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Sámi Feminism and Activism in Ann-Helén Laestadius' Novel *Stöld*

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the thematization of (intersectional indigenous) feminist criticism and activism in the novel *Stöld* (2021), written by the Sámi-Tornedalian-Swedish author Ann-Helén Laestadius. The novel depicts life in a small town in Sápmi, where reindeer herders are strongly affected by the brutal killings of their animals and the lack of legal security they experience. A central motif in the novel is *the resistance* to this discrimination through the characters Elsa's and Minna's Sámi and feminist activism. The first part of the analysis examines their common Sámi causes and activist strategies; and the second focuses on the critique of gender norms within the minoritized reindeer herding society, and investigates the gendered attitudes towards their activism. Finally, I discuss the ways in which the novel functions as literary activism. In sum, the book shows that it requires the effort of several women acting across generations through various institutions such as the police, the media, and the judicial system to create change.

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After more than a century of forced and indirect assimilation, indigenous activism of the 1960s led to a revitalization of Sámi language(s) and culture (cf. Andresen et al., 2021, pp. 364–367). Since that, Sámi activism has been subject to varied degrees of attention from the different majoritized Fennoscandian nations of which Sámi societies are a part. Most recently, however, interest in Sámi activism and literature has grown significantly (cf. e.g. Dankertsen, 2019; Halsaa, 2020; Bang Svendsen, 2021). This is partly due to the fact that the climate crisis and changes in the energy industry—which affect certain Sámi communities in particular—have fuelled Sámi activism, and partly due to the emergence of several new literary voices. Among the latter we find award-winning authors and public debaters such as Sigbjørn Skåden, Ann-Helén Laestadius, Elin Anna Labba, Moa Backe Åstot, Ella Marie Hætta Isaksen, and Kathrine Nedrejord. Ann-Helén Laestadius (1971–) is a Sámi-Tornedalian¹-Swedish journalist and author who made her debut as a fiction writer in 2007 with the young-adult novel *SMS från Soppero* (SMS from Soppero). *Stöld*² is her first novel for an adult readership and describes life in a «sameby»³ in Sápmi and northern Sweden. It thematizes a lack of legal protection for reindeer herders and their animals. Reindeer are brutally tortured and murdered, but although the reindeer husbandry owners gather evidence and report this animal cruelty to the police, all cases are dropped and classified as «thefts» (cf. the novel's title). The reindeer owners are strongly affected by the brutal killings, the lack of help from the police, and the general lack of legal security they experience. In addition, the reindeer herders and other Sámi in the novel are regularly exposed to hate speech and other forms of racism. While Black activists and

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scholars such as Sara Ahmed are concerned with the police's excessive attention to marked racialized bodies (2007, p. 161), *Stöld* thematizes the effects of the opposite, that is, of being *ignored* by the police. Yet although the story's main conflict is the problematic encounter between the majoritized Swedish society and the Sámi community, it is the examination of problems within the minoritized reindeer herding society itself that contributes to nuancing and renewing the well-known conflict-oriented plot in majority—minority narratives. A central motif in the novel is the women's resistance to discrimination both from the non-Sámi majoritized society and within the minoritized reindeer husbandry society itself.

Indigeneity researcher Rauna Kuokkanen points out that «[w]hile the Sami as a people have been colonized by surrounding nation-states, many Sami women have also been oppressed and susceptible to sexism and male violence within their own communities» (2007, p. 76). She sees the two oppressive practices as connected through colonial history, which is characterized by hierarchical and patriarchal power structures (2007, p. 78). Moreover, she argues that indigenous peoples' policies are focused on male priorities and that this leads to «women's struggles against sexism and patriarchy» often being perceived as «white middle-class concerns» (2017, p. 105). Consequently, cases concerning Sámi women are often ignored (2007, p. 78). This may be an expression of strategic essentialism, a strategy in which minoritized groups emphasize their similarities to promote their interests (Spivak, 1990). Until the 1980s the Sámi political movement would, for example, claim that Sámi women were not as oppressed as majoritized Nordic women (Eikjok, 2007; Kuokkanen, 2007, p. 73). Clearly, claims of gender equality in Sápmi are currently questioned, not least in *Stöld*'s depiction of intersectional indigenous feminist criticism and activism. This article will unravel how the novel's Sámi women are exposed to intersecting pressure from the male-dominated reindeer husbandry industry and from the conformist and racist Swedish majoritized society. The political Sámi resistance, I will argue, constitutes a decolonizing and feminist critique⁴ which is part of larger, ongoing decolonization and indigenization processes in contemporary Sápmi. The first part of my analysis examines the protagonist Elsa's and her friend Minna's common Sámi causes and activist strategies. The second focuses on the critique of gender norms within the minoritized reindeer herding society, and, furthermore, investigates gendered attitudes towards Elsa's and Minna's feminist and indigenous activism. In the article's final part, I summarize and discuss the ways in which the novel functions as literary activism (Oxfeldt, 2022).⁵ Before turning to the novel's plot, however, I will situate it within recent scholarship on Sámi literature.

