

**‘MY HARD-EARNED (SÁMI) IDENTITY’:  
THE HARD WORK OF UNCOMFORTABLE READING**

Lydia Kokkola  
University of Oulu  
Elina Siltanen  
University of Turku

**Introduction**

Aina minulta että mitä  
on saamelaisuus  
mitä luonto  
ja minä kerron

joikasin käsi ojossa yksinäisyyttä  
Kuukkeli vanha varoittaja  
istahti ja katsoi hyvin  
kas kun ei sanonut  
että minun on pian sanottava hyvästit  
(Holmberg 2015, 73)<sup>1</sup>

(I’m always being asked what  
is ‘Sáminess’  
what is nature  
and I tell

I stretched my arms and joiked<sup>2</sup> loneliness  
that old informer, the Siberian Jay  
sat and watched well  
when he failed to say  
that soon I should say farewell)

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<sup>1</sup> Permission to quote from Niillas Holmberg’s work granted by the poet and his publisher by personal communication.

<sup>2</sup> “Joik” is a type of Sámi singing style.

In the above, untitled, poem taken from Niillas Holmberg's collection *Jos itseni pelastan itseltäni* (2015, *If I Save Myself from Myself*), the speaker neutrally observes that he is frequently asked to comment on Sámi identity and on their relationship with nature. Holmberg, too, is Sámi: the indigenous people of the northernmost regions of Europe. Formerly referred to by the pejorative "Lapp," the Sámi are comprised of a number of smaller ethnic groups with different traditions, practices, and even languages which are for the most part mutually comprehensible. The Sámi languages, cultures and identity have been threatened by educational policies promoting national languages (Finnish, Swedish, Russian, and Norwegian) at the expense of the indigenous languages. In addition, mining, energy production, agriculture, forestry, and tourism, both from abroad and from Southern Finland, have had a major impact on the region, and negatively impacted in traditional Sámi lifestyles and cultural practices (e.g. Frandy 2017). The poem also indicates that the speaker frequently has to "explain" Sámi culture, a point Holmberg has also noted in interviews (e.g. Mikkonen 2016, n.p.). The need to "explain" indicates the power imbalance that allows the Finnish majority to remain ignorant about the indigenous population but not vice versa.

Holmberg composes his poetry and songs in North Sámi and Finnish, and his work has been translated into more than ten languages. In an interview, he explained that "in my first books, my poems were almost as if from a diary. I wrote about the things that were on my mind each day" (Rasmus, 2018 n.p.). His more recent works, like *Juolgevuodđu*, are more overtly political, reflecting Holmberg's increasing activism in campaigns protesting against infringements of traditional Sámi practices such as herding reindeer, hunting and fishing in Sápmi. Holmberg's home is Ohcejohka (Utsjoki), which he describes as being in "Saamiland (occupied by Finland)" on his website. For readers unfamiliar with the geography of the region, Western maps would situate Ohcejohka as Finland's northernmost town on the banks of the Deatnu River (River Teno) that marks the border between Finland and Norway. For the Sámi, the river is not a border, but rather a natural highway connecting areas within Sápmi which also provides water and fish. In short, Holmberg has all the credentials for being a spokesperson for the Sámi; his poetry and music are easily read through this lens. In interviews, in YouTube clips and on his website, he encourages readers to respond to his works in this way. Indeed, this viewpoint is so dominant we refer to it as the "Sámi script."

Scripts are our default, habituated ways of behaving; they are inherently lazy. Racial prejudices follow scripts: rather than seeing the individual, we use scripts related to ethnicity, nationality, body shape, and so on to form lenses for interpreting behaviors. First articulated by Schank and Abelson (1977), scripts describe the way in which knowledge is stored, created, and applied in sequences. Scripts vary from micro-level linguistic exchanges such as greetings ("How are you?" "I'm fine, thanks") to extended sequences of behavior (Schank and Abelson's example is about ordering

food in a restaurant). Such sociological approaches to scripts highlight actions, which is particularly relevant when investigating the impact of literature on readers (Kokkola and Van den Bossche 2019). In recent years, cognitive literary studies have highlighted scripts to understand the actions of characters in fiction and also to understand how readers engage with texts (e.g. Stockwell 2002; Trites 2014). Both analyses of character scripts and reader scripts focus on making the ordinary visible, enabling us to see that which is there, hidden in plain view, whilst the sociological approaches help us reflect on the real-world implications of such behavior.

Our analyses address Holmberg's poetry written in Finnish, with a particular focus on *Jos itseni pelastan itseltäni*, a collection of about sixty mostly untitled poems, some of which are illustrated with pen and ink sketches by Hanna Lehikoinen. It was Holmberg's third collection of poetry, the first and, to date, only collection to be composed in Finnish, although most of his poetry written in Sámi and English is also available in Finnish translation. Since these poems were written in Finnish, they are ripe with material for a consideration of scripts and reading across differences. Finnish is not Holmberg's first language, so by choosing to write in it, Holmberg hails (in the Althusserian sense) readers and listeners who share neither his cultural heritage nor his ethnic background. The Sámi script is in plain view as the collection is easily read as autobiographical, not least because Holmberg describes his work this way himself. For example, in the video "Saamelainen kulttuurin moniottelija Niillas Holmberg puhuu taiteesta" [Multitalented Sámi cultural figure Niillas Holmberg Speaks about Art], Holmberg describes his artistic endeavors as a pleasant way to perform his thoughts and feelings, a point that is immediately followed with a statement on his sense of duty to speak on behalf of the Sámi and to explain how Finnish society should behave towards Sámi issues (see Salokorpi 2015, n.p.). In another interview, he also said that "[*Jos itseni pelastan itseltäni*] is a kind of autobiography of the events of my life" (Lakkala 2015, n.p., our translation). Most of the poems present the speaker as a young Sámi man who is a poet/musician. Thus, rather than referring to "the speaker" and "poetic 'I,'" we will often simply refer to "Holmberg," which also allows us to expose the dangers of adopting such slippages. Associating the author too closely with the representation that a poetic speaker offers is always problematic, but our premise is precisely to explore the ordinariness of an autobiographical, essentializing reading.

