# Editorial
# Breaking the Rules?

**Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto, Maija Mäki, Hanna Snellman, Kirsi Sonck-Rautio & Tiina Suopajärvi**

This volume of *Ethnologia Fennica* introduces topics addressed at the 15th SIEF congress, held online in June 2021. The event was hosted by the University of Helsinki. The theme of the congress was 'Breaking the Rules: Power, Participation and Transgression', bringing to the fore discourses and practices of making, breaking, reinterpreting and transgressing rules. The idea was to examine the implications of 'breaking the rules' in various social, economic, political, cultural and academic contexts. This special issue of *Ethnologia Fennica* has been edited by visiting editors **Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto**, **Hanna Snellman** and **Tiina Suopajärvi**.

Art and storytelling are powerful instruments for distributing alternative voices. They can contest and convey rules but also transmit knowledge. In Indigenous frameworks, stories and knowing have an inseparable relationship. **Sanna Valkonen's** review article, which is based on her opening keynote at the SIEF conference, introduces three stories as examples of research projects based on Sámi perceptions of the world and its ontological and epistemological premises. With these examples, Valkonen shows how Sámi ways of knowing about, for example land and nature, could be applied to issues of global environmental responsibility instead of understanding such knowing as only being connected to the Sámi homeland. The rules she invites us to break are, consequently, the rules for producing academic knowledge while studying Indigenous worlds. This could be done by applying narrative and dialogical methods where human, nonhuman and material become interwoven, like in the making of Sámi *duodji* (handicrafts) or in Sámi artistic interventions.

The review article by **Ellen Hertz**, also based on her keynote lecture at SIEF 2021, is an important contribution to the discussion of rules and breaking them. She takes us to the world of US corporate circles and a consideration of the problems, consequences and alternatives of 'soft law', i.e. 'agreements, compacts, standards, audits, multi-stakeholder initiatives, certification schemes and the like', and 'hard law', i.e. formal legislation. Hertz argues


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that in terms of controlling corporations that often exploit both human and natural resources, hard law is more productive when fighting for social justice. So, while we as researchers, who often study people together with other species, are in a weak power position to rightfully challenge current rules and rule-making processes, Hertz reminds us that many large and powerful corporations might want to do the same. Hence, we do need rules and laws to protect especially the most vulnerable by, as Hertz writes, not 'fighting against rules, but fighting for better rules'.

At the time of the conference, we were in the middle of the global COVID-19 pandemic, which had profound effects on our social life, work and everyday practices. The pandemic restrictions laid the groundwork for the state assuming an unusual amount of power, as it led to closing of public spaces and prevented social gatherings, directing citizens into transitory and liminal social realities. This created varied reactions and led to both collective and individual responses. One example of a response to the restrictions is discussed in the research article by **Nicolas Le Bigre**, who analyses material responses to street art in Scotland. Walking on the streets, he approaches the art as from the perspective of a passer-by analysing street art as fixed, unofficial, creative and public-facing material *interventions*, calling attention to the location of the street art and people's reactions to it. The reactions included transgressive modification, which can add to, alter or usurp the original semiotic contents of street art. The interplay between creators, witnesses and the materiality of the place highlight the complex interactions with and resistance to hegemonic boundaries.

Some forms of resistance are more visible than others. Often, social activists physically participate and perform in public spaces using their own bodies as a means of compliance, resistance and transgression. **Raúl Acosta's** article evaluates cycloactivism in one of the worlds' largest metropolitan areas, Mexico City, analysing cyclists' acts of resistance as embodied experience and transformative practice that challenge neoliberal technocratic politics. Acosta conducted immersive and participatory ethnographic research, attending the meetings of activist groups and cycling on the streets of Mexico City with the activists. Cycloactivists' rule-breaking is a type of urban ritual that seeks to change the city and its power relations, and in this way affect the practices of urban planning or policymaking by attracting maximum attention via onlookers and the media.

Both Le Bigre and Acosta describe urban cultural environments and situations in which local citizens find concrete ways to make their voice heard in public. The performances of local activists and interventions in the street call attention to complicated global issues and power. In their studies, the urban

settings become places where different stakeholders, like political parties, national authorities and global enterprises, become entangled with the everyday practices of the city dwellers. The citizens are resisting and either implicitly or explicitly demanding new rules. Their methods of resistance are sensory and carefully emplaced in a dialogue with the materiality of the streets, like on the ground, where passers-by step on Putin's face, or on the busy motorways occupied by the cyclists. However, as Acosta shows us, citizens from better socio-economic backgrounds are in a stronger power position to start resisting in the first place.

The last text in the thematic volume, by **Coppélie Cocq**, summarises the roundtable discussion that was held to celebrate the 100-year anniversary of European Ethnology in Finland. In July 1921, European Ethnology was established as an independent subject field at the University of Helsinki. The discussion addressed the societal engagements of ethnologists and the social value of ethnological knowledge. In smaller disciplines like European Ethnology, it is of utmost importance to form networks both inside and outside of academia and to actively engage in discussions on emerging social issues.

This issue of *Ethnologia Fennica* also includes three research articles that fall outside the current theme of focus. In the article 'Sleepless Land', **Simon Halberg** re-visits ethnographical records to identify and analyse, via a political ecological lens, how the arrival of sugar beets and the resulting energy transition changed the everyday lives of peasants and transformed an agrarian lifestyle based on fallow land into one based on the global fossil community and gave way to the birth of a sleepless land. The article offers interesting insights into the question of what a profound impact an energy transition can have on a society, especially every-day aspects of life.

**Pauliina Latvala-Harvilahti's** article focuses on environmental emotions from the perspective of individual experiences of environmental art reception. Latvala-Harvilahti analyses her fieldwork material on how audiences experienced the lament performances of musician and singer Noora Kauppila. In Finland, the debate on the impacts of art performances has only been marginally addressed. It is fascinating how this article offers insights into the meanings and interpretations of an individual's relationship with nature and art performed by and in the nature. Performances and other artistic activities can offer new ways to deal with, e.g. environmental anxiety, from the perspective of ritual examination and offer new kinds of approaches to better understand the range of attitudes towards and affects regarding climate change.

The last research article addresses the topic of agentive materials, e.g. crystals, in everyday life of New Spirituality practitioners in Estonia. **Tenno Teidearu's** research participants wear crystals and find the properties of these

artefacts both supportive and comforting from an esoteric standpoint. Teidearu explores how crystals have material lives of their own: they can lose their gloss, crack, break or become lost. Teidearu interprets such esoteric crystals and their importance to certain people within the context of post-humanism and new materialism. He uses the concept of material agency to demonstrate how natural processes of decay can hold various cultural meanings.

This issue of *Ethnologia Fennica* also includes three reviews of recent doctoral theses. **Pasi Enges** evaluates Silja Heikkilä's doctoral thesis and connects her work to a continuation of folkloristic dream research in Finland. **Lizette Gradén** finds Inkeri Hakamies's doctoral thesis highly relevant since it analyses how museums are defined by museum workers themselves through everyday social practices. **Riikka Taavetti** and **Olga Tkach** next review Pauliina Lukinmaa's doctoral thesis. Lukinmaa analyses how LGBTIQ+ people manage to engage in activism in Russia under increasing state oppression and in an environment that is generally hostile towards sexual and gender diversity. Taavetti and Tkach see the thesis as an essential contribution to research on hidden forms of civic activism in closed, non-democratic contexts. As editors, we are delighted to be able to include these reviews of such interesting doctoral theses. Hopefully, the theses will find new readers based on these reviews.

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**Sanna Valkonen**

# Multiple Worlds of Sámi Research

**Abstract:**
In this text I discuss how Sámi ways of knowing could be woven into the practices of Sámi research. I introduce three stories of three research projects as examples of attempts to overcome the complex and multifaceted challenges that Sámi society is currently facing. These examples place the Sámi perception of the world and its ontological and epistemological premises and practices at the core of knowledge practices. Sámi knowledge and ways of knowing the world are jointly created and shared in the every-day activities of communicating and acting, being in dialogue with the environment, caring for it, and engaging with the principle that a human being is not the master of nature.

Keywords: Sámi, Sámi knowledge, Indigenous knowledge, storytelling, art


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Viidon Sieiddit
1. verse
Herding, herding the herd
Following the weather, following the soul
Balancing the numbers, protecting from the predators
And carnivores, in the goahti sharing the info
While cooking, telling stories
Taking care of things humbly
By the campfire, narrating
With yoiks saving, reminiscing
Taking care of the environment, the family
Relatives, siidas, diligently, firmly
Communicating with the air, water and earth
Asking the hunting luck from the sacrifice stones
Learning the seasons, favorable locations
Over nights, days, months, years
Springs, summers, autumns, winters
With patience the strength and vigor increases

2. verse
Oh we should return to the past
There was no time to enjoy actually
To have time to rest you had to be
Constantly searching for ways to survive
Now its much easier, weather the weather
Snowmobile, engine, ordering a ride
Its possible to save a life no matter is it
Storm or still
Well of course we survive without them
Or can we anymore
Do we fend anymore
Did you sell again, buy again, fly again
But what about the outside forces
Denouncing, condemning
Bringing death, building barrages
Attacking by day, attacking in the dusk
Restrictions, regulations
Laws, poisons, pollution
Eating space from near by lands
And at the same time from distant traditions

3.verse
Today's situation must be taken into account more extensively
That's what the criticizer forgot
How is it so difficult to see
That we only let the nature color our opinions
Blind ones trust the individuals
And the pyramids of power
When the only functional way is to return the authority to local regimes
We have the power when we dare
To fight together against the big devils
For the sake of life this is everyone's responsibility
Our things are governed by nature
Our things are governed by the reindeer
We ourselves know how to determine these lands
Not the one who is separated from nature

These lyrics are an English translation of the North Sámi song 'Viidon Sieiddit' (Widened Sacred Rocks) by the Sámi rap artist Ailu Valle, from the album *Viidon Sieiddit*, released in 2019 (English translation of the lyrics, Ailu Valle).[1] As I and other Sámi scholars (Valkonen, Alakorva et al. 2022) have noted together, the words of the first verse insightfully depict the interconnectedness of humans and the environment based on the Sámi way of life and Sámi worldview in a reindeer-herding society. Nature is not something to be captured, something distinct from the cycles of everyday life; rather, all human action is entangled with the environment: with animals, the earth, air, water, weather, sacred sites, cycles of the year.

When we look at the following verses of the song, the picture becomes more complex. In the second and third verses, the lyrics provide an analysis of contemporary Sámi society and the challenges it faces. The Sámi are in an ongoing struggle over their — our — possibility to be and live both now and in the future in a world where *our things are governed by nature* (Valkonen, Alakorva et al. 2022). Sápmi, the Sámi homeland, has for decades faced various forms of resource extraction, from water reservoirs to the extensive logging of old-growth forests, from mines to windmill parks (see, e.g. Massa 1994;

1 The song and album *Viidon Sieiddit* by Ailu Valle were created as part of the Sámi art and research project 'Viidon Sieiddit – the new dimensions of Sámi nature relationships'/ 'Saamelaisen luontosuhteen uudet mittasuhteet' (funded by Kone Foundation, 2016–2017, PI Sanna Valkonen). The analysis of the lyrics presented in this article is also in some form part of the collaboratively produced introductory chapter (Valkonen, Alakorva, Aikio, and Magga 2022a) to the book *The Sámi World* (Valkonen, Aikio, Alakorva, and Magga 2022).

Hernes et al. 2022; Knobblock 2022; Larsen et al. 2022; Ranta & Kanninen 2019). Today, Sápmi, as with many other areas in the High North, is increasingly becoming a battleground for different competing economic and extractive claims, strategies and interests (see, e.g.; Kuokkanen 2019; Junka-Aikio 2022; Raitio et al. 2020). Together with climate change and its consequences, which are large-scale and far-reaching, the pressures faced by the Sámi people and on their way of life are considerably challenging (see IPCC 2022; Valkonen, Alakorva et al. 2022). Additionally, life in general is becoming more and more dependent on the technical and mining industry, and increasing consumption is a fact of life. As Ailu Valle asks, *Did you sell again, buy again, fly again*?

Valle's lyrics, however, also propose a solution to the question: *We have the power when we dare to fight together against the big devils. For the sake of life this is everyone's responsibility*. In what follows, Valle makes a statement that crystallises an idea quite essential to the Sámi perception to the world:

> Our things are governed by nature
> Our things are governed by the reindeer
> We ourselves know how to determine these lands
> Not the one who is separated from nature

Ailu Valle has said[2] that this song is about the challenges of living in the world today as a Sámi person, about the battle to maintain traditional culture in a rapidly changing world. According to him, the name of the song, 'Viidon Sieiddit' (Widened sacred rocks) refers to the present-day situation where the Sámi are currently involved with and impacted by global culture but also profoundly bound to their traditional, land-based way of life. Valle discusses how sacred rocks have been important in Sámi culture as places of worship. They illustrate how the Sámi have been strongly attached to local nature. But nowadays, as Valle notes, we all are also 'connected to worldwide natures through the parts of the technological devices we use, whether we want it or not'.

I have chosen these lyrics by Ailu Valle as the introduction to this review article, which discusses examples of how Sámi ways of knowing – Sámi knowledge practices, particularly Sámi storytelling in various forms – could be woven into the practices of Sámi research. My aim here is to share three stories of three research projects (*cf*. Outakoski 2020) as examples of attempts to overcome the complex and multifaceted challenges that Sámi society is currently facing while placing the Sámi perception of the world and its ontological and epistemological premises and practices at the core of knowledge practic-

2 Instagram post by Ailu Valle, 13 November 2020.

es (see, e.g. Helander & Kailo 1999; Kuokkanen 2000, 2007; *cf.* Kovach 2009, 55–74; Wilson 2001).

When discussing storytelling as an Indigenous methodology, Margaret Kovach (2009, 94) makes the following observation: 'Stories remind us who we are and of our belonging. Stories hold within them knowledges while simultaneously signifying relationships.' In indigenous frameworks, storytelling and knowing have an inseparable relationship, and storytelling can work as a decolonising action by giving voice to the marginalised and misinterpreted (Kovach 2009, 94–98; Archibald 2001; see also Jensen 2020). I consider Sámi rap music as a particular form of Sámi storytelling, as are other forms of Sámi art and Sámi *duodji* (handicrafts), and hence, it comprises a Sámi knowledge practice in its own right (see Valkonen, Alakorva et al. 2022). The rap lyrics by Ailu Valle discussed in this text can also be read as a portrayal of Sámi knowledge and ways of knowing the world (on Sámi knowledge, see, e.g. Guttorm 2011; Helander-Renvall 2016; Kuokkanen 2009; Valkonen and Valkonen 2019; Valkonen et al. forthcoming). Knowing and knowledge are jointly created and shared in the every-day activities of communicating and acting, being in dialogue with the environment, caring for it, telling stories, asking for luck, being humble and patient, engaging with the principle that a human being is not the master of nature. As noted by Barker and Pickerill (2019, 647), '[i]t is this acting with non-human entities that distinguishes Indigeneity and Indigenous knowledge-making from non-Indigenous theory' (see also Hall 2014).

Sámi knowledge is thus co-constituted, realised together with the surrounding environment and its subjectivities and agencies. A reindeer herder knows together with the collective of herders, with a reindeer, together with a fell and with a snowmobile, just like a *duojár* (crafter) knows together with the materials and techniques, together with ancestors and future generations. Knowledge emerges and is tested in active relationships, and a central purpose of this kind of knowledge is to ensure that life and living will be possible also in the future; it is not knowing merely for the sake of knowledge itself, but rather for the sake of responsible relationships (*cf.* Kuokkanen 2007; 32–33; see also, e.g. Knobblock 2022, 5; Finbog 2020, 14; Oskal 1995; Sara 2013). As pointed out by Margaret Kovach (2009, 57) when discussing Indigenous epistemologies: 'Relationship is not identified as a specific theme because it is wholly integrated with everything else. Indigenous epistemologies live within a relational web, and all aspects of them must be understood from that vantage point.'

The three projects to be introduced in this review article have — by combining social scientific Sámi research (on Sámi research, see, e.g. Junka-Aikio 2019; Junka-Aikio et al. 2022; Valkonen & Valkonen 2016), Sámi art and tra-

ditional and everyday Sámi knowledge and skills — applied and developed relational practices and methods from Sámi perspectives and epistemological understandings to better study Sámi society (Valkonen, Alakorva et al. 2022; *cf.* Kuokkanen 2000; Porsanger et al. 2021). In this article, I focus particularly on the ways in which Sámi knowledge practices and articulations, even Sámi *duodji* (handicraft) items (see, e.g. Finbog 2020; Guttorm 2011, 2015; Magga 2022) and Sámi artistic interventions (see, e.g. Valkonen & Valkonen 2018), can both inspirit and inform the framework for a research project: How *duodji* and art can inspire research and, importantly, transmit and express the research needs, topical questions and concerns of Sámi communities, while also making it possible to examine them and present and share research findings. In other words, the article focuses on how Sámi ways of knowing help researchers tell their particular stories (*cf.* Archibald 2008; Archibald et al. 2019; Knobblock 2022; Martineau & Ritskes 2014).

My aim in this text is also then to illustrate how cooperation between Sámi art, *duodji* and research can enable and construct decolonising research practices by prioritising diverse Sámi knowledge practices in various research settings. This review article hence adheres to and contributes to the challenge of developing Indigenous methodologies and relational research practices (Smith 1999; Kovach 2009;; Virtanen et al. 2021; Wilson 2001) from a particular Indigenous epistemic position and world. To this end, I introduce concrete examples of what a decolonisation of research practices could mean in the Sámi context. I suggest that as in the Sámi world, the boundaries between human and the environment are fluid and relational and knowledge and knowing subjectivity are co-constituted through relationships and co-acting (Helander-Renvall 2016) also Sámi research as an academic field established at the universities must be able to build transdisciplinary, relational and decolonial practices of producing knowledge.

## Discussing Sámi nature relations in the era of global environmental concern

The Sámi are an Indigenous People who live in the area of four nation states. The Sámi lands range from central Norway and Sweden across Northern Finland to the Kola Peninsula in Russia. The Sámi call this area Sápmi (North Sámi spelling of the Sámi homeland). The Sámi have to a rather considerable degree retained their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions, for instance the siida system, which is a historically long-lasting political, legal and administrative unit of society for sharing common sources of livelihood and usufruct territories (see, e.g. Helander-Renvall 2013; Lehtola 2002; Labba 2015). The Sámi have in many respects held on to a traditional land-based way

of life, particularly evident, as also the siida system, in reindeer herding (see Sara 2013; Oskal 1995), their own languages and cultural expressions, and a holistic, relational worldview and spiritual culture, despite various colonial, assimilative and infrastructural measures imposed on them over time. At the same time, living in the wealthy Nordic democracies, with their comprehensive welfare-state models (most Sámi live in Finland, Norway and Sweden, while only a small minority [2–3 percent of the 75000–100 000 Sámi] live in Russia), means the Sámi have a long tradition of operating in-between various realities – *ilmmiid gaskkas*, freely translated as 'in-between worlds and skies', as the North Sámi expression goes, denoting 'living on boundaries, creative moving between two or even more life conceptions' (Lehtola 2000; Valkonen, Alakorva et al. 2022). The Sámi are both European and Indigenous – definitions that, from the perspective of other Indigenous Peoples, are seen as opposites (Valkonen, Alakorva et al. 2022).

The above-described onto-epistemological position of the Sámi has structured the three research projects presented in this review article. The projects have conducted research *ilmmiid gaskkas*, in other words, on boundaries, creatively moving between different life and scientific conceptions and approaches – in-between various worlds – thus challenging the one-world paradigm still dominant in academia (*cf.* de la Cadena 2015; Guttorm et al. 2019; Rosenow 2018). This mono-ontological understanding of the world – the idea that we all share the same reality – is a doctrine enacted by Western political and legal systems and institutions, as well as science; it is based on and promotes a twofold ontological dichotomy: separating humans from nature (the nature/culture divide) and distinguishing and policing the boundary between those who operate within the one-world order and those who have other ways of worlding (the colonial divide) (see, e.g. De Sousa Santos 2014; Escobar 2015; Rojas 2016). Indigenous Peoples all over the world are engaged in struggles to maintain their multiple worlds, the pluriverse (e.g. de la Cadena 2015; Escobar 2020; Valkonen, Aikio et al. 2022). The ontological occupations of their lands and waters (Escobar 2015; Wolfe 2006), identities and cultures (Leroux 2019; Junka-Aikio 2016; Sturm 2011; Valkonen 2019), even knowledge and thought (Sundberg 2014; Tallbear 2017), can be seen as a consequence and manifestation of the one-world order, which suppresses alternative worldings. As described at the beginning of this article, this is the reality faced also by the Sámi in contemporary Europe.

The first project, '*Viidon Sieiddit* the new dimensions of Sámi nature relations' (2016–2017),[3] emerged as a result of another massive resource use plan targeting the Sámi homeland. How this project was born is a story that needs

3 The project was funded by Kone Foundation.

to be told because it demonstrates not only the collective mindset of certain Sámi actors but also how research can truly originate from the societal concerns of Indigenous communities. In 2014, a diamond mine company registered in Ireland was granted an exploration permit to look for diamonds in Sápmi, in the Ohcejohka/Utsjoki region, located in the northernmost corner of Finland. Utsjoki is the only municipality in Finland with a Sámi majority. This news gave rise to much concern and discussion in different Sámi fora. The local Sámi stated their opposition and raised concerns about how the possible mine would affect Sámi livelihoods, especially fishing and reindeer herding, and jeopardise their options for pursuing traditional livelihoods, possibly for many generations (see e.g. https://yle.fi/a/3-7310306). It is undeniable that the existence of Sámi culture and society depends fundamentally on a clean environment and land areas that are expansive enough to practice reindeer herding and other nature-based livelihoods, which also help the Sámi maintain many particular skills and knowledge as well as a rich language. Their relation to the nearby environment is the foundational basis for Sámi society: large-scale extractive projects would crucially affect Sámi culture and conditions vital to its success (Valkonen and Valkonen 2018; Valkonen, Valkonen et al. forthcoming; Valkonen et al. forthcoming; *cf.* Simpson 2004).

A little after news about the diamond mine had spread, a Sámi visual artist, photographer and filmmaker Marja Helander, gave an interview on Yle Sámi radio (Yle Sápmi) related to her exhibition on mining landscapes. She said (https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-7699144):

> – Only when I started to study these things did I realise that we all, all Sámi as well, are married to the mining industry.
>
> Marja Helander is noting that she can't preach against mining because she can't live without the day-to-day industrial products that are connected to the mining industry. Through her pictures, she can only address where we are going.
>
> It has been hard to accept this, especially as a Sámi and a representative of an Indigenous People. Indigenous Peoples are often perceived as closer to nature than others. But the reality may be different.
>
> – Externally, the life of the Sámi is exactly the same as for the Finns – there are computers, cars, snowmobiles, telephones, mobile phones, all that. Helander is reminding that almost everything is based on the products of the mining industry. She continues, saying that this does not always come into mind.
>
> – Somehow, we might not think about this, and neither did I, that actually this Western way of consuming is pretty much based on the products of the mining industry. (Translated by Sanna Valkonen)

In the interview, Marja Helander in my mind questioned her right as a Sámi to prioritise the lands and environment of her own people at the cost of other peoples. She challenged such Indigenous agency and responsibility where 'our' own ancestral lands are at the core of Indigenous politics and ethics, as a counterpoint to Western lifestyles, which the Sámi, as citizens of Western societies, are part of as well, having a profound dependency on the mining industry. The 'Viidon Sieiddit' project was initiated by this kind of unpleasant feeling of hypocrisy related to the fact that while protecting our own nearby environment from the mining industry or other large-scale projects affecting the Sámi surroundings, also 'we', the Sámi, often carelessly consume commodities dependent on raw materials extracted from the nearby environment of other peoples. Perhaps people(s) who do not have any possibilities to resist the exploitation of their environment (see also Valkonen et al. forthcoming).

The Sámi researchers and artists who became involved with the project had had similar thoughts and feelings.[4] As a group, we started to wonder about and ponder the primality of our lands and our privilege in being able to defend our lands while at the same time reflecting on our responsibilities to distant natures, the nearby environments of faraway, or neighbour peoples. The 'Viidon Sieddit' project was initiated to conceive how a similar responsible and caring relationship to nature and knowledge practices characteristic of the traditional Sámi way of life could be extended beyond nearby environments. We wanted to envision how the Sámi consciousness of nature and the Sámi ways of knowing could allow for an increasing awareness of and inform our relationships with distant environments. Our goal was also to open perspectives onto Sámi responsibility as global citizens to care for global natures (see Valkonen and Valkonen 2018; Valkonen, Valkonen et al. forthcoming).

The starting point for the project was the idea that all human action is thoroughly permeated by, supported by and dependent on the materiality of the physical world. The ambitious goal of 'Viidon Sieiddit' was to rediscover nature beyond just planetary threat scenarios. We sought new forms of Sámi nature consciousness and sensitivity towards nearby and distant environments as well as new perspectives on the material relations of communities by combining the Sámi audiovisual environmental art, Sámi photography and filmmaking, Sámi rap music and social scientific Sámi research. The results of the project were presented as 1) an art exhibition entitled *Viidon Sieiddit*, which included several artworks on display at the Sámi Museum Siida from September 2018

4 The research group for the project consisted of a Sámi hybrid artist, queer activist Stina Aletta Aikio, a Sámi visual artist, photographer and filmmaker, Marja Helander, a Sámi rap artist, Ailu Valle, a Sámi professor of sociology, environmental sociologist Jarno Valkonen, and myself.

Figures 1 and 2. Whose cup of tea (2018), by Jarno Valkonen, and Birds in the Earth (2018), by Marja Helander.

to March 2019; 2) a short film entitled *Eatnanvuloš Lottit* (Birds in the Earth, 2018) by Marja Helander; 3) a North Sámi rap album entitled *Viidon Sieiddit* (2019) by Ailu Valle; and 4) a book entitled *Viidon Sieiddit*, which included dialogues between the researchers and artists of the project, published both in Finnish and in North Sámi (Valkonen and Valkonen 2018).With and through both artwork and dialogues, our aim was to critically discuss and make visi-

ble the uncertainty and blurriness related to contemporary nature relations. This can be illustrated through the example of a *guksi*, a burl cup. We basically know how it is connected to nature. The motif of a wooden cup is natural material made from birch burl; the crafter will work it into a practical object, which is then valued and tested in daily use, and the crafter does this using skills learned within the culture. Contemporary practices of human subsistence are more complicated than the making of a burl cup because they have been torn away and separated from the direct environments where people are living. This is why day-to-day life's nature-culture coexistence is harder to understand and perceive: the nature relations of a porcelain cup, not to mention a mobile phone, are not at all as clear as those of a *guksi* (see Valkonen and Valkonen 2018, 11).

In *Viidon Sieiddit*, we explored how a similar kind of understanding of the interrelatedness of all human action and the environment characteristic of the traditional Sámi way of life and Sámi worldview – as figured in the first verse of Ailu Valle's song or in a wooden cup – could be extended to include modern lifestyles and distant environments. By combining the insights of the artists and their artistic work with academic discussions, we aimed to create alternative forms of knowledge, different from conventional academic practice in social sciences, and alternative ways to disseminate knowledge and provoke thoughts. We told stories in diverse forms about the Sámi relationship to nature and its multiple connections, as is the customary Sámi method of knowing, in which knowledge production is understood as narrative and dialogical by nature and with nature, as discussed by, for instance, Elina Helander and Kaarina Kailo (1999) (see also Guttorm et al. 2019).

The rap album by Ailu Valle manifests this method and goal. It is a thorough analysis of the interrelatedness, entanglement and co-becoming (see Bawaka Country et al. 2015) of the human and the environment in the past and present in the form of a particular type of storytelling (*cf.* Gorlewski & Porfilio 2012; Navarro 2014). Or, as Marja Helander elucidates when introducing 'Series North, year 2018', a photograph series forming part of the 'Viidon Sieiddit' project (Helander 2020):

> For several years, I have been taking photographs in Sápmi in the northern Fennoscandian region, exploring the link between the mining industry and today's standard of living and culture of consumption, and in particular, the impact of mining on the sensitive northern nature. The nickel mined in the Kola Peninsula is needed, for example, for the manufacture of stainless steel, computer hard drives and mobile phone batteries. Again, the apatite mined in the Khibiny Mountains is processed further to produce phosphate fertilisers for farming needs. In my work, I emphasise the dependence between people and nature.

Helander studies and illuminates the mutual dependency of humans and the environment in her work. She tells stories in visual forms of the different ways people and nature relate to each other, particularly illustrating the consequences of the consumption of nature in detail. The relationship between the mining industry and modern standards of living as well as the impacts of mining on the sensitive nature of the northern regions and Sámi ways of life especially are a central focus of her work. As Helander notes (Valkonen and Valkonen 2018, 70):

> I have used as one starting point for my pictures of the mines the realization of how much, for example, electronics use materials from the mines and produce mine waste at the same time. Cell phones, laptops, game consoles, all of these need 30 different kinds of metals to function, of which gold is one of the most severe polluters. For the 0,03 grams needed to make a circuit board of a cell phone, at least 100 kilograms of waste is being produced in a mine.

In addition to portraying landscapes that capture the impacts of consumer culture on the environment, Helander investigates the transspecies relations that are central to the Sámi worldview. She uses animal characters to illustrate the ambitious and fluid boundaries of the species: 'I want to highlight the corporeality of people and how humans are just one animal species among many, dependent on nature, ecosystems and land. We are part of the cyclicity of nature; a pile of particles and molecules' (Helander 2020).

Sámi hybrid artist Stina Aletta Aikio talks about their artwork Čierusbeahci (Weeping pine), which was part of the exhibition in the Sámi Museum Siida, in similar fashion: "Čierusbeahci enters into dialogue with nature's own ways of communicating, speech of plants, and human intervention, mining activities, industry and consumption. The work envisions how the impact of consumer culture could be concretized in nature" (Valkonen and Valkonen 2018, 14).

Aikio discusses how in the contemporary world it is urgent to know differently, reach and combine different knowledges, but at the same time they acknowledge that capturing the big picture is basically impossible. We are responsible for the planet, but we cannot fully know it (Valkonen and Valkonen, 2018, 65):

> We can't assume that a Sámi person who lived a hundred years ago thought about the Brazilian beef production. It feels impossible that these days you have to think about the whole existence of nature, and we can never understand the whole existence, no one can. There are species dying of extinction all the time, species we have never even heard of, and we have responsibility for things we actually know nothing about, which is frightening.

Figures 3 and 4. Anatomy of consumption (2018) and Giron (2018) by Marja Helander.

Figures 5 and 6. Hidden from the Dusk (2018) and Looking into the Nightfall (2018) by Marja Helander.

Figures 7 and 8. Weeping Pine (2018) by Stina Aletta Aikio.

In the 'Viidon Sieiddit' project, we told stories about Sámi relationships with the environment while at the same time engaging with, discussing and bringing forth the Sámi worldview and Sámi heritage (*cf.* Archibald 2008). Both during the process and afterwards, for instance after having received positive feedback from a wider audience about raising awareness and making

visible the multiple connections we all have with various environments, we became confident that conventional academic forms of producing and disseminating knowledge may not be enough to address and explore such ethically complex issues as human-environment relations and relationality in the Sámi context in an era of global environmental concern and crisis. What is also needed is theoretical and practical engagement with the environment and with Sámi traditions and perceptions. As Guttorm et al. (2019,153) have suggested: 'Indigenous knowledge is always connected to practice. Indigenous ontologies and knowledge practices are holistic and living, and documented, shared and distributed in oral histories, arts and crafts, other traditional practices, and language'. After the 'Viidon Sieiddit' project, we are committed to further following Indigenous ways of knowing as part of Sámi research practice.

## Investigating the ontological politics of Sámi cultural heritage

Unconventional, alternative research perspectives, practices, methods and means of dissemination are of particular importance to research on Sámi cultural heritage. How otherwise should we approach and examine something that is at the same time historical and contemporary, written and unwritten, oral and tacit? How else should we study something that is enacted in everyday life but also in law and politics and produced and regulated by legal conventions and discourses, by silent conventions? How else can we makes sense of something that is embodied being and knowing, that is feelings, artefacts, memories, knowledge and the skills connected to artefacts and practices? To support my claim about the complexity of what we call cultural heritage, I will tell a story about a particular presentation given at a conference entitled '*Áigi lea buoremus oahpaheaddji*' (Time is the best teacher),[5] which was held at the Sámi Museum Siida in Inari, in the Sámi homeland, in August 2018 (see also Valkonen et al. forthcoming). There were many wonderful presentations at the conference discussing Indigenous museum and cultural heritage from different angles. The international laws, practices and conventions protecting Indigenous cultural heritage were thoroughly discussed by representatives of the UN and UNESCO. There were presentations about the Sámi music tradition, about the repatriation of the Sámi collections in other museums and about many other important, topical issues. Moreover, the new

5 The conference concluded the project 'Culturally and Socially Sustainable Museum. Reframing the Policies of Representing Indigenous Sámi Culture in the Sámi Museum Siida' (2016–2018, funded by the Academy of Finland, PI Sanna Valkonen, project 305476), a collaborative project on the part of Sámi studies at the University of Lapland and the Sámi Museum Siida.

manuscript *Eatnamat leat min mánát / Enâmeh lää mii párnääh / These lands are our children*, prepared for the museum's new main exhibition by Professor of Sámi Culture Veli-Pekka Lehtola, was presented to public for the first time at the conference.

The conference venue was a museum: a place where cultural heritage is collected to be preserved, researched, exhibited and cared for. Through their choices, policies and practices, museums are in central positions to define and decide what is cultural heritage: museums practically determine what is selected to be preserved and displayed, from the vast repertory of traditions, to represent the history and culture of a people (see, e.g. Harrison 2015; Aikio 2022). Indigenous Peoples and museums have complex relations, and historical and present-day examples of the othering of Indigenous Peoples can still be present in the museum. As a matter of fact, museums are institutions that have often quite explicitly enacted the colonial and nature/culture dichotomy characteristic of the one-world paradigm in their conventional orientation of building coherent national histories or histories of humankind. The ways in which the Sámi and other Indigenous Peoples are represented in museums worldwide have often been based on this dichotomy. Indigenous Peoples have had few options to influence how they are defined and presented in museums targeted at majority populations (see, e.g. Lonetree 2012; Opdahl Mathisen 2014; Finbog 2020.) The Sámi Museum Siida is, however, an exception in the museum field because it is founded and led by the Sámi themselves (see Aikio 2022; Valkonen et al. forthcoming).

The keynote speaker of the conference, Sámi researcher and *duojár* (crafter) Sigga-Marja Magga, described in her presentation how she had sewn a *gákti*, a Sámi dress, for her son together with her sister, who also had sewn a *gákti* for her son. While sewing, Sigga-Marja Magga and her sister had at the same time discussed different aspects of the *gákti*: its details and their meanings, traditions, patterns and colours of different families, the *gákti's* previous and contemporary use, the unwritten norms and rules related to designing and wearing a *gákti*, and also the care and love shown to it (see also Valkonen et al. forthcoming). The speech was touching – many people in the audience told later how tears came to their eyes while listening the speech. Perhaps this was because it discussed something at the same time quite mundane, an everyday life item, but also something that many of us may have lost, namely transmitting a particular family heritage that bears irreplaceable values and meanings. The speech discussed care, sharing, family relations, transmitting Indigenous traditions and how to keep them alive and flourishing while describing detailed techniques, knowledge and skills in preparing and using a *gákti*.

During Sigga-Marja Magga's speech, I started to ponder the concept of cultural heritage and the reality it denotes in a new light. The conference offered interesting perspectives and understandings of cultural heritage: in principle, all the presenters were discussing more or less the same thing – Indigenous Peoples' cultural heritage – but through very different frameworks, discourses and understandings. In fact, I wondered, were they even discussing the same thing? The presenters approached their topics differently, and the realities of cultural heritage discussed in the conference seemed to differ quite strongly.

The *gákti* is a significant and visible part of *duodji* tradition (about *duodji*, see Guttorm 2015; Magga 2018a) and Sámi cultural heritage. *Gákti*-making requires practical skills but also co-creation and collaboration, active connections to inherited and learned knowledge, and an understanding of their inter-generational meanings. With a *gákti*, traditional knowledge and skills encounter the aesthetics, needs and material supplies of the contemporary Sámi (see also Valkonen et al. forthcoming). Sigga-Marja Magga's presentation encompassed many kinds of realities and knowledges including the experimental knowledge of a *duojár* (crafter): the skill needed to be able to make the costume. It included caring knowledge: the affection and will to make such a *gákti* that is perfect for a son, a *gákti* that has every detail correct in this cultural and societal context and for its particular intended use. It included inherited and learned knowledge about the inter-generational meanings of *gákti*. Finally, it included the knowledge of a researcher: a perception of how this whole process can be analysed and theorised (see also Magga 2022)

Preparing a *gákti* is an interesting, or perhaps even a perfect, example of Sámi knowledge. Knowledge and knowing are not separate parts of Sámi being but integral to living and acting as Sámi. Moreover, knowledge is caring (Guttorm et al. 2019; Valkonen et al. forthcoming). Sámi *duodji* researcher Gunvor Guttorm (2011, 62) makes a distinction between 'the Sámi concepts of knowing something and knowing about something'. According to Guttorm, *diehtit* expresses theoretical knowledge, that is, knowledge of an action, whereas *máhttit* relates to practical, bodily knowledge, a skill needed to carry out certain work. Guttorm gives an example of a *gietkka*, a Sámi cradle: someone may know (*diehtit*) how to make a *gietkka* without having ever made one. When a person actually prepares a *gietkka*, they gain hands-on personal experience, knowledge through action (*máhttit*) (Guttorm 2011, 62; see also Valkonen et al. forthcoming). This discussion applies to *gákti* as well: I can know in theory how to make a *gákti*; I can also know the particular colours and patterns of my kin. But if I do not have the personal experience of preparing one, not the skills, not the touch possible gained only through making one – the knowing in making – my *gákti* may not look right.

Figures 9 and 10. Pictures of sewing (2015) and *gákti* (2018) by Sigga-Marja Magga.

The conference crystallised for me how cultural heritage is about various practices and ways of being and knowing. In effect, how cultural heritage comes into being, is actualised in various practices: like with *duodji*, the Sámi handicraft tradition, or in the museum, in its conservation and curatorial practices. A Sámi handicraft tool in a glass vitrine in a museum is something quite different than a handicraft tool in the hands of a mother teaching her child how to use it, even if both practices, museum and *duodji*, are about transmitting and creating cultural heritage. On the other hand, when making a Sámi handicraft item, for instance sewing a *gákti*, it is also about conserving and curating as well as defining, interpreting and creating cultural heritage, as is the case with the museum.

I will shed light on the multiple existences and realities of cultural heritage by telling a story about *njuikun*, a heddle. A Sámi woman in old age saves in her wardrobe, inside a pillowcase, her grandmother's *njuikun*. This heddle is made of reindeer antler and dates back to the 18th century. In the family, this *njuikun* has been an important handicraft tool for preparing laces for shoes and bands needed in everyday life. The fact that the heddle is saved in a wardrobe, inside a pillowcase, indicates that it is no longer in regular use, but it is howev-

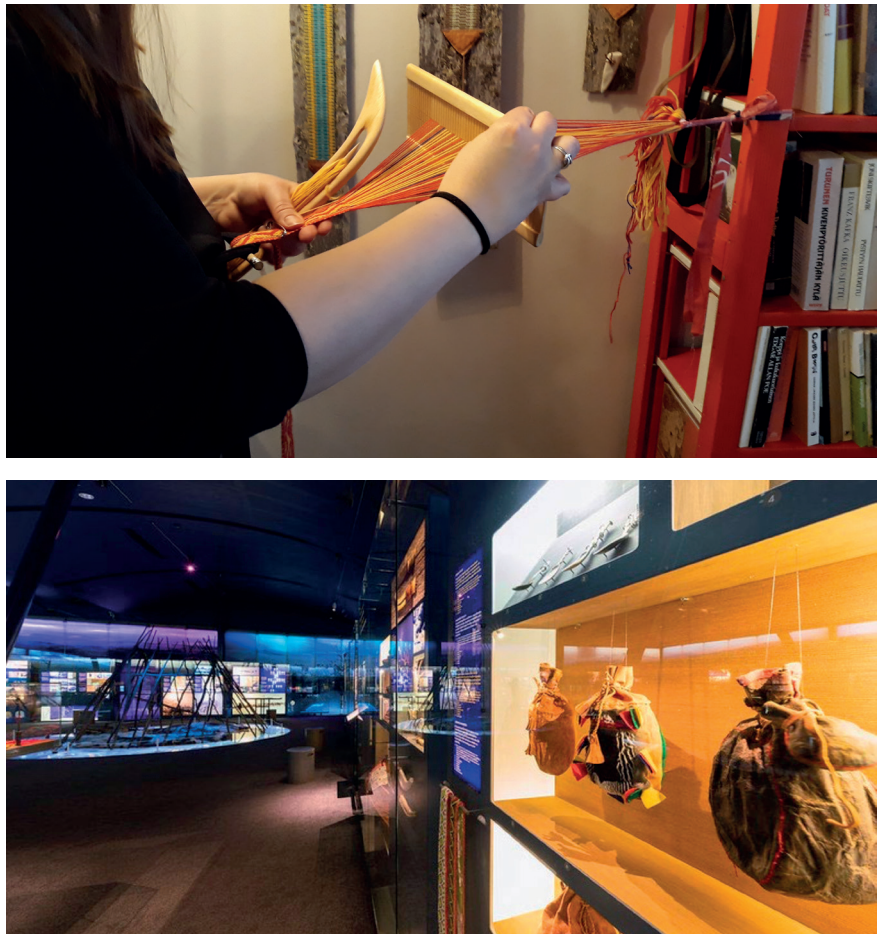
er considered a very valuable piece of bone, something that cannot be put on a bookshelf or in a *kiisa*, a craft box; instead, it is kept safe inside soft clothes.

The *njuikun* is deeply embedded within family stories, skills and handicraft tradition. Its owner, the Sámi woman, has used the *njuikun* for weaving laces for shoes and bands for *gáktis* for her family according to the models used by her family and home region, as have her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother before her. The heddle embodies cross-generational skills, relations and care as well as an awareness of family history. Recently, the owner of the heddle has started to consider whether to donate it to the Sámi museum because it is so rarely used. She however hesitates to give it away for several reasons. Perhaps the grandchildren will want to learn this special skill. Thereby, this family treasure would be used again, and this particular Sámi tradition could continue in the family. Once in the museum, the *njuikun* would become part of the museum's Sámi collection and an object of its curatorial practices and conservation methods. As part of a collection, the object would lose its practical purpose and become a cold object without human touch. When on display, the handicraft item of one family would play a role in a larger narrative of the history and culture of the Indigenous Sámi people. The *njuikun* would thus be transformed from being a personal utensil and part of one family's heritage to an object representing the Sámi people's common and public cultural heritage.

The story about *njuikun* has inspired, even informed, the scheme for the projects 'Logi' and 'Árbi' – the ontological politics of Sámi cultural heritage.[6] Making a *gákti* as a way of creating cultural heritage by combining different forms of knowledges and skills functions as an epistemic framework for the projects' research on Sámi cultural heritage. Our objective in these projects[7] has been to examine, with Sámi-based scientific and artistic manners, how Sámi cultural heritage exists in society. How is it assembled in different practices, such as in the museum, in *duodji* and in art, and again, through what kinds of practices does culture or heritage become cultural heritage? This approach is based on the idea of ontological plurality, namely that different practices create different realities, not interpretations of the same reality (Mol 1999, 2002; Blaser 2012; de la Cadena & Blaser 2018; Joks and Law 2016; Valkonen, Aikio et al. 2022). The processes of constructing realities are both open and

6 The research group for these projects comprises a collective of Sámi researchers and artists, many of whom are at the same time traditional skill holders, *duojárs*, reindeer herders, activists and much more. The members are Áile Aikio, Saara Alakorva, Stina Aletta Aikio, Sigga-Marja Magga, Ailu Valle, Mikkâl Morottaja aka Amoc, Marja Helander, Veli-Pekka Lehtola and myself. The projects are funded by Kone Foundation and the Academy of Finland (project 324427).

7 The "Logi" project, funded by Kone Foundation, concentrates mainly on artistic work, whereas the "Árbi" project, funded by the Academy of Finland, focuses on research.



Figures 11 and 12. Heddle (2016) by Sigga-Marja Magga and a view of the Sámi Museum Siida's exhibition (2020) by Áile Aikio.

debatable, and therefore, deeply political (Mol 1999). This approach to cultural heritage emphasises its fundamental contingency – heritage is 'neither "fixed" nor "inherent", but emerges in dialogue among individuals, communities, practices, places, and things' (Harrison 2015).

