
HON 499 Honors Thesis or Creative Project

Honors

Spring 2022

Where Life and Language Meet: An Interdisciplinary Collection in Context of My Sámi Heritage

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Where Life and Language Meet:

An Interdisciplinary Collection in Context of My Sámi Heritage

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the University Honors Scholar

Designation

May 2, 2022

Abstract: *Where Life and Language Meet* is an interdisciplinary project exploring my Sámi heritage through research and the creation of a poetry collection. Following a brief historical background on the Sámi, the project showcases how my original poems are informed by Sámi storytelling practices. The analytical essay also explores how these poems fit into a larger framework of contemporary literature. Overall, this project demonstrates the creation of poetry as not only cultural heritage work but also a showcase for a culture not significantly explored in contemporary Western scholarship.

A Critical Look at *sinew from syllables*

Like many people, I became fascinated with exploring my heritage in the context of emerging companies providing a full DNA breakdown of your heritage. In particular, I wanted to know more about the history of the people that made me who I am today. What started as an excited look at my 23andMe results quickly turned into a fascination with learning about the genetic heritage I discovered. Later, familial stories led me to take a semester-long dive into Sámi culture to understand my heritage, thereby generating the foundation for a complex, creative work about my ancestry. In this process, I stepped into a part of myself that had only been vaguely alluded to for most of my life, meaning I had the grand task of not only showcasing my own heritage but also working to perform the proper research required to immerse myself into it. Through the culmination of historical, literary, and contemporary cultural research, I have been able to create a project that is both heavily analytical and culturally relevant.

My initial findings allowed me to situate the Sámi as an indigenous group located in a region known as the Sápmi that encompasses the most northern parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and a small part of northwestern Russia. The Sámi people are believed to have entered the area following the last ice age (approximately 7,000 years ago), descending from the Stone Age Komsa culture as they adapted to life in the far North (Simms 1). The adaptation to the Northern lifestyle is most clearly seen in their relationship with the reindeer of the area that has existed “from time immemorial. In old times, semi-nomadic local communities had their own territory and governed the use and allocation of natural resources and central aspects of societal issues” (Sara 153). This close relationship to their homeland has allowed them to survive the harsh conditions of the far North for generations and live a sustainable existence with the land and animals in the area to waste nothing while leaving as little impact as possible (Procopius).

Despite the length of time the Sámi have been on the land and in contact with outside groups, the knowledge of the Sámi people as a native community has largely been left out of the global discussion on indigenous rights. My hope is to provide not only a piece of creative heritage work but a better understanding of the Sámi people as a whole.

Culturally, this deep connection to the land translates into Sámi mythology, where their origin story stems from the marriage of the Son of Sun and the Giant's Daughter. As the story goes, the Giant's Daughter was courted and she became a Sámi after marrying the Son of Sun, going on to have children with him. As the two beings raised their children, these people (the progenitors of the Sámi) became intimately connected to and part of the land they would call their own, and this sentiment continued with the Sámi people (Gaski 39). As Christopher Greiner demonstrates, this origin story shows that the Sámi did not just happen upon the land but were chosen "as caretakers and co-creators to share in maintaining the integrity and balance of the landscape and ecology—in other words, to share in the heart and body of the place itself" (23). Beyond the ancestral rights to the land, the Sámi also acknowledge their place with the world around them is not one of ownership, but as cohabitants and stewards of the land. In the coming centuries, they would come into contact with other developing Nordic societies that challenged their sovereignty.

When European countries' imperialism began globally around the 15th century, they also engaged in colonization of indigenous people and folk practices within their own borders. The Sámi traditionally practice a form of shamanism and animism that engages with the environment that they have inhabited for centuries. Accordingly, the Sámi did not have a concept of a singular god, so their religious and cultural identity directly opposed the beliefs being pushed within Europe at this time. The Nordic religious organizations and governments continued to put

pressure on the Sámi communities until eventually they were stripped of their governing and religious sovereignty through colonization. A yoik (an oral form of storytelling traditionally used to tell epics and stories of myth, which has developed into a tool to speak on many aspects of Sámi history and as a means of dedication to people) from this period, *The Thief and The Shaman*, shows that while they had lost their independence the Sámi worked to refuse assimilation and uplift their beliefs in spite of the pressures to abandon their cultural identity:

The shaman's words continue to live among the Sami, for whom they have always served as a verbal resistance against the thief. The noaidi refuses to accept that the Sami will allow themselves to be assimilated, which he expresses between the lines by calling upon his Sami audience to continue their defiance. (Gaski 36)

This sentiment is indicative of the attitudes the Sámi have towards colonization and their resistance to being assimilated that continues to this day.