In what follows, we discuss first how Holmberg presents his Sámi identity, highlighting authenticity, and thus providing ample material for readings that evoke the Sámi script. We follow along with this 'easy' reading, to show how the script works to the poet's political advantage, but also discuss the problems with assumptions of authenticity. Holmberg also offers alternatives to the Sámi script, performing an intersectional, hybrid identity on multiple fronts as he evokes roles such as political activist and countercultural rebel. These identities overlap with his Sámi identity but also depart from it, raising questions about what is authentic and how to focus our readings. We then dis-

cuss the relationship between these performed identity scripts and reader behavior, highlighting instances where readers are encouraged to experience negative emotions. These ugly feelings, we suggest, are most politically powerful when they enable us to recognize what we are taking for granted: the ordinary. What constitutes ‘the ordinary’ obviously varies from person to person, but ethnic stereotypes certainly constitute part of the ordinary. Rejecting the lazy comfort of using the Sámi script to impose coherence or a resolution, and instead engaging in the hard work of remaining uncertain in the face of the unknown is a more ethically sound way to read. In the final section, we propose that self-reflexivity about the place of scripts in our communicative practices may be the first step towards what Philip Nel calls reading “uncomfortably” (2017, 67–106). Uncomfortable readings acknowledge the interplay of race and affect as well as the “mixed bloodlines” of cultural influence and demand that majority culture readers recognize their own complicity and privilege (Nel 2017, 58, drawing on Shelley Fisher Fishkin). The uncomfortable feelings that arise from this process, we shall propose, are most powerful when they remain unresolved.

Although she does not draw on script theory, Toril Moi (2017) has recently alerted us to the importance of paying attention to what is *in* the text rather than claiming to seek something that is hidden. Her point is *not* that the ideas expressed in literary texts are “easily grasped, self-evident, or banal,” on the contrary, she observes that “we often don’t notice the obvious” (Moi 2017, 184). She continues: “And if something really is obvious to us, we will not feel confused. Then we don’t have a philosophical problem. Maybe we *should* have a philosophical problem” (Moi 2017, 184, original italics). For Moi, holding on to the “obvious” prevents us from “engag[ing] in critical thinking” because “unless *something* grates, gives us a headache, wakes us up from the conviction that our current view works just fine, we’ll never even realize that we are confused” (Moi 2017, 184, original italics). Moi lifts the importance of paying attention to our habituated, “ordinary” ways of thinking and dismisses the idea of what is sometimes dubbed “suspicious” or—drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003)—“paranoid” readings. Reading suspiciously suggests that texts contain secrets which the wise critic must seek to uncover, and herein lies the crux of the problem from our perspective: reading suspiciously raises the critic above other “ordinary” readers, often including the author/poet.

In this paper, we align ourselves with Moi to examine the “ordinary,” understood here as “things we take for granted.” The problem being that – if we take something for granted – how do we recognize that we are doing so? The specific “thing we take for granted” we want to address is Sámi identity. Holmberg’s poetry and songs are brimming with references to Sámi culture, the environs of Sápmi and to the speaker’s experiences of life as a Sámi man. They evoke habitual, normalized Sámi scripts, which are marketed through Holmberg’s website and the press as biographically inspired personal and political pieces. We aim to expose the implications of reading this script ‘lazily’, high-

lighting how this fixes the Sámi community as a uniform, easily comprehended, monoculture. We then offer an alternative strategy that involves hard work on the part of the reader: reading uncomfortably. Uncomfortable readings, we shall suggest, demand that readers question what they take for granted, and perhaps reflect upon why they have taken such matters for granted.

Another easy way to approach Holmberg's poetry would be to interpret it as a concrete example of Gayatri Spivak's (1990) contentious "strategic essentialism". Spivak controversially suggested that disempowered people may engage in "strategic essentialism" in order to further their emancipatory efforts. Strategic essentialism, as Noble, Poynting and Tabar define it, is "the articulation of an irreducible otherness which is operationalised primarily for the critical speaking position it offers minority intellectuals" (1991, 31). Thus, when Holmberg encourages readers to interpret his texts as autobiographical expressions of authentic Sámi experience, he could be understood to be engaging in exactly the kinds of strategic moves Spivak envisages, albeit without necessarily knowing anything about Spivak's ideas. Strategic essentialism has been critiqued in the academy, primarily because it implies that an 'essence' exists, but holds traction when describing the packaging of authenticity for political purposes. For example, Holmberg held up a placard with the words "Colonialistic Fishing License" (*sic!*) whilst performing a protest song about changes in the fishing rights in the Deatnu at the 2016 Indigenous Music Festival Ijahis Idja (Rasmus 2018). This political act was premised on Holmberg's status as a member of the Sámi community with the (unelected, self-chosen) right to speak on behalf of the group as a whole.

