

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Special Section: Knowing by Singing

Meaning or presence? Ways of knowing of the Sámi yoik

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Abstract

This article approaches an Indigenous singing tradition, the yoik, practiced by the Sámi people in the north of Europe, as a way of knowing the environment through presence rather than meaning. The yoik consists of short unaccompanied melodies, often without lyrics, sung in everyday life, associated with a specific being (typically a person, an animal, or a place), and intended to make that being present. By exploring this capacity to invoke and intensify the environment's presence, this article seeks to take the yoik seriously and thereby offer a counternarrative to both semiotic and logocentric understandings of knowledge and human/nonhuman relationships. [*knowledge, singing, semiotics, nonhuman, Sámi*]

Resumen

Este artículo aborda una tradición indígena de cantar, el yoik, practicado por los samis en el norte de Europa, como una manera de conocer el ambiente a través de la presencia en lugar del significado. El yoik consiste en melodías cortas sin acompañamiento, a menudo sin lírica, cantadas en la vida diaria, asociadas con un ser específico (típicamente una persona, un animal o un lugar), y dirigidas a hacer ese ser presente. Al explorar esta capacidad para invocar e intensificar la presencia del ambiente, este artículo busca tomar el yoik seriamente y por tanto ofrecer una contranarrativa tanto a los entendimientos semióticos como "logocéntricos" de conocimiento y relaciones humano/no humano. [*conocimiento, cantar, semiótica, no humano, Sami*]

Résumé

Cet article présente une tradition de chant indigène pratiquée par les Samis dans le nord de l'Europe, le « yoik », en tant que manière de connaître l'environnement à travers la présence plutôt que la signification. Le yoik consiste en de courtes mélodies sans accompagnement, souvent sans paroles, chantées dans la vie de tous les jours et associées chacune à un être spécifique (typiquement une personne, un animal ou un lieu) qu'elles rendent présent. En explorant cette capacité à invoquer et intensifier la présence de l'environnement, cet article vise à prendre le yoik au sérieux afin de proposer une alternative aux approches sémiotiques et « logocentristes » de la

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connaissance et des relations humains/non-humains. [*connaissance, chant, sémiotique, non-humain, Sámi*]

INTRODUCTION

This article approaches an Indigenous singing practice, the Sámi yoik, as a way of knowing the environment. The yoik consists of short unaccompanied melodies, often without lyrics, sung in everyday life, associated with a specific being (typically a person, an animal, or a place) and intended to make it present. I focus here on the capacity of “yoikers” to invoke or intensify the environment’s presence. By doing so, I endeavor to take Sámi practices seriously and thereby offer a counternarrative to semiotic or linguistic understandings of knowledge and human/nonhuman relationships.

Any reflection about singing as a way of knowing is indeed likely to meet some degree of skepticism, both within and outside the academia. Is it not often assumed that knowledge is best conveyed by language, whereas songs have to do with feelings or emotions? Numerous works in the anthropology of music and sound have offered alternatives to such logocentric postures on knowledge, in particular those attending to songs as ways of engaging with nonhumans, from Steven Feld’s (1982) and Anthony Seeger’s (1987) pioneering works to the significant developments of the last decades (e.g., Brabec de Mori and Seeger 2013; Levin 2006; Ochoa Gautier 2016). Yet, as a scholar originally educated in musicology, I remember the surprise of a colleague anthropologist when he learned that my PhD thesis was entirely focused on an Indigenous singing tradition that makes almost no use of lyrics, besides vocables with no linguistic meaning. What sort of positive knowledge one could expect to find in what appeared to be “pure music”—that is, musical gestures without any discursive content—seemed to him a mystery.

As I found out, although Indigenous songs were a widespread object of interest in the anthropology department I was then visiting, most of its members tended to focus on textual transcription and literary interpretation as resources to learn something from them.¹ In this light, the melodic component of songs did not appear as a modality of its own for engaging in the world but rather as a vehicle for words, intended at best to distinguish these words from normal speech—for example, in ritual or educational contexts. As a musicologist, I was sometimes credited by anthropologists who described themselves as “knowing nothing about music” with a capacity to go further and analyze this melodic component in itself. However, whether this was likely to provide properly anthropological insights seemed uncertain.

Historical accounts suggest that this strict distinction between music and language reflects a modern perspective. As noted by Gary Tomlinson (1999, 17), the musical culture of European elites in the late Renaissance era considered word and tone as “always joined in nature,” each of which had to be heard in equal measure. It is only when the opera developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that the word “grew distant from its audible harmony” (27), along with the emancipation of instrumental music. According to Tomlinson, the separation between tones and words then reflected the emergence of modern subjectivity and prefigured Kantian philosophy, as illustrated in opera settings where music reveals the true state of a character’s soul while the words are lying (82).

This separation has been criticized by a number of anthropologists, such as Alfred Gell (e.g., 1979) and Tim Ingold (2000, 406–19), both of whom rely on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s writings on language and reproduce something akin to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s imagination of a “speech-song” vocal expression preceding their division. Similar narratives have also resurged in the past decades in studies about the origins and evolution of music, notably in Steven Mithen’s (2005) speculations on the singing of Neanderthals. Without either embracing or rejecting such narratives, this article reports a diverging perspective stemming from the way Sámi people describe their own experiences of yoiking.