Ann-Helén Laestadius' novel *Stöld* (2021)

Until recently, research on transnational Sámi literature, including Sámi children's and young-adult literature, seems to have been limited (Hirvonen, 2014). This trend has apparently changed, as academic articles about Sámi literature—as well as about Sámi motifs and themes in the majority literature—are on the rise (cf. e.g. Bakken, 2018; Fredriksen, 2020; Karlsen, 2019; Kokkola & Siltanen, 2021; Kolberg, 2022; Pankenier Weld, 2020; Seierstad Stokke, 2020). Previous research on Laestadius' authorship includes Anne Heith's (2020) study of literary placemaking and anti-colonial Sámi and Tornedalians literature, where she examines Laestadius' «Soppero Quartet»;⁶ Lena Manderstedt, Annbritt Palo, and Lydia Kokkola's article «Rethinking Cultural Appropriation in YA Literature Through Sámi and Arctic Pedagogies» (2020), which also focuses on the «Soppero Quartet»; and Asbjørn Rørslett Kolberg's «Identitet, konflikt og veien hjem. Stemmer i nyere samisk ungdomslitteratur» (2022), which examines Sámi identity and belonging in four YA novels, one of which is Laestadius' *Bara dra* (Just Go, 2018).

Laestadius' books are written in Swedish, but in *Stöld*, Sámi words and phrases function as an aesthetic and thematic device that expresses cultural identity and belonging (cf. Heith, 2016). They are used to number the chapters, in single words and concepts, in geographical names, and in particular culture carrying expressions such as family relations (for example «áddjá», meaning «grandfather») and clothing («gákti», meaning traditional Sámi clothing), thus contributing to the

novel's indigenization project. The story is fictional, but the novel is based on real events and supported by a large number of sources, including one hundred police reports on theft and killing of reindeer, according to the book's peritexts (Laestadius 2021, pp. 439–441).

The story is set in a small town in Sápmi. It is divided into three parts with the first taking place in 2008 and the remaining parts occurring ten years later, in 2018 and 2019. At the beginning of the story, nine-year-old Elsa is threatened into silence by the middle-aged Robert Isaksson, as she catches him killing her reindeer calf. Robert is known for poaching among reindeer herders in the area and is immediately believed to be the one behind the crime. The novel follows Elsa and her family in addition to a few other people from the local community. She loves the reindeer herding life, and as she matures, she wants to enter the reindeer husbandry industry. However, it is her older brother, Mattias, who is meant to take over the herd (p. 12). The novel's main conflict is related to the fact that the reindeer herders experience a constant loss of reindeer. In one scene, Elsa finds a reindeer brutally mutilated and murdered, with her stomach cut open and her calf removed (p. 243). Such a loss is deeply upsetting to the herders and their society.

Elsa puts the spotlight on these crimes and the police's lack of investigation through her activism in the second and third part of the book. In these parts, Elsa's friend Minna is also a central character. Minna has already been introduced to Laestadius' readership in *Bara dra* (2018), in which the story takes place around the time *Stöld* ends. In this book, the main character is Johannes—a boy Minna, according to *Stöld*, meets at the Jokkmokk market in February 2019 (2021, pp. 149, 220, 228). Johannes has an unresolved relationship with Minna, whose role is mainly that of a political activist in *Bara dra* as well. The challenging conditions for reindeer herders and discrimination against the Sámi constitute an important background for Johannes' desire to leave the reindeer husbandry he is expected to take over: «The reindeer die./Friends take their own lives./Fields disappear./He can't fight any longer»⁷ (Laestadius, 2018, p. 7; cf. Kolberg, 2022). *Stöld*, in sum, can be regarded as a prequel to *Bara dra*.

