories related to both LGBT+ movements and research on these topics. Add to that our different trainings and methodologies and our relations to the international field of interdisciplinary queer studies. What are your thoughts on this?

JM: I am always reminded of from where I speak, especially during international conferences where I am frequently the only person from CEE. I always remember that “I am where I think”, to repeat Walter Mignolo’s (2011) statement, paraphrasing Cartesian “Cogito ergo sum.” It is the perfect exemplification of a decolonial approach to the geopolitics of knowledge production, and it explains my understanding of knowledge as always already located. As Madina Tlostanova (2015, 48) puts it, “the geopolitics of knowledge refers to the local, spatial and temporal grounds of knowledge. The body-politics refers to individual and collective biographical grounds of understanding and thinking rooted in particular local histories and trajectories of origination and dispersion. Locality here is understood not merely as a geo-historical location but also as an epistemic correlation with the sensing body, perceiving the world from a particular local history.”

To me it is clear that there are different temporalities between “West and the rest”; and the imposition of Western temporality forecloses full recognition of difference in LGBTQ+ movements and rights and how these differences influence thinking about queer kinship. It also dictates the way debate is held internationally as well as its content. In popular historiographical accounts of the sexual liberation in the West, we have the narration that spawns from 1950s and 1960s homophile days, through 1970s gay liberation, 1980s AIDS, to 1990s queer times. In the book *De-Centring Western Sexualities*, which I edited with Robert Kulpa, we used concepts of the “temporal disjunction” and “knotted temporality” and contrasted the Western conception of “time of sequence” with

CEE “time of coincidence” to describe differences in teleological development of sexual politics. For the CEE, “history” (the “new” Western history, which, from 1989, is supposed to be a universal one) happened almost “overnight.” We argue for distinguishing between Western and Eastern geotemporal modalities. What we meant is not that there has been no development or change of “events” in the sexual politics in the “CEE” (both in the past and currently). What we meant is that 60 years of Western history is squeezed and is supposedly to be “reworked” in the “CEE” over only a few years, hence the feeling of immediacy and “all at once” mobilisation. But also, that there is ignorance about the CEE present, as it is seen as Western past. And only recently there are diverse attempts to bring back this forgotten post-socialist past, to debunk the myth of the near-total isolation of CEE during the Cold War and bring back some of the forgotten histories of homosexuality in the Eastern bloc, which might be read as a further step in this de-centralisation we asked for. For instance, in his very inspiring book *Transnational Homosexuals in Communist Poland* (2017), Łukasz Szulc shows that only by dehistoricising homosexuality in CEE, was it possible to present the whole region as homogenous, essentially homophobic, and in need of transition after 1989 (Szulc 2017, 7). As he rightly points out, some Eastern bloc countries decriminalised same-sex acts before many allegedly progressive West countries. For instance, Poland decriminalised (or in fact never criminalised) same-sex acts before many countries of the allegedly more progressive West, including Denmark (1933), Sweden (1944), England (1967), Canada (1969), West Germany (1969), Austria (1971), Finland (1971), Norway (1972), and the U.S. (entirely in 2001). It questions the teleological development of sexual politics and its unidirectionality and its taken-for-granted progressiveness. It also challenges the genealogies of origins as always already located in the West.

UD: Yes, I certainly hear you on these points! I wonder why it is that LGBTQ+ rights and movements, especially when placed on a global scale, are always cast and caught in a teleological progressive temporal framework that is really at odds with the reality of political change. At present, LGBTQ+ questions are increasingly

central to contemporary political tensions, between nations and transnationally, including in ‘anti-gender’ movements (Kuhar & Paternotte 2017; Graff & Korulczuk 2021) and in this sense, I don’t think we can see a smooth progress narrative at all, rather, we see questions pertaining to reproduction, gender, and biopolitics and movements for rights that are differently entangled with larger logics of neoliberalism, privatisations of welfare states and global fertility industries.

I share your commitment to a decolonial approach to knowledge production, one that certainly has to do with geopolitical location and that I have come across both within my US training (through Black, Indigenous, Latinx and Chicana feminisms) and through studying European gender studies for a long time. All of this for me is centrally related to European colonial and imperial projects that go back at least 500 years and also of course to the cold war of the 20th century, which means it is largely about different ideological approaches to how the state should relate to and perhaps, regulate, capitalism. If you find yourself coming up against temporal fantasies of what the East is like, I always have to challenge the deeply held fantasies of Sweden as social democratic paradise, as progressive, as a paradise of gender and sexual rights, devoid of colonial legacies or racism. Furthermore, and I suppose in part because I have worked within Baltic and CEE area studies, I also see a lot of productive travel between and conversation (and scholarly mobility and exchange) around how to understand the impact of these histories on contemporary intellectual and political work.

