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Queer Narratives in Nordic Sami Literature: Coming-Out Narratives and Final Exposures in *Savior of the Lost Children* (2008) and *Himlabrand* (2021)

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how two queer narratives in Nordic Sami literature challenge, expand and change norms and stereotypes related to queer indigenous experiences. Characteristic for these narratives is the ambition to highlight taboos and challenge stereotypes in Sami contexts. In the article, I explore the characters' coming-out processes and relate them to larger narrative traditions. To shed light on the obstacles the characters meet in the process of coming out to themselves and to their communities, and the genres through which the stories are told, I turn to gender scholars Judith Roof, Andrea Gutenberg and Anne Mulhall. I make use of their perspectives to explore whether the coming-out processes take different shapes when the individuals in question are Sami and thus doubly minoritized. Insisting on the importance of coming out not only to oneself, but also to the Sami community at large, they take on an important activist role, transcending the perspective of the individual. The primary texts are the young-adult novel Himlabrand ("Heavenly fire") (2021) by Moa Backe Åstot and the blog novel The Savior of the Lost Children (2008) by Sigbjørn Skåden.

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Introduction

There are at present no major queer literary histories in the Nordic countries, "not regionally, not nationally, nor in the area as a whole". The assertion was made by Dag Heede in 2015 (p. 159). He stressed that whereas a gay history of literature might focus on same-sex desires and identities, "a queer history will necessarily include aspects of sex, gender (including transgender), race and ethnicity, and is thus by nature marked by a profound need for intersectionality" (p. 160). As Heede asserted, "we are in dire need of gay histories of Norway [. . .], Finland, Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe and Åland Isles, not to mention the Sámi Nation in the north of the region" (p. 165). There has been a certain increase in research on queer Nordic literature in the years following Heede's article, for example Ph.D student Ditte Obeling's project "Towards a new literary history: Queer relations between women in Danish literature 1880–2020". However, little if anything has been written about queer Sami literature. As a matter of fact, only a slight number of novels revolve around this topic. In her article "A minority within the minority. Homosexuals in a Sami environment and Sami in a homosexual environment"[1] from 2003, sociologist Merethe Giertsen stated, that except for a few newspaper articles, there were, at the time, no written documentation on being gay and Sami in general (Giertsen, 2003). Giertsen wrote this in 2003, and for many years, nothing

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seemed to change. As Ane Hedvig Heidrunsdotter Løvold documents in her master's thesis from 2014, *The Silence in Sápmi—and the Queer Sami Breaking It*, the Nordic research tradition had rarely thematized queer Sami identity until that year. Her thesis is, together with Giertsen's article, among the first academic works that focus on Sami queerness (See also Olsen, 2015). The year before, nonetheless, in 2013, the documentary book *Queering Sápmi* was published. The book was a result of Sara Lindqvist and Elfrida Bergman's travels in Sápmi talking to Sami lhbtq people and writing down their stories. This was part of a broader art project consisting of exhibitions and talks following the release.

This article aspires to fill in one of the gaps previously pinpointed by Dag Heede, and to analyse contemporary Sami gay coming-out narratives. Through comparative readings of two books for young adult readers about being Sami and gay, I explore the characters' coming-out processes and relate them to a larger narrative tradition of coming-out narratives in order to examine to what extent, and in what manner, the characters' Sámi identities affect these processes. The books are *Himlabrand* (Heede, 2015) by the Sami author Moa Backe Åstot and the blog novel *The Savior of the Lost Children* (2008; Norwegian translation in 2010) allegedly written by a young Sami lesbian girl under the pseudonym Ihpil, but where the true author turned out to be Sigbjørn Skåden. My thesis is that both *Himlabrand* and *The Savior of the Lost Children* challenge traditional coming-out narrative patterns in order to promote the recognition of queer Sami.The core concerns of this paper are: How do the complex coming-out processes of the protagonists vary intersectionally based on indigeneity? Through what genres are the stories told? and finally: How do the particular combinations of form and content problematize previous scholarship on coming-out narratives?