The research of the 'Logi' and 'Árbi' projects builds on the idea that Sámi cultural heritage is a result of assembling different things through different practices, such as the museum, art, *duodji*, traditional livelihoods and so forth. Cultural heritage is therefore not a fixed phenomenon; rather, different practices create different realities for it, as illustrated by the story about the *njuikun*. What is more, articulating traditions in the frame of indigeneity produces new types of (political) meanings, thus possibly changing traditions as social prac-

tices (see Magga 2018b). The ontological politics of cultural heritage is, hence, also about producing futures. As Rodney Harrison (2015) has argued, the definitions, discourses, power structures and interpretations regulating cultural heritage influence the futures and realities possible for Indigenous Peoples. The values and power relations of the present determine what we choose as a representation of the past as well as what we hope to preserve for the future. (Harrison 2015; see also Valkonen et al. 2017.) In the 'Logi' and 'Árbi' projects, we look at the heterogeneous actions of the enactment and embodiment of cultural heritage, and the choices, values and possible struggles underlying them. The method we apply combines *diehtit* and *máhttit*: we discuss the contemporary challenges facing Sámi society by crafting, sewing, interpreting, rewording, analysing, writing and visualising in different forms Sámi intellectual and societal traditions, Sámi cultural heritage, in other words, by engaging in practicing, dialogue and caring. The results of the projects will be presented as several artworks, duodji items and, more conventionally, as research papers, many of which will be co-authored by the members of the research team.

## Concluding remarks

CHORUS
The last who were on skis
-- adjusting, adapting
The first who started working with snowmobiles
-- siidas (village units) reflecting/ answering the fjelds
Do we really long for the past
-- adjusting, adapting
When times change, the sacred rocks widen
-- the villages adapting in the new situations

The chorus of the song 'Viidon Sieiddit' cites the famous thoughts by renowned Sámi linguist, professor and politician, Ole Heandarat, Ole Henrik Magga: the Sámi were the last who were on skis and the first who started working with snowmobiles. According to Ailu Valle,[8] this quote from Magga encapsulates the core of Sámi culture as it has often been defined: the ability to adapt and adjust to changing societal circumstances while maintaining the Sámi essence (see also Valkonen, Alakorva et al. 2022, 1). This kind of flexibility and ability to adapt and take influences from other epistemic cultures without losing one's own foundations – to make research *ilmmiid gaskkas* – is important to Sámi research as well.

8 Instagram post by Ailu Valle, November 13, 2020.

By telling stories about the emergence of and motivation behind particular projects blending Sámi research, art and traditional skills, my aim in this review article has been to introduce and discuss alternative, Sámi-based ways to conduct research on Sámi society and its manifold relations. I have demonstrated how the categorisations and hierarchical positionings of a researcher, artist and traditional skill holder can be fluid and shifting, as are the categories of research and art and scientific and Indigenous knowledge. To engage in profound analysis and gain in-depth knowledge, it is essential to transgress academic conventions and established practices of science and to recognise and make use of various valid expertise and knowledges when doing research.

Sámi research is a multi-, cross- and transdisciplinary critical science that examines Sámi society and culture from the people's own cultural and societal standpoints. Sámi research draws from Indigenous research paradigms and methods in combination with research traditions and methodologies of particularly social sciences, humanities and legal studies – however, importantly it also builds on the Sámi epistemologies and practices of being and acting. An objective of Sámi research is to construct and strengthen Sámi self-determination and it ideally rises from the needs and concerns of Sámi society (see Junka-Aikio 2019; Länsman 2008; Valkonen and Valkonen 2016; Eriksen, Valkonen and Valkonen 2019; Valkonen, Aikio et al. 2022).

Sheryl Lightfoot (2016, 72) has defined decolonising research as privileging Indigenous voices, experiences, knowledge, reflections and analyses. Ina Knobblock (2022, 76) discusses how, 'at the core of the terms decolonisation and resurgence lies a critical examination and dismantling of colonial structures of power and a (re)imagination and (re)creation of the world grounded in Indigenous experiences and world-making practices'. Sámi research has a particular responsibility to promote and carry out decolonial practices within academia. It is crucial that Sámi researchers not just critically deconstruct and examine the prevailing power structures within academia; we must also dare to (re)create and (re)imagine the things that matter to us as Sámi. Part of this decolonial endeavour is to recognise that Sámi research cannot be considered as separate from Sámi society, but rather as an inalienable part of it. Saara Alakorva (2022, 229) argues that 'a community-based researcher has to be, to a certain extent, a servodatberošteaddji – someone who cares for the community'. To build the relations of trust with the community and gain access to it, a researcher must care about the community, its future and its well-being (Alakorva 2022). Sometimes this kind of orientation may take place furtively: there was once an interview on the radio that someone could even characterise as rather radical, at least it was critical of (established) Sámi positions. This interview resulted in a series of knowledge productions with important

Figure 13. Sacred and mysterious (2018) by Marja Helander.

and engaging outcomes. Sometimes the rules must be broken, sometimes people must dare to say out loud unpleasant things, to act as an agent of change. This is an important goal for the Sámi research as well. Linda Tuhiwai Smith concludes her work *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999, 199) with the following words: 'As indigenous peoples we have our own research needs and priorities. Our questions are important. Research helps us to answer them.' The three projects introduced in this text have for their part attempted to prioritise Sámi perceptions, understandings and concerns and answer Sámi questions in a Sámi way.

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Ellen Hertz

# The Fight for Better Rules
## Reflections of a Reluctant Realist

**Abstract**

Rules are a basic property of human societies and yet they occupy a historically contested place in the modern narrative about what makes us human. Rules are infinitely malleable and ambivalent, at the same time a reflection of power inequities, a mechanism for reinforcing these inequities and a means to challenge them. Transgressing them can both create new spaces of freedom and reinforce the norms that they seek to establish. Reframing rules as potentialities helps break this spell. It allows us to ask not what we should do but what we can do, and to take the measure of the limits of our actions, as humans and as social scientists.

Keywords: rules, contestation, governance, legal systems, social sciences


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In the U.S., it seems there's a rule about how to begin a conference: "open with a joke". It's the kind of rule that I would like to explore with you today. It's situated somewhere between the two semantic poles of the word "rule": orders, commands, imperatives, on the one hand; generalizations, regularities, averages, on the other. Should I, must I open with a joke? Or it that simply what people generally do, what they do "as a rule"? Opening with a joke is neither: it's a recommendation, a gentle suggestion, a statistically unverifiable tendency, the way it would be nice if the world were. If I break this rule, nothing will happen to me; indeed, my audience might not even notice that I haven't provided them with an occasion to be amused. In addition, there's probably another rule of equal force (or feebleness) that says the opposite: your opening statement should be clear, no-nonsense, and immediately provide the audience with a sense of where we are going. I am afraid I will have to transgress *that* rule, if it exists…. Indeed, I'm afraid I already have! We'll see what happens to me now.

Here is the joke, a one-liner from the collected *bons mots* of Groucho Marx: "I'm not crazy about reality, but it's still the only place to get a decent meal". Spoiler alert: that punchline is actually the main punchline of my paper, the general point I'd like to make about rules. How's that for a clear, no-nonsense statement of where we are going?

## 2020: Rules and unruliness of historic proportions

The two years we have just experienced seem to be one of the most rule-filled moments in human history. The COVID pandemic has called forth a proliferation and hardening of state-based rule-making such as we hardly thought possible: the generalized confinement of human populations around the world; the closing of borders, schools, shops, restaurants, factories and offices; the isolation of the dying; and the downsizing of sociability to the nuclear family. I am certainly not the first to notice that this kind of massive government intervention into what we consider to be the normal workings of society is characteristic of periods of war, not of peacetime, and, for better or for worse, went way beyond what even the most totalitarian governments have ever attempted. It is also serving as a kind of thought experiment for the intensification of state power in other social domains, in response to what are perceived as extreme risks for the stability of human societies: the fight against terrorism, on the one hand, through increased cyber-surveillance and spying; the environmental crisis, on the other, through moves toward polluter-payer taxation schemes and active state intervention into modes of production and consumption.

Remarkably – and, I believe, coincidentally – this enormous flexing of state-based muscle came at a particularly charged normative moment for civil society. Before and during the pandemic, social movements around the world

were more active than ever, expressing themselves through massive non-violent demonstrations in favor of democratic reform, environmental regulation and for protection of women and minority rights. These demands that the rules of the game be reset opened up a new sense of optimism that the forces of democratic society were alive and well. More remarkable still, this new urgency was sociologically rooted, leading to calls for change that went far beyond the formal rule-making powers of the state to strike at the heart of the informal social, economic and political norms that create and sustain injustice. Whether it be Extinction Rebellion, Black Lives Matter or the #MeToo movement – to take only a few, Euro-American-centric examples – these social movements produced sophisticated analyses of how the state, corporations and dominant social norms combine and collude to perpetuate gendered, racialized, environmental, economic, social and symbolic violence and injustice.

## Breaking the Rules?

In light of what precedes, exploring the issues raised in this SIEF 2021 Congress is one of most important things the cultural and social sciences can do. In their presentation of its main objectives, the organizers rightly point to the complexities and ambiguities that their question – "Breaking the Rules?" – opens up, emphasizing, with Michel Foucault, the creative as well as constraining effects of rules, and the new forms of power, knowledge and subjectivity produced through discipline(s). As they argue (reference?): "Breaking the rules can strip people of the protections provided by mutually agreed ethical principles. It can thus be dangerous or perhaps generate something new and better"[1].

Despite this complex and multi-facetted approach to rules, there is, it seems to me, a discernable anti-rule orientation in the presentation of this organizing theme, a preference for "breaking" rather than "making" the rules, and a (comprehensible) identification with those upon whom the force of rules is exercised rather than with the exercisers. This is evidenced, for example, in the opening quotation from notorious French rule-breaker François Rabelais: "We always long for the forbidden things, and desire what is denied us." The question this raises is simple: who is the "we" in this statement? I will argue that we as social and cultural scientists must be extremely wary of this vague and general "we", and this psychologizing reading of what breaking the rules is all about. "Who breaks which rules, when, where and why?" must be our guiding question.

Once again, a general hostility to rules is thoroughly understandable. Just take a look at the semantic fields associated with the Indo-European root for the word "rule": "reg-". According to the *American Heritage Dictionary* over the

1 See «Theme» at https://www.siefhome.org/congresses/sief2021/ (last consulted 2023-04-02).

course of time, "reg-" has provided the root for such unappealing words as "realm", "anorexia", "rich", "interrogate" and "reckless". Coming to us through the Germanic "*rankaz", "reg-" leads to "rank", and as a suffixed form, "*rog-a", "reg." has provided us with a multitude of unpalatable bureaucratic possibilities: "rogatory", "abrogate", "arrogate", "corvee", "prerogative", "subrogate" and "supererogate". Who can be in favor of all that nonsense?

In addition, I would argue that there is another source of implicit hostility towards rules within the cultural sciences. As most of us practice qualitative or hermeneutic methods – carefully situating our interpretations of texts, discourses, social interactions and performances within their historical and sociocultural contexts – we have a tendency to be suspicious of generalizations. Few of us put much stock in cultural laws or in the calculation of standard deviations, and thus, the entire descriptive pole of the term "rules" leaves us rather cold as well. "No man is an island", of course, but neither is she an average.

This anti-rule sentiment explains why the congress organizers emphasize the positive and creative aspects of rule-breaking: "To break the rules is to be an agent of change, exposing fault lines, establishments, hegemonies, and vulnerabilities." And of course, I get it. I have no hesitations affirming that the powerful social movements I mentioned in my introduction were and are legitimate agents of change, challenging gender-based norms of acceptable behavior, corporate-dictated laws privatizing public resources and externalizing pollution, or race-based policies for profiling and policing national citizenries.

Nonetheless, in this congress, I would like to swim against this tide of distrust and disdain for rules by highlighting other, more sinister kinds of transgressions. I will examine one particular but powerful reconfiguration of the discourse and practice of rules that dominates the transnational political-economic order: the notion that corporations should be held to be "responsible" through something called "soft law" – agreements, compacts, standards, audits, multi-stakeholder initiatives, certification schemes and the like – but that holding them "accountable" under so-called "hard law" is neither realistic nor desirable. My development will concentrate on this new discourse around law and rules in U.S. corporate circles, and I apologize for this Americano-centrist perspective, but as this discourse has had wide-ranging implications for the global political economy as a whole, I would argue that the U.S. example is relevant to all of our reflections here.

Thus, though I won't go so far as to argue in favor of "Law and Order", I would like to interrogate some of the way that critiques of rules have fed into this corporate discourse, creating enormous obstacles to the pursuit of corporate accountability. In sum, paraphrasing Groucho Marx, I would like to say: "I'm not crazy about law and order, but it's still the only place to get a taste of justice."

## Rules: the social and cultural sciences' primal scene

The subject of rules is at the very origins of the social sciences in the late 19th century. From Henry Sumner Maine's *Ancient Law* (1861) to Johann Jakob Bachofen's *Das Mutterrecht (1961)*, not to mention Max Weber, Emile Durkheim and Lewis Henry Morgan, the comparative study of normative systems was central to understanding the evolution, functions and diversity of human societies. In the anthropology of law, this interest translated into a sustained inquiry into what anthropologist Paul Bohannan (1965) called the "double institutionalization of norms and customs that comprises all legal systems" (p. 33). In Bohannan's scheme, double institutionalization implies that a society possess legal institutions charged with three discrete and definable tasks: (1) they must disengage conflicts or wrongs from their social settings; (2) they must provide definable and regular avenues for handling the social disruption within strictly legal institutions; and (3) they must have means for "reinjecting" their solutions back into the social settings from which the problem arose (p. 35). In other words, legal rules are a special subset of social rules, rules that are "capable of reinterpretation, and actually must be reinterpreted [...] so that the conflicts within nonlegal institutions can be adjusted by an 'authority' outside themselves" (p. 35).

In Bohannan's understanding, legal institutions can be found in every society and cannot be ranked in terms of more or less developed. Nonetheless, certain evolutionary overtones have often crept (and continue to creep) into common sense and even scholarly understandings of comparative legal systems. The story goes something like this: "before", human societies were governed by the largely implicit social norms of "tradition", which were themselves linked to traditionally defined statuses: first born, member of such-and-such moiety, of the blacksmith cast, etc. With time (and progress), as the story goes, there emerged in the enlightened West the ideal of the rational, rights-bearing individual. The fundamental paradigm of legal regimes shifted, in Maine's terms, from "status to contract", and legal institutions became more and more specialized and formalized. With the invention of parliamentary democracy, societies were provided a forum for debating the choices of norms and procedures, making law both more rational and more just. Thus, so-called "advanced societies" developed complex and independent legal institutions, while less developed societies struggled to "disembed" legal from social norms.

Early ethnographies in the anthropology of law have shown that this evolutionary understanding is ethnocentric and erroneous. Despite its subtitle, Karl Llewellyn and E. Adamson Hoebel's famous ethnography *The Cheyenne Way: Conflict and Case Law in Primitive Jurisprudence* (1941) demonstrates that disputes amongst the Cheyenne and other neighboring Native American so-

cieties were not settled simply "according to tradition" but rather gave rise to debates about what tradition says, and/or what it should say, and thereby create "jurisprudence": reflexive solutions to disputes, conflicts and injustice that were both cumulative and innovative.

Stepping back: it seems that it is not simply our capacity to conceive of and enforce rules that makes us human, it is also their double institutionalization, through specialized legal institution that disembed some conflicts from the "normal" workings of social interaction. Furthermore, it is human societies' tendency to debate, contest and argue about the legal, as much as to emit, follow or disobey rules, that leads to the surprising dynamism and creativity of rulemaking.

**Marxist perspectives: The semi-autonomy of law**

But there is more, for as we all know, law is not simply institutionalized social norms about which we debate. Law is also an object of strategy and an instrument of domination at the disposal of the powerful. We might call this the "triple institutionalization of norms", by which the abstract and general principles of law are bent, tamed and rearticulated to fit with and serve the needs of what we should properly call "the rule-ing classes". Much of the justifiable suspicion about the role of legal rules in modern society stems from this Marxist or Marxist-inspired critique of the role of the legal "superstructure" in maintaining and legitimizing the capitalist mode of production and the domination of the bourgeoisie. An up-to-date and fine reworking of this thesis has indeed been making quite a splash in legal and political circles in the U.S.: legal scholar Katharina Pistor's *The Code of Capital: How the Law Creates Wealth and Inequality* (2019). As the other Marx, Groucho, succinctly put it: "This isn't a particularly novel observation, but the world is full of people who think they can manipulate the lives of others merely by getting a law passed."

The use of law to fit the needs of capitalism is as evident today as it was when Marx was writing. However, as neo-Marxists have argued, the law also enjoys a form of "semi-autonomy" that makes it difficult to predict and to control. Anthropologist Sally Falk Moore (1973) has argued that the law is a "semi-autonomous social field", simultaneously shaped by its own internal logics and by social forces from without. Thus, while law is a powerful tool in the hands of the already powerful, through its principles of reflexivity, abstraction and generalization, it is also available to the less powerful seeking to contest perceived injustices. Indeed, an impressive body of empirical work in the social sciences has analyzed how law is mobilized by the dominated to combat oppressive social orders, both in industrialized countries in the Global North and in agrarian or industrializing countries in the Global South. Furthermore, whether or not the "little guy" comes out on top in these legal battles, the law

continues to hold out the promise of justice through the public recognition of wrongdoings committed by powerful actors such as states and corporations.

## The corporate critique of the law: rewriting the evolutionary narrative

One clear example of the systematic use of law to combat social injustice was the emergence and proliferation of public interest lawsuits in the United States. Building on the energy of the social movements that challenged the prevailing social order in the 1960s and '70s, public interest lawyers began filing consumer class action complaints and civil-rights, anti-discrimination, sexual harassment and environmental litigation became important avenues for social activism. This proactive and progressive use of the law brought systematic discrimination, corporate theft and human rights violations into public view through the powerful idioms of equal rights and due process.

The "semi-autonomy of law" as expressed through public interest lawyers and lawsuits did not escape the ever-calculating eye of corporate America, who began a long-game campaign to win adherents to their cause within the judicial establishment. As public interest lawsuits were gaining in popularity, certain members of the U.S. legal community suddenly began to worry about backlog and overload within the court system, ascribing it, in strongly culturalist terms, to the "litigious" nature of American society. The Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court began complaining about what he called "the garbage cases", by which he meant public interest litigation in the areas of race- and sex-based discrimination, consumer protection and the environment[2]. While the courts did experience significant overload during this period, legal sociologist Marc Galanter has pointed out (1983) that the reasons for this massive use of judicial resources lay not with the complaints of "the little guys", but rather with corporations themselves, busy activating the "codes of capital" through complex litigation about securities, intellectual property and corporate ownership structures. Nonetheless, the notion that Americans were somehow slowing down their economy through constant bickering in courts became quickly integrated into the common-sense discourse of legal reform in the late 1980s.

This attack on law from the corporate right came at a particular moment in U.S. history, creating a kind of "perfect storm" for questioning the effects of binding rules for governing societies and creating wealth. Japan and the so-called "Asian Tigers" were becoming a serious competitive threat to the he-

2 For a particularly enlightened analysis of this turning point in U.S. legal history, see anthropologist Laura Nader's account in *The Life of the Law: Anthropological Projects* (2005).

gemony of Euro-American industries. These Asian countries promoted an alternative vision of productive society, presenting themselves as tradition- and status-bound, with collective effort and social harmony as their core values. Thus, the rise of Asian economies not only put Western industrial economies under severe competitive strain, it also called into question the model of the rights-based social order at their core.

As Laura Nader has forcefully demonstrated in her work on "harmony ideology" (1990), as the social movements of the 1960s took their fights for social justice to the courts, formal legal institutions began to lose their charm in the eyes of the rule-ing classes, just as the U.N.'s International Court of Justice lost its charm in American eyes when Latin American countries started suing them in it. Step by step, the evolutionary narrative was reversed: as the story went, courts and the complex legal machinery invented by the advanced industrial societies in the West were perhaps not the culmination of civilization; perhaps, to the contrary, they were its bane, and more socially embedded "harmonious" models for resolving disputes should replace them.

It is in this context that, for a variety of reasons and with a variety of motives, different interest groups within U.S. society began pushing for new forms of "alternative dispute resolution", based not in the complex and public procedures of litigation before a court, but in the more "human" interactions that took place outside its walls: "dialogue", negotiation, and more or less public and formal procedures before third parties, such as mediation and arbitration. Numerous works of popular science in management, law and economics touted the virtues of negotiation, mediation and win-win solutions that would allow America to pull together to beat common threats.

## Research on corporate accountability: rules without rights

It is not difficult to see how the anti-law rhetoric fed into U.S. corporate agendas, promoting a regime of transnational private governance that sociologist Tim Bartley (2018) has labelled "rules without rights". To understand the relation between rules and corporate-driven globalization, we need to step back a moment and examine what was happening at the global level. At about the same time that harmony ideology was being peddled in the U.S., the Reagan-Thatcher revolution was setting in motion major social transformations on a global scale. With the deregulation of financial markets, the mounting costs of labor in the industrialized West and the liberalization of international trade, Western-based corporations began outsourcing to those same "emerging economies" that they were competing with, taking advantage of cheap labor and lax regulatory environments abroad to boost corporate profits at home.

Early on, it was remarked that these transformations created a global "governance gap": transnational corporations could relocate production to avoid the constraints of stricter national laws and regulation in Europe and the U.S., while no binding law or norms governed their operations at the international level. Troubled by this "race-to-the-bottom" in the areas of labor, environmental and human rights, NGOs, international organizations, states and even some business associations began calling for corporations to assume responsibility for the effects of their actions globally. After initially resisting the "responsibility" paradigm, many transnational corporations, particularly brands with name-recognition and reputations to maintain, began to see its advantages. Thus, over the course of the late 20th century, high visibility brands such as Nike and The Body Shop, in conjunction with international organizations, NGOs and states, set out to create voluntary schemes for self-regulation. They argued that though binding law was inappropriate or impossible at the international level, they were uniquely situated and committed to designing appropriate norms and "compliance mechanisms" so as to guarantee respect for human and labor rights and the environment "throughout their supply chains".

And thus was born what political scientist David Vogel calls the "market for virtue" (2005): a flourishing economic sector in services such as non-financial reporting and compliance, reputational risk management, sustainability and human rights training, ethical investing and stakeholder dialogue. These private governance initiatives were (and still are – this is on-going!) variously labeled "corporate social responsibility" (CSR), "environmental, social and governance" oversight (ESG), "human rights compliance", "sustainability stewardship", "triple bottom line" (3BL), accounting with respect to people, the planet and profits ("PPP accounting"), "corporate citizenship" or "creating shared value" (CSV). They involve a plethora of measures (norms, standards, audits, platforms, multi-stakeholder initiatives, certification schemes, capacity building programs) and an ever-expanding series of actors (NGOs, IOs, charitable foundations, universities, private consultancies, public administrations). Though they differ somewhat in their objectives, vocabulary and instrumentation, these initiatives all take the form of voluntary, non-legally binding rules and procedures for corporate self-regulation. They represent the kinds of rules that I discussed in my opening remarks, rules like "open with a joke", that carry as their only sanction loss of reputation. (Now isn't that a joke!). But though they deliver no clear disciplinary results, they do produce multiple discursive and material effects, moving the entire corporate governance paradigm away from the rule of law and towards the laws of the market, or, as I have written previously, "turning liability into responsibility, government into governance, development into 'market inclu-

sion' and social justice into a phantasmagorical win-win 'social dividends'" (Hertz 2020: 111).

Critical accountant scholar Peter Miller and sociologist Nikolas Rose (1990) have linked corporate "responsibilization" to regimes of neo-liberal governmentality that are reconfiguring relations between economies and societies across the globe. Political economist Grahame Thompson (2007) and anthropologist Ronan Shamir (2008) have shown that this "responsibility-speak" (Shore 2017: 104) reroutes accountability away from obligations and sanctions, and towards an ideal of "values" and their "ownership", whereby social order will flow from corporate interiorization of the norms of ethical capitalism, often called "soft law". Soft law invokes good will and builds on moral claims and promises, but specifically exempts itself from a right-based governance regime. Anthropological fieldwork (see Dolan & Rajak 2016) has further demonstrated how "soft law" and corporate responsibilization work to depoliticize struggles for social justice, replacing conflict and disputes with techniques dominated by companies and based on voluntariness. Soft law in these contexts mimics hard law in form (sets of rules and procedures that present as stable and comprehensive) but differs fundamentally in function. It is not simply a milder or more flexible version of "hard law", but rather a series of governance techniques based in a radically different vision of regulation, social control and the public good (Zerilli 2010).

## Researching corporate social responsibility in China

In 2007, I was invited to a meeting convened by the International Labor Organization (ILO) in which just such a process of "responsibilization" was up for discussion. It revolved around the ILO's observation that labor conditions within the global electronics industry were highly problematic, involving underpay, overwork, dangerous levels of exposure to chemical substances and low levels of democratic or union participation. As this meeting brought together a number of research themes I was working on, I attended with enormous interest (see account in Hertz 2010a).

From the outset, it became clear that corporate participants had the upper hand in setting both the agenda and the tone of discussions. Treated with great gratitude for simply showing up, they expressed their dominant position by threatening at all moments to leave the meetings if certain of their demands were not met. These included choices of wording – such as banning the words "problem" or "difficult", in favor of "challenge" and "challenging" – and interventions into procedures. Indeed, one representative of a large U.S.-based brand complained that he had "decided to attend the meeting expecting social dialogue but found herself engaged in debate". The Secretary-General of

the Meeting was forced to intervene, very politely, to "clarify" that "the Meeting and the ongoing debate were representative of social dialogue" within the ILO framework. In sum, corporate representatives expected their contributions to the "dialogue" to go entirely unchallenged by the international labor unions and state representatives present at the table.

Intrigued, I decided to launch a research project to investigate the discourses and mechanisms around corporate social responsibility (or CSR) in the electronics manufacturing sector[3]. The question we set ourselves was not "does CSR work?", but what does it do, discursively and normatively? To study this, we followed CSR programs from corporate headquarters to supplier firms in China, but also to the consultancies, NGOs and professionals working to design, implement, audit and assess these programs. We conducted participant observation within consultancies and NGOs working in the area of CSR in the Pearl River Delta area, including numerous interviews with CSR "officers", professionals hired by businesses to guarantee that their operations are in conformity with the basic documents on human and labor rights, and the environment.

My research began as the global business community was busy integrating the new "gold standard" for transnational governance in the area of business and human rights, the "U.N. Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights" (GP), also known as "the Ruggie Principles", after their chief architect, John Ruggie. Ruggie had hammered out the GPs over the course of five years traveling the globe attempting to establish "dialogue" with business organizations, states, international organizations, labor unions and major NGOs in order to come up with a set of binding standards that would be acceptable to all, or at least to most. Amongst this "most", the mostest figured prominently, of course, by which I mean the powerful business lobbies represented by organizations such as the International Chamber of Commerce. In Ruggie's understanding, reflecting that of the U.N. Human Rights Council, getting the international business community behind a guiding document with normative force was crucial to making any real progress in this area, and many of its limitations and compromises from this constraint.

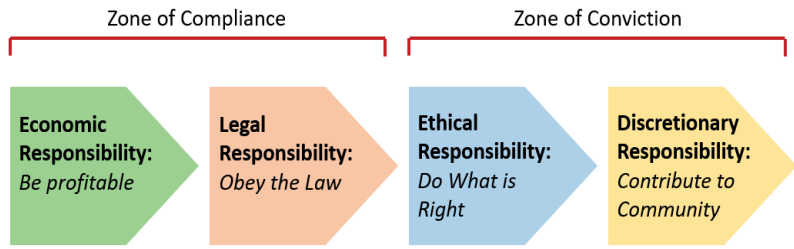
The principal compromise in this otherwise impressive document has, of course, to do with the question of law, and whether it should apply to transnational corporations. In choosing the language for the Guiding Principles, Ruggie performed remarkable rhetorical contortions aimed to suggest that corporations should be bound to respect human rights throughout their supply chains without ever actually saying this. He did, however, make one crucial addition to the otherwise hortatory text that was in many ways similar to previous and

3 For the final report and a short documentary film explaining this research, both available on line, see Hertz (2010b) and Fuhrer & Hertz (2020).

clearly unsuccessful efforts to bind corporations through "soft law", Kofi Annan's "Global Compact" being the most high-profile example. This innovation comes with the document's insistence on "remedies", that is, on the availability of complaint mechanisms for injured parties, provided by the national laws of the countries in which corporations operate. The Ruggie Principles insist, in other words, that transnational corporations should be governed by some form of *double institutionalization*, as explained by Bohannan (1965) – through specialized institutions able to disembed complaints from their social contexts and submit them to independent consideration by a third party.

Despite this innovation, or perhaps because of it, the presentations of the U.N. Guiding Principles that I was able to attend put very little emphasis on law, particularly when they were being given to an audience of business representatives. As one special envoy stated very clearly: "We're trying to move people past the 'voluntary/non-voluntary' debate: law is one tool but not the only tool – there are also social obligations and expectations."

The dominant paradigm for "moving people past the 'voluntary/non-voluntary' debate" at the time was the notion of "compliance".




**COMPLIANCE + CONVICTION = CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY**



The compliance regime, as pictured here, has all the features of "responsibilization": a blurred field of economic, legal, ethical and "community" obligations; a valuing of "voluntary" over "simple obedience", and an emphasis on interiorization, evident in the notion of "conviction". "Simply" obeying the rules is not interesting, in this worldview, and leads to a mechanical and bureaucratic mindset that lacks "passion", "engagement" and "ownership".

In their discussions of the problems that they encountered in their jobs, the CSR officers whom we followed to supplier firms in China talked a lot about this "compliance mentality", whereby firms in producing countries merely "jumped through the hoops" of CSR conformity because it was imposed by

the brands they were supplying. Thus, supplier firms in China, for example, tended simply to "check the boxes", doing what was expected of them and no more. CSR professionals blamed the compliance regime for their failure to "take ownership" of corporate responsibility as a project that was relevant to their own firms, independently of brand or government pressure. Thus, rather than looking at the structural conditions that prevented suppliers and subcontractors in developing countries such as China from respecting human rights, or, more relevant still, looking at their own purchasing practices, which frequently required the production of enormous quantities of goods under impossibly short deadlines, brand-name firms with CSR programs tended to look "beyond compliance", aiming to create "conviction" in the hearts and minds of the subordinate firms they were working with.

The desire to go "beyond compliance" was based not only in CSR officers' psychologizing and moralistic worldviews. It was also based in their own need to feel meaningful and effective in their jobs. Simply put, these professionals were getting tired of going from factory to factory in Southern China, repeating the same ineffectual message about the necessity to respect Chinese labor law, or checking to make sure that there were no under-aged workers on the production line and that the ventilation system was working more or less properly. They were also tired of the various ruses and tricks that supplier factories the world over invented to get around "compliance", often simply to meet the extreme demands for just-in-time production that these same brands were issuing. Going "beyond compliance" for these professionals was a way of "engaging" their "discretionary responsibility" to "contribute" rather than control, to create "shared value" rather than verify wage stubs, and to produce "win-win" outcomes rather than sanctions. Thus, they set about inventing and implementing what are essentially local development projects and programs that had little or nothing to do with their corporations' core businesses. These experiments with even "softer" mechanisms for CSR implementation, generally called "capacity building" programs, were all intended to offset the "legalized" approach to CSR, and to create what these professionals considered to be a more "sustainable" model for respecting human, labor and environmental rights in the countries in which they were producing.

One example of these "capacity-building programs", is a project that our research followed from its beginnings in corporate headquarters in Europe through CSR consultancies in Hong Kong, down to a Chinese NGO tasked with inventing and implementing it and then further afield, to the Chinese countryside where it was implemented. It involved responding to complaints by workers that they were losing contact with their children "left at home" in the rural villages where they originated because of Chinese laws preventing them from bringing their families to the coastal cities where they were work-

ing. Imagined by a couple of transnational firms, this program involved sending "monitors" to the villages where these children were living, in boarding schools or with their relatives, to give them telephones and teach them how to talk correctly to their parents when they called. Thus, rather than insisting that they would not invest in China if it continued to implement these harmful and discriminatory labor practices, Western-based firms invented ways to "do good" within this structure, thereby naturalizing its arbitrary and unjust characteristics.

## Conclusion

It is time to conclude, for I think you get the general gist of the corporate strategies around rules that I have been outlining. My main point is this: when we as cultural and social scientists critique laws and rules, we need to be aware that powerful actors in society may be doing the same, and for reasons diametrically opposed to those we might have in mind. Corporations continue to manipulate the law to work for their own interests, of course. However, they also manipulate "non-law" and invent new ways to transgress the law's constraints so as to run free in the global business landscape.

In Switzerland where I work, the debate about the principles, mechanisms and effects of "hard" versus "soft" law is not simply academic. To the contrary, they figured centrally in recent popular federal initiative that sought to impose hard-law obligations on transnational corporations based in this country, using the "Ruggie Framework" as its basis[4]. In lobbying against this Initiative, Swiss business associations advanced the argument that imposing hard-law obligations on Swiss corporations would, among other things, make them less "responsible", as it would take away their incentive to self-regulate. Hard law was portrayed not as the logical endpoint of soft-law approaches, but rather as its opposite: an impediment to corporations taking "ownership" of their responsibilities for guaranteeing high standards in the areas of work, human rights and the environment. Thus, in a position paper entitled "Solutions rather than Litigation" and prepared by economiesuisse (2016), one of this country's main business associations, it is argued that: "An excessive extension of liability would [...] transfer the constructive discussion about corporate responsibility to the courtrooms and stifle positive developments" (p. 1). "The initiative", the paper continues, reduces corporate responsibility to

4 In order to bring our empirical research on how CSR works into the public debate around this popular initiative, my colleague Yvan Schulz and I published a general audience book in French and German (see Hertz & Schulz 2020). It may be of interest for its content, but also as a model for those looking to bring the results of social science research more prominently into the public sphere.

purely legal questions. Constructive dialogue to solve social and ecological challenges is destroyed".

In sum, corporations have set about, and largely succeeded for the time being, in undoing the double institutionalization of social norms in the area of transnational governance. They have created a regime in which social problems, environmental injustices and human rights violations remain embedded in the very same contexts that create them, placing themselves in the role of players and umpires in the corporate responsibility game. It is not surprising, thus, that the recommendation of the U.N. Guiding Principles that they resist with the most fervor is the requirement that countries provide "remedies" to victims of corporate irresponsibility and malfeasance. Remedies do not create "win-win" solutions, in which everyone can be a good guy. Remedies, pursued in independent legal institutions, create good guys and bad guys, and though the good guys don't always win, they at least have a chance at a public hearing based in principles that are separate from and may even run contrary to, business interests.

In my view, this suggests that in some areas of social life, we should not be fighting against rules, but fighting for better rules. To paraphrase Groucho Marx one final time: "The world is full of people who think they can manipulate the lives of others merely by getting a law passed". I say, in certain circumstances, and under certain conditions, more power to them!

## AUTHOR

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Nicolas Le Bigre

# Resistance through the Temporality, Placement, and Modification of Street Art in Scotland's Streets

**Abstract**

Through a methodology of ethnographic walking and photographic documentation this article considers and redefines street art within the contexts of the disciplines of Ethnology and Folklore. By considering wide-ranging Scottish examples of public-facing interventions through the concepts of temporality, placement and location, and modification and defacement, this article contributes to a wider scholarly and general discussion on the role and importance of street art in our everyday lives. It argues for the significance and usefulness of these conceptual frameworks, which not only link street art in Scotland to street art around the world, but also reveal the common hybrid physical and online natures of much street art. The examples included of public interventions are almost all connected through the theme of resistance, whether personal, local, national, or international. Examples explored relate to the Scottish Independence Referendum, anti-gentrification campaigning, the Covid-19 pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement, trans rights activism, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Keywords: materiality, resistance, street art, ethnographic walking, temporality, placement


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## Introduction

Just days after the Russian military invaded Ukraine in late February 2022, my wife noticed a black stencilled image of the face of Russian President Vladimir Putin on a pavement a few streets away from our home (figure 1).[1] Underneath his recognisable visage was stencilled, in capital letters, the word 'TYRANT'. This kind of stencilling, as well as graffitiing, wheat-pasting, stickering, and other methods of creating and applying unofficial public-facing imagery and text, allow for rapid, publicly-visible responses to wide-ranging concerns of societal, local, and personal relevance (Ryan 2020, 101). Like other more traditional examples of what is categorised as folklore, I would describe these particular material interventions as examples of meaning-making through creative responses to and interactions with everyday life, reflecting its pressures, joys, and mundanities. In examining this material culture, we learn about its creators and witnesses (Christensen 2017), its real-life/online hybridity, and gain insights into perceived hegemonic societal narratives, individual and communal resistance, and the concepts of rule-breaking and transgression.


Figure 1. Image of the face of Vladimir Putin stencilled on a pavement in Aberdeen, February 2020.

1 All of the photos in this article have been taken by the author.

These interventions can be and have been considered from a number of different perspectives and disciplines, but I consider them through the lenses of Ethnology and Folklore. This article, after grappling with definitions of street art and addressing methodological concerns, principally focuses on these interventions through the concepts of 1) temporality, 2) placement and location, and 3) modification and defacement, with references to semiotic content throughout. Principally, I ask and begin to answer how these concepts affect our and creators' interactions with and interpretations of street art, and how this kind of material culture can be treated in an interdisciplinary way while retaining a grounding in Ethnology and Folklore. Semiotic and/or aesthetic analysis is the understandable focal point of numerous studies (e.g. Riggle 2010 and Ryan 2020), but the actual temporal and physical contexts of these interventions and people's material responses to them have been less considered. The examples herein are entirely from Scotland, mostly from its urban centres, and date from 2014 to 2022. Though the examples in this article primarily represent politically-orientated interventions in public contexts, it must be noted that these exist alongside other public-facing material interventions that might better be recognised for their aesthetic aspirations or, for example, their humorous interjections on everyday life. These creative, public-facing, material interventions, whether politically minded like the anti-Putin stencil or otherwise, are often categorised as 'street art' by scholars (Daichendt 2013), the media (Arlandis 2013), and the general public (Gaskell 2022).

## Problematising and Defining 'Street Art'

Like other generic categories, 'street art' is useful in that we can apply it to several creative outputs that share one or more qualities, thus giving us a focal point for study. But as with all terminology, it is worth defining and problematising, particularly in case it gains currency within Ethnology and Folklore, as it has in other disciplines. Like folklore, street art has multiple definitions (e.g. Riggle 2010; McAuliffe 2012), and typical definitions focus on its public and illicit nature, such as Fransberg, Myllylä, and Tolonen's 2021 definition: "public – and often unauthorised – creative art pieces in urban spaces that are produced by self-motivated individuals or collectives". If we are to consider defining our terms, it is necessary to unpack and problematise the connotations innate to a term like street art.

'Street art', like the term 'urban legend' (Brunvand 1981), betrays an urban bias that follows recent disciplinary trends, but belies Ethnology's and Folklore's own (problematic) roots in the study of rural customs at 'home' and abroad. Like with urban legends (more convincingly termed contem-

porary legends), which can be told and take place in rural contexts (Nicolaisen 2001, 137–138), there are examples in rural areas – far from streets – of what could conceivably, in an urban context, be termed street art. I can think of haybales in an Aberdeenshire farmer's fields, boldly decorated in support of the UK's National Health Service (NHS) during the coronavirus pandemic, as seen in one rural example sent to me by my student, Sue Rhodes. If these were urban electricity boxes decorated thus, would they not be considered street art? So streets – at least the city streets that the term implies – do not appear to be an innate ingredient of this kind of folkloric output. Our focus on the urban contexts of such material interventions in everyday life perhaps reflects the city-based quotidian of most ethnographers and scholars who study such creations. Indeed, as a folklorist who in the past twelve years has lived in Scotland's three largest urban centres, Glasgow, Edinburgh, and Aberdeen, my own fieldwork – resulting from walking the streets of these cities – reveals a similar partiality for urban examples. If the urban connotation of 'street' is misleading, however, the word's implication that such interventions are innately public-facing is more useful. The raison d'être of most, if not all, such interventions is to be seen by others, to catch one's attention, indeed, perhaps even to provoke a mental or even physical response (Sage 2016, 856).

If 'street' in 'street art' is imperfect but understandable, what of 'art', in this formulation? Folklorists talk of artistic communication as innate to the process of folklore and most folkloristic studies of art look at it in vernacular contexts, implicitly or explicitly contrasting this with official, 'insider' art (Jones 1987, 154). Folklorists studying public material interventions have examined labour stickering (e.g. Green 1960), scrawls of graffiti (e.g. Grider 1975), bumper stickers (e.g. Salamon 2001), spontaneous shrines (e.g. Santino 2006), ephemeral memorials (e.g. Turner and Merrill 2009), sculpture (e.g. Bezborodova 2016), and murals (e.g. Hopkinson 2021), to give some older and more recent examples. A large number of the scholars actually using and defining the term 'street art', on the other hand, come from disciplines such as Aesthetics, Arts Education, Cultural Geography, Fine Arts, History of Art, and Visual Culture, revealing their own disciplinary predispositions in their research. These scholars studying such material interventions often consider the aesthetically and politically-minded interventions of artist-activists such as the Guerrilla Girls (Wexler 2007), Banksy (Chung 2009), or their predecessors who have made the street their medium (Saunders 2011). Anonymous but identifiable, these artists highlight political concerns and also themselves, in turn raising the profile of their political polemic, the artwork, and their artist aliases.

As a result of differing interests and foci, there is sometimes a disconnect, not only in disciplinary considerations of the word 'art', but also in the types of public-facing material interventions examined by folklorists and scholars of these disciplines. Some definitions of street art exclude graffiti – of interest to folklorists – for various reasons, including that it is an "egocentric form of private communication" illegible to outsiders (McAuliffe 2012, 3), or that it "usually has no message, other than territorial" (Cowick 2015, 30). These limiting definitions of graffiti, which focus on its 'tagging' form – of relevance and interest in its own right – have little to say regarding the graffiti studied by folklorists documenting, for example, latrinalia (e.g. Read, 1935 or Stocker, Dutcher, Hargrove, and Cook, 1972), Dundes's term for graffiti in public-bathroom contexts (1966). Even Fransberg, Myllylä, and Tolonen's more expansive definition of street art quoted above, which is actually an all-encompassing definition for both graffiti and street art in the context of 'graffiti and street art research', could be understood to exclude types of graffiti previously studied by folklorists.

It is clear that street art is a contested term. But its ubiquitous nature makes coining a new term quixotic; a simple redefinition of street art may prove more prudent. It can be of use to folklorists and ethnologists only if we define it in such a way as to be relevant within our disciplinary contexts, and only if we are aware of its problematic connotations. That street art's definition is still being healthily contested perhaps allows me room to gently suggest a new definition, one which may better encompass multi-disciplinary concerns and interests, and one which is derived not from abstract theorising but from years of fieldwork observations of street art. If we take 'street' as a metaphor for public-facing spaces more generally – thus including its rural variants, as well as paths, pedestrian ways, and unofficial, public, indoor spaces like in the case of latrinalia – and 'art' to comprise creative process, product, and person, then ethnologists and folklorists might find use in a definition of street art as fixed, unofficial, creative, public-facing material interventions. *Fixed* refers to its more-or-less static – though not necessarily permanent – nature, thus excluding performances,[2] dress and adornment (unless fixed in location and not worn), and other interesting but innately short-lived street interventions that rely on a person's continual physical presence to exist. *Unofficial* includes here both the vernacular and the illicit, allowing, for example, illegal vernacular graffiti as well as

2 Though my own fieldwork does not include such examples, an argument could be made to include street performance interventions such as those described by Amy Bryzgel, but even in this case usage of the term 'street art' focuses solely on fixed material aspects and not the performances themselves (2017, 24).

an identifiable artist's rule-breaking, public creation while excluding official public art, e.g. sanctioned statues, monuments, publicly commissioned murals, etc. (Chackal 2016, 360; Arnold 2019). *Creative* comprises both the vernacular processes of folklore as understood through Ben-Amos's artistic communication in small groups (1971) and the institutionally-recognised creative processes of those trained in the 'fine' arts, while recognising the ambiguity and nuances of terms like vernacular and institutional (Primiano 1995; Howard 2008). *Public-facing* means visible in a public space, whether the creation is widely intelligible or not. *Material* refers to the materiality of the creation, whether properly tangible or created through subtraction.[3] *Intervention* refers to the attention entreated of the passer-by and also the innate imposition of the item on the site of creation or placement. Though I find 'street art' to be connotatively frustrating, defined in such a way it can at least be of some use in allowing ethnologists and folklorists to comment on a field of study that has been and continues to be of clear relevance to our interests.

## Ethnographic Walking as Methodology

Walking – even walking alone – is a social activity. Neither city streets and their pavements nor rural paths through the woods are separate from those who interact, have interacted, and will interact with them; rather, their very identity and existence is dependent on the ever-changing embodied or disembodied presences of humans, animals, and even machines. In that sense, walkers *are part* of the street, and these streets are both officially controlled and open to vernacular response (Sage 2016, 859). As a result of the dynamic and multivalent nature of the street, any ambulatory excursion, no matter its purpose or familiarity, results in a novel walk with new experiences, new presences, new absences, and thus new dangers, new discoveries, and new mundanities.[4] Though walking is an integral part of my ethnographic practice, I rarely walk with purely ethnographic reasons in mind. Walking, rather, is an intrinsic and unavoidable aspect of my everyday life. It is my sole means of transportation, my principal way of encountering the world outside my home. It is not, therefore, a special, demarcated ethnographic time and space. There is no 'fieldwork site', if only because every place and moment has ethnographic potential. But on walks I inevitably encounter the disembodied presence of street artists who have somehow come and gone

3 An example of this would be scratching away a layer of paint, with the resulting contrasting colours revealing a message or image, as with sgraffito.

