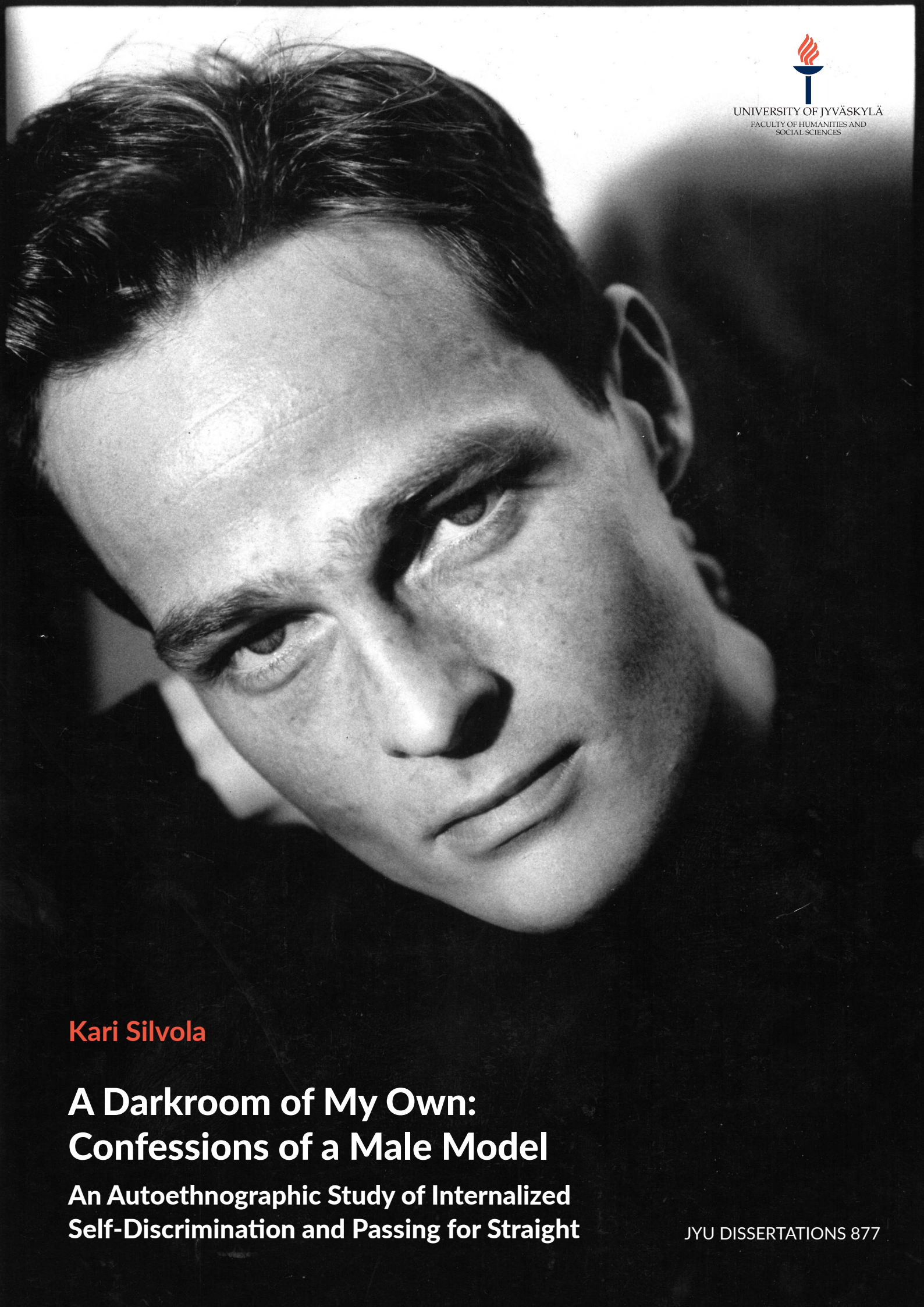

UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Kari Silvola

A Darkroom of My Own: Confessions of a Male Model

An Autoethnographic Study of Internalized Self-Discrimination and Passing for Straight

JYU DISSERTATIONS 877

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ABSTRACT

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A darkroom of my own: Confessions of a male model. An autoethnographic study of internalized self-discrimination and passing for straight
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This autobiographical and confessional creative writing article dissertation examines internalized self-discrimination and passing for straight. I explore these themes through a metaphor I have developed, which I call *confessional sfumato*. It is both a writer's and a researcher's tool – a writing technique for depicting life in the closet and investigating closet epistemological questions. My work is a consciously political and interpersonally egalitarian study of the blooming and flourishing of forbidden and rejected sexuality, as well as the construction of sexual identity within a heteronormative culture. The darkroom of my own serves as a metaphorical space: it is the closet, a photographic darkroom, a dimly lit room in a gay club, a confessional booth, and a writer's sanctuary. It represents a cultural space where knowledge and truths are most accessible to those who have historically, socially, and culturally inhabited such spaces and circumstances. My darkroom is also a particular mode of knowledge acquisition – one profoundly shaped by the closet itself. Those who have grown up and lived within the confines of the closet develop a unique epistemology rooted in personal experience. My theories of the *unintentional flicker of the eye* and the *epistemological trinity of the closet* are examples of such closet epistemological knowledge. In the three articles and the introductory chapter, I investigate how the metaphor of the closet, along with its inherent secrecy and disclosure, shapes knowledge, understanding, and power dynamics related to sexuality. I explore passing phenomenon autobiographically in cultural representations in Finland during the economic recession of the early 1990s. Reminiscence and memory work are central to my research as I closely and against the grain analyze my modeling images published in magazines and advertisements from 1990 to 1995, where I acted the role of heteronormative ideal of masculinity. These images create an ambivalent space between concealing and revealing, between knowing and not knowing, as I reflect on what I am presenting or who I am representing in these images as a homosexual male model. I designate the *male model's double paradox*: they were stereotypically 'known' to be gay, yet they were 'seen' as straight. The typical question in autobiographical work 'Who am I?' I have reformulated into 'How am I in the world?' and 'How is the world in me?'

Keywords: creative writing, autoethnography, autobiography, confession, internalized self-discrimination, sexuality, gay, closet, passing, gaydar, sfumato, affect

TIIVISTELMÄ (ABSTRACT IN FINNISH)

Silvola, Kari
Oma pimiöni: Miesmallin tunnustukset. Autoetnografinen tutkimus sisäistetystä itsesyrjinnästä ja läpimenosta heterona.
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Tämän artikkelimuotoisen, omaelämäkerrallisen ja tunnustuksellisen luovan kirjoittamisen väitöskirjan aiheena on sisäistynyt itsesyrjintä ja läpimeno heterona. Kuvaan ja tutkin niitä luomallani kirjoittamisen metaforalla, jonka nimeän *tunnustukselliseksi sfumatoksi*. Se on kirjoittajan ja tutkijan työkalu, kirjoitustekniikka, kaappielämän kuvaamiseen ja kaapinepistemologisten kysymysten tutkimiseen. Väitöskirjani on tietoisesti poliittinen ja ihmistenvälistä yhdenvertaisuutta edistämään pyrkivä tutkimus kielletyn ja torjutun seksuaalisuuden synnystä ja kukoistuksesta sekä seksuaalisen identiteetin rakentumisesta heteronormatiivisessa kulttuurissa. Minun pimiöni on kaappi, valokuvauslaboratorion pimiö, homoklubin pimeä huone, rippituoli ja kirjoituskammio. Se on kulttuurinen tila, jossa tietynlaista tietoa tietyistä tosiasioista voi olla eniten heillä, jotka ovat historiallisesti, sosiaalisesti ja kulttuurisesti eläneet niissä tiloissa ja olosuhteissa. Kyse on erityisestä tavasta hankkia tietoa, jota kaappi muokkaa syvällisesti, kun kaapissa kasvaneet ja eläneet kerryttävät tietoa omakohtaisen kokemuksen kautta. Teoriani *tahattomasta silmän välähdyksestä* sekä *kaapin epistemologisesta kolmiyhteydestä* ovat tällaista kaapinepistemologista tietoa. Keskityn kolmessa artikkelissa ja johdantoluvussa kaapin epistemologiaan ja tutkin erityisesti sitä, miten kaapin metafora ja siihen liittyvä salailu ja paljastuminen muokkaavat seksuaalisuuteen liittyvää tietoa, ymmärrystä ja valta-asetelmia. Tutkin *läpimenoa* omaelämäkerrallisesti kulttuurisissa representaatioissa Suomessa 1990-luvun alun laman aikana. Muistelu ja muistityö ovat keskeinen osa tutkimustani, kun katson läheltä ja vastakarvaan lehdissä ja mainoksissa 1990–1995 julkaistuja mallikuviani, joissa olen näytellyt heteronormatiivista ideaalimaskuliinisuutta. Kuvat muodostavat ambivalentin tilan salaamisen ja tietämisen, tietämisen ja ei-tietämisen välille, kun pohdin homoseksuaalina miesmallina, mitä *esitän* tai ketä *edustan* kuvissa. Osoitan tutkimuksessani kaapinepistemologisen railon: 1990-luvun Suomessa miesmallit ”tiedettiin” homoiksi, vaikka kuvissa heitä ”katsottiin” heteroina. Omaelämäkerroille tyypillisen kysymyksen ”kuka minä pohjimmiltani olen?” olen uudistanut muotoon ”miten minä olen maailmassa?” ja ”miten maailma on minussa?”

Avainsanat: luova kirjoittaminen, autoetnografia, omaelämäkerta, tunnustus, sisäistynyt itsesyrjintä, seksuaalisuus, homo, kaappi, läpimeno, homotutka, sfumato, affekti

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FEATURED PUBLICATIONS

I Silvola, Kari (2022). "My Lies and Liaisons with Marilyn" An Autofictional Representation of the Downtown Man, a Finnish Successor to the Marlboro Man in the Early 1990s. SQS Vol 16, Nro 2 (2022), pp. 1–18. https://doi.org/10.23980/sqs.125612; https://journal.fi/sqs/article/view/125612

II Silvola, Kari (2023). A counter-story to the rags-to-riches narrative: A Finnish male model wearing hobo style during the deep depression in the age of AIDS. Critical Studies in Men's Fashion, Special Issue: Fashion in the Age of AIDS, 10:1, pp. 93–109, https://doi.org/10.1386/csmf_00068_1

III Silvola, Kari (2025). A Male Model's Autoethnographic Writing and Queer-Theoretical Screening of gAIdar: Can Artificial Intelligence Predict Sexual Orientation, or is the Question of 'Gay or Straight' Wrong? Manuscript.

PREFACE

My fingers on the keys, a blank screen in front of me, a coffee stain spreading across the page of a notebook. 'Start from the beginning,' I whisper myself. But how do one start from the beginning, elegantly, when the main work itself starts with the words 'it all began sometime in 1977'? Therefore, I will jump to somewhere in the middle, about four years ago. To a time when I started my doctoral studies in a PhD program in the fall of 2020. Around the same time, our title changed: we transitioned from postgraduate students to doctoral researchers. By the following year, I was already a part-time university teacher in creative writing, thanks to my then-supervisor and great supporter, University Lecturer Risto Niemi-Pynttäri, who deputed Postdoctoral Researcher Karoliina Maanmieli and me with designing and teaching a creativity course for the creative writing program. As I write this, the popular course is about to take place for the fifth time in few weeks.

Teaching and lecturing have accompanied me throughout the dissertation process. In 2021–2022, I completed university pedagogical studies (25 credits), and next month (February 2025), I will continue my pedagogical studies with a feminist pedagogy course of the Hilma network. My research field has intersected with courses I designed and taught in the spring of 2022, such as *Encountering the Diversity of Sexuality and Gender in Writing Spaces: Inclusion and Intersectional Theory*, for students at the Department of Music, Art, and Cultural Studies, and lectures on Finnish LGBTQ+ history for second-year high school students across Finland as part of the Friends of Queer History association's *Bring a Researcher to School* project funded by the Kone Foundation. Other significant and memorable experiences include guest lectures in Poznań, Poland, at Adam Mickiewicz University in 2022, and in Greifswald, Germany, at the University of Greifswald in 2024, on contemporary Finnish literature.

I cannot thank my primary supervisor, Professor Sanna Karkulehto, enough for guiding my work to this point; without her, I would not be writing this preface. Thank you, Sanna, for your insightful, precise, and thorough feedback, but especially for instilling confidence in my work and its significance, for granting me the freedom to experiment, for your firmness in bringing the work back on track when it wandered off course, and for encouraging me to strive for my best. Above all, I thank you for your friendship. I am equally grateful to my second supervisor, Reader Kate North from Cardiff Metropolitan University. Our friendship began at the European Association of Creative Writing Programmes (EACWP) symposium in Barcelona in 2019. Although I chose the University of Jyväskylä's PhD program in creative writing over yours in Cardiff, I managed to persuade you to become my co-supervisor. Your invaluable insights into creative writing and research in the UK have guided me in considering an Anglo-American trajectory for my career, should I pursue an international path.

A very special thanks go to the pre-examiners of my dissertation, Dean Graeme Harper and Professor Tony E. Adams, for their expert and encouraging feedback, and particularly to Professor Adams for agreeing to serve as my

opponent. Your weighty and appreciative words strengthen and inspire my belief that I can still aspire to some role in the academic world. To Professor Adams, I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude. I became acquainted with his research during my master's thesis in 2017 when I discovered his widely acclaimed master's thesis-turned-book, *Narrating the Closet* (2011). This work has shone brightly as a guiding star throughout my master's and doctoral research. It also led me to autoethnography. My other pre-examiner, Dean Graeme Harper, deserves equal recognition. His contributions to creative writing research and the *Great Writing* conference he organizes have inspired and guided me in the enchanting world of creative writing. My heartfelt thanks also go to Postdoctoral Researcher Karoliina Maanmieli and Associate Professor Hannele Harjunen for agreeing to serve on the evaluation committee for my dissertation, as well as Professors Mikko Keskinen, Sanna Karkulehto, and Tuija Saresma, Associate Professor Sami Sjöberg, and Senior Lecturer Juri Joensuu, who have advanced my dissertation by discussing and providing feedback on my article manuscripts during their doctoral seminars, and Dr. Kate Sotejeff-Wilson, who meticulously conducted the language check of all my dissertation articles and this summary section. A special thanks is also owed to the publication services of the Open Science Centre at the University of Jyväskylä and particularly to Editor Timo Hautala. Without Timo's tangible support, this dissertation would not have seen the light of day.

Completing a dissertation is, for the most part, a solitary endeavor. I have written this research in the spirit of the humanities tradition, alone, though my work has a significant number of contributors, each of whom I am indebted to, though there isn't enough space to mention everyone individually. At this point, I want to rewind time – not all the way to the beginning, but back to when I started my studies in comparative literature at the University of Turku. I never quite found my place there, so when a summer journalist position turned into a permanent one at Finland's largest weekly magazine, leaving my studies unfinished was an easy decision. This marked the beginning of a 20-year career in media, during which I achieved several national records in magazine publishing. When I returned to the University of Turku in 2014 to resume my unfinished literature studies, I finally found my place – in the creative writing program. My deepest gratitude goes to University Lecturer Nina Repo, Dramaturge Satu Rasila, and the other excellent writing instructors who supported and encouraged me: Taina Kuuskorpi, Emilia Karjula, Jyrki Kiiskinen, Päivi Kosonen, and Petri Tamminen. However, even greater and warmer thanks go to my fellow creative writing students. Our small, tightly welded circle formed a spiritual home and a haven for writing that I never thought I would find at a university.

In 2017, I transitioned to the University of Jyväskylä with all my study credits to complete my advanced studies and my master's thesis in the creative writing program. Although I left behind indispensable teachers and beloved peers in Turku, I was fortunate to be welcomed by University Lecturer Risto Niemi-Pynttäri and later Professor Sanna Karkulehto. Their support has been invaluable.

In four years as a doctoral researcher, there have been many turning points and milestones, but three stand out above the rest. In the spring of 2022, I received a working grant from the Central Finland Fund of the Finnish Cultural Foundation. I cannot emphasize enough the encouragement this provided for completing my dissertation: such a prestigious entity believes in my research project! Until then, doubts that had constantly plagued me about the significance of my work began to dissipate. The second significant boost came at the beginning of 2023, when my first dissertation article was published in *SQS Journal* on the last day of 2022. Renowned film scholar Professor Richard Dyer sent me personal feedback about the article: 'It is a fascinating piece, and I have never seen the topic of masculine imagery approached in this way, and indeed never seen the topics of the work of the model and the relation between homosexual actor and heterosexual role addressed at all. You weave together such complex issues so deftly and elegantly – this is an essay that deserves to be more widely seen.' Feedback from such a highly respected and admired scholar gave me further confidence in myself and my work. The third major milestone came soon after when Fulbright Finland awarded me a Fulbright Finland Travel Grant for Research Collaboration for 2023 for a research visit and collaboration at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and archival research at Tom's House, maintained by the Tom of Finland Foundation in Echo Park, Los Angeles. In the United States, I experienced many moments that confirmed the words of my friend Professor Nicholas Boston from The City University of New York: 'Kari, you do realize that as a Fulbright scholar, you're now on the academic radar.' Being a 'Fulbrighter' attracted attention and made a good impression wherever I went. Warmest thanks also go to the Oskar Öflunds Stiftelse sr, the Finnish Museum of Photography, the Börje and Dagmar Söderholm Fund, the Jyväskylä Association of Scientists (JYTTE), and the Department of Music, Art, and Cultural Studies at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Jyväskylä, for their financial support of my research.

The importance of my international networks cannot be understated either. I began building them during my master's studies in 2018, and to date, I have presented at 14 international conferences and symposiums: including at Linnaeus University in Växjö, the EACWP in Barcelona, NAWE in York, Great Writing in London, ICAE in Bristol, and IAANI in St. Pete Beach. These conferences have constituted intellectual home for me – space where I have participated, presented, chaired sessions, and connected with numerous researchers, writers, and university educators in the field.

At its best, writing a dissertation has not felt like work but rather like the purpose of life itself. Fortunately, I have been surrounded by people who have reminded me that there is life beyond dissertation research, and that too is meaningful. I want to thank all of you whom I have had the privilege to meet, whether within the academic world or outside of it, and who have inspired me with your work and personality: Antu Sorainen, Lucy Windgridge, Carolyn Ellis, Bryant Keith Alexander, Daniel X. Harris, Stacy Holman-Jones, Mika Hallila, Christa Welsh, Chris Saunders, Marshall Moore, Olli Stålström, Laura Hollsten, Durk Dehner, and Sari Mäki-Penttilä. Each of you, in your own way, has

contributed to my dissertation project, providing inspiration, support or encouragement during difficult moments and sharing joy with me in moments of triumph. During the spring semester of 2024, I worked as a project researcher in our department and was physically present at Educa in Seminar hills. A heartfelt thank you for the best lunch discussions and laughter in the break room to the incredible literature and creative writing team: Mikko Keskinen, Sanna Karkulehto, Sami Sjöberg, Juri Joensuu, Mika Hallila, Kaisa Ahvenjärvi, Karoliina Maanmieli, Heta Marttinen, Ate Tervonen, and Jani Tanskanen.

Lastly, my deepest and most special thanks go to my partner, Rudolph Stewart, who has been by my side like a rock, someone I can always and have often leaned on during this process. I also thank my sister-in-law, Professor Dianne Stewart, for her emotional support and practical assistance at various stages of my journey toward a doctorate. Above all, my greatest thanks go to my mother, with whom I get to share the achievement of this milestone.

In Jyväskylä on the 2nd of January 2025,
Kari Silvola

CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION

It all started with a dream sometime in 1977. I had reached pre-puberty, and my sexuality was awakening to a new phase. When I went to bed the night before, I had no idea that I would fall ill in the night and this dissertation project would begin. I remember the dream vividly. I am in the shower in the school gym with my PE teacher. A sturdy and muscular man stands behind me and wraps his strong arms around me. The firm muscles of his forearms bulge wetly, pale blood vessels can be seen through the skin, golden hairs glisten. He squeezes hard, but not enough. Hot water splashes over us, droplets bounce off us and splatter on the bright white, sterile tiles. The gray floor beneath my feet is clammy. I close my eyes. I am enveloped in a sense of happiness I have never experienced before. I never even imagined such a thing could exist. In the morning, the haze of sleep drifts slowly, lingering, like steam from a bathroom mirror after a shower. My reflection in the mirror is hazy, featureless. Gradually, it sharpens into a ruthlessly precise image I'd rather not see. My lust of flesh turns into a feeling of sickness. There is no medicine, therapy, surgery, or any other treatment for my illness, only denial, concealment, and attempts to heal. There is not even pain relief. I know that. I still carry its traces in my skin, still feel it in my bones. I was ill for four years, until June 26, 1981.[1] (Silvola 2020A, 76; 2020B, 19.)

A Darkroom of My Own (Oma pimiö) is an autoethnographic creative writing dissertation that is consciously political and aims to promote gender and sexual equality. *A Darkroom of my Own* is a 'hidden person's' (Juvonen 2002, 264) internal 'counter-narrative' (ibid., 220) about the blooming and flourishing of forbidden and rejected sexuality and the construction of sexual identity in a heteronormative culture. In her work *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), literary scholar and queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes how the epistemic crisis that began at the turn of the last century centers on the definition of male sexuality and the division of men as homosexual or heterosexual. She argues that cultural 'normality' could not be produced without concepts of the metaphorical 'closet,' 'living in the closet' and the 'epistemologies of the closet.' My darkroom is a closet, a darkroom in a photo lab, a darkroom in a gay club, a confessional

[1] In Finland homosexuality was removed from the classification of diseases by a decision of the Finnish National Board of Health.

booth, and a writing sanctum. It is a cultural canopy and 'standpoint' (Gamson 2000, 351) where certain kinds of knowledge or knowledge of certain facts can only or best be held by individuals in historically and culturally situated social positions (Harding 1991, 2015). It is a particular way of acquiring knowledge, which the closet shapes profoundly so that only those cultivated in the closet can achieve that knowledge through first-hand experience (see John 2023, 89). This space has been carved out for me by my predecessors – writers, activists, artists, scientists, and ordinary gay men – living their lives, surviving, and sometimes even dying. It is a space of research and writing that I have thus been able to inherit (Silvola 2020A, 75).

I focus on the epistemology of the closet, specifically investigating how the metaphor of the closet and its associated secrecy and revelation shape knowledge, understanding, and power dynamics around sexuality. My research examines the phenomenon of *passing for straight*, which I consider a manifestation of internalized self-discrimination in Finland during the early 1990s recession. I assay passing autobiographically in cultural representations,[2] i.e., in advertising and fashion images in which I pose between 1990 and 1995. The thematic of passing manifests itself in a very particular way in my performances, presentations, and acts in front of the camera. Autobiographical reminiscence is a central part of the analysis of my images: I zoom in on my model images published on magazines and advertisement, in which I have practically played out heteronormative ideal masculinity. There is concrete evidence of these performances left, photographs. They occupy an ambivalent space between concealment and knowing, between knowing and not knowing, as I reflect on what or whom I *represent* or only *present* as a model in the images, *how* I perform, and whether I look gay or straight, whether I pass for straight or not.

'Gay or straight?' is a question that has been asked and probed by community, society, and culture in the West throughout the last century, and is still being questioned, interrogated, monitored, and controlled in most countries of the world. I suspect, however, that the whole question is misplaced. The answer to the question 'gay or straight?' is not as relevant to my research as the asking of it. What is relevant is the epistemological construct that is erected on the basis of that question. One of its outputs is the metaphorical closet, the mental and social situation in which a person conceals their sexual orientation or gender identity. Although the closet has been studied relatively extensively in gender, gay, queer, and feminist studies, sociology and psychology, and elsewhere (e.g., Foucault 1978; Cass 1979; Rubin 1984; Isay 1989; Sedgwick 1990; Butler 1990; Halperin 1990, 2012; Plummer 1995; Barsani 1995; Warner 1999), in my dissertation I want to probe passing and internalized self-discrimination associated with it more deeply as *a narrative of sexuality* that defines the self.

In my research, the narrative of sexuality is related to *truth about the self* (Foucault 1978), which leads to the philosophical question of truth. I exclude the

[2] I understand representation in line with Stuart Hall's definition. Hall (2013, p. 15) takes a constructionist approach to representation as the production of meaning through language, signs, and images. Therefore, the male figure I present in the image represents and stands for a Finnish man.

philosophical approach and concentrate to the epistemology of the closet, its truths and lies. My orientation is queer, as I explore the epistemological questions of the closet through the experience of one observer, my own. In the photographs, I pose for the camera in the closet, acting straight, sometimes succeeding, sometimes failing. But I am not looking for an answer to the typical autobiographical question, 'who am I [gay or straight]?'

Instead, I ask in my research, 'how am I in the world?' and in response, 'how is the world in me?' The follow-up questions are, 'what are the narratives about my sexuality?' and 'how do I narrate it?' The questions I start with arise from the closet: 'How did I play straight on camera when I was in the closet?' and 'what emotions did that act evoke?'

In all three of my peer-reviewed articles (Silvola 2022, 2023, forthcoming 2025), I answer these questions from the focus point of the photographic studio, where, as a homosexual, I have tried to represent the prevailing ideal of masculinity. At the same time, I have faced the pressure of social norms and cultural ideals, as well as inner experience. I start from my experiences of shooting and posing in front of the camera and the emotions associated with this. I proceed from memories to visual analysis and interpretation of the images, as well as reflections on the friction between personal experiences and cultural boundary conditions. The memories, analyses, and reflections form *a narrative of my sexuality* that does not tell an absolute truth about myself, but a *situational, contextual,* and *unfinished* portrait of me. As I describe in my articles, my successes in representing this ideal range from highly popularized images to unpublished ones; in all the images queer gaze reveals inconsistences that violate the heteronormative ideal of masculinity as defined at the time.

The theoretical concepts on which I base my research are the metaphorical closet, passing, coming out, confession, photograph, and affect. I explore passing both experientially in autobiography and representationally in photography. I ponder the epistemological evidential power of the photograph and its ability to reveal or conceal sexual information, and its role in the construction of epistemology of the closet and the cultural self-understanding. The theoretical starting point of my research stems from the narration of sexuality in the form of confession. According to Sedgwick (1990, 3–4), coming out, or the act of confession, enables gay people to performatively construct an open gay identity through speech and action. In philosopher Michel Foucault's (see Dreyfus & Rabinow 1983; Hekanaho 2006) archaeology of knowledge and genealogy, confessional discourse is central to the construction of Western subjectivity. In his introduction to *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1978/1999) presents confession as discursive means of producing a 'truth' that was interpreted as fundamentally sexual in nature. Confession is an introspective act in which Western subjects examine their own desires, feelings, and ideas and describe them to an interpretive authority. The common thread of my research runs through Foucault's idea of the braid between *telling the truth about sexuality* and telling the *true self*: we seek to tell the truth about our sexuality because we believe it tells the *truth about ourselves*. However, I am critical of the 'true self' based on the narration of sexuality as an overly simplistic account of reality and consider

the idea of sexuality as the 'ultimate truth about human beings' to be too narrow (see Pakkanen 2007, 15). I problematize the 'illusion of self that reveals the true self' (see Karkulehto 2007, 132).

A Darkroom of My Own is a *confessional study*. Since the thirteenth century, when the Roman Catholic Church began requiring annual confession of sin from believers, confession has been a central form of self-examination in Western cultures; from the early Romantics to the present, confession has become the dominant form of self-expression, testifying in particular to personal truth, to selfhood. In an increasingly secular culture, self-truth and self-telling have become measures of authenticity, and confession has become a necessary act through which we reveal our most intimate self in order to come to know ourselves. (Brooks 2000, 9.) Confessional discourse is the prototype for the modern form of writing we call autobiography (Brooks 2000, 102). Augustine's *Confessiones* (397–398) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Les Confessions* (1770) are classic examples. I write my confessions in a contemporary culture saturated with revelations, where there has been a revolution in *the narrative of the self.* In the age of the attention economy and neoliberal self-aggrandizement, everything possible has already been exposed, and the confession has become both capital and an object of consumption for a market that exploits the personal. While the tradition of confessional literature is characterized by the narration of one's life as a history of 'becoming me' and the constant dissection of one's own actions, emotions and motives (Julien 2002, 18–22), I experiment with how to write and what new knowledge to produce by writing in a situation and time when the basis of the self is a fragmented, contradictory, and ever-changing process.

A Darkroom of My Own is a study in creative writing with a twofold aim: to explore, with a queer approach, the phenomenon of passing and internalized self-discrimination through the methods of practice-led creative writing research (Harper 2023, Kroll & Harper 2013) and autoethnographic writing, and to create a writing metaphor, the *confessional sfumato*, to explore that phenomenon. Autoethnographic writing produces research material, which I fractionate from the rest of the text in my dissertation by italics. It consists of extracts from my autobiography in progress, *Confessions of a Male Model (*see Chang 2016, 89, 108).

I frame my research methodology within the framework of *practice-led creative writing research*, where creative practice plays a significant role (Harper 2023, 34) and is always at the center of the research, even if the research otherwise involves critical or theoretical reflection (Kroll & Harper 2013, 2). Research on creative writing has the potential to generate new writing practices and creative writing itself can generate new knowledge (Kroll & Harper 2013, 1). In the articles presented here and in the writing practices behind them, I incorporate practice-led creative writing research and creative writing into autoethnographic research and writing. These two research traditions overlap in my autobiographical writing, the framework of which practice-led creative writing research conditions creativity, while autoethnography requires the observation of the self through cultural lenses. In autoethnographic writing, my personal self and culture interact and my cultural representations are mediated through language, history and ethnographic explanation (Ellis, Bochner 2000, 742) as I explore the friction

between myself and culture. From the autoethnographic narrators, I select and allow the 'confessing self' to speak out (Pelias 2019, 25–27).

I write in *my darkroom* and the product of my writing is a portrait, *Confessions of a Male Model*. I have been writing it for ten years, since 2014, as part of my creative writing studies at the University of Turku (2014–2017) and the University of Jyväskylä (2017–2024). Excerpts from this autobiography, which combines drama and poetry with prose form, have been published in my master's thesis *In Search of a Lost Voice: Shaking Boarders, False Memories and Fictional True Stories* (*Kadonnutta ääntä etsimässä eli rajatapauksia, valemuistoja ja fiktiivisiä tositarinoita* 2020), in all three peer-reviewed articles and the introductory section of this dissertation (italicized text sections). I have not written the work for publication, nor do I plan to offer it for publication in the future; rather, writing the autobiography has served as a writing test lab, where I have been able to freely and creatively experiment with how to write a portrait of a person grown up in a closet. I apply to its writing a metaphor for writing that I have developed, which I have named *confessional sfumato.* In developing the metaphor, I have borrowed the name from the art of painting, where the Italian term for fog refers to the blurring of contours and the soft slide from shadow to light.[3] The Renaissance artist Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) is known for his artistic use of *smog*. Whereas the painting technique familiar from the Mona Lisa, for example, blurs contours with numerous brushstrokes and thin layers of paint in a soft and seamless way, creating soft slides, I wanted to develop a technique and metaphor for writing to describe the same effect. The aim of my metaphor for writing is to describe the fragmentary and unfinished nature of the portrait. In a portrait written with a *confessional sfumato*, information accumulates in layers, but the paint in my image does not have time to dry before another layer of paint is applied, nor is the portrait complete. Instead, the image is always taking shape. First, I explore the metaphor of sliding from shadow to light, and second, describe the sliding of cultural boundaries, ideologies, collective values, attitudes, and affects into invisibility as they become internalized into the subject's self and self-narrative. Third, I show how the metaphor, borrowed from the painting technique, describes well the creation, writing, and processing of a contradictory, complex, and multilayered portrait. *The male model* is Caucasian, Nordic, highly educated, and socially privileged, yet marginalized in many ways. I developed the *confessional sfumato* metaphor as a tool for subtle and profound intersectional (Crenshaw 1989) analysis to reveal the multiple layers, the complexity and, above all, the contradictions of the self. It makes it possible to distinguish and explore with ever greater precision, ever more personally, and with ever more truthfulness the layers, intersections, and relations between the various elements.

My methodology is a set of my research methods and approaches, and at the same time it is a framework for generating research material. *A Darkroom of*

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[3] Ital. *sfumato* = smoky; *fumo* = smoke. Sfumato is achieved in oil painting technique by blurring contours and blending colors gently so that colors and tones blend together without clearly visible boundaries, and by applying several thin layers of paint. Helsinki Term Bank for the Arts and Sciences. https://tieteentermipankki.fi/wiki/Taidehistoria:sfumato Accessed October 8, 2024.