Just as some philosophers and anthropologists have come to distinguish music from an earlier, speech-song form of expression, the Sámi tend to make a distinction between *singing* and *yoiking*, the latter sometimes considered as more ancient and more in line with other Indigenous practices than with Western music.² On this issue, the ethnomusicologist Thomas Hilder reported the following discussion with Mari Boine, one of the most renowned Sámi yoikers in the “world music” scene:

For Boine, yoik and Siberian throat singing come from the “same source.” Pressing further for what this “source” might be, Boine explained that it had to do with the “primordial” (*urmenneskelig*) and its connection to nature. This quality, she reiterated, can be heard in yoik, especially [Inga] Juuso’s voice.³ Like with yoik and other “related” vocal traditions, Boine continued, it is the way one uses the voice. Whereas “Western” vocal traditions are descriptive and are removed from and outside of what they are singing about, the “primal-voice” (*urstemmen*) is the very thing it sings, she reasoned. (Hilder 2013, 199)

As I will develop in the following sections, some crucial features of the yoiking tradition are encapsulated in Mari Boine’s contention that, compared to “singing,” the yoik affords a more direct presentification of various beings of the world, notably in the sense that the Sámi never yoik “about” anything: they yoik *someone* or *something*. This idea that one never yoiks “about” is indeed actually one of the most widespread notions I have encountered among Sámi yoikers; it came up in those exact words during nearly all my interviews. In this view, if the yoik has a “primordial” quality (to use Mari Boine’s word, although its use evidently requires caution; see Aubinet 2020, 301–45), it lies not in a state of indistinction between words and

melodies but rather in the melodies being nondiscursive (and one could even say nonsemiotic): their power does not stem from a capacity to convey meaning “about” the world but rather to engage with its presence with immediacy.

This view may seem paradoxical when we note that, due to the Sámi habit of attributing melodies to specific elements of the world (a person, an animal, or a place), the yoik has been described by musicologists as a sort of “musical language” (Graff 2004, 149); some have even aimed at deciphering its “grammar” (Lüderwaldt 1976). This is all the more interesting in a context where Peircean biosemiotics has emerged in anthropology as a fruitful framework for “developing a more robust analytic for understanding human relations to nonhuman beings” (Kohn 2013, 7).

In *How Forests Think*, Eduardo Kohn (2013) thus aims at “provincializing language” by reinserting it in larger semiotic networks encompassing nonhuman interpretants and nonsymbolic signs. In a recent fiction essay, Vinciane Despret (2021) imagines a future where a similar approach has turned into a major discipline called “therolinguistics,” informing humans on the expressiveness of spider webs, wombat droppings, or octopus-ink expulsions, thus illustrating a view according to which nonhuman worlds might become more understandable if approached in terms of meaning. This view finds an echo in the field of multispecies ethnography, where semiosis is frequently invoked to approach nonhuman agencies in various environments, such as marine laboratory labs (Helmreich 2009) or Amazonian shamanism (Giraldo Herrera 2018).

Engaging as such approaches may be,⁴ yoikers led me to be cautious against the impulse to subsume presence under meaning—that is, to consider processes of presentification as interpretive gestures about objects standing for something other than themselves, or to put it more provocatively, to turn everything into signs and everyone into hermeneuticians (see also Giraldo Herrera and Pálsson 2014). Expressing a similar line of thought in the *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*, the philosopher Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2004) suggests that presentification should rather be understood as a process independent of meaning attribution, arguing that the universalization of interpretive behavior reflects a Cartesian understanding of consciousness and tends to make us forget about the possibility of nurturing relationships with the world based on an immediate and tangible level. Similar perspectives may be found in antirepresentational paradigms in the ethnography and archaeology of Indigenous people, committed to taking “things” encountered in the field “as they present themselves, rather than immediately assuming that they signify, represent, or stand for something else” (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007, 1; see also Cipolla 2019).

The art of yoiking itself is not devoid of symbolic meaning, in particular when yoikers add lyrics to their melodies in order to enrich them. As resources for knowing, yoik texts may, for example, include factual information about animal ecologies and behavior (e.g., Stoor 2015). More generally, texts do not appear to undermine the invocative power of songs but rather aim to specify this power with additional clues. The use of presentification and symbolic meaning is therefore not a strict “either/or” alternative among yoikers. However, I focus here on observations reflecting processes of presentification, considered by numerous yoikers like Mari Boine as one of the yoik’s key specificities, in contrast to texts, which are always optional. I start by presenting the Sámi and the yoik before turning to the concept of Indigenous knowledge, to the ways in which yoikers use their melodies to engage with things past and distant and intensify their presence, and then to concluding reflections on the notion of “logocentrism.”

METHODOLOGY

The present study stems from a research project initiated in 2014. It is based on a review of the existing literature on the yoik and ten months of fieldwork in the regions of Finnmark (northern Norway) and Oslo, during which I conducted sixteen formal interviews with Sámi yoikers (lasting from 45 to 120 minutes) and participated in nine yoik workshops (lasting from a few hours to several days) in order to learn the vocal technique and repertoire. At the end of the inquiry, eight consultations with Sámi audiences were organized, consisting of a presentation of my research results and open discussions. These took place in Sámi research and cultural institutions based in Norway and Sweden. All quotations from yoikers were sent to them before publication for discussion and approval.