4 For a useful and intriguingly experimental exploration of such ideas see Cheeseman, Chakrabarti, Österlund-Pötzsch, Poole, Schrire, Seltzer, and Tainio 2021.

since my last walk, leaving a sticker or stencil behind, a message in marker, a child's game in chalk, each evidence of their vitality, their anger, earnestness, or fear (Bachrach 2018, 41). Our footsteps echo each other, and in walking I share with them place if not time.

Intentional embodied ethnographies of the street can and have taught us much about the rhythms of contemporary existence and the complexities of urban form (Vergunst 2010; Duru 2018, 100), but walking is such that ethnographic encounters happen whether one is going out to buy vegetables at the greengrocer or whether one leaves home, fieldnotes and camera in hand, walking with great expectations. In other words walking, and thus interacting with that and those we encounter as metaphorical and literal guides to and experts of everyday life, allows ethnologists and folklorists to 'dig where we stand', whenever we are standing, as it happens (Lindqvist 1979). And as walking in the streets of Scotland has been such a regular, necessary activity for me for over a decade, I have slowly observed everyday changes in those embodied and disembodied presences, as evidenced by a home with Scotland's flag, the Saltire, displayed in a window during the 2014 independence referendum, replaced by the drawing of a pandemic rainbow in March 2020, swapped for the Ukrainian flag in 2022 after Russia's invasion of its southern neighbour.

This context is useful when considering something as dynamic and changeable as street art. While walking, one observes regular changes in these creative interventions. They reflect the vicissitudes of society, and going through a decade of photos from various walks I get a visceral, ground-level feeling for what has being reflected onto everyday life in urban Scotland over the past decade: the Scottish 'indy ref', the Syrian refugee crisis, the Brexit referendum, the climate emergency, the gentrification of neighbourhoods, fear and hope at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement, a renewed fight against misogyny, a growing recognition of the rights of trans people, 5G and anti-vaccine conspiracy theories, the invasion of Ukraine, and more. Seeing photos of this street art gives me access once again to a place now changed. It brings me back to times past, to my own lived experiences; I can feel the pavement under me as I walk back in time, remembering the moments I stopped to take a photo. Street art evokes something of everyday life and of communal experiences; it speaks of anxieties and optimism. It lets one intuitively remember through past feelings and thoughts.

In collecting this data, my methodology has been largely solitary and informal, with the exception of two particular moments, the Scottish Independence Referendum of 2014 and the COVID-19 pandemic. In those instances, I

decided to expand and formalise the collection process beyond my own walks to include people in other parts of Scotland. During the independence referendum I sent out e-mails to contacts, asking them to spread word that I was looking for examples of referendum-related signs around Scotland to include in the Elphinstone Institute Archives. This was a low-key request, and I received a hundred or so images of 'Yes' and 'No' signs from around Scotland in the weeks leading up to the referendum. During the pandemic, because I was experiencing lockdown in Leith in Edinburgh, far from my students and colleagues in Aberdeen, I was keen to know if the rainbow signs and other street displays my wife and I were witnessing on walks were visible elsewhere in the country. With the help of colleagues and student volunteers I launched the Lockdown Lore Collection Project, with the aim of documenting Scotland's creative responses to the pandemic through submissions from the public and also through over seventy ethnographic interviews conducted online with individuals and families about their experiences. Though I have received thousands of responses to this ongoing project, most photographs that have been submitted are of creative projects that people were working on at home, and generally not the window displays, painted rocks, graffiti, stickers, posters, and other forms of street art that I had been documenting.

It takes a certain courage, or nosiness, perhaps, to photograph window displays and interventions on the street (Whalan 2011, 49–50), and I understand why most people choose not to do so. I always take care to photograph ethically, and from such an angle that only the display shows, with little showing behind the window. Though a keen walker and ethnographer, I have always – quite happily – deprived myself of that most useful tool in the fieldworker's toolkit: the mobile phone. Without a mobile, I relied on a first-generation DSLR camera to take photos. Though people with cameras were a common sight in Edinburgh before the pandemic, suddenly as I walked around with detachable lenses, very clearly and intentionally taking photographs through a view finder, I felt conspicuous, like an intruder on everyday life. I eventually moved on to a poor-quality small point-and-click camera, and finally to my wife's smart phone, which she begrudgingly carried round with her on our walks knowing that I simply wanted it to take photos inconspicuously. That most people now document their lives through mobile phones means that these machines are almost invisible. Actual cameras, however, whose sole purpose is to take photographs, are highly suspect, as if their innate documentary purpose is itself questionable. Of course, on my walks I do not always have a camera or my wife's mobile, and if I come across an interesting item of street art, I will often retrace my steps later in the day to take a photo. Sometimes the intervention is still there and some-

times it is not; other times it has been defaced or modified in some way so as to change its message. On the luckiest occasions I am able to photograph street art soon after it goes up, and then again at a later date if it is modified in any way.

Though most of my other research connects to personal-experience narratives and the stories of people's everyday lives – and thus relies on ethnographic interviews – I have, for the time being, left such narratives out of this investigation. If the street art points to further information, such as a web URL or a hashtag, I have followed those clues for any further context. Following social media ethics standards, I do not include any personal information, nor reference to social media posts that were created without a wider public in mind (Townsend and Wallace, 2016). Though neglecting ethnographic interviews deprives me of the vital perspective of the creator – should I be able to find them – it also allows me to primarily consider and interact with street art from the valuable perspective of a passer-by. The perspectives of passers-by are, of course, not universal, and my interpretations of street art inevitably reflect my life experiences as a cisgendered, straight, educated white man who has lived, studied, and worked in several different countries around the world.

## The Temporality of Street Art

The temporality of street art is a key feature that must be considered if one is to understand the wider context and content of its creation and interpretation. The timing of an intervention's appearance, as well as any intended or unintended interactions with the past and the future, can inform our understanding of the intervention relative to its creator(s) and audience. Even interventions that have no intentional anchor in the present, which strive for a timeless message or perhaps have exclusively aesthetic ambitions, can still better be understood through the lens of their temporality. Like the Putin stencil, much of the street art that appears in Scotland's streets – and elsewhere – responds quickly and directly to newly emerging issues, whether of personal, local, national, or international relevance (Tedford 2018, 83). Often the intervention is a creative response to a situation widely known by the general public, though equally likely is that the intervention is created to raise awareness and highlight certain issues that might otherwise go ignored (Haskins 2000, 47). When considering temporality, the concepts of *timing*, *momentousness*, and the *flow of time* are particularly relevant.

If we take the Putin stencil as our initial example, we can consider timing both from the perspective of its effect on the passer-by and for the cre-

ator, too. For the passers-by who have been angered or made distraught by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, seeing a timely intervention in the street keeps the topic in mind, anger, anxiety, and frustration fresh. The rapid production of this item of street art allows for a sentiment that the local community – though seemingly far from the conflict itself – is aware of the precarity of the situation and the need for action. While the UK government was initially considering its response to the invasion, arguably more slowly than the US or the EU, this swift piece of street art could be seen as speaking on behalf of those feeling powerless, and reinforcing the need to stop the tyrant behind the war.

Similarly, the creator of the stencil is presumably able to diminish their own potential feeling of powerlessness through this rapid intervention (Rosenberg and Garofalo 1998, 820). Whether actively observing people's reactions to their street art or not, quickly stencilling Putin's face and publicly labelling him a tyrant may, we can imagine, empower the artist to feel that they are bringing a distant war to the local consciousness, possibly resulting in increased local pressure on political representatives or growing participation in support for Ukraine's many refugees and relevant charities. Most interestingly, the timing of this creative intervention allows both passer-by and creator to take in the momentousness of the period. This intervention highlights the historic nature of the moment, demarcating it as beyond ordinary time. Its very existence is a call to join in the urgency of the period.

In the context of the pandemic, even observing street art through the flow of what has been a relatively short period of time – an almost micro-diachronic study – allows us to see subversive shifts in street art, reflecting changing attitudes to government restrictions, mask-wearing, the vaccines, and more. If we break down the pandemic in Scotland into roughly three phases (so far), we might think of 1) the initial lockdown (March–May 2020), 2) the rolling stages of tentative re-openings and regional and national lockdowns (summer 2020–early 2021), and 3) the post-vaccination period (from June 2021). Each phase has resulted in different – though often overlapping – forms of street art, reflecting issues of societal importance to that moment in time. Though there are many exceptions, generally the flow of time resulted in hopeful signs of community and communal resistance (first phase) making way for street art highlighting political scandal and hypocrisy (second phase), itself largely replaced by anti-vaccination and anti-mask interventions (third phase).

Like with the Putin stencil, during the initial UK lockdown in March–May 2020, street art created an atmosphere whose momentousness was impossible to ignore. Because of restrictions against going outside for reasons other than a brief period of exercise, most street art going up in this early part


Figure 2. A typical window-display rainbow created by a child in Edinburgh, April 2020.

of the pandemic was made up of street-facing window displays consisting of rainbows (figure 2) mostly made by children. Window displays are rarely if ever included in discussions of street art, but this seems an oversight when considering the way they unofficially alter the streetscape. The roots of these rainbows are contested, with some sources pointing to a London nurse (Kleinman 2020) and others to a Newcastle mother (Marlborough 2020), but the implicit message seemed clear: we have hope for the future; humanity will resist and defeat this virus.

Soon after, displays and messages in support of the National Health Service (figure 3) also began to appear, with all of these displays and messages coinciding with the 'clap for carers' campaign that took place on Thursday evenings across the UK from the end of March to the end of May 2020. Regardless of their origins, the window displays that were being put up in the first few months of the lockdown were an integral


Figure 3. An elaborate window display in Edinburgh thanking the NHS, April 2020.

feature of any venture outdoors for one's daily allotted dose of exercise. It is worth pointing out that from my observations in Edinburgh these displays were not particular to any demographic or neighbourhood, with private houses and council flats alike showing off rainbows to the street. Timing – and my own worry that such ephemeral interventions would soon disappear undocumented – affected my thinking as a fieldworker and archivist, and so I took hundreds of photographs of rainbows, chalk messages, and other reflections of solidarity, resilience, resistance against the virus, and most of all, hope in the face of the unknown. The creation and documentation of this street art helped define what seemed to be a largely communal moment, before the revelation of various government scandals and the eventual development of vaccines, both of which changed the situation dramatically.

Though the windows were filled with rainbows and also convivial messages written from one neighbour for another, there were, it must be noted, a few examples of more overtly political street art in this period. There were allusions to a 'new normal', to societal changes that were now seemingly within grasp thanks to the enormous lifestyle shifts undertaken due to the pandemic. Some sign-makers saw the historic moment not only as one of communal resilience, but also as an opportunity for seismic political and societal shifts, for resistance to what had hitherto been a dissatisfactory status quo. One top-floor window display I photographed in Leith filled the entirety of two adjacent windows. Separate blocks of text on paper were posted in the top and bottom frames creating, across the two windows, one message alluding to various inequities in UK policy as regards funding for the NHS and the treatment of its staff, many of whom are people who have moved to the UK. The display exclaimed:

> FUND FUND FUND THE NHS / PAY KEY STAFF MORE M.P.s LESS / PPE TEST TEST TEST / MIGRANTS MAKE THE NHS[5]

The temporal aspects of this display, with its references to past and contemporary inequities and demands for a fairer future, were key to its messaging. That its creation coincided with neighbours' displays of rainbows gave it a transgressive undertone, indicating a dissatisfaction with these largely apolitical displays whose existence might be seen as resistance against the virus but not the political system itself. In other words, its semiotic strength was derived not only from the content of its message but from the timing of its appearance, as well.

5 M.P.s = Members of Parliament and PPE = Personal Protective Equipment, the equipment needed by medical workers to protect themselves from the virus.


Figure 4. Sticker street art in Leith depicting Boris Johnson as demonic, April 2020.

Other political interventions in this early period emerged after it was reported that the UK government had considered 'herd immunity' as a means of defeating the virus at the expense of significant numbers of deaths (Yong 2020). Two stickers – a form of street art that has a long history in resistance contexts (Tedford 2018, 77) – caught my eye in early April 2020. One depicted UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson with horns and sharp teeth (figure 4) justifying these deaths, and another – referencing the hopeful window displays like in figure 2 – consisted of a simple rainbow depicted on a white background with the words

> REVOLT Herd immunity treats people like animals. Don't be a sheep. #PROTESTAFTERLOCKDOWN.

By the time I photographed these stickers the UK government had backed away from any potential plans to pursue herd immunity through widespread infection, but it is clear that scepticism amongst certain members of the population was still strong. This was no doubt aided by the fact that Boris Johnson, who had previously spoken proudly of shaking hands with Covid patients in hospital, was himself – just around the time of my photographs – a patient in the intensive care unit of St Thomas' Hospital in London, suffering from the coronavirus. These interventions served as reminders of the perceived past callousness of the UK government.

The second sticker described above, though arguably of less aesthetic interest, has much to consider ethnographically. Its anger at a policy of herd immunity via infection contrasts with its hopeful rainbow symbol and deference to the life-saving nature of the lockdown. This is a sticker whose message of resistance is heightened not by its visual design but because it has been created to resonate within its moment. It shares the positive messaging of concurrently created hope-filled window displays and respects the NHS, all while expressing anger at what it presents as callous government policy. In other words, the timing of its creation and appearance heightens its meaning and relevance. Indeed, this sticker is so much of its time – this brief period of communal hope, anxiety, and slowly growing frustrations at government policy

– that outside of its specific moment of creation its layers of references and meaning would be difficult to parse.

The hashtag #PROTESTAFTERLOCKDOWN, which concludes the message on the sticker, points to a contemporaneous existence of this message in the digital realm. Reflecting an earlier phenomenon of stickers referencing or being distributed via zines (Radway 2011, 147), this hybridity between the physical world and the online world is very common in street art, with hashtags, or occasionally URLs or QR codes, being used as a means of pointing to an online complement to the message, explaining how to reproduce the intervention itself, or often simply as a way of crediting the artist. As Alison Chang points out,

> By harnessing the "old" medium of print to the Internet, social media and crowdfunding sites, [there is] a bridge between the efficient but disembodied information distribution of the digital age and the power of physical bodies in physical spaces working together (2017, 25).

In this case, the hashtag is easy to trace, as it has only been used by one Twitter account, formed on 11 April 2020, just a few days before I saw the sticker in question. This in-person/online hybridity is important as a means of perpetuating a message beyond the potentially short life-span of street art, allowing the creator to relay more information than is possible on a small public intervention. In this case, the sticker acts as a clarion call for the pedestrian walking past, while also fulfilling the role of a metaphorical hyperlink connecting the physical world with the online world. As this hybridity can be linked not only through temporality but also through the concepts of placement and location, let us use this opportunity to move on to this next principal point of discussion.

## The Placement and Location of Street Art

When considering the full contexts of street art, assessing the potential reasons why a creator has chosen the placement and location of an intervention is essential. Placement refers to how a creator presents their intervention in a specific context (e.g. high or low, alone or with other interventions). Location refers to an intervention's geographic position. In the examples below I will consider how these concepts speak to *visibility*, *added semiotic content*, and *wider societal contexts*. First, in order to disseminate created meaning, an intervention must be placed in such a way that it is visible to passers-by. Second, as is the case with timing, placement and location can add to the semiotic content of street art, both from the perspective of the creator and from that of the passer-by. Third, placement and location are not always entirely dictated by the creator of street art, but also by wider societal contexts.

Let us return to the example of the Putin stencil to introduce the first two of these concepts. With regard to visibility, the stencil's placement on a well-used pedestrian pavement heightens, relative to other potential sites, its visibility, certainly for pedestrians. Further, the stencil artist has placed a number of such stencils around the neighbourhood, creating amplified visibility through sheer numbers. If one happens to glance away and miss one stencil, another will be visible nearby, thus helping ensure that as many people see the image as possible or that one person is confronted with it multiple times. As to added semiotic content, that the stencil in question was placed on the pavement specifically is impossible to ignore. Had it been placed on a wall, with Putin's face looking at or down on passers-by and the text at eye level, one might interpret the stencil rather differently, with Putin's image situated in a protected, elevated position. It was, however, very deliberately placed on the central slab of the pavement, with the face looking up, thus situating it in a spot where pedestrians would be likely to see the face while also most probably stepping on it. In this way, the creator has implicated the strides of passers-by into the semiotic contents of this stencil, with each step adding visceral resistance to the idea of Putin's war, progressively wearing away the image itself. It is a perfect metaphorical manifestation of the hopes of all of those against the invasion, and stepping on Putin's slowly disappearing face may give one a fleeting feeling of agency and power while otherwise helpless to prevent the ravages of an unjust war. Notably, the few examples of this stencil that I have witnessed placed not on pavements but on walls, are slightly different in design. In these stencils, the creator has added a black line over Putin's eyes. Not only is Putin not looking down on passers-by, but the line over the eyes may connote death, either of the tyrant or a metaphorical death for the war. In either case, the change in placement seems to have led to a change in the design of the image, demonstrating how placement influences various aspects of street art.

On 18 September 2014, Scotland held an independence referendum to decide its future relationship with the United Kingdom, either as a member nation or as an independent, bordering state. In the weeks running up to the referendum, I took hundreds of photos in Aberdeen of signs for and against independence, and, as described above, made a public call for further photos from across the country. Most, though not all, signs and stickers were mass-produced, and voters for either side could order them from the respective 'yes' and 'no' campaigns. But no matter their production origin, signs like these should still be of interest to folklorists and ethnologists – and other scholars of street art – because the people using them express their creativity and agency through the placement and location of these signs. In that sense, we can understand the vernacularity of this material through its use rather than through its materiality and design.


Figure 5. Yes stickers next to a pro-independence advert in Aberdeen, August 2014.

In the case of the referendum, placement was strategic, with signs positioned in spots of high visibility where repeated viewings would lend power to the signs themselves. Whether or not one agreed with one view or the other, signs strategically placed around the city gave power to the political community behind them, giving strength to their voice and giving the impression of great numbers of supporters or detractors. In public-facing domestic spaces like windows, one's position in the debate was clearly demarcated for all to see, putting pressure on passers-by to witness this political position and accept the unchangeable nature of the political view in this particular residence. In some cases, vernacular street art was placed in concordance with official signage, no doubt to reinforce the semiotic contents of an intervention's particular message. An example can be seen in figure 5, in which around twenty small, mass-produced 'yes' stickers – usually placed on clothing as a public sign of one's political position – have creatively been placed together in the shape of a Y, presumably representing 'yes', on the entrance of a telephone box. The entrance faces a pavement running along one of Aberdeen's longest streets, so pedestrians arriving from a distance would easily be able to see the colours of the stickers and the Y shape, immediately understanding the intervention's semiotic contents, even before noting the word 'yes' on each sticker. But this series of stickers also works in concordance with an official advert of YesScotland.net, a pro-independence campaigning website, which can be seen on the adjacent side of the phone box. In this way the vernacular comments and builds on the official, here represented by a legal paid-for advertisement placed in public view by the telephone company. The creative ordering of the stickers, the highly-visible location, and the strategic placement next to an advert reinforcing the 'yes'

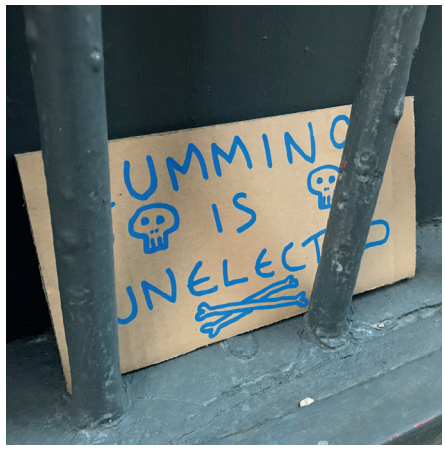


Figure 6. Homemade placard in Leith decrying governmental hypocrisy, May 2020.

message, show how placement and location can come together to amplify what is, at its essence, quite a simple intervention.

Signs and stickers in support of independence, in other words the 'yes' vote, were highly visible and could be found in numerous parts of Aberdeen, much more so than their 'no' counterparts. This visibility lent a significant feeling of momentum for the 'yes' campaign; it added to the semiotic content of the street art itself. That the street art in support of independence was so visible and ubiquitous actively changed the meaning of an individual 'yes' sign by connecting it to what could be interpreted as a swelling tide of pro-independence voters. Despite the high visibility of these signs and the connotations of their ubiquity, it is worth noting that in Aberdeen, 58.61% of voters in the referendum voted against independence, with 41.39% voting 'yes' (BBC 2014). Had one judged the referendum by the interventions visible to passers-by, one could have easily expected the vote to be 9 to 1 for the 'yes' campaign.

If we move forward in time to the pandemic, and consider the period I have labelled above as the second phase, in which pandemic-related political scandals in the UK were gaining notice in the media and amongst the populace, we can consider some further examples in which placement adds semiotic content to interventions. In May 2020 various newspapers reported that early on in the pandemic, Dominic Cummings, then Chief Advisor to the Prime Minister and suffering from Covid-19, broke lockdown rules and drove to his parents' estate in Durham. Before his return to London, he and his family drove to Barnard Castle, a tourist attraction, purportedly so that he could test his eyesight and ensure he was well enough to drive (Fancourt, Steptoe, Wright 2021). This resulted in a number of angry and mocking examples of street art. The placement of one such intervention, made up of two separate cardboard placards with their messages written in blue marker, caught my eye. The first placard said 'CUMMINGS IS UNELECTED' (figure 6) with two skulls and crossbones in amongst the letters, and the second said 'SACK CUMMINGS NOW', this one accompanied by one large skull and crossbones. What interests me most, though, is that both placards were located in a small lane in Leith, placed on a ground-level windowsill behind the metal bars protecting the windows from the street.

It was impossible to read the entire message of either placard without looking from various angles. Regardless of the angle, these thick, vertical metal bars partially covered the name Cummings. The reference to prison bars, and the implication that prison was where Cummings belonged, seems difficult to deny, especially as there were numerous more obvious places in which to place such a placard. Clever placement added to the meaning and message of the intervention. Whether or not the combination of vaguely threatening (though cartoonish) skulls and crossbones and the use of prison imagery combined to make a totally coherent message is arguable, but the anger expressed at an official figure flouting rules his own government created is without ambiguity.

A later intervention, photographed in August 2021, during what I call the third phase of the pandemic, states:

> All they had to do strip you of your freedom was re-brand the flu and convince you that it's a threat to your existence.

The sticker was part of a larger series of anti-vaccination stickers made by a collective, which is common with stickers used in street art (Kozak 2017, 12–13). The content is well in-line with these sorts of stickers which appeared alongside the arrival of vaccines and 'vaccine passports'. And though there is much to consider with regard to what is written on such stickers, in this case I am once again interested by the location and placement of the sticker, which was placed directly onto the window of the Aberdeen office of a Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP), blocking the photo of the MSP's face, thus making a statement in no uncertain terms as to who 'they' in the message refers to.

Anger and frustration at, and resistance to, officials, government policy, or towards society's hegemonic powers, are often at the heart of the semiotic contents of street art. In the case of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, huge numbers of interventions across the world were created to protest against racism existing in all levels of society (Shirley, Lawrence, Lorah 2020). Scotland was no exception to this, and following the reinvigoration of the Black Lives Matter movement after a police officer murdered George Floyd in Minneapolis on 25 May 2020, BLM signs and other interventions began to appear. Having mentioned above the hybridity of street art, it is important here to point out that Black Lives Matter as a term was originally used as a hashtag on social media (Wilson and Sharp 2021, 442), so here an online creation has been transferred to the physical world, not only through street art but in everyday conversation. In that sense, the *location* of #BLM co-exists online and in-person, and much street art reflects this through the continued use of the hashtag when physically writing #BlackLivesMatter or #BLM.


Figure 7. Window display in Newhaven underlining Scotland's role in white supremacy, June 2020.

In the Scottish context, the placement and location of interventions relating to Black Lives Matter has evolved over time to reflect wider societal contexts. In order to consider this with some clarity, it is first worth giving a general overview of the types of interventions I witnessed and how they changed with the flow of time. The very first intervention I remember coming across was on 2 June 2020, roughly one week after George Floyd's murder. It was an enormous mural on the seldom visited western boundary wall of Portobello Beach in Edinburgh, with the name of George Floyd abutted on the left by the image of a tombstone with the date of his death. All of this was flanked by two very large pig heads with eyes crossed out, with the names of the police officers who participated in Floyd's murder written above them. A few days later I came across a cardboard placard attached to an official notice board at the beach, which said 'Stop Riot-Control Exports Now / #BlackLivesMatter', referring to the UK exporting riot-control gear used by American police officers. Soon after I saw a message in chalk stating 'NO WONDER PEOPLE ARE ANGRY / #BLM'. Within a week or so, however, the nature and location of BLM-related interventions in Scotland shifted from these anonymous, relatively low-visible contexts to people's windows. Suddenly one could see variants of #BLM on many of the windows across the north of Edinburgh (and no doubt beyond), with some including messages specifically relating to racism in Scottish contexts. Some of these, as can be seen in figure 7, made reference to Sheku Bayoh, who died in 2015 while in the custody of Scottish police (Davidson 2019). In this example, one can note the strategic placement, with the creator taking advantage of their bay window to angle messages in all directions to passers-by. On the obscured right-hand window there is a quote by Maya Angelou complementing the Audre Lord quote visible in the photo.


Figure 8. Anti-racist placards on Leith Links, June 2020

More or less concurrently to these window placards and displays, groups of people gathered in front of government buildings or at city parks across Scotland, affixing anti-racism placards together. Along with the window placards, these signalled an enormous tonal shift. What started as a few examples of illicitly affixed, painted, and/or written anti-hegemonic discourse in public contexts became a mass movement. Affixing BLM signs to one's window or as a group to a fence in an official space allowed for a rejection of a situation in which anti-racist messages could only exist if anonymous and either unassuming or located in out-of-the-way sites (Noyes 2015, 138). Instead, through these actions, what had been unspoken by the mainstream if not unaccepted, suddenly felt not only speakable but necessary. The toppling of the Edward Colston statue in the English city of Bristol seemed to reflect a potential shift in the hegemonic narrative relating to the UK's relationship with racism and colonialism (Watts 2020), with an official monument to a trader of enslaved Africans being toppled and replaced around the country by vernacular, anti-racist placards, as can be seen in figure 8.

At least for a brief period, these examples of street art reflected a societal context in which active demands were being placed at the feet of policy makers, and the loudest voices were those of anti-racist campaigners. At this peak, street art almost ceased to be transgressive (Schacter 2017, 413), finding itself mirrored and co-opted in official and corporate contexts, recent examples of which have been noted by Hopkinson (2021, 486–487). The working together of people to place placards in groups gave power and momentum to the core anti-racist message at the heart of BLM. Ironically, however, the grouping of most BLM street art in official locations like parks or in front of government buildings, means

that, though the message gained strength in numbers in that moment, most of these placards were collected and presumably disposed of by city councils.[6] As signs in people's windows have largely come down (now sometimes replaced by flags or messages about Ukraine), the result is that legacy street art pertaining to the Black Lives Matter movement is difficult to come by. In Aberdeen I recently came across three stickers – designed to look like corporate name tags in an example of culture jamming (Keys 2008) – from that period, near what had been a centre for BLM placards. They state 'HELLO I AM SHEKU BAYOH [RICKY BISHOP / JIMMY MUBENGA] SAY MY NAME', each giving a different name of a Black man who died while in the custody of British police or security guards, and seemingly making reference to the African American Policy Forum's #SayHerName campaign, focusing on Black female victims of police violence (Crenshaw, Ritchie, Anspach, Gilmer, and Harris 2015). Affixed to lampposts in a location whose significance has shifted, these interventions are now easily missed. Here we see an example of a situation in which temporality, placement, and location come together to affect the creation of street art, its continued visibility, and our interactions with and interpretations of it.

## The Modification and Defacement of Street Art

The modification and defacement of street art adds a transgressive, rule-breaking layer to that which is already innately transgressive and rule-breaking. Modification can be used as a tool to add to, alter, or usurp the original semiotic contents of an intervention. Modification is not always vernacular, and the official painting over, co-opting, or removal of interventions by corporations and the State also affect the landscape of street art, as can be seen with the removal of BLM placards. Modification is key to street art, as pristine, unaltered street art generally has a relatively short life. In my experience, it is rare for interventions to survive whole and unscathed for more than a week or two. The official and vernacular modification of street art, therefore, is significant, and the latter has been considered previously by folklorists in the contexts of graffiti and latrinalia (e.g. Longenecker 1977).

We can see transgressive modification of anti-racist street art that is itself transgressive in its own context. On a public wall near the University of Aberdeen, where I am employed, I photographed a wheat-pasted poster depict-

6 Realising the precarity and ephemerality of such interventions, in early June 2020 I asked volunteers for the Lockdown Lore Collection Project to document as many of these anti-racist signs in Scotland as possible for posterity. Noting the world-wide significance of this, the George Floyd and Anti-Racist Street Art Archive collected examples from around the world (Shirley, Lawrence, and Lorah 2020). In Minneapolis, where Floyd was murdered, Memorialize the Movement has gone beyond photographic documentation to actively 'collect, preserve, and activate' plywood murals (Memorialize the Movement 2020).

ing a raised fist with the words Black Lives Matter in the top-left corner. This carefully located poster, on a busy path between university buildings, can on its own be interpreted as a comment on a British university system struggling with concepts of decolonising the curriculum, and in which minority ethnic members of staff are paid less and are less likely to hold senior positions than their white colleagues (University and College Union 2019). But when modified, the semiotic contents change, and we can see a shift in perception of the target audience between the person who originally wheat-pasted the poster and the person who has modified it. In this distressing case, the poster was modified through the addition of two white-coloured swastikas with what looks like correction fluid. The poster was not torn down or damaged beyond the additions made. We can imagine that in the eyes of the original wheat-paster, the university audience of staff and students needed to be reminded of the inequities and injustices of British higher education. In the eyes of the person who modified the poster, they may have seen members of the university as presumed progressive ideologues, with the intent of the racist modification being to demonstrate that such principles are not without challenge or dispute.

This sort of alteration was common during the Scottish Independence Referendum, with the defacement of signs being perhaps the ultimate act of resistance, giving voice to those who did not have signs of their own to counteract the signs with which they disagreed. This was not simply the uncouth, violent manifestation of simmering tensions resulting from the antithetic political beliefs of 'Yes' and 'No' supporters. Defacement often appeared calculated and seldom haphazard. Roadside billboards were graffitied to invert the message originally being presented. 'Yes' or 'No' stickers were scratched rather than removed, leaving physical evidence, as in the above Black Lives Matter example, for passers-by to witness the defeat of or challenge to the original message.

The coronavirus pandemic has seen many examples of street art that have been modified according to differing political stances and responses to lockdowns and vaccines. In one example documented by my wife on Sauchiehall Street in Glasgow, a street artist called The Rebel Bear created a mural of animals holding placards in support of the lockdown. A tiger's sign states 'BATS RULE' in reference to a possible origin point for the virus. In capital letters written in marker to the top-left of the mural, someone has commented on the mural stating 'Promotion of the Masonic governments [*sic*] fake virus and oppresion [*sic*] of the people is not rebelious [*sic*] it's treason!!!!' The reference to being rebellious seems to be a commentary on the artist's name, and this interpretation is bolstered by the modification of the artist's stencilled signature in which part of the 'The Rebel Bear' has been crossed out and modified to read 'The Rent Boy', what can be interpreted in this context as a homophobic insult. The mural itself has been left completely alone, and one can imagine that the annotator anticipated, in a mul-


Figure 9. Sticker 'battles' in Aberdeen, January 2022.

ti-faceted example of 'jay-talking' (Sage 2016, 855), that passers-by would first see the mural, and then read the threatening and mocking comment, either feeling upset and demeaned by the modification or empowered by its transgressive, conspiratorial, and anti-progressive content.

On the opposite side of the political spectrum, anti-vaccination and related stickers have been modified by pro-science activists. Anti-lockdown stickers began appearing in late 2020, but as the lockdowns eased and vaccines were developed and distributed, these shifted to stickers promoting anti-vaccination and anti-mask messaging. By the autumn of 2021, there were large quantities of these stickers in Scotland, and more and more opportunity for those disagreeing to modify them. Figure 9 shows an example taken in Aberdeen in January 2022, in which three stickers on a lamppost were modified.

The top-most sticker, which originally consisted of a masked face with an anti-mask message, has been modified in a few ways. In the first instance it looks like someone unsuccessfully tried to remove the sticker. It looks like the further modifications were made after this attempt at removal, so we may suppose – perhaps mistakenly – that the person attempting to remove the sticker and the person who modified it are the same. Modification became the sole option left to usurp the semiotic contents of the stickers. The message on the mask was obscured with marker, so the face looked like it was simply wearing a black mask. The website of the referenced anti-vaccination group was crossed out, and the words 'STAY SAFE' were written on either side of the masked face. The next sticker, which originally had a comic showing a man in full PPE with gas mask telling someone in normal clothes that they are paranoid, was more successfully removed. On top of the underlay of this sticker was written, 'GET VAXXED WEAR A MASK'. Finally, the bottom sticker, which compared the acceptance of government pandemic policies to the acceptance of fascism in Germany before the Second World War, has been crossed out multiple times,

with the website of the group also crossed out. The modifier of these stickers has either neutralised or inverted their semiotic contents and co-opts the original design of one of the stickers to support their own pro-mask politics.[7]

In recent years, stickers and signs in support of the rights of transgender people have started to appear in Scotland's streets. Most are stickers with messages like 'TRANS WOMEN ARE WOMEN', 'TRANS RIGHTS MATTER', '#LGBWithTheT', or 'TRANS RIGHTS = HUMAN RIGHTS'. On a walk to the beach in Aberdeen in April 2021, I passed by a bus stop covered with at least ten such stickers. Not having a camera on me, I decided to retrace my steps the following day so as to be able to document the stickers. Rather than finding the stickers I had seen the day before, I found the stickers had been removed, with one single transphobic sticker in their place, stating 'TRANSWOMEN ARE MEN / AND MOST HAVE A PENIS'. In this case, because the original stickers had been removed, few passers-by could be expected to be aware of their original semiotic contents. Further, the single sticker was quite inconspicuous and its low visibility meant it was therefore unlikely to be seen by most passers-by. So unlike the BLM, referendum, and anti-vaccination examples, this seemed less a general message for passers-by and more a message directed specifically at the trans-rights activist(s) who placed the original stickers. In this way, the modification through removal and addition mirrors the dialogic graffiti battles that might be more commonly associated with tagging traditions (Meñez 1988).

In addition to such vernacular street battles, established corporations modify street art and/or co-opt its imagery for their own purposes. Over a period of three years of daily observations, I witnessed such an example on Leith Walk in Edinburgh where, through street art and campaigning, locals battled Drum Property, which purchased a building full of small, independent shops and attempted to replace it with student flats (Broughton Spurtle 2018). As the leases of shops were terminated and their windows boarded up, campaigners began using the boards as a medium for their messages and artwork. Much of the street art related to pride in the working-class history of the area and the onslaught of gentrification. The developer repeatedly arranged for the street art to be painted over, only for new messages, posters, and images to appear the following day. The developer changed strategy and hired a street muralist, who was possibly unaware of the wider context, to paint a large abstract mural where the messages had previously been. As the

7 As a note on the wider context of such stickers, these appeared next to a sticker in support of Palestinian rights and another one on the left-hand side, illegible in the photo, making a claim to 'Reclaim the night!', which appeared after the rape and murder of Sarah Everard by a London police officer.

origin of this mural was not immediately clear, and the work of the muralist was apparently respected, campaigners did not add messages or posters to the mural or try to modify it in any way.

This sort of artwashing, in which the motifs and skills of usually transgressive forms of expression are co-opted by the State or corporations to legitimise their own goals (Pritchard 2021, 182), can also be seen in other parts of Scotland. The city of Aberdeen's NuArt festival pays for street artists and muralists from around the world to create officially-sanctioned public art in locations in Aberdeen more generally associated with street art. This strategy allows a corporation or council to control the semiotic and aesthetic contents of publicly-visible art while displacing, and using the tools of, less 'desirable' vernacular expression (Schacter 2017, 414). As a final example of modification, and as an interesting inversion of the official consuming the vernacular, I recently noticed a vernacular response to an official hospital sign describing its no-smoking policy on hospital property. The sign says:

> We care about your fresh air. We are completely SMOKE FREE! This means the use of any tobacco product is **not permitted** anywhere on our sites[.]

A disgruntled smoker, possibly a patient, staff member, or even passer-by, has modified the sign with a marker to now say: 'We are completely SMOKE FREE! AND SMUG'. In addition to being a humorous annotation to the sign, it is a relevant example of someone intentionally not usurping or inverting semiotic contents, but rather adding an additional layer of meaning that begrudgingly accepts the hegemonic narrative being presented, while also sardonically undermining it.

## Conclusion

Defining street art in a broad, inclusive manner allows us to work with examples of public material interventions that should be of interest to scholars from disparate disciplines. By looking at a number of interventions from over a decade of fieldwork in Scotland, and by investigating street art through the lenses of temporality, placement, location, modification, and defacement, this article contributes to a wider understanding of street art's dynamic contexts. These foci complement interests in the design, politics, and production of street art, all while similarly informing us of its creators and witnesses, and its complex interactions with and resistance to hegemonic bodies. Through an investigation of temporality, I consider the significance of timing in creating and seeing street art, while also considering how street art demarcates momentous periods. Further, by looking at certain forms of related interventions

diachronically, we witness how the flow of time affects the creation and interpretation of street art, all while shaping its relationship to social contexts. Contemplating how and where street art is placed and located gives insight into the importance of visibility and the malleability of semiotic contents in relation to creative intent and external interpretations. The location of street art can also inform us of wider community or societal contexts, while also hinting at potential durability. Street art, of course, does not begin and end with the creator, and modification and defacement are significant vernacular layers of street art that can often tell us as much as the original creation. Though this article intentionally considers examples from multiple locations and periods in order to highlight the relevance of each of these conceptual frameworks, an in-depth study of street art solely considering temporality, placement/location, or modification/defacement, should yield useful insights that will no doubt inform and contextualise street art, while also broadening its multi-disciplinary considerations. If my fieldwork-derived definition of street art as fixed, unofficial, creative, public-facing material interventions allows ethnologists and folklorists to *identify* street art, considering the conceptual and contextual entanglements of examples like those in this article offers us an opportunity to begin to *interpret* street art in all of its complexity.

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Raúl Acosta García

# Cycloactivism in Mexico City
## Breaking the rules between bodily experiences and technocratic politics

**Abstract**

Cycling in Mexico City is dangerous. But over the last two decades it has become less so. New cycleways, a large public bicycle-sharing scheme, various government cycling promotion projects and an abundance of official signalling demanding respect for cyclists have made bicycles visible as worthy vehicles on city streets. For cycloactivists, however, such improvements are not enough. Cyclists are frequently harassed, attacked or run over by motorists. Cycloactivists thus demand more and better cycleways as well as increased measures to address injustices in mobility issues across the city. They do so through protests, information campaigns, public performances and academic debates, and crucially, by cycling through city streets. This means that they use their bodies as symbols, to highlight their vulnerability. Along the way, they often break existing traffic rules to highlight how unfair they are and to draw attention to other demands. I refer to their efforts as experiential cycloactivism, which highlights cyclists making themselves vulnerable as a means of denouncing illegitimate rules and policies that need to be changed. I conclude the analysis by suggesting that their style of rule-breaking is a type of ritual with which they seek to improve the city, not burn it down.

Keywords: cycloactivising, cycling, mobility, ethnography, city, body


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Cycling in Mexico City is dangerous. But over the last two decades it has become less so. New cycleways, a large public bicycle-sharing scheme, various government cycling promotion projects and an abundance of official signalling demanding respect for cyclists have made bicycles visible as lawful vehicles on city streets. For cycloactivists, however, this is not enough. Despite improvements in infrastructure and advances in legislature, cyclists are frequently harassed, attacked or run over by motorists. Cycloactivists demand more and better cycleways as well as increased measures to address injustices in mobility issues across the city. Dozens of activist groups state their demands via protests, information campaigns, public performances and academic debates, and crucially, with collective rides through city streets. In a few years, numerous activists have learned to use technocratic knowledge and language to make their points. In collaboration with non-governmental organisations, they cite quantitative studies regarding energy, pollution, congestion, health and the environment to support their claims and demands. Crucially, however, cycloactivists use a qualitative tactic to induce a sense of urgency in public debates: to performatively stress the vulnerability of their own bodies on city streets. They do so by strategically breaking a few traffic rules and rules regarding the use of public spaces to highlight how unfair some of them are and to draw attention to other demands. Cycloactivists thus use their own bodies to denounce illegitimate rules in order to call for an overhaul of mobility legislation, policymaking and practices.

One case in point was a protest that I witnessed outside the police headquarters of the Mexico City government. On a weekday afternoon, in November 2019, a few cycloactivists and cyclo-deliverers started gathering outside the police department, in a busy elevated roundabout known as Glorieta Insurgentes. They sought to speak to the head of law enforcement to discuss the death of a delivery cyclist earlier in the week in a traffic accident. It was a demonstration organised between individual cycloactivists and a then recently formed collective of delivery cyclists. 'We are here to make ourselves heard because things have not changed, we are still victims of reckless drivers', Adrián[1] told me when I arrived. Adrián is a multitasking cycloactivist: he is a journalist working for an independent cycling online news outlet; a consultant working with friends to design better infrastructures and policies for local governments around the country; and an outright activist who seeks to be present at protests and when stating demands. His social media posts are quite popular, and he plays a central role in public debates about cycling in Mexico City. After more cyclists arrived, they started discussing the problem

1 I have pseudonymised all research participants in order to reduce any potential risk to their persons or reputations.

amongst themselves and decided to first close one of the three lanes of the roundabout. They did so by turning their bicycles upside down and staying close to them while holding up signs.

A few reporters arrived to take photos and videos and to interview some of the organisers. Many of the participating cyclists worked for delivery services, which have grown considerably over the last few years. 'The rich pay to avoid risks on the street, and the pressure is on us to be quick, otherwise you don't get any tip to top up your measly rate per delivery', Santiago told me on another occasion, referring to the trade he represents. He is the leader of a group of delivery cyclists who have demanded better conditions from the companies who hire them, as well as from the government, which oversees such businesses. After a couple of hours, the cycloactivists decided to block yet another lane, leaving only one lane open for cars and another for the Metrobus, Mexico City's bus rapid transit (BRT) system. As it got dark, the protesters kept on shouting their slogans and motivating each other, deciding at that point to block the whole avenue. Shortly before they did so, the transit police officers who had been mediating the tensions between motorists and protesters diverted the incoming transit bus towards a sideroad. In the end, the police chief did not show up, but he sent a representative. The cycloactivists were told that efforts were in place to improve the situation, and after a couple of hours they stopped their protest and disbanded.

It is illegal in Mexico City to block city streets (Meneses-Reyes 2015). The primacy of the automobile in the megalopolis is embedded in the inequality-laden shape of the city (Bayón and Saraví 2013), where gated communities (Sheinbaum 2010; Giglia 2008), private shopping malls (Müller 2010) and other securitised areas continuously seek to determine who can use what space. Nevertheless, these issues have not stopped previous waves of protests (Inclán 2019), many of which included avenue blockades and even illegal camping sites across vast stretches of roads (Crane 2017). Public space has thus served as a site of political negotiation for decades now (Parkinson 2012). The difference with cycloactivists is that their protests do not use the blocking of streets as the ultimate tactic. The case that I have described above is neither a common nor the main form of protest by cycloactivists. They usually state their disagreements with government officials during their everyday cycle rides as well as through purposeful interventions and creative performances on streets and in public spaces. For cycloactivists, breaking rules is not merely about blocking streets but rather about highlighting injustices in the governance of mobility in the city. Other rules that cycloactivists break include the following: cycling in tunnels, on bridges and on high-speed avenues where bicycles are not allowed; cycling in a group through heavy traffic, crisscrossing between

lanes to disrupt motorists; hanging banners and signs on bridges, which is forbidden; painting signs on pavement and tarmac; and laying on the ground on avenues or streets, simulating having been run over (usually known as a 'die in'). Rule breaking among cycloactivists, therefore, is performed in such a way as to stress the vulnerability of cyclists' bodies in city streets and avenues.