My Own: Confessions of a Male Model is based on photographs and an autoethnographic text, which I write based on my images and the memories and reminiscences I have made around them. I present excerpts from my material, the *Confessions of a Male Model,* both in my three research articles and in this dissertation introduction.

In addition to the autoethnographic text, the research material consists of eleven of my fashion and advertising photos published in various magazines and advertising campaigns in the 1990s. All of the images date from the 1990–1995 recession in Finland, the peak years of my 25-year modeling career (see Uitto 2016). In the images, I aim to represent the ideal masculinity of the era, or the ideals of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987, 1995; Jokinen 2000; Silvola 2022). The model's face combines several dimensions: body, experiences, emotions, representation, posing, and performance, the historical context of representation, and prevailing ideologies, discourses, and affects. My own experiences and memories of performing and posing in front of the camera as an ideal masculinity are not relevant to the interpretation of the images (Rossi 2009, 28), but they are primary and provide the only access to the event of performing that ideal, the act of passing. I examine my photographs with a queer approach, i.e., I look for cracks, gaps, inconsistencies, contradictions, paradoxes in them. I look at them against the grain and try to deconstruct the mechanisms, strategies, and systems that create and enable social, societal, and cultural hierarchies and value-laden practices (see Karkulehto 2011, 76–77).

The profession of a model offered me an alibi, a mask beneath which I could obsess over my reflection, much like the caricature of the vain gay man. A groomed, fashionable appearance was not only a skill demanded and spelled out in the fine print of my modeling contract but the center of gravity of my whole existence. Indeed, it was the only way I like most of the gay men was able to exist. We lived on the surface; our looks were all we had.

We had no shared narrative, not even words. We had no tales of movie nights, holiday trips or birthday parties with girlfriends, no celebrations of vows exchanged, or children born. Love stories were absent – neither blissful endings nor mournful departures graced our lives. We had fleeting, random, anonymous encounters in parks, in the dark rooms of clubs, and in the malodorous toilet booths of swimming halls. Our spaces were so cramped and cold and there was so incredibly little time that there was room only for our genitals to touch, for the clammy friction of cold skin against skin. Those were the spaces we had access to; those were the places we considered as our kingdom. We were paper dolls, mute and one-dimensional. The only expression of desire was through the act of looking – to watch but never touch. We couldn't feel the warmth of another's skin, couldn't sense the closeness of passionate breath by our ears. Life played out behind a dazzling shop window, while we stood outside in the dark, forever spectators.

In front of the camera, as I posed polished, I clung to the faintest glimmer of hope: perhaps one day, I would find my way out of darkness to the bright side. Until then, I let my imagination bloom, not dreaming of the window breaking open but being a phantom slipping elegantly through its glass. I tried to cope and pass as well as I could. I tried to survive and stay alive.

I have given my nine photographs to the deep neural networks and facial recognition algorithms of artificial intelligence for prediction: are they posed by a gay or straight person (see Wang & Kosinski 2018; Leuner 2018)?

In A Darkroom of My Own, there is an encounter between me and the scientific community and the wider audience, the culture. Having grown up in the margins and shadows of dominant cultural narratives, I am now participating in a debate about what we remember and what we forget. In this sense, cultural memory is political: it is, to quote Marita Sturken (1997, 1–2), a scholar of visual culture and cultural memory, 'a field of cultural negotiation in which different stories struggle for a place in history.' In the Finnish language, the word *tunnustus* (confession) has a double meaning.[4] It refers both to the act of admitting or confessing something and to receiving recognition: confessing a sin, crime, or wrongdoing (or faith), or receiving recognition and appreciation for good work or performance. My dissertation is about both. On one hand, it's about admitting and recognizing, and on the other, about being admitted and recognized—that is, being seen and heard, and receiving acknowledgment for my work, when the past and the possible, history and hope, meet in our encounter. The imagined possible includes applying for a doctoral program and proposing my research topic, submitting my articles to journals and offering them for publication, and all those who supported my doctoral research with grants. And above all, if this dissertation is accepted in due course, our meeting will reward me with a doctorate in philosophy.

[4] The dictionary of standard Finnish compiled in the Institute for the Languages of Finland defines a confession as 1. for example, a confession of error or faith, or 2. a statement of thanks or appreciation given to someone for his or her work or other activities. https://www.kielitoimistonsanakirja.fi/#/tunnustus Accessed October 8, 2024.

2 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

I started thinking about the topic of my dissertation in the autumn of 2019, when I was finishing my autobiographical master's thesis (Silvola 2020A), the topic of which was *writing in the closet*. The most significant finding of my research was that the closet door is not open to everyone. To get into the closet, one must act straight, one must pass. As a natural continuum to my master's studies, the topic of my autobiographical dissertation was *passing for straight.* The term 'passing' is commonly used to refer to when a person successfully presents as something other than what they perceive themselves to be, and other people perceive the identity presented by the person passing as conforming to that identity (Kroeger 2003, 7–8). As I retrospectively went through the stages of my life, the periods and situations when I had been in the closet and had passed or at least tried to pass, one stage stood out above the rest: my modeling career.

I ended up reducing my long career to five years, a small slice of time that I now rewind in my memories like a slow-motion film, endlessly back and forth. Sometimes I stop the celluloid altogether, cutting and rearranging the frames. I choose the first half of the 1990s, the time when I took my first steps in my career and Finland plunged deeper into recession than at any time since the Second World War. Liz Tilberis, editor-in-chief of British Vogue, asked Peter Lindbergh to describe the 'new woman of the 90s' for the cover of the first issue of the decade, the January magazine. Peter said he couldn't do it with just one woman. The image of women had diversified. The iconic, black-and-white picture featured Cindy Crawford, Naomi Campbell, Linda Evangelista, Christy Turlington, and Tatyana Patitz. The true supermodels had been born.

At the same time, waves of bankruptcy and streams of unemployment were sweeping across Finland. How many of us young adults jumped headlong into that world of images woven from imagination? People queued up at modeling agencies, even though the number of job opportunities and the fees were dwindling. The male image was also in a state of flux. The 'new man of the 90s' was a softy, the offspring of a hero hardened by work and war. The silky-faced, Hollywood-golden-age movie star look that felt safe and trusted in a world that had become insecure. That was my chance. I took it. I became the 'face.'

My past is a photograph: stagnant, fragile, and yet full of life. The 1990s were a time when photography was something real, something tangible. Photoshop and beauty

filters had not yet captured us in their digital delusion. Almost everything was real. A particular light would hit my face at a certain angle and that was it. The photos were taken in the studio, not on a computer screen. The image lived in the moment, it was born from the light and died with it.

I remember the light, dazzlingly bright and burning. It stings my eyes like the golden barrettes of Iocaste. I'm on my knees in the studio, against a white backdrop, with a black barrel, a movie spotlight, floating above me. The rays that fall directly on my face are more than just light. They are at once an accusation and a promise, they are about to reveal the truth. I want and don't want to face it, yet I want to hide from it. How to be in the light without being exposed? 'Bend your hips more,' the photographer says, but how can I. My neck hurts, the light has blinded me, and all I can do is blink. The camera rolls over me and slams me to the floor.

That light hurt. I was afraid of it. Later, when I saw the contact sheets, I witnessed what it had done to me. My cheekbones stood out like cliffs. The line of the jaw was not rounded by fat. And there it was, there was the angle they all were talking about. My shirt was hanging on a clothes hanger, my head was disproportionately large.

That picture defined me. It ended up on the cover of Paparazzi in 1992. That year became my year. It was busier than ever before. I managed to look like what they wanted to see; they didn't see me. They saw someone else, someone I didn't even know.

In August 1990, I signed a contract with Paparazzi, just months after the cover of Vogue. Supermodels were no longer just mannequins or clothes dolls, no, they were actors, businesswomen, entrepreneurs, who priced themselves sky-high. Linda Evangelista famously said, 'We don't get out of bed for less than $10,000.' What about me, how much did it take to get me up and out of the house? The basic fee for a photoshoot was 2,000 marks a day, 1,000 marks a fashion show day on a runway. The most I ever got was 5,000 marks for one shot, plus royalties...

Modeling is a women's arena. What about men? We are the extras. We are the shadows that the stars drag behind them. We are stereotypes, we are 'known' as gay. In my case, they're right. Andy wittily quips in his diary that all gay-looking male models are straight and straight-looking male models are gay.

Paparazzi, ModelBoom, Fondi, Helsinki's top model agencies and the whole scene. They are my theater and my stage where I can experiment, rehearse, and act out my role, for years. Oh, what is my role? To pass, of course. It is the role I have been forced to take on, the role they want me to play. And I act. As best as I can, because I hope that eventually I will change into who I play, and the pain will stop.

But even before that I had the idea of *sfumato* as a metaphor for narrating sexuality developed in the closet. It emerged while writing my master's thesis in spring 2019. On May 5, I was in the airport on my way to Barcelona for the European Association of Creative Writing Programmes symposium when I happened to read an article in *Helsingin Sanomat*, our national, most widely read newspaper, entitled 'Renaissance genius Lenonardo da Vinci did not hide his sexual orientation' (see Petäjä 2019). It said that Leonardo da Vinci's real-life character suffered a fate similar to that of the mythological heroes of antiquity, who were recycled in slightly different ways by each era. Truth is like chiaroscuro, the chiaroscuro of Leonardo da Vinci's paintings – a fading slide from shadow to light. It is constantly mixed with imagination, beliefs, and remembered perceptions. The fusion of sharp contours, *sfumato*, familiar from

Leonardo da Vinci's paintings, can also be seen as shaping a monotonous truth – including that of the artist himself. *Sfumato* required as many as fifty thin layers of paint. The technique gives the painting a curious appearance and the image, depth.

Sfumato, smokiness and colors blending seamlessly into one another, often also referred to as softening, get an association explosion going in my head around my presentation 'Rewriting identity,' which I am going to give to writers, researchers, and university teachers of creative writing. In particular, the blurring of contours through visible repetition, i.e., the swooping of numerous layers of paint, and the reproduction of Rousseau's 'twice-painted self' (see chapter 4) resonate powerfully, like epiphany. I am beginning to wonder whether *sfumato* might not be an excellent metaphor to describe the narration of sexuality in cases where sexuality is forbidden and thus hidden in the closet. The idea of softness, velvet-smooth skin against skin hidden in the dark, will not leave me alone. So, I decide to choose it as the subject of my dissertation and test my luck to see if it will get me into the doctoral program.

Relying on the idea proposed by ethnographer Heewon Chang (2008, 23) that the individual is the basic unit of culture and the individual self is part of the cultural community, I can assume that my subjective experiences of passing have a cultural significance in themselves. But as a fashion model, passing has specific additional layers beyond mere subjective experience, which justifies its selection as a research object. As a professional fashion model, I was in front of the camera physically and bodily, simultaneously an active agent and the passive object of gazes from several directions, an object at the intersection of the private and the public, the self and cultural perceptions, expectations, ideals and the gaze. Even being selected for the shoot was proof that I could convince the client of my ability to present an ideal masculinity, to pass, not only in his eyes but under the evaluative gaze of a wide audience. Second, my images were published, then recorded and stored in our cultural memory and its mosaic of images in tiny bits and pieces and have thus contributed to the way we perceive that ideal. Third, in the early 1990s Photoshop was not yet in use in photography, let alone today's AI-based image editing applications. The photographer had lenses, lighting, staging, and camera angles at their disposal. During development, the contrasts of the image could be adjusted. Therefore, the images carried more evidential weight of the 'real world' compared to today's images, where for years, Photoshop has been used to lengthen legs, narrow waists, widen jawlines, enlarge eyes and mouths, lift cheekbones, and smoothen skin. Modern algorithms have now completely detached the image from its object, the subject.

It all starts when I dig out a big cardboard box from the back of the cupboard in my office. It's been lurking forgotten in the darkest corner of my study since we moved in, untouched and full of disorder, full of the life that once was. Inside are photographs and magazine clippings from my modeling career, topped by a Paparazzi model folder. It's a hefty 33 x 26.6 centimeters and heavy. The client, whether a fashion editor, advertising agency AD, photographer, or photo editor, sent the model agency two copies of the photos after they were published. One stayed with the agency; the other was for me. In theory. In practice, they only submitted photos of big and important jobs. My images include

posters for advertising campaigns, catalogs, magazine covers. And then there's the impressive menu of the new restaurant chain. A multi-page magazine printed on thick cardboard, with a trumpet in my hands. I go through every picture, every clip from the past. There are hundreds of them even though most of my photographs are not in a box. All that's left of them are forgotten memories.

I divide the collection into three categories: full-length, half-length, and facial. I spend a whole day on the work. The next morning, I go to a local photography shop and ask for a loupe. They only have one model for sale, but fortunately it's a good and efficient Dörr LL-572. It allows me to view the pictures accurately. I can feel how looking at images with a loupe takes me emotionally back to the 1990s, when the loupe was a standard tool for everyone in the industry. When we wanted to see an image really clearly, we didn't magnify it with the swipe of a finger on our phone screen, we leaned over the desk and looked through the magnifying lens with one eye, very *close up.* Based on the review of the images, visual inspection and sorting, the poster for the launch campaign of the Downtown cigarette brand, in which I portray a *film noir*-style trumpet player, was chosen as my research subject for my first article (Silvola 2022). The poster is part of an international campaign and was displayed in airports, shipping terminals, tax-free shops, and on the pages of international style magazines. I saw it on Alexander Street in Helsinki, where it was hung on the door of a small tobacco shop, and on Union Street in photographer Lauri Eriksson's studio, where it was framed and hung in a prime spot on the wall. A closer examination of the image, and a queer-oriented reading of the counter-horizon applying visual theory and analysis, reveal the image to be fruitful for my research on the subject.

For my second article (Silvola 2023) I selected three photos by Marianna Hakka (now Wahlsten), which were made for the cover and main story of the men's issue of *City*.[5] Then the hottest urban culture tabloid in Finland, *City* was reminiscent of *The Village Voice*, an alternative magazine about culture that practiced provocative, anarchist journalism in New York from 1955 to 2017. However, the photos were never published and the reason was never explained. The nine photos in the third article (Silvola 2025) were chosen according to the instructions of AI researcher John Leuner (November 25, 2021, 10:09): 'The requirements are: should only be photos of yourself or someone who you have obtained written consent from; should only be one face in the picture; the person should be looking fairly directly at the camera, if the angles are too great it won't be processed.' Leuner agreed to run my images with a face recognition algorithm that predicts sexual orientation.

In the end, eleven autobiographical photographs were selected for the study. Their photographers represent the top of fashion and advertising photography in Finland at the time: Lauri Eriksson, Marianna Haka (now Wahlsten), Pauli Rouvinen, Riitta Sourander, Ralf Åström, Jeff Johnson, Juha

5 *City* was founded in 1986, with a peak circulation of over 1.1 million copies (in 1990 Finland's population was 5.029 million, Statistics Finland, undated), and was distributed free of charge at newsstands in major cities.

Reunanen. They have all given their consent to the use of the images for research purposes and to their publication in research journals. I suggest to the reader different ways of looking at their images and confronting one of the silenced topics of our culture, as previously forbidden and silenced sexuality is defined in ever new ways through its confrontation and verbalization.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 The photograph and representational instability

In a poster for the Downtown cigarette brand, I pose with a Borsalino felt hat on my head and a trumpet in my hands. In my article (Silvola 2022), I considered what kind of model could present, even if not necessarily represent, a Finnish man in recession-era Finland in the early 1990s. I recall that *before the actual shooting of the photo, there is already a test photo of the image, which I do a little earlier with Eriksson. It is styled by fashion editor Anne-Maria Ylitapio. Rikhard Luoto, creative director of the advertising agency designing the Downtown campaign, sees the photo in Eriksson's portfolio and says: 'This is the guy. I want him.'* The previous lines are a memory. Next, I draw on photographic research to reflect on the meanings attached to my photographs and the potential evidential power they encase.

When the camera shutter opens, the rays of light coming from me hit the film. A material trace is created when the radiation causes a change in the photosensitive chemicals in the celluloid. Janne Seppänen (2014, 4) calls this *the material core of* photography. A latent image is created, which needs further development to become a negative image that can be seen by the eye. The material properties of a photograph can be separated from the visual dimensions of the image. In the words of Roland Barthes (1985, 86; 1980, 126): 'It is often said that photography was invented by painters [...]. But I say: no, it was invented by chemists.' Photography is itself produced by material means: film, camera, and optics. The objects of the photograph – including me – are also material, because only objects that are capable of reflecting, refracting or emitting light can make an impression on film (Seppänen 2014, 4).

In the studios of Eriksson and many other photographers, I don't just pose in front of the camera. No, I am between the camera and the photographer's gaze. Between the subjective gaze and the larger, public gaze. At the focus point light is my main collaborator. Light. It is everything. Do you know what my most important skill is? It's not just posing, the

ability to move in front of the camera. No, it's the skill of knowing what my expressions look like in a still image. It's the ability to control every muscle in my face, to move them subtly, with millimeter precision. Finding just the right angle in relation to the camera and the light. It's the ability to know how my face refracts and reflects light. The shape of my face, the tone of my skin. It depends on them what kind of light is most favorable for them. I need to feel the light as if it were part of me. I study it from images. Through a magnifying glass I study every single picture, thirty-six frames of every contact sheet. I develop a new sense. You know? 'Feeling.' It's like my sixth sense. It guides me and my face almost automatically moves to the right angle with the light. It's a minuet, a quiet, precise, but graceful dance. The light and I, we know each other now. It surprises me, I am used to the dark, to walking on the shadowy side of the street (see Silvola 2022, 8).

Light not only reveals and exposes, but conceals and creates shadows; when particularly strong, it burns, erases from view. In the 1990s, a style came into fashion that used sharp and strong side lighting and, in what is known as cross-development, further increased contrast so that the image was partially 'blown out.' The biggest name of the style in Finland was the photographer Matti Hietala, whose fabulous studio Buenos Dias was one of the hottest spots in the industry. As trivial as it may seem, it is possible to make a fashion model's crooked nose, a matter of life and death, look straight with the right camera angle and lighting, as I show in my first article (Silvola 2022, 8.)

Seppänen (2014, 5) writes that a photograph is also a visual representation of the view in front of the camera. It is an image projected onto a two-dimensional plane according to the laws of optics. The materiality of a photograph contributes to why its pictoriality is so strongly perceived. The pictoriality, in turn, gives the material core a visual character. They are mutually constitutive. The material core is often seen as a guarantee of the authenticity of a photograph, distinguishing it from, for example, a painting or written language. Barthes (1985, 82; 1980, 120) formulates it as follows. Discourse combines signs, which of course have referents, but these referents may be 'imaginary,' as they most often are. Unlike these imitations, in photography I can never deny that the subject was there. So, we can doubt the veracity of the representational nature of the photographs taken of me, but the discussion becomes absurd if we do not assume that they are, at least in essence, traces of me recorded on camera and that I was present when the photograph was taken.

The trace left by light can be perceived in a semiotically oriented way with the concept of indexicality. Charles Sanders Peirce (1965, 137) characterizes indexicality as 'A sign is an Index when it is a fragment torn from an Object, both of whose existence form a single whole or part of it' and 'in so far as the Object has influenced the Index, it has something in common with the Object, and it is in this respect that it refers to the Object' (ibid., 143). Photographs, he says, are 'produced under conditions that physically force them to correspond to nature point by point' (ibid., 159). Emphasizing the causality between the sign and its object, Pierce's conception of indexicality is material to the core: the Index is a fragment *torn away* from the object as if they had previously been materially one. Seppänen (2014, 9) refutes this idea, since the photons coming from the object of the image, not the object itself, leave a trace on the film or on the diodes of the

image cell. Indexicality has been evaluated in terms of the meaning of a photograph (Snyder, Walsh 1975; Sonesson 2001; Hainge 2008; Winston, Tsang 2009). Göran Sonesson (2001, 36) emphasizes how 'a photograph should be understood as a direct and explicit trace left by photons, i.e., light from the objects of the photograph, and only as an indirect and abstract trace of the objects of the photograph themselves.' Sonesson (idem) sums this up in terms of signification: 'To understand the meaning of a photograph [...] we need not consider its indexicality. A photograph continues to convey meaning whether or not we know it is a photograph.'

Seppänen (2014, 9) notes that although Sonesson is right about the 'indirectness' of causal coupling, his argument does not negate the material nature of photographic indexicality, in which the energy quanta emitted from the subject of the photograph actually shape and leave a trace on the surface of the film or image cell. This link is not in any way 'abstract' but very material. And yet, it is precisely this evidential power and verifiability of the materiality of the photograph that culminates here in my analysis of the photographic evidence. In my article 'A counter-story to the rags-to-riches narrative: a Finnish male model wearing hobo style during the deep depression in the age of AIDS' (Silvola 2023, 101) I write: 'In the pictures, it is not me but the guy I would like to be. I have managed to present my ideal man in front of the camera. The stylist, make-up artist, and hairstylist and the assistant who held the reflector and above all, Marianna, have managed to construct me into a guy that I can imagine passing for straight.' The photo indexes are ripped from me, but they are not *me*. They are photon reflections of my performance.

I found it exciting to create images of myself. Extremely exciting. Every shoot was an opportunity to create a new version of myself. Every shoot was a new opportunity to see myself through different eyes. Every shoot felt like a new opportunity to be admired and loved. In every shoot there was a chance to be accepted. Every shoot was an opportunity to be someone else.

I believe that when people looked at the advertising and fashion photos of me, they did not think about the material dimensions of the images. They saw iconic, representational images, not 'indexical traces.' Operating at the base of the visual sensation was a tacit awareness that the objects photographed had left their mark on the film or on the sensor of the digital camera. Seppänen (2014, 10) states that the sense of indexicality is activated every time we think, consciously or unconsciously, about or interact with photographs. Since indexicality is a necessary condition for photographic representation, it serves as a basis for other semiotic functions of photography, such as iconicity. Indexicality sustains the notion that a photograph is a picture of something that was in front of the camera. This is a key feature of the agency of the material core of photography. It makes the object present in a different way than, for example, a written text or a drawing in which we are free to imagine the presence of the subject in ways limited only by our own imagination and capacity for envisioning. But it is equally possible to think of the material core as an affordance. The agency of the material core can be approached by considering the concept of representation. The root of the

concept is found in the Latin word *repraesentatio*, which refers to, among other things, depiction and presentation to the eye.

Representation began to refer to representing someone, being a stand-in for someone else, or being an image or form of something. Although representation is only one possible way of understanding representation, it is the most common today. (Knuuttila & Lehtinen 2010, 10–11.) The central dimension of representation relates to presence and absence. Tarja Knuuttila and Aki Petteri Lehtinen (ibid.) write how something absent is replaced by some new form of presence. The new present represents or presents the absent. Representation is thus traditionally understood as an object, state, or property whose function is to refer to something outside.

According to Gottfried Boehm (2012, 17–18), the problematic of presence-absence is activated in all visual representations. The person represented in the painting may be dead or elsewhere, but the painting provides a presence for the absent. 'The most beautiful feature of a painting is its ability to give a face to the absent and absent from us, and even to attach visibility and presence to his name' (ibid., 18). Seppänen (2014, 12) points out, however, that a photograph is a different pictorial representation than a painting or drawing because its material essence makes the subject of the image exceptionally present. When the photons emitted from the object draw their traces on a light-sensitive film or digital image cell, the trace can be rightly considered part of the object of the photograph. Even as the photons are reflected, a strong causal bond is formed between the object and the photograph. The photograph thus does not only conventionally refer to something outside itself as a pictorial representation, but the 'outside,' the self, is present in the photograph itself. According to Seppänen (2014, 12), the viewer of a photograph does not really know which they are experiencing: the subject of the photograph, me, or the representation of me. Seppänen describes the paradox in the following way. First, when the photograph is understood as a representation of an absent subject, the material core makes the subject very present. Second, when the photograph is understood as a present material trace of the object, the photograph as representation renders the object absent. For this reason, the photograph is always an unstable, restless representation in which presence and absence can alternate. The material core of the photograph, made possible by the camera and drawn by light, constantly poses problems for any attempt to define the photograph or its ways of producing meaning. The material core can support by its presence the meanings communicated visually by the photograph. At the same time, the presence-absence dynamic makes the representation itself contradictory: materiality and signification live in a state of tension.

The dynamics of presence and absence in photographic representation have their roots in history. The image can be seen as a visual *description* of its subject and as a *manifestation* of its subject. In the Eastern Orthodox Church, icons are seen as a kind of manifestation of the sacred, not so much as precise descriptions of saints or events, but as constructors of a sense of connection and presence between the perceiver of the image and the person or thing depicted. Instead, in the art that emerged under the influence of the Western Catholic Church, images

presented their subject in a naturalistic way. (Maynard 1983; 1997.) Seppänen (2014, 13) points out that Patrick Maynard's division should perhaps not be understood in absolute terms, since both approaches are in fact a solution to the same Old Testament prohibition of producing any images of the divine. The agency of the material core of the photograph thus boils down to its ability, through its manifesting function, to bring the photographic representation into an unstable state in which the object of the image is both present and absent.

It is possible that the paradoxicality and instability of the photographic representation described by Seppänen is the very crevice where my own representations of ideal masculinity as a homosexual male model and the public's interpretations of them may have been turned upside down. Questions about the materiality, indexicality, iconicity and representation of the photograph justify my research findings on the *double paradox of male models* (Silvola 2022). By this concept I mean how male models in the 1990s were 'known' to be homosexual, but their representations, images, were seen as representations of heterosexual ideal masculinity, i.e., they were identified but not recognized as homosexual. After the publication of my first article (Silvola 2022) and the introduction of the *double paradox of a male model*, I receive direct feedback from Richard Dyer: 'It is a fascinating piece and I have never seen the topic of masculine imagery approached in this way, and indeed never seen the topics of the work of the model and the relation between homosexual actor and heterosexual role addressed at all. You weave together such complex issues so deftly and elegantly' (January 8, 2022, 18:15).

Despite the instability of the representation of the photograph, I give the photos a testimonial value. They are capable of proving that I was present in a certain place at a certain time. The probative value of my appearance is already weaker. The make-up, the hair styled by the hairdresser, the lighting and angles created by the photographer and my own posing have built up the image of how I *look* in the pictures. The pictures do not tell or prove anything about who I *am,* but they are able to show how I *exist* at that moment in that situation. Even so – and although I use my images in my research both as partial evidence and as the basis for my own memoir, as a way of bringing memories to the surface – as *published* and *viewed* images they have become, incongruously, sedimented as small fragments in our cultural memory and self-understanding. Images published in different media are central to our understanding of culture because they reveal our collective desires, needs, and self-understandings. I am not asking whether my memories are true, whether this is what happened, but what the images and the memories and interpretations they evoke tell us about traces of the past in the present.

For me, remembering is a battle for existence, life. *A Darkroom of My Own* is an autopsy of a homosexual male model of the past. Like Anamarija Horvati (2021, 138), says it does not only present but produces memory. My photographs, taken and published three decades ago, contribute today to the debate about what we remember and what we forget. In this sense, cultural memory is political: it is, to quote Marita Sturken (1997, 1–2), 'a field of cultural negotiation in which different stories struggle for a place in history.' My *re-imaging* (Vänskä

2012) and revisionist repetition with a difference feel even sweeter in my second article, when *Critical Studies in Men's Fashion* publishes my images, which *City* magazine rejected without explanation thirty years earlier. Now one of the images ends up on the cover of the journal issue, when the editor, Professor Peter McNeil of the University of Technology Sydney, writes to me: 'Hey Kari, I think one of your images might be ideal for the cover of the journal. Would you need to seek permission for this? I like the first one where you look like a Jean Genet character' (March 1, 2022, 5:19).

3.2 Gaze

In visual studies, and especially in the critique of masculine power, the *gaze* is a recurrent motif. The objectifying gaze of our visual culture was written about as early as the 1970s by both film scholar Laura Mulvey and art historian John Berger. Although Mulvey and Berger start from very different points of view, both argue that in traditional Western visual culture the gaze is a central way of pointing out and producing gendered power relations. In these representations, the woman is the passive object of gaze and sexual desire, while the man is the active agent and bearer of gaze (Mulvey 1975, 11; Berger 1991, 45–64). The function of the motive for me worked in such a way that, in front of the camera, I aimed to meet the expectations and desires of the assumed viewer regarding the presentations of masculinity, rather than trying to be eye candy or please the viewer's eye, i.e., satisfy the gaze.

What makes the setting special is that as a man, my cultural place would be as the bearer of the gaze, not the object that I am as a photographic model. I am not forced to reproduce a subjugating gaze, but, in a feminist way, can take control of the gaze (see e.g., hooks 1992, 115–132) or detach it from the power structures of hegemonic masculinity (Silverman 1992, 125–156). I can look back in the image, as I do in most of my images, but what is particular is my inner uncertainty about whether I can credibly represent the dominant ideal of masculinity. Indeed, I did not feel that I conformed to it, because in 1990s Finland a gay man could not represent the *Finnish ordinary man* nor the *real man* (Silvola 2022), or indeed a man at all.

Film scholar and queer theorist Richard Dyer (1993, 111–112) writes about the representation of male sexuality in the media and especially in the image. Representations of male sexuality, he argues, are so common that they are like the air we breathe – we do not pay much attention to them. Instead, Dyer draws our attention to the penis-centricity of the representation of male sexuality and the endless list of objects that symbolize male sexuality, the penis: trains rushing into tunnels, cigarettes rising from lips, guns flaring from loins. Following Dyer, the visual interpretation of the Downtown man in my first article (Silvola 2022) even takes on a humorous and ironic tone. I hold in my hands a trumpet, an instrument symbolizing the penis. Before the shoot, I had never held a trumpet in my life, and I didn't know what the correct grip should be. I asked photographer Lauri Eriksson for advice, and he said: 'Roll it around in your

hands and hold it the way you feel best.' The campaign poster on which the photo was printed was a smash hit. After its publication, however, Eriksson received feedback that 'the model had obviously never held a trumpet in his hand in his life' (Silvola 2022, 12). In a double irony, I can interpret the image as meaning that I am so clumsy and incompetent in handling my 'penis' because gay men did not have one – at least not a big one – in the 1990s. In the other interpretation – even more ironic – I can question my capability as a gay man too and wonder why I am so clumsy at handling the penis – should a gay man be an experienced expert and master handler of not only his own johnnie, but of all johnnies?

Mulvey's theory has been criticized for being heteronormative (see, e.g., Evans & Gamman 1995). It is therefore important to remember that there is nothing 'natural' about the gaze in visual culture, but that it is primarily a question of what kind of places of looking, identification and desire are offered to whom (Koivunen 2006, 87–89). Dyer (1993, 119–120) presents a frequently recurring setting in film in which the hero, in soft glamour lighting, looks at the heroine without her knowledge, but the heroine rarely and at most glances back at the hero. According to Nancy Henley (1977), this is a convention of heterosexual gaze exchange, with men staring at women and women agreeing to be stared at. Dyer (1993, 119–120) writes that we are thus invited to identify with the heroine through male sexuality, despite the fact that we are not shown the outward signs of male arousal but are made to look at the screen and the woman. *The film noir* image of my first article (Silvola 2022), in which I play a jazz trumpeter, queers this setting of heterosexual gaze. In the image, I am looking directly at the camera, i.e., the viewer, from the level of the spectator. My face has the expression of a poker player, which is impossible to interpret. Next to me is a desk with a silver-framed picture of Marilyn Monroe. A classic wife's portrait on her husband's desk. Marilyn looks from the desk to the trumpeter, to me, up at the top, and much smaller and closed inside frames. The image challenges and turns around the setting of Henley's heterosexual gaze, as the woman stares at the man and the man stares away from the woman at someone else – he must be gay! What is essential to my research, however, is that as a young male model, I was unable to interpret the still life of the image from this perspective, nor did I see its potential to challenge the hetero norm, but instead sought to play my own ideal heroic role without being aware of that revolutionary potential.

Being under the gaze changed my relationship with myself. I began to see myself as the object of the gaze, not the spectator. In interpreting my relationship with myself according to feminist philosopher and queer theorist Judith Butler's concept of performativity, I became particularly aware of the performance of gender expected of me, which I tried to produce with my gestures and movements as best I could (Butler 1990, 80, 91). In my queer theoretical research, I aim to raise the consciousness of the viewer, reader, and writer, to illustrate the social practices that produce gender and sexualities, and to deconstruct the cultural narratives that produce power structures.

