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Re-imagining a Queer Indigenous Past: Affective Archives and Minor Gestures in the Sámi Documentary *Sparrooabbán*

ABSTRACT

This article examines the possibilities for re-imagining a queer indigenous past in *Sparrooabbán* (*Me and My Little Sister*, Suvi West, 2016)—the first feature-length documentary film that discusses non-heterosexuality in Sámi communities. We explore how the film queers the *gákti*, the traditional Sámi dress; how it uses elements other than verbal expression to mark queer traces in Sápmi; and how spirituality and faith create a (dis)connection to a Two-Spirit past and present. We argue that the documentary produces a series of minor transformative gestures to create a queer Sámi archive of affect when there is no conventional archival knowledge of gender and sexual diversity pre-settler colonialism.

A pivotal scene of the documentary *Sparrooabbán* (*Me and My Little Sister*, Suvi West, 2016) follows two Sámi sisters, Suvi and Kaisa West, as they drive across vast expanses of sub-arctic scenery in Sápmi, the traditional homeland of Sámi people in Northern Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Russia. As their car cuts through hills and valleys, a powerful *yoik* song swells in the background. *Yoik* is a traditional Sámi vocal genre, here sung by Kaisa and juxtaposed with the sound of wind and tires on asphalt. As the *yoik* fades, Suvi's voice-over explains: "I feel distressed about the Sámi culture of silence. If our people

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disagree about something, they say nothing. We are taking this trip because I want to talk about homophobia. I hope we can break the silence.” This is the first of the affective and geographical journeys that the straight filmmaker Suvi West and her lesbian sister, Kaisa, take in the film, as they search for a queer indigenous present and past through and beyond silences.

As we watched this scene, Kaisa’s *yoiking*, audible against the images of a car driving through Sápmi wilderness, made the hairs on our arms stand up and tears well up in our eyes. The moment felt affectively significant, like something shifting. In the scene’s *yoik*, there are no distinguishable words, only sound surging through the Sápmi landscape, but it already felt like a break in the silence that Suvi names: a queer Sámi voice resonating with the land, existing within it, connecting with Sámi nature-based knowledge and cosmology.¹ Later, Kaisa and Suvi’s family meets them with silence; the sisters cannot seem to break it despite their best efforts. However, in the driving scene, the land comes alive with a free-flowing, unstifled, queer Sámi voice.

Sparrooabbán is the first, and so far the only, feature-length queer Sámi film, directed by an indigenous director with queer indigenous Sámi as a main focus. This article examines the potential of indigenous documentary to re-imagine a queer indigenous past and present, in which the traces of such a past have all but disappeared. The dual silences—the silence within Sámi communities about sexual and gender diversity and the silence around the continuing settler colonial violence within Nordic countries—form a key tension in the film and this article. Yet instead of focusing mainly on oppression, our aim is to explore how the documentary works generatively and affectively as a small but radical gesture that re-materializes a queer Sámi past in and through the present.² Since there is little to no conventional historical knowledge of the place of non-heteronormative people and relations in Sámi communities prior to or outside of settler-colonialist knowledge production, *Sparrooabbán* creates a field of resonance for this lost history.³

We conceptualize the film as a *minor gesture*: an affirmative political act that, according to Erin Manning, opens “the way for new tendencies to emerge, and in the resonances that are awakened, potential for difference looms.”⁴ As such, we argue that the film participates in building a queer indigenous *archive of affect*, reframing Ann Cvetkovich’s concept of an “archive of feeling.”⁵ Instead of normative archival objects or historical documents, the archive of affect consists of small, affirmative gestures, traces, fragments, and political acts. We explore the film *Sparrooabbán* as, and as

1 For a discussion of Sámi nature-based knowledge, see Jarno Valkonen and Sanna Valkonen, “Contesting the Nature Relations of Sámi Culture,” *Acta Borealia: A Nordic Journal of Circumpolar Societies* 31, no. 1 (2014): 25–40.

2 For a discussion of why this strategy might be particularly useful for indigenous studies, see Eve Tuck, “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities,” *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 3 (2009): 418–419.

3 See, for example, Rauna Kuokkanen, *Restructuring Relations: Indigenous Self-Determination, Governance, and Gender* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 6; and Ane Hedvig Heidrunsdotter Løvold, “The Silence in Sápmi—and the Queer Sami Breaking It” (master’s thesis, Arctic University of Norway, 2014), 26–27.

4 Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 8.

5 Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

consisting of, such affirmative gestures that render visible and welcome the minor force of what else might be.⁶

In addition to the journey to Sápmi, *Sparrooabbán* follows Suvi's and Kaisa's lives in Helsinki, Finland, as well as their journey to Toronto, Canada, and back again. Kaisa lives with her partner in Helsinki, where they are planning for pregnancy and their wedding. During the film, Suvi and Kaisa visit a lesbian dance in Helsinki; a lesbian priest at a church; their childhood home in Utsjoki, in northernmost Finland; the Riddu Riddu festival of Sámi culture in Northern Norway; the Helsinki Pride parade; and a Native American spiritual center in Toronto. Kaisa, who is deeply religious and an Evangelical Lutheran deaconess by profession, struggles to reconcile her faith and her sexual orientation. She is also a songmaker and a musician, responsible for all the *yoik* music in the film. Suvi, the director of the film, is well known in Finland as a public figure: a Sámi rights activist, and a writer-performer of the first Sámi television comedy show, *Märät säpikkäät* (Wet leg warmers, Yleisradio Oy, 2012–2013, with Anne Kirste Aikio).

Suvi's voice-over in Northern Sámi language guides the sisters' journey in the slow-paced documentary, spattered with still and moving images from family albums and historical archives, while the conversations the sisters have with each other and other people take place varying in Northern Sámi, Finnish, or English. *Sparrooabbán* notably lacks much of the audiovisual experimentalism, such as superimposition, animation, collage, and mixed-media techniques, that characterize some other recent Sámi documentaries.⁷ Instead, the film explores its topic with subtlety and respect. It shows moments of sadness, as well as joy, without pointing fingers, careful not to alienate any of its viewers.

Suvi West explained in an interview that the name of the film, *Sparrooabbán*, comes from a longing for words that would capture sexual and gender diversity in culturally specific, non-settler terms. In Northern Sámi, *sparro* refers to a bifurcated branch used for support, *sparronis* to a woman who loves a woman, and *oabbán* means "my sister."⁸ The name of the film *Sparrooabbán* is a made-up word, an attempt to re-create words for what was and could be. In other interviews, many queer and gender-nonconforming Sámi people have expressed the need for words of their own, since settler words, or words such as *Two-Spirit* that are used in other indigenous cultures, do not seem sufficient or accurate.⁹

6 Manning, *Minor Gesture*, x.

7 Scott Mackenzie and Anna Westerståhl Stenport, "Contemporary Experimental Feminist Sámi Documentary: The Autobiographical Politics of Liselotte Wajstedt and Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers," *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema* 6, no. 2 (2016): 169–182; Kate Moffat, "Bodies in Transition: Somatechnics and the Experimental Art of Liselotte Wajstedt's *Sámi Nieida Jojk* (Sámi Daughter Yoik, 2007)," *Somatechnics* 8, no. 1 (2018): 48–63; Niina Oisalo, "Saamelaisuuden maisemissa: Kuulumisen ylirajaisuus *Sámi Nieida Jojk* ja *Kuun metsän Kaisa*-elokuvissa," in *Kuulumisen reittejä taiteessa*, ed. Kaisa Hiltunen and Nina Sääskilahti (Turku, Finland: Eetos, 2019), 127–148.

8 Sari Saaristo, "Tarina sisaruudesta rikkoo saamelaisia tabuja," *Kirkko ja kaupunki*, January 22, 2016, <https://www.kirkkojakaupunki.fi/-/tarina-sisaruudesta-rikkoo-saamelaisia-tabu-1#1646dd7a>.

9 Løvdal, "Silence," 22–28; and Elfrida Bergman, Marie Persson, and Sara Lindquist, *Queering Sápmi—Indigenous Stories beyond the Norm* (Umeå, Sweden: Qub förlag, 2013).

