

This is the author's accepted manuscript to *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies*. Please cite the published article:

Kyrölä, K. (2023) Reading *Border* through Desire: Queer Indigenous Theory, Nordic Settler Colonialism, and Trans Aesthetics. *Camera Obscura* 38(3): 77–105.

<https://doi.org/10.1215/02705346-10772589>

### **Reading *Border* through Desire: Queer Indigenous Theory, Nordic Settler Colonialism, and Trans Aesthetics**

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

**Abstract** This article examines the Swedish fantasy-horror-romance film *Gräns* (*Border*, dir. Ali Abbasi, 2018) through queer Indigenous thought and the notion of trans aesthetics, exploring how the film may sensitize its viewers to seeing and feeling with gender variance, queer desire, and the trauma of settler colonialism. Drawing on Eve Tuck's call for desire-based research, I ask what is at stake in queer, trans and decolonial readings of films that are not necessarily identifiable as such at the surface level. *Border* centers on a love story between two genderfluid trolls who pass as human and whose kin has been subjected to genocide, dislocation, and mutilation, but the film's reception largely misses the connection to the treatment of Indigenous Sámi people and transgender people within Nordic settler states. I argue that *Border*'s ecstatic depiction of genderfluid desires, bodies, and sex, alongside its examination of the psychic consequences of settler colonial violence, make it a thus far unique film in the Nordic context – even though this examination happens through the distancing effect of trolls as metaphorical Natives. The main characters embody wrongness in the settler nation state, in heteronormative society, and ultimately in the delimiting category of the human, but the film imagines rightness in nature as a queer, genderfluid space where all creatures can just be. Through employing notions of trans aesthetics, (non)sovereign erotics, refusal, and haunting, the article proposes desire-based readings of cinema that envision ways of feeling and existing beyond human-centric, settler, binary notions of gender and sexuality.

**Keywords** queer Indigenous studies, transgender, non-human, Nordic cinema, settler colonialism

In this article, I examine how the Swedish fantasy-horror-romance film *Border* (*Gräns*, dir. Ali Abbasi, Sweden, 2018) unravels and critiques entanglements of gender, sexuality and settler colonialism in the Nordic countries as well as globally, particularly in connection to gender non-conformity and the category of the human. *Border*, directed by Iranian-born, Denmark-based Ali Abbasi and based on a short story by Swedish horror writer John Ajvide Lindqvist, speaks to queer Indigenous studies' utopian visions of feeling and existing beyond settler colonial, binary notions of gender and sexuality. The film imagines bodily and gender diversity as intertwined with nature and land in ways that are rarely seen in mainstream popular culture.<sup>1</sup> In this way, *Border* echoes Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) view of how Indigenous thought often sees gender and sexual variance as inconsequential, a part of life, grounded in nature: "They also come from the land – the land that provides endless examples of queerness and diverse sexualities and genders."<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, *Border* is anything but utopian, as it delves deep into the ways in which the trauma of settler colonial violence haunts the Nordic as well as the global cultural imaginary, asking difficult questions about how to exist in ethical relationality with human and non-human entities on this earth through histories and presents of unspeakable damage.

This article explores how the lenses of queer Indigenous thought and trans aesthetics can both illuminate the persistence of white, settler colonial, and cis- and heteronormative frameworks and sensitize viewers to seeing and feeling with gender and sexual variance and the traumatic impacts of settler colonialism. Queer and trans media studies have long been unearthing queer and trans sensibilities in cultural products that do not appear explicitly queer- or trans-themed.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, as Aimee Carrillo Rowe and Eve Tuck (Unangax) underline, many

cultural forms and narratives in settler societies such as the Nordic countries, the United States, Canada, and various other parts of the world, are haunted by specters of Indigeneity and the massive, unspeakable violence of settler colonial attempts to erase Indigenous life, too terrible to remember but impossible to forget.<sup>4</sup> However, queer Indigenous thought has thus far not been discussed in connection to films such as *Border* that are not explicitly about Indigeneity or settler colonialism.<sup>5</sup> Indigeneity may haunt *Border* mostly at a metaphorical level but, as I will show, its presence and entanglement with gender diversity are so close to the surface that they are difficult to miss.

*Border* starts literally on the border between Sweden and Finland where one of the main characters, Tina (Eva Melander), works as a customs agent with an uncanny ability to smell how people feel. Tina identifies as human, just with a chromosome flaw that is, in Tina's own words, about "down there." One day someone with unusual looks very similar to Tina's passes through customs, and a heady attraction between the two of them starts unfolding. This stranger, called Vore (Eero Milonoff), eventually tells Tina that they are both trolls, thought to be mythological but well-known creatures in Nordic folklore, where they are portrayed as usually living in forests and caves but sometimes amongst people: often malicious, hairy, misshapen and heavyset with large noses, animalistic instincts, and tails.<sup>6</sup> *Border*'s trolls have superhuman qualities, such as the ability to smell human feelings, but they are also an oppressed group, subjected to clandestine eugenic research and bodily mutilation, displacement of children through adoption and foster care systems, destruction of their living environments, suppression of their gender and sexuality, and ultimately denial of their existence by the Nordic settler states of Finland and Sweden.

Similar forms of violence have been directed at Indigenous people around the world and in the Nordic countries, as well as at transgender and intersex people. The Sámi people, whose traditional land Sápmi spans the northern borders of Sweden, Norway, Finland, and the Kola Peninsula in Russia, did not experience war or literal genocide but violent, forced assimilation. As Veli-Pekka Lehtola (Sámi) and Sanna Valkonen (Sámi) have respectively asserted, settler colonial history in Northern Europe differs from settler colonialism in North America in that the Nordic nation states only gradually started to see the Sámi as a separate and less civilized Indigenous population in need of control. The colonization of Sámi began in the seventeenth century through Christian missionaries, scientific exploration, and forced land transfers. In the nineteenth century, exploitative colonialism in the Sápmi region escalated into settler colonialism with the aim of complete obliteration of Sámi culture – an aim that never quite succeeded, but its trauma haunts Nordic culture to the current day.<sup>7</sup> Later in the film, viewers learn that both Vore and Tina have scars in the pelvic area of their bodies: the scars are cues to and corporeal reminders of the simultaneous and entangled traumas of settler colonialism and gender normativity. They invoke the history of Nordic eugenics, which pathologized the Sámi (along with Roma, Tatars, and Finns in Sweden) as an “inferior race” and led to an unknown number of Sámi women’s forced sterilizations through the 1930s, 40s and 50s.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, the scars can be seen as a reference to the historical and ongoing mutilation of trans and intersex bodies: the Swedish state required trans people to be sterilized to legally confirm their gender until 2013, and the Finnish state has still not lifted that requirement in late 2022.<sup>9</sup>

When I first saw *Border*, then read reviews and scholarly analyses of it, it felt like I had seen a different movie than most authors.<sup>10</sup> How could that be? I was deeply moved and shaken by the film, particularly because of its ecstatic depiction of genderfluid desire, bodies, and sex,

and its interconnected examination of the psychic consequences of settler colonial violence – even if distanced to the world of fantastical non-human creatures. For me, a non-Indigenous viewer and scholar working with queer theory and Indigenous media studies, these themes seemed so obvious, existing on the surface level of the film, not hidden beneath it. Yet, most authors referred to the two main characters, Tina and Vore, as a woman and a man – although some did write of their relationship as gender-bending, non-binary, or speaking to transgender issues.<sup>11</sup> The matter of trolls as metaphorically Indigenous figures only came up in passing in one film review out of hundreds. This review connected the film’s set-up to Australia’s Stolen Generations, a violent settler state practice that was not used in the Nordic countries. As part of this practice in Australia, generations of Aboriginal children were taken from their families and placed in white families with the aim of obliterating Aboriginal cultures without killing the children.<sup>12</sup> Most commonly, reviews identified trolls as broadly metaphorical Others.