### **The Sámi Script and Staged Authenticity**

In a short poem towards the beginning of *Jos itseni pelastan itseltäni*, the poet recalls driving his car to Sirma, a village on the Norwegian side of the Deatnu, close to Ohcejohka, to attend a dance (Holmberg 2015, 13). Holmberg is a musician as well as a poet so – if we read the poem autobiographically as he requests in podcasts and interviews linked from his website – we can assume that he is on his way to work as a singer. (Holmberg has also been very vocal in campaigns to keep the Sámi school in Sirma open [Larsen 2016]). For the first time, he is stopped by the border guard and asked to open the trunk of his Avensis, which contains nothing other than his "hard-earned Sámi identity", as the following quotation extracted from the middle of the poem shows:

ehdin ajaa rajalle  
 ja ensimmäistä kertaa punainen valo  
 nainen kysyy onko minusta  
 antamaan hänen työllään tarkoituksen  
 vastaan ei mutta se haluaa tutkia takakonttini  
 jossa minulla on paketoituna mikäs muu

kuin työllä hankittu saamelaisidentiteettini  
(Holmberg 2015, 13)

(I drove until I reached the border  
and for the first time, at the red light  
a woman asked me whether I had it in me  
to give her work meaning  
I say no, but she wants to check my car's boot  
where I have packaged nothing other  
than my hard-earned Sámi identity)  
(our translation)

Recalling that the Finnish-Norwegian border is an imposition on the region that many Sámi, including Holmberg, resent, a reading focusing on the Sámi script might deduce that the poem questions the authority of a border guard whose actions divide Sápmi. The phrase “hard-earned identity,” however, indicates the very personal nature of the struggle, proving that being true to himself and to his identity requires hard work. Being “true to oneself” is one of the definitions of authenticity (MacNeil and Mak 2007, 27-8; Trilling 1972, 11). In an autobiographical reading of this poem, the poet has packaged his “hard-earned Sámi identity” into a commercial product – songs and poetry – which he sells for a living. As in the previous poem in which he is being interviewed, there is a tension between being true to himself and performing authenticity in a way that enables him to earn a living. On one level, Holmberg’s hybrid Sámi-Finnish identity can be understood in terms of ‘double consciousness’: the term W.E.B. DuBois used to describe the feeling of simultaneously seeing himself from within and from the perspective of a white person viewing his own African-American skin. Unlike DuBois, whose African-American identity is never valued, Holmberg is dependent on his Sámi identity to earn his living.

The Sámi script is far from hidden in Holmberg’s oeuvre as a whole and in this poem particularly. Nevertheless, the implications of this overt reference to his “hard earned Sámi identity” and criticism of a border dividing parts of Sápmi are not, to recall Moi (2017, 184), “easily grasped, self-evident, or banal” for either Holmberg or his readers. But what, to continue with Moi, is the philosophical problem here? We suggest that these lazy ways of reading – uncritically adopting the script – distract us from the “hard work” of reading for a variety of meanings that may be conflicting, an approach that is predicated on “conspicuous” reading, meaning that we should pay attention to *how* we read rather than assuming that reading or meaning is somehow “obvious, blatant or evident” (Siltanen 2016, 2-6). Just as being true to oneself is hard, reading poetry and the subjectivities it constructs

calls for what Elina Siltanen (2016, 2-6, 89-91) refers to as the “hard work” of reading for a variety of meanings as a reciprocal gesture. While Holmberg’s poetry is not as experimental as the kind of poetry that Siltanen discusses, its engagement with staged authenticity – in this case, textual affordances that encourage readers to read the poems as representing a *genuine* Sámi self, which are then pitted against multiple identities – invites a similar engagement.

Holmberg clearly evokes the Sámi script in his poetry collection, for instance, his opening poem already mentions reindeer (Holmberg 2015, 7). Reindeer herding has often been viewed as a marker of the “traditionality” and “authenticity” of Sáminess, as Sanna Valkonen (2010, 314-5) notes, but she also questions its potential reductivism. The association between reindeer husbandry and Sámi authenticity has long been contentious (see also Ahvenjärvi 2015, 106-7). Today, both the reindeer and the Sámi’s relationship with them are frequently marketed as “authentic” within tourism. John Urry’s ([1990] 2001) work on the tourist gaze is highly relevant for understanding the fetishization of the Sámi-reindeer connection. The first poem in Holmberg’s collection includes a line scoffing at the pleasure tourists take upon seeing reindeer droppings (2015, 7). Urry writes that “in much tourism there is the equivalent of looking at the mad behind bars. The bars can be the camera or the ethnic costumes or quaint village that gets invaded every summer,” and such exotic visual cues then “stage authenticity” for tourists (Urry 1992, 177). Our term, the “Sámi script,” highlights the many similarities between the packaging of “Lapland” (Sápmi) and Sámi culture for consumption by tourists and the politics at play in the production, marketing and reading of Holmberg’s poetry.

The obvious exploitation in the appropriation of Sámi culture by the tourist industry is just one reason why authenticity is so important. The etymological origins of the term *authenticity* highlight that which is “original, genuine, principal” (OED). Like its sister, *truth*, authenticity is highly valued, but ultimately impossible to substantiate since it is wedded to modes of knowing and the subjectivity of experience. In an endeavor to map the ways in which authenticity is understood in different disciplines, Heather MacNeil and Bonnie Mak (2007, 27-8) extrapolate three categories of authenticity, namely “(1) authentic as true to oneself; (2) authentic as original; and (3) authentic as trustworthy statement of fact”, and they observe that “[t]he structures and goals of authenticity vary from one discipline to another and from one age to another”. Authenticity in the sense of being “true to oneself” is, today, strongly associated with the self-help tradition (Guignon 2004, viii), whereas connections to originality are more closely related to disciplines such as art. “Trustworthiness” captures the epistemological problem at the heart of the first two: how do we know what is true to the self or to its origins? One way to address this question is to consider the power balance at play in determining authenticity: who benefits and who is disempowered when, in our case, Holmberg’s poetry is read as an “authentic” representation of Sámi experience? Simply adopting the Sámi script when reading Holmberg’s poetry benefits his “hard-earned” identity as a Sámi, but denigrates other aspects of his

identity about which he is also quite vocal in his poems. A simple focus on the Sámi script reduces Holmberg to a stereotype.