My queer theoretical critique is structured on three levels. The first level is the level of my personal experience, where my critique focuses on the discrimination based on sexual orientation, more specifically of gay men, in a

particular historical and cultural reality. I am aware that discrimination based on sexuality is also faced by, for example, lesbians, and gender-based discrimination by transgender individuals, but I have excluded these and other discriminated groups from this autobiographical study. The second level is the level of visual and public representations constituted by the images. The queer reading or viewing of images draws attention to the porosity and cracks in them, which may not be noticed at first glance but can be seen up close and personal. The third level is the level of masculinities and myths. The Marlboro man (Silvola 2022), the hobo (Silvola 2023) and the male model (Silvola 2022, 2023, 2025) extend the discussion of gender and sexual power relations to an archetypal level, highlighting how power hierarchies are manifested, not only in established narrative conventions but also deep within the core narratives of our culture and the stories we borrow from others. I extend my critique from the personal to the social and cultural level to highlight the need to dismantle hegemonic representations and rewrite new ones.[6]

The images of my modeling days vividly recall the attitude of the time and my own attempts to stay afloat – without suffocating. Even after thirty years, I can still clearly remember my strongest motivation for modeling. Because of the prevailing climate, I could not accept myself as I was, as a homosexual, but I tried to pass. My whole self-image was based on pretense, on silence, on lies. I lived with a strong sense of not knowing who I was. All I knew was that I was not what I was pretending to be. I was not visible to anyone. Modeling, and especially photography, provided a tangible means of gathering evidence that would show me to myself who I could be if I just tried hard enough.

As a male model I was 'a standard male model, a provocateur: young, sleek, and splendid, sexually attractive, instigating a viewer to desire' (see Cortese 1999, 52–57). I referred earlier to Peirce and Seppänen's views on the relationship between the object and the photograph, where the image was seen as a fragment of the object 'torn off.' Susan Sontag (1977, 156) turns this relationship on its head when she states that through photography something becomes part of the information system. Photographs not only redefine our experience but add to it a vast amount of material that we never see. Photographs define reality itself.

While my images contribute to redefining and reshaping our reality, it is evidence that I 'fit' as a small piece to describe a part of our cultural system that we have defined as the ideal, aspirational masculinity. According to Barthes (1977, 22–23), as the object of the image, I am accepted as the evoker of associations or, more ambiguously, as the actual symbol. Such objects constitute signifying elements which, on the one hand, are discontinuous and in themselves complete physical signifiers of meaning, and on the other hand, refer to clear,

[6] The role of the reader in feminist myth criticism is emphasized by Minna Halonen and Sanna Karkulehto (2017, 210) in their article 'The splash in the tower chambers: women's experiences of the body and ethical reading in the dismantling of gendered violence.' They argue that rewriting can function as an intertextual device that invites the reader to reflect on the relationships between experiences and representations. They stress the ethicality of reading when the logic of rewriting challenges the reader to reflect on the relationships between the lived and experienced bodies represented in the text and the representations of bodies in cultural discourses.

familiar meanings. They can thus be understood as elements of a vocabulary which are stable enough to be easily formed into syntax. In the days of the Downtown Man, the images served as concrete and then tangible proof that I had passed, that I could present the ideal masculinity of the era in a credible way and that I was paid to do so. I was able to beat other models in the competition for the same work. On a personal level, I interpreted this success as acceptance and even – albeit in a paradoxical and contradictory way – admiration. But I was the result of the work and efforts of many people. The pictures were designed by ADs from advertising agencies or fashion editors, they were built by set designers, stylists, hair and make-up artists, photographers. I was literally carefully constructed to match the ideal of the time. And despite all the effort, there are inconsistences in the images, some even cracks so big that they were never published, as I point out in my second article (Silvola 2023). In my research, I was looking for cracks *in me;* not in the work of the construction workers who made me. I am looking at my own part in the process of producing the photograph, paying attention to the places where I, by my own appearance or my own actions, have caused scratches and dents in the shiny armor of the ideal.

When I think now, in 2024, how I would portray a homosexual on camera today, I have to admit again that I do not know. There is no 'gay posing' in my mind, nor is there any 'heterosexual performance.' Barthes (1977, 22) states that 'pose is not a specifically photographic procedure but it is difficult to mention it insofar as it derives its effect from the analogical principle at the basis of the photograph.' When I am sitting in the back room of a jazz club with a trumpet in my hands, the viewer, the 'the reader receives as a simple denotation what is in actual fact a double structure – denoted-connoted' (idem). When I recall my experiences, feelings, and actions in front of the camera in the 1990s and read the images in the context of that time, homo/heterosexuality is tightly intertwined with gender and masculinity, with representations of ideal and hegemonic masculinity and, conversely, with the absolute denial and avoidance of male femininity. Homo was thus precisely femininity, effeminate gestures and a little finger sticking out too much (Silvola 2023); aspirational and admirable masculinity was defined as its opposite, although in the 1990s and in the throes of the deep recession, softer masculinity and softies (Rossi 2009, 12; Silvola 2022, 1) began to erode the image of the traditional man, the hero of war and work. The double paradox of the male model, 'known as gay, seen/read as straight,' adds yet another layer to the double structure of Barthes' pose: from literal representation through signification/image to inverse signification; in photographic terms, to the negative.

3.3 The epistemological trinity of the closet: The mutually reinforcing closet, passing, and gaydar

The metaphorical closet is a cultural and discursive construction in which homosexuals hide or to which they escape to conceal their sexual orientation. In

literature, it manifests itself as a language game of secrecy and insinuation, concealment and disclosure, the grammar of the closet (Hekanaho 2006); in real life, as secrecy, half-truths and outright lies. At the same time, the closet creates a particular mode of knowledge production, a perspective on the world that differs from the mainstream; a mode in which there is a special relationship between lies and truth claims.

The existence of the closet always inevitably creates the passing phenomenon. Passing is the ability to be seen as a member of an identity group that is different from one's own. Western subject formation and theories of identity are based on the logic of visibility. We are subjects shaped by how we ourselves and others see us, and we rely on our ability to see and read others to contain a degree of epistemological certainty. Because of this apparently intimate relationship between the seen and the known, passing is a high-voltage source of anxiety and pain arising from visibility, invisibility, categorization, and difference (Schlossberg 2001, 1). Through my own passing, I have sought social acceptance, avoided stigma, and tried to protect myself in situations where expressing my true identity would have been life-threatening or at least threatened my freedom, such as when living in the Arabian Peninsula in 2018–2020 with my same-sex partner and writing the blog *Back to the Closet* for Voima.fi as a criminal.

My research continues from my earlier study (Silvola 2020), where one of my findings was the *double standard of the closet* and the discrimination it implies: the closet itself is not a space open to all; those who differ from the hetero-like appearance are not allowed in. The door to the closet is only open to 'straight-acting' (Pezzote 2008) homosexuals who pass. This is a phenomenon called passing; more precisely, passing for straight. Passing is one of the most common and visible/invisible manifestations of internalized self-discrimination. The metaphorical closet involves a double standard of discrimination, when on the one hand it exists to protect the minority discriminated against by society, but on the other hand it discriminates against those who do not pass.

The roots of passing research lie in the phenomena of people of color *passing for white* and Jews *passing for Christians*. Studies of *passing for straight* have examined it from a moral perspective, asking if a person in the closet has a communal or moral obligation to come out (Cooley, MacLachlan, Sreedhar 2012), as well as from the power-sorting perspective (Hurewitz & Harrison 2012). The phenomenon was introduced to fiction by Nella Larsen, a representative of the Harlem Renaissance (New Negro Renaissance), with her novella *Passing* (1929), in which the colored protagonist Clare Kendry *passes for white* (Wall 1986). Nikki Hayfield (2013, 172–182) shows how our visual identity is the basis for assumptions about our wider identity, such as our sexuality. The surface of the body is thus one of the spaces of passing. Tuula Juvonen (2002, 198) notes that when sexuality was not a topic of conversation, and various sexual experiments were not popular, for many homosexual people it was simplest to structure their lives and themselves through a heterosexual inner story.

In many countries, the straitjacket of heterosexuality and social control are still so tight that individuals are unable to resist their command to marry and

reproduce, and many homosexuals therefore end up going straight for the rest of their lives (Gianoulis 2015, 2). Harri Kalha writes in his book *Sukupuolen sotkijat* (Gender Confusion) how those who have been rejected for not having a socially acceptable identity have denied themselves and repressed their difference while internalizing the phobia of their environment; internalized self-discrimination or self-rejection remains the most destructive form of othering (Kalha 2019, 12; see Sievers & Stålström 1984, 42).

Passing includes minority stress and is based in many cases not only on internalized self-discrimination but also on internalized homophobia. Minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003) divides stressors into distal and proximal. The distal stressor refers to unequal and unfair treatment, manifested as discrimination and harassment against sexual minorities; the proximal stressor is manifested as internalized concealment of sexual identity, internalized stigma, and anticipation of resentment. There is a cause-and-effect relationship between them: distal minority stress causes proximal minority stress in the mental domain and compromises the mental health of sexual minorities (Hatzenbuehler 2009). Minority stress resulting from fear of stigma in the individual mind and in interpersonal interactions causes sexual minorities difficulties in fitting into the majority community (Huang et al. 2020; Schwartz et al. 2016). Internalized homophobia is a psychological mechanism in which experiences of distal stressors affect mental health (Hatzenbuehler, 2009). As a negative self-image, internalized homophobia is an individual's reaction to stigma-based stress, resulting in the acceptance of negative social attitudes and the application of these attitudes to oneself (Newcomb & Mustanski, 2010). The harmful effects of internalized homophobia include self-devaluation, that is, the deliberate lowering of one's self-esteem (Berg et al. 2016; Herek, 2000) and other psychological symptoms (Newcomb & Mustanski, 2010; Szymanski & Carr, 2008). Internalized self-discrimination and self-segregation are consequences of internalized homophobia.

Gaydar, a portmanteau of 'gay' and 'radar,' is a closet epistemological phenomenon related to the concept of the closet. 'Active' gaydar (Gelman et al. 2018: 274, 270; see also Brambilla, Riva & Rule: 2013) refers to the 'code language' developed among sexual minorities. It enabled other homosexuals to identify and communicate with each other using coded signs that were not familiar to the mainstream population. It has been reported that the most revealing cue for identifying sexual orientation (Rule et al. 2008: 1019) is the intentional, deliberate gaze (Carroll & Gilroy, 2002; Nicholas, 2004), a cue that indicates sexual interest (Mason et al. 2005; see also Ekman & Friesen, 1969). In Finnish, *homotutka* (Finnish for gaydar) was already known and widely used in the gay community in the late 1980s, when I made my debut there. I argue that at that time gaydar referred specifically to a homosexual's ability to identify a closeted homosexual, i.e., a homosexual who was straight acting and did not want to come out of the closet to anyone. One of my closet epistemological research findings is *the unintentional flash of the eyes* which I present in my third article (Silvola 2025). The flash is an unconscious reaction beyond the subject's control and 'it takes one to know one.' Defining gaydar as a code language gives too one-sided a view of a

communication system in which both parties participate willingly and voluntarily.

3.4 Affection and affect

Emotions are an essential part of both the closet and sexuality in general. An important part of both the closet and sexuality in general are emotions. Loneliness, shame, fear, anxiety, pleasure, lust, arousal, joy, disappointment, amazement, wonder. In the closet and the sexual act, I experience both affirming and repressive or discouraging effects that sustain my embodied subjectivity. Art – which is what literature and creative writing are – is about more than just the embodied lived experience of an individual subject, which is why it is important to distinguish between the concepts of affection and affect (O'Sullivan 2006, 50; Colebrook 2014, 81).

In his posthumously published *Ethics* (1677), the philosopher Baruch Spinoza uses two different concepts*: affectus* and *affection*. By the former, he refers to the continuous, intense change in the body's capacity to act; by the latter, to the state of the body when it is affected or under the influence of affect (see Seigworth 2005, 162). The philosopher Gilles Deleuze and the psychoanalyst Felix Guattari base their view of affect on Spinoza's *affectus*. Deleuze (2012, 64) makes a distinction between affection process and affect in that affection refers to the state of the affected body and involves the presence of the affected body, while affect refers to the transition from one state to another. Affects, according to Deleuze (2007, 214), do not return to affection, even though the one presupposes the other. Rather, affect is an agent of change that induces changes in the affected body (Deleuze 2012, 63). Affects do not return to personal aesthetic or physical experiences, but are perceptible forces, acts, and activities (Colman 2005, 12), forces that are detached from the individual body and create new relations between lived and thought (see Colebrook 2014, 88–89). The literary scholar Kaisa Kurikka (2016, 88) writes that it is fruitful to distinguish between emotion and affect. In Spinoza's, Deleuze's, and Guattari's concepts of affect, there is a similarity between intensity and affect. Both involve embodied, unconscious, almost reflexive sensations that cannot be adapted, let alone recalled, to a particular image or discursive element: affect manifests something that precedes the individual, while emotion is attached to an already subjectivized content, i.e., intensity is qualified as a personal experience (Massumi 2002, 25–27).

The central argument of brain scientist Antonio Damasio (1999) is that the process of cognition takes place through a 'body loop.' Emotions move between the brain and the body. When this physical flow is registered and returns to the brain in the form of recording and sensing changes, this creates an *affective experience*. Damasio stresses that the body, including the brain, is the 'theater' in which emotions are presented, and that the body precedes the emotion. In each new affective experience, the body comes first. The registration of body and brain activity produces human reality, the experience of emotion itself. According to

Damasio's conception, affect has three stages or moments: the 'state of feeling,' the 'state of experiencing feeling,' and the 'state of being aware of feeling' (Damasio 1999, 43). In our everyday life, however, we experience a functional continuum, a tissue of body and mind that is like a 'running polyphony.' It consists of continuous cycles: bodily reactions, changes in representations of bodily states, awareness of emotions, and the resulting new bodily reactions. Although much of this continuous process is unconscious to the subject, it is often possible to pay enough attention to it to become aware of the body's reactions.

In my research, I comprehend the internalization of self-discrimination, or homophobia, in terms of affect, affection, and emotion. For creative technologies researcher Felicity Colman (2005, 11), 'affect is the auditory, visual and tactile change that occurs in response to a particular situation, event or thing.' For affect researcher Kathleen Stewart (2007, 1), affect is evident when 'something comes together in the moment as an event and a sensation; something both living and inhabiting.' For me, affect is like the moon, when culture with all its pull affects the subject like a tide, shedding shame, anger, and fear, or joy, pleasure, and pride. The discriminatory values and attitudes of society and culture, from law to medicine and from religion to education, form an affective moon, a celestial body of affects under which we are born and under whose influence we grow, live, and act. In the affective process, where affect is internalized, I become physically affected by the intense forces of affect. As Kurikka (2016, 89) notes, the identifiers of subjective affect are conventional, semantically and semiotically perceptible determinants.

Affects are attached to my research topic. I am writing a social analysis that could be called a psychosocial texture. Typically of affect research, I focus on embodiment, I seek to understand how I am in the world, what I am attracted to, and I emphasize pain and pleasure, emotions, and memories. I examine how I am drawn to social formations, how rollercoasters of contempt, patriotism, hatred, and rapture dominate our culture.

3.5 Closet, a spatial space

Passing for straight and gaydar help to conceive of the metaphorical closet as a spatial construct, a three-dimensional space that can be entered, inhabited, and exited. In the course of my memory work, I have wandered through various physical spaces, all of which have included the closet. As I have wandered around the development rooms of the photo lab, I have been aided by my eleven model photographs and model sheets from the Paparazzi model agency from the 1990s. The dark corners of gay clubs have been revisited in my memories. The confessional booth, where I have come out and confessed my other sins, is like the closet for me, a metaphorical space where the things I confess are turning points of my life and therefore ever memorable. The social philosopher Henri Lefebvre argues that space is always constituted by a triple relationship between the *perceived*, *conceived,* and *lived*. In Lefebvre (1991, 38–40), the perceived is related to the everyday perception of space, conceived to the abstract and

structured conception of space by architects, for example, and lived to the subjective living, experiencing, and meaning formation of space (see also Salmela 2006, 38). Mikko Carlson argues that space is not exclusively an abstract model but an illustrative representation of the continuous production of space in culture, which can be understood as fruitful also for the interpretation of literature: in the meaning formation of space, these levels are always present simultaneously. Carlson (2014, 22) combines the idea of the tripartite nature of space with notions of how space is always inherently, with different emphases, social, cultural, and societal; his reading applies to the spaces in my dissertation. Understanding the darkroom of the photo lab, the gay club, and the confessional as social, cultural, and societal spaces is also a prerequisite for examining the process of internalization and for writing about them.

Carlson (2014, 23) notes that the historical cultural reality present at any given moment is mapped out as a referential relationship and a field of meaning-making in readers' readings, making the boundary between cultural space and the space produced by the text, the textual space, quite porous. Social media and digital apps challenge spaces associated with sexuality in new ways, as apps like Tinder, Grindr, Scruff, TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat make the formerly private publicly and openly visible and social; the perceived, the conceived, and the lived are all one. In my writing process, all three dimensions are ever-present in the signification of spaces – they bleed into each other and exist through each other. The darkroom of the photographic laboratory, the darkroom of the gay club, and the confessional booth are all physical spaces that have framed, bounded, conditioned, and defined my sexuality. They are spaces in which I have concealed, performed, displayed, or confessed my sexuality, in other words, in which my sexuality has interacted with culture in various ways. What they all have in common is that they are dark spaces. They cannot withstand the light of day. Carlson (2014, 23) asks whether the gap between a present 'real' space and a linguistically represented 'textual' space can be bridged, when historical time-space and textual space are inherently distinct worlds, different discursive levels. In the space of autobiographical creative writing, the tripartite relationship of the Lefebvrian space, i.e., perceived, conceived, and experienced space, is simultaneously present in the process of writing, and the reality created within them is produced as part of our experience.

The most significant epistemological finding from the perspective of closet epistemology is my new insight into the closet's dimensions. My central concepts – closet, passing for straight, and gaydar – form a whole, which I have named the *epistemological trinity of the closet*. This concept describes the epistemic triad of the closet, where no one part can exist without the other two; the trinity is like a three-legged stool that collapses if even one leg breaks. My theory of the epistemological trinity of the closet views the closet, passing, and gaydar phenomena as inseparable, intertwined, and mutually enabling or generating elements within the epistemology of the closet. Without the existence of the closet, there could be no passing for straight, as there would be no need to conceal one's orientation. Passing and the concealment it entails are prerequisites for the phenomenon of gaydar. Without concealment, there would be nothing to

recognize, predict, spy on, reveal or expose, or know. Gaydar, in turn, is the carpenter that builds the closet. Glances, looks, gossips, and spying – whether they are recognizing, communicative, intrusive, or revealing – or the avoidance of them, are the planks and nails that construct the closet.

Understanding the epistemological trinity of the closet as spatial dimensions in *lived spaces* helps to comprehend the closet not only as a linguistic construct and a space of writing but also as physical, social, and cultural space. The closet is lived in, it provides shelter and safety, it restricts, and one can come out of it. Passing is a state of being in which the subject exists, lives, acts, and feels. As the target of gaydar, one is always in a space and situation. Understanding the trinity as a spatial space helps to conceptualize the position from which the closet is studied, whether from inside the closet, outside on the ground level, from a bird's eye view of a researcher or public authority, or from the pressure of the gap in the closet door.

Feminist philosopher and queer theorist Judith Butler (1997, 5, 18, 27) argues that language plays a crucial role in the formation of the subject, since language sustains embodied being in such a way that the social existence of the body becomes possible, but viewing the closet as a purely linguistic agent leaves the structures and boundaries essential to its knowing invisible. Literary scholar Lasse Kekki (2007, 147) has pointed out that naming and its reproducibility produce a named subject: after naming, the subject begins to behave according to assumptions. The linguistic philosopher J. L. Austin (1979, 101) called this naming a perlocutionary speech act that produces a certain desired or undesired consequence. As Kekki (2007, 147) notes, speech acts can be dangerous for gay men.

The American David Halperin (1995, 29) has argued that the deepest essence of the closet is not to act as a hiding place for homosexuals, but to protect the heterosexual population and reinforce the illusion of heterosexuality; the closet is not so much a protection against the knowledge of someone's homosexuality, but against the demand to consider the knowledge of someone's homosexuality. Sedgwick (1990, 3) has defined the closet as a performance, brought about by the speech act of silence. Not just any silence, however, but an irregular silence, formed impulsively in relation to the discourse that surrounds it and is formed by its difference. The exit is a metaphor for the epistemology of the closet as a confessional, signifying the disclosure of concealed sexual knowledge. The epistemology of the closet, however, does not only imply that something is not said aloud or known, but the unspoken and inarticulate is also itself a state of knowing, a very particular kind of silence. The knowledge of sexuality in the closet is secret, implied, and surrounded by uncertainty. In this insinuation and uncertainty, there is ambivalence. However, since the division between the inside and outside of the closet is part of a binary network of knowledge linked to the gay/straight opposition, this ambivalent knowledge also reverts to a dichotomy in the grammar of the closet; the instability of the opposites does not imply a reduction in their impact (ibid., 10–11). Concealed and revealed knowledge about sexuality is precisely knowledge about homosexuality (Haasjoki 2012, 62).

Sedgwick's definition falls short in some respects, because hiding, silence, and silencing leave invisible the essential part of the speech acts of the closet: half-truths, altered truths, and outright lies. Although the closet is erected through cultural discourses, it is held up by everyone living in the closet. However, mere silence or stillness is not enough to support it; certain kinds of speech acts, outright lies, are also needed (Silvola 2020). My starting point is that the knowledge of closet epistemology is always partial. It is fluid and situational, temporal, and personal. For example, the exit associated with the central concept of the closet is rarely a black-and-white inside-outside question – unless you happen to be celebrity rider Marko Björs, who came out on a TV reality show (in 2022), or ice hockey player Janne Puhakka, who revealed his orientation in a large interview in *Helsingin Sanomat,* Finland's most read daily newspaper (in 2019). In the case of Björs and Puhakka, we can assume that 'everyone knows.' The rest of us, ordinary people, come out in part (see Adams 2011, 85–108). First, we come out to our own parents, siblings, or closest friends. Then maybe to a hobby group or at work. Rarely do we confess 'with card, please, I'm gay by the way,' when we pay for our groceries at the grocery checkout. Our coming out happens gradually, perhaps over a long period of time, and we don't come out to everyone, or in every situation in our daily lives, or in every corner of our lives. We may also go back into the closet, for example when we change jobs or hobbies. Knowledge about homosexuality is also often partial because of the assumptions, beliefs, suspicions, and gossip that are associated with it. The people around us with whom we interact make assumptions about our orientation based on various indicators and cues. Some of these are very stereotypical. Loose wrists and floppy pinkies, a lisping voice, an interest in art, culture, interior design, little enthusiasm for team sports, lack of girlfriends are among the most clichéd indicators on the basis of which non-homosexual people have drawn conclusions about men's unspoken sexualities.

The knowledge is also partial in cases where the subject has internalized self-discrimination and homophobia so thoroughly that they cannot admit same-sex attraction even to themselves, but instead expresses it, for example, in homosocial, close friendships with a teammate, in which a romantic and/or sexual impulse smolders underneath but never comes to the surface – or does when drunk enough. Often it breaks out in *unintentional flash of the eyes* (Silvola 2025).

3.6 Confess but don't tell mama!

Founded in 1982, *don't tell mama* is an entertainment center on the famous Restaurant Row, in the heart of New York's theater district. The origin of the name dates back to John Kander and Fred Ebb's award-winning Broadway musical *Cabaret* (1966). Its heroine, Sally Bowles, appears at The Kit Kat Club and sings a bold, flirtatious song of the same name. In it, she explains to the audience that her mother thinks she is in a convent, when in fact she works in a nightclub. In lace pants! A decade later, in 1992, a gay club of the same name opened in the

heart of Helsinki's nightlife, on Anna Street, to great acclaim. The name implies that 'mother knows best' and that if mother *doesn't* know, that is, hasn't got a clue, then no one else does either. You are safely in the closet. At the same time, the title implicitly suggests that coming out or living in the closet are narrative devices, acts of storytelling, to construct a homosexual identity and explain the homosexual self. In *Narrating the Closet*, autoethnographer and sexual diversity scholar Tony E. Adams (2011, 100–101) draws our attention to the specificity of narration to the mother in coming out. He refers to a scene from the television series *Will & Grace* (1998–2020) in which a character named Jack says to his mother: 'Mom, I'm gay.' In all 186 episodes, this is the only time Jack's mother appears in the series at all. Adams (idem) writes how this 'suggests that Jack's coming out and the reaction to his coming out are the defining moments in the (gay) son-mother relationship.' Coming out of the closet is an act of confession, a shrift that has a long tradition in Western Christian cultures. Confessions are addressed not only to the mother, but also, like Augustine, directly to God, to the priest, the judge, the teacher, the psychiatrist, or the police, to the whole community; confession has developed its own genre of confessional literature, which gives the impression of depth and penetration. It delves into the subject's past and their deepest and most secret thoughts and desires in order to explain the individual self (Brooks 2000, 102). Here, I discuss the confessional literature tradition from the perspective of self-telling.

The confessional model permeates the whole of Western culture. When we recall that the Roman Catholic Church made the annual confession of sins obligatory some 800 years ago, in 1215, we better understand the significance of the verbal confession of sins, crimes, and wrongs. Confession has thus played a significant role in both purifying and reforming our morality, offering us both consolation and control, monitoring and educating us. In the confessional, we have been able to speak out our hidden actions and thoughts in a form that reveals our innermost being. Confession has enabled the confessor to be punished or absolved, or it has enabled them to recover or adjust. (Brooks 2000, 2.)

From the Apostle Paul and the Church Father Augustine (354–430) comes a tradition of confessional literature that reaches back to our own day. Augustine built his theology on the letters attributed to Paul. While Paul's expressions of self-hatred are scattered throughout his letters, Augustine built a whole system of self-denunciations and anchored it in his own personality as naturally as his predecessor and inspiration. The result of this method was the *Confessiones*, a coherent treatise on human insignificance exemplified by the author himself. Augustine addressed his confessions not to the church, nor to any named audience, but to God. The author and translator Martti Anhava (2004, 9–15) asks in his book *Speaking the Truth* whether the length of the work, some 400 pages, was due to a genuine need for confession or to Augustine's desire to show his gradual conversion to Christianity as valuable and dramatic as the epiphany and conversion Paul experienced on the road to Damascus. In any case, his memoirs emerged as a masterpiece of disciplined composition and psychological insight.

For Rousseau (1712–1778), the concept of transparency is vital, and his desire to open all the curtains between himself and his readers is a recurring theme in *Les Confessions*. One of the clearest statements of this aim is at the end of the fourth book, where he apologizes for the richness of detail about his childhood. He must, he says, give the reader a full description of everything he has done, thought, and felt, so that the reader can assemble from the details a complete portrait of Jean-Jacques and evaluate him. This means that he was not afraid of saying too much, of spilling the beans, but of 'leaving something unsaid.' In this way, the desire for complete transparency is linked to the desire to fully confess, to provide a seamless narrative of the inner and outer story of a person's life. (Brooks 2000, 160.)

The creed of Rousseau's work is a sense of one's own individuality. He was aware of the supremacy of his emotions. Instead of trying to control them in the way the century demanded, he uninhibitedly threw himself into his fickleness. Everything he wrote reveals a bigot, a contradiction, a stumbling of thought, but all of it is animated by an almost palpable sense of emotion. In Rousseau's style, one can taste flesh and blood: 'I decided to create a work that would be unique for its unprecedented truthfulness, so that for once one might see man as he was in his innermost being. [...] Besides, since it could not be done without showing other people as they were, and since the work could therefore only appear after my death and that of many others, this fact encouraged me all the more to write my confessions, for which I would never have to blush before anyone.' (Anhava 2004, 30–31, 39.)

They say that the will to live and to reproduce is the basis of humanity. They say that it drives us forward, forces us to survive, to continue life. They say that the reproductive instinct is there to ensure that we leave our mark on the universe, that our genes continue, that our lives go on after we are gone. For me, those things have never been so simple.

Being born, growing up, building a selfhood at a time when homosexuality was either a crime or a disease, affected everything. It shaped us, our identity, our self-image. We became those who hid in the shadows, those who could not conceive of carrying on a family. We had no words, no ideas, no concepts, no models. To become a father? There was no such option! Not only was it completely out of the question, but there was no such possibility. It was clear to me from the beginning that I would never start a facade family. I would never get married. I would never lie so profoundly. I lied enough as it was, morning after morning, day after day. I didn't want to weave other people into my web of lies, which I was forced to spin always and everywhere, so deeply and so fundamentally. I couldn't let go of the needles for a moment.

I internalized the idea that I would never be a father, that my life would end with me. My genes I will take with me to my grave. To the end point. I will never see a child who carries something of me with them. That truth was mine. And so I lived. For me, childlessness was not a voluntary choice. It came as a given. It was such a naturalized part of gay identity that I couldn't question it.

Twenty years ago, I had a wake-up call. Too late though. It was only when I saw with my own eyes on television that the fact that I could not become a father was not a universal truth, but a cultural discourse. It was not a biological fact, not an absolute rule. It was just an idea, an opinion, an attitude, something very common and ordinary. I

remember seeing that television series, The L Word (2004–2009), in one episode of which a group of gay men jog around Los Angeles carrying babies in slings on their backs. At that moment I realized that everything was about to change. But too late for me.

At the same time, a law on registered partnerships came into force in Finland. Suddenly we gays started to establish families. Lesbians and gays together. Me too? I was almost forty years old at the time. Single. At the peak of my media career. Work and training filled my life. And while the idea of fatherhood shook everything I had ever believed in, I couldn't see myself as a father. I couldn't change the image that was so deeply ingrained in me.

The realization that I could have been a father caused sadness, deep sadness. A grief I will never be allowed to grieve. A grief that is not understood, not given space, not sympathized with. Even today, I can't say which I grieve more. Not having children, or being deprived of a choice? The choice that was denied to whole generations of gay men. Fatherhood taken away from gay men is one of the intersections where sexual orientation meets age and gender.

It is our silent, invisible grief. It touches only those of us who live with this burden and cannot be reached by others. It is my life-long grief in the category of queer grief (see Sorainen, 2025, forthcoming). The moment when I realized that my whole life was built on a lie that I had not created, despite what I had led myself to believe. Earlier, I had been feeling guilty and blaming myself for my lies. My stories before and after that moment are different. They run in two different threads, united by one thing: I still don't know who I am. It wasn't just the law, not the medical classification, not even the textbooks at school. It was a culture. It was movies, TV shows, music. Everything that made up the world I grew up in. I never found myself in them, saw myself in them. Not even when I was part, a small cog of that image-making machinery. That too was someone else, a stranger.

There are so many others besides me, too. We who live without a veneer, without the need to pass on our genes. We who live differently, who question the ultimate, superior 'truth' given in the Word. Our truth is neither wrong nor right, it is just different. We live differently.

That's how I did this research because that's how I lived it.

In our cultural imagery today, especially in films and television series, we easily recognize two images. In the first, in a ubiquitous social ritual, the penitent confesses their sins or crimes to the priest in an intimate, if at the same time impersonal, private, and protected space, a dimly lit confessional. In another confession, the suspect is locked with the police detective in an interrogation room where they sit facing each other, a breadless table between them, and as the interrogation proceeds, a sense of guilt and remorse is awakened in the suspect, leading to confession. (Brooks 2000, 3.) Confession is thus an integral part of cultural products such as police series, murder mysteries, and courtroom dramas. But it is also, for example, the core juice of Tennessee Williams' *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1958). In the play, a rich widow, Mrs. Venable, tries to bribe a young brain surgeon, Dr. Sugar, to perform a lobotomy on her late husband's niece Catherine, so that no one would believe her story about the homosexuality of Mrs. Venable's son Sebastian. 'After the operation, who would believe her?' asks Mrs. Venable slyly. In the play, whose protagonist Sebastian does not appear on

stage at all, two stories, two different versions of Sebastian's life, sexuality and death, are confronted. Mrs. Venable acts as witness, prosecutor, and judge, trying to extract from Catherine a confession that her version is a lie. In the film version of the play, we see yet another new closet epistemological layer, as Dr. Sugar is played by Montgomery Cliff. For decades in Hollywood, homosexual actors had to remain in the closet to maintain their credibility as great lovers on screen and in the eyes of the public.