Scholarly analyses have seen the film as catering to conservative ideas of nature-bound femininity while unraveling boundaries between human and non-human animals, or as an aesthetically and sensorially creative allegory for migration and border transitions.<sup>13</sup> The film’s reception shows how even manifest queer and transgender themes are often invisible or ignored in film reviews and by audiences – a testament to the cultural dominance and persistence of hetero- and cisnormative interpretive frames.<sup>14</sup> To insist on my reading of Tina and Vore as indefinable through binary categories, I use the pronoun “they” for both characters. The same could be said about the ways in which settler colonialism makes itself invisible and self-evident, much like whiteness, and teaches non-Native people not to see settler colonialist power structures as such. Furthermore, as Chris Holmlund has argued, *Border*’s international distribution and reception tended to leave out its Nordic and Swedish specificity, and the film “suffered in translation” especially when it comes to trolls and troll mythology’s relationship to the Sámi.<sup>15</sup>

*Border* garnered multiple Swedish and international film awards, including the *Un Certain Regard* prize at the Cannes Film Festival 2018.<sup>16</sup> It was also released at a time when Nordic settler colonialism and media representations of the Sámi – the only United Nations recognized Indigenous people in Europe – were beginning to receive some long overdue public attention, spurred by films such as Sámi director Amanda Kernell’s award winning and globally successful feature *Sami Blood (Sameblod)*, Sweden, 2016), and popular TV series such as the Swedish-French *Midnight Sun (Midnattssol)*, SVT1/Canal+, 2016). Both these examples addressed the dire consequences of settler colonialism for Sámi people’s psyches and land, as well as strategies of resistance and refusal.<sup>17</sup> Around the same time, the first feature-length queer Sámi film, the documentary *Me and My Little Sister (Sparroabbán)*, dir. Suvi West, Finland, 2016) premiered, following the director Suvi West’s and her lesbian sister Kaisa’s journey in search of a queer Sámi past and present.<sup>18</sup> However, while the public conversation on Nordic settler colonialism has been picking up some pace, it has not extended to a thorough critique of settler norms around gender and sexuality – despite notable attempts by Sámi activists through films such as *Sparroabbán* and, for example, Sápmi Pride events that have been organized around Sápmi since 2014.

Johan Höglund points out that around the same time settler colonialism emerged in the Nordic countries in the seventeenth century, the Sámi started to be conflated with trolls in Nordic non-indigenous folk mythology.<sup>19</sup> Examining the trend of troll fiction in Nordic countries in the 2010s as connected to the increased attention to Sámi issues, Höglund argues that films such as the Norwegian horror movies *Trolljegeren (Troll Hunter)*, dir. Andre Øvrelid, 2010) and *Thale* (dir. Aleksander L. Nordaas, 2010) set up trolls as metaphorical Natives. In his view, contemporary troll fiction sheds light on the devastating history of settler violence directed at the Sámi. At the same time, it distances that history to the realm of fantasy and mythological creatures, making it “safer” to consume for audiences invested in Nordic

exceptionalism, a persistent and inaccurate idea that Nordic countries have been outside of or only peripheral to colonial processes and racist ideologies.<sup>20</sup>

One of the less discussed effects of settler colonialism is how settler knowledge production has either ignored or exoticized Indigenous, pre-colonial understandings of gender and sexuality as multiple or fluid.<sup>21</sup> In the Nordic scholarly context, Sámi feminist scholarship is slowly gaining more footing, but queer Indigenous studies perspectives are almost entirely missing.<sup>22</sup> In the case of the Sámi, histories of non-heteronormative relations remain largely undocumented, but accounts from oral tradition suggest that some Sámi communities accepted and revered non-heterosexual and gender diverse people, much like many other Indigenous people around the world.<sup>23</sup>

*Border* stands apart from Sámi cinema and media as well as other Nordic troll fiction of the same time period in its critique of settler colonialism as thoroughly intertwined with cis- and heteronormativity, addressing the erasure of gender fluidity as a part of settler colonial violence – even if through the distance provided by the figure of the troll as a metaphorical Native. The main characters embody “wrongness” in the settler nation state, in heteronormative society, and ultimately in the delimiting category of the human, but the film imagines a “rightness” in nature as a queer, genderfluid space. There, human and non-human corporeality and sexuality are just some of nature’s many forces, directly echoing queer Indigenous cosmologies.<sup>24</sup>

### **Queer and Decolonial Desire-Based and Reparative Readings**

What does it mean to conduct queer and decolonial readings of cultural products, especially ones like *Border*, that are also readable as neither queer nor decolonial? Native feminist

theorists Maile Arvin (Native Hawaiian), Eve Tuck (Unangax), and Angie Morrill (Klamath) maintain that “attending to the links between heteropatriarchy and settler colonialism is politically and intellectually imperative for all peoples living within settler colonial contexts.”<sup>25</sup> They argue that non-Indigenous scholarship disregards this potentiality, ignoring the breadth of Native thought that goes beyond “expected topics.”<sup>26</sup> To attend to such links in *Border*, I heed Eve Tuck’s call for desire-based research<sup>27</sup> – a call that bears resemblance to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s call for reparative reading.<sup>28</sup>

In her essay written in the shape of a letter, “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities,” Tuck emphatically argues for desire-based research instead of the broad tendency towards what she calls damage-based research in the humanities and social sciences, especially when addressing Indigenous, Black and people of color communities. Her concern is with the common critical studies practice of exposing underlying structures of oppression in order to change them.<sup>29</sup> Exposure of damage is obviously important, especially when the historical and ongoing trauma of settler colonialism across the world and in the Nordic countries is unacknowledged or denied.<sup>30</sup> But Tuck asks what happens when the exposure does not help heal the trauma but instead keeps reproducing an understanding of the marginalized as irredeemably damaged. Tuck’s vision is to not disregard damage or pain but to also emphasize desire – complexity, hope, and visions.<sup>31</sup> Desire, in her reading, is not (necessarily) sexual desire, but – inspired by and critical of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s notion of desire, and drawing on Indigenous notions of relationality – a broader force of connecting, longing, seeking.<sup>32</sup>

In comparison, Sedgwick critiques what she calls paranoid readings that – much like Tuck’s damage-based research – rely on exposure of below-the-surface, deeply ingrained power



relations, such as heteronormativity, but do not account for the surprises, surpluses, excesses, or queer possibilities that inhere even within the most extravagantly violent circumstances.<sup>33</sup>

While Sedgwick's focus is largely on why critical scholars are so attracted to paranoid reading, Tuck's focus is on the potential political impact of scholarship itself: how it envisions change.