Offering the Sámi script for readers' consumption involves similar power dynamics to those espoused by the Subaltern Studies Group, whose use of their racialized identities Spivak (1996, 214) was dubbed "strategic essentialism." In Elizabeth Eide's words, strategic essentialism is a "political strategy whereby differences (within a group) are temporarily downplayed and unity assumed for the sake of achieving political goals" (2016, n.p.). In a similar vein, writers can, as Suzanne Keen argues, make use of "ambassadorial strategic empathy," which targets a particular group of people to harness their empathy for another group of people whom the literary text represents (2007, 142). Holmberg's poetry does not directly call for empathy but does address Finnish readers, using strategic essentialism to call their attention to the disempowered and reductively essentialized position of the Sámi within Finnish culture, a call that might involve empathy as well. Yet empathy, Keen notes, may also be "false," which means that people "incorrectly believe that they have caught the feelings of suffering others from a different culture, gender, race, or class" (2007, 159). This exposes the problems associated with essentializing ethnicity but does not promote an alternative strategy.

There is an urgent need to address the ethics of appropriation, but responding with arguments based on Holmberg's authenticity *does no work* for literary critics. The phrase— "does no work"— comes from Moi as she shows how "the fetishization of the hidden" hinders critical ability to see what is evident in plain sight (2017, 179). Elevating authenticity drives us to seek out the "true self," the "original," the "trustworthy" (MacNeil and Mak 2007, 27). In practice, for readers of Holmberg, he is reduced to an example, not an individual speaking for himself: his Sámi identity is fetishized. Furthermore, readers who adopt the Sámi script are also disempowered, stripped of the agency of what Siltanen calls "hard work" (2016, 2–6). Siltanen examines the hard work that is expected from the reader: cerebral work such as immersing oneself into the speaker's position, seeking (or imposing) coherence or simply tracing the allusions. She also implies that such activities can have the effect of making one feel superior (Siltanen 2016, 19–21). Here we extend Siltanen's notion of "hard work" to include emotional labor. Reading beyond the Sámi script, we will argue, asks readers to confront negative emotions and allow themselves to feel "uncomfortable" (Nel 2017, 58) without seeking to contain the feelings through the analysis. Such a reading does not aim to achieve reconciliation, forgiveness or, indeed, demand anything from the poet. The first step in this process is to recognize how Holmberg has packaged the Sámi script as an authentic product for consumption by his readers. The second is to acknowledge the ways he endeavors to circumvent the expectation of representativeness by staging authenticity in multiple ways that unfix the Sámi script.

## Unfixing the Sámi Script through Intersectionality

In *Jos itseni pelastan itseltäni*, Holmberg evokes multiple authenticities, some of which run counter to the traditional Sámi script—for example, he claims the southern Finnish city of Tampere as his home (2015, 20)—as a way of challenging readers to look beyond the Sámi script. The descriptions of life in Tampere and visits to Helsinki question whether Holmberg can be authentic as a Finn who is also a Sámi or as a Sámi in an urban setting. For non-Sámi readers like ourselves, responding to these poems might consist of being or becoming aware of the difference between Holmberg’s experience and their own non-hybrid or differently hybrid experiences and the poet’s melancholy. In the first poem, Holmberg contrasts the urban life of a student or young artist with life in Ohcejohka, where tourists focus on trivia. The poet negotiates his authenticity as a Finn by focusing not on who he *is* but on what he *does* (cf. Guignon 2004, 126–7). Charles Guignon (2004, 126) notes that the postmodern quest for authenticity, or “an attempt to find the true self beneath all social masks” has become more and more difficult, prompting critics to emphasize “a way of thinking about the self not as a *thing* or *object* of any sort, but as an unfolding *story* with certain distinctive features” (2004, 126; original italics; see also Taylor 1989, 47–8). For Guignon, authenticity as “an unfolding *story*” is shaped by how “the self is something we *do*, not something we *find*” (Guignon 2004, 126–7; original italics). Awareness that authenticity is performed has not diminished its privileged status.

Holmberg’s incentive to view “the self ...as an unfolding story” (Guignon 2004, 126) is clear in the poem that provides the book’s title. The phrase “jos itsesi pelastat itseltäsi / et tapahdu” (Holmberg 2015, 71) [if you save yourself from yourself / you don’t happen] is presented as Nils-Aslak Valkeapää’s response to the poet’s desire to save the world. Holmberg’s allusion to Valkeapää (1943–2001), a charismatic Sámi who, through his music, writing, and activism, drew attention to the situation of the Sámi from the 1960s onwards, can be seen as a strategy for establishing (literary) historical continuity. We will discuss such allusions further below, but here we note that these lines suggest that if the speaker were to “save himself from himself,” he would fix his identity thereby making an unfolding story impossible. The lines seem to suggest that identity should be embraced as it happens, not as something essentialized and predetermined. As a whole, the poems in *Jos itseni pelastan itseltäni* perform authenticity in ways that encourage, at the very least, a recognition of the speaker’s intersectionality.

Performing authenticity is confessional, a genre of poetry that has been considered problematic for people who are marginalized or in disadvantaged positions. Christopher Grobe, in a discussion of American confessional poetry, notes that “In the 1950s and ‘60s, it was the privilege of white authors to focus on confession’s ‘individual ‘I,’” because “writers of color were in danger of coming across as merely public, merely social, and merely representative” (Grobe 2017, n.p.). In the twenty-first

century, Holmberg still finds himself in a similar bind, but is able to articulate the problem directly through meta-critical commentaries. For instance, he begins one poem as follows:

Meinasin kirjoittaa kappaleen *Assimilaatio blues*  
 mutta eikös se olisi assimilaatiota itsessään  
 eikös minun pitäisi olla surullinen saameksi  
 (Holmberg 2015, 12)

(I meant to write a piece called *Assimilation blues*  
 but wouldn't that be assimilation itself  
 aren't I supposed to be sad in Sámi)