Hate crime versus theft: Elsa's and Minna's common indigenous activism

Elsa's and Minna's activism is motivated by personal backgrounds and experiences. While Elsa is a young woman whose life has been shaped by an upbringing in a reindeer herding family and who desires a life as a female reindeer herder, Minna is a young woman who has had her life shaped by a mixed Sámi-Swedish background and an absent mother. In different ways, their experiences inspire their shared activist cause—that is, to change the labelling of crimes against reindeer and to reinforce the laws against hate crimes targeting Sámi individuals and interests. While she is first silenced by Robert Isaksson, Elsa speaks up ten years later, confronting both Swedish majoritized society and, eventually, her own indigenous society. This leads to her use of outreach, and eventually inreach, media practices (cf. Lindgren & Cocq, 2016).

In the article «Turning the Inside Out: Social Media and the Broadcasting of Indigenous Discourse», Simon Lindgren and Coppélie Cocq examine the potential and effects of social media for conveying discourses from within the Sámi group to a broader audience (2016, pp. 132–133). They use the concepts of *inreach* and *outreach communication/practices* to conceptualize the ways in which indigenous online communication is often practiced: Inreach communication seeks to build community and to establish and negotiate meaning within an indigenous group, while outreach practices seek to connect «with people from outside the group, to increase visibility, or to correct stereotypes and other false representations» (p. 135). Among other things, the latter relates to building or strengthening alliances between indigenous populations and environmental activist movements, and to interlinking indigenous peoples globally (p. 135). However, inreach and outreach communication in social media intertwines and thus enables the articulation of so-called emic perspectives, i.e. inside perspectives, in broader contexts (p. 136). Both inreach and outreach communication practices are at play in *Stöld*, as Elsa and Minna use digital media to articulate their own perspectives and broadcast emic discourse. Elsa's activism starts as a spontaneous reaction to

the police's dismissal of her request for help, yet progressively it takes shape, and the media become a conscious and strategic tool in her struggle for change. In other words, the reader follows Elsa's growing into the role of an activist and spokesperson for Sámi interests and rights. Minna's support is of crucial importance to her fulfilment of this activist task, showing the significance of female collaboration, friendship and support (cf. Ahmed, 2017, pp. 212, 260).

Elsa's first contact with the press occurs when she discovers two bags containing the remains of two reindeer with traditional ear marks, indicating that they belong to her brother, Mattias. The police claim to have no time to visit the site nor to receive the bags at the police station. As a result, Elsa photographs the bags in front of the police station and sends the pictures to the local newspaper's tip mail. This is an example of contemporary «citizen journalism», in which «first-person accounts documented in writing, and with mobile and digital cameras, becomes a unique addition to the coverage that mainstream journalism is able to provide» (Lindgren & Cocq, 2016, p. 134). However, instead of uploading the pictures to her social media accounts, Elsa decides to convey her story through traditional mainstream media. In Lindgren and Cocq's terms, this indicates an intention at outreach communication with both non-Sámi and non-reindeer herding Sámi local citizens through the local newspaper. At the same time Elsa's reaction to the discovery of the bags constitutes a «feminist snap» in which «she doesn't take it anymore, when she reacts to what she has previously endured» (Ahmed, 2017, p. 211). This snap is what is necessary for the situation of reindeer herders and reindeer «to come to the surface as some tangible thing, as a situation that should not be patiently endured, as a situation that demands our collective impatience» (p. 211). The journalist who responds to the tip and appears at the police station, Lovisa Wikberg, remarks that Elsa's report is «very dramatic» (Laestadius, 2021, p. 195). Elsa explains that she is tired of not being taken seriously by the police and that this has to do with the categorization of the crime. It is «[b]ecause it is classified as theft or vandalism and that is not interesting to invest resources in. But to us it is not theft. It's murder, it's a deliberate murder» (p. 195).