In cinema and media studies, the practice of queer reading has long followed a reparative, or desire-based impulse: particularly when there has been a lack of explicitly queer cultural content, the need for reading the queer through the cracks and leakages in the heteronormative surface has been pressing.<sup>34</sup> The same applies to transgender readings: for example, as Caél Keegan argues, *The Matrix* trilogy (1999, 2003, and 2003, Lana and Lilly Wachowski) has resonated with trans and gender nonconforming audiences due to its “trans\* aesthetics” – the ways it imagines alternative worlds, temporalities, and sensory experiences beyond identity categories.<sup>35</sup> Eliza Steinbock theorizes the recognition of trans glimpses as something embodied and affective, not always intentional: “[o]ur carnal vision affirmatively perceives what to others is a blind spot, seems inscrutable, or, worse, seems simply illusory.”<sup>36</sup> A similar tendency can be seen in Indigenous media studies and decolonial readings. Scholars have lifted up the key role Indigenous media and images of Indigeneity have played in the history of screen media and emphasized Indigenous agency and its affirmative potential even within blatantly white settler narratives.<sup>37</sup> Making use of queer Indigenous thought for analyses of non-Indigenous media, I propose, aligns with the aims of desire-based research: engagement rather than inclusion, expansion rather than correction.

With decolonial readings, non-Indigenous scholars have often been more damage-centered than Indigenous viewers, as exemplified by the reception of immensely popular blockbuster

*Avatar* (dir. James Cameron, US, 2009) which non-Indigenous scholars critiqued for the way it employed a white male savior figure “going Native.”<sup>38</sup> However, many Indigenous activists and scholars argued that *Avatar* made visible the destructiveness of settler colonial exploitation at an hitherto unseen global scale, and it popularized Indigenous cosmologies in claiming that all nature’s bodies beyond the human should have rights.<sup>39</sup> Thus, the relationship between damage and desire, surface and depth is not simple or immutable: what for some seems to be right there on the surface might for others appear hidden, and vice versa. A desire-based queer and decolonial reading (re)frames *Border* in this manner.

### **Trans Aesthetics and Non-sovereign Erotics**

To explore the dimension of genderfluidity in *Border*, I will next address how the film builds up the attraction between Tina and Vore specifically as something that exceeds and disturbs binary gender and sexuality, through what could be described, following Keegan, as trans aesthetics.<sup>40</sup> Through its aesthetics and narrative, the film pulls the viewer along with Tina’s claustrophobic feeling of not belonging in the everyday human world but also with their feeling of expanding possibilities, as they slowly come to terms with who they are or could be—reflecting trans experiences. In *Border*, this expansion happens through sexual desire and sex: they function as catalysts for Tina’s gradual awakening to joy as well as to a devastating history of settler colonial violence, and their eventual refusal to pass as a human or a woman. Therefore, I propose that the film’s trans aesthetics can be productively read together with queer Indigenous studies discussions on the concept of the sovereign erotic, where the erotic is understood as a life force, key to healing and forging community past and through the trauma of settler colonialism.<sup>41</sup> Together, trans aesthetics and the sovereign erotic can help imagine gender nonconforming, queer, and decolonial potentialities as intertwined.

Several narrative moments and audiovisual cues frame Tina and Vore's bodies as similarly gendered but differentiated from the "normal" cis-gendered world. When they first meet around ten minutes into the film, their physical similarity and physical attraction are introduced in tandem, resembling what Jackie Stacey has described as the visual association between queer desire, doubling and mirroring.<sup>42</sup> Tina works as a customs officer at the entrance point of ferries between Finland and Sweden, where their superhuman ability to smell human emotions, such as fear or guilt, has been useful in catching alcohol and drug smugglers or criminals. In the scene, they stand by the ferry's exit corridor in uniform, smelling the air inconspicuously when their sniffing suddenly grows more frantic, and the camera zooms into an extreme close-up to their mouth opening, nose twitching, eyes blinking fast. After the realistic, clanking and murmuring soundscape of the corridor, there is suddenly an extra-diegetic, accelerating humming sound. A backlit figure – Vore – approaches in the corridor, but we do not see the figure distinctly. Tina seems about to faint, saying to the nearing figure with difficulty: "excuse me". Only then does the viewer see the figure's face, startlingly like Tina's, emphasized by several shot reverse shots and a medium shot of their faces mirroring each other. Both look just enough like white Swedish humans to pass as such, yet they stand out, with heavy brows, large noses, rough skin, rough shoulder-length medium brown hair, and uneven teeth – looks far from the white, western norms of attractiveness.

The next time Tina meets Vore on the ferry's exit corridor, they are convinced that the stranger is hiding something. A male officer takes Vore to a back room for a strip search. Meanwhile, Tina goes through Vore's bag and sniffs a shirt, burying their face in it. The handheld camera sways near their face, and instrumental music comes in a wave. It stops when the other officer comes out of the back room, visibly upset, saying he should not have

been the one conducting the search as the subject has a vagina. Tina asks: “Okay... But so has he... she... had surgery?” The other officer answers: “I didn’t ask. She has a scar by the tailbone but that’s so far up in the back...” Tina swallows. We later find out that Tina also has a scar by the tailbone: a tail removal scar which their human father had claimed came from falling on a rock. They go in the back room to apologize and tell the stranger that they have the right to make a complaint. As the stranger leaves the tiny room, they pass very close by Tina, saying: “My name is Vore.” A humming, whistling sound swells and fades in the background.

This scene establishes Tina’s growing, heady attraction to Vore through the very discovery of Vore’s gender ambiguity or suspected transness and their similarity in terms of appearance. Is Vore a trans man? A non-binary person? A woman who presents masculine? An intersex person? Is Tina someone like that too? But Tina never asks Vore about their gender, and the film never applies gender labels. The scars on both their bodies hint to the history of forced mutilation of trans, intersex and Indigenous bodies in Sweden and Finland.

Although the scars hint at layers of hidden damage, there can also be healing, desire-based force in a fantasy that very explicitly imagines bodies outside of heteronormative or settler colonial ideals of attractiveness as overwhelmingly desirable and desiring – if not to the general public, then at least to each other.<sup>43</sup> This fantasy reaches its culmination in the film’s sex scene – a scene that has been characterized as a both a “much cringed-upon spectacle of bodily transgressions” and “one of film history’s wackiest fucks.”<sup>44</sup> In my viewing experience, however, the scene felt like one of the most ecstatically moving, recognizable cinematic sex scenes to date in how it captures the healing and shattering qualities of desire

between bodies deemed by the dominant society as unintelligible, “ugly” and “strange” – words so often used for describing queer, trans, gender non-conforming, or racialized people.

In the lead-up to the sex scene, with a thunderstorm roaring outside, Vore arrives at Tina’s house where they both hide under a kitchen table in non-human, animal-like fear, panting and crying, wrapped in each other’s arms. When the storm passes, they walk out into the woods, which are fresh and filled with birdsong, and a delirious desire unfolds between them. Tina first protests their own arousal by crying out: “I am deformed!” to which Vore responds: “Shut up! You are completely perfect!” Vore finally lowers Tina’s pants, and out of their pubic hair grows a thin, pink, slightly curved appendage. The camera pans from Tina’s crotch to their face, as they gasp, eyes filling with tears. There is fumbling about, and one full shot of their bodies awkwardly fucking against the moss, then the camera stays very close to their faces, straying only to Tina’s hand clutching moss. Instrumental music swells, fades, and screeches throughout the scene. They both scream, roar, and cry. When Tina climaxes in a long animal noise, the camera goes slightly out of focus, pulling the viewer along into the dizzying pleasure.