This study was originally intended to focus on human/nonhuman relationships as they occur in the yoik. After conducting some interviews, learning the vocal technique enabled me to have more fruitful exchanges with yoikers by sharing with them my own experiences and to take more seriously the notion that the yoik is not merely a cultural object “made up” by the Sámi people but also a craft in its own right provoking a range of possible impressions (such as joy, pleasure, discomfort, excitement, relaxation, or exhaustion) that its practitioners discover through experience. This “open-ended” dimension of the yoiking experience led me to try to establish dialogues with various anthropological or philosophical issues pertaining to animality, landscapes, presence, personhood, or temporality and more broadly to reflect on the relationships between yoiking and (academic) writing (Aubinet 2020). On a theoretical level, this approach is inspired by more-than-human approaches in anthropology (e.g., Ingold 2000; Viveiros de Castro 2014), philosophy of science (e.g., Despret 2021; Stengers 2005), and Indigenous scholarship and literature (e.g., Helander-Renvall 2010; Kramvig 2005; Somby 2007; Valkeapää 2017).

THE SÁMI AND THE YOIK

The Sámi are the only “Indigenous” people in the European Union recognized as such by the United Nations. Although indigeneity remains an ambiguous concept (Kenrick and Lewis 2004), the Sámi share with other communities belonging to this legal category a history marked by nomadism

and colonization (Glowczewski 2007). Sápmi, the traditional territory of the Sámi people, is spread over the northern regions of four countries (Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia) and covers an area similar in size to Germany. In Norway, colonial experiences have spread over several centuries, culminating with politics of cultural assimilation undertaken until the middle of the twentieth century. Today, the Sámi of Norway have their own parliament and enjoy some degree of cultural and political autonomy, in an ambiguous context involving both reconciliation and enduring divergences vis-à-vis the dominant national society.

Although they are often associated with being reindeer-herding people, the livelihoods of Sámi people have historically been diverse, including fishing, hunting, and farming activities. As Christian Hicks and the yoiker Ánde Somby note, there has not been a single “identifying basis for the Sámi”; in fact, due to their assimilation to national cultures, many “see themselves as Norwegian or Swedish or Finnish first, and Sámi second” (Hicks and Somby 2005, 275–76). In addition, as noted by the Sámi anthropologist Britt Kramvig (2005, 46), the history of intermarriage between ethnic groups in Sápmi has created “a complex ethnic situation where distinct homogenous ethnic origins in many of the northern communities are hard to come by.”

There are still a number of activities that are considered emblematic of Sápmi. One of them is the yoik, a form of repetitive, unaccompanied vocal music. Among both Sámi yoikers and ethnographers, it is readily perceived as a particularly old practice sharing similarities with musical expressions from the Indigenous circumpolar North (Skaltje 2014). It appears to have been used in rituals performed by Sámi shamans (*noaidi*) at least until the eighteenth century. Perceived either as a “pre-Christian,” heathen tradition or as a form of singing lacking musicality, the yoik has long been condemned as sinful or shameful, both within and outside the Sámi community, and mainly performed in privacy. In the 1970s, it reemerged in the public space through encounters with other musical aesthetics (such as rock, jazz, or choral music) and stage performances and played an important role in negotiating politics of Indigeneity in northern Europe (Diamond 2007; Hilder 2013).

In the region of Finnmark, in northern Norway, the yoik remains practiced in unaccompanied form in everyday life and outside any ritual context by men and women of all ages. In this setting, it generally relies on short melodies using only vocables without linguistic meaning and sometimes a few keywords, although it is always possible to improvise lyrics. The melodies can be repeated as long as the yoiker wishes. Each melody is supposed to incarnate the essence of a particular being, typically a person, an animal species, or a place. Thus, all members of the community are likely to have their own yoik. The bear, the salmon, and the mosquito likewise have their own melodies, which may differ from one region to another. While each of these regions normally shares a common repertoire of melodies, it is always possible to create new ones.

The evocation of people, animals, and places with yoiks is generally accomplished through what appears as a form of “mimesis.” An accustomed ear should be able to picture the overall appearance, behavior, or personality of people simply by hearing their yoiks. The yoiks of animals likewise depict their movements, sounds, or shape through various vocal, rhythmic, and melodic devices: in Kautokeino, for example, the raven’s yoik reproduces the animal’s caws, whereas the salmon’s yoik evokes the way it swims in rivers. Yoiks invoking people may likewise have a joyful, shy, or confident quality, depending on their personality, appearance, or movements. A mountain’s or river’s yoik is generally meant to invoke the atmosphere of that place, as well as memories tied to it or activities usually undertaken there.

In all cases, yoiking something is supposed to make this thing present and enable yoikers to engage with memories associated with it. As expressed by the yoiker Ursula Länsman (1999), a member of the Sámi band Angelit, the yoik is “like a holographic, multi-dimensional living image, a replica, not just a flat photograph or simple visual memory. It is not about something, it is that something.” Yoiking other people’s personal melodies is likewise a way of recalling them and showing respect to them, whether they are physically present or not. In contrast to some similar personal song traditions in the circumpolar North (Nettl, Levine, and Keillor 2001; Sheikin 2001), yoiking one’s own melody is considered inappropriate. Among people sharing a repertoire, a conversation initiated in speech may sometimes switch to the “yoiking” medium, with the interlocutors responding to each other’s melodies and thus invoking and remembering together various beings.