To my mind, considering LGBTQ+ issues solely in geopolitical terms, that is, using the nation as a taken for granted entity, inevitably involves grand generalisations and often seems to need “straw figures” to argue and position ourselves against. In the book you mention above, Łukasz Szulc (2017, 4) critiques the tendency “to blend fact and fiction, and thus, individually and collectively, perpetuate recurrent myth,” not only of CEE but also of the so-called West. Indeed, the three geopolitics myths that Szulc identifies within the larger discussions about the globalisation of sexuality (in particular questions of identity, rights, and movements)

include the myth of homogeneity whereby “both CEE and the West are all too frequently created as relatively uniform geopolitical entities adopting relatively uniform approaches to gender- and sexuality-related issues” (2017, 5), which as he contends, requires that we ignore differences within and exaggerate differences between regions, in order to make grand sweeping generalisations that also tend to flatten out complexity and ignore connections. He points to the problems of casting the West as “essentially progressive, that is, post-racial, post-feminist and post-gay, and CEE as essentially backward, that is, racist, sexist and homophobic” (ibid). Importantly, Szulc here points to the temporal myth whereby capitalism is cast as a political and economic system that brings about liberal stances towards gender and sexuality and whereby the East is lagging behind and at best able only to imitate what has already happened. All these myths rely on an idea of the “East” as isolated pre-1989, which as you point out, Szulc’s own work on homosexuality and exchanges across borders clearly disputes.

Following Szulc, I find it interesting to track not only how LGBTQ+ rights became a global issue in the early nineties through a Western dominated Human Rights discourse and being placed on both UN and EU agendas and spurring a range of different objections due to their entanglements in Western neoimperialism (Szulc 2017, 26) but equally importantly, how neoliberal capitalism, or queer liberalism has shaped demands made by LGBTQ+ movements in different places.

Whilst “homosexuals” in Sweden have long had families and children (often conceived in heterosexual “relations”, but not only), I am not so sure that legal changes and recognition is only thanks to the LGBTQ+ movement’s “success” in rendering “us” visible. Rather, it seems to me that the emergence of new reproductive technologies and the onset of a global fertility market in the nineties, coupled with particular understandings of gender equality and children’s rights to an origin and to access to two parents have been equally important. Clearly, the Swedish state has a vested interest in regulating reproduction and kinship for all sorts of reasons, including ensuring that a child is provided for by two parents (or else the state becomes a stand in parent), but it has also

created different laws for differently conceived children, making the “easiest” path to joint recognition is to conceive via state health-care whereby the state also decides who is a suitable donor and what gametes to use. I would argue that a century of Social democratic welfare state building profoundly shapes how LGBTQ+ questions have been treated and how activism and demands have developed. Relatedly, it doesn’t make sense to me to understand Swedish recognition of LGBTQ+ rights (especially to marriage and kinship) simply as “progressive” by comparison to some imagined homophobic other (indeed that is part of Swedish homonationalism). Rather, I think that Swedish homonationalist politics are deeply entangled with questions of immigration and demographics, and also reflect a distinct form of biopolitical regulation of national reproduction, with differentiated outcomes for differently situated people; far from all have access to these rights and far from all queers are allowed to reproduce the nation.

It seems clear across our empirical research that the struggle for rights is not a linear process that achieves all-encompassing inclusion, but rather, LGBTQ+ movements both work within and beyond the nation, they are entangled with party politics, economic development and a range of other forms inequality. In that sense, how people actually live and practice kinship and the networks and relationalities they are entangled in and draw on to achieve dreams of family, cannot simply be reduced to geopolitical location. An intersectional approach to queer kinship that attends to how material conditions, racial positions and citizenship are entangled with sexual orientation and family making in different geopolitical localities that are in turn shaped by complex historico-political processes is needed in order to challenge simple dichotomies of East and West.

JM: That is why it is perhaps important to distinguish between Western and Anglo-American geotemporalities, which influence our positions towards and against them as queer academics. I cannot speak in any other name but myself. My position as a queer/sexuality researcher is strictly connected with CEE position of being in between, as part of the contemporary semi-periphery (to use a concept developed by a Serbian philosopher Marina

Blagojevic), always trying to catch up with the more advanced “centre”. Blagojević (2009, 34) argues that the semi-periphery is fundamentally “transitional, in a process of transition from one set of structures to another set of structures, and therefore it is unstable, and often has characteristics of the void, chaos, or structurelessness”. This in-betweeness is particularly visible when as a CEE academic I try to translate concepts and theories that originated in the Anglo-American context and check their usefulness in the CEE. This process of translation demands mitigating different obstacles and challenges from both Anglo-American and Polish contexts. It also demands an understanding of cultural and social borders and acknowledging/respecting local epistemologies. And this is probably completely different for you as a person trained in the Anglo-American context but working in Swedish academia.