A damage-based reading would perhaps focus on the “cringe” reactions that mark gender nonconforming bodies as disgusting. However, in a desire-based reading that does not ignore trauma but focuses on what courses through and past it, the sex scene can be seen as healing, an erotic re-imagining of one of the most hurtful tropes of trans representation: the scene of the reveal. The reveal refers to the much-repeated moment in film or television where a trans character’s transness is revealed to another character or the audience, often to a reaction of shock or horror, and often focused on the genitals, as if the “truth” of sex resided there.<sup>45</sup> In *Border*’s sex scene, it is Tina who realizes the “truth” of their gender through pleasure, not

horror. What they thought of as a site of hurt and lack (earlier in the film they turn down their human boyfriend's passes by telling him "it hurts") turns suddenly into a site of desire. What settler medicine named a chromosome flaw and a deformity becomes the most natural, or, as Vore says, "perfect" thing. The scene of the reveal, so often the tragic turning point of a mainstream trans narrative, becomes a moment of unforeseen ecstasy in *Border*. The sex scene's dizzying audiovisuality, the overwhelming waves of sound and the consciously fumbling, close and caressing, in-and-out-of-focus camera, pull the viewer in with such force that it is easy to imagine how some audience members might "cringe" – after all, it is not often that mainstream audiences are invited to identify with gender nonconforming pleasure.

After the sex scene, *Border* focuses on the relatable joy of Tina and Vore falling in love. Tina asks Vore: "Who am I?" Vore explains they are both in fact trolls. The forest and nature's bodies are as much actors in the love story as are the two trolls, as they lie on moss, run naked through the forest, laughing and screaming ecstatically, and jump into a lake.<sup>46</sup> *Border*'s heady depiction of falling in love, which deems gender variance and multiplicity as inconsequential, can be likened to what Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Alex Wilson (Cree) have called Indigenous grounded queer normativity – a utopian vision of a world where all genders just are. Simpson argues that before settler colonialism forced binary gender upon their communities, elders recall individuals of all genders having lived together in intimate relations, without that having been named or deemed queer or deviant.<sup>47</sup>

Kateri Akiwneze-Damm (Anishinaabe) has called for the erotic to be understood as central to healing from settler colonial trauma, to seeing oneself as a whole as well as connected to lands and communities with a future.<sup>48</sup> Billy-Ray Belcourt (Driftpile Cree) argues further that there is a paradox at the heart of the concept of a sovereign erotic, as the focus on sovereignty

“clouds the constitutive non-sovereignty of the sexual, how it entangles us in the breath of others and intensifies the fragilities of the self”.<sup>49</sup> Belcourt proposes to explore instead what *non-sovereign* erotics might mean. He calls for an understanding of sex and love as fundamentally non-sovereign – as they build upon a shattering of self-determining subjectivity – but by no means apolitical. In a way that I understand as deeply desire-based – moving through pain towards affirmative vision – he locates this political potential in the brokenness that both queer and Indigenous entail: “I have been broken by others in a bad way, but I nonetheless want to give into the possibility of breaking apart with you, where breaking is not always-already a site of political injury but a site of a collective political becoming.”<sup>50</sup> Drawing on Audra Simpson’s (Kahnawake Mohawk) work on the generative potential of refusal, Belcourt criticizes the overall framework of sovereignty for its dependence on a politics of recognition; he argues that heteronormative settler structures can never fully recognize subjects and desires that they repress.<sup>51</sup>

Non-sovereign erotics, defined this way, push against settler conceptions of the nation, gender, and sexuality, re-imagining them through desire, and embracing brokenness. In *Border*, Tina and Vore have both been broken by others – people as well as structures – but they take the risk of breaking apart with each other. This shattering might characterize the sexual overall but, in the film, it concerns specifically non-heteronormative desire as it is grounded in connection to land and nature. As Tina embraces non-sovereign erotics, they abandon the quest for recognition as a legibly gendered subject within the settler state. A desire-based reading could even see the very shock or disgust that some reviewers express at the sex scene as evidence of the scene’s non-sovereign erotics: its wild joy and shattering are about abandoning the futile quest for mainstream recognition.

## Refusing and Haunting the Human Settler World

For Jodi A. Byrd (Chickasaw), queer as an anti-identitarian, subject-defying project has promise for Indigenous studies, as it can push against the politics of recognition and the exclusionary model of subjectivity that have oppressed Indigenous peoples under settler colonialism, as well as queers or gender-nonconforming people within heteronormative settler states.<sup>52</sup> Releasing oneself from aspirations towards recognition and full subjectivity propels forms of becoming that are potentially liberating – as well as dangerous. Alyosxa Tudor suggests that looking at the category of gender from a decolonial perspective in fact requires “transing” gender, as the very idea of gender as binary and self-evident builds upon racialization and colonial legacies.<sup>53</sup> *Border* seems to suggest that there is no way to be fully sovereign in the realm of the sexual, in binary gender, in the structure of settler colonialism, or indeed within the category of the human. The realm of the human, just like the heteronormative realm of gender, does not account for the multiplicity and fluidity of human and non-human bodies.<sup>54</sup>

*Border* almost seems like an audiovisual illustration of the multiple ways the category of the human is exclusionary. Trolls as a different species from humans speak to the history of racialization, where racialized bodies have been deemed inhuman, extraordinarily gendered, pathologically sexualized, and at times monstrous.<sup>55</sup> But instead of seeing this as a damage-oriented meaning of the film, I propose that in a desire-based reading, *Border*'s solution (which, of course, is fantastical, not practical) is to disavow humanity and binary gender. This, in turn, opens up a realm of (queer) desire and a forward-moving force of connecting to the world in new ways. *Border*'s fantasy of a non-human world abandons binary gender through denouncing the self-evident desirability of humanity – humanity that has not done much for non-human animal bodies, or any bodies outside of the white, settler, straight, male,



able-bodied norm, bodies left on its fringes, asking for recognition of their value when asking to be recognized as human.

Vore's and Tina's refusals of humanity differ from each other, however. Tina finds out to their horror that Vore has been selling human babies to human pedophiles – stealing babies and replacing them with the baby-resembling entity *hiisit*.<sup>56</sup> *Hiisit* is a large, unfertilized troll egg that Vore gives birth to regularly in menstruation-like cycles. Without fertilization, *hiisit* quickly withers away, making humans think their baby died of a strange disease. Earlier in the film, Vore starts writhing and grunting on their bed, an ominous humming sound in the background. They stumble out of their cabin into the dark woods while yelling in pain, lower their pants, and something with limbs, which viewers later learn is a *hiisit*, comes out between their legs. This horror-coded birthing scene speaks to what Steve Jones has identified as an upsurge of pregnancy-themed horror within the last two decades during an intensification of the debate on abortion rights<sup>57</sup> – the baby-resembling troll menstruation discharge seems to mock the anti-abortion stance where unformed embryonic mass is already seen as a baby. In the scene, the moment of horror or shock is set up as linked to both gender and the human: what appears as male is not; what appears as human is not. Here, *Border* seems to momentarily stray away from its desire-driven trans aesthetics, drawing on the shock value of a birthing trans-masculine body – which, as Paisley Currah sarcastically notes, “can bring people to the very brink of cognition.”<sup>58</sup>

But as the film pulls its viewers deeper into desire-driven affective affinity with gender nonconforming bodies, it becomes clear that its vision of true horror is not gender-related but about capacity for cruelty that is not exclusively human. In Vore's view, “Humans are a parasite that uses up everything on earth for their own entertainment. Even their own offspring.” However, in their attempt to inflict revenge on humans and retaliate for dead and

displaced troll babies, Vore becomes the very “human” they despise, using up their own offspring and trafficking in human babies. Vore feeds their monstrous *hiisit* crushed maggots and safeguards it in the fridge, but only up to the moment when the *hiisit* can be used as decoy – then they leave *hiisit* to wither away and die. Vore’s “species-separatism”<sup>59</sup> takes a similarly violent form as the settler colonial human exceptionalism that has annihilated their kin. Earlier in the film, Vore alludes to being abused as a youth in the foster system – and now they are the abuser.