When asked “what happens to him” when he yoiks, Ánte Mihkkal Gaup, a renowned yoiker from Kautokeino and teacher at the Sámi University of Applied Sciences, answered the following: “It is a joyful thing to yoik. I experience it as a good thing, especially if I have an audience who appreciates listening. But even if I am alone and I want to recall a friend or describe a natural area and give it a tribute through the yoik, then I am a tribute, and I am satisfied” (Eriksson 2002, 130).

The statement that one does not yoik *about* someone, but that one yoiks *someone*, is generally invoked by yoikers to contrast yoiks with Western songs. Following the Norwegian ethnomusicologist Ola Graff (2018, 81), this type of contrast may be seen as part of a Sámi desire to differentiate themselves from their European neighbors and strengthen their ties with Indigenous groups on other continents in a decolonial context. The distinction between yoiking and “singing” is nonetheless widely experienced by numerous contemporary yoikers as a concrete and significant aspect of their practice, one that came up in most of my interactions with yoikers and deserves to be taken seriously. Although I will mostly dwell on ontological aspects of this distinction, it is worth noting that the contrast is also articulated by some yoikers in terms of vocal techniques. The yoik is indeed supposed to have a more guttural quality or to sound more “natural,” “raw,” “unpolished,” or, following Mari Boine’s quotation, “primal,” than Western songs (Andreassen 2017, 62–63). Some yoikers also indicate that, whereas “singing” is done with the “head,” yoiking is done with the entire “body,” with the use of diaphragmatic accents (Diamond 2007, 26).⁵

THE YOIK AS INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

Approaching Sámi yoiks as an epistemic practice calls for some preliminary observations about Indigenous knowledge. This notion has often been conceptualized in terms of “traditional ecological knowledge” (TEK), a category developed both by ethnographers and Indigenous communities and commonly defined as “a cumulative body of knowledge and beliefs, handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment” (Loovers 2020, 7–8).

In the circumpolar North, the concept of TEK is today commonly associated with environmental (co)management schemes involving a dialogue with scientific knowledge. In practice, this relationship tends to be asymmetric (Benjaminsen et al. 2015). In Sápmi, TEK may be dismissed by some political and scientific actors as being mere “culture,” whereas scientific knowledge is considered neutral and objectively valid. In this framework, TEK may at best contribute to generating new hypotheses for science to explore, but it does not constitute a legitimate form of knowledge in its own right (Law and Joks 2017).

Colonial and power relationships have likewise emerged as central issues in yoik scholarship, in particular works focusing on its “accompanied” form performed on stage. In this framework, the yoik is presented as a means for negotiating Indigenous identity in a postcolonial framework (Diamond 2007; Hilder 2013). Yet, important as it may be, this picture does not exhaust the multiplicity of contemporary yoiking expressions and experiences. Many of the yoikers I have met were not inclined at all to discuss the yoik in relation to politics and colonization, privileging instead more personal matters, such as local attachments to the land and to memories. Colonial and national authorities rarely came up during our discussions and did not seem central in their experiences of yoiking.

One reason for this may lie in the fact that my research and interviews were mainly focused on the unaccompanied, everyday-life performance of yoiks in contrast to yoik-inspired musical production belonging to the “world music” scene, which tends to be more explicitly articulated on large-scale political matters. Another reason may have to do with generational factors: the anthropologist Vigdis Stordahl (1997) already noted how the younger Sámi generations in Norway tended to adopt apolitical attitudes toward the dominant Norwegian culture, considering that a fairer society had already been reached. About twenty years later, this picture seemed widespread, despite the persistence of frictions and divergences vis-à-vis national authorities on a number of issues, such as land (co)management. Taking Indigenous voices seriously here meant allowing them to talk about what mattered most in their own practice, namely about what yoiking enabled and what it made present.

The notion of Indigenous knowledge still constitutes a relevant category for approaching the yoik insofar as it generally points to situated experiences of getting to know one’s environment in contrast to objective, Cartesian approaches to knowledge. Indeed, in a paper on the perception of the environment in northern Finland, Tim Ingold and Terhi Kurttila (2000, 186) observe that the concept of Indigenous knowledge invoked in bureaucratic frameworks is far removed from local forms of knowledge: according to them, Indigenous knowledge is not a set of cultural assumptions handed down across generations but a form of ongoing relationship with the land undertaken through specific activities that make the land, for its inhabitants, “a *place*.”

Sámi scholars have likewise emphasized as key features of Indigenous knowledge the importance of personal experience and its embeddedness in specific practices. These include storytelling or talking and listening to the lands as a way of acknowledging them as socially oriented beings (Helander-Renvall 2010), and importantly for this article, performing yoiks as a way of engaging with humans and nonhumans beyond the subject/object dichotomy (Somy 2007). In my experience, most yoikers do not claim to master their art but rather consider it as a mysterious craft that reveals what it can do parsimoniously, in response to their personal experimentations. In fact, as the myth goes, the yoik was not originally a Sámi invention but a gift received from the underworld spirits, the Gufihttar (or Ulda), who are still reputed to be exceptionally skillful yoikers (Skaltje 2014, 41–42).

Thus, most of the yoikers I have met only felt entitled to speak about their own experience, with little inclination for generalization, as if one could not know in advance what the yoik can or cannot do. When I presented to them an idea that they had not heard before (for instance, something I heard from another yoiker), they either agreed with it or replied that they had not experienced it themselves, but they never questioned the legitimacy of other people’s observations. For example, whereas some yoikers had experienced that (nonhuman) animals could understand their yoiks, others had never accomplished this but had no difficulty acknowledging that this might be possible. Thus, it is primarily through personal “epiphanies” that yoikers get to know their own craft and formulate ideas or statements about it.