Himlabrand (2021) is a coming-of-age story about the young man Ánte who belongs to a herding family in Jokkmokk in Sweden and is expected to, and wants to, take over the reindeer husbandry. Homosexuality is not commonly accepted in the Sami community to which he belongs, so being openly gay is not an easy option for him. The blog novel *The Savior of the Lost Children* is formally more complex. It was allegedly a collection of authentic blog posts,[2] a personal diary with entries from August 14th to December 17th written by a nineteen-year-old Sami lesbian student in Tromsø, Ihpil,[3] who ended up drowning in the Arctic city harbour. In 2010, in the wake of the publication of the Norwegian edition of the book, a journalist from the Sami magazine "Š" checked police sources in order to assert whether or not a girl had actually been found dead in the water in Tromsø on the alleged date, only to find that this was not the case (Lieungh, 2011). Instead, it became clear that the blog was a fictional enterprise, a type of performance art piece, penned by Sigbjørn Skåden.

While both works are Sami coming-out narratives, they differ in terms of gender, genre, and time of publication, all of which may account for their opposite endings. Whereas *Ihpil* in 2008 was the first and until this date the only novel to thematize Sami lesbian love in a Scandinavian setting, *Himlabrand* is the first Scandinavian novel to thematize Sami gay male love.

To shed light on the obstacles the characters meet in the process of coming out to themselves and to their communities, and the genres through which the stories are told, I turn to gender scholars Judith Roof, Andrea Gutenberg and Anne Mulhall and their theories on narrative coming-out processes. I make use of their perspectives to explore whether the coming-out processes take different shapes when the individuals in question are Sami and thus doubly minoritized. Insisting on the importance of coming out not only to oneself, but also to the Sami community at large, they take on an important activist role, transcending the perspective of the individual.

Queer narratives: The bildungsroman, the folktale, and the coming-out narrative

In her book *Come as You are: Sexuality and Narrative*, Judith Roof focuses on "narrative and sexuality as organizing epistemes and as expressions of a figuratively heterosexual reproductive ideology in twentieth-century Western culture" (Roof, 1996, p. xxvii). According to Roof, "interwound with one another, narrative and sexuality operate within

the reproductive and/or productive, metaphorically heterosexual ideology that also underwrites the naturalized understanding of the shape and meaning of life" (Roof, 1996). As Roof stresses, "the reciprocal relation between narrative and sexuality produces stories where homosexualities can only occupy certain positions or play certain roles metonymically linked to negative values within a reproductive aegis" (Roof, 1996). Roof turns to Freudian psychoanalysis to elaborate on this, explaining that Freuds own narrative of sexuality "begins with the aberrations that provide the damming stuff against which the hero of normative heterosexuality must struggle" (Roof, 1996, p. xix). Anne Mulhall explains the same pattern in the following manner: "It is a story with a beginning, a troubled and dangerous middle where the 'hero of heterosexuality' is beset by multiple obstacles and trials that must be overcome and averted so that the hero arrives at the final destination, the telos, normal heterosexual (and normatively gendered) maturity" (Mulhall, 2020, p. 143).

Anne Mulhall compares the queer coming-out narrative with the bildungsroman and points out how both types of narrative involve a quest, often portraying: "a young person leaving their rural origins and journeying to the metropolis, eventually achieving maturity and social integration" (Mulhall, 2020, p. 146), which he finally brings with him back home. However, while the bildungsroman and the heterosexual narrative involve a home—out–home again-structure, the queer coming-out narrative deviates by "portraying the protagonist's entry into a subculture rather than his or her integration into heteronormative society" (Gutenberg, 2005, p. 58), thus finding a new home in a different location than one's birthplace.