Anna Estera Mrozewicz argues in her discussion of *Border*’s posthuman and trans sensibilities that the film ultimately takes a stance for trans-species solidarity and against morality as an exclusively human notion. In Mrozewicz’s words: “Humans may act monstrously, while ‘monsters’ may act in ‘human’ ways.”<sup>60</sup> The subplot about Vore’s participation in the pedophile ring undermines the film’s appeal to feel with non-human, non-normative, gender diverse bodies, as the viewer is invited to dramatically shift their affective affinity from the dizzying intensity of new desire and love to sexually imbued repulsion towards Vore. Tina, unaware of Vore’s activities, helps the police to identify and find the pedophile ring through their supernatural sense of smell. As Vore’s involvement is revealed, Tina must choose what to do with Vore who asks Tina to join them and run away with them. In a dramatic scene on the ferry to Finland, Tina finally gives Vore up to the police – the institutional forces of the settler nation state. Before Vore can be caught, they jump from the deck into the dark sea and disappear. On one hand, the pedophile subplot continues *Border*’s blurring of the boundaries between the human and the non-human, as it suggests that intentional, systematic abuse of the vulnerable is not particular to humans, nor is the capacity for “doing the right thing” as Tina appears to do. On the other hand, the subplot feels like a disappointing turn away from the film’s broader insistence on the healing power of non-

human, non-heteronormative, non-sovereign erotics: not only did the ‘perverse’ Other turn out to be monstrous, but monstrous in an indisputable, irreconcilable way. The only options presented to Tina are either to side with the settler colonial punitive justice system or to run away with a child abuser. However, although Tina’s decision seems to make them momentarily side with humanity, giving up Vore is the last thing they do in service of the settler state.

After the shattering decision, distraught Tina confronts their human father about their past. They find out that their troll parents died at a psychiatric hospital where their human father worked as a janitor and learn that they are buried at an old cemetery. The janitor and his wife adopted the three-year-old troll child and raised them as their own, replacing their troll name Reva – remarkably similar to Vore – with Tina. In a key scene, Tina/Reva enters the cemetery where their parents are buried at dusk, walking slowly and stiffly. The camera follows close behind them, handheld and shaking, pulling the viewer there with them. Tina/Reva finds dozens of natural stones without markings or engravings standing at regular intervals, as the camera pans wider behind them, showing them standing in the middle of the gravestone rows. They sit down on the dark ground sobbing, seeing for the first time the extent of the settler violence on their kin.

The cemetery scene is also accompanied by a low instrumental humming sound that grows stronger and weaker in waves. Overall, *Border* contains relatively little extra-diegetic sound, which produces an impression of social realism, an almost documentary effect. The wave-like soundscape echoes the meeting scenes and the sex scene between Vore and Tina/Reva, only at a much lower frequency, underlining the closeness of desire and death, their shared non-sovereignty, the shattering of subjectivity, the irrefutable pull, the connection to other beings

and the earth, the becoming present in both. Overall, the swelling and fading humming sound is a sonic device that the film uses recurrently to indicate a shift – an “aesthetics of change,”<sup>61</sup> a transitional moment.

The cemetery scene in *Border* addresses settler violence and anchors bodies that exist in the now to land and history. It can further be seen as a desire-based moment of mourning for the Native children who were buried in unmarked graves on residential school sites that have come to light in Canada, and as a re-imagining of the Native burial ground motif. As Ariel Smith (Nêhiyaw) highlights, this motif has appeared again and again in American settler horror films as an explanation for paranormal events, but with little regard for Indigenous bodies, histories, or environment.<sup>62</sup> Smith sees this as one version of the romanticized trope of the “vanishing Indian,” following Michelle Raheja (Seneca) who identifies this trope of Indigeneity as a haunting presence, a nostalgic or threatening background instead of a live, living, flourishing presence.<sup>63</sup> For Smith, horror as a genre is exquisitely well equipped for dealing with the brutality of settler colonialism in a potentially healing, reparative way.<sup>64</sup> In *Border*, no settler bodies return to life or become possessed at this cemetery, but its existence both shatters Reva and cements their refusal to lead their life following settler colonial structures, gender included.

Read through a desire-based impetus, Reva’s existence amidst their dead kin can itself be seen as a metaphorical Indigenous haunting – they should not have survived a genocide, but they did. Eve Tuck and C. Ree, in their discussion of horror and haunting in settler colonialism, define haunting as “the relentless remembering and reminding that will not be appeased by settler society’s assurances of innocence and reconciliation.” They continue: “Haunting doesn’t hope to change people’s perceptions, nor does it hope for reconciliation. Haunting lies precisely in its refusal to stop.... For ghosts, the haunting is the resolving, it is not what needs

to be resolved.”<sup>65</sup> This is where the haunting connects to non-sovereign erotics: if the erotic can heal through trauma, then for non-sovereign erotics, the healing *is* the shattering, and the shattering force of desire is the point, not what needs to be resolved.

After the cemetery scene, Reva detaches themselves from the simulation of normal human life. The next images are of their house in the woods, the yard in disarray, spattered with snow and taken over by the forest – their car stands abandoned with its doors open, and a fox jumps into it. The camera zooms to Reva’s bare feet stepping on moss: they stop, dig something up from the moss and eat it, perhaps an insect or a maggot which, as Vore showed them earlier in the film, trolls enjoy. Their face is blank, they wear a large winter jacket and the torn remains of what appears to be a white nightgown – mismatched things hanging on their body like the remains of an earlier self –like a mock image of a ghost, yet alive. Reva has refused the life of a good citizen of the settler nation state, obviously no longer driving to work, no longer caring, no longer trying to disentangle from the nature where they are grounded, no longer trying to integrate or reconcile their non-humanness with humanity.

Refusal is a strategy that Native people have used in various ways, a strategy that should not be confused with resistance, since refusal does not seek or believe in recognition by settler powers. Refusal, for Audra Simpson, is generative – a desire-based approach, in Tuck’s terms.<sup>66</sup> It is not a one-time event but something that hauntings do in an ongoing way, as Tuck and Ree argue: refuse to resolve, refuse to stop.<sup>67</sup> Reva did one last favor to the Swedish settler nation state in exposing the pedophile ring and giving up Vore, and now they are done: done serving the state and its borders, done living what the settler society defines as a “life.” The nameless stones in the cemetery materialize the lack of recognition by the Swedish settler state for Reva and Vore’s people, the presence of death their utter non-consent to live under its rule.