Prejudices against the Sámi continued beyond the initial contact periods of the 15th through 18th centuries and into the 19th and 20th centuries. Following World War II, Sámi children were enrolled in boarding schools and physically punished if they spoke Sámi, something not unheard of in other native communities globally (Mejia). Older Sámi during this time were “stripped naked and measured by officials trying to establish their racial inferiority” (Wall), carrying on the idea that skull shapes gave indications of intelligence, race, and humanity that grew during the scientific movement in 19th-century Europe (Poskett). Probably one of the more significant colonizations inflicted on the Sámi was the suppression of the “democratic village councils known as Siida” (Wall) which effectively eliminated independent decision-making from the Sámi. The systemic oppression of the Sámi became a part of the

Nordic governing bodies' way of interacting with them, discouraging any point of treating the Sámi with respect and dignity.

Following these colonization efforts in the centuries prior, the 21st-century Nordic governments have made attempts to resolve the hurt caused to the Sámi. These have mainly come in the form of apologies issued by various governing bodies and churches across Norway, Sweden, and, most recently, Finland. A significant example is the Finnish government setting aside land to allow the Sámi to practice the tradition of reindeer herding and making it illegal for others to do so outside of the community along with recognizing their culture and language in the constitution of the country ("Constitution of Finland," ch. 2, sec. 17). These efforts begin a basis of recognition of Sámi identity and culture but do not absolve the harm the Nordic governments have done to the indigenous people of their countries.

Despite these actions, the historical instances of prejudice that the Sámi have faced have not disappeared from modern times. The Sámi have been allowed a recognized parliament made up of democratically elected representatives with a president heading the executive council who works with other Nordic governments to identify policy and priorities of the communities (Somby). While Sámi officials are sitting in government positions, their concerns about the pressures put upon their land and the usage of it for resources are often overlooked or ignored by other government officials. A previous president of the Sámi was noted as saying "that the only thing we can really decide is the date of our meetings" (Sanila-Aikio qtd. in Wall) and that concerns regarding how their homeland is treated are left unheard. The usage of the Sápmi land as an area that is just for resources is a byproduct and a continuation of the colonialist chokehold placed on the Sámi. The sovereignty over their own land has never truly been restored, even with the establishment of reserved land and acknowledgment of wrongdoings by churches and

governments alike. In many ways, the actions taken to uplift the Sámi in the 21st century have been performative at best and negligible at worst.

In modern economic development, developers seek to use the Sápmi land as a place that needs to be industrialized in order to save the culture rather than respecting the wishes of the people that want to sustain themselves on their own practices. This attitude of forced industrialization is especially apparent in the financial beneficiaries of the proposed railway system that would connect Finland and Russia through Sámi land to transport deposits that would be mined from beneath the land. Unsurprisingly, most of the support for this railway system comes from those who would economically benefit from mining the deposit. While these stakeholders, including mining companies, see the benefit of bringing industrial employment to the area, the Sámi are against the threats to their traditional practices that come from “industry exploiting mineral and energy resources” (Sara 1).

In large part, these continuous injustices against the Sámi come from the lack of education about the culture, so people outside of these immediate circles are unaware of what is happening. With this history being largely left out of the education system, attempts to acknowledge the history of the Sámi are often unfortunately met with more prejudice. One result of this was the hate campaign that targeted Sámi students who questioned the use of a fake Sámi drum in a music advertisement (West qtd. in nordiceditor). In trying to advocate for cultural integrity, the students were subject to harassment and death threats. The necessity to teach about the Sámi, who have had their history, sovereignty, and culture continuously threatened, is paramount to alleviate situations like the one that the students faced. This needed education has been lacking for years beyond the circles most affected by this prejudice, so taking time in the project to not only explore my heritage but to educate as well was a necessary part of it. I knew

that I needed to make the end product of this project one that was culturally relevant and honored the history I was stepping into. With that in mind, I worked to gain an understanding of what defines Sámi storytelling and how those practices shape the cultural identity.

Sámi storytelling has a long history of being multimedia in nature. Incorporating voice, writing, and music to create a living piece of identity that ties someone to the Sámi. Arguably, one of the most significant is the yoik, which, like Sámi storytelling as a whole, no longer acts as a way to tell epics and myths but has developed into a means of reinvigorating the identity of the Sámi. Yoiks and now Sámi storytelling as a whole are actions that ensure that the culture will not be assimilated and lost to the outside cultures that try to hegemonize them. Making use of the multimedia aspect of storytelling to continue speaking on Sámi identity is not just a way of encouraging contemporary work in the tradition but also a way to keep the culture alive in a very tangible way.