The poem then criticizes the paltry sums of money that are spent on promoting Sámi culture in Finland by describing how many tickets it would buy at a Helsinki arena or how many “lappalaisasua [Lappish outfits] ... made in China” it could buy (Holmberg 2015, 12, our translation). Here, the poem refers to larger recent debates, as the cultural appropriation of the traditional Sámi garment, *gákti*, has been an oft-criticized matter in Finland in recent years, for example when Jenni Hiltunen's video art work *Grind* (2011), which featured women dancing Jamaican dancehall queen style in fake *gákti*, was displayed in Kiasma (a major museum of modern art in Helsinki) in 2016 (see Helander and Pieski 2016), or when Alpine skiing racer Tanja Poutiainen celebrated the end of her skiing career in a fake Sámi outfit in 2014. Holmberg has been active in these debates, commenting on how the discussion has stereotyped the Sámi as people who get upset about trivial matters. He explains how the appropriation of *gákti* is emblematic of colonial attitudes, including teaching the Sámi to be ashamed of their cultural heritage (Mikkonen 2016, n.p.). In the poem cited above, Holmberg does not so much perform the “sad” Sámi as the angry, politicized Sámi who is aligned with other indigenous peoples facing assimilation: another “type” rather than an individual. The alternative is to unfix the Sámi script by performing it alongside other identities, none of which are hidden though may be overlooked if readers allow the Sámi script to dominate. In *Jos itseni pelastan itseltäni*, Holmberg also stages himself as a political activist, as a Finnish student, and as a countercultural rebel.

Holmberg's staging of intersectional authenticity is particularly obvious in the five-page epilogue, comprised of a series of small vignettes latching onto different aspects of selfhood to display an array of identities. Each of the stanzas, apart from the final one, begins with the words “Olen tässä” (I am here) or simply with “Olen” (I am) which emphasizes the sense of focusing on multiple perspectives to the self as a performance. No single stanza defines Holmberg's “I,” but combined these declarations of identity constitute the multi-faceted story that he wants to tell about himself. He is certainly not alone in wanting to perform hybridity: in a discussion of the literatures of indigenous peoples, including the Sámi, Ahvenjärvi notes that “culturally and ethnically mixed identities” and

“hybridity” are common (2017, 42). All of the identities Holmberg evokes draw from stereotyped ideas in one way or another, encouraging readers to view them in comparison to larger scripts. Holmberg begins the epilogue by referring to himself as a young Sámi poet, thereby inviting an autobiographical reading. The first lines recall his first memory: being lifted above the antlers of a thousand reindeer by his father. Bringing the reindeer herds together to earmark the new calves with notches that indicate their owners’ family relations is one of the most significant cultural events in the Sámi year. The poem’s opening gesture positions the speaker simultaneously above the animal world and viscerally connected to his family and community. The stanza concludes with the italicized refrain “*Piirtää hiilellä ja Kontion verellä*” (Holmberg 2015, 75–9) [Draw in charcoal and bear blood], which reappears at the end of all but the first and last two stanzas of this twenty-stanza poem. From this stereotypical starting point, the poet shifts to making an emergency call on a cellphone in Helsinki. The woman receiving the call thinks that he is in difficulty, but the poet states that it is an acid induced psychosis. The phrasing turns the psychosis into the actor; the poet is not in trouble, the psychosis is speaking to the woman from emergency services. The small rhetorical device separates the action from selfhood, forcing the reader to reflect on matters of authenticity: is Holmberg really someone who uses acid? Is this authentic because he confesses to doing so? Are his actions and his selfhood different? The stanza provides no solutions, although it firmly guides readers towards such reflections. The gesture of inviting reflection on what is authentic for Holmberg is consistent with his will to represent his authenticity as an unfolding story.

The refrain—“*Piirtää hiilellä ja Kontion verellä*”—adds gravity to the brief stanzas by demanding that a record be made. The use of charcoal for drawing and writing is traditional: the centrality of fires in Sámi life has meant that charcoal is always readily available. The use of bear blood, however, has a more specific cultural association. Like other indigenous peoples who have lived close to bears, the Sámi revere the animal to the extent that there are many pet-names for bears which allow the speaker to refer to the great creature without calling it by its true name. The ancient Finns had similar practices making it possible for Holmberg to portray this relationship very accurately through Finnish. The word “Kontio” is used in Finnish to avoid using the bear’s true name: *karhu*. In the pre-Christian era, the Sámi regarded bears as mediators between the gods and humans and they had special rituals for preparing the carcass for consumption and burying the bones thereafter. Writing in bear’s blood, then, calls for a connection between the gods and the human world. Moreover, a cream made of alder bark— a charcoal-based substance—is used for drawing the symbols onto the shaman drums that enable the *noaidi* (shamen) to travel into the spirit worlds. Combined, Holmberg’s refrain can be thought of as a prayer as he connects the lived world with the spiritual world. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the epilogue is also published online where it appears under the title “Rummun Kalvo” (The Skin of the Drum), which encourages readers to see the lengthy po-

em as an incantation read to the beating of the Shamanic drum. By highlighting these cultural rituals, Holmberg again draws attention to the Sámi script, as if exhibiting his culture to mainstream Finnish readers, who are then compelled to either do the “hard work” of grasping the significance of the rituals or live with the knowledge that they have chosen to remain ignorant.

The idealized Shamanic allusions are juxtaposed with decidedly prosaic moments. Highly poetic descriptions of the festival when the new reindeer calves’ ears are marked and standing beside his mother’s grave are set alongside apologies for behaving badly at Christmas, having a terrible hangover in Bremen, getting stoned, playing video games and climbing on a roof to help an injured seagull. Holmberg refers to a performance he gave to 3500 people at the Medellín poetry festival and contrasts himself with Native Americans and Inuit people (Holmberg 2015, 76–7). The latter are instances where he portrays himself as a performer who must package his hard-earned Sámi identity for his audience and as an indigenous person more widely, the former draw on stereotypes of artists and students. The epilogue can be viewed as a key to reading the rest of the collection, as it ties together different performative identities that have appeared intermittently in the preceding poems, contrasting the trivial with the personal, the political and the epic to create a view of a self as a rounded, intersectional performance throughout. This inclination to “perform” the self also testifies to how even seemingly autobiographical writing does not reveal a true, authentic self, but only versions or representations. Once we look past the Sámi script and focus on what else is obvious (cf. *Moi*) in Holmberg’s poems and, just as importantly, in our readings of his work, we can see Holmberg writing his own “unique life story” from different representations of identity (Guignon 2004, 127). Such an aspiration is, according to Charles Taylor, increasingly common in the postmodern world where “people are encouraged to...discover their own fulfillment” (Taylor 2007, 299). Readers, too, must seek fulfillment.