UD: It is interesting to consider training, it is a bit like “childhood”, isn’t it, assumed to shape us forever. I have been a practicing academic in Sweden for 20 years now, yet in some people’s views I am “American” in my way of thinking. Yes, there is no denying that my training has influenced my thinking, but I think this has more to do with where I trained and with whom than with some generalised idea of the US. For sure, there is a long history of debating the hegemony or dominance of Anglo-American concepts in the Nordic region as well (see Dahl et al. 2016; Mulinari 2001; Widerberg 1998). Yet, what I always found fascinating here in Sweden is that by assigning geopolitical belonging to certain concepts (for instance, it is commonly stated that “race” and “queer” are American concepts) they can also be disavowed as not useful. When I reviewed the history of Nordic gender studies (Dahl et al. 2016; Dahl 2011), it was very clear that concepts that challenge the progressive story of gender equality, or perhaps rather, that question the “primary” focus on gender (as opposed to an intersectional approach) were not warmly welcomed and have since often been cast as “additional perspectives.”

JM: Interesting what you say about “disavowing concepts” because I do not have such experience. From what I observe, the discussion about the dominance of Anglo-American concepts in

the CEE (but also beyond the Western academia) is not so much about disavowing but rather about showing how certain concepts work differently in different circumstances, like I explained with the concept of the family at the beginning. But also with the concept of what queer might mean in different circumstances or the concept of whiteness (and racism) and scales of Europeanness based more on ethnicity and religion than race in the region (Boatcă, 2006). Since in the past I had been interested in the politics of translation of queer theory in the Finnish context in my queering Moominland project I remember that my queer interviewees there did not question certain concepts to save their privileges but rather to show their complicated functioning there.

UD: Sure, concepts work differently in different locations, but if we take questions of race and racism for instance, questions that many white feminists have been quick to dismiss (through statements such as “I don’t see colour” or “race is an American concept, we don’t have race here” or “it is also difficult to be an immigrant from a different European country”, etc.), it not only makes it difficult to address racism, it also basically refuses to acknowledge the work of many, many critical race, postcolonial, and black scholars *in* the Nordic region who use these concepts (and others) in their work. At many international conferences, people frequently assume that the North of Europe, Scandinavia/the Nordic region, is one homogenous region, and moreover, that it is a sexual and gender utopia where gender equality is achieved, marriage is gender neutral and recognition of parenthood is not reduced to contributions of sperm and egg/womb. To me this is not only a reflection of a kind of progress narrative, it is also a fantasy and my research has found that people don’t necessarily walk around with a warm feeling of being recognised and affirmed. It also seems to me that in an era of neoliberal capitalism, all nations are involved in various forms of “catching up” (catching up to *what* exactly, is a bit unclear at this point). Again, I would say that it is not so much the historically social democratic nation state as it is the privatisation of large sections of the public good, including housing, care, education and so on, a neoliberalisation on a large-scale including individualisation, that has pushed the advances in LGBTQ+ rights;

that is, rights become obtainable through individualism and that market logic. This by no means makes me a fan of neoliberalism, quite the contrary, I am deeply sceptical of the (neo)liberal discourses of rights. So, what do we mean by catching up? What scale are we talking about, who is it that needs to catch up and to what? It seems to me that the whole machinery of thinking about history as progress has ended, certainly with the acute climate crisis and the overall destruction of the planet, but also with the current shift to the right and the rise of massively conservative movements across Europe and the world.

JM: Maybe it ended in some (queer) academics minds but it did not disappear totally. And in writing about “catching up” I have tried with Robert Kulpa to reconstruct the dominant narration about CEE regions and its “delays” in developing sexual politics. This narrative uses Western LGBTIQ gains (ignoring that there is still a lot to be done in the so-called West) as a litmus paper for the democratic credentials of CEE. And I do believe following other scholars from the region that thinking about CEE in terms of time and not place (see for example Tlostanova 2012, Kulawik & Kravcenko 2020) is often responsible for ignorance of CEE local specificities or simply an expressed lack of interest. As Tlostanova (2012, 132) rightly writes, “the almost overnight vanishing of the second world led to a typical Western understanding of the post-Soviet as a time, not as space. It is the time after socialism and not the dozens of millions of rendered irrelevant lives of those who inhabit the post-communist space.” It means that the specificity of the East European perspective and the post-socialist conditions tend to disappear, including the specificity of queer lives there. The whole region starts to be perceived as dislodged, a semi-periphery similar to the West but not similar enough. Not completely Other but not the same either. As a consequence of such disappearance, CEE functions as “Western’s Europe incomplete self” (Boatcă 2006, 100), slowly catching up with the more advanced “centre,” particularly regarding its sexual/reproductive politics and LGBT activism (Mizelińska & Kulpa 2011).

