

Dr. Kata Kyrölä

[k.kyrola@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:k.kyrola@ucl.ac.uk)

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### **Queer Indigenous World-Making in the Sámi TV Comedy *Njuoska bittut***

How can laughter unravel gendered, sexual and settler colonial power dynamics, and help imagine other ways of being? In this chapter, I examine the Sámi TV comedy show *Njuoska bittut* (in Finnish *Märät säpikkäät*, produced by Tarinatalo, broadcast by the Finnish public service broadcasting company YLE 2012–2013) by Sámi creatives Suvi West and Anne Kirste Aikio as a project of queer Indigenous world-making. I suggest that *Njuoska Bittut* offers an alternative vision of a world of Indigenous laughter, erotics and audiovisuality, where settler understandings of gender, sexuality, and the workings of the world are made strange and ridiculous. Aimed at Sámi and non-Sámi audiences alike, the show navigates between making its humor legible for a settler audience and creatively imagining queer Indigenous worlds, disinterested in such legibility.

“Njuoska bittut” is North Sámi language and refers to leg warmers made of reindeer skin that got wet. West and Aikio explain in an interview that they picked up the phrase from a hundreds-of-years-old *yoik* (Sámi traditional vocal genre) where it refers to a treacherous woman with unruly sexual appetites (Huru, 2012). The humor in *Njuoska bittut* does indeed center sex and sexuality, playing with the stereotype of the exotic Native with voracious sexual appetites (Green 2007; Lehtola, 2000, pp. 138–141) – but the laughter is also geared at the Sámi themselves, and tensions or prejudices within Sámi communities. Every episode introduces a broad theme, such as tourism, Helsinki, homosexuality, boobs, babies, and animals. Across the episodes, there are also recurring characters and sketch types, for example mock-ethnographic documentaries about the Helsinki tribe of people whose habits of living in concrete bunkers and of banishing people who cross to the other side of the beltway. In every episode, West and Aikio introduce a Finnish or Sámi human type in nature documentary style. These types include the white meat-eating

hetero man; the wilderness tourist who feels a deep connection to Arctic nature; the Sámiophile, a non-Native who is obsessively interested in anything Sámi; and the super Sámi, a Sámi person who eagerly polices the identity expression other Sámi folks. Every episode includes a music video spoof of a popular Finnish pop song, with new lyrics in Northern Sámi. Most of the music videos address sex in one way or another.

Drawing on queer Indigenous studies, queer of color critique, and Indigenous media studies, this chapter interrogates how *Njuoska bittut* challenges settler colonial and heteronormative views of gender and sexuality, but also (re-)imagines what queer world-making could mean in an Indigenous context. José Esteban Muñoz (1999, 2009) suggests, in his work on queer utopia and queer of color performance, that queer world-making practices are about reordering, decomposing and reshaping, imagining what could be outside of the hegemonic order while using the dominant social order as raw material. Queer world-making practices, for Muñoz, entail a utopian longing for, picturing of and insistence on the possibility of other kinds of worlds, whether they exist within or outside of hegemonic culture. Such worlds carve out realms of pleasure even within the most suppressive conditions. Qwo-Li Driskill (2010, pp. 74–79) proposes further that queer of color critique and queer Indigenous studies could share ground in their insistence to see gender, sexuality, race and national belonging as intertwined, as well as in their imaginative work for decolonial alternatives.

*Njuoska bittut* can be seen to conjure up Sámi worlds both within and outside of mainstream settler culture – but it also diffuses and de-dramatizes settler-Indigenous binaries by laughing at Sámi as well as Finnish culture. The series portrays everyday Sámi practices as normal while making fun of them, and the way they might seem incomprehensible to non-Sámi viewers. Finnish settler practices are equally laughed at, as they are depicted as strange from a Sámi perspective. In the process, settler understandings of Indigeneity, gender, heteronormative desire, and human-animal binaries start appearing ridiculously arbitrary and rigid. Since *Njuoska bittut* is a comedy show that was sold to and broadcast on a national TV channel in Finland, it has to speak to and be customized for Finnish settler audience members, but there are glimpses, echoes, moments of something that escapes – worlds that are not easily accessible for non-Indigenous viewers.