Peter Brooks draws attention to the fact that our social and cultural attitudes toward confession are unconscious and ambivalent, which is why the concept of confession is slippery and can easily slip from our grasp when we try to analyze it. We are concerned about the truthfulness of confession because the reception of a speech act beginning with the words 'I confess' is ambivalent. At the same time, we want to hear the confession and we doubt it. Legislators have sought to regulate and control confession by prescribing that it must be 'voluntary.' Today, as in the Middle Ages, the judiciary treats confessions as 'queen proof,' i.e., as particularly convincing evidence. Since the Romantic period, the whole of Western culture has made confession a sign of authenticity, an act in which the individual verifies and authenticates their inner truth. Modern culture favors confession for its therapeutic value. By 'telling all' in public, confession has become a banal, standard feature of TV realities, with the basic idea that the individual can only redeem their identity through the act of confession. We live in an age in which transparency is demanded of us, which brings with it the demand and tyranny of confession. (Brooks 2000, 3–4.)

In texts such as diaries, letters, and essays, which reflect on the events and problems of lives and the different aspects of self, not all introspection is confessional, nor is all confession confessional. According to Anhava (2004, 15–16), the experience of purification associated with the concept of confession requires a boundary-defying effort, often crossing some kind of threshold of daring or venturing. The clearest case of this effort is the confession of a crime for 'intrinsic' reasons, to relieve the sense of guilt. But it is also sufficient to transgress the boundaries of propriety and shamelessness; it is sufficient when the confession tests the honor and self-image of the confessor.

According to Foucault (1978), confession of sin was the first method of truth production among Western Christians related to gender. The rite of confession, which after the reformations in the sixteenth century gradually moved away from the sacrament of penance, gradually slid into education, child-parent relations, kinship relations, medicine, and psychiatry, developing into a *scientia sexualis* by the nineteenth century. It constituted a complex mechanism for producing truthful gender discourses. It combined the old confessional formulas with methods of clinical listening. It allowed the truth about sex and its pleasures to become a 'concept of sexuality,' which is the counterpart of the slowly evolving discursive practice that constructed the *scientia sexualis*. Thus, confession has become one of the most valued techniques of truth production in the West.

The effects of confession extend far and wide, from the courtroom to the doctor's office, from school to the home, from family relationships to love affairs, from everyday routines to festive rituals. We confess our childhoods, our

illnesses, and our sorrows, our evil thoughts, our sins, and our crimes. We confess in public and in private, to parents, teachers, doctors, and those we love. I am what Foucault calls a confessing animal when I confess my innermost, most private, and intimate knowledge. But instead of treating that knowledge, which I seek not only about myself but also in the exploration of myself, that is, in the search for knowledge about myself, as the ultimate truth about myself, I treat it as a momentary and situational truth that may be something else in the very next moment. I relate to it as an incomplete, partial, and situational truth *here and now*.

Gender and sexuality studies and queer theories have destigmatized sexuality by broadening its categories, and the rise of human rights has broken down the stigma of previously marginalized groups. Alongside this, in the age of the attention economy, neoliberal self-aggrandizement, and social media, everything possible has already been exposed and confession has become both capital and an object of consumption for markets that exploit the personal. As a result, confession has lost its guarantee of truthfulness; confession in itself does not guarantee the truthfulness of a confession, even if it is freely given. Even the confession of homosexuality in Finland therefore no longer reveals anything radically secret – a disease, a crime, or a sin. In other words, confession of homosexuality has lost its evidential value, but the communal demand to disclose homosexuality has not disappeared. On the contrary, its recognition has become controversial. On the one hand, '[d]isclosing one's sexual orientation is thought to be [a] ubiquitously positive experience that creates self-acceptance and confidence through repeated practice' (Phellas 2005, 79), 'it enables the healthy development of sexual identity' (McLean 2007, 154), 'coming out is framed as 'healthy'' (Cole et al. 1996; Downs 2005; McLean 2007; Seidman 2002), 'mature' (Rust 1993), 'moral' (Mohr 1992), 'honest' (Smith 2010), and 'politically responsible' (Burgess 2005, Corrigan & Matthews 2003; Gross 1991; Signorile 1990, 2007). On the other hand, according to Adams (2011, 105), '[c]oming out is considered unimportant, inappropriate, and selfish.' Often, same-sex attraction is considered 'a purely a personal matter' (Panikkar 2009, 241), 'a strictly private affair' (Ankleshwaria 2009, 200), 'a person's own business' (Gupta 2009, 174). The US military's 'don't ask, don't tell' rule was created to protect heterosexuals whose morals are considered offended by the outing of a homosexual person (Dao 2010; Donnelly 2009).

I have never been able to imagine myself giving birth to a new life. No, I've never thought of myself as a father, not carrying my genes on to the next generation. But instead, I know what it feels like when the life ends. I know what it feels like to die. Sorry, no. I know what it feels like in that last moment when you're still alive, but you know you're going to die. I know what it feels like to let go. To give up. I've been there twice.

First time, April 1989. I don't remember the day, but I remember the moment like it was last Monday. I was twenty-four years old. It was not morning, not evening, not night. Somewhere between noon and mid-afternoon, when the spring light penetrated the room, cold and sharp. I stood at the sink, swallowed as many pills as I could, rinsed them down with water. Pills I'd been collecting for days from my great-aunt's house. When she went down for her nap, I took the keys and crept into her dentist's office, now like a museum next to her splendid and luxurious apartment, and opened the medicine cabinet.

I didn't know what the pills were. I didn't understand the labels, but I took them out of all the jars, into filter bags. I collected them, day after day, until I had a mound of different pills.

Now the day had come when I could go no further. I had reached my last limit. I wanted to die. No, no, sorry, that's not true. I wanted to live, but I couldn't take it anymore. I couldn't stand the pain anymore. It was too much. I'm standing there, by the sink, pills in my fist. One handful at a time, water on, and that's it. I'm so tired, it feels like a relief.

I have to hurry to get to bed before I pass out. I lie down on the bed. I remember hearing that people who commit suicide with sleeping pills usually choke on their vomit, unconscious. What position should I lie in to make sure the vomit blocks my throat? I want to be sure I'm choking. I'm in a hurry. The last moment before unconsciousness is so short. Why did I leave this crucial issue until the last minute? That's all I have time to think about and regret, to feel my last moment alive, to look at my last memory of my life, to worry that I was too tired to write my last letter. I'm dead tired and I'm just going to sleep. I feel a sense of relief, although I worry that I don't know how to get into the right position. Life goes dark like in anesthesia in an operating theater, where the anesthetist asks you to count down from ten and you barely make it to nine...

You'll be out of consciousness quickly. Darkness. Then, nothing.

But long before I took those pills, I started carrying a rope. A hangman's rope. It was in a plastic bag, and I carried it everywhere I went. And a copy of the page of the knot book that told me how to make a hangman's noose properly. I took a copy at the library, folded it, put it in a bag with the rope. I was too tired to write the letter and who would I even write it to. But I wanted it to be known, when they found me, that this was not a spur of the moment, but a deliberate and prepared act, a necessity. I walked around the city, looking at the trees, assessing the strength of the branches. The steel bridge railings of the railway station were tempting. But I was afraid that some sweaty jogger or energetic cyclist would hit the spot and start rescuing me. The rope. Weight. The drop. I was afraid the rope would break, but my neck wouldn't.

I've read that when executioners want to be merciful to the executed, they put a rope around the neck of the hanged man so that it snaps the neck like a cat snaps a mouse. It is so much more merciful a death than suffocation, by noose or vomit. I flunked most of my math classes in high school, and therefore I don't know strength calculus, and therefore can't calculate from my weight, acceleration and rope length how strong a rope should be and how many pounds its tensile strength should be. I am also a terrible coward. I'm not afraid to die, even though I want to live. I'm afraid of failing, of becoming disabled. My greatest fear is that the suffering will not end but will increase.

The year 2010. Another new attempt. It confirms the knowledge I gathered by experience twenty-one years earlier in 1989. I am again at the point where I can't take it anymore. Not another minute. This plan of mine is simple. And it is certain. Guaranteed. Although I often feel like I'm living in a (trash) novel written by someone else, and I've read all kinds of stories and seen all kinds of movies, I've never come across anything like this anywhere. I haven't read about it in a single novel or seen it in a single film. It's simple but brilliant.

I'm going to gas myself to death. I've got an SUV, a big one. 4.7-liter engine. The engine growls so much gas through the exhaust pipe it could kill an elephant. But I don't have a garage. No, there's no enclosed space at all. Luckily, I know a place. A small, sweet

opening in the woods where even the mushroom pickers don't go. No one will find me there. At least not for days.

I have ridden there often; I know the forest like the back of my hand. I know the forest road that leads deep into the middle of the opening. The sun is shining, it's a warm July evening. The perfect last moment of the last day. Vacuum cleaner hose, roll of duct tape. Everything is ready. I put the hose on the end of the exhaust pipe, tape it shut. I pull it in through the side window, roll up the window. The hose is the perfect length, it fits between the exhaust pipe and the side window like it was made for it.

I lean back in the seat, almost lying down. I start the engine. Now it hums, calmly, surely. I lie there, looking through the windscreen at the blue sky. Above, the tops of tall spruces frame the view. This is the last image I see. This moment is my last. And it's beautiful. So quiet. I smell the sting of exhaust from the hose, heavy, metallic, and strong. Everything is going so well, like grease. I'm at peace. Relieved. Soon the pain will be over. At last.

Knowledge is accumulating on me. I know that at the moment of departure, I will not be overcome by a frenzied survival instinct. No powerful urge to live that would make me retreat. No, it's gone. Perhaps suffering has weakened my will to live, drained it of its strength. Maybe it was fragile from the start. But I know, I know when it all began to fade. It was a moment in 1977, in that dream, when I entered the closet.

The leitmotif of my closet epistemological research is the idea that *telling about sexuality* reveals the truth about our *true self* (Foucault 1978). In Foucauldian terms, I understand that this narrative is shaped by the discourses in whose sphere of influence we grow and develop. Kekki (2007, 160) has written that the salt of acknowledging homosexuality in gay literature is created through the secret and disclosure of both the narrator's feelings and the possible reactions of the environment. Kekki hits the nail on the head precisely in the area of writing that I explore in this research. First, the dynamics between secrecy and disclosure, second, the space between the external and internal selves of the subject in which the processes of internalization take shape, and third, the friction between subject and culture. In other words, I will observe and write about the effects of passing as attitudes, values, ideas, and words maintained by discourses and affects are translated into internal beliefs and self-narratives. Our whole understanding of ourselves and our relationship to self and others is largely shaped by the need for recognition. The confessional model is now deeply embedded in our everyday morality. We cannot think about ourselves, our upbringing, our growth into adulthood without recognition and what it means for our inner life. Similarly, confessional discourse has become the prototype for the modern form of writing, the autobiography. Confessional literature gives the impression of depth and penetration by diving into its subject's past and their deepest and most secret thoughts and desires in order to explain the individual self (Brooks 2000, 102).

I place this dissertation on the continuum of confessional literature. In it, I write about confessions from which modernity has destroyed the confessional base. Nonetheless, in addition to its autobiographical content, there are features of my writing that defend its place in the canon of confessional literature. I paint a portrait of a male model with *a confessional sfumato.* I write provocatively and

unashamedly, that is, unashamedly about my most intimate experiences, testing the limits of appropriateness in academic writing and in the context of a dissertation. And I do not just test the boundaries, I transgress them. I place myself in dialogue with my confessor, the academic community, and at the same time I expose myself to rejection and disqualification. There is a relationship between suspect and interrogator, patient and analyst, in which it is my task to confess, and the task of the academic community to receive my confession. Usually when this kind of dialogue produces a confession, the confessor and society as a whole are convinced that they can pass sentence in good conscience. The sincerity and truthfulness of my confession, the weight of new knowledge, is weighed by other means: by Turnitin plagiarism detection software, by comparing my results with other research in the field, by peer reviewers going through the articles of my dissertation, and by examiners going through this summary in the most careful manner. Although this is research, and confession is intended to generate new knowledge about itself, about confessing, my acts of confession are like those recited aloud in the confessional or on the psychoanalyst's couch. They generate shame, guilt, contempt, self-loathing, attempts at forgiveness and reconciliation. Brooks (2000, 6) notes that unless the content of a confession can be verified in other ways and its reliability confirmed, it may be a false confession – untrue to the facts, if true in some other sense of guilt.

Confession is still the general mold that guides the production of a truthful discourse of gender (Foucault 1998, 52). I confess my individual pleasures. In this study, my aim is to name the ideas, obsessions, and images that animate my pleasure, my desires, the variations of desire, and the quality of pleasure itself that reproduce and are part of this discourse. Because my own sexuality, same-sex orientation, was for so long forbidden and shameful and has been restricted, repressed, and controlled by a variety of laws and social practices and punishments, the stonewalling and concealment of my sexuality has put enormous pressure on and dominated my self-narrative since pre-puberty. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, in my dissertation I go on the offensive against confession in an attempt to undo it. Not by confessing acts so extreme as to deprive confession of its basis, but by showing confession to be superfluous, by turning it upside down into recognition and acknowledgment in the sense of dignity.

This autobiographical dissertation, based on confession, turns into a project of self-expression. It is set in a continuum with a legacy of self-examination and personal history telling. But instead of its end result being an intact portrait and a description of my 'true self,' the picture is unfinished, the paint is still wet, and the artist has not finished his work. The self is still a work in progress, still taking shape. It is also not unique, individual, or unprecedented. I express because I believe there are some others who have similar experiences, thoughts, minds, traits as I do.

Knowledge begets more knowledge: Knowledge generated inside the closet, the epistemology of the closet. For me, life in a closet has meant suffering. Suffering that takes away the will to live. It stifles the will to live and the will to survive. I write about

moments in 1989 and 2010 in 2023 on Queen's Road in Bristol. By now I have accumulated knowledge of how even failure can be survival.

I wake up in tubes. The translucent extensions of my blood vessels end up in plastic bags, hanging on a rack like a forgotten umbrella and cap. I am the morning mist that gradually evaporates. Then I realize I'm in hospital. My plan has gone awry. In my first bright moment, I realize that no one could have found me but my mother. My mom, unfathomable, opaque fog. Why did she come? I don't know. I will never know.

The nurse says that Mom called an ambulance. I don't understand how she could do that. She, who is not present in this world. I have a catheter. Then the male nurse, a gay guy I gave the cold shoulder in a bar sometime earlier, lifts the sheet and checks the catheter. The look on his face says it all. Now he wants to humiliate me. Do I have to go through this too, arrogance, which takes precedence over shame and humiliation? In the evening, just before the end of his shift, he removes the catheter. His hand lingers too long on my crotch. It doesn't hurt, but it's emotionally painful.

I stay in hospital for an IV drip. The abdominal lavage messed up my blood. No one will come to see me. Except my great-aunt. She doesn't know anything about her pills. Or maybe she does, but she pretends not to. We don't talk about it. We talk about everything else, nothing. We just are. It's like I'm in the hospital on a picnic, a sweet spring picnic.

A psychiatrist on call comes to see me. I can't believe my eyes. Is my life really a B-movie? I know him too. He is my mother's doctor. The one who once helped me get my mother into hospital. Now he's coming to see me. Me, the one who's willing to do anything, say anything, to keep him from writing a compulsory treatment order for me. I want out. I want to get out of here. I won't tell him I have no home, that I'm homeless. I live in the staircases. Sometimes at my mother's, if she's well enough to let me in.

Dad doesn't call. I'll call him. Can you imagine what he says? He asks me what I was trying to prove with this t-r-i-c-k. Am I trying to blackmail him? That's what he asks. For the first time in my life, I'm letting it all come out. I tell him what a motherfucker he is. A selfish, worthless prick. He hangs up on me. People like him should be sterilized by the state before they can reproduce.

In the middle of a remote forest opening, I'm lying on the front seat of a Jeep. The engine is humming steadily. I look at the sky. The image is a beautiful cliché, deep blue sky, white clouds, dark green tops of spruce trees. This postcard is the last picture I'll ever see. And it's so beautiful. Quiet. Then, suddenly. The sting of the exhaust... it's diluted to almost nothing. Something has gone wrong.

I get out of the car and go to have a look. The hose is burned out. The burning hot exhaust pipe has broken the plastic hose. Exhaust gas is billowing into the sky.

Feminist and postcolonial studies have highlighted the political potential of the autobiography to strengthen the rights of oppressed groups and minorities. As Linda Anderson (2001, 104) summarizes, autobiography is a channel for both the sharing of personal experiences of oppression and the empowerment and emancipation of the individual. Indeed, Gillian Whitlock (2007, 3) aptly calls autobiography a 'soft weapon,' as it is a powerful tool in the struggle for human dignity and human rights. Autobiography has been theorized extensively in feminist studies from the 1960s to the present day. Literary scholar Rita Felski (1989, 86–96) offered insights into confessional writing in the 1970s and 1980s in American and European feminist confessional autobiography: I draw on her

insight that at the heart of feminist confessions is the disclosure of intimate, everyday, and often traumatic experiences, and the exploration of their wider social and political connections. In the material of my dissertation gender roles, sexuality, and the sexual act function as intersections of the personal and the social, the experiential and the political, through which I observe and critique the boundaries between the accepted and the forbidden. These boundaries, visible contours or blurred into invisibility by *sfumato*, are the elements of writing with which I create the portrait of the male model, the confessions of the male model in a darkroom of my own.

The Small Stage of the Finnish National Theatre, our country's foremost stage, October 12, 2024. I sit, witnessing Linda Wallgren's direction of Tony Kushner's Angels in America (1992, translated by Juho Gröndahl). Behind the whirlwind of events looms Reagan's America – an era marred by the Cold War, the AIDS epidemic, racism, and homophobia. As the play unfolds, it stirs within me autobiographical memories linked to my second article, 'A Counter-Story to the Rags-to-Riches Narrative: A Finnish Male Model Wearing Hobo Style During the Deep Depression in the Age of AIDS.' It awakens the ghosts of the hatred, disgust, and exclusion thrust upon gay men of the 1980s. How I absorbed that hatred and disgust, turning it inward toward myself and toward every other gay man I couldn't love, couldn't even desire.

Kushner's text, paired with the actors' powerful performances, brings me to tears, mourning all those young and old, men of every age, who perished in the grip of AIDS. Men whom society cared nothing for – whom it abandoned with cold indifference and loathing, without care, compassion, or hope. As the angel, a deus ex machina, descends from the ceiling of the stage, I am struck by a sudden revelation: I am a survivor. I survived the AIDS epidemic, though I stood directly in its path. When the first news of an HIV infection in Finland appeared in Helsingin Sanomat in June 1983, I was 18 years old, a virgin, yet ready and willing to explore my sexuality. In the end, what shielded me from contracting the virus was my internalized homophobia and deeply ingrained puritanical values, which together prevented me from falling in love with men, and from engaging in sexual intimacy with them. Years of drought, of isolation, lonesomeness, and celibacy, turns, in my personal narrative, in my narration of self, into my salvation.

My autobiographical register ranges from metaphorical and confessional, emphasizing personal experience and emotion, to a declarative, detached, and distancing tone, all the way to theoretical reflection. While autobiography typically presents events in the form of the self and through the self-narrator from within the consciousness of the autobiographical subject, I sometimes present myself as an object or image viewed from the outside. By varying registers and distance, I aim to combine the intimacy of the autobiography with the sense of critical distance created by the self-portrait. The aim of combining different modes of representation is to reflect the two dimensions of the self-image, the inside and the outside, and the dynamics between them. The combination of expressionist, realist, and theoretical narratives appears to be one solution to the complex process of internalization on multiple levels. By combining an emotional and detached tone, I seek to reconcile a mental conflict between forbidden and hidden emotions and the efforts of detachment.

The closet is about a hidden identity: who do I feel I am? What is the true story I tell myself about myself? Closeted identity can be exposed, revealed, made visible or brought to light, but only wrongful deeds can be confessed. However, language resists this. I can reveal the hidden part of my identity, but it is not necessarily a revelation. Not all confessions are revelations. To be a revelation, I must be able to shock – though nowadays nothing shocks us anymore. Therefore, it is more accurate to call coming out of the closet a 'confession' than 'revelation.'

Most often, it is not a revelation but specifically a confession because the confessor, when coming out, seeks forgiveness and hopes to be accepted as they are. It is a confession of sin because homosexuality has long been classified, in the Christian tradition, as a sin to be repented and atoned for. In my confession of sin, I do not confess my deepest essence but rather the current or previous truth of my selfhood, the story I have been living, writing, and telling myself my whole life. As I see it, the true self consists of my experiences, feelings, thoughts, and memories; it is a Foucauldian story I create every day and one that is notably true to myself.

4 EXPLORING BY CONFESSING AUTOBIOGRAPHICALLY

My research project is autobiographical and embedded in autoethnography. I am exploring my own life experience and its events, myself. At the same time, I am exploring the process of narrating the self and the ways of describing it. The common denominator of my methodology is autobiography. Like all autobiographers, in my dissertation I have tuned the autobiographical author-narrator-protagonist, i.e., the peripheral conditions of my own life, *in the spirit of truth* (see Kosonen 2016, 43). It can perhaps be read as a story of survival or blooming, but above all it is written as a *case study,* within which I have practiced introspection and reflection, experimented and experienced, meditated and taken notes, read and written. Literary scholar Päivi Kosonen (2016, 48) sees that at its finest, the modern autobiography is *an art of witnessing a unique interiority*, a narrative shaped by one's own self and life truth. It is a narrative that is the foundation of self-continuity and a sense of selfhood. 'We are formed intersubjectively, always in relation to others. But we also have a need to know ourselves and our own interiority, to mirror our present selves against our own past selves' (Kosonen 2016, 48; my translation).

My methodology is not only a set of my research methods and approaches, but also a framework for producing research material. *A Darkroom of My Own: Confessions of a Male Model* is based on photographs and an autobiographical text, which I write based on my portraits and the memories and reminiscences I have made around them. My memories are not 'pure' information, imprinted on anyone's mind, but interwoven with subjective meanings and individual and communal experiences. According to Kirsti Määttänen (1996, 19), remembering is a spontaneous process. It is our way of being. Remembering is being alive and, in a certain sense, alive being. Määttänen distinguishes spontaneous remembering from the purposeful act of recollecting with an intention to remembering, which she considers to be a special case of remembering. Autoethnographic research is often just such an act of reminiscing, just as the 'sit and think' method of creative writing I use (Harper 2023, 37) may be such an intentional and purposeful act of remembering. Alongside this, I make use of memories spontaneously crossing my mind in the writing process. As my

memory work is partly based on photographs taken in the first half of the 1990s, I supplement my visual analysis of the photographs with methods such as photographic elicitation (Hänninen 2022, 234) used in the study of social systems and identity to evoke my memories and to go back in time (Aroldi & Vittadini 2015; Collier 1957) and to bring my memories into textual form (Hänninen 2022, 234). Central to the analysis of my memories is that I understand that they are permeated by dominant ideologies, discourses, affects, cultural imagery, and representations. The first time my memories are filtered through all this is when I experience, live, perceive, or form memories and let them imprint themselves on my mind, as well as each time I recall and verbalize them. Rousseau wrote several prefaces for *Les Confessions*. One of them is the preface written for the first manuscript in 1767, the preface of the Neuchâtel manuscript, *Préambule du manuscrit de Neuchâtel*. In it, he wrote: 'je peindrai doublement l'état de mon âme,'[7] which I translate as 'I paint the state of my soul twice.' Rousseau's idea could be adapted to 'a twice painted self.' I paint my memories many times over with *confessional sfumato*.

My closet epistemological questions related to internalized self-discrimination and the passing phenomenon return to the question of the way of being in the world and how that world is internalized as part of the narrative that sustains myself. I think of myself as fragmented, fragile, unpredictable, and discontinuous. Based on this idea, I use the *sfumato* technique, familiar from painting, as a metaphor and technique for writing: I paint my portrait in thin layers, fragment by fragment, incoherently, intuitively, impulsively, evocatively.

4.1 Queer orientation

My approach to research is queer; I look against the grain, I look for cracks and inconsistencies in images that seem smooth and shiny on the surface, I question the hegemonic world order. At the core of my queer orientation is Simone de Beauvoir's idea that the personal is political, Judith Butler's notion of gender as something that is done (*doing*), not just is (*being*), and the core idea of

[7] 'Si je veux faire un ouvrage écrit avec soin comme les autres, je ne me peindrai pas, je me farderai. C'est ici de mon portrait qu'il s'agit et non pas d'un livre. Je vais travailler pour ainsi dire dans la chambre obscure ; il n'y faut point d'autre art que de suivre exactement les traits que je vois marqués. Je prends donc mon parti sur le style comme sur les choses. Je ne m'attacherai point à le rendre uniforme ; j'aurai toujours celui qui me viendra, j'en changerai selon mon humeur sans scrupule, je dirai chaque chose comme je la sens, comme je la vois, sans recherche, sans gêne, sans m'embarrasser de la bigarrure. En me livrant à la fois au souvenir de l'impression reçue et au sentiment présent je peindrai doublement l'état de mon âme, savoir au moment où l'événement m'est arrivé et au moment où je l'ai décrit ; mon style inégal et naturel, tantôt rapide et tantôt diffus, tantôt sage et tantôt fou, tantôt grave et tantôt gai fera lui-même partie de mon histoire. Enfin quoi qu'il en soit de la manière dont cet ouvrage peut être écrit, ce sera toujours par son objet un livre précieux pour les philosophes : c'est je le répète, une pièce de comparaison pour l'étude du cœur humain, et c'est la seule qui existe.' https://www.autopacte.org/Rousseau-pr%E9ambule-Neuch%E2tel.html Accessed October 12, 2024.

autoethnography, which connects the personal to the cultural (Uotinen 2010, 179).

Having grown up and lived in the closet, still carrying its traces in my bones, I have been overdosed with 'statistically significant' research results that never include my experiences and reality, but always exclude them as 'non-significant' in the margins. It is therefore understandable and natural that not only my research topic, but also my methodology, should focus on deconstructing norms, making the invisible visible and giving voice to the silenced. I am therefore oriented toward queer theory. To quote J. J. Halberstam (1998: 13), 'queer methodology [...] is a scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behaviour.' My queer theoretical orientation draws critically upon Butler's performative theory, the lesbian and gay studies referred to as social constructionism, and Foucault's radical anti-essentialism.

Queer-oriented autoethnography and queer autobiography draw on the practices and politics of queering to offer narrative and theoretical disruptions to taken-for-granted knowledges that continue to marginalize, oppress, and/or exploit those of us who do not participate or find ourselves reflected in mainstream cultures and social structures – including research methods (Holman Jones & Harris 2019, 4). Therefore, rather than adopting an impersonal and 'objective' passive narrative, I use a very intimate form often considered inappropriate in academic writing, namely, an autobiographical first-person narrative. I discuss in my own voice, a rift in the harmony of the academic chorus, which relates to the discourse of who has access to the chorus and whose voice is heard.

For this queer theoretical critique, it is fruitful to focus my autobiographical writing on my embodiment. In my autoethnographic observation and writing, I am constantly in touch with my own physicality. My writing and researching self are a third wheel between the sheets when dealing with my sexuality, the sexual act, and my sexual identity. My own body is the object of scrutiny. The object of visual analysis is my images, my figurative embodiment. Since embodiment is determined by socio-cultural perceptions and values, visual embodiment is inevitably a social and political activity. Corporeality is also the key that describes my awakening sexuality. It guides my narrative as I stimulate my embodied experiences through expressive expression and metaphor. My autobiographical embodiment thus intersects personal experience and the social dimension, providing the basis for my queer theoretical critique.

4.2 Practice-led creative writing research

My methodological framework is practice-led creative writing research and analysis, because these allow me to combine a creative approach with research (Harper 2023, 26–40). The disciplinary-theoretical component of my research draws on gender and masculinities studies, visual and queer theories, culture

studies, creative writing and literature studies. My methodology produces a self-narrative told in different registers. My self-narrative continuously creates my narrative identity, a process of actively interpreting myself as part of social processes (Cavarero 2000; Meretoja 2018). My narrative identity and self-narrative are a temporal phenomenon through which I can create meanings by bringing together past, present, and future (Benhabib 1999, 353). Therefore, my identity is not monolithic and unchanging, but open and multilayered, capable of manifesting itself as different, even contradictory identities (Jytilä 2022, 35).

In practice-led creative writing research, creative practice plays an important role (Harper 2023, 34), as practice is always at the center, even if it deals with critical understanding or theoretical reflection (Kroll & Harper 2013, 2). Jeri Kroll and Graeme Harper (2013, 1) state in the introduction to *Research Methods in Creative Writing* that not only does creative writing research provide insights into writing practices, but also creative writing itself can generate new knowledge. Practice-led creative writing research as a methodology involves imagination, practice, and critical reflection working together, questioning and supporting each other. Many other research methods use language as a tool, but words are the material and core of creative writing (Kroll & Harper 2013, 3.) Practice-led creative writing research and analysis provide specific tools and sufficient scope for research, as the pursuit of the personal and the desire to create something new are the most common reasons for engaging in creative writing. This individualism manifests itself both in contemporary, individual human activity and in texts, and is common in many creative fields. (Kroll & Harper 2013, 4–5.) According to the leading creative writing scholar Graeme Harper (2023, 27), creative writing practices and outcomes are very rarely tested systematically. A hypothesis – if there is one at all – is usually generated by intuition. It is a hunch that something might work in a certain way and produce a certain result. When creative writing produces a theory about the creative writing process itself, the theory is usually personal. The theory is an output of the individual writer-researcher, not necessarily as such shareable and applicable as a general theory. Nor can it be challenged in the manner typical of research, because to challenge such a personal theory would be to claim that creative writing is not primarily a personal and individual process.

I propose that the metaphor of confessional sfumato can contribute to creative writing theory. Since in this study I create writing theory by writing, I apply a *practice-led* methodology to my research. Graeme Harper (2023, 29) defines practice-led creative writing research as a set of identifiable methods, ways of exploring the world, analyzing observations, and making conjectures that fit alongside other human endeavors to better understand what we experience, do, sense, and think. Any or all of the activities of creative writing can be used to explore the self, potentially generating hypotheses and theories about how things happen in creative writing. Free and unconnected to scientific methods, creative writing is often described as a wayward child of the imagination, often unruly and sometimes incomprehensible, demonstrating an awareness of the world but not bound by logic or reason – except, of course, to the extent that it uses written language, which must be intelligible to others, at

least to some extent. Creative writing differs from the scientific method in that it is most often done without observation – the writer writes alone, and often does not observe or record their own actions. (Harper 2023, 27.) Harper (2023, 32) formulates aims of practice-led research as to explore creative writing by writing creatively and produce creative writing that addresses or describes the issues and topics that the writer reflects on.

Practice-led creative writing research includes several subsystems. The most obvious is, of course, writing; for creative writing to occur, one must write. Another essential one is imagination. I use imagination, that is, my inner reflections, internal mental images, and psychological and spiritual conceptions, not to develop imaginary, 'imaginative' events or plots, but to imagine something that I could not speak of, that was not allowed to exist. Practical research as a method allows for textual experimentation (see Harper 2023, 32–33) and, in the process, the creation of the *confessional sfumato*.

In my practice-led creative writing research, *creative practice* is central. I have used it in two ways in my research (Harper 2023, 34–36). The first is the 'simultaneous creative-critical.' I have done creative and theoretical work simultaneously, in parallel. What is essential in this way is that both influence and feed off each other. When working with this practice, *sfumato* also influences the writing process itself, as the boundary—the outline—between artistic and critical writing begins to blur and partially disappear altogether when blending into each other; the boundary of investigative writing becomes porous, leaking and allowing flow in both directions. In my experience, unlike the sequential approach, the simultaneous way of working leaves the door ajar for both the writing and research process. It remains open to the very end and keeps even the conclusion open to changes, new texts, and new research findings. This is the most important aspect of my dissertation writing process. The second is 'inter-knowledge.' I apply ideas and research knowledge from other disciplines to my creative writing, and my creative writing generates new theoretical insights and knowledge. This is also referred to as eclectic, because it draws from a wide range of sources. Harper prefers to use the term *comprehensive* because knowledge from other fields of science or life is often relevant to the study of creative writing, even if the writer does not have a deep scholarly understanding of those fields.

I have utilized three methods of practice-led creative writing research (see Harper 2023, 37). The first is 'imaginative conjecture.' This method has also been called 'sit and think.' I have used it to find stimuli for my imagination in recalling things and my experiences in the past. It is also a vital tool for imagining visions of the future. The second is 'experiment.' I have been experimenting with how to write a portrait, using it to generate new insights from internalized self-discrimination. I have sought to find a new way to write, to delve deeper and to challenge the writing on passing from a new perspective. The third is 'theoretical analysis and application.' Using these theoretical starting points and framework, I have defined the aims and objectives of my practice-led creative writing research. This theoretical framework is the product of my individual choice; I have selected the theories to serve my writing research process.