It is important to see *Sparrooabbán* as a part of a wider cultural landscape in which queer indigenous archives of affect are slowly being generated, for Sámi as well as other indigenous nations, through minor and more major gestures. The documentary unfolds as an activist creation through time and space, as it travels across landscapes, cultural contexts, film festivals, streaming services, and television broadcasts, news articles, and radio and press interviews. In doing so, it connects further to other queer Sámi activist events and creative works, such as Sápmi Pride, organized annually in different parts of Sápmi since 2014, and the 2013 book *Queering Sápmi—Indigenous Stories beyond the Norm*, a collection of photographs and interviews with LGBTQ Sámi people.¹⁰

We focus on ways in which the film re-imagines and (re-)creates affective traces of a queer Sámi past—a past that is seemingly unreachable, although it has to have existed. First, we focus on the *gákti*, Sámi traditional dress, and how, in *Sparrooabbán*, it becomes a kind of collective, affective second skin of the Sámi community that protects but also expels difference.¹¹ Subtle queering of the *gákti* in the film opens a possibility for queer indigenous connectivity to the past through the present. Second, we analyze how silence functions in the film, not only as a stifling force but also as a generative affective trace and a minor gesture that marks queer indigenous bodies. In addition to silence, we explore how *Sparrooabbán* employs non-verbal sounds, such as *yoik* song, and other not-quite-silences, enabling a felt and sensed presence of queer Sámi through the sediments of settler colonial history. Finally, we examine how the film addresses indigenous spirituality, which also stands at the center of Two-Spirit theorizing and indigenous notions of gender and sexuality. We investigate the conditions for minor gestures to re-create a lost past, when searching for a spiritual queer Sáminess, concluding that such gestures cannot succeed if they do not reach into a locally specific affective register. The *gákti*, silences, and non-verbal expression participate in generating an emerging queer Sámi archive of affect.¹² This archive of affect consists of minor gestures that, according to Manning, transform things little by little through small-scale movements.¹³

Furthermore, we feel our way through *Sparrooabbán* and how it can speak to its indigenous and non-indigenous viewers, by reflecting on our own affective viewing as a non-Native queer scholar and an Inari Sámi feminist scholar. Overall, we take inspiration from queer and feminist indigenous studies that explore the interconnectedness of settler colonialism and heteropatriarchy.¹⁴ The difficult, multi-layered experience of being shunned by one's own indig-

10 Bergman, Persson, and Lindquist, *Queering Sápmi*.

11 Valerie Walkerdine, "Communal Beingness and Affect: An Exploration of Trauma in an Ex-industrial Community," *Body & Society* 16, no. 1 (2010): 91–116.

12 Compare with Cvetkovich's discussion of gay and lesbian archives in *Archive*, 241–245.

13 Manning, *Minor Gesture*.

14 Qwo-Li Driskill, Chris Finley, Brian Joseph Gilley, and Scott Lauria Morgensen, introduction to *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature*, ed. Qwo-Li Driskill, Chris Finley, Brian Joseph Gilley, and Scott Lauria Morgensen (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2019), 1–28; and Kuokkanen, *Restructuring Relations*.

enous or tribal community for non-heteronormative sexuality or gender is by no means unique to the Sámi.¹⁵ However, as queer Native scholar Chris Finley posits, Native people are often already located as queer in colonial heteropatriarchal relations, and settler colonial sexual violence has produced silence around sexuality overall. For Finley, this highlights the importance of not only addressing trauma but also re-imagining sex and sexuality as sites of joy and decolonization.¹⁶ Following Finley's cue, our focus is on how *Sparrooabbán* does the work of re-imagining. When there is no recorded history of queer Sámi, how can films like *Sparrooabbán* function as reparative minor gestures that re-imagine such a history?

LOCATING SPARROOABBÁN IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SÁMI, QUEER INDIGENOUS STUDIES, AND INDIGENOUS DOCUMENTARY

The Sámi are the only United Nations recognized indigenous people in Europe. Currently, there are approximately 75,000 to 100,000 Sámi people living within the Sápmi area, depending on the definition.¹⁷ Sámi scholar Veli-Pekka Lehtola points out that the colonization of the Sámi began in the seventeenth century through Christian missionary work, exploration in the name of science, and land transfers. Exploitative colonialism turned into settler colonialism, with the aim of complete cultural assimilation and replacement, in the nineteenth century.¹⁸

Although there are many similarities between the histories of colonial violence in North America and Northern Europe, for example, there are also significant differences. The Sámi did not experience war or genocide; settler colonialism in the Sápmi region took slower, less obviously violent, yet deeply damaging forms, such as forced assimilation and suppression of Sámi culture and languages. Settler colonial oppression by the Finnish, Swedish, Norwegian, and Russian states included putting Sámi children in segregated boarding schools outside of their communities, banning Sámi languages and cultural symbols, forced sterilizations of Sámi women, and forced land ownership transfers. As Sámi sociologist Sanna Valkonen outlines, through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there were isolated incidents of revolt, but after World War II, Sámi identity became an important basis for organized political activism. Slowly managing to change the status quo, Sámi activist efforts and global indigenous collaboration focus largely on environmental issues and exploitation of land and resources by governments

15 For example, see Brian Joseph Gilley, *Becoming Two-Spirit: Gay Identity and Social Acceptance in Indian Country* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006).

16 Chris Finley, "Decolonizing the Queer Native Body (and Recovering the Native Bull-Dyke): Bringing 'Sexy Back' and Out of Native Studies' Closet," in Driskill, Finley, Gilley, and Morgensen, *Queer Indigenous Studies*, 32–33, 40.

17 The definition of Sáminess has been a matter of debate in a way similar to many other indigenous identities, often based on the criteria of descendancy, territoriality, and identification. See Jarno Valkonen, Sanna Valkonen, and Timo Koivurova, "Groupism and the Politics of Indigeneity: A Case Study on the Sámi Debate in Finland," *Ethnicities* 17, no. 4 (2017): 526–545; and Samediggi/The Sámi Parliament, "The Sámi in Finland," accessed January 11, 2021, <https://www.samediggi.fi/sami-in-finance?lang=en>.

18 Veli-Pekka Lehtola, *Saamelaiset: Historia, yhteiskunta, taide* (Inari, Finland: Kustannus-Puntsi, 2015), 10–27.

and corporations, as well as the rights to linguistic and cultural autonomy.¹⁹ However, an extended discussion on local settler colonialism is still largely missing from the mainstream public discussion in the Nordic countries, thanks to the idea of Nordic exceptionalism: a persistent—and inaccurate—self-perception of Nordic countries being only peripheral to colonial processes and racist ideologies.²⁰

A crucial, and oft-ignored, effect of settler colonialism's violent cultural assimilation policies is the lack of documentation of any aspects of Sámi culture that do not fit into colonizing nation-states' heteropatriarchal ideas of ethnic purity, gender, sexuality, and kinship. As Ane H. H. Løvold points out in her ethnographic study of LGBTQ-identifying Sámi people's experiences, many of her informants believe that in the past, the Sámi accepted and revered non-heterosexual and gender-diverse people, like many other indigenous groups around the world. They may have played a spiritual role in Sámi communities as shamans, or *noaidies*. One of Løvold's respondents explained that she learned from her mother through Sámi mythology that gender and sexual variance is the most natural thing. Like the film *Spar-roabbán*, Løvold's respondents speculated that the forced conversion to Christianity suppressed the perception of fluid gender and sexual relations as natural, normal, and a part of spiritual practices.²¹ Indigenous scholars such as (non-citizen) Cherokee poet, scholar, and activist Qwo-Li Driskill and science and technology scholar Kim TallBear have highlighted how gender and sexuality are understood as spiritual forces in indigenous philosophies across Turtle Island (North America), just like other forces of nature.²² Sámi feminist scholar Rauna Kuokkanen has elaborated on how Sámi philosophies are, in this sense, very similar to Turtle Island indigenous philosophies.²³ Contemporary Sámi spirituality, however, often intertwines with the Evangelical Lutheran faith, the form of Christianity that settler colonial missionaries spread most forcefully through Sápmi. The tension between queer existence, Lutheranism, and traditional indigenous spirituality creates a key affective charge for the documentary.

To be queer and Sámi on Sápmi land has long been difficult, due to homophobia that extends to official Sámi governing bodies, as Merethe Giertsen suggests, and many LGBTQ Sámi, like Kaisa in the film, escape to bigger cities, where they may be welcomed as queer but marginalized as indigenous.²⁴ However, Kuokkanen, along with many other contempo-

19 Sanna Valkonen, *Poliittinen saamelaisuus* (Tampere, Finland: Vastapaino, 2009).

20 Kristín Loftsdóttir and Lars Jensen, eds., *Whiteness and Postcolonialism in the Nordic Region: Exceptionalism, Migrant Others and National Identities* (London: Routledge, 2012).