In the following, I explore not only the strategies of humor in Native comedy and *Njuoska bittut* but also my own viewing experiences as a non-Native queer media scholar. In particular, I set out to explore moments in *Njuoska bittut* that do *not* intuitively make sense to me, moments that stop me in my tracks, puzzle me. Could these moments point out the boundaries of the settler colonial imagination, where the embodied knowledge accumulated as a non-Native just does not suffice? Could these moments signal the moments when the series moves into territories unknown, perhaps unknowable to me – in other words, into the realm of queer Indigenous world-making? How could such moments nevertheless function as lessons, as they offer an opportunity to stop, explore and find ways to learn about Sámi worlds through pleasure, laughter and curiosity? First, I briefly discuss queer Indigenous studies and what it means to look for queer Indigenous sensibilities, even if they are not named explicitly as “queer.” Then I outline the role of comedy and laughter as means of oppression as well as survival and pleasure for marginalized people overall and Indigenous and Sámi people in particular, before moving on to examining moments in *Njuoska bittut* that offer glimpses into queer Indigenous worlds.

### **Queer Indigenous Sensibilities**

In *Njuoska bittut*, West and Aikio regularly play male, female and other, Sámi and Finnish characters as well as various non-human animal characters. The queer sensibilities of the show are not necessarily underlined as such, but they are not hidden either, surfacing here and there and always existing as an undercurrent. In queer media studies, it is indeed commonplace to explore queer dimensions beyond explicitly queer or gender diverse characters or narratives, focusing on queer hints, aesthetics, sensibilities, and readings (e.g. Benshoff and Griffin, 2004, p. 10). *Njuoska bittut*'s queer Indigenous sensibilities remind of what Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017) and Alex Wilson (1996) have called Indigenous grounded queer normativity – a utopian vision of a world where all genders and sexualities just are, without being named queer or deviant: “They also come from the land – the land that provides endless examples of queerness and diverse sexualities and genders” (Simpson, 2017, p. 122). The show can thus be seen to speak to queer Indigenous cosmologies, where the human-like and the non-human, gender and sexuality are just some of nature's many forces (e.g. TallBear, 2015; Byrd, 2017;

TallBear and Willey, 2019) – sometimes articulating an explicit reference to sexual and gender diversity, sometimes not.

However, the show's queer sensibilities are not exceedingly difficult to see or extract, nor can they be understood as arbitrary. Particularly Suvi West – also known as a documentary filmmaker – has been outspoken in public about sexual and gender diversity among the Sámi and directed the first ever feature-length queer Sámi film *Sparroabbán (Me and My Little Sister, 2016)*. *Sparroabbán* follows Suvi West's and her lesbian sister Kaisa's journey in search of a queer Sámi past and present. The documentary carefully depicts loss and trauma as well as re-imagines what queer Sáminess could be, since for the Sámi, histories of non-heteronormative relations and genders remain largely undocumented (Kyrölä and Huuki, 2021).

Accounts from oral tradition suggest that some Sámi communities nevertheless accepted and revered non-heterosexual and gender diverse people, much like many other Indigenous people around the world (Kuokkanen, 2019, p. 6; Løvold, 2014, pp. 22–28). In the Nordic scholarly context, Sámi feminist scholarship is gaining more footing and mainstream recognition (for an overview, see Dankertsen, 2020), but queer Indigenous studies perspectives are still largely missing, save for some reports and Master's theses (Giertsen, 2002; Løvold, 2014; Mattanen, 2016; Olsen, Heinämäki and Harkoma, 2017). Queer Sámi activism has started to become more widely visible in the 2010s through the yearly Sápmi Pride events, organized in various parts of Sápmi since 2014, and the groundbreaking photograph and life story collection about LGBTQ2 Sámi, *Queering Sápmi* (Bergman, Persson and Linqvist, 2013).