Elsa is cautious of the way she appears in interaction with Wikberg and does not want to seem difficult or «whiny» (p. 197). She agrees to appear under her full name and to name her Sámi town in the article. After a moment's deliberation, she also agrees to be photographed—but not with the bags containing the dead animals. That would be too dramatic. Her goal is to make people understand the reindeer herders' predicament and she is thus concerned with avoiding distractions from the case, such as tabloid pictures (p. 198). Too often Sámi individuals are depicted in the media using a polarizing rhetoric: «[I]t made it far too easy for the haters to lump them together and call the Sámi whiny or rowdy» (p. 197). Elsa, in other words, is aware that non-Sámi people may minoritize and essentialize (Spivak, 1990) her and this spurs a feeling of great responsibility. Furthermore, it implies that she look at herself from the outside, adapting the majority's gaze or rather a «colonial gaze». From such an outside perspective she is aware that the majority may regard the Sámi as well as the feminists as «killjoys» (Ahmed, 2007). Adding a twist to Ahmed's terminology, one could say that this typically leads to conflict-filled situations, violence, and power being interpreted as being about *the dissatisfaction of the Sámi* rather than about *what* the Sámi are dissatisfied *with* (Ahmed, 2021, p. 124). Thus, the Sámi who point out racism and other forms of discrimination can be perceived as «Sámi feminist killjoys» (cf. 122–125). Overall, Elsa's first, spontaneous meeting with the press is characterized by discomfort and insecurity (Laestadius, 2021, p. 198).

A short while later, Elsa encounters her old friend Minna. The reunion of the two friends occurs at the Jokkmokk market in February 2019. This is a large annual winter festival in Sápmi. After a night of partying, the girls are awakened by the news of a hate crime, in which dead reindeer are hung over a sign, with blood smeared all over the place name Jåhkâmáhkke (Lule Sámi)/Jokkmokk (Swedish); it was «[a]s if someone had taken the reindeer's blood and with a brush disgraced the Sámi place name in a marketplace that had gathered Sámi for over four hundred years» (p. 225). Minna brings Elsa with her to the police, and asks if they have taken pictures and if they are going to «label it a hate crime? It is undoubtedly aimed at the Sámi, at reindeer herders» (p. 227). In Elsa's

opinion «'the reindeer should be left hanging all day. Let everyone see what happens here'» (p. 227). She is sceptical of the police's alleged fear of evidence destruction, and Minna is provoked by the police's claim that they want to do their job «'as [they] always do'» (p. 228). At this point, Elsa has already begun using the media for outreach communication of the reindeer herding Sámi's situation, as shown above. Now she wants to contact newspaper and TV reporters again. However, Minna has already done so. When a journalist from the nationwide newspaper *Expressen* shows up, Minna comments that his presence is merely due to a visit by the Minister of Culture the day before; only then «'the journalists can be bothered'» to travel to Sápmi (p. 229). Half an hour later, an *Expressen* article containing an interview with Elsa and Minna is posted online. Minna laughs and quotes from it, but Elsa conveys a decolonizing feminist critique of what could be called the journalist's «male, heterosexual tourist gaze» (K. Olsen, 2004, pp. 295–296; Pritchard & Morgan, 2000, p. 894), a gaze which exotifies young Sámi women and Sápmi (Laestadius, 2021, p. 232).

Minna plays a peripheral role, but she is still a key character in the story through her role as Elsa's foremost—and occasionally only—support system (cf. 267). The reader is not given much information about Minna's background, apart from the fact that her father is a famous Sámi *duojar*, i.e. craftsman in traditional Sámi art and crafts (Gaski, 1997, pp. 10–11; *Store norske leksikon*, s.v. «duodji», 2022), while her mother «[...] according to rumour [is] a southerner who sought refuge with the Sámi in Jokkmokk to find her inner Sámi» (Laestadius, 2021, p. 228). In other words, Minna did not grow up in a reindeer herding family, but she did grow up in a family that used to help relatives in the reindeer husbandry (p. 344). With her Sámi-Swedish background, she has decided to become a lawyer in order to work for a change in the classification of theft and killing of reindeer within the Swedish legal system (cf. 292, 272, 343). She represents a classic, hard-core political activist, both aesthetically, through her eventually shaved head, and through her persistent attention: «She went around. There were mining protests, demonstrations, and many long days in Stockholm, in the Supreme Court where the state's representative shamelessly called the Sámi Lapps» (p. 420). Where Elsa «had failed to listen to the Sámi radio's live broadcast», Minna had «sat through hour after hour when Girjás fought against the state to regain the right to decide on small game hunting»⁸ (p. 420). Minna's strength, courage and endurance is a source of inspiration to Elsa, who finds comfort in their friendship as well as in Minna's future plans to «'save us all, make sure that Robert goes to prison and that hate crimes online are punished severely'» (p. 343).