Among these ideas and statements, some are particularly widespread, although different yoikers are likely to describe or interpret them in different ways—for example, the idea that one does not yoik “about” the world or that yoiking differs from “singing”. Some other ideas only came to mind among a few yoikers—for example, the idea that humans have “animals” living inside of them (described further below) or that the yoik has a “primordial” quality. Arguably, these should not be approached as pieces of a puzzle to be reconstructed, as if they belonged to a fragmented but consistent field of knowledge about what the yoik’s true nature. They rather constitute so many landmarks around which the experiential space of yoiking and its epistemic qualities can be approached and navigated, while following the yoikers’ taste for exploration and speculative thinking.

Likewise, it must be borne in mind that yoikers do not constitute a homogeneous group or cultural ensemble and that they should not be confused with the Sámi people at large, as many Sámi do not yoik at all. Yoikers nonetheless form a community of people engaged in a common practice that they appropriate in more or less convergent ways, each of them having at least “something” to share about it. Through their own experimentations

with the yoik, some have nonetheless been more interested in its epistemic dimensions than others and therefore receive particular attention in the following sections. For example, Ánde Somby, a yoiker and professor of law at the University of Tromsø, has been particularly prolific in this regard, hence the recurring mentions of his name in the following sections. This article as a whole could be considered a tentative development of his statement, reported by Thomas Hilder (2013, 101):

How would thought be if one thought in a yoik way, that one “yoik-thought” . . . that yoik goes in cycles, structured in a cycle, how is a cyclical way of thinking? . . . So that is one of the contributions, I believe that yoik will be able [to make], in other words, to relate to yoik as a way of thinking, or yoik as a way of being in the world in an existential way. . . Both the Sami culture has use for new understandings of itself, but I also believe that the world has use for new understandings and that there can lie a number of opportunities I believe.

IN PRESENCE OF THE PAST AND THE DISTANT

In an interview, Ánte Mihkkal Gaup once exemplified what it can mean to engage with the presence of distant things by yoiking: “When I want to yoik a particular place in nature, such as a remarkable river or a special mountain, I travel to this place in my mind. We come there, we see the place for ourselves, and in a way, we are there.” He further describes it as a “sort of travel that we do by yoiking” and that provides “a certain affinity with that place” (Eriksson 2002, 131–32). Yoiking animals or people likewise enables yoikers to feel their presence and, sometimes, to “hear” or “see” them, as if they appeared in front of them.

The association between yoiks and the perception of what they invoke could be interpreted in various semiotic terms. A large part of academic writing on the yoik in the twentieth century, mostly by German-speaking scholars (e.g., Danckert 1956; Lüderwaldt 1976), suggests that it is fundamentally iconic, relying on a likeness between melodies and shapes, movements, or sounds. Conversely, Ola Graff (2004) argues that the relationship is fundamentally symbolic, relying on arbitrary conventions, while iconicity is optional. “The yoik,” he suggests, “does not require any likeness with its object. A person who has a yoik could always have received another, and a single person could well have several yoiks that are completely different” (149).

In a Peircean framework, the question of course is not whether yoiks are fundamentally iconic or symbolic, as these are not inherent qualities of signs but processes enacted in relation to specific “interpretants.” Ask yoikers whether their melodies are imitative (iconicity), whether they point to certain things in the world and bring them forth to attention (indexicality), or whether growing up among yoikers is helpful in order to understand them (symbolism) and they are likely to answer “yes” each time. Icons, indices, and symbols are three possibilities of the same vocal expression.

Yet, these analytical terms say little about how yoikers actually experience things from the inside and about what *they* find interesting. To them, yoiks do not just refer to people through a play of productive “absences” giving life to signs (Kohn 2013, 35–38) but rather constitute one of their modalities of presence in the world. Biret Ristin Sara, a yoiker from Karasjok, compares a person’s yoik to a “shadow” that “lives by the side of that who owns the yoik” (i.e., the person that the yoik invokes) but “doesn’t quite follow you.” A yoik lives “its own life” and “the people who are yoiked cannot control it” (in Hilder 2013, 167). As Ola Graff (2004, 148) puts it, “the yoik is part of a person” just like “the person is part of the yoik.” While such an intimate ontological relationship between melodies and the beings they invoke can certainly be approached in semiotic terms, with potentially fruitful results for analytical purposes, it would imply a significant theoretical detour from the feeling of immediacy and direct contact with the world that yoikers tend to put forward.

One way for yoikers to stress this immediacy is to turn to anecdotes where “outsiders” with no prior knowledge of the yoik manage to guess what a yoik invokes and feel its presence. There are numerous examples of this, some of which I have observed myself, as it occurred during a yoik workshop where our teacher started to yoik animals and ask us to guess who they were (we were surprisingly successful). Following the yoikers’ fascination with this issue, I once turned it into an experiment by playing animal yoiks to Belgian listeners. The results, published elsewhere (Aubinet 2021), indicated that people were able to identify the animals correctly at significantly above chance level, although their level of accuracy appeared to depend on various ecological factors and their familiarity with animals.