Exploring the existence, persistence and flourishing of queer Sámi people as well as sensibilities – even when they are not tied to explicit queer identities or openly articulated – is overall a necessary political project. Explorations of queer Indigeneity break the silence around it and (re)imagine not only what it can be, but how to think through and live diverse genders and sexualities beyond settler colonial, heteronormative structures (Driskill, Finley, Gilley and Morgensen, 2011, pp. 10–18). Such a goal resonates with Rauna Kuokkanen's call – alongside those of many other Native feminist theorists – that struggles for Indigenous self-determination must center questions of gender, sexuality, and their multiplicity in order to be meaningful

(Kuokkanen, 2019; Simpson, 2017; Arvin, Tuck and Morrill, 2013). In its own way, *Njuoska bittut* can be seen to forward these goals through a politics of radical laughter and pleasure.

### **Sámi Media and Indigenous Comedy**

*Njuoska bittut* is so far one of the very few Indigenous-made TV series in Europe outside of news and children's programming, and thus a unique trailblazer. Broadcast on the national public service television channel in Finland, YLE, the show uses Finnish, English and North Sámi (with Finnish subtitles). Some of the materials, such as the spoofs of popular Finnish music videos and cut-out sketches, are available on the show's YouTube channel MaratSapikkaat.<sup>1</sup> YLE, like the other Nordic public service media companies, SVT in Sweden and NRK in Norway, has a section for the Sámi, YLE Sápmi. YLE Sápmi has offered *Ođđasat*, a regular news program in three different Sámi languages, since 2013, and *Unna Junná*, a children's program also in three Sámi languages, since 2007 (Dlaske and Jäntti, 2016; Sand, 2019, pp. 3–4; Cocq and DuBois, 2020, p. 23). NRK in Norway broadcast a Sámi TV show for young people called *Kakaos-TV* (*Kákáos tv-sovv*) that ran from 1995 to 1999 and included sketch characters which can be considered predecessors for *Njuoska bittut*. Additionally, NRK produced and broadcast a Sámi drama series for young people called *Skáidi* in 1995. Sámi-created documentary and fiction cinema has been burgeoning since the 2000s (Sand, 2019, p. 4; Lehtola, 2015, pp. 252–256), spurred by the global success of films such as Sámi director Amanda Kernell's award winning *Sami Blood* (*Sameblod*, 2016) (see Cocq and DuBois, 2020, pp. 177–192), but the relative lack of Sámi content on television makes *Njuoska bittut* all the more significant as the first and so far the only one of its kind.

It is perhaps not very surprising that comedy is somewhat overrepresented in Sámi television. Marginalized groups have often received their first breaks into mainstream media through comedy. Comedy has been one of the first areas where women have been able to say and do things that would otherwise be deemed outrageous – comedy enables the normative world “as we know it” to be shaken since transgressions are allowed, even expected (Rowe, 1995). Some of the first Black actors to make it big in Hollywood are or started out as comedians. However, as Bambi Haggins points out, today's Black comedians may use humor as a survival strategy, a

political weapon, and a way to show the truth about race relations – but they must do so against the backdrop of racist comic depictions of Black people as ridiculous and childlike (Haggins, 2007). Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai propose, accordingly, that comedy has a “propensity to get into trouble.” In the world of comedy, confusion, anger, humiliation and pleasure are always close to each other, and “the funny is always tripping over the not-funny, sometimes appearing identical to it” (Berlant and Ngai, 2017, p. 234).

Humour has meant both survival and fighting back also for Indigenous people. Mohawk actor Gary Farmer has noted that Native communities “...had to have the ability to laugh. If they didn’t, they wouldn’t be existing today. So humor has been a means of survival, the only means” (Ryan, 1999, p. 72). Comedy has been one of the first cultural arenas where Indigenous performers have been able to reach wide, multi-faceted audiences and thus engage in “comedic activism” (Berglund, 2016). One of the earliest and best-known figures was Charlie Hill, an Oneida comedian who rose to fame in the US in the 1970s, and whose “act would absolutely slap white people in the face” (Ree quoted in Nesteroff, 2021, p. 153). The punchline of one of Hill’s jokes ended up as the title of a book of interviews with Native American comedians, *We Had a Little Real Estate Problem* (Nesteroff, 2021). In the mid-2000s, a Native comedy group called the 1491s – named after the last year before the arrival of Christopher Columbus – also gained a wide following both for their live shows and on YouTube, appealing to Native and non-Native audiences alike (Berglund, 2016).