The project that informs this article is part of a research group on urban ethics, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).[2] The group included projects in twelve different cities around the world, each studied from the perspective of a different scholarly discipline. Between 2018 and 2020, I conducted eight months of immersive ethnographic participation in what I call the urban mobility milieu, which is comprised of activist groups, non-governmental organisations, private consultancies, academics, international organisations and various government agencies. During my visits, I attended academic events, public discussions and presentations by government officials, as well as activist-organised protests, dialogues, interventions and campaigns. I was also present at cultural events and public occasions. I held informal conversations, conducted semi-structured interviews recorded in digital format, compiled a photographic registry of events and of local infrastructure and urban scenes, and took notes on various events both as they happened and in the form of a fieldwork diary. I have also analysed press coverage, social media and the various publications of activists, NGOs, local academics and governments. Key to my research was my involvement in everyday cycling and cycling events through participant observation. I rode my bicycle alongside activists and others in order to better understand what they faced and how the city is experienced on two wheels.

This article is guided by the following research question: In what manner do cycloactivists use rule-breaking in their efforts to exert influence on mobility in Mexico City? I develop my argument in three phases: first, I describe why activists view the rules and regulations that they break as illegitimate; then I refer to the urban technocratic rituals that cycloactivists take part in; and third, I explore the role of experiential activism that advocates of cycling rely on. I wrap up my analysis with a suggestion that such rule-breaking is a type of urban ritual that seeks to improve the city, not burn it down. It is important to state here that the broader project that the text is a part of involves a study of urban ethics, which in our research group we analyse as quotidian performative or discursive negotiations about what is better for collective life in the city. Although I will not delve here into the ethical aspect of it, mentioning it helps explain the frame used and the attention given to what activists do in relation to the community of urban dwellers and traversers as a whole. In our view, ur-

2 Project number 240207984

ban ethics exist on multiple scales, ranging from micro-situations between two people, to meso-scenes, for example where activists address more people, to macro-circumstances, like urban planning or policymaking. For these reasons, the political implications of urban activism extend farther than the relatively small circle of onlookers or the audience reached by mainstream or social media. In part, my interest in cycloactivism and its struggles for improved mobility and the environment are due to its practical shaping of aspirations for democratic governance outside of established channels in Mexico City. This, I believe, is related to the bodily experience of cycling in the city and the rational and emotional reflexivity it produces among people (Acosta García 2018; Männistö-Funk 2020). By blatantly breaking a few rules, cycloactivists shed light on the need for rules to better reflect what the collective needs.

## Illegitimate traffic rules worth breaking

I arrived early at the Parque de la Bombilla on Friday, 22 March 2019, in the southern part of Mexico City. It was around six p.m. when cycloactivists started coming together. Some turned up alone, others in pairs or in larger groups. Organisers had convened all activist groups in the city for a special intervention, without explaining in advance what it would consist of. The purpose was to protest against government plans to change the denomination of some streets and avenues. This would make it illegal for cyclists to use certain routes because of their re-classification as urban freeways with a maximum speed limit of 80 kilometres per hour. 'Some of us need to use those avenues, otherwise we cannot come all the way into the city from our living areas … it is simply not possible', Fabián told me. I noticed that many of those arriving were leaders of their own groups from different corners of the city: Iztapalapa, Tlalpan, Coyoacán, Azcapotzalco, Xochimilco. After asking around, I finally found out what they intended to do: the plan was to walk slowly along the Avenida Insurgentes southwards for two kilometres, using all lanes dedicated to automobiles (leaving the lane for the BRT free). In the park, they started coordinating so as to walk in the shape of a bicycle (for a bird's eye photo or video opportunity from a drone). At 8 p.m., they set off. Friday is a heavy traffic day, especially in the evening. As expected, drivers quickly became exasperated. On two occasions, motorists sought to run over some protesters, accelerating and pushing their way into the march. The police did not arrive, despite the havoc that activists were creating via an action that was clearly illegal. A few officers were visible on side roads trying to divert drivers from the area. The mainstream media ignored the protest, but activists shared it on social media as well as through the alternative media that usually cover cycling news (Hidalgo Vivas 2019).

This was another occasion in which Mexico City cycloactivists broke rules, disrupting traffic as a way to demonstrate their disagreement with government

policies. The fact that the Mexico City government did not send police officers to stop them or to negotiate with them meant a sort of tacit agreement about their main critiques. Negotiations would follow through back channels and consultations. On the occasions when I visited the Ministry of Mobility, I noticed how several groups – of neighbours, business leaders or other stakeholders – were there to complain or express their disagreement with certain policies, projects or plans. Several government officials told me about the ongoing negotiations that need to take place before any change can occur in infrastructure or planning. Historically, such demands from the government can be seen in the light of corporatist and clientelist networks, which were of crucial importance during the single-party regime that prevailed for most of the twentieth century. As Laura Nader has put it, 'the law cannot usefully be isolated from other social and cultural systems of control that serve many purposes' (2002: 27).

In one way, therefore, cycloactivists have continued with a tradition of defying legal orders in Mexico in order to gain political influence. Legal institutions may follow examples from Europe and the US, but the way in which they function is in response more to local networks of power and influence (Ferry 2003). Power asymmetries have characterised institutional architectures where successive governments have reproduced inequalities based on ideas of race, gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic status (Gledhill 1994). But whereas previously activists had also broken laws and regulations to make their demands, the framework of the cycloactivists' actions was markedly different. The attempts in previous protest movements to challenge the status quo were often met with state violence or reprisals (Pansters 2012). Those who would take up issues important to the public sphere thus needed to seek allies among powerful figures, be they individuals or established groups (like unions or associations). A case in point are the numerous protests that have taken place on Mexican city streets between street vendors and authorities (Mendiola García 2017). Unionised vendors sought to fight ongoing harassment from police forces and continue their trade. In doing so, however, they entered a complex network of corporatism and clientelism, where demands were negotiated in exchange for political favours or support. For those who refused to enter such arrangements, violence was used to take them out of the political arena, often with deadly consequences for leaders or visible speakers. This modus operandi was especially prevalent during most of the twentieth century, as the country experienced a so-called 'soft dictatorship' (*dictablanda*) (Gillingham and Smith 2014; Vaughan 2018). The alleged transition to democracy that started in the 1990s came with multiple protest movements demanding major changes in human rights legislation and policies, as well as in numerous other areas. Despite the

perceived urgency of reforms, the emergent constellation of political parties at various levels of government tended to reproduce many of the practices of the single-party regime. Protests were effectively criminalised; that is, those who demanded changes were often accused of breaking laws (Doran 2017). Activists working on human rights or environmental issues, for example, continue to be assassinated on a regular basis. For these and other reasons, several analysts and scholars have argued that democracy as a form of government has remained elusive in the country (Olvera 2010).

In this context, promoters of the bicycle entering the public sphere constituted a conundrum, a puzzle or quandary, for political analysts and government officials. They were difficult to place. If anything, they were considered a leisure club. The first wave of activists who later became influential started out by complaining that they could not use their high-end bicycles on city roads, as they wanted to exercise and have a pleasant day out. They benefitted from their privileged backgrounds. Many were middle class, eloquent, white and studying for university degrees. They were thus not seen as a threat to the status quo. But as they became immersed in discussions about the bicycle, they gradually incorporated less privileged individuals and issues on their agendas. In a markedly unequal context, which has shaped the physical shape of the city, with its gated communities and privatized spaces (Giglia 2008; Sheinbaum 2010), the bicycle has served as a mediator between individual longings and the public good (Meneses-Reyes 2015). In 1998, a group of activists decided to adopt the name *Bicitekas*, combining the short form for bicycle (bici) with a stylised ending similar to that of 'aztecas' (Aztecs). This group has led the way for hundreds more by inviting anyone interested to attend their activities and events. Something that caught my attention from early on was that the night rides that Bicitekas organised served as a meeting space between social classes. In few other situations had I noticed people from very different socioeconomic backgrounds sharing an experience like that. In doing so, I saw how some people learned to talk to each other across divides that are often stressed by derogatory epithets. Nevertheless, differences remained, especially between those who chose to show-off expensive bicycles and accessories and those with simple bicycles. The scenes of friendly exchanges that I witnessed had their roots in the mobilisations of the 2000s, when cycloactivists started becoming more visible through their public performances and ludic interventions. More recently, social media has helped multiply their messages and announcements. The cycling milieu, therefore, has developed an agenda that crosses socioeconomic divides, denouncing inequalities and injustice. Its aspirations thus combine a broad range of issues, among which the environment and mobility justice stand out (Furness 2010).

The legislation and norms regarding mobility in Mexico are good examples of biased legal frameworks that perpetuate inequalities. Motorised urban dwellers are prioritised over pedestrians and cyclists in various forms: through the distribution of public investment in road and public space infrastructures; through the lack of a need to take a driving test to obtain an official license to drive; and through the incentives that exist for motorised vehicles. For instance, a failure to pay the annual tax for motorised vehicles is often 'condoned' or else the tax heavily reduced to entice urban dwellers to pay other taxes instead. In early 2019, as I saw an ad announcing such a reprieve while walking together with Sara, she told me it was particularly painful because taxing motorised vehicles could help pay for a more sustainable infrastructure (for cyclists and pedestrians). 'As it is, we keep subsidising car drivers', she told me. In most cities, the majority of public space is dedicated to streets and avenues. For this reason, Jane Jacobs has referred to them, together with sidewalks, as a city's 'vital organs' (2011[1961]: 37). The legislation and norms overseeing the social interactions that occur in such spaces thus reflect the priorities of the society in question. The fact that anyone can drive without needing to prove that they have the knowledge or experience to do so undermines any other provision in the norms or bylaws. For these reasons, in the eyes of cycloactivists much of the legislation and numerous government projects and policies lack legitimacy. Without an acknowledgment of their relevance for citizens, or in this case urban dwellers, existing legislation does not necessarily represent the best interests of the collective (Pardo and Prato 2019). This is at heart a discussion about the social contract, known as the exchange through which people give up some rights in exchange for being looked after by rulers (Supiot 2017).

Nevertheless, cycloactivists strive to bring about a better legislative system and a more effective governance architecture that ensures their right to ride on the city streets and avenues. On one occasion, as I saw a car honking at a cyclist and shouting that he should get out of the way (in somewhat rude terms), I noticed how the cyclist responded by arguing that it was his right to cycle on the street, even pointing out the article number of the local constitution to the aggressive driver. 'Look it up!', he demanded as he refused to move from the centre of the lane. Such a sense of having the same right to the space as cars challenges the perspective of motorised urban dwellers, who have been used to having little or no supervision for decades in the city. To better defy the sense of impunity informing the way in which many motorists aggressively target cyclists, activists have teamed up with NGOs and international institutions to help modify the status quo. One example was the 'Programa Integral de Seguridad Vial' (Integral Programme of Road Security), which the Mexico City government implemented with the help of the

Interamerican Development Bank (Rodríguez Martínez 2017). It consisted of a roadmap to reduce insecurity in the city's roads and avenues. At its heart was a complex process of consultation, during which time organisers identified the key issues and concerns of urban dwellers, activists and institutional actors. 'It was the best participatory process I have been part of', Alicia told me. One of the organisers was the 'Laboratorio para la ciudad' (City Lab), an office within the Mexico City government that sought to work across different ministries to address pressing problems.

Participation in the process of designing new legislation and its normative bylaws thus provided activists with a feeling of ownership over the result. In his recent work *The Participant,* Christopher Kelty offers an anthropological conceptualisation of participation as an enacting of the sense of community, or 'the experience of becoming a collective' (2019: 3). Kelty argues that the emotional and affective experience of participation, which is an intense and meaningful aspect of people's involvement, is not usually part of scholarly or policy-related analyses of participatory processes. For policymaking, this means that the ultimate decisions about what is incorporated into legislation and bylaws based on the participatory processes are guided more by official agendas than by participants' emotional and affective priorities. Regarding mobility in Mexico City, this has meant that successive changes in legislation and practices have not only fallen short of expectations but are perceived as only cosmetic changes made to appease protesters. Thus, while some policies have improved road safety – like the reduction of drunk driving (Colchero et al. 2020) – many cyclists often feel at the mercy of aggressive motorists. For these reasons, activists break rules on a regular basis not only to get the attention of authorities, but to alert all urban dwellers about the illegitimacy of some rules. To ensure that the new rules are legitimate, cycloactivists have engaged with technocratic knowledge systems and language that seeks inclusive processes and results.

## Urban rituals of a technocratic sort

Wendy James has argued that people are 'ceremonial animals' (James 2003), as our existence is laden with symbolism and meaningful practices. I believe that Mexico City cycloactivists enact protests by breaking rules not to dismiss the rules or the government that supports them, but to argue for better rules. It is a process akin to what Max Gluckman has described as rituals of rebellion, in which 'there is dispute about particular distributions of power, and not about the structure of the system itself' (1954: 3). This means that cycloactivists demand that the rules include the bicycle as a worthy vehicle in city streets, in order for there to be legal protection for those using it.

Mexican cycloactivists have benefited from a global surge in interest and appreciation of the bicycle. For Marc Augé, the current fascination with bicycles

is due to the increasing urbanisation of our planet, where cycling 'gives the city again its character of a land of adventure' (2009[2008]: 18). Some argue that it is a technified form of flânerie (Oddy 2007). The promotion of cycling, however, goes beyond a mere desire to enjoy the city anew. It has become a global political project (Bonham 2011), characterised by a diversity of approaches in each local context (Cooper and Leahy 2017). Mexico City activists have fully engaged in multi-scalar exercises of networking, consistently expanding their collaborative relations with similar groups around the world. At a national level, they started the Bicired, a network of like-mined activist groups promoting the bicycle in various cities (León 2016). In Latin America, they actively participate in the World Bicycle Forum, which was launched in 2012 in Porto Alegre and modelled on the World Social Forum (which, despite its name, has remained largely constrained to Latin America). In 2017, Mexico City hosted the World Bicycle Forum, through which local activists gained support and funding from the city government. Worldwide, local activists have engaged in collaborations with, for example, the BYCS network of 'bicycle mayors' (BYCS 2020). This programme consists of a leading activist being named 'mayor' either by direct election of local cycloactivists or by the support of existing groups.

One of the main reasons behind the apparent success of cycloactivists and the milieu they participate in can be qualified as neoliberal technocratic rituals. Some activists and promoters of the bicycle have incorporated into their modus operandi a strong sense of measurement and standardisation. This has taken place alongside a cycle of professionalisation through which some activists have trained in national and foreign universities and worked in non-governmental organisations in order to improve their technical knowledge of mobility design and planning. One example is that of Francisca, who started working in 2011 as a cycloactivist but who in 2014 switched to working in the city government to help promote cycling. When she became involved in activism, she was studying public administration in a renowned local university. Once she finished her studies, she was invited to work in the office to promote bicycling. From her position in the government, she has maintained a constant dialogue with activist groups, trying to bridge the gap between their expectations and her projects and constraints. 'We are a minority in government, so that is why we need you to raise your voice', she told a group of bicycle promoters at an event in the city centre during an informal meeting, called 'Café Bicicletero' (Bicyclist café). This event, held on 21 February 2019, invited the bicycle-promoting community to come together to hear about new government projects and plan joint activities. On that occasion, as during the many other times I heard her speak at events or in interviews with the media – or also in our conversations – she repeated her mantra: 'what is not counted does not count.' She thus invited activists to use quantitative studies to substantiate their claims.

'If we can prove that more people are using the bicycle, then our arguments for demanding more infrastructure gain legitimacy', she explained. Her office followed up on this logic by installing three cyclist counters along important avenues with cycleways. Each counter shows the number of bicycles that have passed by on a certain day or in a certain month or year. 'With cycleways, people are a bit shy, you know? You build them and they slowly come. It's not that suddenly they are full … but that they are used a little at first and more later on', Francisca explained to me at a dinner after an event of the Bicycle Mayors.

A peculiar challenge in Mexico City is to administer this push towards technocratisation. In particular, the reliance on trustworthy data is crucial. One of the first institutions that I visited during my fieldwork was the 'Laboratorio para la ciudad' (Laboratory for the City) (LabCDMX 2018). Launched in 2013 and closed in 2018, it was an experiment that combined efforts by government, civil society, the private sector and academia to enact specific projects. One of them was mobility. I went there to interview Javier, who was a renowned activist for pedestrian rights. He explained to me what the Lab did and showed me around the offices. The lab was modelled on an international trend to bring innovation to the management of urban affairs (Karvonen and van Heur 2014). Javier confided in me that part of the challenge was to make sense of the contrasting types of information handled by different ministries. Another one of the Lab's projects was to help ensure the commitment to an 'open city', that is, to the availability and accessibility of public information for its citizens. To achieve this aim, however, they first needed to promote 'data science' in government, or a standardised approach to handling information and its analyses. Major NGOs and international foundations sought to help the Mexico City government enter what was quickly becoming a dynamic field, where delivery and taxi transport companies were handling vast amounts of data on urban dwellers' habits and practices (Goletz and Bahamonde-Birke 2021). But the mass of new data produced by technology companies was at odds with a thorny culture of information handling by government authorities. In a telling study, Sara Sefchovich analysed public discourses by Mexican authorities and prominent figures, showing not only minor discrepancies between ministries, but systematic processes of hiding and obfuscating the truth, proving that governmental practice was not simply careless, but rather openly untruthful. The title of her book summarizes her findings, *Country of lies* (*País de mentiras*), in which she provides evidence to argue that 'as the years go by and ideological fashions change, and despite the changes of political parties in power and officials in government, we Mexican citizens are lied to over and over again' (Sefchovich 2013: 16).

In their efforts to achieve meaningful changes, cycloactivists sought to align their efforts with non-governmental organisations that work closely

with international financial institutions and development agencies. The two key players in mobility policymaking are the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP) and the World Resources Institute (WRI). Both are international NGOs based in the United States. ITDP has historically been more involved with cycling infrastructure, while WRI has prioritised public transport. Numerous activists have at some point either worked in one of these two organisations or else maintain close relations with some of its members. Several of their workers are also activists in their free time. ITDP developed out of a 1980s initiative to deliver bicycles to Nicaragua instead of the military aid that the American government had been using against the left-wing regime (ITDP 2020). The Mexican chapter of WRI grew out of a project to help the Mexico City government launch its Rapid Bus Transit system, called Metrobús (WRI 2022). Both ITDP and WRI produce a series of reports and studies to help governments improve their projects and policymaking. They do so with a clear technocratic approach, prioritising charts and diagrams that show the benefits of sustainable transportation.

To motivate local governments to improve their policies for bicycles throughout Mexico, ITDP awards an annual Cyclocities Ranking (Medina 2021). It is an exercise of quantifying the quality of policies and projects to promote the use of bicycles. Sara, who works at ITDP and is an active member of a collective of 'cycle-travellers', or bikepackers (Reiss 2021), explained to me ITDP's approach. 'We do not want to simply count the kilometres of cycleways to evaluate what cities are doing … what we try is to combine a bunch of issues, with clear indicators that can be measured, to explain our results', she told me one day over lunch close to her office. The Mexican office of ITDP has been doing these rankings since 2013, although they were interrupted for a couple of years (2016 and 2017).

I argue that by engaging with technocratic methods to measure, analyse and make suggestions to governments, activists participate in peculiar urban rituals of a neoliberal age. These rituals are urban not simply because of where they take place, but because they are shaped by thinking and living the city. They are neoliberal since they focus on a heightened responsibility of private actors (individuals, NGOs and organisations), while also pushing for an entrepreneurial approach to creative thinking. Ironically, therefore, activists have tended to demand that the government be more technocratic. This approach has helped activists navigate changing political parties at different government levels, by maintaining a discourse of evidence-based improvement in infrastructures and policies, while remaining free from contractual obligations (which NGOs often had in their dealings with governments) and thus being able to break some rules. This playing on different fields to differ-

ent tunes is not too far from JoAnn Martin's (2005) analysis of the role of 'loose connections' in the transformation of the Mexican state. In a detailed study of Tepoztlán, Martin (2005: 95) identified that loose connections with people they trusted and distrusted helped locals deal with bureaucrats without allowing the state to take over their dealings. In this sense, cycloactivists played the tune of technocratic data management, but in their hearts they still held true to the sensory experience of cycling the city.

## Cycloactivism as a transformative experience

Over the last few years, the bicycle has gained significant status around the world as an ideal example of sustainable mobility. This is mostly because it is propelled by its rider's muscles, eliminating the need for other sources of energy and the pollution that comes with the use of fossil fuels. Some of a bicycle's characteristics have added to its merits in the eyes of urban planners and dwellers, especially its size, which allows many units to flow on streets, and its social character, as it enables people to see each other and sometimes even cycle together while following conversations (Vivanco 2013). It is also considered conducive for public health, as it provides riders with physical exercise while also serving as a form of transportation. In Mexico City, I spoke to dozens of cyclists, some devoted to activism in promoting the bicycle and others who simply rode for practical purposes or for leisure. While many mentioned environmental concerns, economic savings or convivial benefits as motivators for their own cycling, the single most important reason for the vast majority was the personal transformation that cycling had brought about in them. Some feel the urge to encourage friends and family to share in the experience, which is at the root of their choosing to promote cycling. Cycloactivists often told me that they understand the difficulty for drivers and others to understand the cycling experience if they have not cycled themselves, and that awareness is at the root of performative interventions in the public sphere, i.e. to spur a sense of empathy among urban dwellers (Acosta García 2018). Cycloactivists choose to use their own bodies to highlight their vulnerability in streets and avenues and to make onlookers reflect and act differently.

Most cycloactivists that I met in Mexico City only became avid cyclists in their adult life, after years of not having used the bicycle on a regular basis. Most had learned to cycle as children but had abandoned the practice as they grew older. In different ways, many shared with me the awe they felt when taking up cycling on a regular basis, because they discovered the city and themselves anew. But they also discovered the dangers of a city not used to cyclists, where a lack of effective regulations enables motorists to claim every inch of space in streets and avenues. Cycloactivists therefore demand first of all to

be recognised as legitimate users of public routes as a means of seeking protection from harm from all other actors using such spaces. Their actions are akin to Judith Butler's considerations on precarity as the 'politically induced condition of maximized vulnerability and exposure for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence, to street or domestic violence, or other forms not enacted by states but for which the judicial instruments of states fail to provide sufficient protection or redress' (2015: 33–34).

The intervention that launched cycloactivists onto Mexico City's public scene took place in 2004, during the inauguration of an elevated freeway that was meant to reduce the city's greenhouse emissions by resolving some of the gridlock that abounded in the city. The Mexico City government had tapped into international resources focused on addressing global environmental concerns to expand infrastructures for motorised vehicles as well as renew some public transport networks. For the small group of cycloactivists active at the time, the construction of an elevated freeway only exacerbated the problems and did not solve them. When the first overpass was completed, and as the authorities were getting ready to officially inaugurate it, a group of cyclists snuck in and performed a die-in. This is a tactic according to which activists offer a dramatic representation of risks to human life (Hayes 2006). By lying on the floor, acting as if they had died, activists accomplish two things at once: they occupy a space that may be of symbolic significance (in this case, an avenue that could not be opened to traffic), and they provide photo opportunities for the press, which makes it more likely that the issue at hand will appear in mainstream media outlets. Activists' bodies, therefore, provide the legitimacy for their stated objective. In this case, because authorities had determined that the overpasses were good for Mexico City's environment (by reducing congestion), the cycloactivists' arguments were particularly poignant. The government decided to use some of the funds for the overpass to build the city's first cycleways alongside it. While the result is a far from ideal pathway, with steep inclines to avoid streets, at times too narrow and also exposed to all the fumes of the traffic below the underpass, it was a first step. It also provided activists with a sense of success. 'I was crying [for joy]', Alicia told me in her house as we talked about the first strides of Bicitekas, the cycloactivist group that she is part of: 'Together with gaining access to the metro, it was one of our first victories', she said. Alicia, a housewife and mother of two in her early fifties, is a force to be reckoned with. She is one of the most visible cycloactivists in Mexico City and is frequently invited to talk on mainstream media programmes and at other events.

Through their mobilisation efforts, cycloactivists not only seek to persuade government authorities but also all urban dwellers. For each of these target

audiences, the message is somewhat different. For government authorities, the main message is that cyclists have the right to use city streets and avenues. In fact, they argue, all urban dwellers, but especially those who do not own cars and use other means of transportation, pay the taxes that are used to pave streets and build bridges for motorised vehicles. This means that motorists are subsidised by the users of public transport and pedestrians. For other urban dwellers, cycloactivists want to entice them to become cyclists. They do so through a series of activities and programmes to encourage everyone to have the confidence to use a bicycle to commute to work. One such initiative is called 'Yo te cuido' (I take care of you), which, as David explained to me over a cup of coffee, occurred to him as a way to link volunteer cycloactivists with inexperienced cyclists feeling insecure about cycling in the streets. This assistance is threefold: 1) to identify the best possible route to reach the workplace every day ('a common mistake is that people first want to follow the same route they would take by car or by public transport, and it should be different', David told me); 2) to give pointers about how to use the bicycle in normal traffic ('newbies are used to cycling in the park, but not on city streets'); and 3) to cycle together for a week or so, to help the neophyte gain confidence. For all urban dwellers, the message is not limited to cyclists having the right to use city streets and avenues, but crucially of doing so with preferential treatment by motorists because of their vulnerability.

This message in part informed another protest that I witnessed on a cloudy Saturday morning on the corner of a busy crossing in Mexico City. Part of an intervention that included other activities to highlight the vulnerability of pedestrians, nine cycloactivists wearing bright yellow security vests started riding on the Avenida Revolución. They all had a similar sign hanging from their backs, which had been printed on a grey board: 'I am a ___, one less car.' Each activist filled in the blank space with marker. One read 'mother', another 'engineer', yet another 'architect', and so forth. When they rode onto the avenue, they did not do so on the cycleway that had recently been built on the right side of the route, which is protected from motorised traffic by rectangular cement plant holders. They went straight into the five lanes of traffic. They stuck together as they advanced through the traffic, changing lanes and clearly annoying drivers. Since it was a Saturday, the avenue was not as full nor as hectic as it usually is during weekdays. The purpose of such action, activists told me, was to be seen by motorists and make them pay attention to cyclists as vulnerable human beings, and also to help motorists realise that normal people can ride bicycles and reduce traffic by using fewer cars. This action was part of an activist-led, privately financed campaign called 'Mission: zero' to reduce fatal accidents with pedestrians and cyclists in Mexican city streets.

The activist groups involved are Liga Peatonal (Pedestrian League) and Cultura Vial (Road Culture). The funding company is Cemex, the largest cement factory in the world, which decided to sponsor the national campaign after one of its trucks ran over a cyclist in Mexico City.

The strategies that cycloactivists use to get their messages across vary widely. But in essence, they rely heavily on preaching by example. On cycling city streets, they use their bodies as a show of vulnerability and of deserving rights. They insist on forcing a rethinking of the status quo by highlighting the unfairness and problems perpetuated by current arrangements. One example is that of gender violence (Balkmar 2019). The current levels of insecurity in Mexico City have led several public transport services to segregate areas as being only for women and children. Nevertheless, harassment, violence and even kidnappings of women continue to be reported throughout the city's public transport network. During my fieldwork, a few public campaigns had been launched inviting urban dwellers to identify scenes of abuse and inform authorities. The reason was that passers-by frequently assumed that molesters were annoyed partners. It had become a modus operandi for men to talk loudly as if the woman had been acting up and he was 'taking charge' and taking her home, when in reality he was kidnapping her. Many cycloactivist women that I spoke to told me they felt much safer cycling than on public transport. 'Even if men whistle at me while I'm cycling, it is not as bad as men being close to you when you don't have anywhere to go on a crowded metro car; one moment I'm there, the next a hundred meters ahead', Esther told me. An architect studying philosophy in her early thirties, she was particularly attuned to her bodily experience. Esther combined her studies of architecture, urban design and philosophy with activism, but also with art. She taught dance and performance arts, and she regularly held performances to process the difficulties that she experienced in urban life as a woman in Mexico City. She told me that instead of relying on a victimhood discourse, she sought to take control of the situations that she was faced. Her words reminded me of recent feminist reflections on vulnerability and protest, which laud activists' work as offering 'alternative resources for self-empowerment, collective agency, and protection' (Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 2016: 2).

The bodily experiences of cycloactivists, therefore, guide them in navigating the precarity of life in Mexico City (Butler 2012). One of the challenges that cycloactivists face is in confronting long-held views on inequalities and power hierarchies, which shape the city, its regulations and the behaviour of its inhabitants. Since the bicycle is considered much lower in the pecking order than motorised vehicles, the violence that some drivers direct at riders often presumes a need to subjugate the latter, to show them their place. Cycloactivists have used social media to denounce such attitudes and abuses by

demanding their own right to use city streets and avenues. In some cases, they cite established regulations where such a right is already stated. In others, they argue that their rights need to be expanded because of the imbalance that various modes of transportation imply for their users and passers-by.

For my fieldwork in Mexico City between 2018 and 2020, I frequently rode bicycles, sometimes joining activists in public demands, other times becoming involved in collective rides, but also simply as a form of transportation, to know what thousands of urban cyclists face every day. Many people that I know find Mexico City's streets and avenues daunting. Before this project, I had never imagined that I would cycle on its avenues and even through tunnels. But I did, and it was empowering. After some of my initial conversations with cycloactivists, and after hearing some of them in talks and debates, I felt motivated to be more assertive when riding on two wheels. I thus came to realise how one's attitude changes the experience of cycling on dangerous streets. By overtly asserting my right to ride within a lane, to engage in movement that included not just large, heavy and loud machines, it became easier to cycle on a regular basis. This sentiment certainly did not minimise the risks, though, which were always present. But I also noticed that quite a few drivers were actually very considerate; some kept their distance, others waited for me to advance into a crossing before making a turn, while others still made eye contact and smiled. I also came across a few aggressive drivers, but these encounters were not frequent or overly dangerous. After I met some childhood friends for breakfast, it suddenly dawned on me: I had grown up in a suburb of Mexico City, and during each day of my fieldwork I had seen more cyclists moving around the city than I had remembered seeing during my entire childhood and teenage years combined (I moved away when I turned 18). But the streets were also relatively quieter. Busier, certainly, but less noisy. I remember much less restraint in the use of the car horn, often in rapid compositions translating into rude melodies targeting other drivers or pedestrians. I also remember drivers rapidly accelerating their car as a menacing warning, or shouting and swearing. In contrast, during my fieldwork I only sporadically heard car horns, menacing accelerations or shouts. I could not help but wonder what had led to such a change. It may well have been, I thought, that the city itself had changed. There were also now some red lights for pedestrians, which simply did not exist when I was growing up.

Cycloactivists thus use their experience of cycling in Mexico City's streets as part of their protest repertoire. Their bodies are the message and the medium, used to highlight the poetics and politics of cycling. I could link my own sensory experiences of cycling with anthropological reflections on bodies, where perception and practice are fused as modes of understanding and dealing with

the world (Csordas 1990, 1993). As I cycled on Mexico City's streets, I could also understand some ideas that cycloactivists had shared with me as being crucial to their ongoing activism. The one that I heard quite often, which I had thought was simply a rehearsed statement, was that they had discovered the city anew. Some framed it in terms of distance ('I never imagined places would be so close'), others in terms of navigation ('it is very different than being crammed in a train dozens of meters below ground'), and yet others as a means of discovery ('I have found corners I had no idea existed'). After a few weeks of regular cycling, I also felt like I had experienced the city anew. It was suddenly less scary, less menacing. But, crucially, it also felt more like a process of collaboration instead of consumption. I did not feel like I was using the streets as my road, but that I was negotiating with pedestrians, drivers and others to decide how we would all flow a bit more easily. Sometimes it was not easy, but it worked. It was similar to how cycling allows the rider to perceive many aspects of urban life more immediately. Some of them are uncomfortable, like the stench of sewage, which is at times unbearable. Other times it is quite joyful, like the gentle breeze below a tree beside a park on a warm sunny day. Cycloactivists often insisted to me that they worked to allow more people to discover the city as they do, because the more people who would choose to do so, the nicer the city would become.

## Concluding remarks

Cycloactivists break a few rules in order to get their message across, usually seeking to shed light on what they consider illegitimate policies or procedures. Their rule-breaking activities are meant to attract maximum attention from onlookers and media for their interventions or performances in public areas. By breaking minor traffic regulations or public space use guidelines (like those relating to protests), they seek not to undermine the city government's authority, but to highlight the unjust and unequal treatment that cyclists receive every day. They break those rules using their bodies. Cycling. By riding their bikes or placing their bodies in forbidden spaces, they highlight the vulnerability of individual people on city streets and avenues. But they also complement such bodily performances with texts or statements that justify their actions. In collaboration with established NGOs, activists have developed sophisticated discourses to explain each of their actions. They explain the reasons underpinning the unjust treatment they are calling attention to and demand improvements to protect cyclists and pedestrians. This combined strategy of embodied interventions together with technocratic information and language has managed to galvanise some government institutions as well as international agencies in their favour.

The fact that various government offices have chosen not to pursue any punitive action against activists when they break the rules speaks of a tacit agreement regarding their criticisms. Or at least it refers to a willingness to allow certain rule-breaking actions on their part. For activists, this has provided a sense of righteousness that allows them to continue with their campaigns and strategies without feeling threatened. This in turn has helped the cycloactivist milieu to blossom and spread across the city, with numerous groups being formed in numerous neighbourhoods. These nascent collectives serve the double purpose of promoting cycling throughout the megalopolis and extending the collaborative network that underpins city-wide campaigns.

A risk that cycloactivists often seem to gloss over, however, is that relying so heavily on technical expertise, rhetorical abilities and diplomatic practices to liaise with NGOs and international institutions often means letting well-off activists handle the decision-making, leadership roles and important tasks. While new activists who become involved are given advice and pointers, they do not necessarily receive formal or systematic training. This means that individuals who already have oratory skills and social capital tend to remain the most visible and influential activists in the city. With such privileged positions, the egalitarian ethos that the bicycle has come to represent is undermined. Many of the technocratic discourses used by cycloactivists argue against mobility injustice. All cyclists are vulnerable on urban roads and avenues; but if only a few voices end up shaping collective demands, there is bound to be a disjuncture between statements and reality.

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## SOURCES

### Interviews and other fieldwork materials

All the interviews, fieldwork journals, notes, photos, and videos are in the possession of the author, who conducted interviews himself in Mexico City. The Interviewees' names have been pseudonymised. The following list is in the order of appearance:

Adrián, male, late 20s, cycloactivist & journalist, conversation at the Avenida Insurgentes roundabout, 15 November 2019.

Santiago, male, early 30s, cycloactivist & leader of delivery cyclists' union, interview done at the Parque de los Venados, 5 February 2020.

Karina, female, late 20s, avid cyclist, local government employee and mother of two girls, interview done at a café in the Roma Norte neighbourhood, 3 April 2019.

Alicia, female, late 40s, cycloactivist leader and stay-at-home mother of two boys, interview done in her house, in the Portales neighbourhood, 16 October 2018.

David, male, mid-20s, journalist and organiser of 'Yo te cuido', interview done at restaurant in the Roma Norte neighbourhood, 12 March 2019.

Esther, late 20s, activist on pedestrian rights, architect completing a doctoral degree in philosophy and a performance artist, interview done in a restaurant, in the Colonia del Valle, 24 March 2019.

Fabián, early 30s, activist and entrepreneur, interview done in the Parque de la Bombilla in the Iztapalapa neighbourhood, 23 March 2019.

Sara, late 20s, NGO worker and member of a bikepacker collective, conversation over lunch and on her way back to her office in the Roma Norte neighbourhood, 4 April 2019.

Francisca, mid-30s, government worker in charge of sustainable transportation at the Ministry of Mobility, conversation in a restaurant in the Roma Norte neighbourhood, 10 October 2018; interview done in her office in Chapultepec park, 17 October 2018; presentation at the Café Bicicletero, in a restaurant in the city centre, 21 February 2019.

Javier, late 20s, activist and urban planning student, interview done at the Laboratorio para la Ciudad, in the city centre, 7 June 2018.

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**COMMENTARY**

# Towards New Forms of Engagement – Celebrating 100 Years of Finnish Ethnology

*Coppélie Cocq*

The SIEF2021 congress included the occasion to celebrate the 100 years anniversary of Ethnology in Finland: it was indeed in July 1921 that European Ethnology was established as an independent subject field at the University of Helsinki. A virtual roundtable discussion about Ethnology's societal engagements, the social situatedness of ethnological knowledge, and activism in research took place early in the program of SIEF2021. The session was sponsored by the University of Eastern Finland and chaired by Professor Pertti Anttonen (University of Eastern Finland). Speakers included Professor Emerita Anna-Maria Åström (Åbo Akademi University), Dr. Senior Research Fellow Inkeri Koskinen (University of Tampere), Professor Tuulikki Kurki (University of Eastern Finland), Professor Konrad Kuhn (University of Innsbruck), Professor Valdimar Hafstein (University of Iceland) and myself, at that time Professor of European Ethnology at the University of Helsinki.

The invitation to the event took as a point of departure how ethnology has become increasingly collaborative and interconnected to a variety of environments, and how the "engaged turn" of ethnography has an increased focus on social responsibility and engagement in activities characterized by ethical and even political activism, especially regarding humanitarian and environmental concerns, sustainable development, and minority rights, including those of the non-human kind.

The theme of the congress "Breaking the Rules? Power, participation and transgression" permeated the roundtable discussions, with topics such as activist research, societal responsibility and not least the position of Ethnology in contemporary times. The session was framed around a set of questions for reflection: how does historical development acknowledge the gentrification of the "folk" into the middle class? How collaborative and engagement-oriented are ethnologists when the vox populi has the sound of populism? Are ethnological and folkloristic research intrinsically populistic, even when conducted by an academic elite? What about scientific objectivism when we see how fellow ethnologists are involved and engaged with politics in one way or another? Will scholarly activity and political activity intermingle in ways in which scholarship becomes a handmaiden to explicit or tacit social and political agendas, even when adhering to the scholarly principles of accuracy and


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evidentiality? Or, on the contrary, will European Ethnology once and for all be liberated from the ideological and political agendas to which it was tied in its earlier history, when serving nation-state politics, including its coloniality? These questions aimed to spur discussions regarding our role and responsibility. Ethnology as a field, colored by historical ties to nationalism and Western superiority but now in an increasingly diverse modern society, has a need to reflect upon the paths we are taking.

Professor Pertti Anttonen, an expert in the area of folklore and nationalism (see e.g. Bak, Geary, Klaniczay, & Anttonen 2015) opened the roundtable with a welcoming and thoughtful introduction, followed by Professor Emerita Anna-Maria Åström. Professor Åström, with extensive experience and knowledge in the history of the discipline (see Nilsson & Åström 2021), framed Swedish-language ethnology in Finland as a form of activism. Senior Research Inkeri Koskinen provided new insights from her perspective as a philosopher of science (see Koskinen 2021) asking "Can Activist Research Be Objective?" and discussed problems around participation and methodologies, i.e., how participation can both increase and threaten the objectivity of the research. Together, these two contributions rightly observed the continuity of the engagement of ethnologists, and the social situatedness of our field.

Professor Tuulikki Kurki contributed to the roundtable discussion with a talk entitled "Cultural Change: Publishing Research-Based Knowledge in Unconventional Forums". Professor Kurki's experience and approach to narratives of mobility, borders and intercultural relations (for example, Kurki 2021) reminded us of the role and responsibility of Ethnology in situations out of the ordinary. The contemporary context at the heart of in Professor Kurki's research was strikingly relevant as a contemporary illustration of the context framed in the two first presentations.

Next, Professor Konrad Kuhn shared his reflections about "Societal responsibility and the Search for a Firm Ground in the History of European Ethnology". Based in his previous work on the history of the discipline (see for instance Kuhn & Puchberger 2021) and in the context of this specific event, Professor Kuhn contributed insights into the context(s) of the formation of the field of European Ethnology. While the first presentations had their point of departure in the context of Ethnology in Finland, Professor Kuhn's contribution provided a broader perspective of the field in a larger European context.

The roundtable continued with Professor Valdimar Hafstein (University of Iceland). With an excerpt from a video (Hafstein 2020), he shared his reflections on everyday materiality and how it carries traces of social change, cultural history, ideologies, and cultural references – and how perspectives from ethnology are integrated to a large extent in everyday objects and prac-

tices. Not least, Professor Hafstein stresses how Ethnology is part of a cultural self-understanding and how it shapes society's reflexive understanding of itself.

SIEF president, Professor Nevena Škrbić Alempijević (University of Zagreb) and Professor Bernhard Tschofen (University of Zurich) contributed with reflections based on the inputs from the roundtable participants and in relation to the role and ambitions of SIEF as an international arena. The talks illustrated both concerns for the future of the discipline in several academic contexts in European universities, and the long-term commitment of scholars in times of changes and crisis: political and ideological movements affect how research and education are perceived (and financed!); the direct consequences of global warming and its discourses have shown the need for humanistic perspectives for understanding our societies responses to climate change, to mention a few examples (for additional examples, see dedicated special issues such as Ethnologia Europaea, 50:2 *Brexit Matters*, 2020; Kulturella Perspektiv vol 30 *Tema: Pandemi*, 2021; Ethnologia Fennica, vol 45 *Crisis and Recoveries*, 2018).

The topics and discussions of the round table did not only reflect about the past (the last 100 years) of the discipline in Finland, but also about the present and the future in an international perspective. Altogether, the talks illustrated and confirmed how ethnologists are highly engaged researchers and teachers. This engagement can take different forms and can be positioned on various places on a scale of engagement and activism. We are trained into developing a culturally sensitive approach, identifying and considering a variety of perspectives; the reflexive turn in ethnology has taught us to be careful when talking about objectivity. Ethnology has indeed been part of national agendas but also, and not least, has become about understanding intercultural encounters.

The discipline of European Ethnology has changed and is changing – in Finland, in Europe, in the rest of the world. Early ethnology in Finland was a lot about local cultural history, or with focus on Finno-Ugric people, folk culture, rural areas for instance, in close relation to the German *Volkskunde*, and the Swedish *folklivsforskning*. Since then, it has diversified; examples of the ongoing research at Helsinki university include for instance academic cultures, urban studies, affects and emotions, digital culture, queer identities, digitalization of cultural heritage and education, knitting practices and their significance, and more. Topics of interest then, and still now, albeit premises have drastically changed, include work culture and working life, rural areas, and research with and about cultural heritage institutions, such as museums and archives. There is also continuity in the mobility and exchange between ethnologists in Finland and Sweden.

In my own concluding remarks, I reflected upon how ethnology is becoming increasingly interdisciplinary. Despite the confusing number of terms that the multinational and multilingual contexts have somehow created (etnologia or kansatiede, ethnology, European ethnology, cultural anthropology etc.), our research networks, collaborations and exchanges are solid and consistent. These networks have expanded (both in terms of geographies and disciplines), and will surely continue to expand – hopefully, in even more inclusive and diverse ways, across geopolitical and linguistic boundaries. Not least, I hope for an increased dialog with Sámi and Indigenous studies. Sámi Studies has developed and is developing in relation to and along with the international field of Indigenous Studies (Cocq, 2010; 2022), and both Sámi and Indigenous Studies are established for instance at the University of Helsinki, but also at other universities in the Nordic countries. There is potential for cross-fertilization between these fields and the disciplines of Folkloristics and Ethnology. By being more inclusive, Ethnology (and Folkloristics) would also better reflect the variety of cultural expressions in our own region in our research and teaching.

The modes of research and knowledge production have changed because they could not remain the same after we experienced the "reflexive turn" in early 70s (Rabinow 1978; Clifford & Marcus 1986); and later, the "vernacular turn" (Goldstein 2015), how the relationships of ordinary people to expert knowledge have changed, as we can observe in discourses and action, particularly in environmentalism or issues related to health (and more recently, vaccines).

We also have the internet, which has been called a "digital turn" and the "participatory turn" (Jenkins 2019), as yet another significant factor of change. As the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us - if we did not already know - digital places, networks, tools etc. must be included in our fields or research, our methods, our approaches.

Another change in our discipline is the direct and inevitable consequence of the fact that our societies are experiencing new global migration patterns, climate change and its discourses, politics, and its consequences, as well as pandemics that call our working and social lives into question, and highlight, once again, social, and economic inequalities, within and between our societies.

The discipline of European Ethnology engages with what is happening around us and how we meet societal challenges. Our research, methods and perspectives adapt and evolve. These are our tools to examine, question, challenge ideas, hopefully understand, and, maybe, make a change. As ethnologists in the 2020s, we are not only encountering new changes and challenges. We also bear the heritage of a long research tradition, not only through the work of the others who built the discipline and our research and teaching

environments, but also in the responsibility we have with respect to our colleagues and students.

The future of the discipline of European Ethnology that was celebrated at SIEF2021 is unsure due to economical considerations and priorities. This is something that will sound familiar to several of our delegates participating to the congress, as positions in the humanities are unfortunately under threat in different countries. Nevertheless, the value of the work of our predecessors and colleagues, and the engagement and promising work of colleagues and our students, give me confidence that the future of ethnological thinking, approaches and perspectives will endure. One thing is certain: our perspectives, lenses and knowledge are needed. Moreover, as we keep facing cultural and societal challenges, this need will not decrease.