Nils-Aslak Valkeapää's work is an example of how contemporary work can engage with and build off of the storytelling traditions of the Sámi. At the heart of his poetry in *The Sun, My Father*, Valkeapää is invoking his identity and sharing it cross-culturally in ways that are unique to him and his connection with Sámi culture. By working to create a piece of Sámi identity that is active and by using the traditions, he is able to keep the culture alive and at the forefront of people's minds. This is not a culture that has been assimilated but one that has fought against the pressures of colonization to still speak their language, practice their traditions, and create in the modern world. Even the title of the book, *The Sun, My Father*, directly relates to the story of the Son of Sun courting the Giant's Daughter to create the ancestors of the Sámi; in fact, a reader cannot help but be reminded of Sámi life from the first glance at this title. He encourages readers to explore and engage with his culture, look up Sámi words and learn so they are not caught in

the ignorance that would dampen the survival of the Sámi today. Through these aspects, Valkeapää's work is able to seamlessly pull together "the past and present, the documentary and the fictional, in a form that is innovative and creative. It provides at once an expression of Sami cultural history and the richness of language" (Gaski 44).

These ideas housed in *The Sun, My Father* were core pieces that I sought to carry into my own poetry, invoking my own style and perspectives into pieces of poetry that explored my heritage. I sought not to build off of a style for the purpose of placing myself in a poetic tradition, but rather be in conversation with the most recent forms of Sámi storytelling. In the same way that Valkeapää is in conversation with the stories and people of the past, I am working to be in conversation with him to continue this centuries-long discussion. Even though my poems may not be dealing with the same themes or style all the time, I am building on Valkeapää's work to carry on the ideas and sentiments found within his pieces. One of my favorite ways to do so was by engaging in conversation with his work, using poems from his collection and building on them to create my own. My poem, "letters to nils-aslak 33," begins with an embedded quotation from *The Sun, My Father*:

33. I beat these images
on the stone, on the drum

it is so slow

after drumming for a while

I am pulled into another world

to visions

The second half of the poem continues with my original poetry in conversation with the
aforequoted Valkeapää poem:

where I beat images
onto paper, skin the earth

writhing

it is my pulse, beating back at me
visions of stone
seismograph relations

It was important to me to honor where I was drawing most of my understanding of Sámi poetry
in its modern form from. I wanted to let there be space to connect with my heritage as far as the
culture goes back, but also for the contemporary work that shines through with both tradition and
modern identity. Making this poem, and all my poetry, means I am adding another wave to the
“seismograph relations” of my heritage.

Another notable influence in my poetry collection is Julia Bouwsma’s poetry collection
Midden, which engages with primary and secondary sources as well as original poetry to tell the
story of Malaga Island, Maine, through documentary poetics. Bouwsma weaves in photographic
and written evidence to create a multimedia story about the people removed from Malaga Island
that is interspersed with personal poetry relating to her life living on indigenous land and her
own diaspora history. The use of documentary poetics ties in well with the storytelling traditions
of the Sámi, which is what drew me to *Midden* as a source in the first place. The incorporation of

photography and other mediums into poetry is in close relationship with the multimedia aspect of Sámi poetics. Based on these aspects, I structured the actual chapbook on *Midden*, perspective poems interspersed with related media to enhance the impact and message of the poems along with poems relating to my reflection on the research.

Bouwsma's work to incorporate the research and impact of writing poetry from a new perspective helped to ground the reality of her work while allowing for creative liberty. I wanted to do the same, documenting the parts of my life that my heritage came through while acknowledging the emotional intensity of diving into these issues. I felt that as much as it was important to engage with the work creatively, it was also just as important to show where the inspiration for my poetry came from. Her work gave me an example of how to deal with the complex histories of a group while also giving space for the present emotional impact this has on a poet, and I wanted to ensure I incorporated that into the work. One example is in "push":

pull
a scrape of metal
pressure into
eyes
cracked scenes
where borealis
breaks
stinging flesh open
blood
speaking
that beaten language

tear sinew from syllables

and pray

and pray

and pray

I wrote this poem almost directly after reading about the oppression and pressure against the Sámi in the Wall article that describes children being beaten for speaking their language and older Sámi being measured for racial inferiority. The poem became a blend of imagining those moments as they happened and reconciling with the knowledge that someone close to me, a very near ancestor, may have dealt with this. Using very harsh and graphic imagery, I wanted to convey the situations I was reading about but also the terrible emotional toll I was feeling about them. Bouwsma's work in *Midden* tackles this turmoil again and again in a realistic yet creative fashion, and pulling from that allowed me to deal with a feeling that "even before I was born I breathed a loss not my own" (Bouwsma 31).