21 Løvold, "Silence," 22–28.

22 Qwo-Li Driskill, *Asegi Stories: Cherokee Queer and Two-Spirit Memory* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016); and Kim TallBear, "Making Love and Relations beyond Settler Sex and Family," in *Making Kin Not Population*, ed. Adele Clarke and Donna Haraway (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2018), 145–164. The term "Turtle Island" is preferable to "North America" for many indigenous scholars and activists. See Amanda Robinson, "Turtle Island," *Canadian Encyclopedia*, November 6, 2018, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/turtle-island>.

23 Rauna Kuokkanen, *Reshaping the University: Responsibility, Indigenous Epistemologies, and the Logic of the Gift* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007).

24 Merethe Giertsen, "En minoritet i minoriteten: Homofile i samiske miljø og samer

rary Native feminist thinkers, argues that struggles for indigenous self-determination must center questions of gender, sexuality, and their multiplicity in order to be meaningful.²⁵ This is clearly the guiding principle of *Sparrooabbán*, as well as ours in this article.

Sparrooabbán, like queer indigenous studies outlined by Qwo-Li Driskill, Chris Finley, Brian Joseph Gilley, and Scott Lauria Morgensen, emphasizes the need to re-imagine sexuality beyond settler conceptualizations and to unravel the ways in which heteropatriarchy and settler colonialism are entangled and co-produce each other.²⁶ Since the early 1990s, the term “Two-Spirit” became more established as an umbrella term for those who embody and live both feminine and masculine spirit on Turtle Island. Spirit and spirituality are not defined as the opposite of corporeality in indigenous thought but as the connectedness of everything in nature and the world. As Driskill argues, Two-Spirit theorizing uses the concept somewhat analogously to the ways that queer theory uses queer: as an open, political, and radically anti-normative concept that does not aim to cover all non-heteronormative indigenous relations or replace the multiple tribally specific terms for gender and sexual fluidity. Two-Spirit is not an indigenous synonym for transgender, or for lesbian or gay, although some Two-Spirit people might use these terms as well. Instead, the concept aims to bridge Native and Western understandings of gender and sexuality while also providing indigenous-defined terminology instead of non-Native and often derogatory anthropological terms.²⁷ However, as anthropologist and queer theorist Scott Lauria Morgensen underlines, it is also important not to overly romanticize indigenous, pre-colonial, supposedly more fluid understandings of sexualities and genders as inspiration for non-Native queer thought or people.²⁸ The documentary *Sparrooabbán* tentatively asks the question: Could the Sámi people have had something similar to Two-Spirit? On their journey, the West sisters explore this potentiality without any easy answers.

Media scholar Pamela Wilson maintains that documentary film has long been one of the most central areas of indigenous media, and understandably so since the need of indigenous collectives to document, archive, and provide evidence of indigenous lives has been great in the face of the oppressive and suppressive forces of settler colonialism.²⁹ Ethnographic documentaries by non-indigenous filmmakers played a significant role in cultural settler

I homofile miljø [A minority within the minority: Gay people in Sámi environments and Sámis in gay environments],” *Din. Tidsskrift for religion og kultur*, no. 4 (2002) and no. 1 (2003): 12–19.

25 Kuokkanen, *Restructuring Relations*; see also, for example, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck, and Angie Morrill, “Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy,” *Feminist Formations* 25, no. 1 (2013): 8–34.

26 Driskill, Finley, Gilley, and Morgensen, introduction, 10–18.

27 Qwo-Li Driskill, “Doubleweaving Two-Spirit Critiques: Building Alliances between Native and Queer Studies,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, no. 1–2 (2010): 69–92.

28 Scott Lauria Morgensen, “Unsettling Queer Politics: What Can Non-Natives Learn from Two-Spirit Organizing?,” in Driskill, Finley, Gilley, and Morgensen, 138–141.

29 Pamela Wilson, “Indigenous Documentary Media,” in *Contemporary Documentary*, ed. Daniel Marcus and Selmin Kara (London: Routledge, 2016), 90.

colonialism. Thus, indigenous self-representation is invaluable in recuperating and re-creating silenced or forgotten histories or healing “screen memories,” as conceptualized by Faye Ginsburg, a scholar of indigenous media.³⁰ *Sparrooabbán* joins many recent indigenous documentaries in exploring complex subjectivities in a world where indigenous identity can be fraught with tensions between belonging and unbelonging.³¹ Within Sámi documentary cinema, works such as Liselotte Wajstedt’s *Sámi nieida jojk* (*Sámi Daughter Yoik*, 2007), Yvonne Thomassen’s *Familiebildet* (*My Family Portrait*, 2013), and Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers’s *Bihttoš* (*Rebel*, 2014) explore similar themes.³² While *Sparrooabbán* is the first feature-length Sámi-made film that openly addresses queer Sámi, a few short documentaries about queer Sámi precede it. Nils John Porsanger’s *Lesbisk i Kautokeino* (*Lesbian in Kautokeino*, 2001), about a Sámi lesbian who returns home to Kautokeino, Sápmi, Norway, after being exiled, is the earliest of these. Norwegian Sea Sámi artist Gjert Rognli’s *The Spiritual Kiss—Vuoinnalas cummá* (2009) tackles gay Sámi men’s place in their communities.³³ Richard Fagervoll, Maret Aile Sara, and Kristine Heitmann’s *Okto—Alene* (*Alone*, 2010) follows a young gay man bullied because of his sexuality in Karasjok, Sápmi, Norway. Tensions between queer and Sámi identities are a central theme in all of these.

With the birth of Sámi cinema in the 1980s, Sámi people placed themselves in charge of their own representation, and its rapid growth is thus relatively recent.³⁴ In January 2016, *Sparrooabbán* premiered at the indigenous film festival Skábmagovat (Reflections of Endless Night) in Inari, Sápmi (Finland). Since then, it has screened at other, mainly Nordic, film festivals, such as Finland’s DocPoint-Helsinki Documentary Film Festival and Sweden’s Gothenburg Film Festival.³⁵ *Sparrooabbán* also aired seven times between 2016 and 2019 on Yleisradio Oy (YLE), Finland’s national public broadcasting company, and three times on TV Finland, the Finnish-speaking public television channel in Sweden.³⁶ The film can be considered part of the expansion in Sámi cinema in the 2010s driven by Sámi women directors.³⁷

30 Faye Ginsburg, “Screen Memories: Resignifying the Traditional in Indigenous Media,” in *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain*, ed. Faye D. Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 39–52.

31 Wilson, “Indigenous Documentary Media,” 91. For a discussion of indigenous films’ exploration of complex identities, see also Karrmen Crey, “Screen Text and Institutional Context: Indigenous Film Production and Academic Research Institutions,” *Native American and Indigenous Studies* 4, no. 1 (2017): 61–88.

32 For closer discussions of these films, see Mackenzie and Stenport, “Sámi Documentary”; Moffat, “Bodies”; and Oisalo, “Saamelaisuuden maisemissa.”

33 Stein S. Fredriksen, “Film om samiske homser,” *Nordlys*, February 2, 2009, <https://www.nordlys.no/nyheter/film-om-samiske-homser/s/1-79-4096937>.

34 Jorma Lehtola, *Lailasta Lailaan: Tarinoita elokuvien sitkeistä lappalaisista* (Inari, Finland: Kustannus-Puntsi, 2000), 265.

35 “Release Info,” *Me and My Little Sister* (2016), accessed January 13, 2021, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5135894/releaseinfo>.

36 This information is based on a search with the title of the film in Finnish, “Minä ja pikkusiskoni,” in the RITVA database, Finland’s Radio and Television Archive, November 27, 2019, <https://rtva.kavi.fi/program/searchAjax/?search=min%C3%A4+ja+pikkusiskoni>. In January 2021, *Sparrooabbán* was available for streaming from limited regions through a paid subscription on Sapmifilm.com, the streaming service of the International Sámi Film Institute (ISFI).