Roof, too, use the bildungsroman as a source of comparison, and finds that the coming-out narrative's similarity to the bildungsroman "provides the suggestion that coming to a knowledge of sexuality is like coming to a knowledge of individual value or mission, equating the recognition of membership in a sexual category with other narratives of artistic development" (Roof, 1996, p. 107). But Roof also sees the folktale as a foundational narrative structure[4] According to her, the narrative sequence of the lesbian coming-out story correlates with Vladimir Propp's understanding of the categories of folktale elements that comprise the folktale's plot (p. 105). In Roof's words these categories include the following eleven Proppian elements: "well-being prior to complication", "the imposition of an interdiction", "the process of interrogation", "the deceptive villain", "the conjunctive moment", "donors who transmit magical information", "the unrecognized arrival", "the difficult task (turning away the boyfriend, asking out the girl)", "the resolution of the task (boyfriend gone, girlfriend here)", "the recognition (I am a lesbian)" and "the final exposure (look Mom, I'm lesbian)" (p. 105). Part of the similarity between coming-out stories and Russian folktales "comes from the way in which we view and analyse narrative", and Roof contends that this correlation "suggests that heteronarrative structures the shape of lesbian affirmation despite the stories' counter-cultural purpose" (p. 105). Patriarchal form, in other words, dominates content. In contemporary Sami coming-out-narratives, however, we find various ways in which traditional narrative form is disrupted so that the counter-cultural purpose can gain force. One notable change regards the final exposure which does not just concern the immediate family, but the entire Sami community. The protagonists thus take on and model an activist role, paving the way for other closeted Sami. In the following I use Roof's categories to shed light on the obstacles Ihpil and Ánte meet as Sami and queer, and to show how their processes deviate from Roof's and Mulhall's narrative sources of comparison.

The Savior of the Lost Children: Revolution in Sápmi

The Savior of the Lost Children was originally written in North Sami, with the title *Láhppon mánáid bestejeaddji*.[5] Skåden states in an interview that he wanted to explore this theme because of the stigma: "Many people in the Sami population are strongly connected to the Laestadian tradition and are therefore very conservative.[6] I wanted to write about something that had not been talked about

that much. And thus open up for some debate" (Lieungh & February, 2011). Skåden's motivation for writing his book was to broach a silenced theme; to shed light onto Sami queer experiences. At the same time Skåden's conceptual literary experiment had as its starting point "a desire to comment on popular culture and society's growing hunger for private and 'real' storytelling" (Perspektivet Museum 2017).

The novel is framed by death, as the epigraph reveals the end: Ihpil's death:

> On 17 December 2007, a 19-year-old Sami woman was found drowned in Tromsø harbor. The woman had just finished her first semester as a student at the University of Tromsø, and during the semester she had written a blog where she talks about her life. In the blog, she calls herself Ihpil.[7] On the one hand, the blog is a diary that describes a student's everyday life, and on the other hand, it is a visionary manifesto and a resounding appeal to the world. *Savior of the Lost Children* is a true story about feeling different and invisible, and about wanting to conquer the world. At the parents' request, the blog is now published in book form. (p. 5)[8]

Since the reader already knows the outcome, an immediate reading could consist of trying to figure out why Ihpil did not want to live, given that the novel more than hints at her death being a suicide. Such a reading centres on the main character's psychological processes: Why did she end her life? Several of the blog posts hint at quite severe depression; however, at the end of the novel Ihpil seems to be happier than ever, which opens up the possibility that we are dealing with a crime plot of some sort. Yet, as this is not completed either, we are simply left with the question: Why does Ihpil have to die within the framework of this novel? The answer, I would suggest, can be found in the two project trajectories that the novel establishes. The first line is individual and concerns Ihpil's personal well-being; I call this "the gay plot":

> I could need a girlfriend. I have thought for a long time about what I need to obtain peace of mind, and I think just that would have been a cure for a lot of inner turmoil. (p. 15)

Ihpil's goal in the gay plot is to find a girlfriend, but this is not an easy task. In terms of Roof's coming-out scheme, we could say that the "supposed well-being prior to complication" lies before the narrative starts, and that the "interdiction" is something Ihpil imposes upon herself based on social shaming. It is reinforced by gazes she attracts at a café with other gays, which unlike the "Sami gazes" where people send her hostile glances because she is Sami, are filled with fear. In 2008 a widespread discourse was still that "there are no gay Sámi people" (see e.g. Løvold, 2014), which can explain why Ihpil is not even potentially visible as a gay Sámi, but either only gay *or* Sámi. The "interdiction" therefore cannot come explicitly from without but emerges as a sign of internalized norms.