Significantly, one of *Njuoska bittut*’s key strategies of comedy is role reversal: redirecting the exoticizing, ridiculing gaze towards the dominant Finnish settler population from an Indigenous perspective, holding up a mirror to us, providing a “slap in the face” – just the slap does not feel quite painful as it is delivered with laughter. This strategy has been used in earlier Indigenous television comedy too, for instance in *Babakiueria* (1988, Australia), named after a sketch where Aboriginal explorers arrive in a white people’s barbeque area, conquer it and name it by spelling the “Native” name in their own way (Shohat and Stam, 1994, p. 328). Previous academic analyses of *Njuoska bittut* (Dlaske and Jäntti, 2016; Pietikäinen and Dlaske, 2013; Kallioniemi and Siivikko, 2020) have focused particularly on the show’s role reversal strategies, analyzing the sketch characters “Leila” and “Laila.” Leila and Laila are two alcoholic, lewd, openly racist

white Finnish women played by West and Aikio in the second season of the show. The characters are a parody of the stereotype of white working class Finnish femininity as well as a parodic play on a pair of two other sketch characters, well known in Finnish television history: the “nunnuka” men.

The “nunnuka” men were two drunken, lewd Sámi male characters, dressed in costume shop versions of the Sámi traditional dress *gákti*, with blackened teeth, smudged faces and hay straws for hair, who talked about reindeer herding, drinking, getting laid, and doing shady business. They got their nickname from a chant they would repeat, “nunnuka-nunnuka-lailaa-lailaa,” a mocking imitation of the traditional Sámi vocal genre *yoik*. They also popularized a certain “nunnuka” walk where they would walk by jumping from one leg to the other and tilting their bodies from side to side, doing their chant, a mock version of some kind of generic “Native” dance. The characters were played by two prominent Finnish comedians, Aake Kalliala and Pirkka-Pekka Petelius, in sketch comedy shows in the late 1980s and early 1990s, *Hymyhuulet* (Smiling lips, Yleisradio, 1987–1989) and *Pulttibois* (1989–1991). The sketches raised heated debate already at the time of their broadcasting and then again in 2019, when Petelius publically apologized to the Sámi community for the stereotypical and harmful characterization (Kallioniemi and Siivikko, 2020, p. 44). Many Sámi people found the characters offensive and a complaint was made to the board of public broadcasting in Finland. The complaint was dismissed, however, as the characters were seen to be satire of ethnic stereotypes, not promoting stereotypes themselves. But even if the purpose was to be satirical, the experiences of Sámi people who regularly faced “nunnuka” yells and ridicule referencing the sketches told a different story (Kallioniemi and Siivikko, 2020, pp. 49–51).

Indeed, although laughter is most often associated with pleasure, the case of the “nunnuka” men shows how forceful comedy can be as a tool of subordination, turning a whole rich culture into a chant, a funny walk and a dirty joke. With Leila and Laila, however, West and Aikio turned the tables around as Sámi actors playing Finnish characters, talking even dirtier than the “nunnuka” men, and chanting their own non-sensical chant: “Leila löi Lailaa, Laila löi Leilaa, römpsät pesuun” [“Leila hit Laila, Laila hit Leila, time for a cunt wash”]. Leila and Laila also have hay for hair and blackened teeth, and they wear “normal” Finnish women’s clothes, tank tops and

jeans. They carnivalize a certain white working class heterosexual femininity that has to do with the stereotype of Finnish people as boozy or alcoholics (Dlaske and Jäntti, 2016, pp. 12–13), a stereotype most Finns probably recognize and find easy to laugh at.