### **Reading Conspicuously**

Reading poetry is expected to be hard work: readers are expected to make a reciprocal gesture to the poet by committing time and attention to seeking out meanings (Siltanen 2016, 2–6, 89–91). Such reading is “conspicuous”: elements within the text draw attention to the act of reading (Siltanen 2016, 4). Allusion is one of the most concrete ways a poet can demand hard work. Allusions only work if the reader is either already in the know or is willing to find the source of the allusion (an act that can entail hard work), but first the reader has to recognize that an allusion exists. Holmberg repeatedly makes the first step easy for the reader by naming someone and drawing a connection between the person and himself. Above, we noted his allusion to Valkeapää, whom Holmberg refers to by the more intimate, Sámi version of his name, Ailu. Holmberg refers to himself as a child of Valkeapää in the epilogue, describing himself as holding Ailu’s hand during his first flight. In this way, he invites

readers to regard him as a political activist continuing Valkeapää's work. He also connects himself to Aslak Hætta (1824–1854) who led the Kautokeino uprising of the Sámi and was sentenced to death for his actions (Holmberg 2015, 77). In these instances, he seeks to represent himself as a political activist on a par with these legendary figures. The names of his Sámi forefathers function as guarantees of his authenticity and credibility as an activist.

Other names Holmberg uses to raise his profile as an activist include the Mexican political activist “Subcomandante Marcos,” a leader of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation. In addition, he alludes to artistic rebels—writers and musicians—who are known for opposing societal norms. In one poem, he describes himself as “Jack Kerouac on ‘the road’” (2015, 47), thus comparing himself to the Beat poets. The Beat Generation, which included writers such as Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, were countercultural “rebels” in the USA in the 1950s. Their interests included politics, spiritual matters and indigenous life (see Raskin 2006, 16, 18), all of which manifest in Holmberg's writing, alongside heavy drinking and drug-culture. For Allen Ginsberg, for example, a part of his Beat attitude was, as Jonah Raskin writes, to emphasize “personality” and to be a “poseur” (2006, 20), a kind of authenticity that is a confessional performance. Holmberg's explicit and implicit allusions to the Beats stage him as someone whose authenticity is a chosen, real rebelliousness. Recognizing these figures only requires the reader to be capable of typing the names into Google; it is not exactly *hard* work, but there are so many allusions it is unlikely that any reader would recognize them all without at least such minimal effort. These allusions signal an authenticity that, according to Jeffrey T. Nealon, “is these days wholly territorialized on choice, rebellion, being yourself, freedom, fun” (2012, 57). Nealon makes his argument in the context of a discussion of classic rock, but Holmberg also stages himself as “real” in a way that calls to mind the kind of authenticity claimed by hip-hop or rap musicians.

Being “authentic” in the sense of being “real” is a central feature of rap music (see McLeod 1999, 134, 136). In the epilogue, Holmberg alludes to rap musicians Big Syke and Tupac Shakur and their hip-hop group Outlawz (Holmberg 2015, 78). Shakur, who died in a shooting in 1996, was a “gangsta” rap musician and also an active commentator on social issues. Kembrew McLeod analyzed a corpus of texts that connect hip-hop with authenticity and identified “staying true to yourself” as central to hip-hop culture along with, for example, being Black and highlighting one's roots, as a way to resist assimilation even when hip-hop has become more and more commercially viable (1999, 137, 140, 143, 146). Like the poetry of the Beat Generation, this kind of authenticity is a performance or a mask. Hip-hop has also been used for political commentary: according to Michelle H. Raheja, “indigenous hip hop” has, over the last 30 years, become an important means through which to comment on political issues, and digitalization has exacerbated this trend (2017, 203). While Holmberg's poetry is neither rhymed nor rhythmic like hip-hop, Holmberg's interest in hip-hop culture shows in the

political lyrics and in the way he stages authenticity, referring to drug-taking and alcohol abuse. He has also collaborated with Sámi rapper Ailu Valle in a song opposing a fishing law in the Deatnu.<sup>3</sup> While McLeod (1999, 148) is careful not to generalize his findings about hip-hop and assimilation to other cultures, interviews with Holmberg demonstrate clear parallels in the ways he claims to be true to himself, his culture and thus “authentic.” In this way, he resists assimilation, even when writing in Finnish.

By seeking credibility for his role as an activist through evoking proper names associated with Sámi history, Beat culture and hip-hop, Holmberg again relies on scripts, providing readers with concise reference points which might allow them to grasp the activist aspect of his intersectional identity, provided that they recognize the names or are willing to look them up. On the other hand, an affiliation as a countercultural rebel or as a “poseur” in the style of Beat poets might also raise questions of credibility, not least because of the obvious vanity implicit in inviting comparisons with such well-established forebears. A conclusive answer as to what Holmberg might have in common with Valkeapää, Kerouac, or Subcomandante Marcos can hardly be offered, but the gesture of alluding to these figures signals Holmberg’s intersectionality and the work he demands from his readers. Those who avoid the hard work of checking and reflecting, we shall suggest in our concluding remarks, may adopt other strategies that can be helpful. Holmberg stages authenticity on multiple levels in Holmberg’s collection, which may raise uncomfortable feelings in readers, when they recognize the impossibility of reconciling the performed poetic persona into a coherent, credible unity.