In *Bara dra* the reader gains more insight into Minna's political activism. In this novel she enters the story as she leaves «a Sámi demonstration», in which the protesters protest «against the state/letting mining companies destroy the land» (Laestadius, 2018, p. 7). Johannes comments that she has become «'Someone who will fight and demonstrate'» (55)—in other words: an activist. In *Bara dra*, Minna explains why she wants to become a lawyer: She «'is tired of all the shit that we Sámi are exposed to'» and wants to «'make sure that the police start investigating reindeer torture and reindeer theft'» (p. 112). Her belief in the need for Sámi representation in various parts of the state administration and the judicial system are the principal reason for her choice of profession: «'Sámi lawyers and Sámi police are needed. Otherwise, nothing changes'» (p. 112). This is a significant common feature between Elsa and Minna: They see a need for change and they decide that they need to contribute to it, each in her own way.

Shortly after the racially motivated hate crime took place at the Jokkmokk market, «severed reindeer heads and parts of reindeer bodies» are found in the Sámi town, «placed side by side, almost ritually», in a semicircular formation (Laestadius, 2021, p. 270). Elsa recognizes two of the reindeer heads as the evidence she provided to the police and therefore contacts Minna and Lovisa Wikberg from the local newspaper. She worries about the consequences of the media coverage, but Minna encourages her to continue, because «'[n]ow not only the local newspaper will write [about it]'» (p. 272), thus foreseeing an outreach communication (Lindgren & Cocq, 2016, p. 135). «'You have to do it'», she admonishes her, «'because if the police and the prosecutors begin to do their job, it's over. And that's exactly what you should say when the reporter arrives'» (Laestadius, 2021,

p. 272). This shows how Minna supports Elsa in her activism. Ahmed highlights the importance of such support for a killjoy to persist, not least when she «experience[s] the crisis of being unsupported; support matters all the more all the less we feel supported» (2017, p. 260). Furthermore, Minna reminds Elsa why activism is important: «'If you give up, Jon-Isak [her cousin] will never be able to stop looking over his shoulder. Do you understand? Never'» (Laestadius, 2021, p. 273). Jon-Isak represents the next generation, and he is already, at the age of nine, experiencing racialized discrimination at school. Minna wants a picture from the crime scene because she «'has to get it out everywhere'» (p. 272). *Bara dra* explains that she has many followers on the social media platforms Instagram and Snapchat (2018, p. 37), which is most likely what «everywhere» refers to. In addition, she contacts «'television, evening newspapers, and DN [the Swedish Daily News]» (2021, p. 272). Fifteen reindeer owners from the Sámi town gather on the macabre scene, including Elsa as the only woman. It turns out Minna is right: This time it is not just a local newspaper that shows interest; the news of the killed reindeer and former police evidence is spread «everywhere, the articles and the TV and radio features were shared over and over again» (p. 277).

At the end of the novel, a big case is reported: An association of criminals «which provided both taverns and hotels along the coast with meat from poached reindeer» has been revealed (p. 427). In connection with the media coverage of the case, Elsa speaks to the press one last time, *anonymously*, because it is not «risk-free to speak out». She especially fears the consequences for Jon-Isak, who blames Elsa's media exposure for the problems he is exposed to at school. She becomes «[t]he anonymous Sámi town member who told of long-term harassment and threats and demanded that it was time to review the legislation, that the killing of reindeer must be punished more severely, to be titled differently» (p. 428).

Elsa, then, gradually becomes more aware of how she can use the media as an activist tool. The first meetings with the press do not have the desired effect; they neither succeed at inreach communication, bringing the reindeer herders closer together as a community, nor at outreach communication aimed at increasing visibility and correcting false representations (Lindgren & Cocq, 2016, p. 135). Initially, this makes Elsa sceptical of media exposure and media activism. Nevertheless, she continues to use the media, especially for the benefits of their outreach potential. When she contacts Lovisa Wikberg for the second time in connection with the half-circle reindeer constellation, she does so as a savvy media activist. By the end of the story, she has started making explicit demands to the legislative power of Sweden in public media. This indicates that outreach communication is the most important goal of Elsa's media exposure and activism.