It has also consequences for production of knowledge about queer kinship. Seeing contemporary CEE concerns as Anglo-

American/Western past overlooks differences. It also means that the Anglo-American scholars dictate what is considered the most pressing and cutting-edge issues concerning queer (kinship) studies, as Pako Chalkidis also rightly observes in this volume, pointing towards its preoccupation with reproduction. For instance, now when the West has entered its post-marriage phase, the scholarly debates focus on homonormativity of queer reproduction, often not acknowledging the importance of fighting for recognition of queer families in Poland, because they are seen as reminiscent of problems the West has already solved. Consequently, possibilities of profound articulation of the specificity of the CEE position showing that the so-called old Anglo-American/Western problems might function differently elsewhere, resulting in different resistance practices, are not so interesting for Western academia, or, if they are then they are just treated as yet more case studies for a long-known phenomena (see Mizielińska 2020, 2022).

UD: Yes, I agree that there are all kinds of stereotypes and mainstream political fantasies of CEE, but when it comes to *our field*, I keep wondering who you are referring to and where this narrative of dictation happens? It seems to me that what you are saying here is a problem about both national and European (re)unification, identity-building and integration; it is a project that has been going on for centuries. Certainly, in popular culture and dominant EU discourses for example, there are ideas about how “progressive” or “modern” different nations or regions are or of “how far we have come” in various places and of course, like all stereotypes, those feature in academic debates as well. A different take might be to say that since 1989, CEE has become incredibly interesting and important for, for instance, Sweden, demonstrated, among other things, in the amount of funding for research that aims to understand the “new” Europe in all its different specificities, its joint histories, its common futures and shared problems. Maybe you are trying to capture a feeling, or an impression of being placed in a particular way, attributed to a position?

JM: You know that you have just questioned the whole bunch of decolonial works which point out the hierarchy in knowledge production, or what you have just called “narrative of dictation”,

right? And the fact that CEE becomes “incredibly interesting and important” to understand proves exactly my points. Interesting for whom and why? Another case study? Another exoticised “tamed savage”? Attila Melegh, in his book *On the East-West Slope. Globalization, Nationalism, Racism, and Central and Eastern Europe* (2006), tries to capture the paradox traced in the dominant discourses on CEE. On the one hand, 1989 marked the end of the distinct “Eastern” category within Europe and the slow disappearance of the whole East-West divide (in terms of CEE). On the other hand, this divide is still present, although debated with regard to different, geographically, and politically understood contexts. Whenever CEE fails on its Western development path, it causes lamentation about the impossibility of transplanting certain “Western” practices or transcending certain developmental phases (Melegh 2006, 9), and an outbreak of experts searching for the real cause of this failure. Usually, they use arguments of still unfinished transition (i.e., CEE are in the “state-building” phase whereas Western states have entered the “post-nationalist” era) or return to their new/old stereotypes about true Eastern nature, i.e., “East is East” arguments and/or discourses of the so-called Soviet/Balkan mentality (Melegh 2006).

UD: OK, I understand that what you are hearing is dismissal, perhaps that is part of the challenge here. I am not at all saying that our present, including our scholarly conversations, are not deeply marked by the past century in ways that position us differently, nor am I dismissing the profound insights offered by much feminist scholarship from the region. What I *am* saying is on the one hand that due to historical changes that are far beyond the control of academics, we have now had at least 30 years of rich knowledge exchange and production (some of which has happened through collaborative efforts, like ours) and that I do think this makes a difference, and on the other hand, simply that I am not always sure that all epistemological differences can be reduced to geopolitics of location, rather, I think they are also often theoretical and political. Some of the most important psychoanalytic theorising, for instance, certainly comes from “Eastern Europe”, to give but one example. Indeed, the current rise of fascism and right-wing

extremism all over Europe can hardly be reduced to an East-West divide. I remain interested in thinking about capitalism, neo-liberalism, socialism and social democracy as historical ideological forces with intense material effects.

But if we get back to our own field, to my mind what we might call interdisciplinary queer studies is very heterogeneous, both theoretically and methodologically; it consists of scholars and traditions asking specific questions to specific locations or data sets from particular points of view. For instance, I'm not sure there is such a thing as a "post-marriage phase" (and I agree that is a grandiose and unhelpful descriptor). For whom? Where? Rather, there are ongoing theoretical and political debates around marriage as a mode of recognition and different takes on what is queer about it. Theoretical and political debates around its significance seems to me related to the core fact that so many rights, including rights to citizenship and immigration, reproduction and kinship recognition, care and divisions of labour, and so on, are tied to marriage. If we think of queer theorists who are critical of marriage as the "one size fits all" solution to gay respectability, they are by and large critical of queer liberalism as a paradigm (e.g., Duggan 2002; Eng 2010; Eng & Puar 2020). The work of queer scholars of colour and decolonial scholars also points to the limitations of these liberal models of recognition, especially in settler colonialist nations but I would also include rapidly dismantling welfare states under late capitalism, such as Sweden and other Nordic countries. To my mind, there are no "solved" issues when it comes to kinship and reproduction; rather, these issues reflect particular national histories and take on different meaning in different times, to differently positioned bodies. Our task as researchers is to analyse and make sense of complexity and attend to details. I think we do and should challenge the teleological narrative that you describe.