As part of the gay plotline, Ihpil struggles with finding her "true self." Her "process of interrogation" involves questions like "Who am I, are there other people like me, what is a lesbian" (Roof, 1996, p. 105) and constitutes a rather extensive part of the novel, naturally enough, since it is supposed to be a personal blog, or more specifically a diary genre within the blog genre where "authors are sharing personal thoughts and ideas" (Garden, 2012, p. 488). Roof understands the "deceptive villain" as people hindering the lesbian coming-out process, such as "the obligatory boyfriend" or "the suspicious mother" (Roof, 1996, p. 105). In Ihpil's case, this is a boy that confesses his love for her, and that she wants to befriend, but that turns her down when she eventually says she does not feel the same. On a psychological level, one can also regard her growing depression as a "deceptive villain" as it hinders her from meeting a girl or living out her queer identity.

"The conjunctive moment" occurs when she is physically attracted to a fellow student, Poshy, and starts to fantasize about her. This does not lead anywhere, however, and it's not until the "appearance of donors", a gay neighbour in the student housing and her girlfriend, that things start to happen in the gay plot. The neighbour takes her to a gay festival, where an attractive girl from Oslo, whom she dances with represents "the unrecognized arrival". "The difficult task" includes rejecting the abovementioned boy and trying to win the girl. In line with Roof's scheme this lesbian

coming-out story also contains "the resolution of the task" as the girl wants her back. She comes to visit her, and "the recognition" occurs as Ihpil realizes she is gay and happy. Now only one element is missing, namely "the final exposure." This, however, never happens, and to shed light on why, we need to dive into the second plot trajectory, that concerns Ihpil's desire to initiate a Sámi revolution. I call this "the Sami plot":

> I have a plan for Sápmi, I'm going to color our country red, that much I know, but I don't yet know for sure how I'm going to go about it. I still haven't found the right methods, the right paths to go down, but I'm pretty sure that my earthly life carries with it something special for Sápmi, I'm sure that I must somehow represent something important, I feel it deep down, but I am not yet able to concretize it. I seem self-righteous, I know that, but I am serious, and my faith is strong: Sápmi will see. One day, just wait! (p. 15)

Whereas the gay plot concerns Ihpil's process of coming out, the Sami plot concerns an undefinable desire to—as an individual—embody something special for Sápmi and thus bring about revolutionary change, by "waking up the world with words" (p. 7). To colour the country red, in this respect, may be to start a revolution, or to die for one's country; to colour it with one's blood. As we shall come to realize, Ihpil does both, and her death can be understood as the very beginning of the revolution, which links the two plots together.

As for the Sami plot, Ihpil attends Sami organization meetings and Sami parties; her Sami revolution apparently has to do with this milieu exclusively, at least in the beginning: "If I'm going to colour Sápmi red, I have to familiarize myself with Sami student and youth environments" (p. 17). It seems as if she believes that the revolution has to take place in this Sami milieu and that it has nothing to do with finding herself as a lesbian, an idea which is reinforced by the fact that the two plotlines exist side by side but never seem to merge. At the end of the novel, Ihpil consummates her first relationship with a girl. This is the termination of the first, individual quest, and if this project had been the novel's main concern, it could have ended here. Instead it kills off its protagonist when she has finally found love and happiness. The "bury your gays-trope" may serve as an explanatory model and has to be understood from an intersectional perspective.

Death in Sápmi: The "bury your gays" trope

Just a short time after Ihpil writes about a happiness greater than anything on her blog, after her new girlfriend's visit on the 17th of December, she is found drowned in the harbour. The book, as mentioned above, indicates suicide, for example through a poem dated November 9th that ends with the sentence: "It is December 17th, and afterwards there is silence" (p. 63).