37 Lehtola, *Saamelaiset*, 250–256.

MINOR GESTURES AND ARCHIVES OF AFFECT AS METHODOLOGICAL COMPANIONS

In this article, we analyze *Sparrooabbán* as a site inspiring conversation with queer indigenous and Two-Spirit thought while also engaging with Western theorizing on affect, archive, and the minor gesture. *Sparrooabbán* enables the emergence of a queer Sáminess that is difficult to trace through normative methods yet perceptible in visible, audible, and affective cues. To access these traces and cues, we take methodological and conceptual inspiration from Manning's concept of the minor gesture. Whereas major gestures refer to sites where "events make a difference" according to customary criteria, pre-existing structures, and easily recognizable forms of existence, the minor gesture is "a force that courses through [the major], unmooring its structural integrity, problematizing its normative standards."³⁸ The minor is subtle and difficult to grasp and is thus easily overlooked or unrecognizable in major tendencies. As we "think with" this concept, we focus on the gestural, the minor, the felt, and the fragmentary, on the thresholds of "not-yet."³⁹

An effortless conceptual partner for the minor gesture is, as we argue, the archive of affect. For Ann Cvetkovich, the purpose of an archive of feeling is "to enable the acknowledgment of a past that can be painful to remember, impossible to forget, and resistant to consciousness."⁴⁰ While Cvetkovich prefers "feeling" in a generic sense to refer to sensations as well as psychic and cognitive processes, our focus on affect as the non- or near-verbal and deeply embodied highlights the emergent, generative, transformative, and sometimes contradictory possibilities that minoritarian cultural production can hold.⁴¹ We propose that an archive of affect is constantly folding, living, and transforming interest in tendencies, flows, and collectivities, generated through and generative of minor gestures.

Approaching *Sparrooabbán* through the concepts of the minor gesture and archives of affect is meant not to belittle the big waves that the documentary made but rather to enable seeing the film's subtle ebbs and flows that are otherwise easily lost. In this sense, our methodology joins other projects tracing minoritarian histories that are outside of normative archives, hard or impossible to articulate, less-than-conscious, ephemeral, and sensed or felt.⁴²

38 Manning, *Minor Gesture*, 1.

39 Manning, 7. For more discussion on "thinking with" concepts, see Alecia Y. Jackson and Lisa A. Mazzei, *Thinking with Theory in Qualitative Research: Viewing Data across Multiple Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2012).

40 Cvetkovich, *Archive*, 241.

41 Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 4. On the generative possibilities of affect inquiry for 2-QTOPC media, see also Anabel Khoo, "The Emergent Political: Affective Social Transformation in Two-Spirit, Queer and Trans People of Colour Media," *Graduate Journal of Social Science* 11, no. 1 (2015): 38–46.

42 For example, see Lisa Blackman, "Affective Politics, Debility and Hearing Voices: Towards a Feminist Politics of Ordinary Suffering," *Feminist Review* 111, no. 1 (2015): 25–41; Erica L. Johnson, *Cultural Memory, Memorials, and Reparative Writing* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Taina Kinnunen and Marjo Kolehmainen, "Touch and Affect: Analysing the Archive of Touch Biographies," *Body & Society* 25, no. 1 (2019): 29–56, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X18817607>; Tuja Huuki and Sandra Juutilainen, "Mapping Historical, Material and Affective Entanglements in a Sámi Woman's Discriminatory Experiences in and beyond Finnish Boarding School," *Education in the North* 23, no. 2 (2016): 3–23, <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/eitn/journ>

In these projects, as well as in the humanities and social sciences at large, there is a call for the development of new research methods to engage with the non-verbal, non-conscious, and embodied ways of communication and knowing. Several scholars consider affect as one such methodological tool, referring to felt, more-than-human processes that circulate between bodies, their environments, material objects, media technologies, and across times and places.⁴³ Our understanding of affect focuses on the intensities and felt dimensions of a past, which folds into the present, moving between, connecting and disconnecting bodies, objects, histories, and cultural imageries.

In considering the minor gesture in this way, we specifically pay attention to the affective charges surfacing in the documentary, which means that we attempt to become sensitive to other-than-verbal forms of communication, focusing on that which is “indirect . . . unthought and unprocessed and yet communicated.”⁴⁴ We explore affective traces of the queer Sámi once lost but re-emerging in *Sparrooabbán*, surfacing as gaps, textures, hauntings, embodied or unsayable expression, objects, slowness, or frustrations in, for example, the film’s imagery of the *gákti*; the film’s uses of silence; and *yoik* song. We use our respective, repeated viewing experiences—and our embodied, differently as well as overlappingly situated, analytical, cultural, and personal positions. Through these, we focus on moments, scenes, sounds, or narrative arcs in which we felt a particular affective charge, moments that made our bodies react with tears, mourning, pleasure, goosebumps, or something not-quite-articulate.⁴⁵

To become attuned to the major and minor flows in *Sparrooabbán*, we viewed and re-viewed, paused and re-wound the documentary, isolating modalities such as sounds, objects, movement, and language, and discussed our viewing experiences and analytical ideas. Our collaboration started from our shared engagement in feminist scholarship and theorizing on gender, sexuality, affect, and discrimination, as well as interest in settler colonialism and indigeneity.

The fruitfulness of our collaboration lies not only in the shared but also in the differentiation of our ethnic backgrounds. Kata is a white non-indigenous Finnish scholar with a background in media studies, feminist and queer theory, and decolonial thought. Tuija is a feminist Inari Sámi scholar coming from educational gender studies. For Tuija, the analysis reconfigures and is infused with her memories of historical traditions and

al/502/; and Katariina Kyrölä and Susanna Paasonen, “Glimmers of the Forbidden Fruit: Reminiscing Pornography, Conceptualizing the Archive,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 19, no. 6 (2016): 595–610.

43 See, for example, Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); Lisa Blackman and Couze Venn, “Affect,” *Body & Society* 16, no. 1 (2010): 7–28; Lisa Blackman, *Immaterial Bodies: Affect, Embodiment, Mediation* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2012); Rebecca Coleman, *Transforming Images: Screens, Affect, Futures* (London: Routledge, 2013), 32–35; and Ana Dragojlovic, “Affective Geographies: Intergenerational Hauntings, Bodily Affectivity and Multiracial Subjectivities,” *Subjectivity* 8 (2015): 315–334.

44 Valerie Walkerdine, Aina Olsvold, and Monica Rudberg, “Researching Embodiment and Intergenerational Trauma Using the Work of Davoine and Gaudilliere: History Walked in the Door,” *Subjectivity* 6, no. 3 (2013): 276.

45 See, for example, Katariina Kyrölä, *The Weight of Images: Affect, Body Image and Fat in the Media* (London: Routledge, 2014), 2–5, 12–18.

local practices of her childhood Sámi community. For example, the film resonated with her in terms of the practices of systematic repression of culture and language that her mother and other kin had faced in boarding schools and beyond and the massive impact this must have had on the lives of the postwar generation of Sámi people. Tuija carries with her the affective residues of the oppressive legacies of the past, which sometimes impair her agency.⁴⁶ As for Kata, the analysis enabled a learning process as well as moments of affective recognition as a queer subject, who grew up in small-town Finland and a heteronormative world. However, it also entailed moments of estrangement, when the film evoked felt reactions that were difficult to pinpoint, and many of the affective, historical, and culturally specific cues might have gone unnoticed without Tuija's guidance. Furthermore, we see the film *Sparrooabbán* as a partner in this conversation: a work that is more than an "object" of analysis but that speaks and moves with us through it.

THE GÁKTI AS A QUEERED, AFFECTIVE SECOND SKIN

A key object that appears, travels, and transforms in the film over and over again is the Sámi traditional dress, *gákti*. *Gákti* is a long-sleeved, loose tunic, usually made of wool, cotton, felt, or silk; women's versions are a bit longer at the hem than men's. The *gákti* can be worn with a belt, leggings, traditional reindeer leather shoes, and a silk shawl, and it is adorned with contrast-colored bands, embroidery, plaits, and silver or tin ornate brooches.

In its opening, *Sparrooabbán* employs the *gákti* to juxtapose the affectivity and materiality of the past as it concretizes in the film's present. The film begins with a grainy home video of the filmmaker, Suvi, and her little sister, Kaisa, as children, singing a song in Northern Sámi language side by side in a living room. After the film's name appears on the screen, the camera cuts to a close-up of a *gákti*, sliding over the fabric, zooming in to traditional silver jewelry and Kaisa's and Suvi's focused faces as they tend to the dress and admire it (see Figure 1). Kaisa's *gákti* is white and later becomes her wedding dress as she prepares to marry her girlfriend. A montage of still images, including old, black-and-white photos of Sámi people also wearing *gákti* follow these caressing close-ups (see Figure 2).