JM: Of course. I couldn't agree more. But when I say "post-marriage" stage I refer to a scholarship that discusses this problem and also names it as such taking marriage right for granted. Let me give you an example. Look for instance at *Queer Families and Relationships After Marriage Equality* edited by Michael W. Yarbrough, Angela Jones and Joseph Nicholas DeFilippis. It collects papers

presented at the conference held in 2016 entitled “After Marriage: The Future of LGBTQ Politics and Scholarship.” The main aim of this book is to analyse the situation of queer relationships in different countries in what they call that after marriage-period that they presuppose we are all in. The book focuses on the question what are the impacts of same-sex marriage on queer family formations: does it push them into normalisation and resemblance of heterosexual marriages and if so, what happens to those queers whose relationships do not fit into this homogenous marriage model? Although it presents interesting and diverse international articles, ranging from empirical papers to interviews with activists, it still lacks the perspectives of those countries, like Poland, where same-sex marriage or partnership is a highly contested option, probably not available for queer people in the nearest future. In the West/Anglo-American contexts, the way I see it, reproductive freedom and queer parenthood are recognised and ARTs and surrogacy are available, which of course does not mean they are available to everybody and in the exact way/proportion. There are still all sorts of inequalities and discussions about abuses and exclusionary practices of these reproductive freedoms along with those around the reproduction of homonormativity and racism, the need for trans rights, etc. In Poland, when we asked in our survey about methods of having children in the future, most of the younger generation said that they would choose ARTs with an anonymous donor (women) and surrogacy (men). In reality, people mostly have kids from previous relationships with men and/or through finding semen via the “black market,” since from 2015 ARTs is reserved for heterosexual couples (married or cohabited). And surrogacy is forbidden. The reproductive problems of Polish queers might look like old Anglo-American/Western problems whereas in fact they are not. Because they currently include reproduction in their life trajectory in comparable ways as Western queers and the lack of choice and reproductive rights does not stop them from pursuing their plans (i.e., having children). However, their ways or what I call tactics in my new book (Mizielińska 2022), are different, because they are often forced to circumvent the law, finding the loopholes in the system,

etc. Therefore, the question of choice as taken for granted in many Anglo-American/Western debates (focusing on possible abuses/failures, reproduction of race, homonormativity) is less central for them and for me in my attempts to understand their daily practices because they rather struggle with limits of choice (see Mizielińska 2020).

UD: Hm. This is an interesting and quite generalising narrative of the West that also speaks to Szulc's myths that I talked about above. I think we can usefully distinguish between modes of reproduction and forms of recognition of parenthood. Certainly, in Sweden there is "reproductive freedom" in the sense of free and available abortion and contraception and those with wombs who under a certain age can pass the tests of mental health and have the socioeconomic means, and that it is possible to have children through ARTs and that surrogacy happens within a global fertility market. Of course, the "inclusive" family law sends an extremely important message, no denying that, but neither signal "availability", but rather at best "possibility" and each comes with a complex legal procedure through which the state regulates kinship, with deeply biopolitical results. I read the literature you mention as in part concerned with Butler's (2002) questions concerning what kind of qualitative difference same-sex parenting and marriage might make to our understandings of kinship, and in turn to gender and sexuality. To my mind, it is possible to read Poland's current position on this matter as pointing precisely to the centrality of LGBTQ+ issues to nation building; if only through vehement refusal of what you yourself has shown is a sociological fact; queer families already exist.

The point of discussing those "abuses" you mention, is to question the idea of "universal" rights, to call attention to the global dimensions of power and to how reproduction and family-making involve dimensions beyond sexual orientation, often depend on a market logic and a neoliberal idea of what makes a good life, and that far from all can obtain what perhaps *appears* available for those who desire a reproductive futurity. Yet, the discrepancies that you describe are everywhere in my work too; far from all can realise their dreams. What I call a "fertile" generation that comes of age in

an era of rights (Dahl 2018a, 2018b) imagines family life in accordance with what is available to them and at the same time, the way that people actually live with children and make family is not simply as same-sex headed nuclear families with “their own” children. I would strongly argue that what you describe as “choice” here is itself indicative of a market logic – quite far from what, for instance, Weston (1991) was talking about.