Whether Ihpil's death is an accident, a murder or a suicide may not be the foremost question. More importantly her death serves the purpose of silence instead of the expected "final exposure." As such, it fulfils a well-known trope within queer narratives: the "bury your gays" trope, or in Dag Heede's words; "heteronarrativity". Hulan (2017) explains that the "bury your gays" is a literary trope originating in the late 19th century which is still quite widespread in modern media (p. 17). The pattern of the trope is the following: "In a narrative work (novels especially), which features a same-gender romantic couple, one of the lovers must die or otherwise be destroyed by the end of the story" (p. 17). There is often a direct correlation between the couple confessing their feelings for one another and the character's death; "they often die mere moments or pages after their relationship is confirmed" (p. 17). Originally the trope was used as a way for gay authors to get away with writing about gay characters, or as Heede puts it, the tendency to let homosexual characters die had to do with a need "to restore textual harmony and secure happy ends" (Heede, 2017, p. 50).

Heede's material for analysis was Norwegian and Danish literature from 1880 to 1941, and this backdrop does not necessarily apply in the same way today. Being the first Sami lesbian character in a book, however, against an ideology of there being no gay Sámi people, it may be reasonable to assume that Ihpil could not be Sami, gay and happily in love back in 2008, and therefore had to die. But is this narrative requirement necessarily the whole explanation for her death?

Ihpil's gay project is more about identifying with being queer than understanding herself intersectionally as a queer Sami. Her last words in the blog have to do with final exposure: "I'm taking the boat home at 4 pm today. I'm a little busy, but just had to write before I leave. To tell. Tell that the world has become a place of being. Tell that the first child is saved" (p. 84). As the passage suggests, the world has become a place of being for her, but she obviously has no place in this world. She is ready for her final exposure, presumably telling her parent(s) that she—as the first-born child—is saved from doom, depression and a sense of being lost. The fact that she does not specify her audience also opens for an extradiegetic interpretation, namely that Ihpil is "the first child" in that she is the first literary lesbian Sami and that she is ready to come out publically—through publication.

This second level of interpretation makes it possible to see the publication of the book as fulfilling the second plot line, i.e. the Sami revolutionary plot. It is on this level that Ihpil can be regarded as the saviour of the lost children. If we understand the saviour metaphor religiously, we can say that it is precisely by sacrificing her own life that she can save other "lost children", others who "live in sin", or more specifically: other queers. Ihpil can thus be understood as a Christ figure who, through her death, saves her peers and through the blog/novel makes it clear that it is possible to be queer and Sami. This potential for salvation, however, depends on the book's reception, on a spreading of the word, and on a community being built up around her story. If no momentum builds up around Ihpil and her cause, if hardly anyone reads about her and believes in her, her story will perhaps just serve as a cautionary tale and a warning to other queer Sami, that they must stay in the closet.

Ihpil's name, "ghost," similarly suggests a metaphysical reading, albeit with fewer religious overtones. Ihpil's voice returns to haunt the silence surrounding queerness in the Sami community, one could say, and this makes her some sort of avenger or revenant. And maybe it is precisely the fact that she dies, in a "strong and dramatic story from reality", that provides the novel with its true capacity of impact. In this sense the book is not just a Sami revolution, but a Sami queer revolution, making the queer plot and the Sami plot intersect. As such, the book can be read as an example of queer literary activism or queer literary performance art, not just a realistic coming-out-narrative about a Sami lesbian girl. This, of course, will depend on its reception, originally intended for a Sami reading audience, and subsequently through translation involving a greater Norwegian/Scandinavian audience. In terms of the plot, it is furthermore important to note that Ihpil could have ended "happily and socially integrated in the city" (cf. Mulhall), in the subculture in Tromsø, but this does not happen, as she intends to return home to her place of origin. Though more implicit in *Ihpil* than in *Himlabrand*, place-attachment takes on a decisive role in the identity formation of the Sami protagonists in both novels.

Himlabrand: Breaking norms from within

Himlabrand (2021) was nominated for the Swedish August prize in 2021 and is among other things praised for daring to question traditional norms. According to Wahlström (2021), *Himlabrand* manages to push the limits, "in reality as well as in fiction". As Åstot explains in an interview, the Sami community has not come as far as the majority society in narrating gay love, and Åstot wants to change this: "I think it is important to dare to shed light on the problem before moving forward. This is already done in the majority society. Now it's our turn" (Raben & Sjögren).