Considering that the reader gets far less insight into Minna's movements and actions, it is more difficult to determine the effects, desired or not, of her activism. However, her ultimate goal is the same as Elsa's: She «'will make sure that the police start investigating reindeer torture and reindeer theft'» (p. 112). In addition to her media activism through various media platforms such as social media, television, and newspapers, she engages in a more physical and mobile form of activism where she assumes a physical presence at central battle sites. Ultimately, she wants to make activism her livelihood and to fight for her cause from within the system. As mentioned, she believes that Sámi representation in the state administration and legal system is fundamental (cf. 112). In other words, Minna's end goal is on the one hand to contribute to better legal protection for reindeer and reindeer herders, and on the other, to contribute to emic discourse in the state administration and the legal system, where she can «articulate [Sámi] perspectives and share insider knowledge that can reach out to allies as well as other policy makers, journalists, governmental bodies and so on» (Lindgren & Cocq, 2016, p. 136). Together, Elsa and Minna use different activist strategies in the hope of achieving their common goals.

Elsa's feminist activism

Stöld also has a feminist agenda and conveys discriminatory attitudes towards women within the Sámi community. This discrimination is confronted mainly by Elsa, Minna, and Hanna (Elsa's

neighbour and the mother of Anna-Stina and Jon-Isak). The reactions to Elsa's, and to some extent Minna's, activism, it turns out, are mainly negative and gendered. In addition, they tend to be propounded by older, established men, which makes Hanna's transgenerational support particularly important (cf. Ahmed, 2017, p. 260). Hanna carries forth a feminist critique of the fact that sons have a higher status than daughters within reindeer herding families. She emphasizes the importance of having «a child who want[s] and [is] able» to pass on reindeer husbandry to the next generation, rather than having a child of a certain sex (Laestadius, 2021, p. 212). Hanna has personal experience with gender discrimination; despite the fact that she was the firstborn in her family, «there had obviously not been any talk of the girl in the family taking over her father's reindeer mark or becoming a master» (p. 45). When Elsa as a child asked her older brother to explain why, «she had only got an eye-rolling in response» (pp. 45–46), indicating that this is a commonly known—and accepted—norm in the reindeer herding community. Another example of gender discrimination in this community is the lack of acceptance of Elsa's mother Marika. She was never accepted as «a real Sámi», even though she «spoke [...] Sámi, sewed costumes, had her own costumes, and was a reindeer herder» (p. 20). She used to be called a «rivgu» – a derogatory term for «women who were not Sámi». The «problem» is that she did not grow up speaking Sámi nor in a reindeer herding family (p. 20). Hence, while Hanna is mainly discriminated on the basis of gender, Marika is oppressed for being from the south of Sweden, for not having a reindeer herding-family background, and for not being «Sámi enough».

The traditional gender norms of the Sámi society are also upheld through criticism of Elsa's activism, both within the Sámi community and from the majoritized Swedish society. The reactions to her activism are gendered in that within the reindeer herding society, her appearance in the media mainly attracts negative attention from men. It is usually Olle, the «chairman of the Sámi town», who speaks to the media (p. 197). He is critical of Elsa's timing and blames her for receiving several anonymous threats after her first interview in the local newspaper (pp. 215–216). Elsa's brother and father are not positive either; they think she should have told them she was in the newspaper and are worried that «'[t]his may be dangerous for you'» (p. 215). When Anna-Stina and Jon-Isak's father sees the newspaper interview, he holds the newspaper with «hard fists» and says that «'[t]his had not been discussed in the Sámi town» and wonders if «the girl [had] made her own decision», indicating the collective character of decision-making practices within the Sámi town (p. 211). Hanna, on the other hand, thinks «'[i]t's good that she dares'» (p. 211). She supports Elsa and believes Elsa will be «'the Sámi town's first female chairman'» (p. 216). In Hanna's opinion it is time to «'stick together, be united and say that we have had enough'» (p. 216). When this does not happen, Elsa suspects that it is her *gender* rather than her *actions* that constitute a problem for Olle, and she feels certain that she would have gotten a pat on the shoulder for her media display, had she been a man. Nevertheless, Olle's behaviour is counter-productive; Elsa experiences a new urge to rebel that motivates her to tell the aforementioned local newspaper journalist Lovisa Wikberg about the phone threats she is regularly exposed to (p. 274). Overall, Hanna acts as a mouthpiece for the novel's feminist critique and supports Elsa in her efforts to create change. She expresses an explicit gender awareness through statements such as «'[i]t should be a girl who speaks out. It's time now'» (p. 216).