Choice is overrated as a term with which to think reproduction and family; in fact, my own research has taught me that few people actually simply have “families of choice,” they have multiple forms of kin relations and quite flexible grammars to describe these by and for many people. Kin is not chosen, nor does it always recognise one’s own family. In my work, I’ve tried hard to understand what queer kinship “is” or “does” beyond what the state sanctions or what is obtainable in the market and then retroactively fought to have recognised (such as in the case of transnational surrogacy). It is clear from the survey that I discuss in another chapter in this book that “equality” is far from achieved for all LGBTQ+ people in Sweden, that many struggle with their families of origin, and also the fact that recognition from the state also comes with subjection to its regulations. Is that reproductive freedom? I don’t know. Justice? Not really. Are all forms of “chosen families” or queer parenthood recognised? Most certainly not. So when I read your work, I certainly don’t think of the queers you work with as being in a different time or fighting for something that has already been “achieved”, in fact, I often see similarities in how differently situated queer subjects negotiate and articulate “feelings of kinship” and that all queers live, in a sense, global lives and imaginaries. It seems to me that what Butler (2002) meant when she discussed the dilemmas of “desiring the state’s desire” in “Is Kinship always already heterosexual?”, namely that with every legal change and inclusion, there are new exclusions and boundaries drawn around what counts as legitimate relations, is an ongoing question for all of us and that the fantasy of linear progress must be disputed. We must ask freedom and recognition for whom, when, where and how?

JM: I agree. But I think that we ask similar questions from different geo-political locations and it matters. It seems to me that we also deal with different types of biopolitics and ways of regulating queer lives. When in CEE queer subjects/families are governed by punishment/prohibition and non-recognition, in Sweden they are controlled by inclusion on the condition that they will reproduce the right version of the nation. And this conditional inclusion gets idealised by CEE queers who, for instance, do not understand the critique of commercialisation of Pride parades because in their geopolitical contexts one can be put into the prison for hanging the rainbow flag on the statue and/or heavily beaten by wearing the rainbow badge.

UD: Fair enough. And those differences, as you say, matter profoundly in the everyday lives of queers. I think I am also trying to make a distinction here between analytical frameworks and empirical data, even if that distinction is extremely difficult to make, especially when we are also entangled in these political projects in different ways...

Queer methods: Living and researching queer kinship

UD: One of the great benefits from this project has been learning from one another's methodological approaches and working with mixed methods. What have been some of the gains and insights provided from studying queer kinship in both quantitative and qualitative ways, and what does it mean to study queer kinship in our respective locations?

JM: As my points above illustrate, also in thinking about the project methodology one has to take into account specific local contexts. In the Anglo-American context, where there has been plenty of research on LGBTQ+ families, one can concentrate on smaller scale projects "to create strategically illuminating set of facets in relation to specific research concerns and questions, not a random set, or an eclectic set, or a representative set, or a total set" as Jennifer Mason explained while writing about the facet approach she promotes (Mason 2011a: 77). This single phenomenon approach makes more sense there than in the Polish context where,

so far, there have been no larger and mixed-method projects regarding LGBTQ+ families and relationships. In my project we had to gain the general knowledge first (that's why we used quantitative survey first with more than 3000 respondents) and only then to start to deepen it by use of diverse qualitative methods (biographical interviews, participatory observations for 30 days, interviews on family maps, important photos/objects, focus group interviews see Mizielińska & Stasińska 2020, Mizielińska 2022). In a way we tried to make up for "delays" in the CEE knowledge production, to do "everything at once," which, from the beginning to the end, as we applied many methods and tried to cover all spheres of family and intimate life of non-heterosexual couples in a relatively short period of time (3.5 years), was very demanding and challenging.

UD: I find the question of how methodologies and research questions relate to geopolitics quite fascinating. Most research, certainly in anthropology and sociology, starts from the idea that one should either study a population that has not been studied before or that one should ask a new question or employ a new method (cf Dahl & Gabb 2019). Like much work conducted by queer scholars, "Families of Choice" has not only provided groundbreaking empirical research but also been politically motivated and that is important. Yet, I see a paradox in your reasoning here. On the one hand, you criticise the idea that CEE is "behind" and on the other, you propose that you need to make up for a "delay," an absence. It makes me wonder again what the measuring stick is, so to speak. Could it be that it depends on our research questions, that different methodological approaches and theoretical apparatuses are more or less useful, depending on what we study? Relatedly, I am wondering to what extent we are constrained by different disciplinary conventions and expectations?

JM: And you have caught me here! Because it is and it is not contradictory. When I said "delays" in the CEE knowledge production I express the insider perspective which reflects my in-betweenness. Namely, that I know the field and I know what has been produced here and there. So, on the one hand, I am overwhelmed by these wonderful and insightful works which makes me feel

inferior, always not good enough. And on the other hand, facing “the emptiness” in the Polish context makes me at least want to map the territory, put something on the almost empty table. However, I also wanted to underline that our research questions are always already shaped by work that has been done before us, so I guess our starting point is different.