## AUTHOR

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Simon Halberg

# Birth of the Sleepless Land

## The Arrival of the Sugar Beet and Some Ethnological Observations on the Steam Plough and its Fossil Mode of Operation in Scandinavian Agriculture ca. 1880

**Abstract**

In this paper, I track the arrival of the sugar beet in Scandinavia and explore the technical changes, ecological implications and new social arrangements that followed in its wake. Based on ethnographic records and other historical material dealing with agricultural practices, I argue that an ethnological view that takes the agrarian landscape and the organisation of social life together as one analytical totality may be useful for addressing an important question: What are the implications in everyday life of an energy transition into—and out of—fossil-fuelled food production? The analysis demonstrates that the sugar beet arrived along with fossil fuels, steam ploughing, commercial fertiliser, migrant labour and agricultural consultants in a large infrastructural complex that significantly impacted the landscape. These material elements mirrored the historical victory of bourgeois industrial logic over peasant forms of life whose ecological cornerstone was the fallow land. Agricultural land became sleepless in the Anthropocene—and rural life became fossilised.

Keywords: Black Transition, Cultural Landscapes, Ecological Boundaries, Fossil People, Modes of Operation, Sleepless Land, Steam Plough, Sugar Beets


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## The Spiral of Climate Change Begins

The path to a non-fossil world is sometimes called the Green Transition (Raskin et al. 2002; European Commission 2020). To gain a better perspective on just what such a transition may look like in agriculture, I propose that we take a closer look at its historical opposite—what we may preliminarily call the 'Black Transition'. [1] My argument is that the changes occurring when local landscapes and livelihoods became fossilised has something to tell us about how to defossilise ourselves and our ecology. Based on an ethnographic analysis of the agricultural plans of operation and other material shedding light on practices with the soil, I draw attention to perhaps the most inconspicuous part of the agricultural landscape, the fallow. I argue that the idea of fallow land provides a hidden key to understanding the political ecology of the 'green transition'.

'The spiral of climate change', writes human ecologist Andreas Malm, 'is set in motion by the act of identifying, digging up, and setting fire to fossil fuels' (2016b, 222). The birthplace of the fossil economy was the British textile industry, where steam engines were united with proletarian labour in the factories. Later, fossil-fuelled technologies slowly spread to almost all spheres of human life. From people's clothes, to transportation across oceans, to the way houses were lit, fossil fuels conquered more and more dimensions of social life: first coal, then oil and gas. Even the food we eat somehow ended up deeply embedded in the global commodity flow of the fossil economy (Pfeiffer 2006). A historical break occurred between non-fossil agricultural practices and the globalised agro-food system that emerged after the Second World War. Commenting on the rapid social transformation resulting from the *fossilisation* of agriculture, historian Eric Hobsbawm (1995, 288) wrote that for '80 percent of humanity, the Middle Ages ended suddenly in the 1950s; or perhaps better still, they were felt to end in the 1960s'. In the Scandinavian context, however, there was a historical precursor. Already in the 1870s and 1880s, a sugar industry was established in Sweden and Denmark, and from its inception it was a thoroughly mechanised and industrial form of agriculture. While the 'green revolution' that followed soon after the Second World War was largely fuelled by oil, it was coal that first fossilised sugar landscapes in the 19th century. The contrast between the before and after of fossil-fuelled agriculture is striking in this region at a time when relations between the soil, the landscape and the people who depended on it were rearranged.

To fully grasp the social and ecological implication of 'the black transition', this article revisits the classical ethnological concept of cultural landscapes to

1 What follows is the first results of a research project on the fossilisation of Scandinavian rural life entitled 'Sleepless Land, Fossil People'.

answer the following questions: *Seen from the perspective of landscapes in southern Scandinavia, how did the introduction of coal reorganise ecological circuits in sugar beet agriculture? What social changes were fuelled by this historical energy transition from renewables to fossil fuels? What, in other words, was the political ecology created by the first arrival of fossil fuels in the agricultural regions of Scania and Lolland around 1880?*

By addressing these issues, the article makes an ethnological contribution to ongoing debates on historical energy transitions. While the study of energy as culture is a rapidly growing topic, most ethnographic contributions analyse contemporary attempts at managing energy transition and the cultural problems that arise from such projects (Boyer 2019; Coronil 1997; for an overview of the field, see Smith and High 2017; Halberg forthcoming). Current approaches take a quite different approach than classic historical studies on industrialisation (Landes 1969) because the planetary condition of the Anthropocene has challenged fundamental presumptions about the directionality of social and technological progress in history (see also Pomeranz 2001; Podobnik 2006). Marxist scholars have been particularly successful in demonstrating that the 'black transitions' of the past should really be seen in the light of the social contradictions inherent in particular historical energy systems (Malm 2016; Mitchell 2013). Owing to the industrial basis of Marxist theory, these contributions tend to depict the social world through the labour–capital binary. While the dynamics of this contradiction no doubt account for the rise of fossil capital, as Malm (2016) argues, it tends to lose sight of the people who make up—in one form or another—the peasantries of this world. The goal, then, of this article is to contribute to ongoing discussions based on an ethnographic approach to historical studies on how we became fossil. At a time when most discussion of energy shifts are dominated by technological discourse, I would like to propose a more synthetic approach that allows us to see how political struggle over what makes life worth living takes place in relation to technologies in the landscape. Seen from the perspective of the Anthropocene, there is good reason to begin describing the energy transition involving fossil fuel with new metaphors that highlight the social and ecological contradictions of it rather than dissolve them into gradualist, historical narratives. Whereas most historiographies of this agrarian revolution, as Boyhus (1976, 27) writes, deal with it in terms of 'development and progress' and thus describe 'the problems from without and retrospectively', I opt for another narrative—one that relies more on metaphoric reasoning (the sleepless land and the black transition) to highlight the point that a landscape with and without fallows are two fundamentally different ecologies, in which people's lives are governed by different concerns.

The first part of this article addresses these issues by tracking how the introduction of the first truly industrial crop in Northern Europe, the sugar beet, brought changes to the cultivation system and the landscape as a whole. The second part of the article discusses, on this ecological basis, how such changes impacted social stratification. It makes the argument that through fossil means, the lives of rural people—peasants, crofters and land-lords—were subjugated to an industrial logic. But first, a few words on the materials, methods and theory.

## Archival Explorations of the Sleepless Land

The approach of the article is an attempt to return to the methods and theoretical objects typical of early 20th-century ethnological studies of preindustrial peasants (Campbell 1928; Lerche & Steensberg 1980), but from the premises set out by current political issues and critical theories on social contradictions in the Anthropocene (Malm 2016). While the latter approach is grounded in a project of engaged political ecology, the former implies returning to the study of rural life in the style of the former ethnologists. I aim to bridge this epistemic gap by relating classical ethnographic questions about the cyclicity of peasant life, the yearly rhythms of agricultural activities, the relationship between cultivators and tools, the relationship between production and reproduction in daily life to questions about social class and ideology in the Anthropocene.

Thus, I have brought my research question regarding the role of fossil fuels in ecological circuits and the transformation of social relations to a study of archival material at the National Archive of Denmark and the Ethnological Investigations (NEU) at the National Museum of Denmark. In these archives, I have consulted manorial records for a selection of manorial estates that were among the first to introduce not only the sugar beet but also steam ploughing. It was possible to use this material to reconstruct the agricultural cycle of what was grown on what parts of the fields through analysis of the so-called 'plans of operation' (*driftsplaner*) (De Danske Sukkerfabrikker [Højbygaard] 1882–1934, 214).

Any standard account of agricultural history will mention that steam ploughs were first used on the large estates when farmers began to cultivate sugar beets, and that this period of transition marks the historical time when the fallow was abandoned once and for all (Bjørn 1988, 274; Nilsson 1981, 104**)**. The next sections of the article explore the ecological, social, ideological and political implications of a landscape without fallow. Cadastral maps have provided one way of linking the ecological cycles to forms of social organisation both before (Cadastral Map 0481652) and after (Cadastral Map

0481652) the 'black transition' at one particular manor, Højbygård. The maps reveal certain social aspects of the shift by showing how the boundaries in the landscape changed over time, pointing to the coexistence of one type of agricultural unit with others—other manors, adjacent yeomen farms, cottages, villages and infrastructure connected to the central factories. The internal communication of the sugar factory illuminates how people reacted to the socio-ecological contradictions at the time, describing how consultants should convince peasants to fossilise by growing beets in land that used to lay fallow (Nakskov Sukkerfabrik). The Ethnological Investigations (NEU M 14.726) offer a bottom-up perspective of a 'yeoman' farmer (*gårdmand*) who signed such a contract with the sugar factory shows some implications for farm labour in terms of intensity and gender divisions.

Højbygaard is a particularly interesting estate because it was the first estate in Denmark to acquire a steam plough. Not only do existing records describe the arrival of this technological novelty, the owner of the estate, Erhard Frederiksen, was himself a very active debater on issues of agricultural modernisation. Frederiksen's writings (1892) provide a diagnosis of the old landscapes and what he considered to be the (fossil) remedy. Like the 'plans of operation', this publication brings us very close to the soil and the patterns of crop rotation.

Finally, this section of materials also introduces the main character of this story, an engineer named Gustav Adolph Hagemann (1842–1916), who, perhaps more than any other individual, was the central figure in the first wave of the fossilisation of Scandinavian agriculture. More than anyone else, he found ways for fossil capital to come into contact with the various agrarian sectors. Backed by the great financiers of the time, he was appointed to develop the technical systems necessary to develop a domestic sugar industry capable of competing with the colonial production of cane. As it turned out, he would also become heavily involved in modernising the colonial production of sugar in the post-emancipation decades. His publications, which form the last major group of material used for the purposes of this study, reveal how the colonial experiences played an important role in the formation of a sleepless land domestically as well (Hagemann 1875, 1885).

All the archives consulted for the study were created either by a state that mapped out its landscape and the people who inhabited it or by capitalist companies that grew from nothing to become masters of both the economy and ecology in the 19th century. As scholars at the archive pointed out, the process of reworking the observations about cadastral boundaries in the landscape, plans of operation and ethnographic knowledge about traditional ways of life into structured information on the world *outside* the archive is always directed as much towards the future as it is the past (Derrida 1995, 24). The archives bear witness to the birth of the sleepless land, with all the reorganisation of

social life involved in such a transition, but they do so from a very particular point of view. What they show is not so much the world as it was, but the friction between the fossil world-building projects of people like Hagemann and the old (non-fossil) world that resisted and challenged the fossilisation process.

We return to this material to show that even in something as apparently neutral as the cadastral map, we find the social contradictions between state, capital and rural population materialised not just in the landscape but also in the documents that have been long hidden away (Scott 1998, 89–91). Clearly, as already predicted by Derrida (1995, 9–11), we are dealing with archives of a very hierarchical nature. After all, non-fossil peasants tended to produce few archives; the etymological root of the word archive means both 'commencement' and 'commandment'. If such documents were originally created to bring a certain future into being—an agricultural landscape without fallow, hence the title of this paper—we return to them now from the Anthropocene to read them against the grain and to ask who would be responsible for realising that future, and by what means.

We return to the propagandistic writing of the proponents of progress to expose that such a linear vision of history was, since the beginning, fuelled by coal and oil. While the archives are silent on matters that did not capture the biopolitical interest of state or the economic interest of the corporations at the time, even still, if we combine the scattered evidence and bring in other analyses and theoretical perspectives, it should be possible to provide at least a vague outline of some of the landscapes and forms of life that was suppressed by the fossil modes of operation. In the following section, by studying the historical contradiction of the great energy transition between a sleeping and a sleepless land not as a form of progress but as political ecology, we will try to catch a glimpse of the possibility of another world. The Ethnological Investigations materials are of particular interest in this regard since researchers actively sought out the experiences of ordinary people, who are usually not the subject of interest in hierarchical archives, though it is safe to assume that the state no doubt had concerns other than the peasants when creating its impressive ethnographic record. With Derrida, we might even say that these archives produce, simultaneously, a peasant past and a national future. First, however, a few words on the theoretical framework underlying such a metaphorical reversal of the archive. From an ethnological standpoint, we may even go a step further and begin to understand the landscape itself as an archive, although a rather non-verbal one. As an archive, the landscape shelters its own hierarchical etymology; 'it also shelters itself from this memory which it shelters: which comes down to saying that it forgets it', as Derrida notes (1995, 9). The article now reads the archive against the grain, as the habitat of the fossil people.

## Landscapes as Ecological Culture

In Nordic ethnology, the study of cultural landscapes leads back to Åke Campbell, whose pioneering studies in the 1920s and 1930s were ground-breaking in the sense that they created the landscape as a topic of analysis (Campbell 1928, 1936). At a time when much of agriculture was, in Hobsbawm's words, still in the Middle Ages, Campbell saw clearly that a fundamental break in the ecological system had occurred with the arrival of fossil fuels and industrial rationality. Like many ethnologists of his time, he was primarily interested in describing, analysing and theorising about the culture that was lost in the processes of modernisation rather than assessing the cultural structures of modernity itself (Gustavsson 2014). However, the analytical framework he employed is just as relevant for a study of the modern industrial, or fossil, landscapes.

Returning to the mode of analysis introduced in the writings of Campbell implies at least two things. First of all, it implies that landscapes have been changed through human intervention to the degree that they can be considered cultural products. This is the material side of the landscape, and an analysis of it implies studying environments as a product of human practices.

> Only when humans grabbed the tool and the fire, and with them, built up his existence in forms other than that of the animal did the new factor of landscape formation come into being: the culture or the technique. Human beings are the only beings that have managed to plant extra-bodily organs, tools, and with these organise the environment according to their purposes. Through human settlement and cultivation, a cultural landscape with villages, towns and cities is formed out of a natural landscape. (Campbell 1936, 5, *my translation*)

Second, Campbell shows that the concept of cultural landscape implies a more subjective or ideological focus. Since the use of tools is never random but carried out based on the specific goals of the people working the landscape, ideas too are inscribed into the environment. He writes: 'a human group, in its treatment of the landscape, strives for or is driven towards expressing and realising its cultural, economic and political ideas. It becomes an ethnological task to analyse these' (Campbell 1936, 36–37). For ethnologists, the landscape then is the archive of life that was lived; life that also created, objectively in the landscape, the conditions for future life.

In his writings from the 1920s and 1930s, Campbell was looking backward in time, not forward. The orientation towards salvaging the disappearing material culture of mid-20$^{th}$-century ethnology could be one reason why analysts such as Campbell never scrutinised the industrial landscapes that are today

being problematised politically (Löfgren 1981). Such landscapes, in contrast, are the central point of focus in this article. To understand the ecological culture of the fossil age, we might supplement the two dimensions of landscape—the material and the ideological—with a third: a temporal dimension, which views the landscape as a process.

Campbell and other landscape theorists mobilised many concepts to capture this temporal aspect of a landscape (e.g., Ingold 1993; Boserup 1965). From this praxeological perspective, the different forms of cultural landscapes—forests, bush, plains, intensive fields, plantations, and so forth—have been understood as the material side of an agricultural practice that managed the flow of resources over time. Swidden agriculture, for instance, might look like a forest to a stranger, but agriculturalists at the time viewed the entire landscape as a productive one, where most of the fields 'rest' and reproduce themselves, while a few—maybe 1 out of 20—yield harvests at any given time (Boserup 1965, 11–12). In principle, we can consider such a system a specific mode of operation, which is the more general term often used in Scandinavian terminology (*driftsform*).[2] This means looking at any practice from the standpoint of technology and ecology (Højrup 2003, 265). As such, the *mode of operation* concept suggests a way to analyse culture that accounts for the relations between landscapes, methods and principles of operation, as well as the tool complex of the studied practice.[3] By focusing on mode of operation, we are able to describe a cyclical system of cultivation that produces products and landscapes at the same time via the application of a certain technology (Bernild & Jensen 1978, 74). A classic example is the feudal three-field system, where a regime consisting of a heavy wheeled-plough divided the arable land into three parts, with the crops being rotated in a settled sequence: rye–barley–fallow (White 1972, 39; Wolf 1966). With this concept, we explore the dialectic between how social groups organise themselves in the landscape around them and how they shape this landscape to suit their preferences. Let us see then what the landscape was like at the time sugar beets and steam ploughs arrived in the later 19th century.

2 The term *driftsform* is used by farmers as a descriptive term and by ethnologists as an analytical concept. It is an etic and an emic concept in Danish and Swedish. Campbell, for his part, often used the term 'forms of cultivation' (*odlingsformer*).

3 In ethnology and anthropology, the notion of ecotype has also been mobilised to analyse this relationship between humans and ecology. The use of the concept was popularised by the anthropologist Eric Wolf in his famous work *Peasants* (1966), and a similar approach was adopted by Scandinavian ethnologists such as Bjarne Stoklund (1976) and Orvar Löfgren (1976). Valuable as they are, these studies focus more on how people adapt to ecological niches than on how they actively produce such ecologies themselves. My ambition here is to focus on the latter.

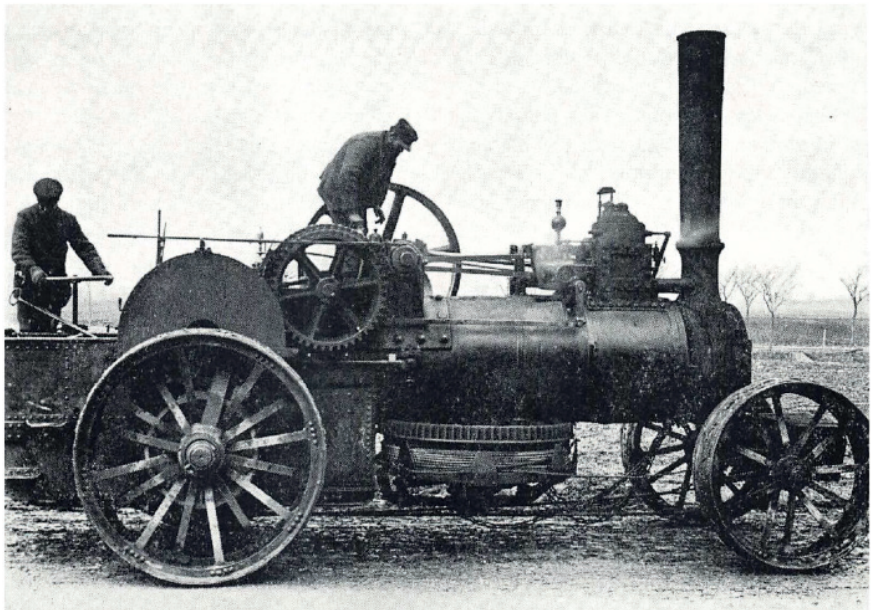


Figure 1. One of the two Fowler steam ploughs that arrived at Højbygård in 1872; they remained in use for almost sixty years, until 1929 (picture from Boyhus 1973).

## Ploughing with Steam, Growing with Coal

On the 22nd of October 1872, the residents of Maribo, in Lolland, Denmark, gathered around the western edge of town to watch a remarkable spectacle. Around midday, writes the local paper, two traction engines (*lokomobiler*) came steaming down from the north on their way to the first sugar factory, where they were to plough the fields that had been chosen for sugar beet cultivation.

> The machines were driven with much ease along the country road and although they with coal, water, and remaining apparatuses weighed about 30,000 pounds each, they moved with remarkable lightness over the uneven cobbled road as well as over newly macadamised road. (*Lollands Posten*, as cited in Boyhus 1976, 26)

These new traction engines were destined to replace the horses that, until then, had pulled the plough through the wet and heavy soils of a large estate, Højbygaard. Sugar beets needed, the fossil pioneers had learnt in Germany, the type of deep ploughing that the expensive machinery had been brought in to do. Whereas the horses would feed on the hay or graze in the marginal soils—like meadows—the steam engine consumed coal and coal alone.

But the problem of the ecological boundary remained. Even if the soil would now be ploughed deeper than before, and the horses made redundant, thus

clearing the way for specialisation, the question of fertility was not solved in this way alone. Hagemann was quite aware of the limits of fertility: 'Without punishment, can nobody, year after year, take crop after crop from the earth without payment-in-full' (Hagemann 1885, 5). Recognising the ecological boundaries of any mode of operation, Hagemann imagined an ingenious system for the plains of southern Scandinavia in which sugar beets did not come at the expense of other crops. Sugar beets, his argument went, would only be a supplement to the existing crops, though the same could in principle be said for other root vegetables, like potatoes and fodder beets (Sveistrup & Willerslev 1945, 218). There is, however, an important difference in that fact that a sugar beet needs industrial processing to gain use-value, whereas the other root vegetables have immediate value in the ecological circuit of a farm, thus rendering industrialists superfluous (Boyhus 1976, 33). As Hagemann writes:

> It [the sugar beet] is brought into the ordinary crop rotation so that it neither reduces the areas of grain nor the green crops upon which the summer nutrition rests, but instead takes the parts of the field that 'rest' or is little profitable (the fallow and the perennial grassland) in the ordinary extensive operation. Its significance is that it can replace the necessary 'rest' and 'cleansing' of the earth of ordinary operation. It requires a deep and energetic treatment of the soil to become profitable and even in summer a—by the power of hand and horse—working between the plants by which the soil is kept loose and porous and seeds of weed are brought to germination and destruction. It has hereby the same influence in the rotation as the fallow and leaves the soil loosened to a great depth, free from weeds and, by the rich plenitude of leaves and roots, enriched with Humus. Moreover, it demands a plentiful supply of fertiliser to succeed. In this way, it becomes the means to very intensive use of the soil and a passage from the ordinary extensive form of operation to the intensive proper alternating operation [*Vexeldrift*], a rotation where a regular alternation between grains with long straws and short leaves and an appropriate area with 'Chop Fruit' [*Hakkefrugt*, i.e., beets] allows one to do away with the fallow and the 'rest' of the soil. (Hagemann 1885, 8–9)

A plentiful supply of fertiliser was the key to overcoming 'the "rest" of the soil', as Hagemann metaphorically called the fallow. Before becoming reality, the sleepless land was a vision in the minds of bourgeois industrialists like Hagemann.[4] Transgressing the boundary of 'sleep' is first an idea, then a

4 While Hagemann did diagnose the old agrarian landscape, based on renewable sources of energy, as a 'resting' one, he did not talk about 'developed' landscapes as sleepless ones. But one only has to bring his own ideas to their logical conclusion for the fossil landscapes to appear as sleepless. I think it is high time to begin to turn the metaphors of 'progress' on their head and see them more for their ecological rather than ideological implications.

| | FIELD NO. 1 | NO. 2 | NO. 3 | NO. 4 | NO. 5 | NO. 6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1873 | *1st year clover* | Oats & barley | Barley & peas | Winter wheat | *Fallow* | *2nd year clover* |
| 1874 | *2nd year clover* | *1st year clover* | Oats & barley | Barley & peas | Winter wheat | *Fallow* |

Table 1. Plan of operation (*driftsplan*) for Højbygaard, 1873–74 (De Danske Sukkerfabrikker, 1882 – 1934); crops that help restore soil fertility shown in *italics*.

reality. But there is an interesting tension at work in this quote. On the one hand, Hagemann recognises that the ecological boundary is fundamental to any system of operation, and at the same time he argues for an intensification of cultivation. The solution to this ecological contradiction was the introduction of commercially available fertilizers: first in the form of guano, rock granulate and superphosphate (called 'chemical' in the sources), later in the form of artificially produced fertiliser (Smil 2004). This marked a conceptual and ecological shift from locally produced manure to a source of fertility that was bought and sold on the global market. 'From 1880 to 1895, the import of chemical fertilizers quadrupled', Björk writes: 'and nowhere was the use more widespread than in Malmöhus (the south-western part of Scania), where about three-quarters of the Swedish sugar beets were grown. Here the use of chemical fertilizers was almost double the Swedish average at the beginning of the twentieth century' (2009, 61–62). Chemical fertiliser became the fossil amphetamine that kept soil awake year after year, by digging deeper and deeper into a mine somewhere else on the planet. Now, the most fertile areas of southern Scandinavia have experienced 150 years of sleeplessness.

When the two steam ploughs found their way to Højbygaard, its 800 hectares of arable land became the first in Denmark to be continually ploughed by steam. Owned by an aristocratic dynasty, it had—like so many of the manors in the fertile plains of Scania and Lolland—a long-standing tradition of employing agricultural managers that directed a large labour force of rural workers. Therefore, it also had, as we will see, quite good conditions for managing the transition to large-scale sugar beet cultivation. The archive of the estate at the National Archive of Denmark (*Rigsarkivet*) contains plans of operation for what was cultivated in the fields during those years. An excerpt from the years 1873–1874 shows the cultivation system before beets were introduced; a system called the 'Holstein system' (*kobbelbrug*) (Lampe & Sharp 2018, 67).

In this pre-industrial system, the arable land of the manor was divided into six fields—of around 130 hectares each—of which one lay fallow and two

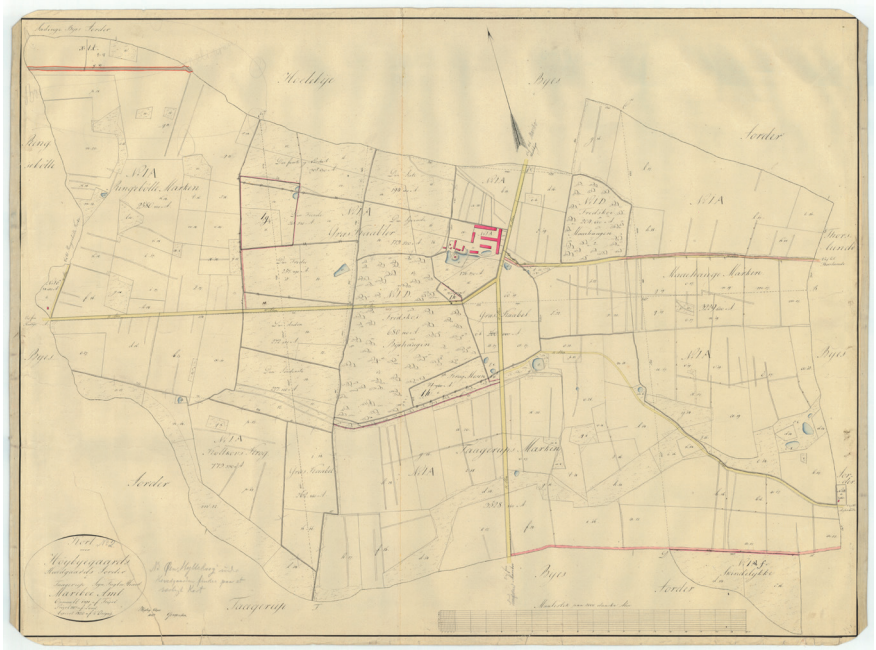


Figure 2. Cadastral map of Højbygaard, 1862–1882 (0481652). The old and sleeping land was still a pre-fossil mosaic of different functions, where animal husbandry and the cultivation of plants were interconnected in a cycle of rest and yield; marginal soils, like meadows and wet lowlands, would provide fodder for the draft animals that still drew the plough before sugar beets.

provided a combination of fodder and regeneration of the soil by means of clover. In the analogy of sleep, the land in such a system rested roughly half the time, with one-sixth of it remaining decidedly fallow and a third resting with the clover. The landscape still had the character of a mosaic of different parts, weaving together wakefulness and sleep, production and reproduction.

Let us then see how the arrival of beets, steam ploughs and artificial fertiliser woke up this sleeping land. The same archive also contains plans of operations from the year 1880, after the new system had been implemented.

The six fields were reduced to four, and the fallow parts had been eliminated. The only trace of 'rest' left in this system of cultivation is the clover, which had been reduced from a third to an eighth of the arable land. Whereas half the land before had had a reproductive function in the versatile and integrated cultivation of animals and plants, specialisation has now set in. After the introduction of beets, all crops except clover were directed towards the market. The individual fields grew in size—as they colonised the fallow and meadows—and none of them slept. In Danish, such a system is called *veksel-*

| | NO. 1<br>200 ACRES | NO. 2<br>200 ACRES | NO. 3<br>200 ACRES | NO. 4<br>200 ACRES |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1880 | Beets | ½ Wheat<br>½ Spring grain | ½ Legumes<br>*½ Clover* | Barley |
| 1881 | Barley | Beets | ½ Wheat<br>½ Spring grain | ½ Legumes<br>*½ Clover* |

Table 2. Plan of operation (driftsplan) for Højbygaard, Lolland (De Danske Sukkerfabrikker, 1882–1934); crops that help restore soil fertility shown in *italics*.

*brug* or *vekseldrift*, terms that do not translate easily. Sometimes, these terms are translated into English as 'crop rotation' or 'alternating cultivation', but the central idea to highlight is that this is a system in which all fields are under cultivation every year *without* having to rely on a large stock of cattle and horses to provide the manure, as was the case in the 'Norfolk system'. We are dealing, in other words, with a system where the abundance of steam power and commercial fertiliser made it possible to separate animal raising from crop breeding—contrary to the 'Norfolk system', which integrated animals and plants even more intensely and which was predicated on the fundamental conceptual shift that accompanies a steady flow of energy into operations from beyond its own ecological boundaries. *Vekseldrift* is, in this sense, a globalised mode of operation.

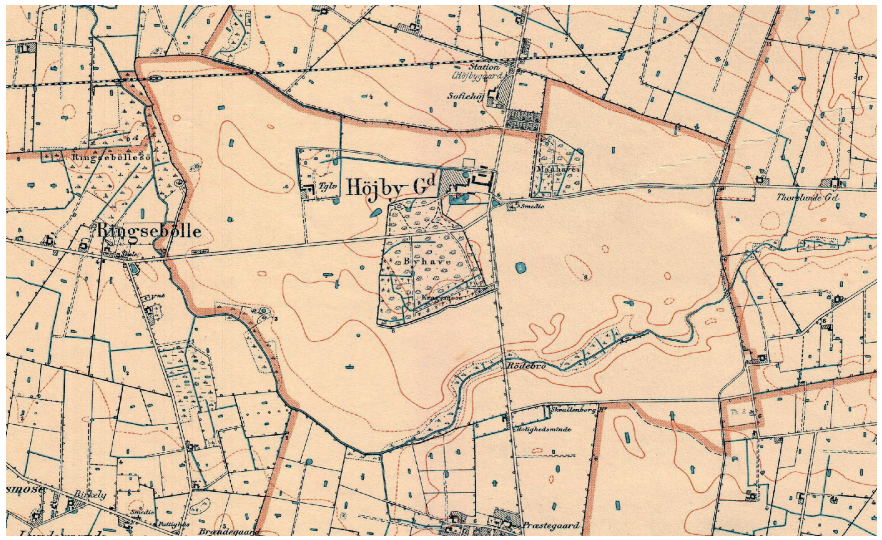



Figure 3.Højbygaard, based on a topographical map (*målebordsblad*) of Holeby from 1908 (4623); the marginal soils lost their reproductive function as steam engines ploughed the fields, which began to grow in size to fit the four-course rotation of the fossil mode of operation.

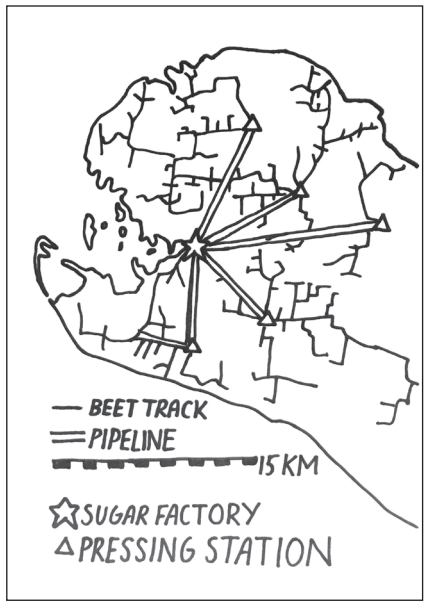



Figure 4. The landscape as a productive organism. Lolland, around 1900, when the central factory in Nakskov was supplied with beet juice from five pressing stations. The stations were, for their part, supplied with beets on beet tracks. Large parts of the agrarian landscape within a perimeter of 30 kilometres grew beets for the factory. For the sugar crystals to emerge out of the juice produced by the sleepless land, incredible amounts of energy were needed to boil away the water. 'For every pound of sugar that was produced in 1875', writes environmental historian Frederik Björk, 'up to four pounds of coal were used in the factories' (Björk 2009, 62) (drawing by the author).

The effort to do away with the sleeping land depended on the steam plough, or later on a tractor, to replace the draft animals. After this, another logistical problem remained: How to transport the enormous amounts of beets to the central factory? Hagemann in this instance as well devised a solution. He designed a system inspired by the work of the French engineer Jules Linard, who had won a gold medal at the Universal Exposition of 1867 in Paris. A central factory would be supplied with a steady flow of beet juice—or sugar cane juice in the colonies, where Hagemann first implemented the system—pumped through pipelines from pressing stations located five to fifteen kilometres away, in the sleepless landscape. Some central factories had as many as five pressing stations distributed evenly throughout the hinterland. During the harvesting season, many people would be employed to receive and process the beets and pump the juice into the beating heart of the landscape organism. But even moving the beets from the field to the local pressing station posed too big a task for many cultivators, so eventually a small railway was built, running along so-called beet tracks, which extended further out into the beet fields from the pressing stations. In this way, millions of tons of beets were brought to the factory furnaces each year.

During the last decades of the 19th century, this landscape model spread from the Danish sugar colony of St. Croix, in 1878, to Lolland, where the first station opened in Nakskov in 1880, in Landskrona in 1883 and in Nykøbing Falster in 1885. Soon afterwards, the model had spread its infrastructural arms to encompass all the most fertile soils of southern Scandinavia, across the border in Sweden.

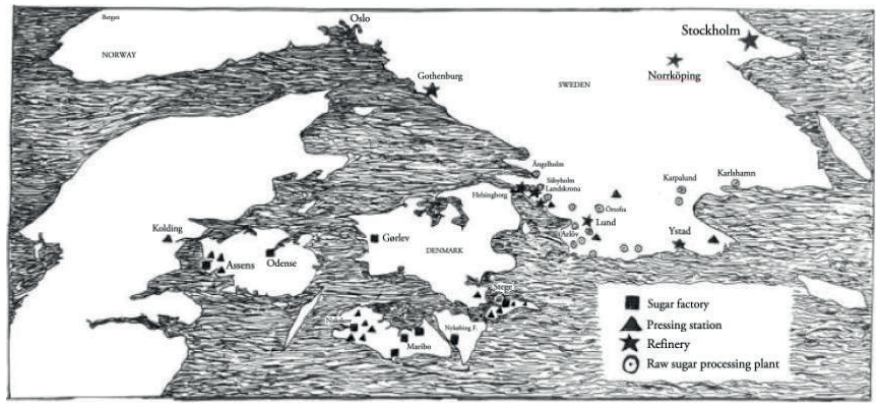
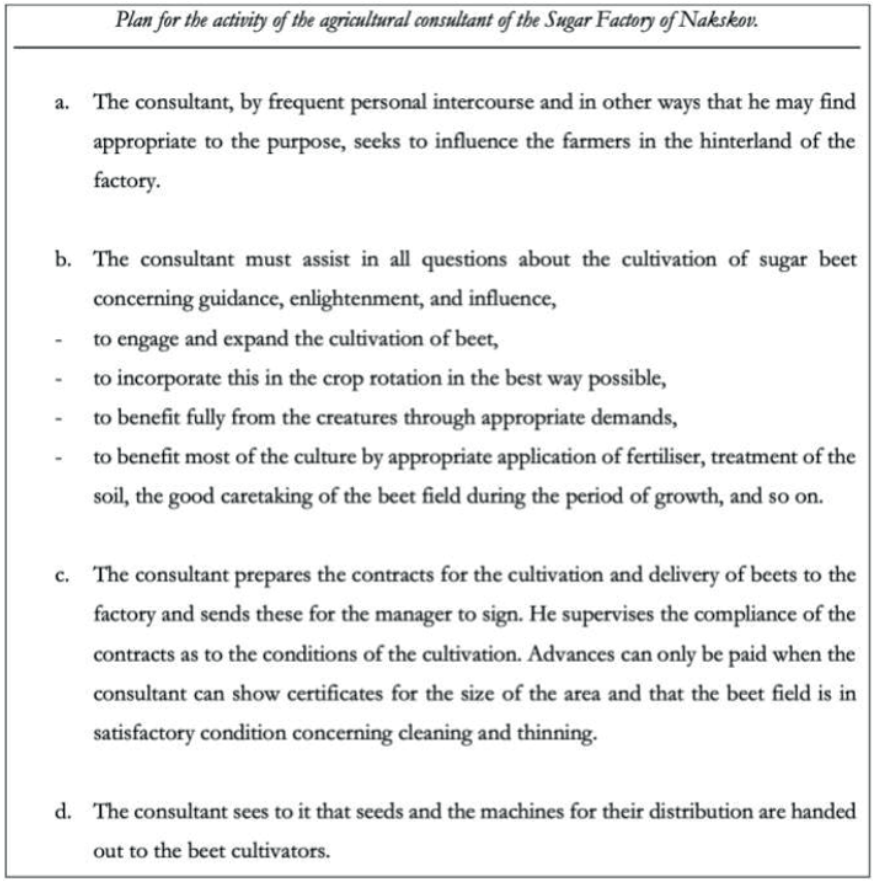



Figure 5. Distribution of sugar beet cultivation and sugar factories in southern Scandinavia around 1920; sugar cultivation had become a reality in most fertile soils, everywhere clustered around a central sugar factory (drawing by the author).

## Colonisers of the Fallow

Many moments of mediation were needed to forge the necessary links between industrial capital and agrarian landscapes. Investors, consultants, migrant labourers and their overseers arrived at the sleepless landscapes to assist in transgressing the ecological boundaries of the fallow. Driven by the logic of homogenisation and ecological exchangeability, factory managers like Hagemann encountered the old agricultural world as complex, messy and tied to a specific time and place. This 'rootedness' of agrarian life stood before them as a concrete socio-ecological obstacle to capital accumulation. The problem was simple enough: a sugar factory needs a steady flow of beets that it can rely on. But before the second half of the 19th century, no sugar beets had been planted in the landscape. Within the logic of preindustrial peasant life, there was no impetus to cultivate crops that were overly demanding in energy and labour and had no direct use-value (because of the need for industrial processing). The sugar industrialists, thus, were faced with the problem that they had to create the market on which they based their production. This problem gave rise to a social practice that is today a common trait in agriculture: the hiring of consultants to drive changes in the mode of operation to better align 'independent producers' with the logic of the industrial sector. Erhard Frederiksen, the owner of Højbygaard and the first two steam ploughs, later became chief agricultural consultant for Hagemann. In an internal memo to his consultants working on the grounds, Hagemann clarified the chief objectives:

The consultants were the link between the industrial and the agrarian spheres, and the sugar beet was their biological materialisation. Contrary to grain crops like rye, barley and wheat, which grow only one stem, the beet



*Plan for the activity of the agricultural consultant of the Sugar Factory of Nakskov.*

a. The consultant, by frequent personal intercourse and in other ways that he may find appropriate to the purpose, seeks to influence the farmers in the hinterland of the factory.

b. The consultant must assist in all questions about the cultivation of sugar beet concerning guidance, enlightenment, and influence,
- to engage and expand the cultivation of beet,
- to incorporate this in the crop rotation in the best way possible,
- to benefit fully from the creatures through appropriate demands,
- to benefit most of the culture by appropriate application of fertiliser, treatment of the soil, the good caretaking of the beet field during the period of growth, and so on.

c. The consultant prepares the contracts for the cultivation and delivery of beets to the factory and sends these for the manager to sign. He supervises the compliance of the contracts as to the conditions of the cultivation. Advances can only be paid when the consultant can show certificates for the size of the area and that the beet field is in satisfactory condition concerning cleaning and thinning.

d. The consultant sees to it that seeds and the machines for their distribution are handed out to the beet cultivators.

Figure 6. An internal memo to the consultants (De Danske Sukkerfabrikker, 1882–1934).

was a much more labour-intensive crop because each seed germinated many times. For the beets to be industrially processable, it was necessary to thin the excess germinations two or three times during the growing season. This meant that a successful harvest required endless days of backbreaking work, with labourers bending down for hours on end to remove all weeds and side shoots from the growing beet. Beet farming was, well into the 20th century, horticulture on the scale of a plantation, quite unlike any other crop cultivated on a large scale in this part of the world. Due to the enormous labour demand, sugar beets became known as the 'disciplinarian of the farmer' (Björk 2009, 61). In this way, it was not only land that was awakened out of sleepiness, so too were the farmers (this, anyway, was the perspective of people like Hagemann, who considered them lazy for not doing anything productive with the fallow). However, since the agriculturalists by no means formed a homogenous group, it is important to note how they were divided into dif-

ferent groups and discuss how they shaped the landscape differently, thereby engaging in the 'black transition' in various ways.

Logically speaking, we might divide any agricultural unit of operation into one of three categories. First, we can imagine a plot of land that is too large for its holders to operate on their own. Disregarding for the moment the judicial system in place—which defined whether the landholders was the owner or the rightful user of the land—both a plantation and a large manor required externalised labour. The size of the landholding was so large that even should the aristocrat or the colonial planter have wanted to cultivate it on their own, which, generally speaking, they did not, it would not have been possible. Second, imagine a plot of land that would have been the right size for the landholders to operate by themselves: the operational unit could very well have been the family, even though only one member of the family might have been considered the rightful owner or user of the land. In this case, the productive potential of the land would have corresponded to the needs and abilities of the operators—whatever cultural differences there might have been in that respect. Third, imagine a plot of land that would have been too small, especially considering the prevailing mode of operation, for the operators to reproduce their own livelihood from it. Such an agricultural agent would clearly have then needed to supplement land practices with something else to stay in business. As it turns out, all of these logical possibilities existed empirically in and around the sleepless lands of southern Scandinavia at the end of the 19th century.[5]

The smallest units were the crofters' plots of land, which were often no more than a few hectares in size and rarely more than five in number. For most such smallholders, it was impossible to make a living off the land, so supplementary incomes were necessary. The same villages also included larger farmsteads of around 20–30 hectares of land, making them, by European standards, quite large farms, and the households also consisted of farmhands and other helpers not related to the family (Christiansen 1982, 45). Finally, the third category included larger estates with aristocratic or bourgeois owners who cultivated enormous areas. There was great variation within the group,

5 These distinctions are a classical topic in ethnological treatments of social stratification in rural society. It is, however, noteworthy that in the English context, the yeomanry seems to have disappeared from cultural history centuries earlier. This difference has had a deep impact on social and cultural theories of agricultural life. Marx, for example, painted a picture of agriculture as a social world consisting of landowners, capitalist managers and agricultural labourers as three distinct categories. In his formulation, and in many other British-oriented agrarian sociology studies, the importance of a class of independent producers, yeomen in different forms, unfortunately fades away or disappears altogether.

| The size of the properties in *hectares* | Area cultivated with sugar in *per cent* |
|---|---|
| 0-4 | 0.8-2.6 |
| 4-64 | 3.0-3.4 |
| 64-128 | 6.1 |
| More than 128 | 11.6-15.7 |

Table 3.Percentage of the sugar beet area out of the total arable land in Falster, ca. 1900, by farm size and area cultivated with beets (adapted from Sveistrup & Willerslev 1945).

though, with landholdings ranging from hundreds to thousands of hectares, meaning the owners could not do the agricultural work themselves. These manors and proprietary farms were estates that depended on an external labour force. Economic historians have found that at around the turn of the century, the smallest agricultural units devoted the least amount of land to the cultivation of sugar beets, while the large estates devoted much greater shares of their lands to it (Sveistrup & Willerslev 1945).

The reason for this distribution was not a cultural reality organised linearly based on different degrees of modernisation, in the sense that the large estates would have been more 'modern' than the less 'developed' cottages. Rather, it is important to consider the different levels of *fossilisation* as expressions of qualitatively different practices, that is, of different modes of life and operation (Halberg forthcoming**)**. To understand how a landscape becomes sleepless, the ethnological task, to paraphrase Campbell, becomes that of analysing the social group that 'is driven towards expressing and realising its cultural, economic and political ideas' in the landscape (1936, 36–37). Behind the word *beet farmer*, thus, we find a variety of logics and practices at work. In the following pages, I take a closer look at the main types of agricultural practices that sustained the sleepless land: large estates, independent yeomen and a rural proletariat of smallholding crofters.

*Landowners*. As the feudal system crumbled, the aristocrats, with their large, landed property holdings, needed to adjust to a changing world. Gone were the days when peasants were obliged to deliver labour to their local lords. Instead, the landowners had to procure workers from a more or less 'free' market. The cultivation of sugar beets for the new, more global industry was one appealing way for the large landowners of southern Scandinavia to overcome the *challenge of modernisation* (Bengtsson et al. 2019, 29). From the perspective of the sugar factory, the large estates were appealing as suppliers because of their size. The sugar industry would create the infrastructure to bring the beets from the field to the factory, but the landowners had to implement sys-

tems of operation for cultivating beets that did not depend on the fallow. One of the large landowners who pioneered the cultivation of sugar beets even saw the beet as a saviour plant that could bring feudal agriculture into the modern world (Sveistrup & Willerslev 1945, 205). The aristocratic landowners would not and could not do the heavy work of thinning and cleaning the endless beet fields. But who, then, was to do it?

Already before any beets had been sown in Denmark, a national committee was established to address the problem of thinning the beet, which was not easy since it required backbreaking labour, walking bend forward with nose to the ground, all day long, which most men refused to do. A politician who would become minister of agriculture a few years later wrote in 1915 that,

> the men can hardly reconcile [themselves] with the crooked position that is required for a good result. They consider themselves disqualified to do so since, they argue, as I have often heard it, [they seem] to lack the extra hinge that women are presumed to possess (Boyhus 1973, 121–122).