Finally, Reva's refusal, the haunting that will not stop, becomes generative not only in their refusal to die, but also in concrete regeneration. As Reva returns to their house in the last scene, they find a box at their door and a troll baby in it. The box is accompanied by a tacky tourist postcard, where against the background of a lake view the words "Welcome to Finland—the land of 10.000 lakes" are printed—a cliché tourist slogan for Finland, well-known in Nordic countries. This baby has a tail and fuzzy hair on its body. Reva feeds a beetle to it, and it seems satisfied. The viewers never know for sure if this is a baby that Vore might have given birth to, perhaps fertilized by Reva. Vore tells Reva earlier in the film that a community of trolls live somewhere in Finland, but the trolls cannot be found, they have to find you. The baby and the postcard are an indication that this community has now found Reva. Reva is not the last of their kin, the trolls are no vanishing metaphorical Natives, but alive, connecting, and laughing in the face of the settler nation state, utilizing its postal service for the delivery. The ending suggests a possibility for care, community and healing beyond the exclusionary ideas of humanity and subjectivity.

### **Shifting What We See**

My desire-based reading of *Border* through queer and feminist Indigenous theory points toward how this film imaginatively and hauntingly participates in a desire for a gender-subversive, non-sovereign, non-human erotic, asking what healing could look and feel like when the "human" and settler colonial normativities are refused. Moreover, my goal has been to argue for the value of queer Indigenous theorizing for queer and trans theory and cinema studies more broadly, as it can help trace the ways in which Indigeneity haunts the settler colonial imagination and decolonize how gender and sexuality are conceptualized to begin

with.<sup>68</sup> In this article's desire-driven reading, what is at stake is the ability to see beyond, in excess, of what settler colonial structures teach us to take for granted about humanity, nature, gender, sexuality, and the very existence of settler colonialism as an underlying condition of contemporary culture, including cinema and media. I have argued that Native theories and queer Indigenous studies can provide imaginative possibilities for analyses of deviant bodies, desires, and ways of relating to the world. While one important part of Indigenous media studies is to uplift Indigenous authorship, agency, and activism, another is to interrogate how Indigeneity and settler colonialism condition the ways in which the realms of possibility are narrated, imagined, and can perhaps be shifted audiovisually.

Of course, *Border* could be critiqued for ultimately not shifting anything: a film about gender-nonconforming trolls may offer safe pleasures to mainstream settler audiences who can only handle queer desire, gender fluidity and settler colonial violence when a film is firmly framed as fantasy. But my desire-driven reading of *Border* emphasizes the potential in imagining and thinking otherwise: it aims to place it alongside other films re-signified by queer, trans and Indigenous media studies. My hope is to mobilize the interpretative realm not only of this film, but also of other cultural products, inciting a desire that is “not mere wanting but informed seeking”<sup>69</sup> for queer, genderfluid undercurrents that stir the taken-for-granted of settler colonial worlds; once you see those undercurrents, you cannot un-see them.

**Acknowledgements** The writing of this article was enabled by a Senior Research Fellow grant by the Kone Foundation (Finland) as part of the research project *Queering Nordic Indigeneity*. I want to give my heartfelt thanks to Chris Holmlund, Mari Pajala, Salla Aldrin Salskov and Alyosxa Tudor for thinking with me and offering their valuable comments on

earlier versions of this article, and Tuija Huuki and Elsi Hyttinen for inspiration and encouragement. I am also grateful to Patty White and the readers of this article for their careful and generous feedback.

---

<sup>1</sup> Qwo-Li Driskill, Chris Finley, Brian Joseph Gilley, and Scott Lauria Morgensen, "Introduction," in *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature*, edited by Qwo-Li Driskill, Chris Finley, Brian Joseph Gilley, and Scott Lauria Morgensen (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011), 1–3; Daniel Heath Justice, Mark Rifkin and Bethany Schneider, "Introduction," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, no. 1–2 (2010), 5–39.

<sup>2</sup> Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "Indigenous Queer Normativity," in *As We Have Always Done. Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 122. When citing Native authors, I follow the established practice in Indigenous Studies to include tribal and national belonging, whenever possible. For more discussion, see Cornel Pewewardy, "Renaming Ourselves on Our Own Terms: Race, Tribal Nations, and Representation in Education," *Indigenous Nations Studies Journal* 1, no. 1 (2000): 11–28.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Jenny Björklund, "Queer Readings/Reading the Queer," *lambda nordica*, no. 1–2/2018: 7–15; Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt, *Queer Cinema in the World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 22–23.

<sup>4</sup> Aimee Carrillo Rowe and Eve Tuck, "Settler Colonialism and Cultural Studies: Ongoing Settlement, Cultural Production, and Resistance," *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 17, no. 1 (2017): 6–7; see also Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> For examples of queer Indigenous studies perspectives in readings of Indigenous films, see Lisa Tatonetti, "Visible Sexualities or Invisible Nations: Forced to Choose in *Big Eden*, *Johnny Greyeyes*, and *The Business of Fancydancing*," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, no. 1–2 (2010): 157–181; Gabriel S. Estrada, "'Cloud Atlas' Queer Tiki Kitsch: Polynesians, Settler Colonialism, and Sci-Fi Film," *Journal of Religion & Film* 18, no. 2 (2014), <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol18/iss2/5>; Kata Kyrölä and Tuija Huuki, "Re-imagining a Queer Indigenous Past: Affective Archives and Minor Gestures in the Sámi Documentary *Sparroabbán*," *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 60, no. 5 (2021), DOI: 10.1353/cj.2021.0020: 75–98.

<sup>6</sup> Chris Holmlund, "Gräns (*Border*, dir. Ali Abbasi, 2018) and borders: transnational ties, Nordic roots, Swedish knowledge in critical reception," *Transnational Screens* 12, no. 2 (2021), DOI: 10.1080/25785273.2021.1976467: 154–156.

<sup>7</sup> Veli-Pekka Lehtola, *The Sámi People. Traditions in Transition* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2004); Sanna Valkonen, *Poliittinen saamelaisuus* (Tampere, Finland: Vastapaino, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Terry-Lee Marttinen, "Scandinavian Anthropology, Eugenics, and Post-Colonial Geneticization of Sami Culture," *Acta Historica Medicinae, Pharmaciae, Veterinae*, November 2015, 68–85.

<sup>9</sup> On the history and present of trans healthcare in the Nordic countries, see for example Ulrica Engdahl and Katherine Harrison, eds, *Trans Health (Care)*, special issue of *lambda nordica* 18, no. 3–4 (2013), <https://www.lambdanordica.org/index.php/lambdanordica/issue/view/51>; Daniela Alaattinoğlu and Ruth Rubio-Marín, "Redress for Involuntarily Sterilised Trans People in Sweden against Evolving Human Rights Standards: A Critical Appraisal," *Human Rights Law Review* 19, no. 4 (2019), 705–732; Pekka Vanttinen, "Finland to update transgender rights law in autumn," *Euractiv*, July 4, 2022, [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/finland-to-update-transgender-rights-law-in-autumn/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/finland-to-update-transgender-rights-law-in-autumn/).

<sup>10</sup> For example, Meta Mazaj, "Border Aesthetics and Catachresis in Ali Abbasi's *Gräns/Border* (2018)," *Transnational Screens* 11, no. 1 (2020): 34–47; Rebecca Pulsifer, "Trolling Humanism: New Materialist Performativity in *Border*," *Gender Forum* 71 (2019): 7–22, [http://genderforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/71\\_New-Feminist-Materialism-and-Queer-Studies-in-the-Anthropocene.pdf](http://genderforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/71_New-Feminist-Materialism-and-Queer-Studies-in-the-Anthropocene.pdf); Glenn Kenny, "Review: Sniffing out Guilt in a Strangely Engaging 'Border'," *New York Times*, October 25, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/25/movies/border-review.html>; Peter Bradshaw, "Border Review – into the Woods for a Body-Horror Romance," *The Guardian*, March 7, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/mar/07/border-review-ali-abbasi>.