As settler colonialism's aim is to make itself invisible, a natural and innocent state of affairs at the cost of making Indigenous people and land symbolically and concretely disappear (Kauanui, 2016; Veracini, 2010), one of my aims in this chapter is to make the settler gaze visible as a power-laden construction – using my own bafflement and “getting” or “not getting” Indigenous jokes as an example. Michelle H. Raheja argues, in her exploration of Native American representation in Hollywood history (2011), that Indigeneity has been a hypervisible and invisible locus in western settler media, although Indigenous representations' impact on all viewers, including settler audiences, has been under-examined. The Nunnuka men dominated the hegemonic public imagination on the Sámi in Finland for a long time with extraordinary force. In my childhood and early teens in small town Finland, the “nunnuka” chant and the “nunnuka” walk were something kids did regularly for laughs. When I have given talks in Finland about Sámi media, these sketch characters are what people roughly in my age group remember most. Finland's participation in settler colonialism and the systematic mistreatment of Sámi people across the Nordic countries was something we did not learn about at school or at home – an omission necessary for maintaining Nordic exceptionalism, the persistent and inaccurate self-perception of Nordic countries being outside of settler colonial processes and racist ideologies (Loftsdóttir and Jensen, 2012). Comedy functioned as settler colonial pedagogy of privilege through ridicule for us who were non-Native.

The image of the “nunnuka” men was so pervasive that against its background, *Njuoska bittut* seems even more radical as a “slap in the face” – as well as in terms of its politics of representation. Indigenous people playing non-Indigenous characters almost never happens in the media, although non-Indigenous actors habitually play Indigenous characters. When there are only few mainstream media representations of a marginalized group available, as is the case with the Sámi, single ones gain considerable definitive power, which can be said to ring true of both the “nunnuka” men and Leila and Laila, two decades apart. Role reversals such as the characters Leila and Laila are never simply reversals, but they force that which is normative and invisible



into a sharp focus, revealing its utter dependence on perspective. They point out the white settler gaze for what it is, expose its disguise as a view from “everywhere and nowhere” (cf. Dyer, 1997, p. 45), just having a bit of fun. As an adult, the Leila and Laila sketches make me laugh perhaps a little bit too hard and a little bit too enthusiastically – yes, because they are incredibly rude, but also because the laughter offers a way to face and diffuse the embarrassment I feel about the other kind of laughter of my youth.

Sketch characters like Leila and Laila are, however, easy to “get” for anyone who has seen the “nunnuka” men. Next, however, I want to zoom in on some moments in *Njuoska bittut* that I did not get at first viewing, that required effort, but might just therefore offer entrance points to queer Indigenous world-making.

### **The Sámi as Queer and the (Im)possibility of a Sovereign Erotic**

Although various plays with gender and non-heteronormative sexuality abound in *Njuoska bittut* overall, episode 2 of season 2 tackles intersections of Sáminess and queerness explicitly with the title “Mortal sin: the price of being gay” (“Kuolemansynti: homostelun hinta”).<sup>2</sup> In the episode, Aikio and West visit the Helsinki Pride event. They begin the episode by stating matter-of-factly that they are now coming out of the closet as lesbians, even though the series has, up until then, focused on them as very eager and active heterosexuals. During the episode, they joke about homophobia within Sámi communities (“we should recruit preachers to tell that heterosexuals will go to hell and have their drums burned”); they interview queer participants of the Pride parade; and, notably, march in the parade, holding signs saying (in Finnish) “Homo without status” and “We are gays too”. The signs seem to mostly baffle folks in the parade. At the time when I first watched the show, these signs baffled me as well – they simply made no sense. What could a homo without status possibly mean? In reference to queer Indigenous world-making, it seemed rather like West and Aikio really did create a little absurd world of their own, as straight but maybe-newly-lesbian Sámi carrying inexplicable signs.

Status, in the sense meant in the sign, is something that non-Indigenous people rarely have to think about but is a central point of debate in relation to Indigenous sovereignty and settler

colonial nation states. Status as Sámi in Finland is the equivalent of being an enrolled member of an Indigenous nation in the US and Canada, and debates over who belongs in Indigenous groups are common globally. This reflects the fraught settler colonial cultural terrain where Indigenous belonging can signal both being a target of stark state regulation and a desired identity, for example to gain access to Indigenous rights (Valkonen, Valkonen and Koivurova, 2017). By carrying the sign, Aikio and West make fun of the absurdity of the simultaneous appropriation and regulation of Sámi identity by absurdly appropriating homosexuality, claiming that they are “homo without status,” presumably because they decided to become lesbians for this one episode and purpose only. By carrying the signs, they happily disregard the histories and lived realities of homo-, queer- and transphobic subordination, just like the markers of a Sámi identity, such as *gákti*, have been appropriated over and over again in Finnish culture, happily disregarding the history of Indigenous oppression and the deep cultural significance of *gákti*. To be recognized as homosexual or queer, of course, does not require official “status,” and belonging in these categories is not regulated in any state-sanctioned way. The “We are gays too” sign can be seen to point out the continued forgetting of Native people and settler colonialism from queer activism and theory (Driskill, 2010), as well as the queering of Native peoples overall in colonial heteropatriarchy through accounts of “deviant” genders and sexualities (Finley, 2010).