Every season, therefore, thousands of daughters of crofters were recruited to put their 'extra hinges' to productive use in the beet fields. From Småland and neighbouring regions in Sweden, the masses migrated to the beet centres of Scania, and some travelled even further, to Lolland in Denmark. Everywhere, they were lodged in barracks near the large estates from the first thinning in May to harvest time in November or December (Frederiksen 1892, 71). Later, Polish women were hired to do this endless backbreaking work in the fields. Here, the beet was perhaps not so much the disciplinarian of the landowner as it was of the young girls who worked 13-hour days under the panoptic eye of their overseers (Nellemann 1981, 60–73). On the larger estates, beet work became the task of *foreign women*.

One result of this modernisation process was a productive landscape where the fallow system had been replaced by a plantation-like social and ecological structure. Where the colonial sugarcane plantations grew the same crop in the same place, year after year, century after century, the sugar beet fields were plantations that moved around in the landscape each year, following the rotation of the crop. The labour force consisted of foreigners—their otherness was an intersection of gender, race, class, national or regional differences—who 'did battle against the beet', to paraphrase Sidney Mintz (1974, 16). This wandering plantation work that had replaced the fallow system created the necessary, historical conditions of existence for the steam plough that tilled the sleepless land as the extra-bodily organ of the fossil people.

| NO. 1 | NO. 2 | NO. 3 | NO. 4 | NO. 5 | NO. 6 | NO. 7 | NO. 8 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Wheat | Barley | Barley | Oats | Beets | Beets | *Grass* | Fodder beets, potatoes, crops for stall-feeding, *fallow.* |

Table 4. Plan of operation for a system of 'ley farming' with some sugar beets. Here, the sugar beet arrived in the ecological structure of the Holstein system (*kobbelbrug)* without transforming it into a full-blown *vekselbrug* system (adapted from Boyhus 1976, 36); crops that help restore soil fertility shown in *italics.*

## The Longue Durée of the Horse

*Independent yeoman cultivators.*[6] Many independent farmers—usually those with around 25 hectares of land—would also sign contracts with the beet consultants. In their case, the disciplinary effects of beet cultivation appeared a bit differently. The ethos of those farmers encouraged them to do all the necessary work themselves before seeking labourers from elsewhere. But their mode of operation remained versatile and consisted of plant production and animal husbandry far into the next century (see Hobsbawm 1995). With their mode of operation, beets could not acquire the same important role as they did on the larger estates. So, the cash income from beets was proportionally lower, but it did still fit the ecological requirements of drawing one's plough with the horse. The historian Else-Marie Boyhus identified the following rotation system on a farm in Lolland from a taxation record from 1913:

The fallow system was reduced to only a fragment of one of the eight fields, which was only possible since beet was being grown on two of the fields. This meant—as we saw in the instructions to the consultants—that the sugar factory secured the farmstead with a steady flow of energy in the form of commercial fertiliser together with the beet seeds. Contrary to non-industrial crops, which could be reproduced on the farm by saving seeds year after year, sugar beets are an early example of the type of crop that agriculturalists had no possibility of reproducing themselves. In Jack Ralph Kloppenburg's classic study *First the Seed* (1988), he calls this change perhaps the most decisive point in the historical divorce between production and reproduction. By breaking the farm's own reproductive cycles, the industrial interests found a way to intervene in the local ecology. One yeoman recalled how the temporality of the factory began to direct farm operations:

> Around 1 October, a message came from the sugar factory in Nakskov saying that the beets had to be delivered in a railroad wagon to Søllested Station, usually one wagon

6 In Danish, *gårdmænd*; in Swedish, *bonde*.

per week until one had finished. Each wagon could hold around 100 centner (the railroad had been established in 1878).

The pulling up of the beets began a few days before the delivery was to take place. The blacksmith was engaged to produce a heavy iron tooth that could go beneath the beets and lift them out of the ground with a plume; it was an iron hoop with screws mounted on an older plough beam with a handle and draft gear. When two horses were harnessed, one could plough the beets loose so that they could be pulled up. One ploughed 10 rows at a time, then placed the beets in a circle of 3 *alen* across [1.88 metre], with the tops facing outwards; afterwards, the tops were cut off and the cleansed beets were placed in the centre; the beets were loaded onto a box wagon and driven to Søllested Station, where they were loaded with a beet fork onto the rail wagon, which could hold 9 box wagon loads; the remaining beet pulp from the sugar factory was sent to the cultivators in the same rail wagon, so this [wagon] had to be emptied before the beets could be loaded; the pulp was good fodder for the dairy cattle and young stock, and they quickly grew accustomed to eating it; at the same time as this was collected from the rail wagon, it was unloaded into an earth pit that had been dug 1 foot into the ground and soon after covered with soil; it could be kept as feed for spring. (NEU M 14.726)

But even in such a system, the burden of beet thinning might be too much to bear. Six hectares of beets is a lot to thin—not to mention the transport process mentioned above—so often there would be a need to hire extra hands, either in the form of migrant labourers or local crofters (Jensen 1985, 92). The Danish farmsteads (*gårde*) were protected by laws ensuring that aristocratic landowners could not confiscate the land of others. The absolutist Danish state had banned the destruction of individual farms as operational units in 1682 and the transfer of peasant land to the manorial estate in 1769 (Hesselbjerg 1949, 473). This system of protection for yeomen and crofters was in place in different forms for three hundred years, until the political climate shifted to favour the specialisation and enlargement of agricultural units in the 1960s. (We might consider this a protection against what Marxists call primitive accumulation or the original creation of proletarians out of peasants through dispossession.)

In some parts of southern Scania, though, Swedish yeoman did not enjoy the same political protection, which led to a cultural landscape more heavily dominated by the interests of the larger landowners. Entire villages, although by no means all of them, were demolished and their land incorporated into the operations of the local manor (Möller 1990, 72–73). Many peasants who had previously been relatively independent operators of plots of land that were practically theirs now found themselves dispossessed, homeless even. The strategy of the larger landowners was to tie this rural proletariat to their operations by irrevocable contracts and housing for the agricultural workers in centralised barracks (Möller 1990, 76). Many of the estates in the flat and

fertile plains of southern Scania grew to incredible sizes—thousands of hectares—and began to specialise in valuable dairy productions and, towards the end of the century, also in the cultivation of sugar beets.

In Lolland and Denmark, on the contrary, the manorial system continued to coexist with yeomanry. In this landscape, the centre of gravity shifted from grain production in the 1870s to dairy products and sugar beets in the coming decades. Interestingly, peasant dairy production continued to be organised in cooperatives owned by the yeomen themselves, while the industrial side of sugar production belonged entirely to the realm of capitalist commodity production. In this way, the fields of one individual farmer could operate in an entirely different economic manner. The beet field was linked to global value chains of coal, capital, steam technology, management and sugar, while the fields of oats and grains fed the livestock upon which the yeomanry's cooperative institutions were based. Finally, parts of the fields and other resources at hand continued to make up a subsistence economy that guarded the peasant families against the insecurity of the market. Freedom for these peasants consisted of striking a balance between these different economies, which allowed life to continue both on and in connection with the land (Christiansen 1982, 70). This act of balancing meant, as we have seen, that sugar beets did not entirely colonise the fallow parts of yeoman land until later in the 20th century. So long as the horse provided the main draft power and the operation was versatile—raising of crops *and* animals—there was a place for the fallow in the landscape under the 'Holstein system'.

On the yeoman farmsteads, thinning and cleaning the beet field was not exclusively the job of foreign women, but a job that fell upon the entire household. There seems to have been a class dimension to beet work, making it primarily the work of children, young people and women on a farmstead. Since beets required much more work than the grain crops, which did not need much attention between sowing and harvesting, there was an upper limit to how much of the farmstead could be sown with beets. Sometimes, extra hands would be engaged to help with the task, but in such cases local crofters and their wives would be employed more than migrant labourers.[7] This was the reason why the beet was called the disciplinarian of the farmer.

*Small-holding crofters*. This rural proletariat consisted of people whose plots were too small to subsist on as a family, which forced them to turn to additional wage labour.[8] The mode of operation for crofters continued to mirror that

7 During the first decades of the 20th century, censuses show that it was also not customary among some yeomen to have a 'beet girl' in the household—this custom was systematised to the extent, though, that 'beet girl' even became an official category in the legal language of the surveyors (*roepiger*).

8 In Danish, *husmænd*; in Swedish, *torpare*.

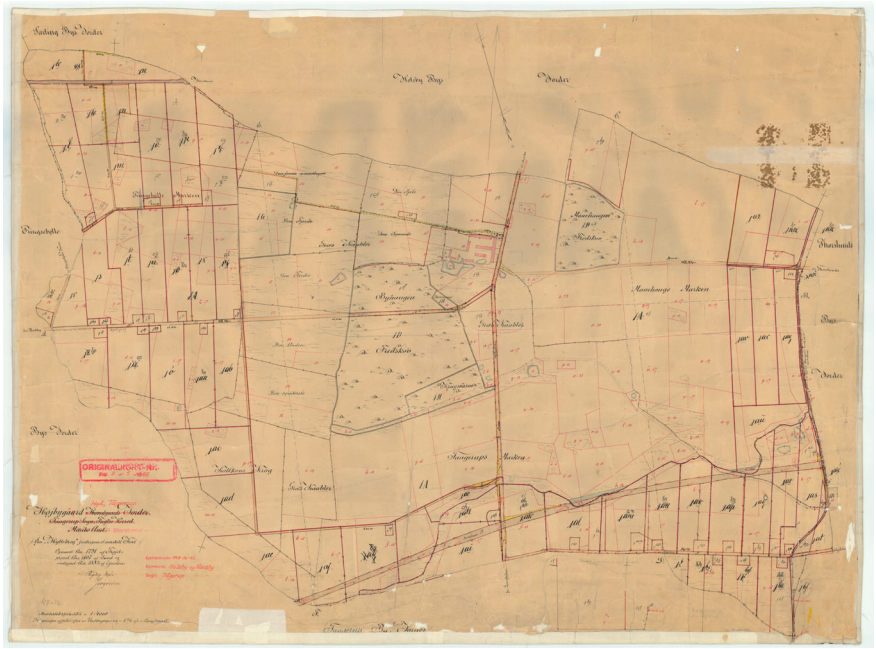


Figure 7. Cadastral map of Højbygaard Estate (0481652), showing developments in the 20th century. After the agrarian reforms of 1919, the fields to the west, east and south were converted into state property and smaller plots were rented to crofters on life-long leases. The crofters would then implement a mode of operation similar to the one depicted in Figure 9. In this way, the political intervention fostered a transition from a sleepless land to more versatile forms of ley farming—with the fallow system being reintroduced. Speaking with Campbell, we can understand this map as a palimpsest of different historical forms of life, each of which expresses and seeks to materialise its own political, economic and cultural ideas in the landscape: a landscape of class contradictions.

of the yeomen (see Table 4) well into the 20th century, although on a smaller scale (Solvang 1984, 185). For these smaller operating units, usually 1–4 hectares in size, the breeding of plants and animals continued to mutually presuppose each other in a *versatile mode of operation*. Within this mode of operation, which was always a struggle for families to make ends meet, sugar beets only played a minor role in crop cultivation, functioning as a supplementary cash crop but never as the foundation of their operations.

The crofters viewed the ownership of land as an absolute value (Christiansen 1982, 32), preferably large enough to live entirely off of it, but as this was seldom possible, any plot, however small, was something to strive for. On this land, they employed economic strategies of frugality and an ecological strategy of intensive diversification that would help them stay clear of extra expenses (Højrup 2003, 242). They might grow sugar beets on a small part of their land, 1–2 per cent of the area, but many of them also took extra work thinning and cleaning the beet fields of their yeomen neighbours.

Throughout Scandinavia, the second half of the 19th century saw remarkable population growth. This growth posed a particularly difficult problem to the rural population since their modes of life depended on access to land (Solvang 1984, 17–20). Most of the children of crofters and many children of the yeomanry class saw very little possibility of ever owning a farm in the sleepless landscapes, and many wandered off into the great unknown overseas, leaving their families and everything they knew behind. This population drain was paradoxical considering the fact that the sugar industry was in a constant need of labour. Labour power became necessary for the operation of the sugar estates, but it proved impossible to draw enough workers from the yeoman and crofter classes since they were above all preoccupied with the operation of their own lands. Therefore, migration was necessary as labour increasingly became globalised in the fossil mode of operation.

## A Bourgeois Vision of a Moral Landscape

The development of the sleepless land was not a unilinear process that unfolded in Scandinavia and the rest of the world at the turn of the 20th century. Rather, it was the product of a practice that continually had to secure its own conditions of existence. In the first decades of the 20th century, the social problem constituted by the increasing landless population became so threatening to the general social order that agrarian reforms were put in place to secure the welfare of the rural population and/or avoid their radicalisation, depending on how one sees it (Solvang 1984, 17).

After the first wave of fossilisation, during the last decades of the 19th century, the crofters managed to express their cultural ideas with respect to the landscape when the state recognised them as an independent class. With support from the agrarian reforms of 1899 and 1919, they lived their lives engaged in a versatile mode of operation until their political protection disappeared, when the second wave of fossilisation hit Scandinavian landscapes after the Second World War. Under the Marshall Plan and its ideology of technological development, sleeplessness once again expanded as the fossil modes of operation were further promoted scientifically, politically, economically and ideologically in the post-war period (Fitzgerald 2003, 188). During the 1960s and 1970s, the landscape ideal of small parcels of land that were cultivated intensively in a versatile system faded away, and those who did survive managed to do so only by adapting to a logic of expansion and specialisation (Christiansen 1982, 63).

In the bourgeois worldview of 'cultivated people', like that of Hagemann, argues ethnologist Orvar Löfgren, landscapes were split into two forms, productive and recreative landscapes, each of which constitutes the negation of

the other: 'The landscape of industrial production is ruled by rationality, calculation, profit, and effectiveness, while another new landscape of recreation, contemplation, and romance emerges—a landscape of consumption' (Frykman & Löfgren 2008, 50). The sleepless land belonged to the landscapes of industrial production. For an agrarian landscape to be good, moral even, it had to be arranged rationally, effectively, scientifically. We have already seen how Hagemann 'did battle against' the sleeping land, and he did so not only in the fertile landscapes of southern Scandinavia—he owned estates in Scania and directed the Danish Sugar Company—but also in the Danish colonies in the West Indies. Some scholars have claimed that the plantation was the historical birthplace not only of rational and scientific agricultural production, but also of the factory system as such (Mintz 1985, 59–61; Buck-Morss 2009, 101). In one text, Hagemann concludes that the industrial side of colonial sugar production was predatory—and therefore needed to be modernised. He ends up in a logical paradox, when he, as a good modernist, locates the predatory moment of the 'good old system' of plantation operations (pre-fossil) not in the over-use of resources, but quite the opposite, in the under-use of them:

> That this industry can and should be called a predatory operation (*rovdrift*) is clear from the fact that while 100 pounds of cane, as they are brought in from the field, contains around 16 pounds of sugar, the final result is that only 5 pounds can, in the end, be shipped off. In the first part of the industry, only about half of the juice that the cane contained is extracted and the rest is used as fuel together with the threaded substance of the cane. (Hagemann 1885, 8)

The above quote provides a striking example of Hagemann's line of reasoning. The predation that he sees in the 'good old system' is really at odds with his worldview. By mobilising the vocabulary of predatory or exploitative practices, he takes a moral stand against the old ways. To Hagemann, it is morally wrong not to extract more than five pounds of sugar per 100 pounds of cane. But notice how the focus subtly shifts—the idea of certain practices being predatory stems from the field of ecology: extracting more than can be reproduced, or more literally, killing all the prey that the predator lives upon. It belongs to the sphere of life and the circulation of energy in a landscape. But when Hagemann condemns the 'good old system' for being predatory, it is at the economic level in the sense of a *loss of value*. Seen as an economic system, what happens in the old factories of the colonies is, if we do not consider the social aspects, not predation but rather the opposite: wastefulness. Predation becomes taking too little, not taking too much from the earth. For him, an efficient industrial landscape was moral from a rational point of view,

but if another 'cultivated man' came along looking for a beautiful and exotic landscape of wilderness to experience and enjoy, then the judgement offered would be entirely different. The Swedish author August Strindberg expressed (what he believed to be) the lack of aesthetic qualities of the sleepless land in the following way:

> No longer fields of waving corn, a disturbing copper green is now laid over the old provincial yellow. A factory landscape […] where the scent of clover is powerless against the stink of hydrogen sulphide and ammonium sulphide from the drainage ditches of the sugar factory. The Scania of days gone by will soon be no more, but this ugly beet has saved Scanian farming and further enriched the country, we may live off the fat of the land, but that fat has no beauty. (as cited in Kuuse 1983, 35)

With the introduction of beets, farmers were no longer alone in the landscape. The landscapes of the fossil modes of operation are not only an object of aesthetic criticism to the urban eye; they are also the products of an industrial logic that penetrated the former peasant landscape (Fitzgerald 2003, 187–190). The farmland, whether owned by smallholders or aristocrats, was not managed freely by the farmer; its operation became tied to the factory through infrastructures and contracts. No individual farmer begins to cultivate beet on their initiative, but only as the agricultural consultants convince them to do so. The consultant replaces the horse, a process that ironically has been called the 'de-horsing' of agriculture (*afhestning*).

## A Fossil Mode of Operation

Seen from the perspective of the soil, sleeplessness means globalisation of the land. Seen from an atmospheric point of view, the birth of the sleepless land marked the fossilisation of the prevailing mode of operation. Although only possible in a preliminarily manner here, I have suggested developing the concept of mode of operation along three lines: as (I) a method for renewing the ecological conditions of life, as (II) certain principles of operation that call a set of tools into action and as (III) the simultaneous cultivation of certain biological lifeforms—crops and animals—and certain cultural forms of life.

The fossil mode of operation reproduced itself by transferring energy from the underground deposits of ancient sunshine to the social activities of farmers (Wolf 1966, 19). This method of renewing the ecological foundations of the system of sugar cultivation enabled the cultivation of the entire land year after year by digging deeper and deeper into the coal mines for fossil fuels. Scholars have identified the length of the fallow as of primary concern when typologising different modes of operation (Boserup 1965; Bernild & Jensen

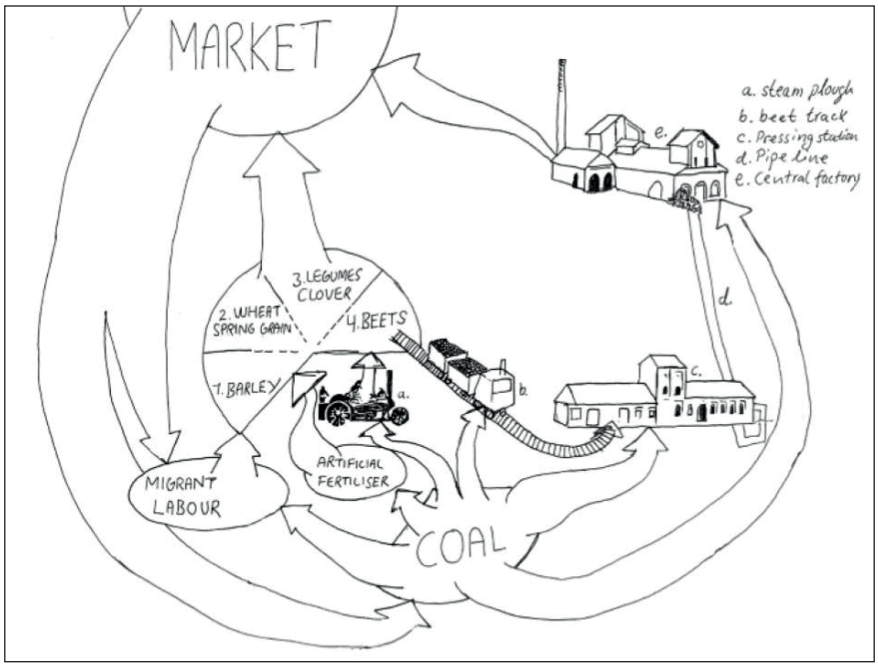



Figure 8. Energy flow chart showing the four-course rotation of the fossil mode of operation, with the centre of gravity being the sugar beet; the colonisation of the fallow presupposed large infrastructures to support the globalisation of the individual field (drawing by the author).

1978, 74–75). The sleepless land was the product of the fossil mode of operation, in which the principle of specialisation reigns supreme. Specialisation becomes possible when the flow of energy is not restricted to a closed system whose borders coincide with land that the operator has access to. Rather than being caught in the logic of versatility that follows from the interdependence of plants and animals, the fossil mode of operation needed specialised tools that run on the energy that flows from the subterranean forests overseas (Højrup 2003; Sieferle 2001).

The global mobility of energy, tools and labour presupposed an infrastructure capable of transporting them to the sleepless fields of the world. Steam ploughs, railroads, pressing stations were some of the necessary tools in the inventory that supplement the hand tools held by the migrant labourers. Growing sugar beets, together with wheat and barley, meant cultivating managers to redirect the global energy transfer, cultivating 'disciplined farmers', diligent migrant labourers and industrious aristocrats. Unlike the wind that blows without regard for the wishes of the manager or the horse that is tied to a local space and exercises its own temporality, beets, migrants, steam ploughs and coal all could be moved around freely in the landscape, that is,

freely from the point of view of the manager (Malm 2016, 41). Anthropologist Anna Tsing has referred to them as 'free' elements, illustrating the history of sugar in the early plantations, meaning non-social landscape elements, or provocatively abbreviated as nonsoels (Tsing 2012). A horse, by contrast, would then be a social landscape element since it is deeply embedded in its environment both spatially and temporally. Under the dictate of specialisation, the fossil mode of operation breaks the symbiotic relationship between plants and animals. The nutritional bond of destiny between cattle, horses and pig and the plantscape they live in and by is broken by the abstract imperative of the market. From this point onwards, it becomes possible to imagine fields without animals, and animals without fields.

As the modes of the operation escaped local ecological restraints, caught up in a state of partial sleep in the pre-fossil age, a new temporality was produced. In the sleeping land, time moved in circles mirroring the rising and setting of the sun, the yearly movement of the fallow, and the times for ploughing, sowing and harvesting (Frykman & Löfgren 2008, 15). But then, with the arrival of the non-social landscape elements (coal, migrant labour, steam ploughs and artificial fertiliser), time became money (Frykman & Löfgren 2008, 19). This new kind of time did not mirror any activity in everyday life but was rather a purely empty temporal yardstick that homogenised time. For time to become money, however, it needed to be abstract (Malm 2016, 305). As time became loosened from ecology and tied to the economy, it became linear rather than cyclical, and as an economy subject to the bourgeois eye for profit, it has needed to continually grow. In this way, time itself became the measure of progress as materialised in accumulation. The landscape became the mirror of ideology, or in the words of Henri Lefebvre: 'What is an ideology without a space to which it refers, a space which it describes, whose vocabulary and links it makes use of, and whose code it embodies?' (Lefebvre 1991, 44). The fossil mode of operation's regime of abstract and linear time cultivated not only sugar beets but also the forms of life of the migrant labourer, of the large landowner and of the industrial capitalist. The landscape, in this analytical perspective, became the site of coexistence between different cultural forms of life and a variety of biological life forms, impacting the way in which the relations between them are organised. Their destinies became tied together in the multi-species drama that plays out in the sleepless land under a warming sky.[9] As a whole, the system has been designed based on the image of the factory. As such, we might consider the birth of the sleepless

9 Recently, ecologists have found that the decline in biodiversity was 'strongly associated' with a decline in—and eventual disappearance of—the fallow system (Traba & Morales 2019).

land as the embourgeoisement of a cultural landscape, the materialisation of its particular concept of freedom, as freedom from the sleeping land and the freedom to colonise the fallow.

## While We Are Waiting

This paper has focused on the extent to which energy transitions have clear social and ecological implications. I have taken the introduction of sugar beets into Scandinavian agriculture as a local example of the global process of fossilisation. The birth of a sleepless land tied formerly fallow land in one part of the world together with mines and extractive practices in another part of it, with infrastructure as its necessary precondition. By revisiting older ethnological theory, it becomes possible to analyse a landscape as comprised of social contradictions—different political, economic and cultural views of how the land should be used, and by whom. These contradictions, as was shown, materialise in certain technologies that spread out across the landscape; these technologies come together in bundles, as was the case with sugar beets, steam ploughing, artificial fertiliser, migrant labour, expertise and pipelines. By showing how a certain landscape structure came into being—here we have focused on the birth of a sleepless land—ethnological analysis holds a potential for destabilising the view of our immediate surroundings as being more or less 'natural' and therefore also more or less 'neutral'. Instead, ethnology contributes a story of cultural ecologies as *cyclical systems* in which class dynamics materialise. In this article, I have focused on the shift from a mode of operation in which the local landscape was materially and conceptually an energy system of its own to one in which the fields were opened up to global flows of land and labour. The pivot in this new ecological system—here conceptualised as a fossil mode of operation—was the steam plough. Contrary to all earlier and non-fossil forms of tilling, steam ploughing was detached from the metabolism of the draft animals, and thus, decontextualised from the landscape. Instead, the steam plough found its conditions of existence within the industrial system, with its managerial logic, infrastructures of free trade and consultants. What may seem like the most natural of things today—namely that agriculture is an activity that is carried out with ever-larger machines in the fields without animals (or large stocks of animals without fields)—has thus been shown to be only one historically and ethnographically specific way of cultivating the land, and thereby also the people on it.

The guiding principle then has been to reveal the hidden social values in phenomena that otherwise appear 'neutral' in all their technicality. This classic ethnological strategy of 'defamiliarisation' has direct political implications. Recognising that our sleepless landscapes are currently being shaped by spe-

cific historical social actors—the bourgeoisie by fossil means—also makes it clear that things could indeed be different. In fact, there is very little point in arguing against the notion that things must change—and do so quickly. Seen from the perspective of historical epochs, it should be clear that agriculture without fallow belongs to the fossil age. Under the planetary imperative of defossilisation, ethnological theory helps make clear to us that even a sleeping land embodies political values of freedom and independence, but it is not a freedom of the bourgeois type that Hagemann envisioned—an ideology of sleeplessness. Or as one saying goes: 'the ploughing of Lolland and misery of Hell are two things that never end'.

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Pauliina Latvala-Harvilahti

# Experiencing a Lament Performance in a Mire
## Emotions linked to Nature and Unsustainable Lifestyles

**Abstract**

The article addresses the topical issue of environmental emotions from the perspective of individual experiences of environmental art reception. The research focuses on how the audience experienced lament performances by singer and musician Noora Kauppila in natural mires in Finland, and it asks the research question: What kinds of environmental emotions have laments in the mire provoked, and how are emotions contextualised in audience interviews? Art performances in the mire have become part of a growing international mire trend in the 21st century. I understand mires as a living heritage that reflects the diversity and inter-connectedness of heritage elements (e.g. practices and knowledge concerning nature) experienced by community members and individuals. The effectiveness of art (lament performances) is linked to reception research, which has not previously been applied to mire art performances. In the debate on the impact of art, the experiential perspective has been marginal. In the interview material, individuals' experiences reveal strong emotions about the endangered environment. The lament performance transformed a mire into a culturally appropriated space for the collective and individual processing of emotions regarding a fragile natural environment. The interviewees reported unwanted changes in their own surroundings, and their feelings about the changes were reflected in the observed decline in the habitats of birds and other mire animals. In a broad sense, the article offers insights into the meanings and changes of an individual's relationship with nature. The research evidence suggests that a communal context is needed to deal with environmental emotions, especially negative emotions like sorrow, hatred and grief. Likewise, the individual accounts reveal a need for a communal change in abandoning unsustainable lifestyles. The article is based on research that has been undertaken as part of the 'Mire Trend' research project at the University of Eastern Finland.

Keywords: environmental art, sustainability, human-mire relationship, art reception


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## Introduction

Mire art is a diverse and long-established field of art that is constantly taking on new forms (Laurén et al. 2020; Laurén 2006; Latvala-Harvilahti 2021; Kaukio 2022).[1] The background informing this current trend is that, ever since environmental art first began to enjoy success in Europe in the 1970s, mires along with other outdoor areas have been used for artistic purposes (Huhmarniemi & Jokela 2019). Environmental art is art made in nature or in the cultural environment, and it can take the form of a work, a process or a single event. It makes people aware of their environment, encourages pro-environmental behaviour and creates new meaningful relationships with the environment. In environmental art, moving the same material and form to another place changes the work and may create an entirely new work. An environmental artwork is seen not only in a particular place but as constantly living in time, in specific local cultural and social conditions. (Marks et al. 2014; Hannula 2002; Tieteen termipankki 25 January 2023; Naukkarinen 2003, 76–78.) In parallel with the re-activation of mire artists in the 2000s, mires have deliberately been harnessed by society as spaces of well-being (Nikkilä & Korhonen 2008; Gearey 2021). This article traces how laments performed in a mire are experienced by the audience when environmental problems dominate the social debate. The research question is as follows: What kinds of environmental emotions have laments in the mire provoked, and how are emotions contextualised in audience interviews?

In the 2000s, both in Finland and internationally, a new approach has been adopted to organise the activities that are distinct from the previous use of mires. The new approach includes festival-style swamp football and volleyball competitions in ex-peat production fields as well as various mire art events and performances in natural mires (Laurén & Latvala-Harvilahti 2021), but it did not include laments until Finnish musician and singer Noora Kauppila realised her art project *Dirge on the Mother's Grave – lamenting as a tool of collective grief in the era of eco anxiety* (2018–2019). Kauppila's mire art could be experienced as a tour, which is atypical in the field of mire art. More common are individual performances, organised as part of an event. Tours were carried out in cooperation with the local associations of the Finnish League

1 The research is part of the University of Eastern Finland's Mire Trend research project (2020–2023), which studies the changing cultural heritage of mires in Finland. In the research group, the cultural use of mires is examined based on different thematic areas of interest: my own contribution to mire art from the 21st century was well suited to providing an overview of the cultural heritage of mires in the fields of mire sports, media and literature, and the soundscape of the mire. Using interviews and personal observations, I aim to understand the current forms and impact of mire art, how it is experienced in the mire and what messages artists want to convey in their work.

for Nature Conservation and the cultural services of the localities where the performances took place. In the first year, Kauppila's lament performances focused on the natural mires of northern Ostrobothnia. In 2019, the tour moved to central and southern Ostrobothnia and Häme. After the tour, Kauppila's lament project has been performed in the capital of Finland, Helsinki (Music House 2019, the park of the Finlandia Hall as part of the UN Alliance programme 2020 and Seurasaari Open-Air Museum 2021).

The core of my analysis is based on audience interviews (2020) concerning Kauppila's performances in the mires of Pilvineva in Veteli, Karvasuo in Seinäjoki and Torronsuo in Tammela, Forssa (2019). The audiences ranged in age from children to the elderly. The artist's encounter with the audience has been analysed based only on the interviews that I conducted with adults. My work and contact with Kauppila only began after her tours in the mires, which is why fieldwork during her performances in the mire is not included to this study. I interviewed Kauppila face to face and was in the audience in the park at Finlandia Hall in 2020. The interview and my experience in the park increased my understanding of the interviewees discussions of the performances. Kauppila also helped me with making audience connections. Since this article is about her tour, I felt it was ethically important to give Kauppila a look at the forthcoming article before publishing it. After the referee reviews, she has read the manuscript version of the article and the translation of one word in her quote was clarified.

In Finland, debate on the protection of mires is currently quite topical. Mires are part of the local landscape and therefore also play an important role for many people, including on an emotional level. However, not everyone in Finland is familiar with mires, even though there are so many of them in the country. They also look different depending on the type of mire, and moving around in them depends on the water content of the mire in question. Brown peat bogs that have been converted into energy use look quite different than natural watery mires or ditched mires. Mires, their use and their importance have nevertheless been much discussed in Finnish society. Mires are controversial landscapes, and tensions thus exist between public authorities and citizens, for example when it comes to peat production areas and environmental damage. One of the key issues is the serious risk of pollution accumulation in mires and water bodies from the mining industry. (See, e.g. Lindholm & Heikkilä 2006; Khan 2020.) For example, in southern Ostrobothnia the coexistence of peat policy and ditch restoration is an everyday occurrence for locals.

Mires and peatlands are referred to by various names, such as bogs, wetlands and swamps. I will use the concept of mire, which refers to a peatland where peat is actively being formed (International Peatland Society 30 Octo-

ber 2022; Ojanen et al. 2021). Both in Finland and internationally, research on mires has mainly focused on the natural science perspective. Globally, undrained natural mires are habitats for a wide range of biodiversity and provide important ecosystem services that benefit human communities. The main ecosystem services are biodiversity maintenance, carbon and water storage, solution retention and water regulation (Clarke & Rieley 2019, 11). Cultural studies and qualitative, ethnographic methods provide access to the cultural use of mires and the reception of art in nature. The current climate crisis and the need for a sustainability transformation requires that everybody join in the effort of preserving them. (SYKE Policy brief 2021.) Participatory mire art is an international trend. For example, the Swedish Swamp Storytelling project invites people directly to confront environmental problems (Swamp Storytelling 2021). The environmental crisis has also sparked school collaboration in Lithuania, with artists, researchers and students working together as part of the Swamp School project to promote the vital ecosystem of the mire (Swamp Pavilion 2021).

The hypothesis is that (mire) art as a social construct has the power to transform society step by step, together with other sectors and tools at society's disposal (Hiltunen et al. 2022; Siivonen et al. 2022). Thematic analysis is guided by the combination of the concept of environmental emotions and theory of art reception. To answer the central research question, the article first presents the core aspect of Noora Kauppila's lament performance. Theoretical perspectives on the impact of lament performances are discussed, after which the research material is introduced. Then, the text proceeds to an analysis of how three interviewees experienced the lament performance and the environmental emotions it may have awakened in them. Finally, the article presents some important conclusions.

## Noora Kauppila's performance *Dirge on the Mother's grave – lamenting as a tool of collective grief in the era of eco anxiety*

The Karelian tradition of lamenting is part of living heritage, practised today by musicians in their public performances as well as by individuals to deal with their own emotions (see Silvonen 2022; Hytönen-Ng et al. 2021). Multidisciplinary research on lamenting is still abundant, but the roots of the research extend back to the 19th century (Stepanova 2014, 7).[2] The subject has

2 Early Karelian performers did not think of themselves as performing music; lamenting was a community ritual practice, used especially at various crossroads in life, such as weddings, funerals or going to war. From this point of view, new research on laments has approached the tradition as a cultural practice, which is also perceived as a musical phenomenon. (Silvonen 2022, 81.)

been studied from the perspectives of folk music, ethnomusicology, folkloristics and other forms of cultural and gender studies, ranging from early fieldwork and encounters between performers to research based on listening to archival recordings (see Tenhunen 2006; Silvonen 2022). As a genre, laments combine different forms and styles, content, audience, reasons for lamenting (i.e. social and cultural functions), as well as situational and usage contexts. Laments are ritual poetry using traditional lamenting language to express not only collective themes, but also the singer's personal sorrows (Stepanova 2014, 36–37). In modern times, however, the tradition has benefitted from increased global connections between them. Noora Kauppila (2020, 83) describes her feelings as follows: 'Performing the laments as stage art has felt contradictory and it was only in the mires that they seemed to be placed in a natural setting for the first time.'

In this article, I am not exploring laments as such, but the effectiveness of the environmental art form as experienced in the mires, as audience members recount their experiences in interviews. The interview with Noora Kauppila reveals the structure and aim of the performance and provides the background for the audience interviews. Kauppila says that her preferences have changed over the two years preceding the interview, as she has spent a great deal of time in the mires. What fascinates her about mires is their healing nature; the mires make you pause: there is depth, unpredictability, silence to them: 'The fascinating thing about the mire is that you see the open sky quite differently than elsewhere.' For her, the mire reflects the symbolism of life and the values of a slower pace of life. She did not want to write down the message of the performance in the leaflet. (Interview, Kauppila 25 February 2020.) During the interview, Kauppila emphasised the freedom attached to the audience's experience of the mire performance:

> I would like people to have some experience of it; I have not as an artist wanted to define what it is. *It's personal* for everyone -- I wanted to show the beauty of the mires and a certain theme of presence -- I have tried to build up in a way, even if I schedule the sunset towards the end of the performance and look at the directions, how it, even though I am not a dancer, how I position myself in relation to the sunset, uses the echo of nature, light and so on; it can *deepen the experience*. (Interview, Kauppila 25 February 2020.)

Noora Kauppila makes use of the idea of ritual art (which is an old form of social art), whose central aim is to connect with something larger than oneself. In ritual, the focus is on change or transformation (Tieteen termipankki 18 August 2022). Kauppila sees lamenting as one way of dealing with

the confusion surrounding environmental concerns. The performance lasts about an hour and features new Karelian-language laments composed and written by Kauppila herself. One of the laments uses the Karelian language metaphor of cranberries to refer to children. Similarly, the mire symbolises the mother. Kauppila also performed a lament of thanks, and another song accompanied by one of the most important instruments in Finnish folk music, a small kantele. Through her artistic work, she highlights the uniqueness of mires in terms of their biodiversity, as carbon sinks and stores, as well as an experiential landscape. Kauppila cherishes the endangered Karelian language and the traditional Karelian laments. Although the title of the performance highlights a collective mourning, there are other emotions expressed in the performances as well. Alongside grief, she has included tones of sadness and anger as well as tones of hope and gratitude. As a further consideration, lamenting makes mourning public, but it also allows listeners a personal level of grief. Thus, the performances evoke emotions and prompt later discussions about the state of the local mires. (Interview, Kauppila 25 February 2020; Kauppila 2020, 81–83).

In Finland, peatlands have been cleared for fields, peat has been extracted for fuel and, above all, peatlands have been drained to promote forestry (See *Turvetyöryhmän loppuraportti* 2021). Mire art can thus be organised in various mire environments, e.g. in areas that include ditched mires, in mires facing ecological restoration and in those in a natural state or peatlands that are used for peat energy. Each of them could be suitable for a specific art theme and method. Kauppila's lament performances deal with grief and loss, and they include wildlife, birds and the natural landscapes. Heavily mechanised landscapes in the process of restoration, which show more human than animal activity, would have changed the atmosphere of the performance. Kauppila thus influenced the starting point of the experience through her choice of performance venues. Particularly, the audiences arrive at a natural mire, and not a peat bog, and she justifies this decision as a preservation of hope:

> I think peat bogs are so ferocious and impressive, there's something really cool about them visually. But I didn't want to take the laments directly to the edge of the peat bogs, because I wanted to preserve *the aspect of hope* in some way. (Interview, Kauppila 25 February 2020.)

Furthermore, the positioning of the audience in the performance, and the boundary conditions assigned to the audience (such as their encounter with the artist), may influence the experience. When performed outdoors in a mire environment, like in Kauppila's case, the art event breaks the estab-

lished conventions of a live concert (*cf.* Heinonen 2020, 13; Bourdieu 1987, 205; Hamilton 2020; Pihkala 2019). An art performance in a mire setting involves unforeseen factors, as weather conditions are strongly present in the immediate art experience, as are smells of nature.

The audience of approximately 10–20 (max 50) people helps create an intimate space during each performance. People met Kauppila at the car park near the performance venue and later escorted the audience back. From there, they walked together to the performance site. Kauppila explained to the audience what her laments are about and handed out leaflets with the lyrics of the laments in Karelian. She had also translated the lament from Karelian into Finnish, entitled *ABEUDUNNUO – A cry for a lost land:*

> This cry was born out of the mining industry and the environmental lobby. It *mourns the transfer* of flourishing land and life force to commercial, environmentally destructive use, using the vocabulary and metaphors of old bridal laments. (e-mail to the author.)

The middle of the performance included *The Wolf spell*, where Kauppila ran away from the audience, and on her return, played the role of a wolf making noise. Kauppila told me that the *Wolf spell* section came about when she became excited about the proverb 'No wolf gets lost in the mire' (25 February 2020). Here, one can find mythical intertextual references to writer Aino Kallas's novel *Sudenmorsian* [*The Wolf's Bride*] (1928 / translated into English 1930). Set in the 17th century, 'Sudenmorsian' is depicted as a mire that attracts a female witch (Laurén 2006, 49), with the mire functioning as a supernatural place where the protagonist can transform herself into a werewolf. While lamenting, Kauppila feels the mire come to her in the form of watery tears. Emotions and affectivity are linked to laments, where the emotions of sadness and suffering are combined in a certain sense of awe. The grief is transmitted to the audience, and it is common to cry at this point; when lamenting, Kauppila uses a traditional weeping cloth, which is seen as a material sign of laments (see Silvonen 2022).

Artists draw on the emotional and affective cultural heritage of mires, but they also reproduce it in a future-oriented way (Adam & Groves 2007; Birkeland 2015, 173). The cultural meanings of the mires extend to the layering of the soil. Cultural activities like lament performances are key drivers in building places of hope and resilience (see Beel et al. 2017, 460). Resilience is best enhanced in relation to future-orientated action by an improved ability to accept the loss and changes that occur (see Holtorf 2018). Tensions may arise with respect to the concept of nature since it is given many meanings that stress either the resources that can be used or the view that people are

part of nature. Consequently, how people can both use and protect nature in their everyday lives remains an open question. (Henttonen et al. 2022, 14; see Hankonen 2022.)

## Theoretical perspectives on the impact of lament performances in the mire

I approach lament performances as an art form that may affect the audience in many ways. Here, the main aspect involves examining environmental emotions through the interviewees' experiences of traditional, but renewed, lament performances (see Latvala-Harvilahti 2021, 2022). The effectiveness of art is linked to reception research,[3] which has not previously been applied to lament performances in the mire. Traditionally, reception research has been used to study the relationship between literature and the reader in relation to the text, but since then, other artistic genres have also been considered (Tieteen termipankki 14 October 2022). Study of the reception of art relies on the interpretation of the interviewee's verbalised experience. Cultural studies bring cultural meanings and individual values to the study of ecological crisis. This is important because the arenas of engagement with climate change are situated in the present day, and the awakening to action and agency occurs through everyday contexts, landscapes, lay knowledge and meaning making (Hamilton 2020, 2, 30).

The study of experiences is central to the human sciences, which seek to understand different social and cultural situations and activities (Rinne et al. 2020, 5). Mire art is experienced subjectively, with the focus being on one's own sensations. The art element creates the experience lived in the environment (e.g. Sepänmaa 1994). Emotional engagement with the mire has been reported as personal attachment, love and identification, especially when living nearby (Flint & Jennings 2021). Studying the impact of lament performances in the mire provides knowledge about the welfare effects of arts and culture (Crossick & Kaszynska 2016). Together with research on the reception of art, the most recent contemporary art research trend also includes an examination of works as a discussion of the future: Huhmarniemi and Salonen (2022), for instance, have tried to identify what kinds of future images the works of art invite us to imagine regarding the relationship between human beings and the earth.

3 Recent themes in reception research cover cultural differences in art experiences (Yli-Mäyry 2011) and YouTube users' discussions of nature campaign films, especially considering connotations and metaphors that reflect values (Olausson 2020). On the other hand, the emotions and feelings of the viewers in dance performance influence the valuation, but the performance itself, as well as the interaction between the audience and their environments, lies at the heart of value formation (Moisio 2022).

Feelings related to environmental issues are labelled with the umbrella term *environmental emotions*. Various artistic events deal with environmental anxiety from the perspective of ritual examination and underline the importance of understanding the scope of the phenomenon (Pihkala 2021, 9). The people who gather in the mires may also feel sadness about non-environmental issues, too. However, the presence of mire nature and the thematic linking of laments to, for example lost land, deepens the connection between their sentiments and nature. The role of the lament performer is to be the voice of the community and the interpreter of the feelings expressed on behalf of nature. As part of environmental art, the laments in the mire emphasise sadness and concern, as environmental emotions. Although environmental emotions include worry, fear, guilt, responsibility, shame and anxiety, fortunately not all emotions are so gloomy. People's sense of belonging also brings with it feelings of joy, relief and even pride, which further inspires hope. Environmental grief and feelings of loss have been widely studied internationally, and, for example, grief has been linked to concrete changes, while anxiety can be accompanied by restlessness and feelings of helplessness and powerlessness (Pihkala 2019, 100–101; 2021; similar feelings are connected with *climate emotions*; see Pihkala 2022; Hamilton 2020; Bowman 2019, 298, Henttonen et al. 2022, 24). Although research on environmental emotions has mainly focused on the experiences of young people (Ojala 2016), concern about the environment is not exclusive to young people.