The *gákti* used to be everyday clothing for Sámi people but are nowadays worn primarily in festive contexts or other situations to signal the wearer's Sámi identity. The dress varies in terms of shape and design, decoration, and accessories according to the wearer's specific home region, family background, gender, age, marital status, and individual preference.⁴⁷ As Sámi scholar Sigga-Marja Magga points out, heteronormative gendering of women's and men's clothing is quite strictly regulated today, and mixing or bending gendered codes is frowned upon in the community. There is no *gákti*

46 Tuija Huuki and Maija Lanås, "Sámi Child-Adult/Past-Present Entanglements in a Painful Lecture at University," in *Social, Material and Political Constructs of Arctic Childhoods: An Everyday Life Perspective*, ed. Pauliina Rautio and Elina Stenvall (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2019), 139–153; and Huuki and Juutilainen, "Mapping."

47 Lehtola, *Saamelaisset*, 15–17; and Tiina Mattanen, "Saamenpukua omivat puhetavat ja niiden vastadiskurssit epäaitoa saamenpukua käsittelevissä verkkokeskusteluissa" (master's thesis, University of Oulu, 2017), 28–33.



Figure 1. Suvi West (left) admires her sister Kaisa's wedding dress *gákti* in the documentary *Sparroabbán* (Vaski Filmi Oy, 2016).



Figure 2. An old, black-and-white photo of Sámi people in *gákti* appears in a montage sequence in *Sparroabbán* (Vaski Filmi Oy, 2016).

specifically for non-heteronormative genders or sexualities, although some queer Sámi individuals have consciously stretched gendered regulations.⁴⁸ The *gákti* is handmade, and the processes of making it and wearing it are considered important and respected corporeal and affective markers of a Sámi identity. Otherwise, Sámi identity is not necessarily visually distinguishable from white non-indigenous bodies, which makes the *gákti* all the more

48 Sigga-Marja Magga, "Nurinpäin käännetty gákti saamelaisen vastarinnan muotona," *Politiikka* 60, no. 3 (2018): 260–264.

meaningful. In Nordic countries, costume shop versions of the *gákti* and its cultural appropriation by non-indigenous people have been a target of stark critique by the Sámi, much like with indigenous dress and accessories in other parts of the world.⁴⁹

In the opening scene of *Sparrooabbán*, as well as in several later scenes, the *gákti* and its components, such as jewelry and shoes, are depicted lovingly, almost caressingly, in extreme close-ups and half close-ups, especially on Kaisa's body. Accompanied by old photos of Sámi people dressed in the outfit, the *gákti* forms a material connection to the past, thus creating a sense of continuity: this cannot be the first queer Sámi body to wear a *gákti*, although the film also juxtaposes the *gákti* to histories of disconnection and disappearance in certain scenes. At the same time, the affectionate, minor movements of tending to the *gákti* happen in Helsinki, in the sisters' city apartments far away from their Sápmi home: the *gákti* is not only an object tied to tradition or the past or a particular place but also moving, living, and transforming through the Sámi bodies that make it and wear it.

To understand the affective force of the *gákti* in *Sparrooabbán*, we draw on Valerie Walkerdine's idea of "second skin."⁵⁰ For Walkerdine, a psychic skin delineates the self, like the skin that delineates the body's boundaries, and allows for a feeling of safety within oneself. She suggests that similar mechanics apply to community bodies that also have a psychic second skin, a felt and collectively regulated boundary that protects and holds the community together.⁵¹ Group second skin phenomena sometimes include clinging to "a psychic object in that it could be said to contain all the projections of the people: it is simultaneously a material object and an object of fantasies, dreams and hopes."⁵² Such a psychic object in the documentary is the *gákti*, which signals belonging but also bears the weight of the transgenerational, affectively transmitted experiences of Sámi oppression.⁵³ For Walkerdine, the second skin operates to bring a profound sense of safety to combat great anxieties in the face of demise.

Sámi scholar Sanna Valkonen argues that the sense of communal beingness for the Sámi actually emerges through shared experiences of oppression.⁵⁴ Settler colonialism and longitudinal cultural assimilation have ruptured the traditional communal beingness of the Sámi from within as well as from outside, as they do with other indigenous people. Although settler colonialism is a structure and an ongoing process, not a singular, limited-time event in the past, it is also a disruptive affective force that both produces

49 Mattanen, "Saamenpukua omivat puhetavat."

50 Walkerdine, "Communal Beingness," 96–99.

51 See also Valerie Walkerdine, Helen Lucey, and June Melody, *Growing Up Girl: Psychosocial Explorations of Gender and Class* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Valerie Walkerdine and Luis Jimenez, *Gender, Work and Community after De-Industrialisation: A Psychosocial Approach to Affect* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); and Walkerdine, Olsvold, and Rudberg, "Researching Embodiment."

52 Walkerdine, "Communal Beingness," 99.

53 Huuki and Lanas, "Sámi"; and E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 105.

54 Valkonen, *Poliittinen saamelaisuus*.

and threatens the psychic second skin of a community.⁵⁵ Thus, group second skin phenomena can include poor toleration of otherness.⁵⁶ In *Sparrooabbán*, this becomes visible in the strict set of values and rules, including resistance to and expulsion of non-heterosexual people, within Sámi communities.

Kaisa's lesbian wedding *gákti* renders visible this multi-directional flow of force of the Sámi second skin: through caressing depictions of Kaisa's *gákti*, as well as its materialization on a queer indigenous body, the documentary queers the Sámi second skin inasmuch as it is transmuted into a lesbian version. Simultaneously, the queer *gákti* refuses the expulsion of homosexuality that has been forged through settler colonialism and revitalizes it by mending the link to a sense of historical continuity of queerness, once lost in the turbulences of cultural assimilation. *Sparrooabbán*'s still and moving images of Kaisa in her *gákti*—the one made in the documentary for her wedding and another one she wears at a Sámi cultural festival—exist in a continuum of other, historical images of Sámi people, as well as queer indigenous people from other cultural contexts. Although there are no historical images or documents of explicitly queer Sámi, the film re-inserts Kaisa's queer body into such continuums through the very act of making the film.

We propose that the gentle, stroking images of the queered *gákti*, and the acts of making it, wearing it, and filming and photographing it for a lesbian wedding, function as minor gestures that push for small shifts, not only in relation to the *gákti* but also in relation to land, history, gender, sexuality, and community. As Driskill has argued, indigenous sexuality and gender cannot be understood outside of such relations.⁵⁷ These processes or gestures mark the existence and persistence of queer indigenous bodies even through the stifling force of heteropatriarchal settler colonialism. They do so not by reaching back over generations and trying to reach what was then but by offering a present-day account of a queer Sámi *gákti*-body and locating this account in relation to the past.

SILENCE AND THE AFFECTIVE WEIGHT OF SETTLER COLONIALISM AND HETERONORMATIVITY

Silence about the existence of queer Sámi people is one of the weightiest affective tensions in the film. In a similar vein as the queered *gákti*, we see silence as a minor gesture that the filmmakers utilize as an audiovisual strategy and explore in *Sparrooabbán*—but only up to a point, as silence necessarily marks that which cannot be put into words. Silence in the film points, on the one hand, to inadvertent silence or the inability to speak and, on the other hand, to silence as a conscious strategy of refusal and expulsion by and within Sámi communities. Sámi people have long used silence as a dissent tactic amid settler colonial violence, in addition to other evasive forms of

55 Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (December 2006): 387–409; and J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, "'A Structure, Not an Event': Settler Colonialism and Enduring Indigeneity," *Lateral* 5, no. 1 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.25158/L5.1.7>.

56 Walkerdine, "Communal Beingness," 96.

57 Driskill, "Doubleweaving," 73.

protest like withdrawal and delay.⁵⁸ The tension between silence as a mark of trauma, silence as resentment of otherness, and silence as a show of dissent in the face of overwhelming suppressive force is palpable in the film.

Sparroabbán clearly places Sámi community's silence around non-heterosexuality as a traumatic effect of settler colonial violence that has taken root in the community body on an affective level. Silence as the mark of trauma indicates a severed connection to that which has caused the hurt while being a hurtful practice itself.⁵⁹ Much of the silence that Kaisa and Suvi encounter leaks into the present from various sediments of the past, blending together with that of the present time. This silence is something they witness in their parents and family members, who have declined to participate in the film; it is something they try to talk about, a deeply felt, affective inability to speak, of which they cannot make sense. The film captures this inability in still images and failed attempts to speak.