Hanna's and Elsa's, as well as Minna's, critique of the male dominance in the Sámi town is not just an internal Sámi issue, but can be seen as related to the historical regulation and organization of the reindeer husbandry industry at a national level. As Kuokkanen points out, this legal interference has led to an «interconnectedness of colonial and patriarchal discrimination and domination» (Kuokkanen, 2007, p. 79). In many cases, it has meant that women have lost their traditional rights to ownership of their own reindeer, and that reindeer-owning women has been placed under their husbands in the official documentation. All in all, the Reindeer Husbandry Act has had a gender-discriminatory effect and made reindeer herding women dependent on their husbands (79; Eikjok, 2007, pp. 109, 112; Halsaa, 2020, pp. 129–131; Sametinget, 2022).

We see the consequences of this colonial and patriarchal domination reflected within the literary universe of the novel, where Anna-Stina, Hanna, and Elsa's *ákkhu* (grandmother) primarily contribute to the reindeer husbandry when extra labour is needed, such as during the calving season. The regulation also clearly affects Elsa and her ability to continue in the reindeer husbandry industry, which in addition to being regarded as a central Sámi identity marker in general (Eikjok, 2007, p. 109), appears as a central identity marker for her personally (cf. Laestadius, 2021, p. 349). Ultimately, the importance of the reindeer husbandry becomes clear through her willingness to fight for it and her place within it. While the male reindeer herders fight against economic challenges, natural forces, climate change, and theft and killing of reindeer, Elsa, as a woman, also has to fight against other — male — reindeer herders (in addition to a few patriarchal Sámi women). In other words, Elsa is fighting a battle against intersectional discrimination from the majoritized society at large and from the minoritized community of which she is a part (cf. T. Olsen, 2018). This two-front battle leaves her with a limited support system, and this makes her activism all the more demanding—and important (cf. Ahmed, 2017, p. 260). She fights for the right to her own history as a Sámi and as a woman born into a reindeer herding family, for her identity, for tradition, and for her own and other reindeer herders' future. This may also be why Elsa shares her name with one of the most important activists in Sámi history, Elsa Laula Renberg, who has become a Sámi activist symbol (cf. Andresen et al., 2021, pp. 207–217; Bang Svendsen, 2021).

Despite the gender divide in the reactions to Elsa's activism, the depiction is not entirely one-sided. One of Elsa's most important supporters is Lasse, Hanna's younger brother who commits suicide at the end of the novel's first part. Despite the fact that Lasse is no longer alive, the memory of him and the feeling of his presence and support is important to her. And although she and her brother, Mattias, slide apart after Lasse's death, the siblings mean a lot to each other and gradually regain their closeness. Mattias is struggling with the loss of Lasse and with the effects of the abuse he is experiencing as a Sámi reindeer herder, but he never loses faith in his sister. When contemplating suicide, he feels confident about leaving the reindeer husbandry to his father and his sister. Furthermore, there is one, newly transferred policeman Elsa trusts. Even though he is not able to arrest Robert Isaksson, he shows compassion and takes her more seriously than any other policeman or --woman has ever done before.

Nevertheless, most of the depicted Sámi men appear to disfavour Elsa's indigenous activism because it is also feminist. It seems they would rather live with maimed and killed reindeer than support her. This may reflect an attempt at retaining their male identity. Indigeneity researcher and former activist Jorunn Eikjok points out that there existed a «gender-based division of labour, particularly for men» in traditional Sámi society; while women could perform tasks associated with both genders, «men were subject to strict sanctions if they in any way participated in women's work, as it would be perceived as 'unmanly'» (2007, p. 110). In modern Sámi societies, according to Eikjok, the dividing line is primarily based on education because «[t]hose who have an education have a command of both the dominant society's and Sami society's competence» (p. 111). Yet, in some municipalities, twice as many women as men obtain a higher education, thus *gendering* this dividing line. As if to compensate for a loss of male power, this has led to a masculinization of Sámi resources: «Snowmobiles and all-terrain vehicles are not solely a means of food transport however, but have, just like nature, become new symbols for Sami masculinity» (p. 111). In this sense, male identity should be regarded as closely linked to Sámi identity and traditional trades and when Elsa agitates for Sámi women's place in the reindeer husbandry industry, this is most likely perceived as threatening to the male reindeer herders, who may not experience that they have any alternatives to that industry. In this manner, while Elsa and Minna fight a common cause against hate crimes, their feminist cause inward gains more (personal) importance for Elsa, both because of her own desire to be a reindeer herder, and because of the way she and her activism are received by the Sámi reindeer herders, with Olle being a significant, authoritative male representative and opponent.