When experiencing art in general, emotions convey information from the personal frame of the experiencer (Rannisto 2015, 121). Art feeds thinking, suggests frameworks for interpretation and creates an interaction between the artwork and the perceiver in its environment. This process creates what is known as co-awareness. What people most expect from art is that it will provoke thought and bring new perspectives on familiar issues, even to the extent of questioning one's own values. It is noteworthy that there is a positive presumption in assessing the impact of art. (Kantonen 2021, 335, 340; Heikinaho 2021; Menninghaus et al. 2017, 2.) According to the classical view, the experience of art is created when the artist, the artwork and the audience meet in an individual and culturally bound 'process of experience' (Yli-Mäyry 2011, 268–269). In the debate on the impact of art, the experiential perspective has been marginal. Instead of hard-to-choose metrics, the impact of art is better understood by asking how people experience and give meaning to participation in the arts (Lehikoinen & Vanhanen 2017, 12–13; *cf.* Kantonen 2021, 319). However, the individual's contribution to the impact debate has also started to receive more attention (Virolainen 2015, 101–102; Hormio 2020, 106–107).

Mire art has several ritualistic features and symbolic dimensions: the place is delimited, the audience experiences the performance closely together in nature, while the mire also represents the human mind. As environmental art, mire art acts as a channel for the articulation of emotions. I share the notion that mire art is not just about self-expression and works, but above all about experience and exploration, producing and sharing meanings. Mire art provides a holistic and multi-sensory framework for the interpretation of knowledge. The mire can empower the audience to pay attention to the details of the mire environment. The embodiment of the audience's experience is enhanced by insects crawling on the skin, birds that may be seen, the ground and plants that can be felt against the body (Latvala-Harvilahti 2022). A lament performance places the nature directly on the experimental stage. The mire as a material platform affects aspects of embodiment and sensory memories and builds multi-sensory meanings for what is experienced (see Kajander & Koskinen-Koivisto 2021). The biocultural heritage of mires consists of, for instance, value of biodiversity, local knowledge, experienced landscapes and place-related memories (Latvala-Harvilahti 2022; Russell 2021). The mire environment, like the human body, serves as a medium that creates meaningful features for the transmission of art (see Hietala et al. 2020, 235).

## Interview material from the audience

The knowledge gained from the interviewees includes values, emotions and worldviews. Interviewees recounted their memories of a lament performance a year after the experience, but the narrative strongly conveys what was experienced at the time and its individual meanings. Each interviewee had a freedom to talk about his or her experiences as they wished, and the final material product, an interview, was constructed in dialogue with the interviewer, who interpreted the narration using the key analytic concepts. The interviewees (two women, one man) were early middle-aged persons, born between 1970 and 1980. Due to pandemic, I conducted the interviews, each lasting about 40 minutes, by telephone. I did not request any preparation for the interview. However, prior to the interview, one of the participants tried to write down her own experience of mire art. I refer to interviewees in the text by a sequential code (starting with H_Y1) and use Kauppila's name with her consent.

I used a thematic framework that began with an exploration of the interviewee's background and their human-mire relationship. Already in the introductory questions for the interview, the interviewee could compare the childhood of today's children with their own and consider the extent to which people enjoy experiences in nature now compared to in the past. Apart from one audience interviewee, being in nature had been part of the interviewees'

leisure activities throughout their lives. The interviewees did not represent people who felt alienated from nature. In their case, it would have been interesting to compare the effectiveness of art with others. However, for two of the audience interviewees, the lament performance was their first experience of art performed in a mire, and they were also unfamiliar with laments. The mire environment was familiar to most of those interviewed, though. Each interviewee's existing human-nature relationship is an important element behind the experience of mire art and emotions. Understanding the importance of the mire on a personal level was considered in connection with the importance of the ecology of the mire.

When conducting the interviews, environmental emotions were not the main theme of focus. The material, however, proved that emotions were important part of the lament experience for all the interviewees. In recounting the experience of the lament performance, the interviewees verbalised their understanding of the strain on the environment and the need for sustainability transformation. During the interviews, time was allowed for themes to emerge, and the interview structure could be described as quite informal. In the analysis, while the interview material plays the key role, my own experience of Kauppila's performance in the park surely had an impact on my writing, too. A telephone interview affects the dialogue and the information produced in the interview differently than a face-to-face interview. In my experience, the interviewer does not control the interview process as much as in a face-to-face interview. In telephone interviews, listening plays a more prominent role, and this also applies to listening to silence. The space given to the interviewee to continue or stop should be interpreted without gestures or eye contact. The situation is challenging and requires patience.

### 'Natural phenomena happen in us and in our bodies' (H_Y1)

Torronsuo, the location of Kauppila's performance, was not a particularly familiar place for the interviewee quoted above (b. 1978), and it was her first time at a mire art performance. However, she had been taking her children to the mire for educational trips, as 'nature had been her playground' as a child. Her own relationship with the mire had developed around a bog pool near her home, and the scents of the mire. In her family, nature was not seen as a separate place to go out into, but more as an everyday environment. The interviewee wondered about the difference between her own childhood experiences of nature and that of today's children: for example, do children today have their favourite trees? A vivid human-mire relationship is part of a culturally constructed relationship with nature (Laurén et al. 2022, 3–4). However, in accordance with previous research (see, e.g. Laurén 2006, 127–128),

the interviewee understands that her own actions can influence her children's relationship with nature. The field of art and art education has long been concerned with creating a dialogue between humans and non-humans as well as promoting fairer and more sustainable lifestyles (Meyer-Brandis & Taipale 2022). Through its collaborative activities, it aims at a more ecologically and socially sustainable future (Järvinen et al. 2020).

The Torronsuo performance had elements of participatory art, as the audience was invited to participate in a workshop related to the theme of environmental concerns (Kaitavuori 2021). Kauppila invited participants to this workshop through an advertisement placed in the local newspaper, and Kuvio (a cultural association in southwest Finland) also shared the ad on social media (below):

> Do you want to look at environmental grief and crying in a Karelian voice in a group? The workshop is part of the 'Dirge on the Mother's Grave' project, where the facilitator will create a lament/song based on the workshop and incorporate it into a performance in September in a mire in the Forssa region. In the workshop, we will reflect on environmental concerns in ourselves and as a phenomenon in society. Participants will learn about the tradition of laments in music and poetry, and if they wish, will be able to try lamenting as part of a group. The workshop is free of charge. The first 12 participants will be accepted. (Kuvio 9 June 2019, Facebook.)

The interviewee participated in the lament workshop. She had not heard about laments from anyone before, but she intuitively went along with it. She says she felt an intense sense of climate change-related anxiety and exhaustion with 'the modern machinery'. In her lament, she is addressed by way of embodied experience, self-consolation and self-compassion, and her experience is set against the backdrop of a busy contemporary life. Particularly, she felt a strong personal need to experience a new kind of connection with the world.

The interviewee described how the rush turned into calm as Kauppila led them through the village of Torro. A beautiful landscape opened up before them, but as they moved into the mire, the interviewee was nervous about the sinking nature of the soil. She described the situation as dreamlike, where the artist is nearby and guides them to the spot. After describing the move, the interviewee burst into tears. She explained that there is no place or space in everyday life for dealing with feelings of concern and sadness about the environment, and she extended these feelings for the environment to human beings. Climate change is a topic that she feels other people are avoiding and evading. The concern for people is extended in the narrative to reflect an alienated way of life that is being questioned. Through her work, she has seen that

even in nursing, there is no time for a patient and for gentleness, but rather work has become mechanical. She believes that people's lives should not be so stressful when there is also the beauty of nature around us. I understand from her emphasis that for people who need tools to deal with their emotions, laments open the floodgates. The immobile mire and the artist facing the audience created a sense of hopefulness. As someone who has intensely experienced mire art, she then wondered about the nature of people and their ability to be enraptured by nature in the future: 'Will people be able to quieten and calm down in front of something like that? How strong is that capacity in people? Will the capacity for that be lost in a few generations?'

The interviewee was delighted to return to the experience of mire art. She found Kauppila's singing, playing and performance in the mire to be infinitely beautiful, and for her the mire art was strong and magical in a way she had not expected. Although I did not focus on human well-being in the research interviews, earlier research evidence demonstrates that the health and well-being effects of the natural environment are both short- and long-term (Salonen 2020, 19). It is clear from the interviews that the mire art experience provided relief on an emotional level. The importance of leaflets is underlined in her interview in a completely different way than in the others. She read the words and names of the laments from the leaflet only after the performance, when she noticed the lament on the disappearance of the species. But at the location, she concentrated on experiencing and sensing the performance.

> *I start crying when I remember it.* (Laughs first, then sobs). I spent this morning trying to write down why it was *such a powerful and intense experience*. There was something about the fact that *we humans* have environmental anxiety, and that was the theme…

On the other hand, prosperity is underpinned by the realisation that no one is alone in their climate woes; humanity is facing the challenges together. As can be seen from the above quote, the mire art experience can be particularly evocative, and the aim in articulating it is to convey its meaning. It is then a question of an immediate sensory and emotional experience – a holistic sensation. Intense experiences around sensations and emotions are affective, which can be difficult to describe in an interview (Heinonen et al. 2020, 11–12; see also Kantonen 2021, 334–335.) The interviewee had tried to prepare for the interview by finding the right way to describe her positive experience. The meta-meaning of the expression 'we humans' could be seen as an emphasis on agency: humans do not meet the environmental concerns of other animals and plants, but humans are capable of acknowledging and sharing the feelings of concern related to the environment.

There were about twenty people at the lament performance in the Torronsuo mire. She says that the audience was seated on picnic stools about 5–10 metres away from the performer. She admittedly does not remember the reactions of other audience members or whether there was applause at the end of the performance, but the intensity of the experience may explain the lack of recollection; she says that she herself shed tears heavily. As the performance was in Torronsuo, it was naturally linked to the mining plans known to the local inhabitants.

> Researcher: What do you think about the mining issue?
>
> Interviewee: It is, yes – I am concerned, and I am very much against them. In a way, [there was] this idea that somehow, *we should be able to find another kind of way of being and living.* This digging up and depriving the land somehow seems to go on and on. It is very distressing that they constantly come with news, and yet somehow it remains very unclear where we are going. (sighs) Have they been able to prevent it – how much? It seems to me that there are two kinds of people: those who see things a little differently, who can look at things differently, see other values that need to be cherished, and those who are not capable of doing so at all. I have grown up in such a way that I have been the object of ridicule and belittled when I have taken care [other things]. I would like nature, forests and mires to have their own value, and not to be overly interfered with and subjected to machinery.

She said that there are two kinds of people: those who see other values and those who are not capable of doing so. The latter group of people have become familiar to her, as her words have not been taken seriously when she has spoken aloud about her environmental concerns. She was happy to have been able to work through her own tears in a lament workshop, sharing her sadness at the eutrophication of her home pond because of the mine, the springs being clogged and the water not flowing as it used to. She stressed that everything is connected to humanity: humans are not disconnected from what is happening in nature, but not everyone is connected to their emotions. Feelings of anxiety are attached to nature more than to the continuous digging up and exploitation of the land. As such, the lament performance did not evoke new feelings about the environment, but rather brought to the surface feelings that already existed, both about the mires and the forests. But at the same time, the responsibility for a more sustainable transition extends beyond the borders of personal life.

Emotions are expressed in laments through words, affective grammatical forms, melodies and non-verbal means (Stepanova 2014, 100, 280). During

the performance, the interviewee focused on the moment. She described the experience as overflowing with sound, song, music, silence and landscape. The interaction with the birds was experienced as part of the mire art: the cranes responded to Kauppila's call, something that could not be done indoors. But for this interviewee, the most memorable part of Kauppila's performance was *The Wolf spell*:

> Taking on the character of an animal. As she ran and disappeared into the mire and then got up again. What a wonderful mother earth we have, a layer like this, where we all eventually go; it swallows us up and then creates something new, when we think on a long-time span. There are thoughts and experiences that do not come up in everyday life. *A strong sense of connection with nature, we are all connected to each other through a performance like that.*

Art provides cultural value to its experiencers by broadening their perspective and inspiring their imagination. The post-humanist approach (see, e.g. Karkulehto et al. 2020) reflects the tendency to see humans as part of nature, but not above other species. In the performance, following the detachment from the human figure gives space for personal reflection and a sharpening of the narrator's relationship with nature, where 'mother earth' is clearly seen as a precious and introspective place that acts, engulfing us, and thereby creating something new. At the same time, the audience as a community is transformed into one. In a very emotional interview, she said that tears also spontaneously flowed among members of the audience while she experienced the performance. She described the features of the mire as primordial; a world that influenced the experience, perhaps because of fear, mysticism, scents and the element of water.

From the standpoint of art reception, the interview draws attention to two themes expressed by the interviewee: first, the human being who is not detached from nature, and second, the emphasis placed on the 'visionary role' of the artists. The use of the 'we humans' form expands the perspective of the individual, and the interviewee found the work done by the artists to be of utmost importance. Artists such as Kauppila have, in the interviewee's opinion, a new ability to envision. As a ritual, the heart of the laments lies in the role of the performer, where Kauppila acts as a mediator between different realities, emotions and times.

### 'The mire gives permission to grieve' (H_Y2)

The second interviewee (b. 1976) was part of the audience at a lament performance at Pilvineva mire in Veteli, Kaustinen. In his home region of Lapland, na-

ture was always a close part of everyday life. He described his childhood nature as a necessary challenge. Mires were part of his childhood environment, and it was common to go out into nature with family members. In describing his relationship with mire, he reported that feeling a hate for the mire is to word it too strongly. Rather, he finds mires to be fascinating, beautiful, mysterious places with their own vegetation. He also associates the wilderness with his well-being, talking about a family-owned, unoccupied mire. On the one hand, it has an emotional value as a pristine part of nature, but on the other hand '*It can proudly be called Rapasuo ["The Dirt Mire"]-- a place where I can go to cry*'.

The interviewee had not participated in mire art events before. He described performing mire art as a return to the roots of humanity. The interviewee considers nature a more natural venue than indoor concert venues and advocates taking art performances even more often into nature. In his experience, there are fewer and fewer people in concert halls. He recounted that Kauppila led the audience to the venue and gave them seats for the concert. The audience helped the performer and tried to wipe the instruments dry from the rain that had started to fall during the performance. The audience did not talk aloud or make eye contact with each other until the end of the performance. Then, the sun set behind the performer in a colourful glow, and the audience looked at each other wondering whether to react to the situation. The interviewee took a couple of photos of the 'insane sunset', but the performer was so preoccupied with lamenting that she did not notice the photos being taken.

The interviewee described the mire art experience as 'enchantingly powerful', and as a performance he would go to again and would recommend to others. The downpour was a surprising element in the performance, one which also had a significant impact on the soundscape. He says that the roar that blended in with the flow of water and noise of the rain showers swallowed up all the other sounds, which meant that the distance between the audience and the performer could not be great. The interviewee said that the show lived up to his expectations, as the weather and small group size made the experience even more intimate. The rainy weather and watery ground underfoot drenched the audience, with people remaining in their seats for an hour in their rain gear.

In general, art poses questions, offers experiences, invites us to observe the world and to confront chosen perspectives (Hietala et al. 2020, 206). In mire art, this can be done by a sense of playfulness, too. Earlier I referred to Kauppila's transformation into the role of the wolf in her performance. The interviewee felt the wolf role to be moving, not only for himself and the rest of the audience, but also for the performer. He joyfully described *The Wolf spell* as the performer's own retreat and initiation into a conversation with the mire, and as a request for permission – i.e. 'give me permission to be here in your arms'. He described the agreement as being made not only with the

mire, but also on behalf of the audience: 'We get to share together, the public and nature, to come together for a while. We are part of the mire.' The plants and animals of the mires are interlinked in mire art as a biocultural heritage, part of a site-specific entity (Latvala-Harvilahti 2022). Through art and the biocultural heritage of mires, a profound cultural level that reflects worldviews and values may thus is reached. For example, by questioning the current nature-consuming way of life, such a dialogue addresses the relationship between humans and nature and its manifestations. (See Siivonen et al. 2022.)

During Noora Kauppila's lamenting, the interviewee felt the sadness and awe among the audience members, and tears also came into his eyes. He said that the occasion was accompanied by a permission to cry together. At this point, I asked: 'Is there any environmental sadness involved in being in the mire?' To which, he replied:

> Well, there in the mire, the experience is still that the *mire gives permission* for that grief, and *the presence of the mire somehow maybe made it even more cleansing* than if it was done in some man-made spaces - - and given what has happened in the world during the year, the same experience now in the autumn would probably be even stronger, because of what has happened in the world (e.g. forest fires) and everything; so then, perhaps it would be more conscious and a fiercer expression (pause) as an emotional reaction.
>
> You know, I cried this morning at work — when I heard the news — when an area of forest half the size of Finland is burning in America. (Interviewer: It is absolutely shocking.) Even now I am crying. Yes, it is shocking.

Although the local mire is understood to invite visitors to show grief, the lived experience is not only interpreted in a local context. In the previous emotional part of the interview, the narrative shifted from the art performance itself to broader social and political connotations. At the beginning, he sought expressions and words to articulate the mire as an agent of nature that gives him permission for grief. But thereafter, the purifying essence of the experience became emphasised by the place itself. There was a slight pause in the narrative, and as the interview was not face to face, I cannot know the cause. However, during the pause there was clearly an emotional shift towards global natural disasters, and despite the seriousness of the situation, to (indifferent) Trumpian politics. The theme of environmental grievance encompassed the theme of mire protection and mining, and he said: '…the mining companies' obsession with destroying mires is something … (pause) I just get a deep, sad feeling. I do not know what to say.'

The interviewee talked about species loss and its effects. Environmental and land-use themes require discussions about the global value of the mire zone, and particularly the key role of mires as 'the lungs of the world'. The interviewee was clearly frustrated by the slow reaction speed and general lack of response from decision-makers at a time when information on biodiversity and its importance is readily available. However, he said there is hope in the wisdom of the younger generations. He further stressed that the mire is a good place as it is (without humans), that it is good to learn to navigate and appreciate it, and that it does not need to be cleared. The view that nature is better off without people was evident without my having to raise the question. But he reported feeling that it is also a place where you can 'politely ask nature's permission, enjoying what it gives you'. In that way, at the individual level a lament performance plays an essential role in the building of resilience.

The interviewees articulated in different ways what may be equally powerful experiences. The mire landscape as an experience is not static and the same for everyone either; rather, it is unique and time bound (see Silvennoinen 2017). It is not necessarily easy to find the words to describe experiences over the telephone, where gestures and facial expressions are not part of the communication process. It was striking that crying emerged as one of the markers of the experience of laments in the interviews.

### 'In the mire, the public becomes a community' (H_Y3)

The third interviewee (b. 1975) is a volunteer in the field of mire conservation. Describing herself as a 'passionate lover of mires', she has a strong personal emotional attachment to mires because of her own local mire, which she described as being 'raped by peat production'. The destruction of the mire is one of the greatest tragedies to have occurred in her lifetime. At the time of the interview, 18 months had passed since the destruction of the mire, but it still evokes rage, sadness and longing in her. She relates strongly to the changes and did not visit the mire for six months before it was destroyed, to leave it in peace. The influence of the mire's perspective on one's own behaviour towards nature is quite exceptional, and the peace of the mire refers also to the mire animals as mire users. She is in favour of defending mires and hopes that the value of the mire ecosystem will be seen and understood without human intervention. She attaches a high degree of importance to the mire as a habitat, and she also looks at it from the point of view of birds:

> The cranes lived there and saw traffic there in the mire. Now it is completely stopped; it is all dead and quiet [in] that mire. There is no life there. All the birds that used to nest there have now found somewhere in the fields. *It saddens me to think* what the

> crane thought when it first returned to the meadow and realised that, damn, there's nothing here anymore.

Climate change is not just a headline for the interviewee. Its consequences in her own home environment are tangible and have already happened: 'It is all dead and quiet [in] that mire. There is no life there.' If the mire as a living heritage has meant following the mire's fauna, then the opportunity to do so has been lost. Her feelings of misery are also associated with thoughts of a crane. This raises the question, is the grief felt by a human and a crane the same and of equal value? The recent 'plant turn' in performance art, meaning, for instance, strengthening the co-agency of plants, can help people reflect on their relationship with other forms of life, especially in the mire, where the presence of plants in their own performance space and habitat is obvious (see Arlander 2022, 470, 487, 489).

It was not the first time she had been to the Karvasuo mire in Seinäjoki, where the laments were performed. On the day of the performance, she did not think anyone would come to the unaddressed venue on a weekday evening and in harsh weather, even though the performance was free. However, there were several dozen people in the audience and the weather unexpectedly improved. The interviewee had expected a 'mire conservation hipster crowd', but most members of the audience were pensioners.

The interviewee said that the gentle breeze, colours and setting evening sun in early autumn created a magical space for the art performance. The audience formed a semi-circle in three places in the mires, depending on where Kauppila was performing. Some of the audience members sat on their camping chairs, while others, like the interviewee, stood still 'with their eyes fixed' on the performer. The audience was quite close to Kauppila, and in many ways the traditional division of roles between performer and audience was thus broken. The Karelian laments were performed first and last, with *The Wolf spell* in between, which she felt was the most memorable part. Kauppila first played the kantele, then closed her eyes and was silent for a long time. Then she began to growl, yawn, howl and finally ran off in laughter 'really far' in her wolf's clothing. '*It was really powerful, though; I had a child with me and a friend, they were highly impressed too.*' At this point, some of the audience members wondered if they should move too, and some did. However, Kauppila came back with a screech of an owl and a wolf's howl, making the audience realise that the show was still going on.

The interviewee feels that the artists are nature conservationists and that they have the right to say that mires must be protected. She sees mire art as a potential way to influence the cause of mires, with the value of the mires expressed in the mires themselves. On the other hand, she feels that '*mires*

*should be left alone*', i.e. the idea of mires as noisy arenas for public events does not appeal to her. However, the laments were not played through amplifiers; they were experienced through the pure human voice. The soundscape of the laments was further combined with the presence of nature and animals, as well as the sound of the wind. At a quiet point in the performance, a crane flew overhead, which the interviewee felt was part of the choreography. As the performer vocalised the role of the wolf, they could hear dogs howling in response in the distance. The interviewee understood that the theme of the laments was the loss of the mires and remembers Kauppila handing out a leaflet about their background:

> I had previously taken the attitude that we would go to the mires to sing, and she wanted to organise performances of this kind *on behalf of the mires*; I took the themes as grief in the face of the loss of the mires. For me, it was secondary what was sung in the laments.

The mire as a natural environment is temporarily transformed through artistic activities. The mire becomes a cultural space, where the public gathers to appreciate mires that were previously underestimated or prioritised purely for economic purposes (see Jones 2009). Sustainability transformations require that changes take place in all social systems to ensure ecological and sustainable development (SYKE Policy brief 2021). The interviewee noticed that the older women in the audience were moved during the performance, but she was not affected in the same way herself. All the people there were overwhelmed and impressed after the performance, and some gave feedback to the performer. Another thing that made the performance remarkable was that they were not left alone. After the performance, Kauppila escorted the audience back to their cars in the dark and returned alone to retrieve the instruments she had left behind. The overall effectiveness of the performance does not need to be found between the lines of an interview, and the elements of safety and of a shared experience was present from start to finish. As the interviewee said: 'the performance took you into the spaces. But the performance is still in the back of my mind a year later.' It was also vastly different from what she had otherwise experienced. She explained that there are many good things about art in nature:

The ears are retained when the music is not as loud out there as elsewhere; you can be outside and the atmosphere, the community of the audience, is completely different – it's so unique, *it's intense to experience the art*, and apparently, to perform it -- in every way more intense than indoors.

The interviews that I have analysed above open a new layer of understanding environmental art – mire art – through lament performances. By working together, artists and environmental organisations can create experiences in nature that also raise people's awareness about mire protection and the importance of mire nature.

## Conclusions

Mires combine well-being and concern in an interesting way. Besides being interested in art, a concern for nature is clearly a factor in people's choice to attend a mire art event. From newly produced interview material, three interviewees described their experience of the performance *Dirge on the Mother's grave – lamenting as a tool of collective grief in the era of eco anxiety* by musician Noora Kauppila. Her performance had an environmental theme, as the audience heard a lament entitled *A lament for the lost land*, which was performed in a mire overshadowed by mining plans. The lament performance transformed a mire into a culturally appropriated space for the collective and individual processing of emotions regarding a fragile natural environment. Crying and weeping are essential to laments, and as such, the performance can be seen as a shared ritual that emphasises concern and sadness. The cultural knowledge generated by the interviews provided much-needed information on art as a tool sharing for environmental emotions.

The audiences were quite small (max 50) in all the performances, ranging in age from children to the elderly, but all my interviewees were adults. The physicality, emotions and physical closeness of both the artist and the audience were stressed. Interviewees verbalised their experiences as being mesmerising, powerful and charmingly intense and emphasised that the mire environment is magical. The atmosphere of outdoor art was unique and intense, not least because the audience became a community in quite an unusual way, which makes the performances different than those of indoor concerts. Kauppila was able to influence the reception of art by creating a safe experience of art in nature from start to finish. The shared, peaceful, artist-led transition from the car park to the venue and back again at the end of the performance is clearly a key part of the experience, one that reinforces the well-being aspect of the art. The interviews also reflected the interviewees' background experience with nature as a place of well-being.

I asked interviewees about the kinds of environmental emotions that laments in the mire provoked and how they contextualise such emotions. The first interviewee addressed her concerns not only towards mire nature, but also to busy people and everyday life. The concern arose from a *realisation of the need to change people's unsustainable way of life*; for her, mire art immedi-

ately created a strong connection with nature. The second interviewee extended this concern to the level of global, nature-destroying politics, but he also reported finding solace in the mire and in mire art. He associated hope with a generation of young people. In a third interview, the concern was more for cranes that cannot find their former habitat when they return to the mire, but at the same time, this interviewee highlighted the role of artists as defenders of mire conservation. In addition, the interviews highlighted feelings of helplessness, worry, anxiety, anger and frustration. Many interviewees mentioned experiencing anger and frustration especially in relation to the wider context of the degradation of nature. In the interviews, the experience of the art performance was the main theme touched upon, but the interviewees' other accounts of their feelings about nature broadened their understanding of environmental care and other environmental emotions. Two interviewees cried during the interview when relating their descriptions to global climate concerns and their sadness about the destruction of nature. The interviewees also reported unwanted changes in their own surroundings, and their negative feelings about the changes were reflected in the observed decline in the habitats of birds and other mire animals. Two interviewees described a vivid interaction between Noora Kauppila and mire birds, with the cranes responding to Kauppila's calls. The above elements of the performance were further seen as enhancing well-being, and one of the interviewees offered a forward-looking perspective to people's relationship with nature by asking whether people will still be able to be enraptured by nature in the future, or whether this skill will be lost. With these points in mind, there was a call for more art performances to be held in nature and for more visits to nature as a child.

The rich biocultural heritage of mires is now being contextualised anew by art projects. The amount of data in this study is small, but the understanding of experiences gained through the interviews opens a dialogue about the reception of mire art and the need for a collective processing of environmental emotions and cultural transformation. Mire art invites us to gather together in an event where emotion, not speech, dominates. Perhaps that is precisely why the effects are so powerful.

## AUTHOR

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All the interview material will be archived in the Finnish Literature Society, in the Joensuu branch archive.

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H_Y2 17.9.2020.

H_Y3 9.9.2020.

For all the interviews, the interviewer was Pauliina Latvala-Harvilahti, University of Eastern Finland, Mire Trend research project.

The lyrics for the lament *ABEUDUNNUO - A cry for a lost land* were obtained from artist Noora Kauppila.

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Tenno Teidearu

# The Material Agency of Crystals in New Spirituality
## Significance of Decay and Failure of Materials

**Abstract**

This paper[1] studies crystals in New Spirituality in Estonia not only as things, or objects, used in certain practices, but also as agentive materials. My research participants, who wear crystals, take their material properties seriously, finding the properties to have supportive qualities, according to esoteric interpretation. Nevertheless, things and materials, objects and minerals, are never permanent; they have material lives of their own. Sometimes minerals lose their gloss, crack, break or just become lost. Physical decay and displacement, which are the focus of this paper, have meaning-making potential, which my interlocutors interpret within the framework of the esoteric. Their perception of these minerals can be understood in post-humanist and new materialist terms. The paper uses the concept of material agency to demonstrate how natural processes of decay acquire cultural meaning by connecting material properties and human interpretation.

Keywords: Material religion, material culture, new materialism, materiality, materials, agency

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## Introduction

Crystals[2] are currently widespread and popular objects in Estonian New Spirituality,[3] as well as in European and Anglo-American New Spirituality in general. People most often wear them as jewellery or accessories that have esoteric[4] and supportive qualities (see Teidearu 2019). They have gone from being part of a strictly spiritual subculture to becoming more visible, or a matter of discussion, in mainstream culture and media. What is significant about this trend is that it made material objects a focus of New Spirituality, and therefore, these ideologies and beliefs have become more material and tangible. Nevertheless, there has been only moderate interest in the study of crystals among scholars of religious studies, sociology of religion and anthropology of religion internationally (e.g. McClean 2006; Melton 2013).

Based on my ethnographic material on the use of crystals, people most often wear crystals as jewellery in the form of pendants, bracelets, necklaces, earrings or rings, or else they just carry tumbled[5] stones or raw minerals

2 The crystals popular in New Spirituality are semiprecious minerals that are usually cheap and mined and traded globally. Based on my empirical data, synonyms include 'gemstone' (*poolvääriskivi*), 'gem' (*poolvääriskivi*) or 'stone' (*kivi*). In this paper, I use these three designations as synonyms for crystal (*kristall*).

3 The terms 'New Age' and 'New Spirituality' are occasionally treated as synonyms, but in my paper I draw a distinction between them and prefer the term 'New Spirituality'. I use the term 'New Spirituality' to mean a contemporary Western syncretic spiritual movement or religiosity. The concept 'New Age', however, applies to the New Age movement and 'cultic milieu' (see Campbell 1972) of the 1960s and 1970s. More recent research proposes that this is no longer an emic term and that the main focus in contemporary spirituality has shifted from the cosmological idea of entering into a new era known as the Age of Aquarius to the spiritual development of the self, which Paul Heelas (1996) have defined as 'self-spirituality'. Therefore, several scholars (e.g. Sutcliffe 2002; Lynch 2007; MacKian 2012) propose that the concept 'New Spirituality' is more appropriate for a contemporary setting. The paper does not, however, develop a discussion on the distinctions between these two terms.

4 In my research, I understand the esoteric as an element of discourse that is linked to an absolute or hidden truth or knowledge and that can also be experienced; esoteric discourse is not identical to a specific tradition; rather, it represents knowledge, opinions and the social organisation of a tradition (von Stuckrad 2014: 6–10). Esoteric knowledge, or the esoteric in my paper, is linked with specific knowledge about crystals in New Age or New Spirituality, which is applied in my interlocutors' narratives and interpretations as discursive elements. In my empirical data, the spiritual energy of the human body and minerals (i.e. the hidden properties of crystals) comprise this discursive esoteric knowledge. Esotericism, distinctively, refers to a broader body of specific esoteric tradition. However, Western esotericism and esoteric knowledge can also be perceived culturally as an umbrella term for various associated religious teachings and streams of philosophical thought in Western culture that have been rejected by Christian and academic authority as 'superstition', 'magic' or 'the occult' (Hanegraaff 2012, 230; 2013, 258–266).

5 Tumbled stones are gemstones that have been polished in a rock tumbler.

with them in a pocket or bag. As I have discussed it in a previous paper (see Teidearu 2019), people generally use crystals to solve personal problems and to bring change to their lives by supporting their human capacities and qualities. In esoteric interpretations, crystals have energetic qualities that support people by affecting the chakras of their subtle body.[6] Every stone supports a specific energy or human quality associated with a particular chakra (Teidearu 2019, 144; *cf.* Johnston 2009, 27–29). By using crystals, people develop, enhance and (re)construct themselves (Teidearu 2019, 137–145). My informants wear stones every day, often the same stone every day, which they perceive as a mutual relationship having a supportive effect on humans that affects the crystals as well (Teidearu 2019), a relationship that shows bodily intimacy with stones (Teidearu 2022). Therefore, it is a particularly material and interactive practice. Besides perceiving stones as objects, my interlocutors also value crystals as unique and 'powerful' materials (i.e. minerals) in their own right (Teidearu 2022), and they take the material and its properties seriously (see Ingold 2007). However, some crystals become lost, break or develop fissures, or their gloss or colour becomes altered over time and through much use, which are the cases that this paper concentrates on.

In the study of material religion, the main focus is on how religion takes place through, or as, material culture and how material expressions of religion are part of people`s religious and mundane lives (Arweck & Keenan 2006, 13–14; Meyer et al. 2010, 209; Morgan 2010, 56–70). So as not to treat religious objects as evidence of belief (see Keane 2008, 110) or emphasise belief over materiality (see Teidearu 2019, 134–135), my study departs from a methodological view of crystals as first and foremost just pieces of material culture, and materials specifically. Religious objects, after all, have the same meaning-making qualities as any other objects (Morgan 2010, 70–73). One way to make sense of materiality in religion or New Spirituality, which I focus on in this paper, is to pay attention to the material forms of objects and to their materials as well as to any alterations in or decay of that material.

This paper studies the decay and material failure of crystals and analyses them not only as things, or objects, but as materials also. Materials, as discussed in this paper, are not permanent; they are often affected by decay. Through much use, crystals sometimes happen to fall apart or become lost. Physical disintegration and displacement have a meaning-making potential in the human use of things. I will analyse interpretations of the physical alterations of crystals as viewed through esoteric interpretations and knowledge. Material agency,

6 A holistic understanding based on the concept of the energetic subtle body and its chakras is widespread in New Spirituality and modern Western Esotericism in general (Samuel & Johnston 2013, 1–6).

as a concept used in this paper, aims to apply a new materialist perspective to bring together the material properties of crystals and human interpretation in a posthuman perspective. Instead of just rejecting an anthropocentric viewpoint, my argumentation demonstrates how natural processes of decay acquire cultural meaning through human interpretation. Concentrating on materials and decay by acknowledging natural and essentially material processes offers a new materialist possibility to better understand material religion and material culture in general from subjective, cultural and natural perspectives.

In my ethnological study of the contemporary use of crystals in New Spirituality, I have followed the methods and theories of material culture studies in anthropology that make it possible to analyse the meaning-making processes of things in material religion (Morgan 2010, 70–73), and I have been also inspired by the archaeological approach to objects and materiality, which focuses on the materials that objects are made of, their material properties and decay. Furthermore, my approach in this paper is influenced by posthumanism, and more specifically, by the new materialist perspective on materiality as inherently performative or agential matter, addressing the question of the agency of things and materials. While ethnology has often focused on human relations with the non-human world, the aim of this enquiry has traditionally been to comprehend human culture and the human worldview (Kaarlenkaski & Steel 2020, 1). The discussion on posthumanist approaches in ethnology (e.g. Murawska 2020) is more recent than in the humanities and social sciences.

The study of material culture and material religion has a long history in European ethnology. Since the early national orientation of the discipline in 19th century, together with a focus on salvage ethnography, which concentrated on collecting and preserving the materiality of peasant everyday life, artefacts have long been of interest (Korkiakangas, Lappi, & Niskanen 2008, 8; Löfrgen 2012, 170; Jääts 2019, 2–4). Unlike in Scandinavia or Central Europe, material culture remained at the centre of interest for Estonian ethnographers under Soviet rule until the early 1990s (Jääts 2019, 7–10). Alongside an interest in mundane folklife, early ethnographers in Estonia collected some Christian and folk religious ritual artefacts, but their interest in the materiality of religion remained modest (Johanson & Jonuks 2018a, 203). Folklorists have been active, though, in documenting narratives of folk belief and folk magic, which were also often linked with specific things or natural objects, such as sacrificial stones (see Tvauri 1999), trees and springs (Johanson & Jonuks 2018b, 108–109; see also Mohay 2008, 30–31). However, archaeologists Kristiina Johanson and Tõnno Jonuks (2018a, 203–207) point out that certain types of stones and stone objects are the most abundant exemplars of folk religion, including folk magic and folk medicine, in the collections of Estonian museums; for example, the muse-

ums contain thunderstones, curing stones, witch's stones, raven stones, stones protecting against strokes, stone hearts, stone sticks, ear stones and stone axes linked with thunderbolt folklore. Ethnologist Jana Reidla (2012, 16–61) finds that in Estonian traditional jewellery, beads used mainly as necklaces were widespread until the beginning of the 20th century; most often, the beads were made of glass, but beads made of stone or minerals (usually calcedony or quartz) are also known, spreading mainly between the 13th and 17th centuries. However, the semiprecious stones – i.e. minerals – found in New Spirituality today have not been studied in Estonia before my research (e.g. Teidearu 2019).[7]

## Fieldwork material

This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork done in Estonia between 2017 and 2022. During this period, I conducted 41 in-depth, semi-structured interviews, combined with ethnographic observations at 17 esoteric shops,[8] focusing on the sale of crystals across Estonia. During or after the interviews and observations, I kept a fieldwork diary. Also, I took photographs of the crystals that people use and of the esoteric shops. In addition to ethnography, I have analysed esoteric books written on crystals, although the books usually describe the effects that the stones have, leaving aside the human–stone relationship, which is the general focus of my research. This empirical, visual and textual material forms the basis for my PhD research project, as does this article. However, this paper makes use of empirical examples from eight interviews with six research participants. Both in presenting empirical examples from the ethnographic data and when referring to my research participants, I have used pseudonyms and birth years with their approval.

My research participants, in general, do not form a solid community or group. Nearly half of my interlocutors are spiritual practitioners who wear crystals daily, with whom I met through the snowball method. The other half are clerks or owners of esoteric shops, or crystal therapists, whose devotion to stones is more professional. I met with them mainly by visiting various esoteric shops. I also visited one Estonian jeweller and gem cutter who works with minerals as a material. Most of my interlocutors are women, with only four of

7 Some recent research on material religion has been done, for instance, by Estonian ethnologist Laur Vallikivi, (2011) who studied sacred objects of the Nenets people, and folklorist Madis Arukask (2017, 2021), who studied Votian and Vepsian rituals involving trees and the materiality of text and books in Seto oral culture.

8 The term 'esoteric shop' (*esoteerikapood* or *esoteerikakauplus*) is an emic term among customers and shopkeepers. Other emic terms that I use in the paper are 'crystal shop' (*kristallipood*) and 'stone shop' (*kivipood*), both of which are used by customers and shopkeepers alike. The terms illustrate the recent and common trend of selling mainly crystals in esoteric shops in Estonia. In this paper, I use the term 'esoteric shop' without developing a further discussion on the recent trend, and characteristics of 'crystal shops'.

them being men. This percentage may just be a random outcome of the snowball method, but it does correspond with the claims by shop owners and clerks that crystals are popular mainly among younger or middle-aged women. The informants who reportedly just wear crystals, and are also clients of esoteric shops, are mostly women in their twenties or thirties. The shop keepers, clerks and crystal therapists whom I met and interviewed are mainly middle-aged women.

The main method used to study the practice of wearing crystals (see Teidearu 2019) and their physical alterations was 'object interview', in which stones were the main focus of the semi-structured in-depth interviews (both thematically and physically). Sophie Woodward (2019, 35) explains that the object interview as a part of a 'material methods' approach is an interview method that 'incorporates objects into the process of doing an interview'. The physical presence of such objects in interview situations helped me and my interlocutors to think with things (Woodward 2019, 12–20), and moreover, to 'think through things' (see Henare et al. 2007, 4) as they appear in their lives. I asked my research participants to bring their crystals to our interviews. This allowed both me as a researcher and my interlocutors to have stones physically present in the centre of the interview space, providing both a material and thematic connection. My informants occasionally touched their crystals or held them during the course of our conversations, which helped them to recall memories and feelings and to contemplate their relationship with the stones (see King 2009, xvi). Objects evoke and recall experiences, narratives and emotions that would not necessarily emerge otherwise in a conventional inter-subjective interview situation (Woodward 2019, 37). The materiality and material form of objects are also present in the object interview, and both researcher and research participants are able to pick them up, touch, feel, smell and inspect them closely. This allows the material form, materials and material properties of the crystals to be part of the interview. For me as a researcher, the physical presence of stones highlighted the significance of their material nature (see Ingold 2007). By taking close-up photographs, I was able to document these material details. Moreover, material traces of any damage or alterations, such as fissures, erosion and lost gloss, became part of my interlocutors' narration. In those cases, material alteration and decay as natural processes, too, became part of the object interview. Narratives of decay reflect human interpretations and explanations of natural processes, which sometimes are less materialist and more cultural, i.e. linked with other types of cultural knowledge and interpretations.

All the interviews were transcribed for further analysis. The transcriptions were analysed using the grounded theory method to prevent forming an initial hypothesis or following initial theoretical categories during the analytical process. The analysis revealed clear links between different categories and topics, which allowed me to situate my interlocutors' statements in a broader con-

text. For example, clear links emerged between the material form and material of crystals and their physical alteration and the concept of spiritual energy.[9]

## Materials and agency

Things are not passive, as material objects have an effect on people in various ways (Woodward 2019, 20–22). Objects have many qualities that are part of their meanings, as is evident from the study of material culture in anthropology or ethnology. The material form of things is significant because materiality has tangible and sensuous qualities that shape human experiences and identities (see, e.g. Alftberg 2017). For example, the materiality of homemaking is full of mnemonic and affective significances,[10] and even the materiality and sensuous qualities of books can have affective and emotional agency upon people (Kajander 2022). Agency is generally understood as a socio-cultural ability to act (Hoskins 2006, 74; Gell 1998), which can also be applied to non-human actors, such as things, machines and technologies that affect both human behaviour and ways of being in the world. Agency can also be applied to religious objects and entities (Lynch 2010, 49–50), which are experienced as having an active role in human use or interactions.

However, objects are not static or permanent, as the unexpected may happen. Things sometimes fail or misbehave, which is experienced as a rupture of their functionality, or they just become lost, which also sometimes affects human actions and feelings. Anthropologists Timothy Carroll, David Jeevendrampillai and Aaron Parkhurst (2017) propose that things sometimes falling apart or becoming lost can be theoretically understood as a 'material failure', in which material stuff behaves contrary to human intention. Things have a temporal dimension, although they are often expected to continue in the same situation in the future as in the past or present; people expect that things will be permanent (Carroll et al. 2017, 2–15). Therefore, 'material failure' in cases of breakage or loss is perceived as a significant event, which encourages human meaning-making practices. This approach opens up an understanding of things, for example crystals, as potentially unstable objects, which I aim to apply by analysing my interlocutors' interpretations of losing stones.

In the case of crystals, besides being valued as things, they are perceived as meaningful and valuable because of their unique material – they are natural minerals. In the simplest terms, 'minerals are naturally occurring, macro-

9 The reference to 'energy' in the concept 'spiritual energy' is a widespread holistic notion in New Spirituality (see Lynch 2007, 11–47); it forms the basis for the use and valuation of minerals in esoteric interpretation (Teidearu 2019, 144; Melton 2013, 203–207).

10 For example, see the current Finnish ethnographic project 'Material and Sensory Memories: Explorations on Autobiographical Materiality' (SENSOMEMO).

scopically homogeneous chemical compounds with a regular crystal structure', formed by geological and chemical processes (Wenk & Bulakh 2014, 3–11). For some of my interlocutors, their esoteric qualities and their ability to support people are caused by their molecular structure. For them, scientific knowledge is embedded in the esoteric framework. Nearly all of my informants feel that their esoteric qualities are an outcome of their long-term formation in the ground, with their unique material identifying them and their use as things. Kaia-Liisa Reinut (2015, 104), the most well-known crystal therapist in Estonia, writes in her handbook of crystal therapy that 'every person who has studied crystal therapy knows that crystals emit positive energy according to their chemical constitution, colour and physical form'. It is evident that my interlocutors who wear gemstones, including practitioners of crystal therapy and shopkeepers, take the material and its properties very seriously. Similarly, the evaluation of diamonds in the buying and selling of precious stones is based on an investigation of their material, its properties (flawlessness) and qualities (colour, opacity) (Calvão 2015, 201–204). However, instead of assigning financial value to them, my interlocutors value the material of inexpensive crystals, i.e. semi-precious stones, because of their esoteric meaning and because they perceive minerals as 'powerful' material (see Teidearu 2022).

Tim Ingold (2007) writes that when material culture and materiality are under discussion in anthropology, and in material culture studies in general, materials and their properties are often neglected. Instead, we should take materials and their properties seriously. Materials are not permanent, however; they alter and decay, as do the objects made up of those materials. From an archaeological standpoint, decay is a natural part of material culture, an outcome affecting all materials and their properties. Archaeologist Bjørnar Olsen (2010, 162–166) stresses that material culture is never static or permanent since its primary property is to decay with use and time. Similarly, archaeologist Ian Hodder (2012, 68) states that things have material lives of their own, which is their primary agency; not a secondary agency that is delegated to things by human intentionality (see Gell 1998). As archaeologists Eleanor Conlin Casella and Karina Croucher (2014, 95) put it, '[d]ecay is not only essential, but an inevitable process'. The objects in people's lives change, wear out and decompose, which is a function of their material properties; or they just become lost. In their engagement with human life, the decomposition of objects and materials provokes reactions, feelings of unease, discomfort or curiosity (Casella and Croucher 2014, 95–96), and often requires explanation (*cf.* Carroll et al. 2017). Scholars in the field of archaeology appreciate and apply the study of the intrinsic properties of objects and materials from geology, mineralogy, chemistry and biology, as well as a focus on the process

of decay (Casella and Croucher 2014, 92–93). From this perspective, a form of agency can be ascribed to material properties and physical alterations (see Olsen 2010, 157–173; see also Ingold 2007, 12). As a result of this instability, people become entangled with the material life of things through human contributions to the maintenance and persistence of objects (Hodder 2011). An appreciation of materials and of decay and material alteration in archaeology provides things with their explicitly material agency, or the agency of material and material life, which opens up new perspectives also in an anthropological study of material culture and the everyday use of things.