### **Reading Uncomfortably: The Politically Ambiguous Work of Negative Emotions**

In her ground-breaking book, *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai exposed the “politically ambiguous” work of negative emotions (2005, 1). These ordinary negative emotions posit people in “a state of obstructed agency,” as when one’s sense of powerlessness with regard to another person causes an emotion, but Ngai also highlights their “*critical* productivity” (2005, 3, original italics). The ugly feelings Ngai highlights—envy, anxiety, paranoia, irritation—bring about a “*racialized* affect” she dubs “animat- edness,” as well as “a strange amalgamation of shock and boredom” she refers to as “stuplimity” (2005, 2–3; our emphasis).<sup>4</sup> Adopting Ngai’s principles, we resonate to the idea that negative emo-

<sup>3</sup> The Deatnu has traditionally provided the Sámi with fish, especially Atlantic Salmon, which are traditionally caught using weir-and-net traps. Since the mid-nineteenth century, tourist anglers—most of whom fish with flies—have depleted the fish stock alarmingly (Frandy 2017). Holmberg, Valle, and other activists are protesting against attempts by the Finnish and Norwegian states to impose fishing restrictions, arguing that local people should have the right to decide such matters. In his discussion of fishing in the region, Tim Frandy observes that “tourist fishing is very much a colonial act, and an extension of the legacy of appropriating Sámi resources for the benefit of non-Sámi people” (2017, 666).

<sup>4</sup> Ngai associates “animat- edness” with the idea that “ethnic subjects” are often depicted as particularly “agitated” or “emotional[ly] hyperexpressive” (Ngai 2005, 91, 93–4). When Holmberg asks, in the poem we cited earlier, that “eikös minun pitäisi olla surullinen saameksi” (Holmberg 2015, 12) [aren’t I supposed to be sad in Sámi?], he appears to refer to these kinds of assumptions.

tions *do* political work, but doing and maintaining this work involves sustaining those negative emotions.

Examining one's uncomfortable, negative emotions while reading poetry is productive. Recognizing one's own prejudices, particularly these habituated responses that feel normal is not pleasant: readers often seek to end uncomfortable readings. One knee-jerk reaction to ugly feelings is to deflect them, for instance, by abdicating personal responsibility. A reader might reasonably claim that she has not personally benefitted from colonial practices in Sápmi, without acknowledging that she may well have been complicit by buying water and wind generated electricity produced in Sápmi, by benefitting from tourist dollars, or by ignoring the cultural appropriation of Sámi culture. Another response is to acknowledge an individual share in the collective guilt surrounding the colonization of Sápmi. As we have noted throughout, Holmberg's poems do not explicitly require readers to feel guilt or apologize; instead, these feelings are invited by, for example, encouraging readers to recognize their ignorance. Sara Ahmed (2014) identifies such feelings of shame as critical in the work of apology, which imposes special limits and conditions. She observes that shame functions as "not only a mode of recognition of injustices committed against others, but also a form of nation building" (2014, 102). Acknowledging the collective guilt of benefitting from colonization is complicatedly implicated in the work of nation building because, as Ahmed explains, "feeling bad" about national transgressions can enable feelings of "coming to terms with" the guilt (2014, 102) thereby creating "ground for a narrative of national recovery" (2014, 109). Performing "shame can be a substitute for an apology," a short-cut that acknowledges the collective failure to live up to national ideals but which takes pride in performing guilt because when "*we mean well, ... [we] can work to reproduce the nation as an ideal*" (Ahmed 2014, 120, 109, original italics). To be appropriate, a pedagogy of apology needs to negotiate a knife-edge balance between enabling genuine apology to take place without promoting the kinds of nationalistic idealism that lay behind the original abuse.

In contrast, we are suggesting that remaining uncomfortable in our readings may be a more desirable goal than seeking resolution. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Judith Halberstam argues that failure may function as a form of norm-critique: "Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" (2011, 2–3). Failure, as celebrated by Halberstam, is not a step on the road to success, rather a way to question the measures used to define success. Failure forms roads that lead to other, surprising places. Rather than seeking reconciliation, recovery and an end to our uncomfortable feelings, failure allows readers to remain awkward, ignorant and distanced and see the "surprising ways of being in the world" that open up (Halberstam 2011, 2–3). Let us start with the problem of forcing coherence. In the previous sections, we discussed Holmberg's writings from an intersectional perspective, highlighting the inadequacy of a singular

Sámi script to capture the complexity of his lived experiences and the role of allusion. Intersectionality highlights the fragmented reality of people's lives, and yet even intersectional analyses tend to impose coherence by regarding the individual as formed of many parts. We have not been able to avoid this in our own writing since this assumption is embedded in the language we use: phrases such as "Holmberg offers" and "the poet states" necessarily impose a sense of unity. If habitual language does not allow us to truly engage with a fragmented other (or self, for that matter), then there may be other ways of allowing our awkwardness, ignorance and distance to become part of our mode of reading, whereby self-reflexivity about the uncomfortable experience of remaining in such ugly feeling might lead to surprising conclusions.

Equally, Holmberg's many allusions are so overt that they give the impression that we should either recognize them or bother to look them up because enough information is provided for us to do so. In such cases, we could argue that Holmberg is inviting his readers to dwell on his words and do the hard work of paranoid readings, by seeking out that which is hidden in the text. Success would be measured by the ability to determine a correct reading, thereby elevating oneself as a member of "an intellectual elite" who are superior to "the mainstream" (Konstantinou 2016, 30). It is here that success as a goal becomes deeply problematic. If, by looking things up and tracing sources, one gives oneself the right to assume that one now knows what the experiences described by the poet are "really" like, or at least enough knowledge to feel one belongs to "an intellectual elite," one will inevitably continue the colonial project. Another solution, which allows for failure, is to question why it is experienced as shameful to fail to recognize an allusion, and whether feelings of shame might be a more appropriate response.