Stöld as literary activism

In this article I have examined the depiction of indigenous feminist criticism and activism in the novel *Stöld*. I have analysed Elsa and Minna's causes, their activist strategies, and the importance of their friendship. On the one hand, Elsa's and Minna's activism is directed at the Swedish majoritized society and the lack of legal protection for the Sámi in general and for reindeer herders and their reindeer in particular. On the other, their critique is aimed at indigenous reindeer herding societies in order to combat discrimination of girls and women (cf. T. Olsen, 2018). Although the novel has an open ending regarding the success of the activist projects, it ends on a positive note, with the exposure of the criminal poaching network (cf. 427), the media coverage of the case, and with Elsa going into reindeer herding full-time—at least while her brother is getting treatment for mental health issues (Laestadius, 2021, p. 429).

Stöld shows that it takes the effort of several women acting across generations through various institutions such as the police, the media, and the judicial system. It indicates that the battle can be worthwhile, but also illustrates the tensions and opposition involved. *Stöld* can be considered a lesson in indigenous feminist activism, showing that change requires inreach, as well as outreach practices, and that getting your own community behind you may be the most challenging battle due to intersectional oppression. It is against a background of colonization that the older Sámi men opt not to support the young, Sámi women. In addition to—or maybe as a consequence of—*Stöld's* thematization of the entanglement of feminist and indigenous criticism and activism, the novel might be viewed as an activist effort to further indigenization, decolonization, and feminism in contemporary Fennoscandia. The novel shows both Sámi and non-Sámi readers the strength of young women, their sources of motivation, their need for mentorship, and their potential ability to change the world and fight for justice and equality, through various forms of activism. Ultimately, the unattained goal of gender equality may inspire readers to continue the fight in real life, after the novel has taught them about the specific causes as well as about available activist strategies. At the level of the author and her work, we find a story about reindeer herders written from a Sámi perspective by a (non-reindeer herding) Sámi, female author. This, too, contributes to the indigenous, feminist aspect of the book as literary activism. Linguistically, the indigenization and decolonization project emerges through the intermittent use of Sámi language. Even so, the novel's use of Swedish as its main language illustrates the consequences of Nordic colonization and assimilation policy towards the Sámi, leaving the author unable to write *Stöld* in a Sámi language.

Notes

1. The term «Tornedalian» denotes the minoritized multiethnic and multilingual Tornedalian-Finnish population living in the border areas between Sweden and Finland (in the Torne Valley).
2. The book was published in English under the title *Stolen* in 2023.
3. Directly translated from Swedish «sameby» means «Sámi village». This is an economic and administrative unit led by a board, whose task it is to govern the reindeer husbandry in a defined geographical area on behalf of its members (Sametinget, 2022).
4. Decolonization is a perspective where «colonization and imperialism are seen as processes that are still ongoing», in contrast to what the term postcolonialism indicates, according to T. Olsen (2018, p. 185). Kuokkanen, however, does not clearly distinguish between the two concepts (2007, p. 73).
5. All quotations are translated into English by the article author.
6. Translations of titles into English are by the article author. The «Soppero Quartet» consists of the YA novels *SMS från Soppero* (SMS from Soppero, 2007), *Hej vacker* (Hello Beautiful, 2010), *Ingen annan är som du* (No One Else Is Like You, 2011), and *Hitta hem* (Finding Home, 2012).
7. The slashes are due to the fact that *Bara dra* is written as an «easy-to-read book» and in a poetic language that borders on lyrical. They indicate line breaks in the original text.
8. The Girjás case is a long-standing dispute between the Girjás Sámi District and the Swedish State over the right to administer hunting and fishing rights in the Girjás land management area. On 23 January 2020, the Supreme Court of Sweden delivered an historic verdict in favour of the Girjás Sámi District (Ravna, 2020, p. 19).

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