<sup>11</sup> For mentions of *Border*'s "gender-bending" in reviews, see Eric Kohn, "Fairy Tale Is a Wild Ugly Duckling Story from the Writer of 'Let the Right One In,'" *IndieWire*, May 10, 2018, <https://www.indiewire.com/2018/05/border-review-ali-abbasi-cannes-2018-1201962689/>; for "non-binary," see Fredrik Sahlin, "Filmrecension: Gräns," *SVT*, January 3, 2019, <https://www.svt.se/kultur/film/filmrecension-grans> and Johanna Grönqvist, "Metsässä kaikki on mahdollista," *YLE*, November 28, 2019,



- <https://yle.fi/aihe/artikkeli/2019/11/28/metsassa-kaikki-on-mahdollista-raja-on-alykas-aistikas-ja-umpihullu-elokuvasatu>; for “transgender sensibility,” see Siddhant Adlakha, “‘Border’ is the Year’s Ugliest and Most Beautiful Movie,” *Film*, October 18, 2018, <https://www.slashfilm.com/border-meaning-and-analysis/2/>. Anna Estera Mrozewicz analyzes *Border* as “post-celluloid... post-gendered, posthuman” using trans studies as part of her discussion, and Chris Holmlund briefly explores the film’s allusion to transgender issues and queerness. See Holmlund, “Gräns”; Anna Estera Mrozewicz, “A shimmering movement: Ali Abbasi’s *Border* as a trans\* posthumanist post-celluloid adaptation,” *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema* 11, no. 1 (2021): 11–30.
- <sup>12</sup> See Anton Bitel, “Border,” *Little White Lies*, March 4, 2019, <https://twlies.com/reviews/border/>. I warmly thank Chris Holmlund for bringing this one review to my attention through her analysis of *Border*’s critical reception in Holmlund, “Gräns.” For more discussion on the Stolen Generations, see Margaret D. Jacobs, *White Mother to a Dark Race: Settler Colonialism, Maternalism, and the Removal of Indigenous Children in the American West and Australia, 1880-1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009).
- <sup>13</sup> Pulsifer, “Trolling Humanism;” Mazaj, “Border Aesthetics.”
- <sup>14</sup> Björklund, “Queer Readings,” 8.
- <sup>15</sup> Holmlund, “Gräns,” 154.
- <sup>16</sup> “Border (2018) Awards,” Internet Movie Database, accessed October 30, 2022, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5501104/awards>; Kate Erbland, “Cannes 2018: Ali Abbasi’s Off-Kilter Fairy Tale ‘Border’ Wins Un Certain Regard Prize,” *IndieWire*, May 18, 2018, <https://www.indiewire.com/2018/05/cannes-2018-un-certain-regard-prize-1201966147/>.
- <sup>17</sup> For more discussion of *Sameblod*, see Coppélie Cocq and Thomas A. DuBois, *Sámi Media and Indigenous Agency in the Arctic North* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020), 177–192; for more discussion on *Midnattssol*, see Anne Marit Waade, “Arctic Noir on Screen: *Midnight Sun* (2016–) as a mix of geopolitical criticism and spectacular, mythical landscapes,” in *Nordic Noir, Adaptation, Appropriation*, edited by Linda Badley, Andrew Nestingen, and Jaakko Seppälä (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020): 37–53.
- <sup>18</sup> Kyrölä and Huuki, “Re-imagining.”
- <sup>19</sup> Johan Höglund, “Revenge of the Trolls: Norwegian (Post)colonial Gothic,” *Edda* 117, no. 2 (2017), [https://www.idunn.no/file/pdf/66957653/revenge\\_of\\_the\\_trolls.pdf](https://www.idunn.no/file/pdf/66957653/revenge_of_the_trolls.pdf), 121.
- <sup>20</sup> Höglund, “Revenge of the Trolls,” 118–123; Kristín Loftsdóttir and Lars Jensen, eds., *Whiteness and Postcolonialism in the Nordic Region: Exceptionalism, Migrant Others and National Identities* (London: Routledge, 2012).
- <sup>21</sup> Driskill, Finley, Gilley, and Morgensen, “Introduction,” 9–10.
- <sup>22</sup> For Sámi feminist scholarship, see for example Jorunn Eikjok, “Indigenous Women in the North: The Struggle for Rights and Feminism,” *Indigenous Affairs* 3 (2000): 38–41; Rauna Kuokkanen, *Reshaping the University: Responsibility, Indigenous Epistememes, and the Logic of the Gift* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007); Kuokkanen, *Restructuring Relations*; Astri Dankertsen, “Indigenising Nordic Feminism: A Sámi Decolonial Critique,” in *Feminisms in the Nordic Region: Neoliberalism, Nationalism and Decolonial Critique*, edited by Suvi Keskinen, Pauline Stoltz, and Diana Mulinari (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020): 135–154.
- Queer Indigenous Studies in Sámi context are limited to some reports and Master’s theses. See e.g. Merethe Giertsen, “En minoritet i minoriteten: Homofile i samiske miljø og sameer i homofile miljø [A minority within the Minority: Gay People in Sámi environments and Sámis in Gay Environments],” *Din. Tidsskrift for religion og kultur*, no. 4 (2002) and no. 1 (2003), 12–19; Ane H.H. Løvold, *The Silence in Sápmi - And the Queer Sami Breaking It* (MPhi diss., The Arctic University of Norway, 2014).
- <sup>23</sup> Rauna Kuokkanen, *Restructuring Relations: Indigenous Self-Determination, Governance, and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 6; Løvold, *Silence*, 22–28; Kyrölä and Huuki, “Re-imagining.”
- <sup>24</sup> Kuokkanen, *Reshaping*; Kim TallBear, “An Indigenous Reflection on Working Beyond the Human/Not Human,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2015), 230–235; Jodi A. Byrd, “Loving Unbecoming: The Queer Politics of the Transitive Native,” in *Critically Sovereign. Indigenous Gender, Sexuality and Feminist Studies*, edited by Joanne Barker (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); Kim TallBear and Angela Willey, “Critical Relationality: Queer, Indigenous, and Multispecies Belonging beyond Settler Sex & Nature,” *Imaginations* 10, no. 1 (2019), <http://imagination.glendon.yorku.ca/?p=11525>; Jarno Valkonen and Sanna Valkonen, “Contesting the Nature Relations of Sámi Culture,” *Acta Borealia: A Nordic Journal of Circumpolar Societies* 31, no. 1 (2014), 25–40.
- <sup>25</sup> Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck, and Angie Morrill, “Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy,” *Feminist Formations* 25, no. 1 (2013): 8.
- <sup>26</sup> Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill, “Decolonizing Feminism,” 18–19, 27.
- <sup>27</sup> Eve Tuck, “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities,” *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 3 (fall 2009): 409–427.
- <sup>28</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You,” in *Touching Feeling. Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 138–147.