One of Holmberg's shortest, most rhythmical poems – ILO-sopimus – is just 15 words of which four are a repetition of the word "koparakeittoa" (soup made from the fetlock or hock of a reindeer, often cooked with reindeer blood). It is arranged in four miniature stanzas, which conclude with the name of the soup.

ILO-sopimus

isä keittää koparakeittoa

EU ja talous

keittää koparakeittoa

presidentinvaalit ja

koparakeittoa

minä syön koparakeittoa

(Holmberg 2015, 62)

(The Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention

dad cooks fetlock soup

EU and budget

cook fetlock soup

presidential elections and

fetlock soup

I eat fetlock soup)

The poem contains several allusions and terms which can easily be checked. The type of soup is not widely eaten in southern Finland, and so the associations surrounding it (a homely comfort food, usually eaten with family not guests) may not be familiar. The abbreviation “EU” should be easy to recognize, but the abbreviation “ILO” is not as widely known in the south. In Finnish, the letters form the word *ilo* [joy], which is utterly misleading. Budgets and presidential elections are familiar enough terms, but the specifics of which budget and which presidential election Holmberg is referring to remain unclear: he could mean them in a general sense, or he could be trying to refer to the specific events that were taking place at the time the poem was composed. All of these things can easily be checked.

If we strive for a successful reading, we would produce a reading that runs something along the following lines:

The soup is positioned as a response to the ILO 169 agreement on indigenous rights, to the EU and national economy, and finally the presidential elections. At first the father eats the soup—which is considered the cheapest part of the animal and is sometimes associated with poverty and hunger. The fetlocks are usually given to dogs to chew on or for training them to follow tracks. By the end of the brief poem, the speaker also eats the soup thereby symbolizing the passing on of poverty from one generation to another. When the poem is read as being written by a poet based in Ohcejohka, it takes on an additional poignancy. Ohcejohka is located on the southern shore of the Deatnu, in Finland. The northern side of the river is in Norway which was the first country to ratify the ILO 169 agreement on indigenous rights in 1990. Finland has still not ratified this agreement

which declares the human rights of indigenous peoples and supports ratifications which would enable indigenous peoples to flourish on a par with other members of the society provided that these ratifications are not opposed by the groups themselves. During the 2012 presidential elections, Pekka Haavisto (Green), one of the two final candidates, expressed his desire to ratify the ILO 169 convention but the winning candidate, Sauli Niinistö (National Coalition Party) claimed that it was “not relevant” for Finland.

This is a perfectly adequate reading of the poem that displays the “hard work” of the critic who has looked up the relevant information and combined it to form a coherent whole. The reading is primarily cerebral, focusing as it does on verifiable facts. In doing so, it positions the poet and his father as victims who should inspire pathos, while dusting the critic’s hands of responsibility as the problem lies with Niinistö, not with the reader him- or herself. There is an implicit arrogance, and an assumption of superiority as the critic explains things for the less elite reader who, by reading the text, is then invited to join the club of people in the know.

It will hardly have escaped your notice that we have produced many such commentaries throughout this paper. We have displayed our “hard work” as critics by filling in background information about key people mentioned in Holmberg’s poems and the cultural significance of charcoal paste, bear’s blood, drums, and reindeer. Doing so is an established convention and we needed to establish our credentials in the bulk of our paper in order to propose our alternative, where we ask what happens if we read the poem without striving to display our hard, cognitive work and instead allow our uncomfortable feelings to take precedent and to fail. Neither of us, the authors of this article, is Sámi: one is a native Finn, the other belongs to an ethnic minority but is also not Sámi. It is therefore, obviously, incumbent on us not to fall back on easy explanations, and nor should we aim to assume a position of authority or knowing. Whilst we can, and should, engage in the hard work of trying to understand what the Sámi find ordinary (for example, fetlock soup, ILO 169), maintaining what Siltanen (forthcoming) dubs a “difficult relation” allows for apology without fetishizing difference.

The details presented in a poem such as “ILO-sopimus” mark the speaker’s cultural authenticity as well as his difference from non-Sámi readers whom Holmberg addresses in this book that is written for a Finnish-speaking audience. Readers, on the other hand, are invited not necessarily to identify with the poet-speaker but to recognize how and where they differ from his carefully constructed authenticities and to, perhaps, admit ignorance or a lack of belonging. Rather than evoking sympathy for those affected by poverty or by the unratified agreement, the emotions associated with reading the poem may involve inadequacy, uncertainty, and even shame. Ultimately, then, instead of working hard to “master” all allusions and thus master the poetry, we might do better to accept our

uncomfortable feelings of ignorance and our laziness about the rights of others. Remaining with the feeling of shame produces a sustainable humility.

As we have discussed, Holmberg's poems make extensive use of scripts and easily produce scripted responses from readers, particularly with reference to the Sámi script. Holmberg makes use of strategic essentialism and displays double consciousness as he invites readers to explore the intersections between the various identities that he evokes, positing his Sámi identity against his identity as a political activist, as an urban Finn, and as an authentic, countercultural individualist. A simple acceptance of the Sámi script can be avoided by witnessing these multiple interlacing scripts which allow space for incoherence and uncomfortable feelings. If we accept Moi's argument that we need to work hard to expose the ordinary, rather than working hard to master the poetry and preside over it as well-informed critic-readers, we can allow ourselves to remain in the genuine discomfort of failing, remaining trapped in negative emotions without forcing coherence or hope. In this sense, failure, instead of success, is an appropriate goal for reading Holmberg's poetry. By allowing space for uncertainty and discomfort, rather than seeking to elevate ourselves as knowledgeable, informed readers, we seek ethical ways of relating to those whose experience is neither familiar nor known to us.

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