In an essay about the creation of yoiks, Ánte Mihkkal Gaup (1995, 89) tells an anecdote where this process of recognition happens “backward”: a Sámi herder visiting a foreign place started to improvise yoiks and came up with the same melodies as the ones yoiked by local people. In fact, even some nonhumans are credited with the capacity to “understand” the yoik. In particular, the reindeer is reputed to enjoy when people yoik its melody. According to Ánde Somby, being understood by animals is actually “the ultimate applause you can get as a yoiker” (interview, 2015).

In the yoiking tradition, this can be explained by the fact that a yoik directly stems from what it invokes. Thus, yoikers do not necessarily get any credit for creating a new melody. As Elin Kåven, a yoiker, musician, and dancer from Karasjok, put it: “If I yoik someone and the yoik is very beautiful, it is not because I am good at creating yoiks, it is because that person is beautiful” (interview, 2017). Getting into a discussion about how yoiks are created would exceed the scope of this article (on this issue, see Aubinet 2020, 182–96). However, it is worth mentioning that one normally needs to be highly familiar with what is to be yoiked. In order to create a yoik for the mosquito and to perform it properly, Ánde Somby explained that he stopped slapping mosquitoes for about fifteen years and tried to pay attention to the feeling of being bitten (interview, 2015).

While this familiarity is generally a prerequisite for yoiking, it will also, in turn, be enhanced by the act of yoiking itself, as part of a circular relationship. When I met Terje Trednes, a yoiker and musician from Karasjok, he stressed that yoiking the wolf was, in itself, a way of educating children. “By listening to the wolf’s yoik,” he observed, “children can hear that this animal may be dangerous.” It enables them to “associate a personality with these animals” (interview, 2017). Such an epistemic resource is all the more precious knowing that wolves are no longer permanently settled in the region of Karasjok; in the animal’s absence, yoiking at least enables people to preserve their familiarity with the animal and to keep caring for its presence.

In a similar way, people may still be yoiked long after they pass away. In fact, in Sápmi, it is a common saying that people remain alive as long as the living keep yoiking them, even if they have stopped breathing. This may occur long after a person’s death: Elle Márjá Eira, a yoiker, composer, and filmmaker from Kautokeino, told me that she once found a recording of a yoik from her great-great-grandfather, who emigrated to Alaska more than a hundred years ago. When she sings this yoik today, she can still see “his shape” and “what kind of person he was” (interview, 2017). However, it is more common to yoik people that yoikers have known before their death as a way of managing the sorrow, such as in the following testimony by a yoiker who lost two relatives, anonymized by the ethnologist Ingrid Hanssen as “NN” and “XX”:

It was much harder to process NN’s death than XX’s, because I could yoik XX, but not NN. I constantly yoiked XX. Whenever I was driving my car, I would yoik him. While NN—that sorrow I had to process through talking. I have [children] and we talked very much together, and I probably talked such a lot because NN died and I could not yoik him. While we yoiked XX. (Hanssen 2011).

Eventually, one of her friends created a yoik for NN and she was able to accept his death. This anecdote points again to the contrast between yoiking, understood as a way of presentifying people, and language (“that sorrow I had to process through talking”), suggested to be a less powerful means of accomplishing a sense of presence. Arguably, language might enable her to convey a message “about” NN, but only yoiking appears suitable for invoking people, animals, or places, being in their presence for a while, and deepening one’s familiarity with them.

INTENSIFYING THE OTHER’S PRESENCE

After Ánde Somby told me about how he created his yoik for the mosquito, he began performing it. He used a high-pitched falsetto voice and melodic inflections meant to reproduce the sound of an insect flying around our ears. Yoiking an animal, he explained, is not particularly different from being an actor: “You need to empathize, you need to really try to understand what you’re yoiking” (interview, 2015). In this case, the yoik was accompanied by lyrics describing in the first-person the mosquito’s perceptual environment, what Jakob von Uexküll (2010) might have called its *Umwelt*, although people in the north of Sápmi are more likely to call it *luondu*—that is, the character, behavior, and experiential world of a particular being (Helander-Renvall 2010, 45). In this case, it invoked the “sweet taste of blood”: “I sting you. I sting you because blood is so sweet. I sting you because it is through this little sting that you will notice that you are alive” (interview, 2015).

During a yoik workshop in Oslo in 2018, our teacher, Ingor Ántte Áilu Gaup, gave another illustration of this by making me and the other participants yoik the wolf. He gathered us in a circle and started yoiking, alternating the wolf’s melody with howls, moving around the room like a predator, and growling. When he stopped in front of us, we had to respond with the same “wolf” quality in our voice and gestures. During one of these workshops, I once met a skillful yoiker who admitted that for a large part of her life, she did not dare to yoik the wolf due to the animal’s ambiguous status, sometimes associated with the devil among reindeer herders: according to her, yoiking the wolf would have meant hosting inside of her something evil.⁶

This ability to change perspectives may be approached as a case of “perspectivism,” following Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s (2014) concept: namely, the assumption that the world entails a multiplicity of points of view, each being retaining the possibility of enacting a subjective position at any time. However, in contrast to the Amazonian shamanic practices investigated by Viveiros de Castro, the yoik enables every member of the community to switch perspectives at will, with more or less intensity, and without the need for specialists acting as a “cosmopolitical diplomat” for the community (151).⁷ According to some yoikers, the possibility for anyone to explore animal worlds by yoiking stems from the fact that humans are predisposed to do so, as they carry inside of them animal presences that can be contacted and expressed using their melodies.