My hypothesis, which I have developed in practice, is that the *confessional sfumato* is a metaphor for writing – a comparison in which I refer to *sfumato* in painting and fine art, or the technique of light haze, its parallel in writing, and the method of portraiture in text. In this context, I understand mode, technique, and method as synonyms with which I aim to construct a textual portrait and describe the self. It is a method of writing a persona or biography in which a round, multilayered persona is created layer by layer by describing the internalization of cultural discourses and affects into the minds of the subject's inner world and the reactions of the inner world to the friction between it and the outer world. I have experimented with *confessional sfumato* more intuitively, thinking that it could work in a certain way and produce a certain result, or that I could paint my own portrait with da Vinci's brush-like strokes by running my fingers across the keyboard. The theoretical account I have created of how I have written my portrait is personal; it is not universal, universally applicable, although it may be applicable or useful to some other writer or researcher. My theory itself cannot be questioned, because that would mean that my own creative process is not primarily personal (see Harper 2023, 27).

4.3 Autoethnography: The friction between self and culture

I have followed in the footsteps of autoethnographer Tony E. Adams (2015, 8): 'I set out to do the work that mattered most to me, and to bring my feelings and experience to the research process.' Because as an autoethnographer I am an integral part of my own research, the method can also provide insights into areas of subjective experience that more traditional approaches cannot easily reach, such as emotions, memory, experiences, and trauma (Adams et al. 2015, 21–22, 26.) In my practice of exploring internalized self-discrimination and the *passing phenomenon*, autoethnographic writing is a method that allows me to directly access my deepest feelings and to analyze the interplay between the inner and the outer, the dialogue that takes place between, first, the inner and the outer self, and second, me and culture. In autoethnography, the key concepts are 'self' and 'culture.' They have been defined in different ways in the research field, but all definitions are united by the idea of an interactive relationship between the two (Chang 2008, 17–21, 23). According to Chang, the individual is the basic unit of culture. The individual self, in turn, is part of the cultural community. In this sense, the analysis and study of the self is always an analysis and study of culture (Chang 2008, 23). According to Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner (2000, 742), autoethnography is autobiographical writing by the researcher in which the inner and personal self and culture interact and in which cultural descriptions are mediated through language, history, and ethnographic explanation.

My autoethnographic research methodology is centered on the *remembering self* – my writing is centered on the *confessing self*. Methodologically, I do memory work, recalling and recording memories of the autobiographical self (Hustvedt 2012, 133) and the confessional self (Pelias 2019, 25–27) within the framework of autoethnographic writing. In the tradition of ethnography, which focuses on

cultural fieldwork, the researcher makes observations and writes about the 'others' under study; in autoethnography, I take myself as an object of research observation, examination, and reflection (Gannon 2016, 229). Alongside the remembering self, my research question places at the heart of the culture to which we develop and live under the influence of and exposed to. The researcher's lived experience and personal narrative are integral to my autoethnographic research (e.g., Adams et al. 2015, 30). Autoethnographic writing is at once an artistic and analytical method of 'how I come to know, name and interpret my personal and cultural experiences' (Adams et al. 2015, 1). In reflecting on my ways of being in the world, I can 'by telling my story[s] be present to each other; this act provides a space to create a relationship, manifested in the performance of writing and reading, that is reflective, critical, loving, and in solidarity' (Adams et al. 2015, 5).

When I applied to the doctoral program in April 2020, my original research plan included, in addition to autoethnographic material, a portrait based on research interviews with professional ice hockey player Janne Puhakka, the first Finnish Championship league player to publicly come out. My intention was to study passing phenomenon and internalized self-discrimination through two life stories – Janne's and my own. In my application, I wrote: 'The boundaries of masculinity are shifting or blurred for both of us. The language of science alone is insufficient; I also need belletristic language to describe the subject matter of my research – a human being seeking justification for their existence.'

I interviewed Janne extensively in the fall of 2020, but then research ethics became an insurmountable obstacle between us. I felt it would not be ethically acceptable to guide the interviewee into waters as deep and dark as I deemed necessary for the study. I was approaching a boundary I did not want, and could not, take the interviewee across. I, on the other hand, could dive as deeply into my own self as I was able. I decided to focus the study solely on myself and turn the research into an autoethnographic study.

The image reflected in the mirror formed by my photographs was not easy to look at closely and carefully. Admitting to myself the internalized homophobia, stereotypes, and inability to love myself and others lying beneath internalized self-discrimination was difficult. Many of my memories sting, and my wounds still fester. The process of turning an observant gaze on myself, my innermost thoughts, and emotions was therefore heavy and exhausting, and for that reason, as my dissertation progressed, my decision to exclude Janne from the study proved to be the right choice. Regardless, he shattered the boundaries of masculinity with his public work and tore down barriers wherever he went.

On October 14, 2024, at 10:31 AM, I received a message from the university faculty stating that my dissertation manuscript had been sent for examination to professor Tony E. Adams and dean Graeme Harper. It was time to let it go. Less than an hour later, at 11:25 AM, a message from a friend popped into my Facebook Messenger. It contained only a link to a news article: Janne Puhakka had just been murdered by his partner. Nonetheless I excluded him from this study for ethical reasons, I hope this dissertation honors his memory and all the work he did, not only for the queer community but for all of Finland.

In the autoethnographic sections of this dissertation, the present and the past, the real and the remembered, the private and the public, the personal and the

cultural, the research data and previous research, all twist together into a whole from which it is impossible to separate its parts precisely, they cannot be clearly delineated. Because I am simultaneously researching myself and cultural phenomena, research and my own life intersect, and no clear distinction can be made between them either (Chang 2016, 108; Ellis 2016, 10; Sirkkilä 2022, 259). However, through language and writing, I have the opportunity to outline, reflect on, and analyze different elements in a verbalized, written form. The freedom of verbal expression is the basis for reflecting on my experiences and feelings and making them scientifically meaningful; not for their intrinsic value, but to demonstrate their general and shared, social significance (see Holman Jones et al. 2016, 22). Autoethnography is suitable as my research method because it allows for a more artistic, permissive, creative, and polymorphous expression than is usually the case in scientific presentations. My research and writing process is also influenced by the fact that my mother tongue is Finnish, and in order to reach through my memories to my deepest feelings, it is done through the Finnish language. So, I write an autoethnographic, creative autobiographical text in Finnish and then translate it into English, which is only the third foreign language I have learned, after German and Swedish. What is special about the process is that the text is refined in English at the level of vocabulary and syntax, and that even at this stage of the writing process the ideas and thoughts take shape, become more precise and clearer.

My research topic, internalized self-discrimination and passing, lead both the researcher and the recipients of the research to difficult questions, vulnerability, and the experience of empathy (see Holman Jones et al. 2016, 24). Typically of autoethnography, I aim to conduct evocative research, that is, to evoke emotions in its recipient, either the same or different emotions I bring up. As I am concretely observing in my research the effects that the closet and passing have had on me, my focus is specifically on the emotions that internalized self-discrimination has generated in me. Reaching these feelings after decades is fumbling, largely a matter of intuition and imagination. Other feelings, such as the deep anxiety created by my self-destructive thoughts on the Katajanokka bridge in August 1988 when I went to hear the results of my first AIDS test, are not forgotten but remain vivid in my mind – I can still point to the spot I chose where I stopped to look at the water flowing under the bridge (Silvola 2023, 105). I know that the feelings may not be the same as they were years ago, but they are genuine and sincere.

Emotions are the compass, measuring tape, and yardstick of my research, with which I measure and weigh the meaningfulness of my memories. They are an integral part of the writing process. Touko Laaksonen, a.k.a. Tom of Finland, repeated in several interviews that 'my cock is my master.' By this phrase he meant that if he did not have an erection himself when he drew the picture, it could not be good for others. The image did not excite sexually. Personally, when I write, I try to get in touch with my emotions and write 'with emotion.' I also try to get my text to touch and move the reader's emotions in some way, in some direction. My text can evoke empathy and compassion, astonishment, wonder, but also disgust and rejection. All these emotions are relevant. I feel that

autoethnographic research and writing increases my understanding of myself and I hope it will increase my readers' understanding of themselves, others, and the world. Above all, I hope readers will feel that their presence in the world is at least a little more meaningful. Self-reflection sensitizes my capacity for empathy, for understanding the vulnerability of others through reading and recognizing my own vulnerability (Bochner 2016, 53–54; Andersson & Glass-Coffin 2016, 75–76).

4.4 Affection and affect in autoethnographic writing

Affects and the affection process do not only flow like blood through the veins of my subject but form the dark undercurrent that I try to capture, to verbalize. This processual and intensive mode of use is reflected in the fact that I consciously seek to affectively charge my material in order to offer perspectives on that 'dramatic and mundane' which often remains invisible and otherwise difficult to reach. Affect can be used as a concept on a thematic basis, thus broadening the scope of social research and enabling, for example, the study of embodiment; by exploring what moves or attracts people, pain, and pleasure, emotions, and memories, we bring the dramatic and everyday back into social analysis (Wetherell 2012, 2). Affect and the affection process are not only the tools or catalysts for my research and data generation, but also the instruments for analyzing the material as I assess the emotional effects of internalized self-discrimination and their intensity in the text. Affects pulse at the heart of autoethnographic and practice-led creative writing research, as the driving force behind the entire process and the production of autobiographical material. Affectively intensified moments have been a prerequisite for autobiographical reminiscences; moments of low intensity are hardly remembered, let alone felt to be worth the effort of writing. Hence the material is characterized by affectively charged life events and experiences. And by this, I do not mean to suggest that everyday life, with its seemingly insignificant events or even the absence of them, cannot contain moments charged with intense internal tension. As I described at the very beginning, my entire dissertation research has its origins in an affectively charged dream and subsequent self-understanding that has shaped my identity and guided my life choices. One twist in the spiral comes full circle as this dissertation writing has had an impact on my embodied experiences, my emotions, and my identity, and in itself shapes my affective experience.

Fruitfully for the study of practice-led creative writing, affect returns drama and the mundane to social analysis. I think of affect as a writer's intensity, with components of embodiment, emotions, and meaning formation. It draws my attention to moments of love, lust, resentment, kindness, boredom, and affection. It allows me to analyze extreme suffering and the ecstasy and rapture. It opens new avenues of thinking about contradictory and subtle emotions.

4.5 My writing body

Literary scholar Mika Hallila (2025) writes how the study of literature as cultural representations reduced interpretation centeredness, i.e., a way of thinking that always focuses on the hidden meaning of the text, achieved through close reading and/or counter-reading, beyond the manifestation. Cultural researcher Johanna Uotinen (2010, 186) defines my work as 'big' autoethnographic research, when I focus on dramatic turning points in my life instead of small and mundane topics. Autoethnographers Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner (2016), on the other hand, would classify my research as evocative autoethnography, or research that evokes images and emotions. I do not only seek to write evocatively, i.e., to evoke emotions, but to deal with emotions through writing and I seek to feel them while writing. Therefore, my embodiment is an important factor in theorizing the situation I have been in. I draw on my own body, my experiences, my anecdotes, my prejudices, my relationships, and my feelings to critically reflect on the epistemology of the closet (Sedgwick 1990; Fournier 2022, 67). I understand my embodiment in the manner of R.W. Connell (1995, 53): 'Bodily experience is often central in memories of our own lives, and thus in our understanding of who and what we are.' I apply the notion of embodied-reflexive practice, '[t]hrough which bodies are addressed by social process and drawn into history (both personal and collective), without ceasing to be bodies. They do not turn into symbols, signs, or positions in discourse' (Connell 1995, 64). At the same time, I consider what has made my experiences possible (Scott 1991) and what mechanisms of power shape the context in which I have lived these experiences (Saresma 2010, 59–61).

Uotinen (2022, 449) seeks to access *unconsciously known embodied knowledge* by applying the autoethnographic research method of walking, observing, and recording observations and thoughts that arise while walking. Uotinen writes that the body knows anyway, but to raise knowledge to the level of consciousness requires focusing the researcher's gaze on something. Since my research topic relates to sexuality as an abstraction, a representation, and a practical sex act, I am not only scrabbling my unconscious knowledge by remembering and writing, but also by making love, in a sex act.

In the late 1970s at the time of my awakening dream, in Western science the theories from biology, sociology, economics, psychology, and anthropology to myth interpretation shared the idea of a natural, universal essence of masculinity and femininity: the *sex act* (Dickason 1977, 71–98). In our identity-politicized age, in which we are engaged in a power battle over the rights and entitlements of our sexual identities, I want to focus on their core: sex. When we address the topic of sexual orientation, we cannot ignore the gender to which the orientation refers. Conceptually, therefore, options such as same, different, all, or none are relevant even though they do not cover all cases. In my case, it is a sexual orientation toward the same sex, specifically male, and a very specific preference at that. In this study, too, I extensively address the cultural and social dimensions of sexuality and gender, but I do not shy away from its core. On the contrary, I dive

headfirst into it: What kind of knowledge can the sexual act itself produce? Autoethnography as a method allows for the exploration of this simultaneously mundane and everyday, yet mind-blowing and self-shaking bodily experience, which is difficult to put into words, and of the knowledge I unknowingly know. Uotinen's concept of 'unknowingly knowing' is closely related to the notion of embodied knowledge. Both are grounded in Merleau-Ponty's body phenomenology, which emphasizes the inseparability of the body and mind: experiences, thoughts, actions, connection to the world, and thus also knowledge, all occur through the body (Merleau-Ponty 1962/1995; Parviainen 1998, 51). Embodied knowledge refers, on one hand, to awareness of one's own body and its functions, and on the other, to knowing through body-awareness and the senses (Parviainen 1998, 51; 2002, 11). Knowledge is always embodied, as it requires the existence of the body (Uotinen 2022, 438).

The autoethnographic process is itself embodied and sensual, because as a researcher and autoethnographer I know through my body and its experiences. In other words, my body is a central pathway for the formation of research knowledge, and the production of knowledge is no longer based only on observation or recollection of my own experiences but is embodied in a present empathic and reflective way of doing research (See Uotinen 2022, 439). When I apply Uotinen's method and pursue what I know without knowing by making love, the embodied knowledge, which is constantly being created, is secondary to conscious knowing (see Uotinen 2022, 439). This knowledge is difficult to access because it is fuzzy, vague, ephemeral, and hard to specify. Although lovemaking as such is often mundane and even everyday, at its peak it is extraordinary and earthmoving. In those moments, life and death are present. There are so many overwhelming emotions involved that it is impossible to analyze them coldly with a yardstick.

It is often difficult to articulate and put physical information into words, and it is not necessarily easy to grasp even by observation. Autoethnographers often take field notes. The scientific persuasiveness of this research material is based on the fact that people's lives are not only unique, but also general and generalizable (Lapadat 2017, 590; Pink 2009, 1222, 124; Uotinen 2014, 221). Uotinen writes that the generalizability of knowledge is built through contextualization and storytelling (2014, 231–232). In my own autoethnographic process, I do not take field notes, there are no note-taking devices by my bedside or a dictation device to moan or sigh over my freshly made observations during lovemaking. Instead, my mind is attuned to autoethnographic observation even before I jump between the sheets. Then I let go and enjoy the act, not as research but as lovemaking. I do the memorizing only after a considerable amount of time, when the storms generated by the experience have subsided and taken shape, and the information it has produced has been worked out in my subconscious, from which it emerges from unconscious awareness as verbalized thoughts, ideas, and insights.

5 ARTICLE SUMMARIES AND FINDINGS

My dissertation consists of three peer-reviewed articles.

The first article is ''My lies and liaisons with Marilyn': An autofictional representation of the Downtown man, a Finnish successor to the Marlboro man in the early 1990s,' SQS, vol. 16, 1–2/2022, pp. 1–18, https://doi.org/10.23980/sqs.125612. It addresses the representation of ideal masculinity and passing. I interpret the seemingly smooth and flawless image for the launch poster of Downtown, a new cigarette brand. In the article, I use the labyrinth of *film noir* as a metaphor for writing and narration to delay and prolong the interpretation of the image. I seek ambiguity, alternative interpretations, gaps, paradoxes, contradictions, and cracks in the heteronormative image. My aim is not only to make visible the structural nature of the prevailing hegemonic masculinity but also to challenge its naturalness and create space for alternative meanings emerging from the image. I demonstrate how our perspective affects what we see. I describe the extreme self-control associated with passing and introduce the *code of peeing standing up* related to hegemonic masculinity: men urinate standing, women and gay men sitting.

My research findings, in addition to the code of peeing standing up, include the ambiguity and multivalence of localization, language, and the masculinity represented in the Downtown poster, as well as the tendency of the hero to create rather than solve mysteries. The Downtown man character combines the traits of a *film noir* hero and a homosexual man, highlighting the extreme control and bluffing that a gay male model had to practice in 1990s Finland. My micro-experiences reflect what was forbidden: not homosexuality per se, but male femininity, which was automatically interpreted as submissive homosexuality. My central research finding is the *paradox of the male model*, a reading where they were 'known' to be gay, but in the images, they were 'seen' as straight. It is a mirror that shows us ourselves; representations themselves cannot be trusted. What matters is the image we, as viewers, form from the image. This quality of representations reveals how we can get lost in the image – not only in a photograph developed in a closet, but in any image – and how futile it is to search for what has never been there: the ultimate truth.

The second article is 'A counter-story to the rags-to-riches narrative: A Finnish male model wearing hobo style during the deep depression in the age of AIDS,' *Critical Studies in Men's Fashion*, special issue *Fashion in the Age of AIDS*, Vol. 10/2023, pp. 93–109, https://doi.org/10.1386/csmf_00068_1. It describes the failure in the presentation of ideal masculinity and analyzes the cracks in passing. The very publication of the article itself serves as meta-evidence of the change in the representation of masculinity, as the journal published photos – one even on the cover – that the tabloid *City* rejected thirty years ago. My queer theoretical analysis revealed six cracks in the images that made them unsuitable for publication: (1) overly groomed sideburns; (2) the expression of a sad young man, a euphemism for a homosexual man; (3) broad shoulders cropped out of the image; (4) protruding lips; (5) (wo)man spreading and a reference to the rectum; (6) a heavy lower body, slender upper body. Today, these 'cracks' are interpreted differently; the publication of the images serves as evidence that our understanding of masculinity and how we look at and see men has changed over the past thirty years. It also demonstrates the constructed and ever-changing nature of masculinity.

The autoethnographic research approach, which allowed me to take an insider perspective, to look at the images 'from within,' produced new knowledge that made me aware of my internalized homophobia. I had to look at myself both from the inside out and from the outside in. Through memory work, I revisited how I posed in front of the camera and represented my idea of ideal masculinity, and I realized how, at that time, I saw other gay men as stereotypes. I saw myself in the mirror as a (stereo)type who could not accept himself, but who no longer feels ashamed of himself. More specifically, I no longer feel ashamed of my sexuality nor am I as insecure about my masculinity as I was thirty years ago. I reveal the personal and intimate effects that passing had on me. I confess how the hostile attitude toward gay men during the AIDS era internalized into homophobia and prevented me from seeing myself and other gay men as feeling and lovable human beings, ordinary Finnish men. I question whether my text is appropriate for a research article or if my descriptions of my sexual acts are merely pornography and the narration of the rest of my life just social pornography? Are they literature, legitimate research, or mere exhibitionism?

My third article is titled 'A Male Model's Autoethnographic Writing and Queer-Theoretical Screening of gAIdar: Can Artificial Intelligence Predict Sexual Orientation, or is the Question of 'Gay or Straight' Wrong?' The first two articles focus on the representation of ideal masculinity and the cultural norms/discourses/gaze related to passing; in the first, passing succeeds, while in the second, it fails. In the third article, I critically analyze how representations of ideal masculinity are subject to surveillance. The starting point for my analysis is storytelling as I trace the closet epistemological knowledge's core to narratives and Michel Foucault's (1978) idea of the intertwining of sexuality, narration, and truth: We strive to tell the truth about our sexuality because we believe it reveals the truth about ourselves[i]. 'Gaydar,' recognizing, monitoring, and exposing gazes, can be understood as a practical example of Foucault's (1975/1977)

definition of a modern surveillance society, where bodily and public punishments have been replaced by hidden and internalized punishments. Gaydar based on artificial intelligence and using facial recognition algorithms is a real-life application of the *panopticon* that monitors and observes us everywhere. Unlike Foucault's panopticon, where prisoners were unaware when they were being watched, today we know we are being watched all the time – and we shape our behavior based on that information. Thus, gaydar as a phenomenon is a demonstration and proof of how modern surveillance and control society does not only focus its surveillance on our bodies, but effect on our minds and our behavior.

A significant epistemological finding from my research is the *epistemological trinity of the closet* – a conceptual understanding that no one part of the closet, passing, or gaydar can exist without the other two. I reflect on how individuals and communities monitor the boundary between gay and straight, normal and abnormal, with a concrete example being the resurgence of AI-based gaydar research in recent years, which seeks to predict individuals' sexual orientation using algorithms to answer the question, 'Gay or straight?' I analyze both the meaning of the term 'gay' and the ability of AI-based gaydar research to 'detect gayness' in my nine 1990s model images.

The central argument of my third article is that the question related to gaydar, 'Gay or straight?' is fundamentally flawed. I demonstrate that current AI-based gaydar research is not about predicting sexual orientation – as it assumes – but rather about the stories told about it and the representations of those stories. The term 'gay' is so broad and encompasses so many different things that categorizing people into either/or categories, as done in gaydar research, is overly simplistic – even when attempts are made to define 'gayness' as a biological-anatomical-physiological feature. My first research finding is the shift in meaning of the term 'gaydar' from the observation of social behavior to biological-anatomical speculation, using DNN software and facial recognition algorithms to predict sexual orientation from facial features. I term this kind of research gAIdar.

I analyze the use of the term 'gay' in one gAIdar study, in which facial recognition algorithms predicted individuals' sexual orientation based on images collected from social media, namely Facebook and a dating site. I show how the significance of language in the production of gender and sexuality is easily overlooked in a technology-centered society and research. In the AI study I analyzed, homosexuality is understood in an essentialist manner, as a biological, physiological, and anatomical trait, while socially constructed attributes of masculinity and femininity are naturalized as facts. In my article, I highlight the lack of precise definitions of terms and the overly narrow approach. A queer theoretical reading reveals the conceptual shortcomings of the study:

1) The researchers did not recognize, either in conducting the study or reporting it, that the data they trained their algorithm on – social media images – are entirely tied to identity construction. Online profiles serve specifically to build and present a desired identity image within a particular historical context and discourse.

2) The researchers neither attempted nor succeeded in showing that their research material was not contaminated by prevailing discourses, cultural, and environmental factors, and they were therefore unable to eliminate the influence of these discourses on both the data and their own assumptions and research parameters.

3) The researchers ignored the fact that social media and dating platforms not only serve to present identity but also to create and construct it.

4) In attempting to justify the prediction/assumption of homosexuality, the researchers had no means to standardize or define how the subjects themselves conceptualized and defined their identities and orientations; they only had information on how the individuals expressed it in a specific context: social media. The researchers did not attempt to distinguish when the assumed sexual orientation related to behavior and when it pertained more broadly to identity.

5) Based on the dating site information, it was impossible for the researchers to reliably know a person's identity or define sexual behavior as permanent; it could just as well have been as situational, fluid, polyamorous, or contradictory as the study's named categories of homosexual and heterosexual.

6) It can generally be assumed that the data collected from dating sites focused primarily on sexual behavior, while the images from Facebook may have represented more constructed sexual identity.

My epistemological research finding related to the gaze is the *unintentional flash of the eyes*, which I introduce in my article. It refers to an unconscious eye movement beyond the control of the individual, that inevitably occurs when a person sees someone they find sexually or physically attractive but tries to hide that attraction. The flash is momentary, lasting so briefly that to recognize it, one must experience and feel it in their own eyes first. In times when homosexuality was a crime and/or disease, and the majority of homosexuals lived in the closet, gay individuals were skilled at noticing this flash in others because they had felt it in their own eyes so many times.

From an epistemological perspective and in terms of *confessional sfumato*, the most significant finding about the closet is my new insight into its nature and dimensions. My central concepts, closet, passing (for straight), and gaydar, form a whole, which I have named the *epistemological trinity of the closet*. I describe the epistemic trinity of the closet as a situation where no one part can exist without the other two; it is like a three-legged stool that collapses if one leg breaks. My theory of the epistemological trinity of the closet encompasses the phenomena of the closet, passing, and gaydar as inseparable, intertwined, and mutually enabling or generating factors in the epistemology of the closet. Without the existence of the closet, passing for straight would not be necessary, as there would be no need to conceal one's orientation. Passing and the concealment it entails are prerequisites for the gaydar phenomenon. Without concealment, there would be nothing to 'recognize,' 'predict,' 'spy on,' 'expose,' or 'know.' Gaydar, in turn, is the carpenter who builds the closet. The glances, looks, and spying, whether recognizing, communicating, prying, or revealing, or their avoidance are the planks and nails that construct the closet.

My theory of the epistemological trinity of the closet is not an attempt to replace other epistemological theories or approaches to the closet but to introduce a new perspective to the research. My theory does not, for instance, replace or even overlap with intersectional theory and the concept of intersecting, overlapping, and cumulative bases of discrimination, but rather interlocks with it. Understanding the epistemological trinity of the closet as spatial dimensions helps to comprehend the closet not only as a linguistic construct and a space of writing but also as a physical, social, and cultural space. One lives in the closet, it provides protection and safety, it restricts, and one can come out of it. Passing is a state of being in which the subject exists, lives, acts, and feels. One is always in a space and situation when under the scrutiny of gaydar. Understanding the trinity as a spatial space helps to conceptualize from which position the closet is studied and written about using *confessional sfumato*: from inside the closet, from the outside at ground level, from a bird's-eye view of the researcher or public authority, or from the pressure of the closet door's gap.

We are increasingly living in a digitized world. Even something as simple as the fact that mobile phone cameras typically have wide-angle lenses and that photos are taken at close range results in an optical distortion, where the nose and other central facial features appear disproportionately large compared to the rest of the face in a close-up. For this reason, selfies taken with a mobile phone are not accepted for official documents such as passports, ID cards, and driver's licenses.[8] However, the optical distortions of selfies are a small imperfection of digitalization compared to beauty filters in digital applications. These filters smooth our skin, reshape our facial structure to fit prevailing beauty ideals, refine our noses, plump our lips, enlarge our eyes, change their color, and alter the color, length, and style of our hair, as well as add or remove facial hair in any desired shape. In other words, our image has become almost entirely detached from its material core and ourselves as the camera's object as a living, breathing subject of flesh and blood. Almost, but not entirely. Even if a filter modifies our already optically distorted image into something radiant, smooth, and beautiful, our features are usually still recognizable to those who know us: 'Yes, that's them in the picture, even though they doesn't look that good in real life,' their friends might think when they see their photos.

If I take as a starting point my conclusion that 'deep neural networks are more accurate than humans at detecting sexual orientation expressed on social media from facial images,' and emphasize the intentional expression of sexuality – self-definition in the context of social media – but I do not assume they are capable of predicting any existential truth about us, the use of beauty filters could be an intriguing subject for the study of digital images and image manipulation. After all, AI and deep neural networks can easily be trained to recognize the use of filters in images. Based on this, one could analyze what kinds of individuals prefer to use filters and which do not. This analysis opens an entirely new avenue for considering why and what factors influence the fact that we undeniably use

8 Poliisi.fi: https://poliisi.fi/documents/25235045/31329600/Poliisin-passikuvaohje-2020-FI.pdf/d7709348-8248-09a0-8b74-7526e6ee2a5d/Poliisin-passikuvaohje-2020-FI.pdf?t=1600339651285

more and more filters, even though they only depict us in a referential manner, and even though we have become better at recognizing filter-edited images with the naked eye. I began my dissertation research with the question of *whether a gay man can represent the average Finnish man or only present this role*. However, this new avenue transforms the research question entirely: *Who do filtered images present, and what do they represent?*

6 *CONFESSIONAL SFUMATO*

When I embarked on this autobiographical research project, I wasn't searching for an answer to the typical autobiographer's question 'Who am I [gay or straight]?' Instead, I began to outline the question 'How am I in the world?' and to fumble for an answer to it. The counter-question that arose was 'How is the world in me?' From the perspective of my research subject, which is internalized self-discrimination and the phenomenon of passing for straight, the way I exist in the world is most significantly defined by my sexuality, one of the most important sources of life force for me. Therefore, I formulated a follow-up question: 'What does narrating my sexuality reveal about my selfhood?' and a further question: 'How can I narrate my sexuality as descriptively and precisely as possible, truthfully?' The questions from which I started, but which I hoped would lead me back to the original question of my way of being in the world, stem from the closet: 'How did I present myself as straight in front of the camera when I was in the closet?' and 'What feelings did that performance evoke?'

The most important research outcomes, in terms of my research questions, are, first, the double paradox of the male model: 'they were known to be gay, but they were seen as straight' (Silvola 2022). Second, the epistemological trinity of the closet, passing, and gaydar, which forms a metaphorical yet always social, cultural, and societal space, none of which could exist without the other two (Silvola 2025). Third, the *unintentional flash of the eyes*, which is an involuntary and uncontrollable reaction to life itself, i.e., sexuality, attraction, sexual desire, and lust (Silvola 2025). Fourth, the code of peeing standing, in which culminates the entire performance of hegemonic masculinity: real men pee standing, women and gays sitting (Silvola 2022). Fifth, the tendency, stemming from internalized homophobia and internalized self-discrimination, to see myself and other gay men as stereotypes, not as real, ordinary, lovable men (2023). Sixth, *confessional sfumato*, a metaphor and technique of writing through which I describe my uncertain, confused, fickle, multilayered, contradictory, ever-changing, incomplete self.

The research outcomes form a partial answer to my main question about my way of being in the world. The most significant closet epistemological observation relates to the double paradox of the male model: the knowledge and

the paradoxical flipping of that knowledge upside down. A person who is 'known' to be gay but who is 'seen' as straight, and who is actually gay, is firmly trapped between the door and the frame. While they suffer the social penalties of homosexuality, they miss out on both the social rewards that fall seemingly naturally and automatically to straight men and those that come out. This is the double burden resulting from partial knowledge inherent in the male model's double paradox. The state and situation are not only paradoxical; they are impossible. Not only because of the secrecy, silence, and lies that the situation requires but also because of the unintentional flash of the eyes when sexual, compulsive yet unfulfilled desire bursts uncontrollably to the surface. These flickers create a new closet within the closet, as the subject must hide in social situations behind their eyelids and eyelashes or completely avert their gaze. Passing for straight proves to be a continuous performance, culturally and temporally bound. In Finnish society, the imperative for men to pee standing up has been an overwhelming command, imperative, manifesting how performative our gender presentations are and how culture extends its watchful eye even into the most private of spaces, the toilet, to observe our actions and postures. Because I limited my research subject to the early 1990s, the so-called AIDS era when there was no effective medication for the virus, the question 'How is the world in me?' produces an answer of discrimination and outright hatred. My joy, the source of pleasure and life force, was seen as the gateway through which the 'gay plague' spread to Finland. The penalties were severe: exclusion, being ignored, outright rejection. My source of life force drained; desire disappeared. Joy and pleasure were nowhere to be found. Ahead lay decades of exhausting aridity.

Confessional sfumato is the most significant outcome of my research, and in it culminates – or more precisely, through it, I write my entire dissertation. It metaphorically blends the brushstrokes of two late masters, da Vinci and Rousseau. da Vinci's soft and transparent strokes combine with Rousseau's soulful ones, but I paint life experiences, knowledge, skills, and wisdom with my brush layer by layer – acquired through hard work and perseverance, through extreme pain and suffering, but also through joy, pleasure, and success. Bringing forth and highlighting this knowledge, rooted in life experience, is of utmost importance in this day and age, especially in Finland, where age discrimination, ageism, is the most common basis of exclusion, and yet nothing is being done about it. Aging and elderly people – those who have already contributed their share to society – are often spoken of in a negative tone, referred to as a burden, waste, and a sustainability gap. Long-acquired, experience-based knowledge and expertise are seen as a hindrance in Finland, not as an admirable achievement or a competitive advantage. Advanced age is an unquestioned, self-evident reason for exclusion from many services and opportunities. In the job market, those over 55 are not hired and more often dismissed and retraining for career changers – especially for those rendered unemployed by the rapid development of digitization and artificial intelligence, and the extinction of entire industries – is not supported. The elderly are literally left to die due to lack of care; people are dying all the time, both in their own homes and in care homes, simply because of insufficient care. The situation of aging people in Finland is so shocking that it

is hard to even comprehend. At the same time, we wash our hands, faces and our dirty laundry by shining as the 'happiest nation in the world.' After surviving the age of AIDS and the open hatred society directed toward me and others like me, I believed I would never have to face anything similar from society again. How wrong I was! Today it is clear that in the future, we will face cold abandonment, even though we have torn the skin off our backs to take care of others, as the Nordic welfare state model, where we take care of each other at the beginning and end of the life cycle by collectively paying taxes, is being dismantled.