Himlabrand centres on Ánte who lives a life marked by Sami traditions, growing up in a reindeer husbandry family and convinced that he will take over reindeer husbandry one day. As he falls in love with his best friend Erik, his convictions begin to falter, since homosexuality is not accepted in his Sami community. *Himlabrand* starts and ends with Ánte googling "do gay reindeer herders exist?" (p. 5) Initially this is a topic too scary for him to explore further, and he closes his computer abruptly without checking the results.

As Åstot states in an interview, it is important to dig into Sami history in order to understand why Ánte is having a major identity conflict: "Sticking out becomes even more threatening in a minority society, where one throughout history has had to fight to maintain one's identity" (Aftonbladet, 2021). In a society where the major fight has centred on rights and equality for a minority, other fights have been suppressed, such as those pertaining to gender equality and sexuality. As Cheryl Suzack asserts in a Canadian context, "[g]ender inequality is neither the only nor the most important form of oppression [indigenous communities] face" (Suzack, 2015, p. 262).[9] (see also Dankertsen, 2021; Halsaa, 2020). The same can be said about sexuality, a theme that has been strongly downplayed in Sápmi throughout the years.

The Sami life world setting plays an important role in the novel. Indeed, part of what is at stake for Ánte is whether there is room for him there. Ante's anguish is for instance rendered through his indirect comparison of himself to the hunter Fávdna of Sámi mythology:

> He looked at the pole star that held up the sky. The giant moose, Sarvva, and the hunters who followed it. Stuck in an eternal hunt. It was said that if the hunter Fávdna caught up with the moose and shot his arrow at it, he could hit the pole star and the sky mount. Then the sky would fall down and crush the earth. *The world would be set on fire*. Go under once and for all. He wondered if the hunter would dare to shoot when the whole world was at stake. Was it worth taking such a big risk? To either win or lose everything. (p. 19)

To Ánte, revealing his identity as gay represents the risk that his whole world might fall apart, raising the question of whether he is willing to lose everything or not. The title of the novel emphasizes this: Ánte's universe could collapse and be set on fire, and this is his greatest fear. He identifies with Fávdna and his impossible task and decides that he cannot take the risk of losing everything. The fact that Ánte reflects upon his life through Sámi mythology is crucial here—it demonstrates his sense of cultural belonging and pulls the reader into this lifeworld. At the same time, it also suggests a sense of responsibility that causes him to fear that if he takes a risk, he sets his entire community at risk.

Mulhall's coming-out narrative culminating in finding oneself in an urban setting, away from one's homestead, is not an option. Other characters in the novel have indeed chosen this path, such as the family friend Lasse and his husband Ruben who could not bear to stay but left Sápmi for the south of Sweden. Ánte would rather live closeted, it seems. To him, the local Sámi community is intimately intertwined with the basis of his identity: the lifestyle of reindeer husbandry and the proximity to nature, where the environment carries traces of tradition, culture, and history. To Ánte it seems impossible to renounce this feeling of belonging, and the contact with family and kin. Overall, the *place* for Ánte represents what is at stake, and this is one of the main premises for the whole novel (See also Manderstedt et al., 2020).[10]

Coming out in Sápmi: Normativity and homophobia

Himlabrand begins in medias res, and the "well-being prior to complication" is presumably located outside of the narrative, in what we can assume was a happy childhood until puberty and the realization of gay feelings. The interdictions put upon Ánte most explicitly have to do with normative expectations and homophobia in Ánte's family. Two passages point at such obstacles. When the family watches TV together, a gay love scene suddenly appears on the screen:

> Dad turned on channel 3. The first thing that appeared were the bodies. Two guys kissing each other. One pushed against the other, pulled at his shirt. The hands crawled under. Ánte stopped breathing. He pulled the pillow tighter against him. 'But damn it,' dad said. 'That they show that stuff on TV.' Mum looked up from her knitting and shook her head. Dad reached for the control and changed the channel. Bombs exploded on the screen, little men ran in a gray landscape. They looked like tin soldiers. *The world was on fire*. (p. 24)

The passage about two gay men consummating their love and the following war scene tie in with the previous passage about Fávdna and the risk of causing a heavenly fire. At this point however, there

is no longer a risk; it has happened. To live out one's gay identity seems to boil down to setting the world on fire for Ánte, and his fears are confirmed by his parents' reactions.