The connections between silence, trauma, indigenous land, and non-heterosexuality become clear as Suvi and Kaisa travel north to their childhood landscapes. After the car ride scene, described in the beginning of this article, a montage sequence marks their arrival at home in Sápmi: a big wooden house behind trees (see Figure 3), a vanity desk inside the house, a family photograph, clips of two home movies in which Suvi and Kaisa appear as children (see Figure 4). Suvi explains in a voice-over that although they have a loving family, no one wanted to be in the documentary, which is hurtful but has to be accepted.⁶⁰ The still images concretize the overwhelming affective weight of silence as inarticulable absence.

From their family home, Suvi and Kaisa continue driving to the Sámi cultural festival, Riddu Riđđu, determined to talk to people about Sámi queerness and the documentary that they are making. They roam the festival grounds dressed in *gákti*, run into friends and acquaintances, dance, and laugh, but somehow, they just cannot utter what the documentary is about, not even when asked directly. Suvi's voice-over indicates that she has no idea where the fear comes from. Late at night, after a few beers and with some help from a couple of strangers, Suvi and Kaisa set up their tent against gorgeous scenery, lit by the midnight sun. Only then is Suvi able to say out loud that the documentary is "about Sámi lesbians." She says it three times before the strangers get it: the man starts mouthing "lesb . . ." but stops and frowns. The young woman says that it sounds cool but is a taboo subject, and the young man echoes her and chuckles that as long as it is not about gay men.

The next day, Suvi and Kaisa speak to Pauliina Feodoroff, an openly lesbian Skolt Sámi film and theater director and the former chairperson of

58 Veli-Pekka Lehtola, "Evasive Strategies of Defiance—Everyday Resistance Histories among the Sámi," in *Knowing from the Indigenous North: Sámi Approaches to History, Politics and Belonging*, ed. Thomas Hylland Eriksen, Sanna Valkonen, and Jarno Valkonen (London: Routledge, 2018).

59 Françoise Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudillière, *History beyond Trauma*, trans. Susan Fairfield (New York: Other Press, 2004).

60 Compare to Crey, "Screen Text," in which she discusses the documentary film *Navajo Talking Pictures* (Arlene Bowman, 1986) and the controversy around it; indigenous filmmaker Bowman filmed her conflict with her grandmother, who was supposed to be the film's key character but after a few days refused to be filmed.



Figure 3. Suvi and Kaisa's childhood home stands silent, as their family did not want to participate in the documentary (Vaski Filmi Oy, 2016).



Figure 4. Suvi and Kaisa appear as children in a home movie as part of a montage in *Sparrooabbán* (Vaski Filmi Oy, 2016).

the Sámi Council. The interview takes place against a stunning mountain background, as Pauliina describes her experience of being closeted for a long time, then coming out after her eldest daughter was born: “After that, I couldn’t pretend anymore. A deep silence ensued. People disappeared from around me just like that. It was such a shock since I had been working for four years every day for the good of Sámi people [as the chairperson]. And then all of a sudden, I was the biggest piece of rubbish amongst Sámi people. . . . I still can’t say that I am *lesbian* [strained, mocking voice]; I have to turn it around somehow.”

In the interview, Pauliina is wearing a cap and a leather jacket, while Suvi and Kaisa wear the *gákti*, and she frowns and looks at her hands almost the entire time. She explains further that after she married her wife, she wore the traditional cone-shaped headpiece of the wife for the Skolt Sámi at a Sámi conference. However, people were outraged, saying that she had no right to wear the headpiece in public. In other words, Pauliina, too, had tried to queer the *gákti*, but instead of being met with silence, she encountered outspoken homophobic anger.⁶¹ Pauliina's coming out happened in Sápmi as a brave but costly major public gesture: it was a sudden rupture to the status quo, seemingly too much to bear for the community. She and her *gákti* collided with the affective force field of the second skin and were painfully expelled. For both Pauliina and Kaisa, the moment of rupture and queering was tied to wearing *gákti* in relation to non-heterosexual marriage—itsself a settler colonial and heteronormative institution.

Kaisa, however, was able to queer the *gákti* without similar cost or push-back, perhaps due to the distance provided by the documentary medium, which does its affective work through slow-burning intensities, and via geographical distance, emanating from outside of Sápmi land. Kaisa and Suvi's strategy is subtle, minor, and attuned to the contradictory affective forces of settler colonialism and heteropatriarchy in Sápmi—stretching the second skin but careful not to break it. This is in line with what Suvi has expressed about the film in interviews: she wanted to make a movie that builds more than breaks, that seeks understanding rather than division.⁶²

The interview with Pauliina ends when Suvi asks, "Do you think homosexuals have a special place in the Sámi community? Sámi homosexuals?" And Pauliina answers, "In this time and place, I think our task is . . . somehow . . . even . . ." and her words die out. She lets out a deep sigh and looks at her hands, unable to utter any more words. Kaisa looks at Pauliina, eyes glistening with tears. The next shots are of the West sisters driving again, along the Deatnu river, in beautiful scenery and rain, in silence.

The affective charge of silence intensifies through the course of Suvi and Kaisa's travels through Sápmi, from the absent presence of their family in their childhood home and the overbearing hesitance to talk about the documentary to its climax in the abrupt halt in Pauliina's ability to speak. In these instances, we begin to see how the past surges through the contemporary landscape, and broad sociocultural forces find their expression, or lack thereof, in intimate moments—shared through the documentary. Through these silences, the viewers also get a sense of the risks the West sisters took and could not take in relation to their family and community in making the documentary. The affective residues of wider hetero-patriarchal settler-colonizing power are flowing abundantly in the film's journey through Sápmi, expressed in the sediments of silence.

61 Anna Anita Hivand, a Sámi journalist in Norway, has spoken in public about similar experiences after coming out as lesbian in the early 2000s. The Sámi Council stopped the publication of Hivand's article about homosexual Sámi and launched a smear campaign against her. The matter was settled eventually in court. For details, see Martin Gaarder, "Krenket av Sametinget," *Samtiden*, no. 2 (2004): 23–24, <https://www.idunn.no/file/ci/1868259/samtiden>.

62 Saaristo, "Tarina sisaruudesta."

As Finley argues, heteropatriarchal structures within indigenous communities must be understood as effects of settler colonialism. Therefore, settler colonial structures would fall apart without heteronormative ideas of gender and sexuality.⁶³ We maintain, then, that the silence marking and surrounding queerness and sexuality in *Sparrooabbán* cannot be understood simply as absence, or as a sign of internalized homophobia within Sámi communities, but instead as a bodily and cinematic materialization of the visceral weight of the intertwined histories of settler colonialism and heteronormativity, weight so heavy it is hard to verbalize.⁶⁴ Archives of affect are often archives of trauma, including fragments, memories, fantasies, ephemera, moments, and objects—things that can stage disturbances in the major tendencies of official history.⁶⁵ Silence, we propose, can signal such disturbance and thereby become a part of the queer indigenous archive of affect.

NOT-QUITE-SILENCE ON THE VERGE OF ACTUALIZING QUEER SÁMI

In addition to silence marking the affective force of heavy settler colonial histories, which are too big, too complex, and too painful to put into words, silence also marks the moments when structures are about to fall apart: the moments when words fail and other means of expression come to the fore. These possibilities for rupture are evident in *Sparrooabbán*; even in silence, something seeps through and generates possibilities for transformation. Read through the generative logics of the minor gesture, silence—and other subtle forms of expression—can be thought of as something other than lack, or coping with stifling forces. It is not so much the complete absence of sound, or of words, but rather the affective marker of how language can ultimately fail. Silence in *Sparrooabbán* is also a presence.