In the same episode, there is a music video spoof in North Sámi called “Dán ija” (“I don’t want to lick tonight,” in Finnish “Mä en haluu nuolla tänä yönä”), based on a popular pop song by Finnish singer Jenni Vartiainen called “I don’t wanna die tonight” (performed in Finnish “Mä en haluu kuolla tänä yönä”) from 2010. In it, West and Aikio are dressed in white, writhe and sing on a bed, occasionally lie on it next to each other very still with their hands crossed, and stroke a cross and a bible in close-up. In the beginning of the video, the lyrics state: “Even though you come close and stroke me, I have no desire tonight, so I have to tell you, I don’t want to lick tonight.” On the first glance, I took this music video spoof to be about (the alleged phenomenon of) “lesbian bed death,” not really seeing the point, even somewhat annoyed by it. But as the video progresses, West and Aikio stroke the cross and the bible ever more frantically, exclaiming that instead of licking, they are going to read the bible and become whole again. The writhing and stroking and longing facial expressions are in stark contrast with the exclamation that there is “no desire tonight.” The video ends in lyrics: “Leaving women and lesbianism behind, I am

able to live alone – at least for tonight.” This gave me pause and made me reconsider my original lesbian bed death interpretation against the history of settler colonialism in Finland. What was it that I did could not see?

Christian missionary work was a key part of settler colonialization of the Sámi in Finland from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onward, and knowledge of earlier Sámi understandings of gender and sexuality exist only filtered through Christian missionary notes, non-Native anthropology, and generations of assimilation policies. Indeed, many contemporary queer Sámi believe that current homophobic and transphobic attitudes in some Sámi communities are not a part of traditional Sámi nature-based spirituality but a product of settler colonial conservative Christianity (Mattanen, 2016, p. 48, 90). Laestadianism, a conservative Lutheran revival movement, was particularly strong in Sápmi, and one of the key themes of Suvi West’s later documentary film *Sparroabbán* is the oppressive silence around queerness in Sápmi which her sister Kaisa finds heavy to bear – a deeply felt conflict between the love of her land, her family, her people, her deep Lutheran faith, and being queer (see Kyrölä and Huuki, 2021, pp. 94–97). Against this background, the video seemingly about lack of sexual desire becomes about the suffocation of non-heteronormative desire, traced back to settler colonialism.

In thinking more carefully through the “I don’t wanna lick tonight” video, my attention is drawn to a prominently featuring mirror on a wall through which the viewer sees the two women writhing on the bed. Is this the inescapable mirror of settler colonialism that twists the vision of queer Sámi people about themselves, not allowing them to see themselves as fully themselves and sovereign in their sexuality? The video begins to seem rather more like a playful attempt to laugh at the trauma of the loss of knowledge on pre-colonial notions of gender and sexuality; to tackle the incredible difficulty, even impossibility of imagining full self-determination in terms of genders and sexualities beyond settler colonialism.

Queer Indigenous thinkers, artists and activists have tackled this difficulty by carving out spaces of queer Indigenous world-making through poetry, performance, and art. Driskill (2004) has conceptualized the goal of such world-making as a *sovereign erotic* which ties together pre-colonial understandings of gender and sexuality as fluid, multiple and connected to land and history, and Indigenous political struggles for self-determination. A sovereign erotic sees the

realm of the sexual as broader than sex, and the sexual as a powerful healing force that does not forget but embraces trauma as a part of that healing (Driskill, 2004, pp. 51–52). In Driskill’s (2004, pp. 56–57) words: “A sovereign erotic is a return to and/or continuance of the complex realities of gender and sexuality that are ever-present in both the human and more-than-human world, but erased and hidden by colonial cultures.” As such, the sovereign erotic speaks to Muñoz’s (1999) understanding of queer of color world-making, as both aim to create spaces for pleasure, healing, desire and sovereignty on terms not dictated by the surrounding white settler colonial heteronormative society, but simultaneously being embedded in it. In the “I don’t want to lick tonight” music video, West and Aikio are addressing and diffusing this tension through laughter and playfulness, but with a tragic undertone. There are hints toward a sovereign erotic in the frantic strokes of the bible and in the erotic writhing, but the erotic remains suffocated, even if just barely.