A few pages later the interdiction is further reinforced, as Ánte overhears his dad talking to some friends, calling Lasse's husband Ruben (whom they don't know is Lasse's husband at the time) a "damn gay bastard" (p. 30). This leads Ánte to conclude his own future destiny: "Dad and his friends had been clear about their views [. . .]What if they would talk about Ánte the way they talked about Ruben? He could not take that risk" (p. 31).

Throughout the novel Ánte spends a lot of time in his room pondering who he is and who he can be, in a "process of interrogation", asking himself whether he can ever come out, whether Erik loves him back and whether he can be Sámi and gay at the same time. Feeding this doubt are the numerous "deceptive villains" surrounding him in his everyday life: the family, Erik's girlfriend Julia, his cousin Ida's friend Hanna whom he pretends to be in love with, and his group of friends who in their outbursts about girls reproduce normative attitudes. Despite this, occasional tender "conjunctive" moments with Erik, where Erik seems to reciprocate Ánte's feelings, albeit subtly, prevent him from being stuck in the closet. The same goes for the two "donors who transmit magical information": His cousin Ida assures him that he is part of the family and the clan even if he feels different, and his grandmother offers him positive role models by telling him how she and his grandfather also broke norms through their non-traditional and norm-breaking love at the time. In their case the grandfather was Norwegian while she herself was Sami. "The unrecognized arrival" furthering the plot may be the recognition of his own special tie to the family friend Lasse as a child, that he considers retrospectively, having learned that Lasse is gay like himself. Ánte's "difficult task" involves telling the truth to Ida, breaking up with Hanna, making up with his friends, and confessing to Erik the nature of his sentiments.

Lasse contributes to the "resolution of the task" when he, upon letting Ánte know that he is married to Ruben, visits Ánte's family to reveal the truth to them, opening the door for Ánte, so to say. It's after Lasse's visit that Ánte's mother finally gives her son her acceptance and tells him that she loves him. The acceptance from the father is indirect, however, passed on through the mother. There is thus no clear final exposure vis-à-vis the father.

Upon the sexual encounter with Erik at the end of the novel, Ánte again understands his love as associated with Fávdna, and now he seems to *be* Fávdna, experiencing the real consequences of daring to take the risk:

> Then he saw them, the flames. Flaming clouds in red, pink and orange. A crackling bonfire. With it the whole world burned – the room, the bed, the bodies, the skeletons. But it wasn't the end of the world. He realized it now. It was the opposite. (p. 205)

The world is truly on fire, as the presages said, but not in a catastrophical and apocalyptic way; the heavenly fire is an ecstatic one. The mythological threat materializes, but in an unexpected way, as Ánte finds bliss and a profound sense of union instead of having to flee the life world that he holds so dear. The consequences of a world set on fire does not equal the end of the world after all, but the opposite—it is the beginning of a new life for Ánte where he can live out his gay identity within a Sámi life world. This is an ultimate moment of recognition.

The novel's final page does concern a "final exposure", but not to the family, as in Roof's scheme.[11] As in *The Savior of the Lost Children* this is a community issue. Ánte opens the web browser and searches for the forum that discusses whether gay Sami people exist and writes: "We exist [. . .] and we are alive" (p. 206). Ante takes on an activist role, coming out publicly on social media, embracing and strengthening a queer, Sami identity.