A Darkroom of My Own: Confessions of a Male Model is a self-narrative that sustains me, helping me get through to tomorrow. It is an emotional journey into my past and an ever-ongoing remodeling or re-imaging (Vänskä 2012) of my self-image. To tell this travelogue, I have developed the metaphor of *confessional sfumato*, where performance, the language games of concealment, lying, and revealing, and confession, i.e., the pursuit of truth, intertwine. While the most significant confessors are Church Father Augustine with his work *Confessiones* (397–401) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau with *Les Confessions* (1782–1787), the common thread of *confessional sfumato* is formed by Michel Foucault (1978), whose discourse places confession within the framework of the archaeology and genealogy of knowledge in the construction of Western subjectivity. In the introduction to *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault presents confession, and the discourse of confession, as means of producing 'truth,' which was ultimately interpreted as sexual.

The portrait of the male model, which I paint with autobiographical *confessional sfumato*, is placed in this long rhetorical tradition. But unlike its predecessors, who are characterized by telling their own life story as the history of 'becoming themselves,' as well as the constant analysis of their own actions, emotions, and motives (Julien 2002: 18–22), my painting depicts the disappearance of the foundation of selfhood. I take a critical view of the 'true self' narrative based on telling sexuality as a too simplistic story of reality, and I find the idea of sexuality as the 'ultimate truth about a person' too narrow (see Pakkanen 2007, 15), but I do not question the truthfulness of selfhood per se. What I challenge is specifically the 'illusion of the true self' (see Karkulehto 2007, 132) as a coherent narrative of selfhood, as a narrative and selfhood that would be 'original' and unchanging and something that could be 'discovered.' Instead, in my self-narrative, I aim for a 'truthful' self, which is partially true and is true here and now, in the moment. It is incomplete, contradictory, situational, fluid, and constantly under formation, becoming something *new, other*. I developed the metaphorical *confessional sfumato* to describe my life inside and outside the closet and to tell my story by narrating the sexuality that defines me. Personally, and subjectively, sexuality and sex are not the only factors that define my selfhood, but they are central and therefore some of the most significant sources of my life force.

I believe that *sfumato* is particularly well suited as a metaphor for (auto)biographical confessions of sexuality because, in painting, it has often been used specifically in portraits. It metaphorically depicts both the manner of telling

– repetition, overpainting/rewriting/re-imaging – and the depiction of the subject, i.e., the softening of contours, the blurring of outlines from view. The repeated layers of paint and numerous brushstrokes aptly describe the processual and incomplete nature of creating a portrait. The paint or ink doesn't have time to dry before a new layer is brushed over it; the image is never finished. The metaphor is especially apt for describing the process of internalizing self-discrimination, where contours and boundaries blur as the colors blend and shift from light to shadow. What fascinates me about the metaphor is its tension: with each new layer of paint, the visible image changes, but the image beneath the layers does not disappear; it merely becomes almost hidden under the new layers, continuing to shine through and resonate in our souls, even though it remains out of sight. Another tension arises from the sliding movement from light to shadow and from shadow to light, which is an apt comparison to stepping into and out of the closet. After all, the closet is a dark place where we hide something that cannot withstand the light of day. Autobiographically, it is particularly applicable in my research, which is based on advertising and fashion images, in yet another way, as light and shadow are especially significant in photography and the photograph itself.

All in all, *sfumato* describes life in the closet in a multidimensional way. The processualism of the metaphor's repetition reflects how the discriminatory values of culture and affects are internalized, painting themselves into our inner selves without us realizing it and shaping themselves into a self-discriminatory narrative of the self that we tell day after day to ourselves and others. Emotions are the material of the autobiographer, creative writer, and autoethnographer, evoked by reminiscing and recalling memories. In this research, present and past, real and imagined memories, private and public, personal and cultural, accumulating new research material and previous research, are intertwined into a braid from which it is impossible to separate precisely its parts.

Earlier, I presented the idea of David Halperin (1995, 29) that 'the deep essence of the closet is not to act as a hiding place for homosexuals, but to protect the heterosexual population and reinforce the illusion of heterosexuality; the closet is not so much a protection against knowledge of someone's homosexuality, but against the demand to consider knowledge of someone's homosexuality,' and I return to it once more. The idea illustrates how meaning-making works. Halperin turns attention to the mainstream, heterosexuals, as if without our noticing. This shift is analogical to the double paradox of the male model, where the reasoning and views of the hegemonic majority are turned upside down in an absurd and irrational way to advance their own interests and to protect their grand narrative and world order. Consequently, the minority is pushed to the margins as the backdrop of the image or the pedestal of the privileged, again, even though they are the object of study and the subject of discussion.

In my master's thesis, I pointed out that life in the closet is not just about silences, but above all about lies and lying. However, lying can be difficult to admit, to confess, so it is easier to talk only about silences and omissions. But what are the effects of lying on the subject? The philosopher Hannah Arendt

wrote in her essay 'Truth and Politics' (1967) that the real consequence of the systematic and total substitution of lies for truth is not that the lie is accepted as truth and the truth is reduced to a lie. The real consequence is that our ability to navigate in the real world is destroyed. To navigate requires a separation between truth and falsehood. Let me turn Arendt's idea of truth around once more to the closet and the lies told in the closet. Life in the closet is based not only on non-telling, on silences, but on outright lies. But that does not mean in all cases that lies replace the truth; they only present it. On the contrary, forced lies may glorify and sharpen the ability to distinguish truth from lies, the ability to see more clearly and to love truth more deeply. Even to the point of confessing to lying. Underneath the layers of *confessional sfumato*, there may lie truth, even if we do not want to see it or cannot bear to look at it, even it would burn our eyes blind.

Our portrait is not a stagnant, 'finished' or complete painting on the wall of a museum, but a living image that is constantly being repainted, layer by layer, transforming over time. In a *confessional sfumato*, I experiment with different writing techniques to reflect the unfinished state, leaving the image open, the painting wet, while generating new insights into the process of internalizing discriminating discourse and affects. I define the metaphor of *confessional sfumato* according to the following basic principles.

1. My aim is to draw a blurred line between what is acceptable and what is not.
2. I am not trying to write a plot-driven story, but to paint the smallest, day-to-day, trivial, micro-historical events that you might not pay attention to, but where internalization happens.
3. With a broader brush, I trace on canvas the movements between my inner and outer self and my border crossings between self and culture. My text reveals how the internalized image is transformed, the contours slip and change place. The whole image changes, then disappears altogether. The self disappears. *I* disappear. (Article 1.)
4. As a writer I endeavor to increase my awareness of my own position and to reflect on myself in relation to the culture, society, and theme I am writing about.
5. My aim is to breathe life into theory and to show the diversity of reality that may be invisible in abstracted theoretical representations. Everyday experiences and emotions are subjective; each individual subject's experience is significant.
6. I foreground the effects, moods, and emotions that the phenomenon passing has (Article 2.)
7. Writing with *sfumato* is fragmentary and episodic, because life as such does not form a coherent, causal, plot-driven story. The reader forms a story by making sense of the fragments. This story changes from one reader, time, and place to another; it is a different story for different readers. Similarly,

the author, as the first reader of their text, looks at the text, reads it, and forms their story in different ways at different times.

8. Writing is free, intuitive, and associative. The writer has the freedom to write about events or ideas that on the surface seem to be out of context (Article 1.)
9. Writing is repetitive. The same thing is returned to and written about again and again. In different words or in the same words. You cannot finish a portrait in one go. It is never finished, even after death. (Articles 1, 2, and 3.)
10. Writing and text are evocative, that is, as a writer I try to experience emotions, i.e., to write 'with emotion' and to evoke emotions in the reader, although not necessarily the same emotions that I experience when I write.
11. When writing a portrait, I use imagination and fantasy. Places and spaces that I have not enough knowledge or experience of must be imagined. Imagining is different from lying or cheating; imagining is not the same as lying or cheating. (Article 1.)
12. I am allowed to lie if it is meaningful in itself and the act of lying tells the truth. (Article 1.)
13. A portrait is created as a by-product. It is formed by the weight of accumulating fragments. The narration and writing of fragments are the purpose of everything.
14. Writing is a process without a precise plan, but a persona is created layer by layer, open to the information that each new layer generates and the direction it points to.
15. It is impossible to create a 'life story' by writing, because there is no such thing. Life is not a story, but a series of events. A story can be created and told knowing that it is a story and does not describe life as such. Life has no plan, no plot.
16. A portrait written with *sfumato* is not meant to replicate reality but to capture the essence of a moment, a mood, or a fragment of being.
17. Writing a portrait demands patience; it is a slow, deliberate unveiling. Each layer adds depth, but no layer is ever final.
18. Time is nonlinear in *sfumato*. Past, present, and future blur together, reflecting the subjective experience of memory and perception.
19. Memory is fluid and unreliable, yet it forms the foundation of the narrative. Writing navigates the tension between remembering and forgetting.
20. *Sfumato* describes 'how,' not 'what,' or 'what kind.'
21. The act of writing with *sfumato* embraces imperfection. The smudges, the shadows, and the blurred edges are not flaws but integral parts of the portrait. *Sfumato* is used when writing about contradictory, sliding, mutable differences. *Sfumato* describes inconsistencies.

22. With *sfumato*, you write from light to shadow and from shadow to light. It makes visible outlines invisible and invisible outlines visible.

23. Writing with *sfumato* is a dialogue – not only between the writer and the text but also between the writer and the reader, the self and the world. Each word opens a space for interpretation, layering the narrative with possibilities.

24. *Sfumato* respects the reader's freedom. It does not dictate meaning but offers an invitation to explore, to interpret, to feel, to create alongside the writer.

25. Writing a portrait with *sfumato* continues even after the pen stops scribbling or the fingers cease running across the keyboard. Even if the curtain falls, the last sentence never ends with a period, nor does the story conclude with 'the End.' The writer does not seek closure but embraces open-endedness, leaving space for the unknown, the unresolved, and the infinite possibilities that extend beyond the text.

I never call you by your name. 'You can call me whatever you want,' you said and never call me by my name.

'Hey, man, how's it going?' you ask. 'Hey! Good. Nice to see you,' I reply.

We wrap our arms around each other. Every bump and hollow of my body find their place in you. You squeeze me tightly, and I press myself closer against you. I lift my face, reaching with my lips for your, but you turn your head away. My lips brush the side of your chin. 'You're not into kissing?' I ask quietly. 'We're not on that phase yet,' you reply. You slide your fingers down my smooth, velvet-soft back. Your hands stop at my buttocks and squeeze.

We had been seeing each other for three or four weeks, having sex, before we spent our first night together. Sex, yes. When we went to bed, you reached out for me with your long, strong, incredibly muscular arms. With them, you, the king, locked me in a golden cage.

Your iron chest muscles are plump pillows on which I lay down my head. My right ear is an anvil, pounded by a hammering heart. Your stubble scrapes the top of my head as our legs intertwine like grapevine. During the night, I pull away from you, but each time your hands reach out and pull me back. Your arms wrap around me, firm yet gentle, to keep me there, where I never want to leave again. That's when I realize I've awakened to my dream.

I didn't lean over petri dishes, didn't peer at the world through a microscope lens, nor did I calculate statistical probabilities. No; I tore off my clothes, threw myself onto you on the bed, and spread my legs wide, wide, from east to west, and served my lust and the rest. You descended upon me heavy with your boiling fluids and opened me in one starving yank like a box of chocolates. In that fleeting moment I wondered if are you the type who devours the best pieces first and leaves the ones with berries, the sour cherries for last, or the kind who saves the most delicious piece, the jewel of the box crowned with a precious nut, for the end, savoring it slowly, sucking, letting it melt in your mouth as if you couldn't bear it to pass your throat and swallow it at all. You, galloping in my veins, panting, holding the reins. At last, you pour your lava into my drains. Stained, crumpled sheets, the tingling beads of sweat on my velvet chest, your savory and sweet juice inside me, and the dark purple bruises on my arms consist of my research material. That's how I conducted this study.

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ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

I

"MY LIES AND LIAISONS WITH MARILYN" AN AUTOFICTIONAL REPRESENTATION OF THE DOWNTOWN MAN, A FINNISH SUCCESSOR TO THE MARLBORO MAN IN THE EARLY 1990S

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"MY LIES AND LIAISONS WITH MARILYN"

An Autofictional Representation of the Downtown Man, a Finnish Successor to the Marlboro Man in the Early 1990s

Kari Silvola

ABSTRACT

In this autobiographical/autofictional article, I analyze the representation of masculinity, an advertising poster for a new Finnish cigarette brand from the 1990s recession, when a new man, a "softie," debuted under the pressure of the traditional male model and the twenty-first-century dudes and lads. The model posing in the poster is a homosexual, me. In the article I ask whether a gay could represent a Finnish man in the early 1990s or only present him. I examine the picture with a queer eye in search of inconsistencies and distortions that break present alternative interpretations to heteronormativity.

Keywords: homosexuality, masculinity, heteronormativity, advertising, representation, autofiction

ABSTRAKTI

"Valheeni ja viettelykseni Marilyn kanssa". Downtown-miehen eli Marlboro-miehen suomalaisen manttelinperijän autofiktiivinen representaatio

Analysoin autobiografisessa/autofiktiivisessä artikkelissani maskuliinisuuden representaatiota, uuden suomalaisen tupakkamerkin julistetta, lama-ajalta 1990-luvun alusta, jolloin uusi mies, "pehmo", debytoi perinteisen miehen mallin ja 2000-luvun äijien ja jätkien puristuksessa. Julisteessa poseeraava malli on homoseksuaali, minä. Artikkelissa kysyn, voisiko homo edustaa suomalaista miestä 1990-luvun alussa vai vain esittää tätä. Tarkastelen kuvaa queerilla katseella etsien epäjohdonmukaisuuksia ja vääristymiä sen heteronormatiivisuudessa ja esitän sille vaihtoehtoisia tulkintoja.

Avainsanat: homoseksuaalisuus, maskuliinisuus, heteronormatiivisuus, mainonta, representaatio, autofiktio

Writing this article has been like watching an old film and suddenly recognizing someone vaguely familiar from the past and exclaiming: "Pause it, I know that man!" I examine this "paused" image from an advertisement in November 1991, in which I, a homosexual model, represent a Finnish man (Image 1). The early 1990s is an interesting period in Finland, because it presented in media culture and advertising an image of the "new man," a "softie" who fell between the traditional Finnish man, a war or a labor hero, and the twenty-first-century dudes and lads (Rossi 2009, 12). Although this image of masculinity is *presented* in the advertisement by a homosexual, I analyze its representation in a heteronormative matrix (Butler 1999); in 1990s Finland, I was not able to *represent* anything else but a heterosexual man and to stay in the closet (see Sedgwick 1990) as a homosexual male model.[1] During all those years in the closet, I could not make myself be seen. Therefore, I started to look for myself in retrospect in the advertising pictures taken of me in which I unambiguously played a straight man. In this article, I analyze this gay model's succeeding and

1 To distinguish presentation from representation I rely on Hall's (2013, 15) constructionist approach to representation as a production of meaning through language, signs and images, and presentation as an act or performance without "standing for" something or someone else. Therefore, the male figure in the image represents and stands for a Finnish man.

failing to pass for straight. If I do not pass for straight in the picture, why not? By taking a critical stance against the heteronormativity reproduced and naturalized in and by advertising images (see Saco 1992, 25; Rossi 2003), I aim to find inconsistencies and distortions and make room for alternative interpretations.

In the 1990s it was impossible to represent homosexuals openly in Finnish media except as objects of laughter or mockery in jokes and sketches. The media could hardly report about us freely and in a positive light, because the "Finnish Section 28" was removed as late as 1999, meaning that encouraging same-sex "unchastity" publicly was illegal, even though homosexuality itself had been decriminalized in 1971. This law made the press self-censor and it was used as an excuse not to publish any neutral or respectful news about homosexuality. One favorable exception to the rule was Leena-Maija Rossi's article about Tom of Finland in *Helsingin Sanomat* at the time of release of the Downtown campaign in January 1992 (Rossi 1992).

Downtown, a Finnish cigarette brand of Rettig Ltd., was launched and the campaign poster released in 1992. There is a man and a woman in the picture. The ambiance is dark, like on a stormy November night. And it really was pouring rain. Marilyn lies on the desk, squeezed between the fan and the radio which is on. I am taking five from my performance on stage and looking straight at the camera – at you. Marilyn looks at me, maybe seductively or lovingly. My top shirt button is open, the tie pulled loose, the hat pushed back. Everything shows that at last, it is time to cut loose and let the devil out. The advertisement raises a question about the nature of our relationship. Are we a couple or is Marilyn my fag hag and I, her flamboyant handbag? Am I a *film noir* hero or a flashy designer purse that sparks joy when taken to the theatre, art exhibition, shopping, and late lunch, but is never held at parties and soirées where only married couples

Image 1: Photo by Pekka Järveläinen 1992. Photo of the original poster by Lauri Eriksson and graphic design by Rikhard Luoto 1991.

or the family are invited, and stored in the wardrobe? The questions raise new ones. What kind of a man is the "Downtown man," what kind of masculinity does he represent in the picture, and what kind of masculinity do I represent? Therefore, I keep asking, if I could represent and not just present "an ordinary Finnish man" or even better "a real man"? These questions are a continuum of my previous research finding, the double standard of the closet: it rejects stereotypical homosexuals (Silvola 2020). In this article, I analyze a representation in which a male model labeled as homosexual passes for straight and not only presents but also represents a Finnish man.

Methodology: My Gaze

If the Downtown man had had a profile on social media, he would probably have stated his relationship status "hard to explain." "They" – he and Marilyn – exists in a world that manifests itself only through images and visual representations (see Vänskä 2006, 12). "They" live literally in a society of spectacle, where people's affairs are mediated by images and life itself has been transformed into a representation (see Debord 2005, 35–36; Vänskä 2006, 12). My poses are based on repetitive performances of gender defined in Butler's performative gender theory (1999) embedded with representations in the sense of re-presenting not reality as such but other representations (Dyer 1993, 2; Nieminen 2006, 25) which I have studied in literature, movies, TV series, music videos, magazines, and fashion catalogs all my life. An image, language, speech, text, and discourse can all be perceived as factors that produce and form our reality (see Vänskä 2006, 13). After the "pictorial turn" (Mitchell 1994/2005) and "visual turn" (Jay 2002), our worldview has changed into an image and our bodies into the canvas or screen where values and attitudes – a good and happy life worth striving for – are projected (Vänskä 2006, 13).

My research material is autobiographical: a photograph of a poster, the emails sent by its photographer Lauri Eriksson, a star photographer of the 1990s Finnish fashion scene (see Onninen 2022), his related memories and the memories I share with him. The photograph is in a plastic bag on page nine in my old model book. The dimensions are 10 x 12 inches. The color picture of the original poster was taken by the photographer Pekka Järveläinen in studio four at United Magazines; the poster itself was photographed by Eriksson in his studio at 17 Union Street, Helsinki. Instantly, the picture takes me back to the moments when I saw the poster at Helsinki-Vantaa Airport, at the ship terminal in Stockholm and years later in the window of a tobacco shop, Havanna Aitta in central Helsinki. Then, it takes me back to castings and other occasions where I have showcased my model book and pitched myself thirty years ago.

Today, I examine the photograph with a professional Dörr LL-572 loupe. With a queer gaze I look at it from a temporal distance, in detail and against the grain (see, e.g., Rossi 2003; Karkulehto 2011). I apply heuristic semiotics by reading the signs that carry meanings and codes that support ideologies (Fiske 1990, 61–62). It is methodologically essential that I base my visual analysis on Juha Hurme's (2017) idea of an abstract chasm between person and character. He sees theatre, film, and advertising as all situated in a huge, invisible abstract chasm: two things are always seen as crossing it and merging into one; on stage, screen, celluloid or paper, everyone and everything starts to act, and everyone knows that things do not really happen, they are played out. The magical merger happens when the model becomes one with the character of the poster: the autobiographical "I" that narrates the memoirs, the "I" of the utterance and the "I" that writes this article also merge. The merger destabilizes my narration.

The "Downtown man" image is a result of previous representations of a type, like the title character of *Dick Tracy* (1990), a film directed by and

starring Warren Beatty and co-starring Madonna. Based on them we recognize the type, yet it is a presentation of myself. Masculinity has been defined in many ways, such as a category, a configuration, an ideal and a subject position (see Rojola 2004; Connell & Messerschmidt 2005) and a Butlerian performance (Butler 1999; Jokinen 2003, 25–27). I approach masculinity as a representation. My performance of masculinity electrified the homo–hetero dichotomy if we assume that gender is real and that men represent masculinity (Nieminen 2006, 25), because the Downtown man was played by a gay man; in the age when homosexuals were still widely classified as a "third" gender. In other words, masculinity was presented by a guy, who experienced being culturally and socially considered as not fully a "real" man, even as a "non-man."

This research article is a Chinese box, a Russian doll (McHale 1987, 112; Füredy 1989, 745), or story-within-the-story (Ricardou 1981), that contains both autobiographical and autofictional material. Without the fiction included in the autobiography, it would not be possible to do research the way I do. Eriksson tells me in his email (2021) that the embedded story that the advertisement is trying to tell us was written by the late Thor Forsskåhl, Rikhard Luoto and himself. Forsskåhl was the leader of the design team of the advertising agency Erva-Latvala. Luoto was the art director, who designed the visual image of the campaign.[2] Eriksson was not only the photographer but also the copywriter. This professional advertising team created a story about the Downtown man and Marilyn where nothing was real (see Genette 1993, 75–77). The signs in fiction do not refer to the real world, but act as self-reflective mirrors (Cohn 2006, 18; see de Man 1983, 17), so our Downtown man does not have an "extratextual existence" but is repeatedly returned to his image (Genette 1993, 25), whereas the fictional character of Marilyn is more complex because she is recognizable as a Hollywood star, originally named Norma Jeane. This story is embedded in another story, an autobiography/autofiction of a model who plays the Downtown man's role. This narrative no longer only refers to itself, but the name of its narrator and protagonist are extratextually connected to the name of a real person and to documented real-life events (Genette 1993, 35, 76–77).

Autobiography and autofiction emphasize authorship. Though Barthes (1977) declared the author dead it does not mean that the author is devoid of meaning. And although Foucault (2010) classified homosexuality as a cultural, historical, and social construction, it does not mean that gay identity has no cultural, historical, and personal consequences (see Dyer 2002, 78). I rely on Dyer's (ibid., 79) idea of authorship and homosexuality as a performance we all do, but only within the terms and discourses available to us, and whose relationship to any assumed self that produces that performance cannot be taken for granted. Likewise, I rely on Butler's (1999, 177) concept of performativity: the body is performed or "made" by ever-repeating performances on top of previous performances; thus, the body is not completely free for any kind of performance but is trapped in its own history. She suggests "that gendered bodies are so many 'styles of the flesh.' These styles all never fully self-styled, for styles have a history, and those histories condition and limit the possibilities"; she considers gender "as a corporeal style, an 'act,' as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where 'performative' suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning." For Dyer (2002, 79), exploring gay authorship means studying the specific ways in which they are presented in texts. Such an understanding sees the author as a real person, but in a "decentralized" way (Wolff 1981). Therefore, it matters that *I* am writing this text, because of what my material and social positions are in relation to other discourses that I may or may not have access to (Dyer 2002, 79–80). In other words,

2 Luoto is no longer in the advertising business, but I have his permission to name him here.

I can write this story because I have certain gay signs and codes – often unknown to non-homosexuals – from the 1990s at my disposal. Moreover, the word within reach at that time, was "gay;" that was the word with which I conceptualized my identity.

In autobiographical discourse, the narrative voice is plural. According to Lejeune (1989, 8–11), in autobiographical discourse the self is always divided, because whenever I say "I" about myself, I am divided into the self of the act of expression and the self of the utterance, the latter representing the character on the level of utterance. In this article, the narrating self is more multilayered. On one level, there is a "model" whose voice belongs to the character in the image, the Downtown man. On the other, diegetic,[3] level is the actual model acting the character for the camera. I aim to describe both truthfully. In autobiographical narrative, a sincere pursuit of the truth is enough, even outright lies and memory distortions tell their own truth about me (ibid., 24–25). My memories change over the years and remembering is an active process involving imagination. I invent my past time and again, but I know how to distinguish a truth from a lie (Hustvedt 2012, 120–121). Therefore, this story is based on the latest version of my memory and though I (re)search myself in a fictional representation which requires imagination, I refrain from fabricating events that never happened or untrue stories but write about something that was impossible to speak out then.

When the voices are decentralized and the corporeal subject is absent from the text, one doubts the stability of narration (Lejeune 1989, 8–11). This instability is the prerequisite for my approach and method. Päivi Koivisto analyzes the division into the self and the other in the autofictional trilogy by Pirkko Saisio, an award-winning Finnish writer, director, and actor. According to Koivisto (2011, 36), in the concreteness of writing, the relationship between oneself and the other can be seen in the distance that the writer takes from the self: do they describe themselves simply as "me" or do they see themselves as something else, which can be expressed in third-person narration? In this article, I examine my relation as writer to my narrating self, but since this is not a work of fiction, I am unable to question or queer the illusion of the existence of my "true self" by mixing narrators (see Karkulehto 2007, 132); I can only allude to the possibility of such a play. In autofiction, where Doubrovsky (1993, 37–42) left one's true self unsolved and replaced it by a myth, I lose the true self in a maze and search for alternative plausible endings of the narrative.

The distance between the author and the narrator is less important to my research than their temporal location: do they have access to the discourses of a certain era and are they plausible narrators of those times? Simultaneously, I make visible the narration itself and the constructedness of meaning formation and knowledge (see Karkulehto 2011, 77). The narration, the way I tell the story, is part of its truth. According to Saisio (2001, 350), the content of a text does not alone determine its truth, but also its form, i.e., structure, language, and patterns of expression. I structure this story by a frame of a few hours at a photo shoot, on which I let my memories accumulate. A significant factor forming the narrative is Dyer's analysis of homosexuality in *film noir* and the maze (Dyer 1993), which becomes a metaphor of my writing. I apply the storyline of *film noir* to my analysis: the hero wanders in a maze trying to solve the case. The meandering and searching tell us more than any ending could. Below, I interpret the poster the way we look at it, zooming in from the big picture to the smallest details.

3 I use the term based on Genette's theory: the world of the narrative's main story is referred to as diegesis (*diégèse*) (see Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 116). Diegetic in this context means "in relation to the realm of the story."

At First Sight

He looks like a *film noir* hero to me. The top button of his dress shirt is open, the tie pulled loose, the sleeves are rolled up, suspenders peek out from the folds of the shirt. The hat is pushed to the back of his head. Finally, I notice his trumpet. Eriksson wrote to me in his email on October 12, 2021, at 4:33 p.m. that the visual image of the advertisement was constructed of elements of jazz and film. The nostalgic atmosphere of the big city and its neon lights was linked to the name "Downtown," Petula Clark's eponymous hit, and the rhythm of Bossa Nova. The idea was to depict a big city where the musician is on a break. They wanted it to express the nostalgic mood of a 1950s movie. The expression was finished with toning that added the feeling of nostalgia, longing for the past and *film noir*. (Eriksson 2021.)

The *film noir* style makes the poster particularly compelling for analysis. The first widespread images of gay people were seen in American *film noir*s (Dyer 1993, 52). These representations of homosexuality are typical structured in a maze in big cities and their nightclubs. A hardboiled hero in an unpressed suit, loose tie, hat pulled down low, and unshaven face does not so much solve the mystery as delay resolving it (ibid., 52–57) which emphasizes the genre's ambiguous nature. The *film noir* hero's ambivalence is a perfect match with the Downtown man's ambiguity; the looks of the latter repeat the former's appearance up to the top button and loosened tie. The only difference in costuming between the two is the position of the hat. When the poster is visually positioned in the *film noir* genre, its relationship to the representation of homosexuals actualizes. For Dyer (1993, 60), homosexual characters even define the entire genre despite their supporting role:

> [I]t is clearly only in a minority of *film noirs* that gay characters appear, yet their absence from all other types of film and the caution with which even *film noir* had to introduce them suggest that they do none the less constitute a defining feature of *film noir* taken as a whole.

Homosexual characters formed a negative to the protagonist, the hero. Sleek and well-groomed gay men were opposites of rugged, stubbled, and careless straight he(te)roes. (Dyer 1993, 60.) In the Downtown man's character, a gay man is merged with the hero. His costumes, self and milieu repeat the *film noir* type of a hero, but his smooth face does not have the roughness that defines the original paragon. His hat is not pulled down over the eyes but is pushed back to frame the face. At a deeper level, the hero's reluctance to solve mysteries, the lack of straightforwardness, creates a distortion in the prevailing ideal masculinity and is thus a possible sign of queer that connects the hero to the Downtown man. When hegemonic masculinity threatens other ways of being a man by making them obscure and vague, *film noir* and thus the Downtown man can be seen as an extension of traditional hegemonic masculinity (see Nieminen 2006, 25; Connell 1995, 80–81; Sipilä 1994, 20–21).

I managed to escape the casting stage of the Downtown advertisement production process. Before they set it up, Luoto saw my picture in Eriksson's portfolio and said: "That's the guy." Therefore, I did not need to queue with all the other male models in town to get the gig. Choosing a model is expensive for an advertiser. Henrik C. Le Bell, the CEO of Rettig Ltd., said that launching a new international brand requires a huge amount of money. One must do market research, find the right flavor and invest in advertising (see Iivonen 1995). Statistical analyses show that advertisers favored traditional male stereotypes at the time of the Downtown campaign (Ganahl et al. 2003; Vigorito & Curry 1998). If there had been a casting, the makeup I would have needed to wear would have been more abstract and not so much about looks but attitude associated with hegemonic masculinity: aggression, independence, rationality, activity, intelligence, and strength (Forward & Torres 1989, 143; Grönfors

1994, 67). Furthermore, my face would have had to showcase an ability or willingness for competition, emotional coldness, self-control, hardness, tendency to seek adventures and fights, desire for power and control (Miedzian 1992, xx–xxiii). Likewise, it would have to exude economic, social, erotic and physical strength, and an orientation more to work than to home and family (Niskanen 1996, 147), emotionally impenetrable and aloof (Steele 2020, 11–12). In sum, I would exhibit the palette of the "Masculine Norms Inventory" (Mahalik et al., 2017; Parent & Moradi, 1998): winning, dominance, emotional control, being a playboy, risk-taking, self-reliance, violence, primacy of work, power over women, pursuit of status, and heterosexual self-presentation. All these myriad elements were part and parcel of the intended Downtown man's act.

By far the best known and utmost stereotypical man in advertising is the Marlboro man, the archetype of all cigarette ads (Salo 1997, Chapter 10.4.2). Men take great risks at the expense of their health and lives to be rewarded with honor (Kortteinen 1992, 47, 60–61); who would embody this better than a dusty cowboy. The lonely rider risks his life to achieve glory in dangerous rodeo races with wild horses. The work of a cowboy is hard physical labor that requires a great deal of courage. Its equivalent is the lumberjack, familiar from Finnish traditional cultural male imagery. Instead of horses, he wrestles pinewoods. Conditions are harsh; both men are literally living at the mercy of the weather. According to advertising research (Heiskala & Luhtakallio 2000, 21–22) men return to the traditional male roles and stereotypes of the 1950s in 1990s commercials; women had expanded their lives since the 1970s, but men burrow into the bunkers to defend themselves when confronted with the changes demanded by women. In the age of the Downtown man, the only arena of advertisements left completely for men is social status and work. Controversially, the new man, the Downtown man, is a performing artist, a musician with a trumpet. In the deep economic depression of the early 1990s, the ideal masculinity of a Finnish man is at a historical turning point, where a new man, a softie, debuts alongside the traditional male image before the macho lads and dudes (Rossi 2009, 12) of the twenty-first century begin to take over. He is earning his living, too, although in Eriksson's words, "taking five" (Eriksson 2021). Finally, life is no longer just sweat and hard labor, it has moments of rest. And not only that, but free-time and entertainment.