When settler words fail, minor gestures are “capable of carrying the affective tonality of nonconscious resonance and moving it toward the articulation, edging into consciousness.”⁶⁶ This can be heard and felt in the affectivity of *yoik*, a vocal genre in North Sámi culture, “characterized by distinctive vocal timbres and techniques, in which the performer *yoiks* something rather than *yoiks* about something.”⁶⁷ One can *yoik* a landscape, a feeling, an opinion, an animal, a person, or a memory, among other things. Therefore, *yoik* does not have a subject and object in a conventional sense, nor a begin-

63 Finley, “Decolonizing,” 34.

64 Here we can compare silence in indigenous film, where it marks the trauma of the intertwined histories of heteropatriarchal and settler colonial violence, with Mark Rifkin’s examination of silent indigenous presence in popular settler film in the United States. For Rifkin, the silent but highly visible, inexplicable presence of the Tonawanda Seneca chief Ely S. Parker (played by Asa-Luke Twocrow, Oglala Sioux) in the film *Lincoln* (Steven Spielberg, 2012) marks a disjuncture between indigenous and settler colonial time—Native presence is needed to legitimize the settler nation-building project, but the silence becomes a trace of their profound incompatibility. See Mark Rifkin, “The Silence of Ely S. Parker,” in *Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

65 Cvetkovich, *Archive*, 244.

66 Manning, *Minor Gesture*, 7.

67 Tina K. Ramnarine, “Acoustemology, Indigeneity, and Joik in Valkeapää’s Symphonic Activism: Views from Europe’s Arctic Fringes for Environmental Ethnomusicology,” *Ethnomusicology* 53, no. 2 (2009): 188.

ning or an end.⁶⁸ *Yoiking* was prohibited in some areas and schools up until the 1970s in Finland and the 1990s in Norway as a part of the settler states' cultural assimilation policies, although in the 2000s and 2010s, it has become popularized and even commercialized through TV shows, star performers, and broad audience interest.⁶⁹

In *Sparrooabbán*, awareness of the history of *yoik* suppression can feed into affective reactions it provokes. The film employs *yoik* perhaps most powerfully in the scene described at the beginning of this article, in which Suvi and Kaisa drive to their childhood home through Sápmi lands. The hair standing up on our arms as we watched testify to that hard-to-capture affect that echoes powerfully with many queer and other indigenous scholars, such as Driskill and Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith, in their calls for other means of expression than settler colonial language. These can include song, poetry, ritual, dance, visual art, and film and should be recognized and explored as theory and ways of knowing.⁷⁰ One does not need to fully understand or have words to empathize with Kaisa's *yoik*, at once queer, indigenous, traditional, and contemporary, in the air, in the body, and connected to the land and place. Sometimes those other means of expression can be some of the few means available to carry through and create affirmative indigenous ways of knowing, feeling, and materializing through the stifling sediments of settler violence. Kaisa's *yoik*, when understood as an expressive and theorizing force, can be seen to give voice to the not-yetness of the queer, or the queer-taking-form that flows through Sápmi, making it sensed and felt, edging into consciousness, but not yet clearly articulable.

In addition to *yoik*, the film employs other non-verbal, sonic expressions, not-quite-silences, such as whispers. Suvi and Kaisa quietly whisper about queerness, guilt, shame, and bitterness in their childhood bedroom; they are eager to break the silence in Sápmi but then mostly fail to do so. Together, these expressions open up and activate the minor registers of the queer Sámi that seep through the interstices of major registers. They operate on the verges of the articulable, where the queer has not yet re-actualized in the Sámi community and is difficult to put in spoken or written language.

The Sápmi environment, where homosexuality still fluctuates at the edges of expression, is set in stark contrast to the capital city area. In Helsinki, it is possible to talk out loud about Kaisa's lesbian identity and sexual and gender diversity, attend public queer dance parties, live and cohabitate openly in a queer relationship, which can be sanctioned by the state and partially by the church: the queer, in and through its Western versions, is actualizing there. This is also from where Suvi's and Kaisa's expressive capacities

68 Ånde Somby, "Joik and the Theory of Knowledge," in *Kunnskap og utvikling*, ed. Magnus Haavelsrud (Tromsø, Norway: University of Tromsø, 1995), 17.

69 Stine Agnete Sand, "Indigenous Television for the Majority: Analyzing NRK Sapmi's *Muitte Mu* (Remember Me)," *Television and New Media* (June 21, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419857203>.

70 For example, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999); Driskill, "Doubleweaving," 82; Macarena Gómez-Barris, "Countermanifestos and Audibility," *Cinema Journal* 57, no. 4 (2018): 126; and Driskill, Finley, Gilley, and Morgensen, introduction, 2–4.

draw strength, both in terms of professional opportunities and their ability to live the kinds of lives they want to live.

In *Sparroabbán*, it seems that while the queer can only emerge in minor ways and through subtle traces in Sápmi, one's indigeneity can be fully actualized there. By contrast, in the capital city—the power center of the settler colonial state—settler normative queerness can find expression with full force, but there is little space for fully actualizing queer indigenous existence. After the West sisters return to Helsinki, the film cuts to rainbow balloons in front of the Great Cathedral and Suvi and Kaisa marching in the Pride parade, dressed in Western clothes. The camera, however, captures not only the sisters but also a nearby marcher, who is wearing a colorful costume shop headdress of feathers—the common, banal gesture of cultural appropriation of indigeneity. This small, barely noticeable, but hardly accidental cue in the film underlines the not-yetness of the co-articulation of queer and indigenous lives in the supposedly freer urban south. The disarticulation of queerness from indigeneity is so deeply ingrained that it is not even acknowledged. In the background, Kaisa sings a wistful hymn in Northern Sámi about having to leave one's homeland. Thus, through subtle gestures, and by tracing this disarticulation to settler colonial power, the documentary skillfully addresses, but nevertheless refuses, the tension between notions of Western, progressive queer freedom and indigenous heteronormativity or backwardness.

SEEKING QUEER SÁMI SPIRITUALITY AND THE LIMITS OF GESTURAL ARCHIVES OF AFFECT

For models and cues on how to co-articulate and co-actualize Sámi belonging with queer identity, Suvi takes her sister to Toronto in the latter part of the documentary. After feeling the weight of the silence in Sápmi, Suvi explains in a voice-over that she feels comforted by the fact that in other indigenous communities, sexual and gender fluidity has been embraced as a key part of spiritual life and tradition. Kaisa, however, is not so certain. She tells her non-indigenous Finnish fiancée that Suvi wants to travel to Toronto “to meet . . . Indians? I don't know how to call them! . . . See how well up to date I am?”

During the documentary's trip to Toronto, *Sparroabbán* attempts to gesture, in minor ways, toward a spiritually based queer or Two-Spirit Sáminess. We suggest that these attempts point in two directions: Evangelical Lutheran Christian spirituality and nature-based indigenous spirituality.⁷¹ The former informs and fuels Kaisa's queer Sáminess: all the Christianity-related scenes in the film (such as discussions in a church with a lesbian priest) revolve particularly around Kaisa. It is Suvi who seeks connection to the nature-based Sámi spirituality.

Here we begin to see the limitations and boundaries of minor gestures and archives of affect: it is difficult or impossible to foresee which gestures will fail and when and where the affective charge falls flat, despite attempts to the contrary. In our viewing experience and analysis, the attempted minor gestures toward queer Sámi nature-based spirituality do not produce a sense of something opening in the film, even in minor ways, but rather a deeper sense of

71 Valkonen and Valkonen, “Contesting.”

loss. This raises the question: When and how can things, events, residues, and phenomena contribute to an archive of affect, and when can they not?

For the minor gestural force to activate, “conditions must be created that open the event to variability.”⁷² The director Suvi West and the film’s production team did everything they seemingly could to produce the possibility for imagining queer or Two-Spirit Sámi spirituality on the sisters’ trip to Toronto, through making connections to local indigenous communities. Suvi enthusiastically wants to show Kaisa “everything,” and she arranges a dinner with a local Two-Spirit indigenous woman and her female partner and a visit at an indigenous cultural center. However, Kaisa seems detached from the purpose of the trip as *Sparrooabbán* delves deeper into local queer indigenous spirituality. Her demeanor grows more and more withdrawn, while Suvi throws herself into learning more about nature-based faith. Where queer indigeneity most clearly intertwines with non-Christian worldviews in the film, as in the scene where Two-Spirit Native people explain their traditional faith and rituals and the sacredness of Two-Spirit and their wedding ceremonies, Kaisa listens with a deep frown on her face, in silence.

Over dinner with the sisters, the Two-Spirit woman talks about what Two-Spirit means in her community, and she asks whether there is something similar for the Sámi. Suvi explains that they have no documentation of anything like Two-Spirit—no pictures of it—although she is convinced that before settler colonialism, there must have been a spiritual understanding of gender and sexual variance. In a visual sequence that focuses on each person’s face, the woman speaks emphatically:

When I walk on this earth, everything, every step is with the power of my ancestors. . . . You know, it included Two-Spirited people. So when I hear you talk about the Sámi, and the Sámi world—we have the same ancestors, we are all connected, and we all come from the same place, and you guys have a powerful past. There has to be this Two-Spirit, there has to be. And where has that gone, that’s what I don’t understand. . . . I don’t know; it just makes me cry that you guys don’t know.