Outside of these models, I worked to incorporate the influences that developed from my personal readings of Objectivism in poetry. Objectivism in poetry worked to create poetic structures that are read as a whole rather than a series of symbols. My work leverages the similarities between Sámi verse and Objectivism to emphasize the functional nature of poetry. As it happened, I ended up falling into a style that was stylistically similar to George Oppen. The American poet is considered one of the main figures of Objectivism as a second-generation Modernist. Looking through the ways Oppen and Valkeapää's poetic approaches engaged with each other gave me a doorway to connect with a style I was just learning about (Sámi yoik) and a style I could recognize in the Western world (Objectivism). By exploring the intersection of these two styles, I was able to carve a space for my work.

In recognizing this connection, I was also drawn to how Oppen’s style dovetails with a major focus on Sámi art. Oppen’s poems are minimalist, and he is more interested in the functions of language (illustrating how different parts of speech interact, for example) than in representing an external reality. This emphasis on function is a deeply ingrained concept in Sámi art and poetry under the term “duodji,” or functional art, that highlights the practicality of the piece over its aesthetics. This new understanding of the push for clarity, functionality, and usefulness became an important source for my work. The exploration of that connection is what allowed me to understand how I could make my poetry as a means of cultural expression without overstepping into my (still living) cultural heritage.

Exploring Oppen and Valkeapää’s styles side-by-side allowed me to more closely see the similarities the two poets share and how their works influenced my own poetry for this project. Below are two examples of their work, one from Oppen’s *Of Being Numerous* and Valkeapää’s *The Sun, My Father* that exemplifies the process I went through comparing the two poets:

<p>19</p> <p>Now in the helicopters the casual will Is atrocious</p> <p>Insanity in high places, If it is true we must do these things We must cut our throats</p> <p>The fly in the bottle</p> <p>Insane, the insane fly</p> <p>Which, over the city Is the bright light of shipwreck</p> <p>George Oppen, <i>Of Being Numerous</i></p>	<p>119: what gave me this mind bird mind</p> <p>to fly with</p> <p>and still when I depart so terrible to leave everything</p> <p>not even in the air a path to reveal where I have flown if I have even been</p> <p>Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, <i>The Sun, My Father</i></p>
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Both pieces are engaging with similar styles, spacing, and even wording to explore topics grounded in the real issues they and many others face. Oppen's example documents the reality of perceived progress and how a new wave of technology can drive a person to insanity. By the same token, Valkeapää's work acts as a means to empower his indigenous identity and share aspects of it with the world through his poetry. They are both working to achieve a feeling of functionality and usefulness, speaking on grounded issues rather than abstract concepts. While both poets each explore their unique places and experiences in the world, the style they use to tell these stories also shares striking similarities. For instance, the fragmented minimalism of Oppen's poem pulls away from the abstract to focus on language. Valkeapää's style is very similar in this way because he uses fragmentation and minimalism to emphasize the specific language he is using. This technique thereby allows him to speak objectively on his Sámi identity to a larger audience. By incorporating the attention to language from Oppen's work into Valkeapää's approach helped me to expand the Sámi poetic tradition. I do not see this as an effort to attribute Western work to an indigenous practice but rather to draw important links between poetic practices as a means of expanding literary forms. Making these connections between the two works is what grew my style from merely working with the Sámi forms into a functional methodology for heritage work. At the same time, the process of fostering these connections and using them in my own poetry was never a simple one.

From the beginning, I have had to contend with the understanding that I will not be able to answer all the aspects I have set up to explore. There is no feasible way that I can adequately address the prejudice, colonialism, and historical pressures on their land—issues that are still alive and well. This tension, having one foot in the Sámi world as my heritage and one foot in contemporary American life, has been especially trying while working to create a project that

hones my creative style and still honors the aspects unique to Sámi culture. In seeking a mix of writing from the perspective of Sámi culture, their historical and modern-day experiences, and how that impacts me, I have had to draw my inspiration from both pain and connection. The source of any writing blocks I have had are not from feeling a lack of inspiration, but rather from having to process the emotional toll it takes to explore these experiences. While they are not lived experiences, I am still grappling with the knowledge that the people I share a close heritage with were discriminated against and still continue to be to such an intensity today.