### **Bears, Lemmings and Queer Non-Human Indigenous Worlds**

If the episode on homosexuality hints toward queer Indigenous worlds yet to come but not yet fully realizing, there are other, brief moments in *Njuoska bittut* where those worlds do seem to fully exist, even if briefly. The moments where my comprehension as a non-Native viewer really collapse – and which I therefore take to signal queer Indigenous world-making – relate to one particular feature of the show that was never acknowledged or even mentioned in its public reception or scholarly analyses. Throughout the two seasons, there were seemingly random, abruptly appearing, recurring inserts, only a few seconds long, featuring a bear character during the first season, and a lemming character during the second season. The bear inserts include the bear rowing a boat on an arctic lake; hitch-hiking by a roadside in Sápmi; having sex with a woman in the woods; sniffing a car’s gas tank and walking away high; and slow-dancing with someone by a pool table in a bar. The lemming, on the other hand, has bloodier adventures: the inserts end with the lemming’s head exploding every time: for example, for getting on an escalator and failing to get off; for driving a car in a traffic jam; for trying on a too small top in a department store’s fitting room; and for walking into a filthy public bathroom. When I first watched the show, I barely noticed these inserts, as they were so short and seemingly so absurd – strange little glimpses into another world, as if parodying the idea of sending subliminal

messages through a screen. However, as I re-watched, the inserts started captivating me for exactly these reasons.

The bear (*guovza*) features prominently in Sámi culture as the holiest and most powerful of animals – in the Sámi worldview, bears have souls just like all living beings. Bear hunting was a ritual event, and in Sámi mythology there are stories of an erotic relationship between a bear and a woman, as well as bear-human mergers and transformations (Rydving, 2010; Heith, 2016). The bear in the inserts is presented, however, in present-day situations, like it was just some youth looking to get away, get high, and have sex.

The lemming (*goddesáhpán*), on the other hand, is known for its mass migrations, and such migrations – repeated every few years – were seen as premonitions in Sámi mythology. In the Sámi worldview, the lemming is also known for its persistence and even recklessness in dangerous situations. The idea of the lemming as suicidal, however, has come about from a Disney documentary *White Wilderness* (1958) which portrayed Norwegian lemmings to throw themselves off a cliff into the Arctic sea during migration. In fact, the documentary crew had thrown the lemmings off a cliff into the sea to make the film more dramatic (Nicholls, 2014). In a study on suicide in Sámi communities (Stoor et al., 2015), the lemming was nevertheless a point of reference and identification for the interviewed Sámi people who felt like lemmings, their existence threatened by settler colonialism. They did not identify with the lemming because it is suicidal, but because it will fight for its survival until the very end, and die for its inability to flee even in the face of annihilation. The lemming in *Njuoska bittut* inserts not only explodes inadvertently and extravagantly bloodily, but it explodes in contact with settler colonial urban environments that are as mundane as they are frustrating.

Kuokkanen (2007, p. xix) has pointed out that in Sámi worldviews, just as in many other Indigenous philosophies, the human is seen as just one of the many forces of nature instead of its center. Sexuality is one such force, and cannot therefore be understood as exclusively centering on the human either. Kim TallBear (2015) similarly underlines that stories and understandings of sexual fluidity, desire, and couplings between human, non-human and spiritual entities are common in Indigenous mythologies and traditions, even if they are not necessarily framed in

terms of what western thought considers sex or sexuality. Could these little inserts of the bear and the lemming, then, offer glimpses into queer non-human Indigenous world-making, creating momentary escapes where the erotic is not defined by settler heteropatriarchy or human-centrism, even if the flipside is the danger of exploding? The inserts can perhaps be seen to momentarily actualize a sovereign erotic (Driskill, 2004) which merges trauma with healing and pleasure, and does so through connection to land and non-human animals as equal actors. The glimpses of the bear and the lemming do not care about “making sense” or giving pleasure to a non-Native viewer like myself – not even when they eventually do.