The approach of focusing strictly on material processes can be associated with the quest for new materialist strands of thought, which aims to detach itself from the anthropocentric view of things as passive objects. It seeks to understand things as matter, which itself is intrinsically active or inter-active, affective and agentive, or even vital (see Bennett 2010, vii–xiii). In this paper, and in accordance with my empirical data, I highlight Karen Barad's (2007) perspective, which emphasises the performative nature of matter and can be categorised as a 'performative new materialism' (see discussion in Gamble et al. 2019, 122–123). According to Barad (2007, 137–178), matter is productive, it is both generated and generative in the sense that matter is constantly in motion and in formulation, similarly to the flux or flow of materials (see Ingold 2007, 11–14); agency, for its part, can be understood as 'doing' or 'being', or an 'enactment' that occurs only in intra-active[11] performances. Matter in new materialism has inter-active and performative potential often specifically because of its substance or material. Sonia Hazard (2013) writes that new materialism in general is based on the assumption that things have unique properties because of their material form, which users or consumers are not always aware of, i.e. things have agency of their own, which is not clearly perceived or understood. Therefore, we need to pay more attention to the materiality and properties of things (Hazard 2013, 64–67). Due to their chemical and physical properties and processes, materials are an active party in interactions with humans and human use or with other materials; according to the natural science perspective, materiality is not static or persistent (Jones 2016, 4–6; Coole & Frost 2010, 5–15). When humans use things, these things sometimes break. This is usually caused by physical wear, usage that does not correspond to the properties of the material, or it is just the natural decomposition of materials over time. However, the material failure enacts human

11 Instead of using the term interaction, Barad (2007, 141) proposes using the term intra-action to address agency within matter that in itself and in its occurrence with other matter or forces is performative and generative and not to treat items or agents as pre-established objects.

meaning-making practices. This phenomenon, which is an outcome of both physical alteration and human interpretation, can be understood strictly as 'material agency' (see Woodward 2019, 20–22) in this paper. Similarly, post-human mutual interactions can be perceived by focusing ethnographically on everyday life encounters, for instance with natural objects such as lakes (Murawska 2020).

The focus on materials and interpretations of their alteration provides an approach that seeks to understand both material causes and human intentionality, and their interrelations, grounded in ethnographic data. New materialism is an interdisciplinary field of thought with its own aims and intellectual sources, which sometimes manages to provide a connection to both human and natural sciences (Jones 2016, 2–4). Material agency, as I conceptualise it here, includes processes long known in natural sciences and gives them cultural meaning.

Based on the following empirical examples, I will discuss how crystals as things have agency when people lose them, and how stones as materials have material agency in cases of breakage and physical alteration. Furthermore, I analyse interpretations of such unexpected occasions. These significant events, in which gemstones are claimed to act upon people, are often interpreted in an esoteric framework.

## Losing stones as 'material failure'

My interlocutors wear or carry crystals with them in various ways every day, and they rarely take them off or leave the house without their stones. Most of my research participants have experienced losing a crystal, having a crystal falling off or finding somebody else's lost crystal. On such occasions, they often attribute agency to crystals. People develop strong intimate and emotional bonds with the crystals that they wear daily, which I have conceptualised, based on discussions about 'my stone', as an analytical concept (see Teidearu 2019, 143–144). Losing such a personally significant object, one that supports their human qualities and aspects of everyday life, is perceived as the stone leaving the owner's possession against their will. My interlocutors often interpret such an occurrence as accidental and unexpected, and therefore meaningful. They have described how and why their stones have fallen off or been lost, for example a pendant band snaps, a clasp or attachment breaks or comes off, a stone falls out of a setting due to poor glue or a loose guide setting, or the stone or jewellery piece itself is lost. Maya (b. 1991) related how her lazurite pendant, which she got from her older brother, was lost:

> In a way, it was very important to me, and I was disappointed when it was lost. I thought that probably I didn't need it. However, this stone gave me so much power and strength, I really felt it. When I didn`t have it anymore, I was in a situation where I had to cope by myself somehow. I was even thinking [about buying a new one]; I was looking for jewellery with the same stone. Eventually, I thought that it was lost once and for all, and I wouldn't buy it for myself again. I had just gotten it, and then it just went away. I didn`t choose this stone or this jewellery at all. If I was going to have contact with this stone again, it would be in just the same way: I would get it as a gift. I wouldn't obtain it myself, but I would like to have it. It feels right somehow, that if I didn't choose it, it just came to me and then it went away; so, I can't acquire it just like that.

Maya interprets the loss of the stone as coincidental, but also as a natural occurrence. An instance of failure, for example losing a crystal, is also a moment of reinvention and meaning-making (Carroll et al. 2017, 10–14). Perceiving it as just a random occurrence is often not enough to explain or overcome the loss. Maya and many others among my interlocutors understand losing gems as stemming from the fact that the gems have agency to act in a certain way towards humans. Their main argument is that a crystal is lost when a person no longer needs the support it affords. This means, in my informants' own words, that the stones 'have done their job', they have supported the person in solving some specific problem and are no longer needed for their specific quality. Using an esoteric interpretation, my interlocutors say that the crystal has balanced the human subtle body, or chakra, compensating for a deficiency. Once this action has been accomplished, the gemstone can leave that person's possession. Tiia (b. 1966) said that the angel aura quartz[12] pendulum she had for a short period did a great job for her, and after that it may have gone to another person who also needed its support:

> It was really very strange how it got lost. I got a marvellous crystal pendulum, an angel aura quartz pendulum, and it stayed with me for only two weeks. Then it left me, and I don't have a clue how. One day it was simply gone, and I couldn't remember where I put it. It was 2014, I think, and it hasn't returned. It did its job; I even perceived what it did and it was wonderful. It did its job and went where it should inexplicably. Perhaps it went to somebody else who found it where I, so to speak, lost it. Well,

12 Aura crystals are quartz or amethyst crystals that have been chemically treated to colour the surface with different metals, giving them an unusual sheen. The base mineral is heated and treated with vapour from a precious metal (gold, platinum, titanium, silver, iron, magnesium or nickel), which coats the crystal. Angel aura quartz is treated in this way using silver or platinum.

> anything can happen in the subtle realm. … For me, it still means that it has done its job. It can go to another person. It has shared the information with me that it should.

Tiia admits that the human mind is sometimes unable to comprehend how things happen in the subtle world,[13] which is the basis for the agency of crystals according to her understanding. In fact, this perception is shared among my informants and in common esoteric discourse on crystals in New Spirituality. In the words of my interlocutors, stones know better what humans need, and they act accordingly. Therefore, people try to accept such instances as losing personally significant crystals, even if it is experienced as a 'material failure' (see Carroll et al. 2017, 5–6). For example, Daisy (b. 1991) told me that the two crystals that she wears every day no longer stay around her neck. She had the stones hanging around her neck on a leather band, but now they always come off, whatever type of knot she makes. Therefore, she cannot wear them anymore, and there is nothing that she can do about it. Like Maya, when she lost her jewellery, Daisy concluded that probably she should not wear the stones anymore.

My informants have great respect and empathy for stones, and therefore, they tend to think about stones not only in anthropocentric terms, but also in 'stone-centric perspective' ways, i.e. they interpret events from the perspective of the stones. Gordon Lynch (2010, 49–50) writes that people often tend to attribute subjectivity and agency to religious entities and things in a specific cultural context. Graham Harvey (2012, 198–201) explains in animist terms that people attribute human qualities, such as intentionality, to non-human entities or objects only if they can relate to and communicate with them in a particular and meaningful way; only under such conditions can a thing or entity be perceived as a 'person' or 'other-than-human person'. In another paper (Teidearu 2022), I have analysed human relationship with crystals as 'other-than-human persons', as a kind of animist materialism, which is in my empirical material based on a specifically bodily, i.e. a phenomenological, relationality and intimacy with the stones (*cf.* Harvey 2013, 135–151). As my interlocutors in general pay respect to crystals, and sometimes claim that stones are alive and have an agency, they regard gemstones as equipotent actors with humans. This can be understood as an example of a 'flat ontology', in which everything exists equally and humans as individual actors are just one part of a larger whole (see Harman 2018, 54–58). The way in which my interlocutors perceive crystals shows clear parallels with animism and flat ontology. People who use gemstones often think about losing them from a 'stone-centric per-

13 'Subtle world' as an esoteric term indicating the subtle materiality and reality based on spiritual energy, which forms the basis for a holistic worldview in New Spirituality.

spective', which, for them, implies that crystals have agency and cause events in case of instances of 'material failure'. Specifically, they perceive the material displacement as a physical reaction on the part of the crystals. Similarly, my interlocutors think about material and the material alteration of stones from the perspective of crystals and their relationship to human interactions.

## Physical alterations as material agency

In addition to losing stones, some of my research participants have experienced physical alterations or breakage of their stones as well, or they have heard stories about such occurrences from their acquaintances. As with lost stones, my interlocutors perceive the breaking of stones as the stones' ability to react to humans. They often interpret these instances in esoteric terms and associate them with subtle energy. Annika (b. 1987) explains the breaking of stones in an esoteric framework as their energetic ability to absorb and store, transform and emit, spiritual energy (see also Teidearu 2019, 144):

> When a stone gets lost, then I believe that it did its job for me and it took what it absorbed away from my energetic field. Or, if a stone breaks, then it has done its job – it absorbed as much as it could, and it broke.

Figure 1. Bella's (b. 1990) moonstone necklace, which has developed a fissure in the middle of the largest stone because, as Bella explains, it transforms energy and supports her and other people she is working with, but they has not cleansed the stone recently. Photograph: Tenno Teidearu.

The subtle energetic essence of crystals is directly linked to the materiality of stones, or to be more precise, to the material of which the minerals are made. Annika and Bella (b. 1990), like many others, associate the breakage of stones with a saturation of negative energy. In my interlocutors' personal experience narratives, crystals change over time physically by breaking or developing fissures or by their colour or gloss changing or fading. For example, Daisy's moonstone,[14] which she had been wearing permanently as a pendant against her chest for more than half a year at the time of our interview, has faded and developed fissures:

> This is moonstone and its gloss have faded. It was very glossy before. I have been wearing it since June. I graduated from the EAA [Estonian Academy of Arts] and was about to apply to university and I felt that the pressure I had at the EAA was off me and everything was beginning anew. I heard the name of this stone in a dream, in my dream and during the day, I heard it repeatedly in my mind – moonstone, moonstone, moonstone. Therefore, I started to search for information about this stone. I found out that it symbolises a new beginning; it was a stone of new beginnings. It was glossy. Perhaps it is because of wearing it physically, maybe it is like erosion or something like that, I don't know. … Now, I don't really know whether I should wear it or not, to be honest. It is the first time, I guess, when I have taken it off for a long period, for several days, since I got it. Look, it has completely eroded! [Daisy is inspecting the stone closely and asks me to look it – it has eroded and developed fissures and lost its gloss.] It was completely smooth before. Can you believe that! It means that it gets too much pressure; it has to work too hard. It just can't keep it up; it doesn't manage to do its duty anymore. It is hard for them [laughs], but it is because of me. … It also means that it's job is done; now you have to buy a new one, if you wish. Yes, it has fissures all over. [Daisy shows me the moonstone.] What!? It really was glossy when I bought it! Yes, I had a lot of faith in that now everything new begins. Yet, now I haven't had this faith for more than two months, and I still don't have it. I have fallen back to the same state. Perhaps therefore it [the moonstone] is having a hard time. However, I haven't been cleansing it much. I also think that it is hard for the moonstone that I quit smoking every day. It is a new beginning every day, isn`t it bothersome? […] Actually, the moonstone is the first one that has quit by itself, like that: 'Daisy, enough!'

Daisy bought the moonstone when facing positive changes in her life; she associates it with having a supportive effect and with changes and new beginnings in her life. In addition, she associates the fading shine and fissures with the fact that, actually, she has been unable to change her life. Therefore,

14 *Kuukivi* in Estonian.

Figure 2. Daisy's crystals, which she cleanses in salt. Her moonstone, which has faded and eroded, is at the bottom right. Photograph: Tenno Teidearu.

it has been more difficult for the gemstone to support her. Alterations to the surface and appearance of the stone represent a change in the meaning or story of the stone itself (see also Ingold 2007, 15). Regarding the physical alterations, Daisy says that she has not cleansed the energy of the crystal enough, and therefore it has absorbed too much negative energy.

Cleansing crystals is the practice of taking care of them, and in doing so of maintaining their supportive effect (Teidearu 2019, 146–149). Taking care of them is linked to the practice of wearing them, and in doing so people are involved in the life of minerals. Hodder (2011) argues that humans and material objects depend on each other – people depend on things, but things depend on people as well, because they need human interruption in order to maintain their functionality. This mutual dependency in Hodder's terms is entanglement, which he finds to be the primary agency of things and material culture in general (2011, 155–162; 2012, 68–86). My informants find it essential to cleanse their stones energetically, to maintain their support but also to prevent physical alterations, as this will decrease or negate their effect. As my empirical data demonstrates, the intention underlying the need to take care of the esoteric energy of the crystals is also a desire to maintain their material qualities. The tangible material forms of crystal, and their maintenance and impermanence, is inherently and causally linked with esoteric interpretations. Estonian jeweller and gem cutter Arne (b. 1947) told me that clean-

ing stones and jewellery with soapy water and a brush is essential because cleaning maintains their gloss and water prevents them from becoming too dry, which may cause fissuring. From his perspective, the esoteric approach to the effect of cleaning crystals is peculiar, but it may be therapeutic from a psychological standpoint. He emphasised that within an esoteric framework, cleaning the jewellery is often accompanied with certain beliefs, but the intention of taking care of the stone physically is still the same.

In the above quote, Daisy indicates the possibility that her moonstone has lost its gloss because of physical impairment or erosion due to constant use. Apart from esoteric interpretations of changes to crystals, people sometimes highlight material effects and causes. This knowledge is also spread in the general discourse about crystals, but mainly among experts and dedicated practitioners. For example, Kaia-Liisa Reinut (2015) explains in her handbook on crystal therapy that sunlight damages some minerals, causing their colour to become lighter or cloudy. Water or salt can also damage some minerals. (Reinut 2015, 71–78.) However, people use – and are taught to use in esoteric shops and in books about crystals – water, salt and direct sunlight to cleanse and recharge the energy of crystals (see Teidearu 2019, 146–149). Rinsing them in cold running (tap) water and placing them in the sunlight are the most common methods of taking care of stones, but Daisy, for example, also uses salt to cleanse her crystals.

A moonstone, for instance, may crack when soaked in water for an extended period. A moonstone in general is categorised as having poor wearability because it is not a very hard mineral (6–6.5 on the Mohs Hardness Scale) and can be scratched; it is also brittle and can easily crack or develop fissures, just like Bella's moonstone did (see figure 1). Moreover, it is vulnerable to salt, sweat and cosmetics, such as lotions, which may cause the stone to take on a matte appearance, just like Daisy's moonstone (see figure 2). Arne told me that many minerals, including moonstone, can be damaged by cosmetics and creams, seawater and salt, direct sunlight, too hot a temperature or a sudden change in temperature. Therefore, people should take into consideration these factors when wearing their jewellery and stones. For instance, people should not wear jewellery on a beach in the summertime, where it is exposed to sun, sun cream and seawater. In addition, it is better to wear, for example, a necklace on top of clothing rather than under it in direct contact with the skin because sweat contains salts. However, my interlocutors, who regularly wear crystals, usually wear them in contact with their skin. Tumbled minerals are sometimes coated with oil, wax or lacquer, which conceals small fractures and gives them a high gloss (Wenk & Bulakh 2014, 542), or treated chemically in the case of aura crystals, despite the fact that the treated surface can be damaged by physical wear or through contact with skin, sweat, detergents or cosmetics.

Knowledge of the technology used in the production of commodities and the constituent materials used to make them can diverge from what could be called consumption knowledge, used for example when buying and wearing crystals. Consumption knowledge is often vernacular, although the two do not contradict one another in essence. Interruptions in the distribution of production knowledge may be caused by distance (spatial and temporal) between the manufacturer and consumer as well as the commodity chain (Appadurai 1986, 41–56). For consumers, and for my informants, knowledge about the technological treatment and production of crystals, their physical and chemical properties, and chemical reactions with different substances is often limited. In my empirical material, only the owners of esoteric shops and experienced clerks have told me about their physical and chemical properties and about stones that react to water, sunlight or salt. If they are aware of such reactions, they usually inform clients of the possible damage that such substances can cause to particular minerals, but not every clerk is aware of the details. My informants who wear stones have experienced breakage or fissuring of their crystals, snapped pendants, the breaking or detaching of clasps, and fading or alterations in their colour. Due to a lack of knowledge, my informants only rarely included material (chemical or physical) explanations in their personal experience narratives. Usually, their argumentation was based on esoteric knowledge and an interpretation of the esoteric properties of crystals, with them associating the absorption and emission of spiritual energy as the reason crystals break or become altered physically. However, even if my informants sometimes had a material explanation, they still tended to explain matters in esoteric terms as well. Esoteric interpretations can accompany material causes, which expands the meaningfulness of such instances and provides further explanation for the material properties and alterations of crystals.

The material agency of crystals comes about due to their instability as objects, and moreover, as materials that are meaningful to the people who use them. Olsen (2010, 158–160) writes that people often assume that things and the material environment are stable and permanent, a perception that feeds into our imagination of the existential security of human life, and this has culturally constitutive significance. The materiality and tangibility of crystals, and wearing them, creates feelings of security and trust in the stability of one's life. Stones are biographical objects (see Hoskins 2006, 78) that are interwoven with their owners' lives and personalities. However, minerals can be damaged by inappropriate wear and exposure to damaging substances. Every change or alteration in the material form of things is more or less unpredictable and unexpected (Hodder 2012, 85). 'Material failures', such as physical alterations of stones or their loss, are always unpredictable and unexpected

for my informants, and they are accompanied by feelings of unease (*cf.* Casella & Croucher 2014, 95–96; Drazin 2015, 4–24). To avoid this predicament, they become entangled (see Hodder 2012, 95–98) with crystals by taking care of them. My interlocutors, for example, cleanse gems physically, which maintains both their spiritual energy in esoteric interpretations and their material form. However, some methods for cleansing stones, for example the use of salt, can damage some minerals and therefore cause unintentional results.

Material culture and materials have their own temporalities and material lives (Hodder 2012, 98–101). As Ingold (2007, 7) puts it, people are involved in 'a world of materials'. The agency of matter resides in the flux of materials, and materials often become evident at the moment of their transformation (Ingold 2007, 11–14; see also Drazin 2015, 23–24). Material agency emerge out of this motion or flux of materials that enacts material performances. Similarly, in a new materialist perspective, matter is constantly in motion and in formulation, and agency in this case emerges only via an enactment of intra-active performances (Barad 2007, 137–178). Hazard (2013, 64) points out that new materialism aims to address the capacities of matter that people, including my interlocutors, are often not aware of, but which causes things to have agency of their own. Importantly, unexpected and unintentional occurrences are moments of human reinvention and meaning-making (Carroll et al. 2017, 10–14). Unstable and performative matter, or material, enacts human interpretation. Any change or alteration in the physical form and material of crystals needs interpretation, which is usually based on an esoteric framework. Ultimately, the material nature and esoteric interpretation of crystals are intertwined because their physical alteration is understood as an energetic process.

## Conclusion

In the tradition of the ethnological study of material culture, artefacts have changed from being representations of everyday peasant life to being affective and tangible things in people's lives. Some recent ethnological studies have also applied a posthuman perspective, and my paper contributes to this emerging approach. In research done on Estonian culture, stones and minerals as artefacts, natural objects or materials have occasionally been linked to folk religious beliefs and magic, and traditional jewellery is no exception. However, crystals as part of contemporary spirituality have not yet been studied. My ethnological study of semiprecious stones is influenced by the anthropological study of material culture, an archaeological perspective on the materials of objects and their material properties, and the new materialist approach.

The meaning and significance of crystals, as a form of material culture or material religion come from their tangibility, material form and materials, all of which are associated with their supportive and esoteric qualities. Materi-

ality has an abundance of various characteristics and significances. In doing research on material culture and things, we should take materials seriously (Ingold 2007). This applies to my empirical material explicitly because crystals are valued not only as things, but as special material – minerals – as well. Based on my empirical data, the esoteric qualities of crystals are the outcome of their chemical molecular structure (crystal structure) and formation in the ground; therefore, they are valued primarily as a material.

However, crystals do not have permanence as things. In losing stones, people often attribute agency to the stone itself because they aim to understand such instances in esoteric terms from the perspective of gemstones. The displacement of stones that they wear close to their body constantly is perceived as unintentional loss, a kind of 'material failure', which needs an interpretation. My interlocutors often explain the loss of crystal from a 'stone-centric perspective', and they transfer the agency involved in leaving a human's possession onto the stones themselves. It is evidently a non-anthropocentric viewpoint that emphasises the life of things.

Moreover, crystals are not static or permanent as material. The breaking or physical alteration of stones, which my informants interpret in terms of energetic qualities, is nevertheless a material process. It is the material of crystals that alters. Material culture is essentially unstable and impermanent because of its materials and the properties of materials, which causes things to become worn out, decompose or break apart over the course of time and through human use. Material agency, as I understand it in my paper, is based on materials and their chemical and physical properties and processes, which are interpreted as part of another category of knowledge.

Decay is an inherent and meaningful property of all material culture in general as well as material expressions of religion and spirituality, as discussed in this paper. This process of decay and resulting impermanence of things opens up new methodological possibilities for studying material culture or material religion, and the question of agency. Therefore, how people interact with things, and how these things become part of creating, maintaining and changing culture and religion, is hugely significant. Relatedly, what people do when the instability of things offers resistance to their intentions is equally important. In other words, just like the permanence, durability and stability of things has cultural significance, so too does the impermanence and decay of things. The main agent here is the material life of things or matter, i.e. the chemical and physical processes that are the causes of decay and 'material failure'. Apart from concentrating on objects and material practices when studying material culture or religion (see Keane 2008, 124) and thinking through things (see Henare et al. 2007, 4), we should also think through materials

(see Ingold 2007) as they are exposed to decay or alteration, and therefore, have material lives of their own. This opens up a new materialist perspective on material culture as being constantly in a state of formulation and having performative power.

Material agency, as I have discussed in this paper, is not primarily anthropocentric or cultural because it is caused by the instability and decay of material culture, which is an inherent property of matter in general. Rather, it is a natural process caused by materials and their material life. I call this inherently material process 'material agency' to distinguish it from the social dimension of objects, by which agency is often understood. Material agency becomes evident when the temporalities and lives of humans and materials meet in a situation where things escape out of human control and act independently. To make a broader generalisation, this approach emphasises the physical decay of material culture and the human interpretation of this material process, in which material nature and cultural interpretations are entangled. In an ethnological study of material culture from emerging posthuman and new materialist perspectives, material processes can have cultural significance.

## AUTHOR

Tenno Teidearu is a PhD student in ethnology at the University of Tartu. He works as a researcher at the Estonian National Museum. His PhD project concentrates on the use of crystals in contemporary New Spirituality and their trade in esoteric shops in Estonia. His main research interests are material religion, vernacular religion and material culture and consumption.

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### Fieldwork materials

All the interviews, photographs and fieldnotes are in the possession of the author.

### Interview materials

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Annika, female, b. 1987, January 2017, Tartu, Estonia.
Bella, female, b. 1990, January 2017, Tallinn, Estonia.
Daisy, female, b. 1991, January 2017, Tallinn, Estonia.
Maya, female, b. 1991, January 2017, Tallinn, Estonia.
Tiia, female, b. 1966, January 2017 and August 2019, Tartu, Estonia.

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# Dreaming Cultural Heritage

***Pasi Enges***

Silja Heikkilä 2021. *Unien elävä perintö. Etnologinen tutkimus unikäsityksistä ja unien kertomistilanteista*. [Dreams and living heritage. An ethnological study of dream conceptions and dream telling situations.] University of Jyväskylä, Faculty of Humanistic and Social Sciences. 213 pp. ISBN 978-951-39-8867-8 (print) ISBN 978-951-39-8866-1 (electronic).

Although defended within the field of ethnology, Silja Heikkilä's doctoral thesis can above all be described as a continuation of folkloristic dream research in Finland. Professors Leea Virtanen and Annikki Kaivola-Bregenhøj especially have, through their numerous publications, brought forward various aspects of dream traditions, e.g. the contents of dreams, their individual and collective interpretations and meanings, as well as the social transmission of dreams as oral narratives. Heikkilä explicitly identifies herself as continuing in this socio-culturally oriented research tradition. However, her purpose is to examine and define her research subject within a wider framework of intangible cultural heritage, thus emphasising the contemporary relevance and cultural value of the subject. She is not primarily interested in specific dream contents but focuses instead on people's thoughts about the meaning of dreaming and transmitting dreams in present-day society. These ideas, memories, beliefs, interpretations and evaluations, most often verbally transmitted, are the main focus of the study.

## Theoretical and methodological framework

As an evidence-of-learning project, a doctoral thesis must meet certain criteria relating to the overall structure and presentation of the study, and in my opinion Silja Heikkilä's thesis satisfies these criteria quite well. The content of the book is logically arranged and it consists of eight chapters, the first four of which are dedicated to the theoretical framework and the next two chapters to the analysis. After the analysis section, the thesis is appropriately recapitulated with a chapter devoted to research results and another to a final discussion of the research subject as living heritage.

In the introduction, the author first briefly presents the subject as well as the key concepts of her study: *dream conceptions*, *dream-speech* and *living heritage*. Then, she provides the background for the study by describing her own relationship with dreams and dream narration and her earlier and present activities concerning the topic in the fields of art and science. Heikkilä proves to


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be an active supporter of dream traditions, and the subchapter can be received as self-reflective positioning of the researcher, although it is not titled so. The research task is to fundamentally identify the living heritage of dreams, and on that basis to interpret the processes of living tradition as they appear in the research material's dream-speech. Before providing an answer to this overarching objective, the author poses six research questions concerning the characteristics of dream-speech, the formation of dream concepts in childhood, the different dream concepts emerging from the research material and the expectations, situational assessments and objectives present while communicating about dreams (20–21). All six questions are descriptive (of the 'what kind of' type), and at this point the reader has the impression that the study is mainly descriptive by nature. It is also noteworthy that the concept 'heritage' is not at all included in the research questions. Taking into account the title of the study, this can be considered a deficiency. It indicates that the objective of equating dream traditions with cultural heritage does not emerge from the empirical data, but instead from the theoretical thinking of the scholar.

In her discussion of cultural heritage and especially of living heritage, Heikkilä relies on the broad definition given by Unesco. The model on page 25 summarises the author's view of her research subject as consisting of immaterial and unofficial processes (rather than products), identified both individually and collectively as meaningful. When taking into account the overall nature of the work and Heikkilä's aim to find a new viewpoint for understanding dream traditions, I think this subject could have been dealt with more profoundly.

Chapter 2 presents the research framework. The approach of the study is phenomenological-hermeneutical: the author aims to identify and understand different life-worlds emerging from her research material. Also dialogicality, an approach present at different stages and in various relationships throughout the research process, is emphasised as an important aspect of the production of knowledge. The thematic interviews and questionnaires as well as the organisation and analysis of the research material is described in detail. The practical analysis tool is qualitative content analysis. At first glance, the amount of material seems quite small and somewhat biased: it consists of 62 persons, roughly two-thirds of whom participated in special dream groups, arranged in connection with seminars organised by the Dream Group Forum in Finland, and practiced a special method of sharing and discussing dreams with each other. The rest of the material consists of questionnaires circulated at university lectures and on Facebook. One could ask whether this material gives a satisfactory picture of the phenomenon. This must of course be judged against the goals of the study, and I admit that Silja Heikkilä manages to justi-

fy her decision reasonably well. Why not ask especially those who most likely have something experiential to say?

Chapter 3 introduces different definitions of dreams and dreaming, and here the central concept of the study, dream conception, is discussed more comprehensively. Chapter 4 contains a historical review of earlier research and a more in-depth subchapter on the socio-cultural aspects of dreams. Then, the author delves deeper into her main influences, that of folkloristic dream research and its two main orientations: folk belief research and the study of narratives. She especially reflects on and interprets the work done by the two aforementioned folklorists, Virtanen and Kaivola-Bregenhøj.

## Analysing dream-speech

The first analytical chapter focuses on dream conceptions. The dream-speech of the interviewees and respondents is examined, with Heikkilä asking both *what* and *how* it has been discussed. In this chapter, she traces the ways in which dream conceptions are shaped and how their meanings may change throughout an individual's lifetime. She argues that in the end, different types of dream experiences are verbalised and categorised individually and are exposed to new interpretations in different social situations; dream concepts are reflective, multi-layered and flexible. The classification of dream types and interpretations is a redevelopment of earlier folkloristic classifications, and it works well here. A wealth of quotes from the research material illustrates the analysis.

Dream-telling situations are discussed in the second analytical chapter, and both the teller's and the listener's positions are taken into account. Just as dreams are unique, so too are the contexts in which dreams are told, and besides, the dream type and content as well as the place of telling and the people present are all factors guiding the situation. Prevailing expectations and the goals of the teller and the audience make the telling situation, e.g. confidential, explanatory and/or openly entertaining.

At the end of the study, the research questions set out at the beginning are logically scrutinised and adequately answered one by one. In the final chapter, Heikkilä ponders how respect for and transmission of traditions regarding the telling and interpreting of dreams meet the concept of living cultural heritage.

## Folklore, tradition, heritage

As a folklorist, I am a little uncertain about the relationship between the concepts of folklore, tradition and heritage. Folklore can be defined as meaningful messages circulated as tradition among a given group (e.g. Hakamies 2015, 45–46). Does this meaningfulness make, without question, all folklore cultural heritage? Indeed, cultural heritage has been defined as 'a conscious process

of valuing and productising cultural and traditional phenomena' (Tieteen termipankki). Why not simply talk about folklore or tradition? Is a special type of activism and purpose-orientedness needed for something to be valued as cultural heritage? Silja Heikkilä approaches these questions in an interesting way, and the study is an important opening to further discussions.

Heikkilä's study shows that the tradition of narrating and interpreting dreams can be a vital part of oral tradition in present-day Finland. However, focusing on a limited population consisting mainly of 'dream-activists' does not tell us much about the status of this particular tradition among the Finnish population in general. To say something about that, a totally different research setting would have been needed. Convincingly, this study shows that when approached from the cultural heritage standpoint, the subject is not part of an official institution's responsibility and possible safeguarding actions. The tradition of sharing dreams and discussing them communally belongs to and is kept alive at a grassroots level. Moreover, academic interest may also play an important role in the multi-faceted processes of heritage making. For this reason alone, Silja Heikkilä's doctoral thesis is a welcome addition to humanistic, socio-culturally oriented dream research. It moves the heritage debate forward and opens new insights into what living intangible heritage can consist of at the moment.

## AUTHOR

PhD Pasi Enges is a retired university lecturer in folkloristics at the University of Turku. His main research interests include Finnish, Scandinavian and Sámi folk beliefs and narrative traditions.

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# Practicing museums: Museum people, Museum work, and Change in Practice

***Lizette Gradén***

Inkeri Hakamies 2021. *Practicing Museums: Museum People, Museum Work and Change in Practice.* Helsinki: University of Helsinki. 134 pp. Diss. ISBN 978-951-51-7517-5 (PDF) URN: 978-951-51-7518-2.

Inkeri Hakamies's insightful doctoral thesis comprises three single-authored articles, all published in international peer-reviewed journals (2017, 2018, 2019). These articles are further contextualised in Hakamies's reflexive introduction and summarising synthesis.

This doctoral thesis analyses how museums are defined through everyday social practices. It shows how some professionals, various tasks and museums are considered more 'museal' than others in the Finnish museum field of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The empirical material consists of biographical interviews with professionals who reflect on their careers in the Finnish museum and respond to a questionnaire in which museum visitors share their memories of museums with museum volunteers. The material covers a time that brought many changes to museum work practices and the ways museums function in society, the effects of which continue to unfold in the museum field. For example, museums increased their marketing efforts and edutainment angles and introduced digital tools, changes that challenged previous ideas of what a museum could be and even some professional roles and skills of long-time museum workers. The roles and responsibilities of museums in society were subjected to new debates in Finland, the Nordic countries and internationally.

The topic selected by Hakamies for her thesis is highly relevant, as the conditions for museums are changing worldwide and in Nordic countries especially. Based on extensive archival material produced by the Finnish Museum History Project (2005–2011) and the 'My museum memories project', by the Finnish Literature Archives, Hakamies analyses how museums in Finland in the late 20th and early 21st centuries have been shaped and defined through social practices. These were decades marked by social upheaval, geopolitical change and globalisation, all of which impacted the museum field – internationally as well as in the Nordic countries. During this time, the role of museums in society became subject to debate, including aspects of professionalisation, edutainment and digitisation. These shifts caused rifts as well as new


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allegiances within the museum sector. As Hakamies points out, these changes call for studying how museums are shaped in practice, by whom, for whose benefit and to what effect.

Significantly, her study focuses on how professional museum workers perceive their work and careers and how audiences reminisce about the museums they have visited. Tacit or practical knowledge is at the centre of the analysis, given the fact that social and cultural practices produce norms and differentiation and carry meaning for the people who share the practices. Hakamies asks: At a time of societal change, what does the concept 'museal' mean? 1) for museums as institutions? 2) to museum workers? 3) in daily museum practice? 4) to visitors and society at large?

Based on ten in-depth interviews, and by applying the concept of '*communities of practice*', she demonstrates in her first article, 'Practice Makes "Museum People"', how operations shape professionals and that the hierarchy among individual specialists and professions impacts how the museum world unfolds and how it sustains itself. As Hakamies discusses in her introduction, and come back to in her articles, there is a methodological challenge in treating archival material produced by others as fieldwork. She offers a profound and reflexive discussion about the difficulties she encounters in doing so and how she handles such difficulties. Her own experience with museum practice is pivotal to her approach, to her ethical and other validations.

In the second article, 'The Dusty Museum', Hakamies investigates people's perception of museums and what makes a museum 'dusty'. Based on three interviews with museum professionals, and using 'Elements of Practice' as a critical concept, she asks: What sort of element is dust in museum practice? The analysis contends that perceived stagnation is the most evident element of dust.

The third article, '"Real museum work" and information technology – does not compute!' analyses museum practices in response to changing society. Using nine interviews with museum professionals and articles from *Museum Politics*, Hakamies investigates how museum professionals respond to organisational changes. The analysis contends that curatorial practices are perceived as 'real museum work', whereas new emergent professions are done so with reluctance.

Hakamies's thesis adds to discussions on current tensions within the museum organisations as the cultural institutions strive to grow, professionalise, adapt and contribute to a hybrid market both in Nordic contexts (Gradén & O'Dell 2018, 2020) and internationally (Ekström 2020). Highlighting visitors' recollections of museums in Finland, the study shows that museums are not solely for the museum workers to define, which calls for future research on

how museums in Finland navigate outward pressure arising from stakeholders and visitors' expectations.

The strengths of this doctoral thesis lie in the timespan and the stringing together of multiple analytical insights into the fruitful theoretical framework of practice. As Hakamies demonstrates quite well, although the international and national museum field comprises numerous shared standards and guidelines, they continue to co-exist with a plurality of practices. Hakamies brings these tensions to the forefront and interprets them within the practice theory framework, which reveals how people tend to adhere to praxis that they find valuable and meaningful; or 'the ways we do things around here'. These approaches and behaviours also produce allegiances and define whose work is more 'museal', which can influence the professional identity of their practitioners: the 'real museum people' are those who do 'real museum work'. That said, the change in everyday museum practices reflects a change in ideologies and the role of museums in Finland and abroad, the changes in the museum profession and the dynamics of museum work. These changes also probe the future of museums and museum work. Studying museums as social and cultural practices and lived phenomena allows for a critical examination of visitors' and workers' understandings of museums, their origins and their roles in society in the future.

In the report, synthesis, and epilogue, Hakamies stresses the need to think in terms of a meta-museum, where layers of museum practice have been disclosed and the pace of work elicited. She contends that just as with objects, collections, exhibitions, and programmes, so too the practices of cataloguing, exhibiting and guiding visitors should be regarded as a vital part of the museum's history. Indeed, shifting from a focus on material culture to institutional practice offers a productive perspective. These conclusions relate to previous studies in ethnology and folkloristics that differentiate between what museums do and how they do it, the 'meta-cultural production' (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2000) and the 'cultural practice about cultural practices' (Aronsson & Gradén 2013) that produce communities of practice and institutional knowledge. As the title of Hakamies's thesis indicates, the changes may shape new categories, in this case 'museal', 'museum people' and 'real museum work', which in turn reflect history and ideologies. By applying a 'practice theory framework' (Wenger 1998, 2020) to the archival material, Hakamies demonstrates how professionals describe their practices and how these descriptions produce perceptions not only about museums as institutions but also about the people who work there. These practices, in turn, influence the idea of what museums can be and how they operate.

The structure of the thesis is logical in terms of how the three articles are presented and linked together. The introduction, synthesis and epilogue offer conceptual clarity and a solid material presentation, and the three articles provide conceptional clarity and in-depth analysis, all written eloquently. Among the thesis's gems is the rich biographical material by museum workers, which the author treats with ethical care and reflection. Hakamies wisely discusses the challenges of handling a vast body of material produced within a specific framework, such as the 'Finnish Museum History Project'. By applying the theory of practice to archival material, she reveals how people's stories about their community practices can be more important than the actual practices themselves. Interestingly, no matter what an official job description might have been, people create a practice to do what they find needs to be done and shape a practice of recounting it verbally.

In this discussion, she addresses the struggle of dealing with 'gaps' in information and 'gaps' in time. She reflects on the ethical issues involved in transcribing and analysing material produced by others when standards of informant integrity were different from today. These reflections highlight the difficulties of treating archival sources as if generated by in-situ fieldwork situations. The recognition of these 'gaps', however, is partly due to Hakamies's tacit knowledge gained from similar communities of practice, the experience of working both in the museum sector and the academy. Such insights would probably have gone unnoticed without the cultural competence of both worlds. Hakamies's work is a well-situated contribution to ethnology, museology and museum practice. It demonstrates how tacit knowledge, organisation and communities of practice impact – propel and limit – what museums can become. It spurs further questions, such as: How does collaboration between academic and museum practice contribute to restoring or probing change in the museum? What does it mean when museum workers increasingly refuse to hide behind the false notion of neutrality? As museums are never neutral, when will we see some museums gain a second life as museums of museum history?

## AUTHOR

Lizette Gradén is associate professor of ethnology at Lund University. Her research includes museum leadership and curatorial practices, ritual and performance, and traditional knowledge and more than 20 years of research into Nordic-American and Swedish-American culture. Her recent publications include *Kulturarv i förändring* (2020), co-edited with Tom O'Dell. Much of her research is conducted in projects involving public and private actors outside academia.

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# Rhizomatic LGBTIQ+ Activism in St. Petersburg

***Riikka Taavetti & Olga Tkach***

Pauliina Lukinmaa 2022. *LGBTIQ+ Activists in St Petersburg: Forming Practices, Identifying as Activists and Creating Their Own Places.* Publications of the University of Eastern Finland. Dissertations in Education, Humanities, and Theology, 188. Joensuu: University of Eastern Finland. ISBN: 978-952-61-4604-1 ISSN: 1798-5633 http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-61-4604-1

Pauliina Lukinmaa's doctoral thesis, *LGBTIQ+ Activists in St Petersburg: Forming Practices, Identifying as Activists and Creating Their Own Places*, analyses how lesbians, gays, bisexuals, trans people and those who identify as queer (LGBTIQ+ people) manage to do activism in Russia under increasing state oppression and in an environment that is generally hostile towards sexual and gender diversity. Other current studies analyse growing anti-queer violence in Russia as a consequence of homophobic legislature and culture (see, e.g. Kondakov 2022). Lukinmaa, however, approaches queer people's lives in this authoritarian context with a different, experimental, optics that portrays the LGBTQ+ movement in a rhizomatic form with the capacity to remain flexible, ever moving, situational and unstable but also productive, diverse and yet targeted. She provides a lively thick description and analysis of the activist network, firmly situated in a specific time and place, in the 2010s, in St Petersburg, a Russian metropole, a cultural city and an LGBTIQ+ hub, in late 2010s, currently experiencing repressive laws but before the Covid pandemic and Russia's attack on Ukraine, both of which have had a damaging influence on Russian civil society.

The book is based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork that the author conducted in St Petersburg between the years 2017 and 2019. In addition to participant observation by Lukinmaa at various events and activities, she conducted 45 interviews with activists divided into three overlapping groups: those active in the registered LGBT organisations, those taking part in grassroots groups and those she has chosen to call influencers. Moreover, the fieldwork was not limited to the time she spent in St Petersburg. Lukinmaa stayed in touch with the research participants between her field trips to Russia and conducted online interviews with activists who had emigrated abroad. Therefore, her study also includes a focus on transnational networks of LGBTIQ+ people.

The study consists of an introduction, which presents the research problem, an extensive analytical chapter on the century-long history of non-normative sexuality and gender expression in Russia, and chapters on locating


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the field the field, her methods and theories. In each section, the author offers an elaborate and transparent view on how the study was conducted and discusses her research choices as well as her complex positionality in the field as an activist, a friend and, most of all, a researcher. We find this work makes a strong contribution to the insider-outsider debate and the discussion on ethics in ethnographic research as well as the core and peripheries of anthropological knowledge (Martínez et al. 2021).

The empirical findings of the thesis are addressed in three chapters, where the research questions are answered one by one. First, Lukinmaa describes the activists' position and tactics within the repressive context of the 'anti-gay propaganda law', approved in 2013, and the generally homophobic environment. Second, she addresses activists' identifications and negotiations with the stigma and a sense of belonging as well as the complexity of how Russianness intersects with sexual identities under threat. Third, Lukinmaa analyses how the activists construct the city space of St Petersburg as theirs and carve out places for demonstrations, events, meetings and parties. The thesis ends with a concluding discussion that ties the threads together, highlights the contributions of the work for the academic discussion and points to future directions.

Lukinmaa's theoretical approach engages with Hannah Arendt's concept of praxis and especially with Michel de Certeau's concept of tactics together with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of rhizome. Using these tools, she paints a nuanced picture of how the activists negotiate with the state oppression they face, the often hostile environment around them and the multiplicity of identifications and mutual replacements within the movement. We would also highlight that the author succeeded in tying together the so-called 'Western' mainstream with Russian (and Finnish) theories on equal terms and in combining different theoretical streams. To study the positionality of LGBTIQ+ people and address non-normative sexualities outside modern identities in particular, she bases her discussion on Bahtin's concept of outsideness (*vnenakhodimost'*) and utilises Tuula Juvonen's (2002) conceptualisation of homosexually-desiring people. Queer theory, however, is not present as much as it perhaps could be in the empirical part of the work, and some of the concepts used in the study, such as belonging, could have also played more of a theoretical role in the work.

A rich ethnography of how the current St Petersburg activist scene works is preceded by an extensive cultural history, or historical sociology, of homosexually-desiring people in Russia. The timeline runs from the creative period, in pre-revolutionary times, through the repressive Soviet times, to liberation in the 1990s, then the conservative turn of 2010s and today's political repressions. This genealogy knits together various discourses on LGBTIQ+ in Russia,

including artistic (elitist and popular), legislative, criminal, medical and civic discourses from diachronic and synchronic perspectives. This elaborate and systematised historical background introduces to the reader the legacy of the current survival tactics of the Russian LGBTIQ+ movements. The researcher shows how the rhizomatic network of current activists is able to make use of even the smallest cracks in the oppressive and surveillance-oriented regime, and also how the extensive 'surplus' that is left outside the normative ways of doing gender and sexuality in Russia allows the activists to explore new ways of living, loving and belonging. Apart from analysing its topic, the study also takes indirect but relevant and detailed excursions into various aspects of the everyday in Russia and St Petersburg in particular. For example, the reader can learn from the thesis about the housing and transport systems in the city, its territorial structure and position with respect to internal migration flows, including examples from mainstream pop culture and menus of the coffee houses. All these vignettes paint a panoramic picture of the context in which the research participants act, and they make the text an informative piece also for a reader who does not know St Petersburg well. Therefore, the work can be attributed to the best traditions of cultural studies.

We find Lukinmaa's book an excellently written and quite accessible academic study. Her monograph provides an analysis of the multiple aspects of the rhizomatic movement of LGBTIQ+ activism – despite severe oppression and legislation that makes the work difficult, the movement has managed to survive and succeed. This is an essential contribution to the research on publicly invisible, hidden forms of civic activism in closed, non-democratic contexts. We believe that the book will interest a wide range of scholars – sociologists and anthropologists in particular – engaged with gender and queer studies, cultural and urban studies, as well as studies on civil society.

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