Another large part of the process was developing my own style of poetry as I worked through this collection. This was my first ever attempt at a poetry collection, and I was taking on the challenge of using that poetry collection to tell a nuanced, complex story. I was nervous to be entering into a conversation that had really very little written on it in Western scholarship and that nervousness cropped up in my earlier poems. This is why I decided to leave the earlier poems relatively unchanged. I wanted to keep hold of that uncertainty and pressure to present my work in a way that honored my heritage before realizing that honoring my heritage was being free with my poetry. The journey this collection takes, in many ways, mirrors my journey in understanding how I fit into the story of my heritage.

The main form my style has taken has been minimalist, which allows for an exploration of my poetry's purpose and how it may act as an objective piece of media. I wanted to highlight the sentiment that a "book is a modern product of duodji, and as such, it should be beautiful to look at, pleasant to touch, and well-written" (Gaski 33) by encapsulating these aspects into one unified project. For me, Duodji, the Sámi concept of functional art, means creating something that has utilitarian value at its forefront rather than its aesthetic attraction. That has meant opening myself stylistically to the ability to let go of what something needs to look like to be

beautiful, and rather the work that it is doing by breaking those boundaries. Part of that has been leaving words out or keeping words untranslated to encourage personal exploration and engagement.

The other aspect I had to develop with the actual project itself was what form I wanted the final product to take. Beyond any personal belief on what I wanted to do, there were the very real issues of accessibility, time, cost, and production to consider. Eventually, I settled on wanting to make physical chapbooks, small books of poetry, to present the entire collection. I did this not out of a desire to make something for the sake of making it but because it was more valuable that way for me. A physical collection became not monetarily valuable but of real utility to readers thinking through their own relationship to their heritage. Having a physical copy of the poetry collection means that it is not only accessible for the moment of interest and then gone after exiting the page; rather, it is an existing reminder of the process surrounding any heritage project while being read (or not being read, as the case may be). Again, this approach ties back to the Sámi concept of duodji and functional, pleasant art.

While developing the project, I also had the opportunity to learn and become familiar with myths, folklore, and spirituality within Sámi culture. I wanted to not just have an understanding of the historical discrimination against the Sámi, but also actively work with the culture I share heritage with as a means to reconnect with it. Along with the importance of educating on the issues facing the Sámi, it is equally as important to allow for reconnection and affirmation with their cultural heritage. Doing so ensures that the culture has an opportunity to survive both within its native land and in the Sámi diaspora.

Doing this project creatively as opposed to a standard research project gave me a freedom I did not know I would need at the time. If I had gone the route of just explaining the history and

current prejudice against the Sámi people, I would have had no other outlet to address my own tension on the situation. I feel as though needing somewhere for the emotional aspect of heritage work to go speaks to the usefulness of making a creative product for this kind of research. I am allowing myself to explore the hardships that are felt through my heritage while also engaging with it in a way that is culturally relevant. It is a means of resistance, a call to action, and a love story to my heritage all rolled into one. I will never be able to ignore the fact I am separated from this culture and the absorption of these traumas comes from the comfort of my bed, but it is a separation I want to lessen as much as possible. By lessening this distance, I am able to bridge the gap between learning my biological ancestry and engaging with my cultural heritage. More importantly, I am seeking to lessen the separation between the Sámi and the Western world through this project. Working to advocate and educate on the Sámi, and native cultures as a whole is required for their sustainability and continuity and the far North as we know it. In no uncertain terms, “the future of the Sami and the future of life on this planet will depend in large measure on how human beings going forward come to understand and respect the connection between cultural diversity and biodiversity, and the vital links common to and constituent of, each” (Greiner 27).

As my work on this project has come to a close, I have found a connection to my roots that will shape me for years to come. The opportunity to explore my heritage and find a culturally significant way to reinvigorate my Sámi identity is a connection that I will continue to foster for the rest of my life. That was the greatest part of this project, gaining this abundance of knowledge and understanding on an ancestry I hold dear to my heart that will now carry beyond these few months. In highlighting that through both the analysis of and creation of my poetry collection, I hope to have shown the importance of heritage reconnection through an academic

and creative lens. The work I have done here will help in shaping my identity and give a basis for anyone in the future who seeks reconnection with their heritage. I had the unique opportunity to research, learn, and embrace my heritage in ways that I could never have imagined outside of this creative sphere. There is no true end to this project since, in many ways, I am another beat on a long history of Sámi storytelling and identity.

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