Suvi’s eyes tear up, but Kaisa only sits quietly.

Finally, when the Two-Spirit woman invites the sisters to join her in a cleansing ceremony, Kaisa pulls away entirely. She discloses in their hotel room that she does not want to be there and should not have come along on the trip at all. She explains that everything in Toronto feels strange to her. Kaisa’s queer Sáminess is deeply tied to her Evangelical Lutheran faith, which makes her resistant to indigenous spirituality. Suvi is left to do the cleansing ceremony alone, without her sister. At the same time, the potential for re-creating *queer* Sámi affective traces begins to fade, as the key queer protagonist of the film pulls away, and a connection between Sámi and local spirituality does not seem clear to the viewers. Even if the local rituals echo some Sámi spiritual practices, the film makes clear that the customs of a strange culture do not reach into both sisters’ affective registers, nor do they

72 Manning, *Minor Gesture*, 72.

move them enough to materialize something new or re-imagine a piece of the Sámi past. Though Suvi believes that “there has to be this Two-Spirit” for the Sámi, it is not something that actualizes for her, or Kaisa, or the viewers in the documentary. The wish is left to dissolve in the air: it does not produce the kind of gestures or traces that would become material for the queer Sámi archive of affect.

The Toronto section of *Sparrooabbán* searches for that which has been largely lost in Sápmi; that is, a deep, culturally specific, land- and spirituality-based queer indigeneity. The failure of this task underlines that not just any trace or fragment can meaningfully participate in the creation of an archive of affect, and not all cues and nods become minor gestures; they would still have to transform, nurture, and repeat something in a perceptible way. Otherwise, these cues are just small deviations from the norm, not minor gestures.⁷³ Affective archives cannot be produced by cutting and pasting, quoting, or simply adopting things or concepts from other minoritarian cultures or groups. Traditions and terms, even from other indigenous contexts, cannot replace missing things, and they cannot simply slide into Sámi culture, into the affective flow and sedimentation of embodied and location-bound history. As Two-Spirit scholars Jenny L. Davis and Kai Pyle have argued, it is crucial to the survival of indigenous knowledge and spiritual systems that umbrella terms such as “Two-Spirit” do not replace locally specific terminology. At the same time, transnational connections enable organizing and enacting kinship relations in and beyond location-specific struggles.⁷⁴ Through making palpable the failure to create an affective trace of Two-Spirit Sámi, *Sparrooabbán* concretizes the importance of this argument.

Many queer indigenous scholars, such as Driskill, see the realm of the queer or Two-Spirit erotic as a normal part of indigenous spirituality and tradition and as a key source for healing from the trauma of settler colonialism, especially as settler colonialism has often caused systematic sexual trauma.⁷⁵ Indeed, a number of queer indigenous films from the United States and Canada, both shorts and feature length, have employed the register of the erotic and sexual.⁷⁶ In comparison, *Sparrooabbán* is an astonishingly asexual film for its subject matter. For example, the camera never shows Kaisa kissing her partner on the mouth or touching in ways that might hint toward an erotic connection, and the sisters never discuss desire, sex, or the carnal aspects of sexuality with each other or anyone else in the documentary—only love. As Lisa Duggan has argued, desexualization and a focus on respectability, marriage, monogamy, and “normal” domestic life have been strategies

73 Manning, 72, 92.

74 Jenny L. Davis, “Refusing (Mis)recognition: Navigating Multiple Marginalization in the U.S. Two Spirit Movement,” *Review of International American Studies* 12, no. 1 (2019): 65–86; and Kai Pyle, “Naming and Claiming: Recovering Ojibwe and Plains Cree Two-Spirit Language,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (2018): 574–588.

75 Qwo-Li Driskill, “Stolen from Our Bodies: First Nations Two-Spirits/Queers and the Journey to a Sovereign Erotic,” *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 16, no. 2 (2004): 50–64; and Driskill, “Doubleweaving,” 83.

76 Lisa Tatonetti, “Visible Sexualities or Invisible Nations: Forced to Choose in *Big Eden*, *Johnny Greeyes*, and *The Business of Fancydancing*,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, no. 1–2 (2010): 157–181.

by which non-Native LGBTQ groups have been able to gain access to public life and appear less threatening to the straight public—but with the price of assimilating to homonormative, Western values and practices.⁷⁷ The focus on desexualized queer indigenous love in *Sparrooabbán* avoids the risk of alienation as well as hypersexualization, since the audience of the documentary includes both settler viewers, who may be consciously or unconsciously invested in exoticizing and eroticizing tropes of indigeneity, and conservative kin and community members. This asexuality underscores *Sparrooabbán*'s focus on the minor register as an important means for healing and creating an affective archive—without shattering its potential before it builds up. The film may not have been able to engage the realms of the spiritual and the erotic as potentially powerful streams in the queer Sámi archive of affect, but those streams still haunt the limits of that archive as an absent presence, a futurity waiting to emerge.

THE GENERATIVE POTENTIAL OF MINOR GESTURES

In *Sparrooabbán*, the minor gestures of queering the *gákti*, the generative silence, the non-verbal and almost-silent forms of expression begin to form an archive of affect, resistant to settler colonial documentation and archival practices. Together with other Sámi creative works, the documentary combines micropolitical actions and activist practices that might seem too mundane or small to be included in settler institutions and histories. As arts scholars Katve-Kaisa Kontturi and Tal Fitzpatrick argue, micropolitical activism—a form that indigenous activism often take—do not tend to make huge splashes at once but are instead localized, seemingly smaller, slower, and processual. However, they should not be deemed less significant than macropolitical activism.⁷⁸ *Sparrooabbán* may not have reached, or even aspired to reach, global screens, like some of its contemporaries, such as *Sameblod* (*Sami Blood*, Amanda Kernell, 2016). As the first feature-length queer Sámi film, *Sparrooabbán*'s macropolitical significance is clear, but its micropolitical significance and potential are perhaps even more radical.

The unspeakable and unwritten pain in indigenous communities, forged by settler colonialism through generations, becomes unavoidably expressed through something: through the body, through silence, through material objects, and through other seemingly small but affectively significant means. *Sparrooabbán*, and our analytical approach to it as generative of minor gestures and archives of affect, attempts to grasp the difficulty as well as the creative potential of this something that is on the verge of being uncommunicable yet cannot be contained. Histories of oppression and tradition, loss, and longing are not just background but constitutive of the present, graspable in the now as hauntings, embodied sensations, and abilities and inabilities, as well as norms, routines, and community habits. Ethically and politically, it is a difficult balance to address and unravel homophobia and transphobia

77 See Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon, 2004).

78 Tal Fitzpatrick and Katve-Kaisa Kontturi, "Crafting Change: Practicing Activism in Contemporary Australia," *Harlot*, no. 14 (2015), <http://harlotofthearts.org/index.php/harlot/article/view/290/185>.

within indigenous communities together with addressing and unraveling settler colonial violence while also remaining sensitive to differences between and within various indigenous nations and communities. *Sparrooabbán*, in our reading, conveys the depth and complexity of this difficulty.

The minor register unfolds in *Sparrooabbán* not only because that is all that can unfold but also because the minor enables and necessitates an archive of affect rather than more conventional archival practices. On the one hand, the queer Sámi archive of affect can only be generated in minor ways at the interstices of the major due to the potential expelling force of the second skin system and the intertwined histories of settler colonialism and heteronormativity. On the other hand, the minor seems a creative strategy that effectively avoids the risk of alienation (for some Sámi audiences) and exoticization (for some non-indigenous audiences). *Sparrooabbán*'s general tone is neither pity seeking nor apologetic: it shows the pain caused by settler colonialism, heteronormativity, and silent rejection by the community. Through subtle gestures, it seeks to generate an affective sense of queer Sáminess that is at once historical and contemporary, traditional and modern, irrefutable and newly emerging. The traumatic and the emerging potential cannot be separated. *Sparrooabbán*'s archive of affect is a living, ever-shaping, ever-emerging memory repository in which multiple foldings of time, matter, location, geography, sound, image, and embodied experiences carry the lost past of the queer Sámi into the present, even if in necessarily fraught ways.

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