- <sup>29</sup> Tuck, "Suspending Damage," 416–419.
- <sup>30</sup> See Diana Mulinari, Suvi Keskinen, Kuura Irni, and Salla Tuori, "Introduction: Postcolonialism and the Nordic Models of Welfare and Gender," in *Complying with Colonialism. Gender, Race and Ethnicity in the Nordic Region*, edited by Suvi Keskinen, Kuura Irni, Salla Tuori and Diana Mulinari (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 1–16.
- <sup>31</sup> Tuck, "Suspending Damage," 411–414.
- <sup>32</sup> Tuck, "Suspending Damage," 418; see also Eve Tuck, "Breaking Up with Deleuze: Desire and Valuing the Irreconcilable," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 23, no. 5 (2010), 635–650.
- <sup>33</sup> Sedgwick, "Paranoid Readings," 147–150.
- <sup>34</sup> Björklund, "Queer Readings," 7–8; Schoonover and Galt, *Queer Cinema*, 8–9.
- <sup>35</sup> Caél Keegan uses the notion of "trans\* aesthetics" with an asterisk, as does Mrozewicz. For them both, the asterisk implies a fluid, relational understanding of gender nonconforming bodies, experiences and knowledge production, whereas Eliza Steinbock uses the asterisk, the hyphen, and the forward slash (trans\*, trans- and trans/) for varying purposes. The asterisk comes from the Internet search function where it enables searching for anything that starts with "trans." Contemporary transgender studies use the asterisk inconsistently: I have made the choice to not use the asterisk as I do not see it necessary, when the context of the discussion already implies a fluid use of the term "trans". See Avery Tompkins, "Asterisk," *TSQ* 1, no. 1-2 (2014), 26–27; Caél M. Keegan, *Lana and Lilly Wachowski: Sensing Transgender* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2018); Eliza Steinbock, *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment and the Aesthetics of Change* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2019), 20-21; Mrozewicz, "A Shimmering Movement," 13.
- <sup>36</sup> Steinbock, *Shimmering Images*, 8.
- <sup>37</sup> For example, Joanna Hearne, "Native American and Indigenous Media," *Feminist Media Histories* 4, no. 2 (2018): 123–127; Joanna Hearne, *Native Recognition: Indigenous Cinema and the Western* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012); Michelle H. Raheja, *Reservation Reelism: Redfacing, Visual Sovereignty, and Representations of Native Americans in Film* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2011); Cocq and DuBois, *Sami Media*; Kliph Nesteroff, *We Had a Little Real Estate Problem. The Unheralded Story of Native Americans and Comedy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021).
- <sup>38</sup> Annalee Newitz, "When Will White People Stop Making Movies Like Avatar?" *Gizmodo*, December 18, 2009, <https://io9.gizmodo.com/when-will-white-people-stop-making-movies-like-avatar-5422666>; Lorenzo Veracini, "District 9 and Avatar: Science Fiction and Settler Colonialism," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 32, no. 4 (2011), 355–367.
- <sup>39</sup> Joni Adamson, "Indigenous Literatures, Multinaturalism, and Avatar: The Emergence of Indigenous Cosmopolitics," *American Literary History* 24, no. 1 (2012), 143–162; Yosefa Loshitzky, "Popular Cinema as Popular Resistance: Avatar in the Palestinian (Imagi)nation," *Third Text* 26, no 2 (2012), 151–163.
- <sup>40</sup> Keegan, *Sensing Transgender*.
- <sup>41</sup> Kateri Akiwneze-Damm, "Without Reservation: Erotica, Indigenous Style," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 35, no 3 (2000), 97–104; Qwo-Li Driskill, "Stolen from Our Bodies: First Nations Two-Spirits/Queers and the Journey to a Sovereign Erotic," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 16, no. 2 (2004), 50–64; Mark Rifkin, *The Erotics of Sovereignty. Queer Native Writing in the Era of Self-Determination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Billy-Ray Belcourt, "Indigenous Studies beside Itself," *Somatechnics* 7, no 2 (2017), 182–184; Justice, Rifkin and Schneider, "Introduction,"; Mark Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017).
- <sup>42</sup> Jackie Stacey, "She Is Not Herself: The Deviant Relations of *Alien Resurrection*," *Screen* 44, no. 3 (2003), 267–274.
- <sup>43</sup> Compare to e.g. Richard Dyer, "Dracula and Desire," *Sight and Sound*, January 1993, 8–15.
- <sup>44</sup> Mazaj, "Border Aesthetics," 11; Sahlin, "Gräns."
- <sup>45</sup> Danielle M. Seid, "The Reveal," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1–2 (2014), 176–77.
- <sup>46</sup> On trolls as queer forces of the forest in early Finnish literature, see Elsi Hyttinen, Elsi. "1910-luvun erämaakuvaukset ja queerin tehtävä," *AVAIN - Kirjallisuudentutkimuksen Aikakauslehti* 17, no. 4 (2021), 64–81.
- <sup>47</sup> Simpson, "Indigenous Queer Normativity"; Alex Wilson, "How We Find Ourselves: Identity Development and Two-Spirit People," *Harvard Educational Review* 66, no. 2 (1996), 303–317.
- <sup>48</sup> Akiwneze-Damm, "Without Reservation," 99–100.
- <sup>49</sup> Belcourt, "Indigenous," 183.
- <sup>50</sup> Belcourt, "Indigenous," 184.
- <sup>51</sup> Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*.
- <sup>52</sup> Byrd, "Loving Unbecoming."
- <sup>53</sup> Alyosxa Tudor, "(Im)possibilities of Refusing and Choosing Gender," *Feminist Theory* 20, no 4 (2019), 361–380.
- <sup>54</sup> See also Mrozewicz, "A Shimmering Movement."

---

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987), 64–81; C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides. A Racial History of Trans Identity*, (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2017).

<sup>56</sup> In ancient Finnish language, the word *hiisi* referred to a place of worship or a graveyard, but during conversion to Christianity, it began to refer to a small evil spirit in nature. *Hiisit* is the plural form in Finnish, although used as singular in the film and the novel, perhaps (mis)appropriated by John Ajvide Lindqvist in the novel.

<sup>57</sup> Steve Jones, "Torture Born: Representing Pregnancy and Abortion in Contemporary Survival-Horror," *Sexuality & Culture* 19 (2015), 426–443. See also Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) 43–58.

<sup>58</sup> Paisley Currah, "Expecting Bodies: The Pregnant Man and Transgender Exclusion from the Employment Non-Discrimination Act," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 3–4 (2008), 332.

<sup>59</sup> Mrozewicz, "A Shimmering Movement," 23.

<sup>60</sup> Mrozewicz, "A Shimmering Movement," 23.

<sup>61</sup> Steinbock, *Shimmering Images*.

<sup>62</sup> Ariel Smith, "This Essay Was Not Built on an Ancient Indian Burial Ground. Horror Aesthetics within Indigenous Cinema as Pushback against Colonial Violence," *Off/Screen* 18, no. 8 (2014), <https://offscreen.com/view/horror-indigenous-cinema>.

<sup>63</sup> Raheja, *Reservation Reelism*, 8–9.

<sup>64</sup> Smith, "This Essay".

<sup>65</sup> Eve Tuck and C. Ree, "A Glossary of Haunting," In *Handbook of Autoethnography*, edited by Stacey Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams and Carolyn Ellis, 639–658 (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2013), 642.

<sup>66</sup> Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*, 113–114.

<sup>67</sup> Tuck and Ree, "A Glossary."

<sup>68</sup> A similar argument in relation to the value of Native feminist theories has been made by Arvin, Tuck and Morrill, "Decolonizing Feminism," 17–18.

<sup>69</sup> Tuck, "Suspending Damage," 418.