While some yoikers partake in this view about metamorphosis, others are content with noticing that yoiking an animal enables them to deepen their relationship with it and may serve to express respect or admiration toward it. As a member of a Sámi community, being yoiked by others or having a famous yoik is likewise considered a sign that one is appreciated or holds a certain prestige. Thus, yoiking other people may well be considered a way of making their presence grow in one’s life and that of the community.

When it comes to yoiking landscapes and places, yoikers also tend to agree on the idea that it makes them even more “beautiful” or “alive” than they already are (Helander-Renvall 2010, 48; Skaltje 2014, 229). Per Hætta, a yoiker from the region of Karasjok particularly known for his animal yoiks, exemplified this in the following account, where yoiking does not necessarily “mean” anything but merely repeats and intensifies the presence of what is already there.

For centuries my people have lived in close contact with nature, and that has made an impression on me that I neither can nor wish to erase. The tones have been grasped from the womb of the Finnmark plateau. How many times have I tried to sing a “civilized song” when I was sitting in a reindeer sleigh driving over the tundra, but how miserable and inane it seemed; it was as if it didn’t suit the surroundings. It belonged to an unfamiliar world. Had I taken a yoik melody instead, well then I wouldn’t have just been waking myself up, but somehow it seemed that every stunted bush, every little rolling hill in the terrain, everything in nature would wake up and want to yoik along. The reindeer would prick its ears and raise its head; it seemed to pick up the pace. The tapping of its hoofs kept the beat. At every pause in the yoiking it was as if nature shouted: “juoigga, juoigga”⁸—that is our song, yoik as much as your lungs can take, and we will yoik along. (Weinstock 2014, 265)

One could argue that such a process is inscribed in the very structure of yoiks and their propensity for *repetition* rather than linear developments like those of logical arguments or written descriptions (Somby 2007). Most yoik performances actually include a gradual rise of intensity, as if each repetition of the melody brings the presentification to a higher degree. Johan Sara, a yoiker, composer, and producer from Máze, once stressed during a lecture that neglecting to stop at a certain point of the performance and continuing further “is going to end in catastrophe” (Sara 2002, 20). While Sara does not describe what sort of “catastrophe” might occur, yoikers tend to agree that an intense yoik performance eventually has to stop, if only due to the significant amount of energy it requires; in Per Hætta’s words, the process can only go as long “as your lungs can take it.”

Such moments when one feels the environment becoming more present and alive might be captured with Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s expression “epiphany,” which I already used in relation to how yoikers get to know their own art. Focusing on aesthetic experiences involving artworks and sports, Gumbrecht (2004, 98) suggests that such moments have no “message” and are best understood as “moments of intensity” where presence overcomes meaning. As part of his argument, Gumbrecht invokes an Argentinian tradition according to which one should never dance a tango with lyrics due to a “nonbalanced situation of simultaneity between meaning effects and presence effects,” making it difficult to follow the music with one’s body (108). Both types of effects, he contends, “will never grow into a stable structure of complementarity” (110).

While yoikers often insist on the idea that yoiking differs from language as a means of engaging with the world, the former being more suitable for presentification and the latter for discursive communication “about” things, they do not necessarily experience them as irreconcilable. Lyrics are generally meant to intensify the invocational power of the yoik rather than undermine it; a yoik invoking a person with a limp may thus be accompanied by a text describing the act of limping or focus the attention on one particular aspect of this person (Graff 2004, 158). However, in line with Gumbrecht’s observation, it seems that the melody and the text always keep some degree of autonomy, since the latter can always be omitted or changed (Graff 2004, 157), even in the few regions where the use of lyrics is the rule rather than the exception, such as eastern Finnmark. Like the mimics and gestures of yoikers, lyrics appear to form an additional dimension to the melodic core of a performance that cannot presentify things on its own.

A more significant divergence between observations of yoiks and Gumbrecht’s theory of presence lies in the latter’s contention that, insofar as it involves presence, “there is nothing edifying in aesthetic experience, nothing positive to be learnt” (Gumbrecht 2004, 116). While this may be so when thinking about a Mozart aria or a football match (two of the examples he relates), the yoik stands out in that its melodies are not merely aesthetic objects aimed at animating temporary epiphanies devoid of any learning process. In the yoiking tradition, the melodies must be understood as stemming from particular beings located in the environment, in the past, or in human interiority. In other words, the presentification at work here does provide insights and positive knowledge, informing yoikers on the temperament of various beings, enabling people to experience the world as others do, to explore relationships with nonhumans, or to appreciate the land in a new light.

In this perspective, knowing amounts to getting more familiar with something or someone and being in its presence. As such, knowing appears inseparable from caring. I follow here Britt Kramvig and Helen Verran’s (2020, 68) description of care as “attuned attentiveness, and adaptive tinkering” asking for an “embodied engagement” with humans and nonhumans. “Different caring practices,” they observe, “articulate differences in modes of knowing” (68). While Kramvig and Verran derive their reflection from Sámi storytelling, “the interactive relationship of call and response” it induces, and its capacity to make the past tangible, the yoik has an epistemic quality of its own, partly stemming from its propensity to repetition, aimed at intensifying the presence of something that is already there (in the land or in the yoiker’s imagination) and make it more knowable in the process.