For me, modeling is not a glamorous, high-status career. Our work is considered stereotypically "gay" like that of male hairdressers, waiters, and dancers. When I walk shoulder-to-shoulder with a blond, blue-eyed breathtakingly handsome German model, Andreas, down the runway at the legendary nightclub Charles XII in Helsinki in 1991, a drunken yuppie wearing a limp blazer and garish silk shirt shouts from the audience: "Gays off the stage!" It takes years to understand that the exhortation is not addressed to us in person, but to the category we represent, male models in general. It is a coincidence that indeed we both are gay. Not *all* male models are gay, however. In my long career as a model, which lasted for twenty-five years from 1988 to 2013 (see Uitto 2016), I never played a gay man per se. For a fact, I was a homosexual model booked to present a straight man.

The real eye magnet of the picture is the face, as it is placed in the golden ratio and is brightly lit. I am a standard male model, a provocateur: young, sleek, and splendid, sexually attractive, instigating a viewer to desire (see Cortese 1999, 52–57). More specifically, I am *the face*. The most important part of it is my jaw, which is just as angular as it ought to be (see Rossi 2003, 43). The thinner I am, the hollower my cheeks are and the more clearly the angle of my jawline will come out – when I zoom in very close to the image, I can see a thin streak of light outlining my jaw from the shadow. However, my mandibles are not strikingly wide. They are just wide enough.

Nothing on the model's face can be too exaggerated. Eyes cannot be too large, lips too thick, cheekbones too high or jawbone too wide. Another criterion is the symmetry of the face (Balsamo 1996, 60–61). My nose is slightly curved to the left, but I can hide it by turning my face to the right angle with the camera. In the picture my face is perfectly symmetrical. In the 1990s, I muse in a flashback, they were less often looking for a face. Everyone wanted the body, beefy meat, muscles, the utmost markers of masculinity (see Cortese 1999, 58–59; Dyer 2002; Lahti 1992), and castings became humiliating and began to resemble cattle shows in every way: "Take your clothes off. You can leave your underpants on."

In the 1990s gay scene, type and style are everything, so the clothes that I take off play a big role in more than one scene. I do not represent any of the most common gay stereotypes, a man wearing glasses and a cardigan, a leather type, a bear in a checked flannel shirt or a self-tanned bleached blond in a tank top bought in Ibiza. As a professional model, I get access to the latest fashions long before they arrive at stores, set a trend, and end up on everyone. My style is not actually "gay," but it would be gay to be so voguish if modeling were not part of my personality. It is even written in my employment contract with the modeling agency Paparazzi that I must always be fashionable because I represent the agency in and out of work. Hence, my style is within the reach of few in the hierarchical system of class, appreciation, and consumption, but it is not quite as dubious as it could be on someone else. It depends on the finances and assets of who can wear what and thus who can be what (Holliday 2001, 220), yet the status of the most wanted piece of candy in the chocolate box cannot be bought. The right clothes on the wrong type do not "pass;" one must match the clothes, just like they must fit, in more ways than one (Clarke & Turner 2009, 271). Nevertheless, the exchange rate of one currency is even higher than style: hetero likeness. Hetero-like, manly men are on the top, the most sought after; effeminate men least wanted (Nardi 2000). Therefore, each new photograph is a new concrete proof on top of the previous ones, not only for me but for everyone to see. Perhaps, I subconsciously believe that when enough evidence is deposited in me, I will eventually become what I am performing, and others will take me as such.

At the beginning of my career, my facial muscles get tired quickly. Numerous repetitions of the same expression or emotional state dull the expression, make it look fake. Little by little, I learn to use my facial muscles and sustain the intensity in my gaze, uphold the emotional charge, the illusion of authenticity and true feelings. My acting skills evolve. Other models practice in front of a mirror. If they see a facial expression that would work for them in a magazine, they go to the bathroom to practice until they know how to keep it on their face. Instead of doing this, I examine the photographs, the contact sheets. I analyze every little screen. What kind of expressions do I use? What is the illumination like? What does each angle and pose look like? The most important skill of a model is to know what each facial expression looks like, and which expressions work in a still image. In addition to improving my facial fine motor control, I need to be able to find just the right angles in relation to the camera and, above all, know how my face refracts light. The shape of the face and the color of the skin affect what light is most favorable to them. Over time, I develop a new "sense" and almost automatically approach the right angle with the light and camera.

On the focus point, going into the role requires careful preparation. I must become aware and eliminate all my effeminate gestures. I must be bold and broad, not narrow, my knees should be far apart, my shoulders look wide (see Steele 2020, 11–12) and my postures should take as much space as possible. Contrary to women who exaggerate the angle of their hips in their poses, my hip should be straight. My chest and face should be towards the camera and indicate power and fearlessness. I have the exact

same two moods to choose as the Canadian fashion photographer and former model Gabriel Steele (2020, 11–12): emotionally impenetrable and aloof detachment. My hands must not embellish, my wrists must not be loose but rigid and exude strength (see Rossi 2003, 107). The hands are as expressive as the face: their movements are either masculine or feminine. What needs extra careful control is a cliché, the little finger. It should not stick out from the other fingers as an allusive sign of gayness but stay in line with the others. I avoid straightening any of my fingers fully and always keep them at least slightly bent. I usually make a manly fist. Stylists often give me a cigarette. I exaggerate when I wrap my fingers around it. Sometimes they put a butt dangling from one corner of my mouth, like in the movies where the hero does not use his hand when smoking. A skilled actor and *film noir* hero like Humphrey Bogart can even speak with a cig on his lips – I cannot even smile with it. Maybe they do not want me to smile but look stone-faced. Smiling is always a risk; I might look more obsequious than triumphant.

The image is both the photographer's and my imagination. Only Eriksson does not photograph me, but his own idea, I am just a medium. In my mind, I go through the imagery from Paul Newman to Clint Eastwood and James Dean, the men far enough in the past. I imagine I am Paul. Clint is "too much of a man," James too "rock." The photographer shows society a mirror: this is the kind of man you want. But they do not want me. They want an image, figurative abstraction. Therefore, my image does not portray me, an anonymous model, but cultural perceptions of masculinity and manhood. As the Downtown man, I do not express myself, but represent common gender roles (see Schudson 1984, 211); I am a type, part of a larger machinery of the advertising and marketing industry, yet in front of the camera, I want to make people fall in love with *me*. According to Jokinen (2000, 217), in the media, I can create a fictional archetype of ideal masculinity even without possessing any real power. Even if I had it, the demands of ideal masculinity are so impossible to achieve that they can only be pursued through (images classified as) fiction. In real life I have no high social status but relationships which do not last, no children or family life, and social opprobrium (see Dyer 1993, 84) and my "sad young man's" (see Dyer 1993: 73–74; Karkulehto 2011, 40) life expectancy is short. Therefore, modeling represents public, published testimonies that I can present the ideal masculinity of the era, even though I am unable to attain its unachievable hypermasculine standards (see Jokinen 2000, 217). As cold comfort, I at least can pass for straight, compile evidence of being hetero-like and as the sweetest revenge, the image is eventually stored into a cultural catalog, a mosaic whose purpose is to depict the idealized man of the era.

As a male model I am a paradox. The paradox of homosexuality is defined by Tony Adams (2011, 113–122): to come or not to come out of the closet and when. The situation is made complex by the fact that we all know that they know, and that they know that I know they know, but we still must pretend that none of us know. Male models suffered from this paradox in the 1990s, when it was even more tortuous. It was not a question of the sexuality of real people but of the label stamped on the stereotype. In other words, while there was at least a "well-established reputation" and a "strong suspicion" if not a "sure knowledge" of homosexuality, we were expected to represent the ideal straight Finnish masculinity – convincingly. This paradox within a paradox occurred in the eyes and mind of the viewer as the male models were "known" as gay but "read" as straight. D. A. Miller (1988) defined homosexuality as an open secret, not spoken aloud but known or at least suspected and talked about behind our backs. My suspected homosexuality created a form of cultural otherness that had to kept behind closed bedroom curtains. Paradoxically, according to Miller, monitoring the closet door and keeping me in there required some degree of publicity. Therefore, even though some "suspected" or "knew" that I

was gay, I had to pretend to maintain the facade so that they could pay my photograph the compliment of believing and swallow my passing-for-straight act. The model and character merge into one in the eyes of the audience. "I" disappear from the picture.

Next: The Title

I look at the photograph like watching a paused movie and imagine the big screen. The transverse strip of the word "new" repeated on the top of it gives the impression of a celluloid film, reinforced by the dots between the words. This representative nature of the poster is enhanced by its temporal distance. The campaign was launched in the early 1990s, but the era of the image is 1950s. The composition, style, scenography, costumes, lighting and toning of the image all refer to Hollywood, to the heart of the entertainment industry. This is all not only positioned in leisure time, but within the industrial mega-imaging machine (de Lauretis 1984, 37–38, 84–86; Vänskä 2006, 41), that forms us by pouring unending representations on us.

The Downtown campaign was designed for international locations: ship terminals, airports, and tax-free shops. Therefore, English is an obvious language choice. It highlights the North American flavor of the ad and grants the Downtown man the place of Marlboro man's successor. Linguistically, the name connects to the Anglo-American world. From very early on, North American advertisements had the strongest influence on Finnish advertising (Heinonen 1999, 379; Kortti 2003, 200). In this case, the number 13.90 transgresses the languages. The currency cannot be sterling or the US dollar because 13.90 a pack would be way too much. Therefore, the number must be in Finnish. With my Dörr LL 572 magnifying glass, I can see the words AMERICAN TASTE, SMOOTH FLA[VOR] and KING [SIZE] on the packs – in English. The words FLAVOR and SIZE are covered by a red banner. On the beach, a red flag warns of strong currents or dangerous weather. In formula races, its wave stops the competition. In the nineteenth century, it became a symbol of the French Revolution, and of resistance. A red banner in a cigarette ad is ambivalent: it simultaneously attracts attention and indicates danger. From a queer perspective, it may even warn about a sin when it covers the equivocal reference to something king size swelled into capitals. So, do the words even refer to the penis, which is bashfully covered with a warning sign?

Like the liminal spaces where the ad is to be displayed, the stage of the image is a transit area. When the Downtown man's relationship to Marilyn is perceived as a mystery and the image as a maze, the actual focus point becomes relevant because it adds to the ambiguity of the ad. The character is not photographed in his real place of work, on the jazz club stage. He is resting in the back room, out of the spotlight in the dark, in noir-like illumination. Nevertheless, both stage and back room are located in the consumer's leisure time. He plays on stage when the audience enjoys dancing, drinking, flirting, coupling. Suggestively, they are smoking better cigarettes, *Downtown medium*. The world of the picture lies outside the traditional, binary, and middle-class post-war world order of home and honorable workplace, an office. The suit, collared shirt, stylish art deco tie and hat might make a business-like impression if the open top button, the loose tie, and the whole setting did not tell the viewer that they had been taken on a drive into the world of *film noir*.

The English text and Hollywood-like visual display problematize the national identity of the advertisement. Berlant's (1997, 15–23) idea of national heterosexuality includes the many ways of structuring citizenship that heterosexual intimacy advocates. This national sexuality needs constant support from institutions, narratives, pedagogies, social practices (ibid., 17) and foremost, advertising (Rossi 2003). The hegemonic way

of organizing society based on heterosexual intimacy, the family, and the economic structures revolving around them inevitably produces an outside area called queer (Hyttinen 2020, 64). The English language and the Hollywood theme transgress the borderline of Finnish national heterosexuality. It is unclear where it is geographically located. The transgression is also highlighted by the final placements of the poster, the airports and ship terminals, which are intermediate, transit, and out-of-place spaces. This "nobody's-land" may have more room to resist the heteronormative social order – here, the compelling norms are not as tight as our everyday life.

Only then: Marilyn

Would you have noticed Marilyn if I had not mentioned her? The picture features two human figures. When a person appears in an advertisement, it is always a matter of gender advertising (Rossi 2003, 11). Men and women are expected to be specific and behave accordingly to culturally coded patterns (Leiss, Kline & Jhally 1990, 215). Marilyn's image on the bureau opens up a variety of interpretations. In the context of a jazz club, my first thought is Billy Wilder's 1959 movie *Some Like It Hot,* with a strong queer dimension, where Marilyn's character Sugar Kane is the soloist of a female jazz orchestra. In the context of the cigarette ad and as an association with another icon, the Marlboro man, I think of the movie *Bus Stop* directed by Joshua Logan in 1956. Marilyn plays an anonymous singer who dreams of Hollywood stardom but is lassoed and finally ringed by a wild cowboy. These two are among Marilyn's best known performances on the big screen. Nevertheless, we should not forget how women have traditionally been the object of the male gaze in media imagery (Karkulehto 2011, 109). According to Dyer (2002, 118–120), Marilyn's appeal was based on the fact that she embodied what the discourses of her era defined important: sex and sexuality. From pin-up pictures to movie screens, her public image was built entirely through sexuality and sex appeal. In the 1950s she became a sign of sex and sexuality – from a male perspective. This was not only because of her movies, but because of her pose on the cover of the first issue of *Playboy* magazine founded by Hugh Hefner in 1953. She was not just the cover girl but also the centerfold girl. The centerfold photo was not taken for *Playboy*, but by pinup photographer Tom Kelley in 1949, when cash-strapped, jobless Marilyn consented to pose nude. *Playboy's* first issue sold 50,000 copies and the magazine was profitable from the start. Marilyn's reward for the picture was $50 to fix her car. About the photo shoot, she later said that the only thing on was the radio. The decade made her the most worshiped sex symbol in the world, the object of gaze above all others and a representation of hyperfemininity, not a real woman named Norma Jeane Mortenson (1926–1962). Marilyn's picture is thus itself a representation layered from a person to an icon and a transgression between reality and representation.

On the poster, Marilyn is a *mise-en-abyme*, a picture within the picture, in which her representation multiplies recursively. Embedded Marilyn can be seen in Rosi Braidotti's view in interview with Judith Butler: a prisoner of her body where the Downtown man is free from his body and entitled to transcendental subjectivity (Butler & Braidotti 1994, 38–39). As a picture within the picture Marilyn is trapped within the frames. Moreover, she is not the main target of the gaze and does not make eye contact with the viewer. The frame is set so that she looks at the man, even from below, while he makes direct eye contact with the viewer on the same level. In the hierarchy of gaze directions, Marilyn is positioned subordinate to him, in accordance with the heteronormative order of the era, that is, to look up at the man. The size of the characters (see Goffman 1979, viii), makes them a disproportionate couple in multiple ways. The discrepancy is not only between the world-famous icon and the random

musician, but between the identifiable Marilyn representing herself and the anonymous male model representing whoever. In other words, there is a relationship between a public figure and an unknown, formed through images and therefore on a different diegetic level. The fact that Marilyn is a *mise-en-abyme*, situated in a different diegesis, makes her unreachable in the realm of the poster; she is more of an idea, thought or memory than flesh and blood. Consequently, the ratio of representations is complex. The sex symbol shrinks from the object of admiration and desire into a mere recognizable, but not pleasurable component to prop up the man who dominates the entire screen.

As a portrait on the musician's desk, where we are used to seeing a photo of a wife, Marilyn highlights the gap between the icon, in this case materialized ideal femininity, and the image of the random man. That would not be the case if Marilyn were not recognized all over the world as herself, the movie star. In this poster, her image refers to a real person, the Hollywood star Marilyn, born Norma Jeane. The viewer knows as well as you that Marilyn/Norma Jeane had died 30 years earlier, before I was even born, but in the realm of the image, she is at the peak of her career. As such a complex figure, she represents the idea of a woman that is unattainable to a man. The absence of an engagement or wedding ring highlights this symbolism; through a heteronormative magnifying glass, the absence of a ring on my ring finger stands out like a neon sign. In the hierarchy of masculinity regulated by heteronormativity, the unmarried musician playing in underground clubs is way below the middle rungs of the social ladder. The cultural imagery and always-already representations of cultural products offer many possible explanations of a man who has not "got a woman" for himself. Maybe he is losing his earnings at the game table, maybe he is drinking them down, maybe he is a lady-killer, or maybe even one of "those men"? With a queer gaze I can see that he would look down on her – if he bothered to look. The fact that he turns his gaze away from the woman, and not just from any woman but Marilyn, can be seen as an eminent symbolic gesture, a sign of resistance to heteronormativity. The Downtown man looking away from Marilyn Monroe herself is a queer gesture in a heteronormative set-up.

Finally: The Instrument

Despite all, there are cracks in the image. After the launch, Eriksson gets feedback that the model looks like he has never held a trumpet. When I look at the picture against the grain and search for cracks in its heteronormativity, the clumsiness is the most obvious. The viewer may rightly ask, is this man as clumsy with his manhood as he is with his tool? Is he equally unsecure and incompetent with *all* his instruments? He certainly does not know how to play, so everything else must be pretending too. His incompetence can be interpreted not only in terms of sexual performance but in the context of *film noir*. It is analogical with the hero's impotence to solve mysteries. This distortion is framed by how he is not presented. He does not appear as a family man, a supporter and provider, reading a newspaper, as a mighty breadwinner, an office father, a bit lost and out-of-place at home (see Rossi 2003, 115; Hattunen 2006, 28). True, nothing is real in the picture. Everything is sheer acting. Indeed, I had never held a trumpet, let alone played one. The picture is situated in the 1950s, when I was not even born. The clothes and hat are not mine. And I do not really represent the prevailing ideal masculinity and heteronormativity. I am gay. I have never even smoked[4].

4 Robert Norris (1929–2019), the original Marlboro man from the 1950s and 1960s ads, was not a model but an authentic, tall, and lanky cowboy and a horse breeder from Colorado, USA, who was originally discovered by advertising executives in a photo with his friend John Wayne. He never smoked cigarettes. (See Padilla 2019.)

My performance is to a large extent based on the instructions of the photographer, expectations of the paying client, view of the make-up artist, wardrobe and hairstylist. To portray an ideal, I must perform the masculine gender role in a precise way. Even if I painted all the colors of masculinity on my face, the makeup of manliness (to which I alluded earlier) would not be enough. The core of correct presentation is dominance. Whether a man dominates a woman or another man is not so relevant, as in both cases the dominant man lands safely in the zone of normality (see Bersani 1987, 197–222). The concept of dominance – physical, economic, or sexual – thus makes the paradox within the paradox of a male model partially comprehensible. Dominance implicitly reveals that the boundaries of normality can stretch as far as to include the sexual dominance of another man; homosexuality is thus acceptable when it is dominant and active. What is particularly ambiguous about the performance of the 1990s male model is that while he is suspected of being gay, viewers are most concerned about the lack of dominance in his performance. A dominant gay might still do, but a submissive and passive gay would not.

Advertisers and viewers are driven by fear of deviating from gender norms and a ban on male femininity (Garst & Bodenhausen 1997; Martin & Gnoth 2009, 356). "Abnormal" gender and male femininity are comprehended as signs of homosexuality when visible to others. Male femininity is acceptable to some degree without risking or losing manliness if it is compensated with rough enough outward appearance or behavior, or if it is loosened at home, behind closed curtains. (Rossi 2003, 105.) Basically, what is prohibited from view is submissive homosexuality, which, in a nutshell, appears as a lack of masculinity (Connell 1995, 143). It is a paradox, because sexual orientation is outwardly invisible to others, and we can always choose whether we express our orientation with culturally coded and recognized signs. In the 1990s, this signifying system, homo–hetero dichotomy, was a zero-sum game that served as a key criterion in valuing masculinity.

In terms of masculinity, the most dominant part of the body for a man, the penis, is not visible in the picture even though its cultural significance has swelled to extravagance. It is impossible to see even a shadow or bulge of it. Therefore, we must imagine it. When the penis is transformed into a sign, the phallus symbolizes all the power, control, and superiority associated with masculinity. The psychoanalysts' term phallic masculinity is sometimes equated with Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity. (Jokinen 2000, 229.) Susan Bordo (1999, 89) argues that the larger phallus has come to stand for a generic male superiority over women, other men, and other species; as such, the desire for larger penises has been disguised, through advertising, pornography, television, and books, as a need to "measure up" – to fall in with certain expectations of modernity's scopic fetishism (Mangham & Lea 2018, 2). I go even further. I equate the function of the penis not with penetration or ejaculation but urination. Since my teen years I have experienced how hegemonic masculinity is concentrated into the code of peeing standing up, a performance. Young men construct and perpetuate masculinity norms in interactions with their male peers (Pascoe 2007) who exert influence above and beyond that which men experience from the media (Nielson et al. 2022, 9). The peeing while standing code is extremely homosocial because it is demonstrated in front of other men. In the age of the Downtown man, public toilets have urinals, long troughs without partitions. There are no front walls in the toilet booths of army garrisons. According to Jokinen (2003, 15–16), men must differentiate themselves from women and find their own place in the mutual hierarchies of men by competing with other men: showing off one's penis is a key gear in this competition; even little boys learn this show-like ceremony in the "who wees the farthest" competitions. However, homosocial performances of male potence are in danger of being eroticized (Jokinen 2000, 224); when peeing in front of other men, it is almost palpable. Nevertheless, it must be performed standing, because in a sitting position the penis and its size are impossible to show and compare.

Therefore, men stand; women and gays sit.

When Eriksson replies "play with it and hold it as you feel most natural" to my question about what he wants me to do with the instrument, I feel the demands of masculinity pulsing in my pants. The whole concept of manhood is encapsulated into the code of peeing, the strong imperative to pee standing and the prohibition to sit on the toilet – at least not in front of other men. To sit down is sissy stuff, and thus a sign of being gay. This code is activated each time I step in front of the backdrop and set myself on the focus point. I feverishly ponder how to express with a mere facial gesture that I pee standing up. I feel immense fear, downright horror, when I think that the camera could snatch some fleeting, out-of-control micro-expression or gesture that would reveal the truth that I sometimes sit down to pass water. Not only that, but there would be evidence: a photograph! When I imagine the Downtown man without the trumpet, I clearly see him sitting on the porcelain seat. The homo–hetero dichotomy is activated to the highest degree in the question of what errand he is on.

The End: Stone Face vs. Softie

As the opposite to the Marlboro man who embodies the hardness, danger, and independence of work, the smoother Downtown man becomes very popular – to my great surprise. Everybody wants the poster and prints of him run out. Even Eriksson hangs him framed on the wall of his studio. The popularity can be explained by the fact that he represents the transition from a granite-faced, weather-beaten hardness to a softer, indoor-type, entertainment-seeking masculinity and male ideal. My assignments never question the white hetero assumption. Of course, I could never perform anything other than Caucasian. White, young, healthy, straight. They never tell me to perform gay, to show that I am into men. I have my suspicions though, maybe the case is not that straightforward. What if I am chosen because I do not so obviously look straight but they just do not tell me?

The work of musicians is not considered physically hard like cutting logs or roping cattle. Jazz music is not particularly mainstream in Finland, nor the music of oppressed Black people as in the US, but resonates as elitist. The musician is supported by a significant amount of social power. He is an object of attention. In modern terms, he has valuable assets: attention capital, which is marketable (Franck 2019). As a musician he is a celebrity. Celebrity capital, based on the media, enables him to cut across social fields. The media is a form of "meta-capital" that exerts influence in multiple social fields, giving celebrities a wide range of locations where they can exercise their power. This celebrity capital can be traded in for economic capital. (Driessens 2013, 13–14.) He plays as part of the band, "one of the boys." Naturally, he gets his fair share of the gang's homosocial power and possesses gender capital that acts as a hybrid of cultural and symbolic capital and hegemonic gender expectations defined as "the value afforded contextually relevant presentations of gendered selves" (Bridges 2009, 84). As a musician the Downtown man is an interpreter of emotions, not necessarily an expert feeling them himself. He controls his own face and emotions and what the audience feels. Therefore, he has power over the feelings of others. Where the Marlboro man won in physical strength, the Downtown man wins as ruler of the emotions of the entire herd.

I meet Eriksson at the model agency, Paparazzi's. As we sit on the couch and sip coffee, I hint that I would be more than happy to continue working with him after the campaign. He replies: "Kari, you're not a model type, you look like a hero," and never uses me again. After 30 years, he writes to me pondering on his unorthodox approach to fashion and advertising:

> My early photographs from 1989 to 1992 were more portraits than fashion images. It was important that the performers did not look like "models" in the traditional sense. Hence, I distinguished

> the "real person in the picture" from the "model." […] A bit the same way a figure may be drawn from a living model, but it does not necessarily portray an actual person. I adapted the idea and aesthetics of portraits into my photographs. I chose performers that fitted into the fluid conception of identity: a person with changing or conflicting identity. (Eriksson 2022.)

With these words on the fluidity of identity in mind, I take one last look at the photograph with my loupe. The *mise-en-abyme* starts to worry me. All these years I have believed that it is Marilyn in the picture. But now, I can no longer be sure. With a closer look she could be any young blonde. So, there are cracks everywhere and no solid ground underfoot anywhere. The relationship between me and Marilyn was pure imagination; it was all about me and my ability to represent a Finnish man. The story had a maze and a case, which I tried to delay solving and confuse, even misleading the reader – you. *Film noir* as a metaphor for writing worked until the end.

Conclusion

Autobiographical material and autofiction as method inevitably make us aware of authorship and narration. I used the maze of *film noir* as a metaphor for writing and to develop the means of narration: to prolong solving the puzzle. To do that, I was in search of multiplicity, gaps, distortions, paradoxes, and contradictions, in sum cracks in the heteronormative picture, not only to make visible the structuredness of the prevailing hegemony, question its naturalness and make room for alternative meanings arising from the image but also to show how our standpoint affects what we see. The hardboiled facts I presented – the real places, dates, photograph, newspaper articles – in addition to the memoirs of my micro-experiences and related feelings provided a base for new interpretations, the criterion being not their ultimate but their partial plausibility. The fate of the story is in the hands of the reader. If you correctly identified the female character in the picture from the start, you read the story differently; you read another story.

On paper, I structured the story the way we look, meandering intuitively from the big picture towards the smallest details. This gaze and the embedding and embedded narratives based on it found many cracks in the heteronormative. The most significant finding about the Downtown man ad is its ambiguity. The localization, language, prevailing perceptions of masculinity, and the double paradox of male models at the time; the hero's tendency to mess up the mystery rather than solve it; and the code of peeing. The tension in the Downtown man's character, which combines traits from a *film noir* hero and a gay man, show the extreme control and bluffing that a homosexual male model had to practice in the early 1990s. My own micro-experiences are testimonies of what was not allowed to be seen: not homosexuality per se, but male femininity interpreted automatically as submissive homosexuality. On closer inspection, the seemingly smooth and dapper Hollywood image is full of cracks.

I performed my analysis in the chasm between person and character, between the narrator's, writer's, and researcher's voices. The whole structure collapses like a house of cards without a reader who swallows the bait and sees something which does not exist, Marilyn. Without a reader engaged in my lie, the mirror created by the article does not reflect, the reader does not see themself in it, but the image remains "the other" or at least blurry. If you were seduced by the story, it showed not only how we look at representations, but also produced new knowledge about the closet. Seeing every young blonde as Marilyn, the double paradox of male models – "knowing" them as gay, but "reading" them as straight – is a mirror that shows us ourselves; representations themselves are unreliable. What matters is the image we form. This quality of representation reveals

how one might get lost in the image photographed and developed in the closet and how searching for what was once lost in the image is pointless.

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II

A COUNTER-STORY TO THE RAGS-TO-RICHES NARRATIVE: A FINNISH MALE MODEL WEARING HOBO STYLE DURING THE DEEP DEPRESSION IN THE AGE OF AIDS

by

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A counter-story to the rags-to-riches narrative: A Finnish male model wearing hobo style during the deep depression in the age of AIDS

ABSTRACT

As a former male model whose modeling career lasted 25 years (1988–2013) and as a researcher, I am interested in the production of meanings and knowledge related to representations of masculinity. As a homosexual former male model who was classified as "other" but represented the normative ideal and passed for straight in fashion shows and photographs, I look back on images of myself differently and against the grain. I analyze three of my fashion photographs – taken for the Finnish tabloid *City* in 1993, when AIDS was considered the "gay plague," but never published – in terms of critical studies of masculinities, gay and sexuality studies, and queer theory. I speculate and examine gestures, facial expressions, and poses in the photographs that were still intolerable and prevented their publication thirty years ago. The publication of my photographs now is concrete proof that masculine gestured performances are becoming more inclusive and diverse.

INTRODUCTION

In the early 1990s in Finland, advertising and fashion images showing men mostly represented ideal masculinity and, at first glance, heterosexuality. I know this from personal experience as a professional model at the time. A closer look reveals inconsistencies in these images. In this article, I examine three fashion photographs of me taken in August 1993. According to the double paradox, male models of the era were stereotypically categorized as homosexuals like all male hairdressers, waiters, and dancers, even if their images were seen as representations of ideal masculinity; they were simultaneously "known" as gay, but "read" as straight. AIDS deepened the era's hetero–gay dichotomy and began to distort male images. It became increasingly unlikely that an openly gay man could represent an *ordinary Finnish man.* (Silvola, 2022.)

Heteronormative representations of masculinity were defined by the prohibition of femininity and, more precisely, the expression of a submissive, anti-dominant position. Male femininity was unquestionably interpreted as homosexuality, and submissive femininity produced a submissive gay, a bottom; it inevitably involved the intolerable mental image (see Althusser 1969; Gallop 1992; Macherey 1978, Silvola 2022) of anal intercourse and a rectum, the negative of the masculine self

(Bersani 2010, 29). AIDS started to rage in Finland in 1983, at the end of the decade deaths increased, and the suicides of young men infected with HIV increased in the early 1990s (Nikkanen & Järvi 2014: 138); in this context, the mainstream audience could not tolerate being reminded of a man's rectum, the gateway through which AIDS was seen to have spread in Finland. I explore here how the AIDS epidemic affected my performance in front of the camera and my presentation of masculinity throughout my 25-year modeling career from 1988 to 2013 (see Uitto 2016). I analyze three fashion photographs taken of me in August 1993 both as cultural imagery (fashion and advertising photographs, films and movie posters, LP covers, magazines) and as a performance, where my inner experience and subconscious play a role.

Masculinity has been defined as a category, configuration, ideal and subject position (see Connell & Messerschmidt 2005), as socially constructed within a historical context of gender relations (Kimmel 1987), and as performance (Butler 2006). In this framework of the cultural representations of masculinity, I ask why the photographs were only published now, thirty years later. I look for the cracks and inconsistencies that might have made the pictures inappropriate in 1993. Nieminen writes that the perception of masculinity contained an implicit assumption that gender is real and men represent masculinity (2006: 25). My representation of masculinity was gay, still widely classified as a "third gender"; I experienced that I was not considered culturally and socially a "real" or "full" man but, in the eyes of some, even a "non-man." Does the retrospective (luckily not posthumous) publication of these images mean a small victory over hegemonic knowledge-power in the constant cultural battle of meaning formation (see Karkulehto 2011: 77)? Taking former fashion model and photographer Gabriel Steele's view, will 'the once separating and siloed terms such as male, female, masculine and feminine […] become obsolete because they are not terms that can be used as accurate identifiers' (2020: 17)?

MATERIAL AND METHODS

(Figure 1)

In this article, I analyze two types of material: first, the three photographs, and second, autobiographical memory texts related to the memories they raise. I look at the photographs closely, from a temporal distance, in detail, and against the grain (see e.g. Rossi 2003, Karkulehto 2011). I apply visual analysis and heuristic semiotics by reading the signs that carry meanings and codes that support ideologies (Fiske 1990: 61–62). Thus, I look at these images subversively in order to make prevailing meanings, systems, and ideologies of the era visible and to show the produced nature of their "naturalness" (Karkulehto 2011: 77).

The three photographs were taken by Marianna Haka (later Wahlsten). They are in the style seen in fashion features of glossy magazines. I am alone in each picture. The first (figure 1) is a close-up of my face, the second (figure 2) is a three-quarter-length shot of me standing, and the third (figure 3) a full-length shot of me sitting with my legs open, the only image where I am making eye contact with the camera. It would be tempting to describe the style of the clothing as grunge (dirty-looking hair, oversized flannel plaid shirts, and loose pants) but my posing has no traces whatsoever of the hardcore and heavy metal music grunge were known for, nor of its punk or indie attitude. The style in the images can be classified as vagabond or outcast and I narrow it down to the *hobo style*, the couture of train tramps. It is a style of a person who dodges train fares and lives on the railroads without the stability of fixed destinations. Hobos wore their entire worldly possessions layered on them for hot days but cold nights; for them layering was fashion designed by circumstances. My performance thwarts the grunge style and refers to an older subculture where young, stray men sought protection from older men and where rail savviness was traded for male-to-male sex.