The bear and the lemming inserts also defy the usual audiovisual aesthetics of western television, as they are incredibly short, lack any so-called introduction, and appear and disappear suddenly at seemingly random moments. They do not have background music, sometimes they do not have sound at all, and when they do, the sound is brief and diegetic, coming from the world depicted, such as the lemming’s scream before its head explodes. In this sense, not only do the inserts create glimpses of queer non-human Indigenous worlds, but they forge into existence a vision of *visual sovereignty*. Visual sovereignty, a notion coined by Raheja (2011), occupies a paradoxical space between the need for creative Indigenous self-determination and what that can mean within a cultural context where representations of Indigeneity have for so long been defined from the outside. Visual sovereignty aims to capture audiovisual moments, created by Indigenous artists, that envision Indigenous aesthetics and defy western audiovisual logics – for example, by creating their own pace and temporality, and underlining entanglements of land, humans, non-human animals and geographical place (Raheja, 2011, pp. 17–18). The bear and the lemming inserts do just that, barely even registering for a viewer who is not sensitized to such visuals, but creating spaces of outrageous pleasure, while gathering force for their funniness from trauma.

### **Conclusion: Good Relations and Tiny Islands**

Following Muñoz (1999; 2009) and Driskill (2004; 2010), the glimpses of queer Indigenous world-making in *Njuoska Bittut* unravel distinctions between the human and the non-human, sex and seriousness, trauma and laughter, settler representations and Indigenous visual sovereignty.

The series does this not through direct confrontation but by inviting Sámi and non-Sámi viewers alike to laugh with West and Aikio, laugh together at themselves and each other – while it also offers potentially pedagogical moments where viewers unfamiliar with Sámi worlds might choose to educate themselves. However, the series itself does not explain, preach or educate: it leaves cues which are there to be followed but also possible to ignore. This strategy of invitation can be seen to reflect the Indigenous notion of “good relations:” collaboration, respect, and mutuality (e.g. Kuokkanen, 2019). Notably, however, this also means that it is entirely possible to watch the series as a non-Native viewer and ignore many if not all of such cues, enjoy the bits that are easily digestible and let others pass by.

As Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck and Angie Morrill (2013) argue, thinking through the production of gender and sexual categories as colonial and settler colonial constructs and imagining alternatives is a project worthy of interest for all scholars who seek to unravel injustices. This project cannot be left as the responsibility of Indigenous, Black and Brown individuals and communities but it also requires work and listening by white and settler actors. *Njuoska bittut* offers possibilities to do so by both creating glimpses of queer Indigenous worlds and by refusing to strictly distinguish between Sámi and settler worldviews and spaces. As such, the show can be seen to follow Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017, p. 196) as she urges us to ponder on “our own relationships to place and to each other outside of the spatial constructs of settler colonialism.” For Simpson, Indigenous and settler spaces cannot be understood as strictly separate, since Indigenous people have long been moving between spaces and living outside of their ancestral lands. This is what West and Aikio, and the bear and the lemming do in *Njuoska bittut*: they move between urban settler-dominated spaces and Sápmi landscapes, they adapt and defy, laugh and clash, sometimes pay the price of an exploding head. But while seeking common ground, Simpson (2017, p. 197) also insists on “tiny islands of Indigeneity, in spite of these settler colonial spatialities” which are a form of “survivance,” “an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories.” *Njuoska bittut* offers such tiny islands – which in the end, are not that tiny, as on these islands it is possible to laugh in the face of the immense force of settler colonial heteronormativity, persist in absurdity and pleasure, and see glimpses of other kinds of worlds.

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<sup>1</sup> YouTube: MaratSapikkaat, <https://www.youtube.com/user/MaratSapikkaat> (accessed 16 August 2021).

<sup>2</sup> During season 2, every episode is named after a made-up mock mortal sin.