Confessions, exposures, and storytelling

Savior of the Lost Children and *Himlabrand* contain different coming-out narratives, told through different genres, and paving the way for a more inclusive and democratic Sami society in different ways. Ihpil leaves home to find herself in the city where she can be gay "with ease" (cf. Gutenberg,

2005). She is, however, prevented by death to go back home, although this was her intention. On the level of the plot, this complies with the "bury-your-gays" trope. Ánte's coming-out narrative is less traditional. For him, as for Ihpil, place attachment and commitment to his Sami community is of utmost importance. Hence, his goal is to be able to stay within his rural origins, making space for his untraditional gay relationship where he already lives, and he thereby challenges the norms from within. Instead of leaving Sápmi, entering into a subculture in the city, as his predecessors Lasse and Ruben did, he integrates into a heteronormative society with a norm-breaking lifestyle that has the potential of paving the way for other queer Sami. By choosing to be open within his Sami community Ánte furthermore changes the past, inspiring Lasse to open up about his sexuality, and his grandmother to open up about her own norm breaking relationship. Ironically, it is his insistence upon living with and through Sami traditions that prevents his process of coming out from fitting any of the coming-out narratives elaborated on above.

Furthermore, both *Himlabrand* and *The Saviour of the Lost Children* culminate in a need for activist, community-building final exposures. Ihpil's urge to "tell" is what has the potential of connecting the blog novel's two plotlines, making the Sámi revolution a Sámi queer revolution. On a diegetic level Ihpil dies, but through the publication of her story, her true identity is exposed, and readers can read about her as a source of identification and confirmation that queer Sami do exist. The publication also opens up for more metaphysical readings in which Ihpil is regarded as a religious saviour figure or a ghost. Both of these figures serve to motivate movements for social rectification and change, whether these be considered in terms of revolution, revenge, or religion.

In the Sami community, where queerness has been downplayed and kept hidden, uttering the words "mom, I'm gay" is not sufficient in order to end the narratives. As the protagonists' final exposures extend beyond telling the parents, their fictional coming-out stories echo lesbian personal life stories from the 1970s and 80s: "Enacting the assertion that the personal is political, the coming-out story was not just an individualist emancipation but a political and community-building act, contributing to 'the production of a shared narrative or life history . . . the assimilation of individuals' life histories into the history of the group" (Mulhall, p. 146). As for the 1970s and 80s when personal life stories were used to open up for queer identities, and thus functioned politically, the intersectional Sami perspective today also requires a more public, activist, community-building stance at the end than what is suggested in Roof's scheme.

The fictional testimonies carry the potential to change the lives of imagined queer Sami people in the novel's portrayed communities, and the two novels' portrayal of queer Sami coming-out processes bear in them the potential to change the lives of queer Sami individuals in Sápmi by making hitherto taboo subjects visible and heard. The works serve as "a visionary manifesto" and "an appeal to the world", urging a Sami revolution, and underscore the importance of community-building through social media exposure as well as literary activism through story-telling that models, recognizes, and approves of those living life as queer Sami.

Notes

1. All translations are my own, unless indicated otherwise.
2. The blog actually existed online, and still does: http://ihpil.blogspot.com/.
3. Sami word for apparition, ghost, a being between life and death.
4. Roof leaves it up to others to explore gay male coming-out processes, but in this article I use her pattern to analyse both Ihpil's and Ánte's coming-out processes to shed light on minoritized aspects rather than gendered differences.
5. In Norwegian: De fortapte barns frelser.
6. A Christian conservative movement that arrived in Norway in 1848, that "[c]ontributed to a set of conservative, Christian ideals related to gender, and a similar set of values and a language—or even lack of knowledge—related to sexuality and sexual identity" (Olsen, 2008).
7. Which means apparition, ghost, a being between life and death.
8. All translations from the two novels into English are mine.

9. Stine H. Bang Svendsen highlights the same regarding Sami women and feminism in her article «Sami Women at the Threshold of Disappearance: Elsa Laula Renberg (1877–1931) and Kari Stenberg's (1884–1969) Challenges to Nordic Feminism» (2021). The conviction that oppression based on gender is less important than that based on indigeneity explains why Elsa Laula Renberg and Kari Stenberg have not earned the status they deserve in the gender research field.
10. As indigenous researcher Dwayne Donald emphasizes, indigenous identity is often closely connected to place, such as place of tradition, homeland and spiritual relationship to specific locations in the world (Donald, 2012, p. 540. See also Basso, 1996; Borrows, 2000; Collignon, 2006; Heith, 2016).
11. The only male figure Ánte comes out to is his gay predecessor Lasse with whom he identifies.

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