CONCLUSIONS

In response to Ánde Somby’s reflection on the yoik “as a way of thinking, or yoik as a way of being in the world” (in Hilder 2013, 101), a few conclusions may be drawn from the present inquiry. I have chosen to start from what may be the most common assumption about the yoik among its practitioners: the idea that people do not yoik *about* things but rather yoik the *things* themselves. Although it may be interpreted and developed in different directions, this idea points to a contrast between the yoik and discursive practices intended to convey propositional knowledge, such as language. Likewise, yoiking is distinguished from “singing” due to its focus on a particular being that it seeks to presentify and its use of the entire body (not just the head) to accomplish this process.

The yoik thus appears as a diverging epistemic resource that cannot entirely fit in research agendas approaching more-than-human socialities in terms of “meaning.” While the yoik certainly implies iconic imitations of animals, indexical ways of pointing at things, or symbolic forms of communication, none of these terms can capture what makes the yoik unique in the eyes of its practitioners. By approaching it as another way of engaging in an interpretive chain “about” the world, what we lose is the immediacy with which people, animals, or places are made tangibly present as soon as one starts to yoik, the intensity of such moments as compared to experiences of talking “about” them, and the caring attitude implied in the act of intensifying another being’s presence in one’s own life. Embracing these aspects of the practice does not necessarily imply disqualifying semiotics but does at least entail “provincializing” meaning as one way of thinking about songs and knowledge among others.

More specifically, taking seriously the yoikers’ emphasis on presence implies a move away from certain lines of research that Gatt and Lembo identify in this issue as “logocentric,” tending to focus on a rationalist ideology of language, wherein the systematizable, conceptual, and referential aspects of language are understood as the privileged or only means of generating and conveying knowledge. However, the use of the term “logocentrism” requires some caution here, considering its history marked by Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* and following works, where it specifically refers to a sense of identity between signifier and signified enacted in spoken discourse (as opposed to writing), involving what Derrida calls a “metaphysics of presence.” At first sight, this emphasis on identity and presence may seem reminiscent of the yoik, suggesting that “logocentrism” cannot be so easily dismissed.

However, in Derrida’s view, “logocentrism” does not actually rely on presence. It rather derives from an interruption of interpretive chains from sign to sign, realized by *artificially* assigning a sense of immediacy to discourse. In other words, “logocentrism” emerges by inserting presence within semiotic processes that fundamentally rely on difference. The Peircean semiotics invoked by Eduardo Kohn in *How Forests Think* broadly follows this perspective by defining absence as the source of all meaning (Derrida 1997, 49–50). Such a definition can doubtless be described as “anti-logocentric.” In contrast, the yoik presents an alternative that bypasses Derrida’s notion of “logocentrism” altogether. Not only does it explore the epistemic potentialities of the voice beyond spoken discourse and words, but more importantly, it posits immediate presence as the primary quality of vocal expression, whereas interpretation and meaning remain secondary. In short, the yoik invites us to consider that presence comes before absence, not the opposite.

Participating in yoik workshops had at least the merit of making this plainly obvious: when your teacher starts growling, howling, and yoiking at you with anger in his eyes, wolfness is palpable enough. In that moment, presence is not just a “metaphysical” assumption; it is experienced. Analyses of the performance as iconically or otherwise semiotically related to the wolf only come afterward. Perhaps leaving such analyses on the side, restoring presence to its rightful place, and approaching songs as they present themselves may be the most direct way of considering ways knowing by singing beyond “logocentric” frameworks, in all meanings of the term.

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NOTES

¹ This one-month visit, done in 2018, may be considered ethnographic material. Keeping the department involved anonymous, numerous other recent examples with similar approaches to Indigenous songs as knowledge can be mentioned, consistently referring to the songs’ lyrics as their “content” (e.g., Gibson 2019; Reyes-García and Fernández-Llamazares 2019; Washburn and Fast 2018).

² Given that yoikers do not consider their art as “singing,” in the following paragraphs and sections, I will write “singing” without quotation marks when referring to its broad sense encompassing the yoik and with quotation marks when it needs to be contrasted to the yoik.

³ Inga Juuso is another renowned yoiker from the region of Finnmark, in northern Norway.

⁴ I have personally found Eduardo Kohn’s *How Forests Think* (2013) helpful to analyze the process of creating new yoik melodies (Aubinet 2020, 203–10).

⁵ Similar contrasts may be encountered elsewhere, such as in European early music performance, where the “clean” head-voice aesthetics of the “Oxbridge” school is opposed to ensembles like Organum, focused on bodily resonance and ornamentations, and frequently criticized as “barbaric, illiterate, and uncivilized” (Horvitz 2010, 33).

⁶ In the 1950s, the ethnomusicologist Wolfgang von Laade likewise encountered difficulties to make Sámi people yoik the wolf or the bear, as they considered this a potentially dangerous thing to do (Domokos 2006, 68).

⁷ As noted by Charles Stépanoff (2019, 416–17), this diplomatic function of shamans is absent from a number of communities in northern Eurasia practicing a “heterarchical” (i.e., nonhierarchical) form of shamanism, namely communities where anyone can engage in shamanic rituals.

⁸ Juoigga is the imperative form of the North Sámi verb juoigat, “to yoik.”

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- Elle Márjá Eira. Interview in Trondheim, 25 February 2017.
- Anne Lise Varsi. Interview in Tana, 31 May 2017.
- Elin Kåven. Interview in Alta, 29 September 2017.
- Ijgor Ántte Áilu Gaup. Yoik course in Oslo, 23–25 February 2018.

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