UD: I understand and recognise the struggle of “in-between-ness”; we certainly always have to speak to many audiences at once! However, I don’t necessarily see a contradiction between small-scale qualitative research and larger quantitative ones, nor do I see them as sequential. Rather, I think they reflect different scales, on the one hand, and research traditions, on the other. Of course, the question of what kind of research gets funded is a political one, both in Sweden and in Europe at large. There is a lot of (straight) gatekeeping by researchers on the different research councils and those assessing research applications. Perhaps there is a longer tradition in some settings of viewing small-scale qualitative research as valid and worthwhile forms of science? I cannot say that it always makes much of an impact, and it can clearly be dismissed, as the overall attack on poststructuralism (and queer) at the moment attests to. Clearly, you identified a need to point to the existence of LGBTQ+ families in relation to both “conventional” Polish family research and in relation to a state that does not recognise LGBTQ+ people, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that what you call a “single phenomenon” project is a “Western” thing. Rather, to me it suggests that your stakes are clear and you draw on certain kinds of disciplinary and methodological traditions in order to realise them. Every project on LGBTQ+ livelihood in Poland from now on has to refer to your work; and that can hardly be said of mine...

JM: I guess that is one of the advantages of having done pioneering work in the context where literally nothing existed but where there are the disadvantages I talked about before. I have never said that small-scale projects are not important and invalid, because I think quite the opposite. In making the distinction here I refer more to the plenitude of work being done in the Anglo-American academia, both large scale and small scale, and the

feeling of dealing with “nothingness”. And I think this simply shapes you and your research questions, i.e., you cannot be polemical because there is nobody to argue with except very heteronormative family studies scholars, at least at the time I started the project. But of course, I see your “in-betweenness” in relation to Swedish academia and work on LGBTQ+ families being done there.

UD: I understand the need to be polemical and to figure out to whom to address one’s critique, and I get that yours then becomes the wider (queer) academic world, in which you are geopolitically positioned. One entry into thinking about queer kinship in Sweden for me came from reading the 2001 state sponsored public investigation (called an SOU) on “Children in Homosexual families,” which laid the ground for changing family law around adoption (see also Nordqvist 2006). In Sweden, significant policy and legal changes (always reflecting political ideals of their time) often begin with state-initiated scientific investigations to lay the ground for, and to enable researchers and politicians to propose legal changes. This one found some hardly surprising results: gay people do raise children and same-sex parenthood does not mess up the gender identity and psychosocial development of children! Its starting point is clearly profoundly heteronormative; heterosexual parenthood is the ideal, norm and point for comparison and it sets the stage for a conditional “inclusion” of queer parents; yet, only insofar as biogenetic origins (“fatherhood” in particular) is not hidden and to the extent that these families are *like* heterosexual ones in gendered but also classed and racialised ways. While I certainly understand that for many LGBTQ+ people there is a strong desire to be “normal” (whatever that means beyond feeling belonging in one’s tribe so to speak) as a kinship theorist, I find it fascinating how the “inclusion” of new family forms by the state actually serves to secure rather than trouble biogenetic parenthood as the foundation for family and belonging.

This investigation does not rely on any significant empirical data on gay families in Sweden, but on previous research conducted elsewhere. As far as I know, there are no surveys done on families in Sweden that ask about how people define family, or any

empirical data collected that comes near to what you have done in Poland (other than the one I did thanks to working with you and that I discuss in this book). Perhaps what this suggests is that in fact, Sweden is “behind”; we still do not know how many families there are or what their thoughts are.

JM: But it was partly what drove me to do the survey, that these very heteronormative questions were asked in the Polish national polls without even taking into account even the possibility of the existence of LGBTQ+ families or queer subjects in general. So, in my survey I repeated some questions that have been asked to representative group of Poles in heteronormative national surveys, I simply reshaped the questions and added some less heteronormative responses as options (for more see Mizielińska, Abramowicz & Stasińska 2015).

UD: It is clear that we face different challenges in different locations. From very early on when I presented my research through ethnographic examples and complex stories of kin-making, I have frequently been met with questions of validity: questions about the size of my data set and how “representative” my analysis or my examples are. Objections seemed particularly salient when I pointed to significant silences in the literature, or to inequalities and norms within the fertile part of the LGBTQ+ population and how it was being studied. In particular, when I addressed how queers of colour I have interviewed understand and create family within a hegemonically white society, how families that do not fit within the couple and dual parenthood-based model understand relatedness, and how changing relations between adults involved in raising children might alter understandings of parenthood, I was often met with objections or told that my examples were exceptions. Reading previous research and following cultural representations, it has become increasingly clear that the nation and its majoritarian (white) population is often taken for granted, rather than interrogated and in the case of Sweden, the history of welfare state biopolitics was often ignored in discussions of how LGBTQ+ people make families in a historical context of increasing rights. Making this argument, I am frequently met with numbers that point to the progressiveness of the Nordic states, or

told that family-making via access to assisted reproduction is a right upheld by a social democratic welfare state and its state-funded healthcare will “democratise” reproduction. Learning about your survey made me curious about what numbers might tell us and they did not exactly show “equality.” It made a huge difference, so thank you!