The three photographs formed a "story" as we called them. They were taken for the cover and to illustrate the main feature of the male-themed special issue of a tabloid called *City*, the hottest newspaper introducing urban culture to Finland as *The Village Voice,* the first tabloid-sized "alternative weekly" writing about culture and practicing provocative, anarchist journalism, did from 1955 to 2017 in New York. *City* was founded in 1986, with a peak circulation of more than 1.1 million copies (in 1990 the population of Finland was 5.029 million, Statistics Finland) and distributed free at newsstands in the biggest cities. *City* did want to expand the image of men – straight men, especially with its male-themed issues but it was not openly gay-friendly. It did not pursue gay rights as openly and courageously and did not publish Pride-themed issues as its Manhattan counterpart. However, it courted the gay target group by publishing a well-read "man looking for man" dating column. In this article, I present three pieces of evidence that its relationship with gays was contradictory and subtle.

According to Steele, the photograph has been perceived since its early days as an authoritative document; the viewer compares themselves to the person(s) in the picture, and historically the measure of comparison was a white, straight man, the "One," whom no "Other" equaled, with 'those who are on top, the "One," wanting to maintain their position and those who are not at the top, the "Other," seeking the means to elevate their status' (Steele 2020: 10). In men's fashion photographs, the clothes formed a material code of the American rags-to-riches narrative.

I would like to emphasize two things in this regard. First, masculinities are always based on larger narratives. Rags to riches, the American dream, the industrious and entrepreneurial bourgeois, the pistol hero... They are more than images; they shape our notions and physical, visible expressions of masculinity. Second, while them look like fashion photographs that sell clothes, my images were

taken to cover a male-themed issue and illustrate its main feature. Hence, the product proposed and measured by the editorial staff was me and my capability to represent the ideal masculinity of the time. Since *City* was the trendiest print in the largest cities in Finland, my task was to embody a young, urban ideal man. Steele writes in a similar manner about his modeling career in Canada, beginning in 1986, and how he was expected to present ideal masculinity defined 'as being strong, broad shoulders, wealthy, impeccably tailored fabrics and emotionally impenetrable, expressions of detachment of being aloof' (2020: 11–12). I have listed expectations that I had to meet in Finland and Germany from 1988 on (Silvola 2022: 6–7) – all Steele's definitions included. Essentially, to succeed in my profession, I had to get the majority of male viewers to identify with me and most of the women to desire me.

My perspective on advertising and fashion images differs from the usual. They are most often studied from the external perspective of the advertiser, manufacturer, seller or viewer, or as a medium. I agree with Leena-Maija Rossi (2003: 28) that the people behind or *in* the advertisements do not have any master interpretation that the viewer needs to interpret it correctly; nevertheless, my internal perspective has one advantage: I am the only person who has access to the act of performance in the photograph. I have looked at the pictures "from the inside out." Therefore, in the text, I have looked "to the left" even though in the picture I am clearly looking to the right. Rummaging in my memories, I had to go back experientially to when I was in front of the camera, not "behind" it looking at the photographs today. This enables the study of factors that are not directly visible in the picture but have had a significant effect on it. My sexuality is one essential factor, which has an effect on not only my self-image and whole identity but on how I pose in front of the camera. Thirty years ago, very few people had access to the media to perform in the process of producing cultural imagery that shapes our lives and ourselves. Social media and digital technology today have made publicity accessible to almost everyone who wants to use it.

In Finland in the early 1990s, it was rare to talk about homosexuality openly. Consequently, the second part of my research material, my memories related to that time, originally had no words, so I had to imagine them using autobiographical writing. According to Lejeune, in autobiographical narration, my aspiration for truthfulness is more important than succeeding in telling the truth. Faults in my description, even outright lies if there were any, and memory distortions are part of the "truth" of the utterance and tell their own truth about me. (Lejeune 1989: 24–25.) When I state that I am writing an autobiographical text, I am sincerely aiming at telling the truth. My agreement with my readers to do this holds even though my conscious, implicit memories form only part of what I remember and their meanings change over the years. Like sensory perception, remembering is not passive receiving or retrieving from our internal hard drive. It is an active creative process involving

imagination. We invent our past again and again, but even the most massive delusion is not a lie, because we know how to distinguish a lie from the truth. (Hustvedt 2016: 120–121.) For this reason, what I tell here is the latest version of my memory.

My autobiographical writing can be characterized as autoethnography, or 'stories of/about the self told through the lens of culture' (Adams et al. 2015: 1) and 'creative narratives shaped out of a writer's personal experiences within a culture and addressed to academic and public audiences' (Goodall 2000: 9), that '[display] multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural' (Bochner & Ellis 2016: 65). It forces me to ask whether making myself the object of my research has advantages. I observe what happens during the research process. The person writing about the publication of my three fashion photographs after 30 years is my *confessional self* (Pelias 2019: 25–27) and probably my confession will have consequences.

HOBO (LIFE)STYLE – COUTURE OF OUTCASTS

(Figure 2)

The cultural figure of a hobo provides a framework for this analysis. The narrative of a hobo was an essential part of American self-understanding at the turn of the twentieth century. A street-savvy, nomadic, and ingenious hobo accustomed to outdoor life (Hyttinen 2020: 67) can be understood as an extension of the new image of American masculinity – a cowboy, pistol fighter, and buffalo hunter – and thus as a critique of nineteenth-century "too soft" white bourgeois masculinity that idealized entrepreneurship and honesty (Photinos 2008). The figure became known in Finland. Between 1860 and 1923, approximately 340,000 Finns emigrated to the United States (Korkiasaari 1989: 8), rising in 1899–1913 to a maximum of 20,000 Finns per year (Kero 1991: 25–26). One of them was my great-grandfather, Johan Hermanninpoika, who sailed with his brother to the U.S. and left his family in extreme poverty in 1902. His wife, my great-grandmother Caisa Greta, was too afraid of the long voyage across the Atlantic so she stayed with their four daughters, including the youngest, my two-year-old grandmother, in hopeless hunger and deprivation in Northern Ostrobothnia. Some emigrants returned, some stayed, but communication was maintained through letters and parcels like Cousin Betty's. She sent a magnificent doll with golden hair, rubber hands, a porcelain face, and blue glass eyes that opened and shut to my mother after the Second World War.

The figure was made famous by literature. Jack London's and Upton Sinclair's novels were popular in Finland and hobos played an important role in them (Roininen 1993: 270–279). For my generation, the train tramp was familiar from the Hollywood movies and American television series that I have watched all my life and much more than Finnish ones. Hence, the hobo has been recognizable in the Finnish mosaic of masculinity, albeit as a small, transgressive, non-Finnish figure.

Contemporary research sees the hobo figure as a critique of brutal early capitalism and resistance to bourgeois society (Cresswell 2001; DePastino 2003; Lennon 2014; Photinos 2008; Tapley 2012). Early capitalism caused high unemployment and demand for cheap seasonal labor (Hyttinen 2020: 67). In 1993 when my photographs were taken, Finland was struggling with the worst recession since the Second World War and high unemployment (it rose from 3.5% to 18.9%), a tsunami of bankruptcies, and drastic cuts in the Nordic welfare state. In the modeling business, Finnish clothing producers escaped to the countries with the lowest possible costs. Unemployment brought a lot of new models to the market while jobs, photo shoots, and fashion shows started to decrease. Even today, the hobo is a relevant figure, when wars, globalization, fiscal policy, and free movement of capital, reckless exploitation of both people and natural resources, digitalization, automation, robotization, population growth, and environmental crisis deprive people not only of livelihoods, but literally uproot them, making them homeless and refugees.

The hobo plays a role here too as a figure of the subculture that included homosexual acts, albeit in a limited form; contemporary understanding links the possibility of sex between men to vagabond culture (Hyttinen 2020: 63). According to Hyttinen, the hegemonic way of organizing society is based on heterosexual intimacy. The family and economic structures revolve around this intimacy, and inevitably produce an outside which queer theory calls the queer (2020: 64) – where, in the beginning, AIDS was placed as a "gay plague." The hobo figure's outsideness is defined by numerous signifiers of deviance and transgression (Cresswell 2001: 20). In my case, the signifiers include the character's queerness, the insinuation of male-to-male sex, and a vaguely demarcated nationality. The photographer and I, stylist, hairstylist, producer and assistant all participated in making the photographs and each one of us built the figure based on our own visions and fantasies. My perceptions of manhood and thus my performance of masculinity inevitably involved AIDS. Not the virus itself but the hate, fears, and prejudices that had contaminated the way I perceived my gender and sexuality when (especially in the 1980s) gay men were subjected to harsh discrimination and outright hatred. AIDS changed the relationship of entire generations to sex (Nikkanen & Järvi 2014: 8) and more broadly to sexuality.

However, the hobo figure was not contaminated by the virus. It was not constructed so much through the normal (Cresswell 2001), but through a joker–punk relationship (DePastino 2013: 88) between a more experienced master, or "daddy," and an inexperienced apprentice, which could include sexual acts. In this model, experience and seniority as a vagabond meant a sexually active role; inexperience meant passivity (Hyttinen 2020: 67). In the narrative of the early twentieth-century American working-class man, masculinity had to be performed in the right way. This correct performance involved dominance. Whether a man dominates a woman or another man is not so relevant, as in both

cases the dominant man lands safely in the territory of normality. What pushes a man out of the realm of normality is desire for another man. That is suspicious. It is reprehensible. Pleasure and enjoyment between men are placed outside normality. The passive receiver role is the most suspicious – and forbidden – as it steps into the dangerous area of the anus. In the early days of AIDS, I, like so many others, was under the same delusion that the receiving party was the susceptible to infection in anal intercourse, and that the active party was safe. Vulgarly, the virus was not believed to be so easily transmitted to the fucker. This increased contempt and hatred towards the bottoms and the rectum, as Bersani (1987: 197–222) has indisputably remarked, and evoked ever more horror. If it had earlier meant an organ of ejection and reception of pleasure, it became an abyss of perdition.

The basic unit of hobo culture is a male couple, which is not defined by an equal romantic relationship, but by dominant masculinity on a working-class model, a hierarchical relationship between the more experienced protector and the inexperienced one who is protected (See Hyttinen 2020: 69; DePastino 2003: 87; Chauncey 1994: 72– 76). However, hobo culture is characterized by an emphasis of sexual ambivalence, as it is difficult to verify how many train tramps actually had sex with another man and how often (Hyttinen 2020: 68). We do not know how many male couples' sexual acts were based on a practical arrangement where security, knowledge, skills, and savviness were exchanged for sexual satisfaction and in how many relationships romantic feelings, desire, lust, love, and commitment were at play.

MY MODEL BOOK

(Figure 3)

I dredge up my model book and photographs. The white covers of the book are shabby, its corners are frayed, but its red letters, PAPARAZZI, indicating the name of the model agency I was listed in, are still vivid. The 10 x 12 inch photographs have been preserved well in their plastic pockets. I open the book. Strangely, the first five of 28 photographs are in the order in which they were taken, although they are placed on completely different, aesthetic, grounds. My booker ordered them with the idea to sell my looks to the client in the most alluring yet convincing and profitable way. I take pictures 2, 3, and 5 out.

I remember sitting in the back seat of an old red Volkswagen Beetle. My knees press against the backrest of the front seat, and I pull back as far back as possible so as not to disturb the driver. The seat springs hit bottom under me with every pit and bump. The producer is driving, and the wardrobe stylist is sitting next to her. When we pick up the hairstylist-makeup artist and all her make-up boxes and bags from Ruoholahti, the space on the back seat becomes crowded. We are heading towards South-West Finland. The journey from the capital Helsinki to Parainen in the Turku Archipelago

takes a good couple of hours. Our destination is the limestone mine Partek, today called Nordkalk, and its mounds of fair sand.

Photographer Marianna, a reticent and distant, blonde ex-model, is coming with her assistant in her car. She always directs me with the smallest gestures and very few words; maybe because of that she is one of my favorite photographers. I love to work with her. She sees me exactly as I would like to be. I want to think that she sees me for who I really am – when no one else does, not even myself.

The first photograph (figure 1) is a close-up of my face. As a model, I am a provocateur, a stereotypical instigator of watching, identification, and desire, which combines youth, sexual attractiveness, and gendered "handsomeness," "good looks" and "neatness," meaning a well-groomed appearance (see Cortese 1999: 52–57), but basically my work had very little to do with looking good or handsome. My job was to express and reflect more abstract qualities, such as strength, independence, courage, and potential to violence with my facial expressions, gaze, gestures, the positions of my head, hands, and feet. I was to avoid portraying the opposites of these qualities, such as weakness, neediness, and submission, at all costs. (Silvola 2022: 8–9.) In the picture, I look to the side, past the camera at a 45-degree angle. The shooting assistant tilts the reflector so that the sunlight burns the contours of the face from the right side. The face blends into the white sky. The short hair is messed up on the forehead. A thick layer of wet gel makes it look dirty, as if it hasn't been washed for ages. The narrow sideburn, which reaches just to the level of the earlobe, is way too trimmed in the 1993 fashion and way too well-groomed to belong to a hobo (crack 1). The forehead is wrinkled, the expression is sad. The image reminds me of the portrait of a *sad young man*, Dyer's concept of the stereotype of a young gay man who is 'complex, varied, intense and contradictory, an image of otherness in which it is still possible to find oneself' (1993: 73–74) (crack 2). This euphemism and representation of gay is common in Finnish cultural imagery (Karkulehto 2011, 40). It can be recognized by the fact that there is no visible reason for the sadness of the young man (often handsome and sleek), but its source can only be insinuated. My broad swimmer's shoulders, made even wider by several thick layers of clothing, have been amputated out of the picture (crack 3). On top is a large, light-gray, checkered duffle shirt. Underneath it is a darker, cotton-jersey shirt, with a light gray camisole. The clothes are too big for me. I feel starved inside them, like I'm slowly disappearing into the folds of the fabric, although I'm not as hungry. I've recovered from anorexia and my weight has increased by several pounds.

The second photograph (figure 2) is one of my favorites. I would like to be the man in the picture – although I don't smoke or plan to start. The three-quarter image borders a little above the knees. I don't make direct eye contact with the camera this time either but look to the left. My face no longer fades into the landscape but is sharply defined. Despite my furrowed forehead I don't look the sad

young man anymore, but self-sufficient. There's a fag between my lips. In the close-up, my head is straight, and my gaze is horizontal, but here I tilt my head slightly back and raise my chin self-consciously. In the hierarchy of gaze directions, I am not leveling with the viewer but place myself above them by looking "over" them. The beanie is pushed to the back of my head. Like in the close-up, the layers of clothing are visible. A thick, loose woolen plaid shirt flutters open. Underneath it is another thick checked shirt. Its fabric is stiff like the cardboard that homeless people wrap themselves in the cold night and it stings my skin like the unplaned floorboards of a cattle wagon floor. The trousers are dark corduroy. The blurred background vaguely resembles mountains that could be anywhere. Three years after the photograph was taken, my agency sent some pictures of mine to Ford Models in the U.S. This is one of them. Shortly after, I had an answerphone message from my agency (I still had a landline along with a cell phone). A call request from Ford Models. Late one night I call the number. There is Billy Ford (Gerard William Jr.), head of the Miami office and a son of the legendary Eileen Ford, whom I had met in Helsinki in 1992. 'Kari, you are a very good-looking guy. You could do a lot of work here. How soon can you come here?' I find it hard to believe what he says. I hesitate for a few weeks and then decide not to go. Instead, I apply to a Finnish university to study literature. (Silvola 2020: 65).

The third picture (figure 3) is the most important – and the most revealing. It was designed for the cover of *City*. I'm wearing the same duffel fabric, loose plaid shirt, gray cotton tricot shirt, and lighter gray undershirt as in the close-up. This full-length portrait shows dark corduroy jeans and a lace-up boot on the right foot. Its old-fashioned metal hooks climb up the leg and disappear into the pant leg. I'm sitting on a slippery slope of a high pile of sand, the cold of the damp sand seeping through the corduroy. On the skin of my particularly sensitive erogenous area, I can feel almost each grain separately. I lean back and open my legs wide. My facial expression is provocative. I protrude my lips alluringly. I make a duck-lip without any fillers and try to make my lips look as full as possible. The way one bulges them in front of a mirror after applying lipstick and the way young women tend to do now when they take selfies (crack 4). Though I don't open my mouth, it makes the sign of satisfaction and pleasure familiar from a porn scene, and even though I have clothes on, my pose can be read as porn. The concept of sex is closely linked to the concept of porn, which can be considered not only as a bodily practice but also as a system of representation (Nikunen 2005, 21).

The idea is that my spread legs would make a perfect layout for the main title on the cover – in between them. If the picture had been published on the cover, I'd have literally had a "man" between my legs. Since the photograph is taken from downhill, my legs appear larger in the foreground, while the upper body leaning away from the lens becomes narrower. My half-lying position is provocative. In the center of the picture is my crotch, not so much the penis as the anus. Spreading my legs is not

an act of masculine space-taking, manspreading, but I see it specifically as an effeminate gesture (crack 5). Of course, it is possible to see the position as masculine and phallic, where I am ready to receive a blowjob, but the heavy lower body emphasized in the composition and the narrowing shoulder line make me bottom heavy (crack 6) and reveal the anal potential of the pose. In a society of spectacle, where all people's affairs are mediated by images and life itself has been transformed into a representation, a performance (see Debord 1967/2005, 35–36; Vänskä 2006, 12), according to Karkulehto (2011: 70–71) representations strongly depict the concept of porn because they explicitly present sex per se. Compared to concepts of gender and sexuality, sex is the closest to the concept of porn. When sexuality is an abstract construction that reflects sexual desire or orientation and is often tied to identities, sex is more palpably functional. In the photograph, the sex act is clearly seen, though it is not actually presented.

The idea of spreading my legs is Marianna's, but the implementation is entirely mine. With my gestures and expressions, I bring the content to the picture in the context of the background and clothing. I could spread my legs in a manly manner, I could be manspreading, but I unconsciously do it in an effeminate way. I spread my legs like a receiver, not a giver – expressed in gay language, in an opposite setting to the hetero realm where women "give," and men "get." Perhaps the trigger is the cold and damp sand; the grains sink deep into my palms and feel both hard and yielding, conforming me, squeezing around me as some stranger who strives to enter me and to whom I want to surrender. Or maybe it is a pent-up hunger for sex and thirst for a fuck. Maybe it is the fear of death that shadowed my very first experience with my classmate in the toilet of a swimming pool in late 1983 or the shame that overshadowed me long before that. Perhaps the urge to spread my legs and surrender erupts forcefully and instinctively, and the camera lens snaps before I can consciously intervene and correct my expression. In my article "My Lies and Liaisons with Marilyn" I describe the extreme control in front of the camera during a photo shoot and this is exactly the sort of situation I fear. In that article, I analyze the Downtown cigarette poster, where I am also sitting, legs apart, and introduce the code of peeing standing up, which, in my theory, summarizes a significant part of homosocial performance of ideal masculinity. (Silvola 2022: 13–14.) Steele writes how he as both model and photographer was 'a facilitator of the current ideal, but did not know where that ideal had originated or where it was about to go' (2020: 12). Was I, too, a harbinger of the changing male image (see Kalha 2005: 34) ahead of its time, an impetus signaling the break with heteronormativity that started to gain visibility and the pornographic imagery that began to pervade the media in the next decade (Nikunen et al. 2005; Kalha 2007)?

IN THE AGE OF AIDS

Exploring my sexuality and its influences on my self-image inevitably also means exploring a key factor in the development of my gender and sexual identity, their performance, and cultural representations of masculinity in general: the virus. It started to spread in Finland in the early 1980s; the first case of infection was in 1981 but it was not identified as AIDS until a few years later. On Tuesday, June 28, 1983, the first news appeared in *Helsingin Sanomat*, the biggest newspaper in the country: 'The life-threatening AIDS virus landed in Finland' with the subtitle 'A homosexual got it in Helsinki' (Nikkanen & Järvi 2014: 31). Since then, the news started to spread like wildfire and homosexual men were blamed for the "gay plague." I was 18 years old, gay, and still a virgin. A friend of mine, an activist and a gay researcher studying homosexuality, Dr. Olli Stålström, told me that at the AIDS Support Center, which was opened in 1986, they used to light a candle every time someone died from AIDS. They stopped lighting the candles in 1996, when the triple medication began to work, and the number of deaths decreased. Therefore, in this article, I narrow down the Finnish age of AIDS to 1983–1996; people still die from it, but not to the same extent, and getting the virus is no longer a death sentence.

A queer gaze reveals why I may have failed in my portrayal of a young hobo – or succeeded even too well. The role of a train tramp was risky: it inevitably involved sex between men and the presence of the anus. As a male model in the early 1990s, the most critical thing was not to hide my homosexuality per se, but to hide my submissive, passive preference (Garst & Bodenhausen 1997; Martin & Gnoth 2009: 356; Silvola 2022: 13). The spread of HIV in Finland in the previous decade, media reporting, and people's attitudes towards it made even the insinuation of a submissive preference impossible and the role more despised.

In the solitude of the closet (see Sedgwick 1990), I was ready to pay any price, no matter how high, for getting laid. Even my life. I first heard about AIDS from the news in the summer of 1983. Although the newspaper articles were sensational and stigmatized gay men, based on them I was informed how the disease is transmitted and how to prevent this in practice: avoiding casual sex and using condoms. It wasn't until the end of that year, one Saturday afternoon, that my classmate, whom I had known since kindergarten and had had a huge crush on since I was 12, asked me to the toilet in the swimming pool, where we had innocent sex. 'Well, it wasn't anything that special. This won't happen again. I just wanted to try what it's like with another guy,' he whispered barely audible to my ear after coming on my hand and before leaving the booth.

AIDS defined, set boundaries, constituted content, gave words (dirty, disgusting, plague, sick, death, condom) to the development of my sexual identity and self-image. The "gay plague" repeated by media hammered my developing sexuality. When I dreamed about my physical education teacher at the age of 12 in 1977, I woke up sick as I realized that I was gay. Homosexuality was diagnosed as a

disease in Finland until June 1981, when overnight, I was "cured" – until things took a turn for the worse because of the AIDS reportage two years later. As long as AIDS was considered only a disease of gay men, medical professionals and the public healthcare were not concerned about it. Only when was seen to affect the "normal population," including women and their newborns, did the disease begin to be taken seriously. One medical authority even suggested in the Finnish Medical Journal that AIDS patients should be isolated from society for the rest of their lives on a deserted island in Turku Archipelago where leprosy patients, mentally ill, criminals and vagrants had previously been abandoned. (Nikkanen & Järvi 2014: 74–75, 79–80.)

In the early days of AIDS, the newspapers labeled all gay men as sex maniacs, because a group of very sexually active gay men were selected for the initial medical studies and the tabloids were endlessly inquisitive about their subcultures and wrote sensational cover stories about them. SETA (LGBTQI rights organization in Finland) would have preferred to educate the public about the majority of homosexuals and rather report about the large number of lonely men whose problem was too few gay contacts, not too many. (Nikkanen & Järvi 2014: 89.) However, the news did not protect me from the virus. Not even the fear of death would prevent me from hopping from bed to bed, crawling from bush to bush in the parks and cruising from urinal to urinal in the public toilets. What does is the fact that I never meet an ordinary Finnish gay man that I feel sexually attracted to, even if there are only ordinary men in those few gay clubs, bars, and restaurants in town. Bespectacled men in their knitted cardigans, pot-bellied bearded bears in checked flannel shirts, and self-tanned bleached blonds in tank tops bought in Ibiza. Slim men, beautiful men, skinny young men, aging men with permed hair. There are "men's men," leather guys who order their manliness by mail from Germany or Denmark, black leather in a brown package without a sender. Their leather pants and chaps and straps have rivets and there are spur straps but no spurs in their long boots. The cockades of their leather caps have shiny pieces of red glass. These places are frequented by chain-smokers and red-faced alcoholics, who were haunted like criminals and treated like they were sick, who are overweight, ruined by depression and antidepressants, broken by persecution, and battered by the oppression of society. There are ordinary men.

What ultimately protects me from the virus and practically plunges me into decades of celibacy is the closet. Internalized self-loathing, self-discrimination, and homophobia make me see other men as gay stereotypes and not as they are, as *ordinary Finnish men*. The worst thing is that I do not identify as gay nor straight, but with self-contempt. I cannot appreciate or even experience myself as a man. If someone asked me, who I am, I couldn't answer. I don't know. It drives me to look for myself in images – and fail to find myself, time after time.

I expose myself to infection for the first time in the late spring of 1988. I see a tall man at Botta (Restaurant Ostrobothnia in Helsinki), a club where gay parties are held every Monday. He draws my attention at first glance. He glares at me all evening but doesn't come to talk. A week later I see him again. Then, he comes to me straight away. When he opens his mouth, I immediately know that he is not "my type." However, I drag him to my home. We have unprotected sex. My first anal intercourse is a painful experience. I consent even if it doesn't give me any pleasure. I just wish it would be over as soon as possible. We start dating. After a couple of weeks, he reveals that he lives with another man. We continue dating – and having unprotected and unsatisfying sex as I'm not learning to enjoy him inside me – through the summer. In the fall, I'm ready to leave him. The fear, no, the horror of infection that has been growing inside me all summer overflows. I have no symptoms, but I am convinced that I have it. I go to take an anonymous test at the AIDS Support Center in Katajanokka, Linnankatu 2. They take my dark red, almost black blood and give me a code to collect the result in two weeks. During those weeks, all I can think is that my life is over. It's a warm late summer day when I return to the center to hear my verdict. Suicidal thoughts have filled my head. On Katajanokka bridge, I stop and look for a place to jump down and drown myself if the result is positive.

I'll see the contact sheets a few days later. I like them. In the pictures, it's not me but the guy I'd like to be. I have managed to present my ideal man in front of the camera. The stylist, make-up artist and hairstylist and the assistant who held the reflector, and above all, Marianna, have managed to construct me into a guy that I can imagine passing for straight. It's not the style or fashion that strikes me, but the type. He doesn't seem ashamed. He seems smug, he looks so pleased with himself. He doesn't seem to beg for others' approval of his own existence. It is a shock to me. Marianna sends the images to the *City* office, but when the male-themed issue comes out, there's another man on the cover. They never publish my pictures, not on the cover or inside. They never explain. I never hear from them again.

CONCLUSIONS

At the beginning of this article, I noted that creators do not have a correct or more truthful interpretation of advertising or fashion images than the viewers. Nevertheless, I have taken an internal perspective, not as superior, but as an alternative point of view in the historical context. In the age of AIDS, the beginning of MusicTV, Miami Vice (1984–1989) and straight men starting to adopt fashion and glamor for themselves: designer sunglasses, boxy blazers with enormous shoulder pads, pleats in the waist and hem of trousers and revolutionary pastel colors, such as pink, coral, and turquoise. The metrosexual was conceived and showing off, including aesthetic, was escapism at its

best. In the 1990s, deep recession wiped away the shoulder pads and most of the fabric of the blazers. They were replaced by rock music, a relaxed attitude, grunge, jeans with a record high waistline, a model boom, and real supermodels.

In this article, I have pointed out cracks in the ideal masculinity according to the prevailing heteronormativity that prevented my photographs from being published. Queer theoretical analysis revealed six cracks in the images which made them unsuitable for printing 30 years ago: 1) too-well-groomed sideburns; 2) the expression of a *sad young man*, a euphemism for a gay man; 3) broad shoulders cropped out of the picture; 4) protruding lips; 5) (wo)manspreading and innuendo of an anus; 6) bottom-heaviness of the body. These distortions are interpreted differently today, and the publishing the pictures can be considered a sweet revenge and a proof that our perception of masculinities, how we look and see a man, have changed in 30 years. This shows the constructed, ever-changing nature of the masculinity.

My autoethnographic method and internal perspective produce new knowledge. This made me aware of my internalized homophobia: I needed to see myself both inside out and outside in. The return to the age of AIDS in my memories not only brought back how I posed in front of the camera and presented my ideas of ideal masculinity, but also how I saw other men: as stereotypes. Finally, I saw myself in the mirror: as a stereotype who could not accept himself. I still do not dare to say that I love myself, but I am not ashamed of myself anymore. To be precise, I am no longer ashamed of my sexuality and am not as insecure about my masculinity as I used to be. However, confessing shameful things about myself, such as internalized homophobia, and writing about the most intimate experiences can cause new shame. Can part of this text be considered porn and inappropriate in a research article? Is it belletristic, valid research, or just exhibitionism? The autobiographical process continues. It is difficult to end it.

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Figure 1: Marianna Haka, Model Kari Silvola, 1992. 10 inch × 12 inch. Parainen, Finland.

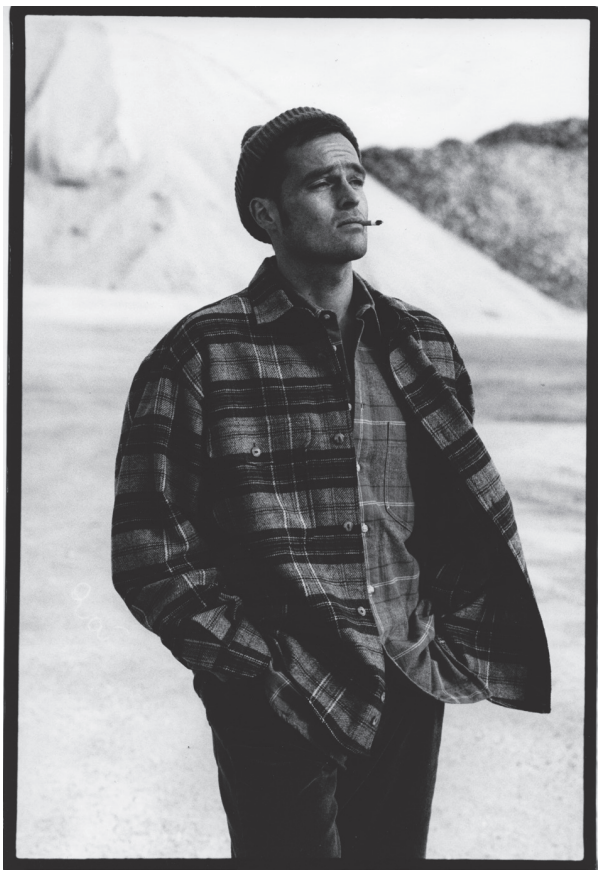

Figure 2: Marianna Haka, Model Kari Silvola, 1992. 10 inch × 12 inch. Parainen, Finland.

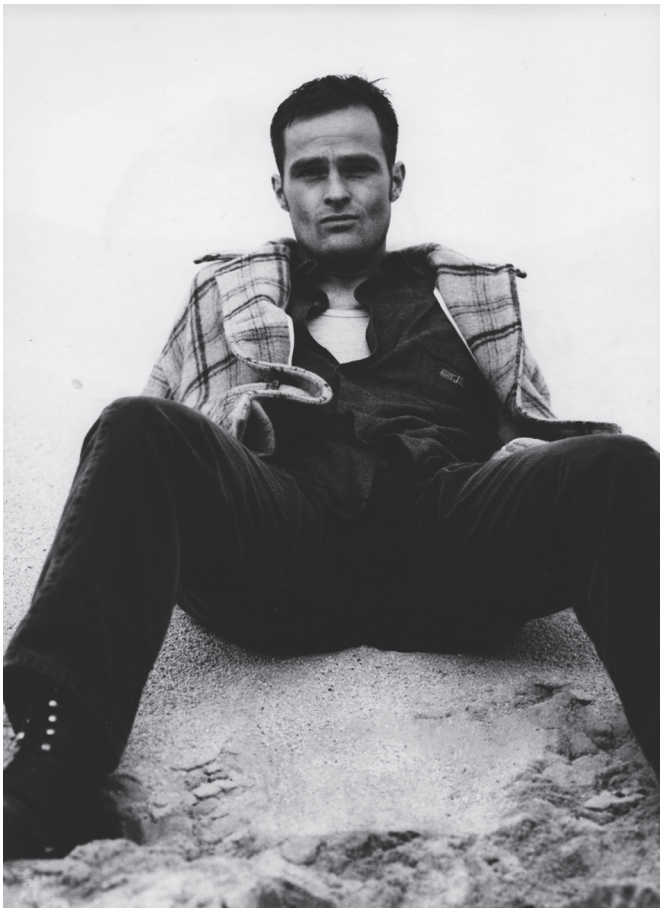

Figure 3: Marianna Haka, Model Kari Silvola, 1992. 10 inch × 12 inch. Parainen, Finland.

III

A MALE MODEL'S AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC WRITING AND QUEER-THEORETICAL SCREENING OF GAIDAR: CAN ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE PREDICT SEXUAL ORIENTATION, OR IS THE QUESTION OF 'GAY OR STRAIGHT' WRONG?

by

Silvola, Kari (2025).

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