Queer futurities: Where do we go from here?

UD: As we finalise this project, and thus our many years of collaboration, what do you think we have learned from our conversations? Have we managed to further the discussions within Baltic and Eastern European Studies or within queer kinship studies? What kinds of questions are we left with and what do we study next?

JM: For me it was important to be in a dialogue with all of you, to share our knowledge, sometimes argue too, because as Sarah Schulman rightly notices, conflict is not abuse (Schulman 2016) and particularly in our turbulent time we need to differentiate between harm and different/polyphonic visions which might be productive. In Poland I often feel very “homeless” in terms of academia and academic disputes. I lack community, community of interests, shared political visions, sensitive to all kinds of exclusions. It was also a productive dialogue because while sharing my data and analysis with you all, I could see them through different eyes and deepen my perspective. So “shareness” and queer solidarity are what I value most. But of course, it was an intellectually very inspiring dialogue too. Particularly, when we were all in one place for a short while. For instance, when we were in Stockholm, Antu Sorainen and I started to think about lesbian relationships with age differences as an important and largely ignored topic in queer kinship literature (see our chapter in this book). I agree with Pako Chalkidis’s point (in this volume) that nowadays queer kinship is so focused on family making through the reproduction that neglects sexuality, but I would add that it also ignores its other possible forms and that family means diverse forms of relating and as such does not have to be focus on the child.

So, I do hope that our piece will encourage other scholars to develop projects concentrating on age differences in queer relationships. I also think that thanks to this inspiring dialogue between the four of us we are better equipped to undertake future projects, in different configurations and with different foci but with the same intellectual (and queer) generosity, which is more than needed in such difficult times in all of our present locations.

UD: I agree that it was incredibly important to have time to meet, work closely, and engage in conversation. To that end, all our meetings, also in Warsaw and Helsinki, and at various conferences have been very important. A long slow conversation, in which there is also room for the body, for our lives at large, and for our partners and kin. Interestingly, I did start out wanting to have a much more open definition of family (one that did not centre so much on children) but the “baby boom” in Scandinavia and all the complexities of the different laws that regulate parenthood depending on modes of conception sort of took over. Antu Sorainen’s work on queer will-writing and inheritance (especially among queers who do not have children “of their own”) has been profoundly significant for my thinking about queer lineage and family and I’d like to think more about this (see Sorainen 2014). My research assistant Johan Sundell conducted interviews with gay/queer men of different generations, many of whom insisted on other forms of family than through procreation as well, and I have met many radical queers who make kin rather than babies (to paraphrase Haraway, 2016, 137). Yet, I remain fascinated with how (white) lesbians have become mothers and thus central to reproducing the nation, but very rarely seem to rock the boat (or do they? I guess time will tell!) Trans parents on the other hand, along with multi-parent families, meet much more resistance as do transgender and nonbinary children.

I think a crucial part of our project has been Raili Uibo’s (2021) thesis project on *Queers doing close relations in Estonia*. Raili set out to study the context for and consequences of Estonia being the first post-Soviet state to introduce a same-sex partnership law. Yet, what she found as she started doing research on families was that perhaps more than anything else, the livelihoods of queers in

Estonia were shaped by extreme neoliberal austerity politics under which the care of others took very different shapes. I have learned a lot from Raili's work on care and in particular from her notion of opacity and how queers neither hide nor separate their queer lives but rather opaquely incorporate queerness in their lives. Her work has contributed both significant data on queer lives in the Baltic region and made important theoretical contributions. In addition, she is a very skilled researcher and editor, as work on this book as well as in my new project on assisted reproduction across Scandinavian borders, where she designs surveys and preps for research, testifies.

For myself, I suppose I am still interested both in the relationship between (queer) kinship and nation building and in the conditions under which LGBTQ+ people are able to form recognisable families. I also remain interested in queer kinship practices, that is, how we address what Butler (2002, 15) calls the "fundamental forms of human dependency, which may include birth, child-rearing, relations of emotional dependency and support, generational ties, illness, dying, and death (to name a few)" in a complex time marked by growing nationalism and conservatism, on the one hand, and queer liberalism and late capitalism, on the other. To that end, I am frequently drawn to art, to the work of filmmakers, podcasters, writers. I am also drawn to constellations in which life, work and kinship merge in different ways. I think it is true that while in many respects it is difficult to distinguish kinship from friendship and community or from state definitions, kinship and reproduction as core organising concepts has far from lost its significance; in fact, it remains at the heart of geopolitics and of what it means to live a liveable life.

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