Abstract
This article follows a story played out by children at a Sámi early childhood centre in north Sweden. It does so by reflecting on the children’s story as a form of Critical Indigenous Philosophy. In particular it explores what it could mean for a child to be a philosopher in a Sámi context by developing the concept of jurddavázzi, or thought herder, in conversation with Wittgenstein’s method of ‘leading’, and Cavell’s of ‘shepherding’, ‘words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use’. The children’s play story – involving themes of death, struggles with natural surroundings, and interconnectivity through seeing life in nature – is read in relation to questions about traditional stories raised in the poetry of the Sámi poet, artist and philosopher, Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, or Áillohaás. The article ends by discussing how the children’s invitation to follow their story can be seen as a decolonizing pedagogical gesture of the child that requires a particular kind of philosophical listening by the teacher or adult. The article is in its style an attempt to demonstrate a form of philosophical storytelling the children are engaged in.

Keywords
Sámi, Indigenous Philosophy, Áillohaás, early childhood education, storytelling, death

And what rich gazing lands for new thoughts
meet different people, different thoughts
strange customs, a wealth of colors
(Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, Trekways of the Wind (1994))
Introduction

Beside a pile of snow, looking at a pool of water, three four- and five-year-old boys are talking intensely to one another, completely absorbed in something, but my Davvisámigiella (the North Sámi language) is not good enough. I can’t understand what they are saying. Their movements – moving while squatting, pointing, their gazes following something in the water – and their voices tell me that something important is going on. They are squatting beside a small inlet, or perhaps a fjord, to a large pool of water that has been formed by the melting snowdrifts surrounding it. It is not deep where the boys are standing, but the water is knee high for the children at its deepest parts. Piles of snow form small islands in the vast sea pool, and the large drifts of snow surrounding it look like a beautiful miniature mountain landscape, not unlike what the children would find all over Sápmi.1

‘Viktor, come and see!’ Aslak2, one of the boys, is calling me. His voice is loud enough for me to hear without him having to scream, which is significant for these children. They are not loud, but quite softly spoken. I slowly move towards the boys.

‘Viktor, máhtágo don sámejielá [do you know Sámi (language)?]’, Aslak asks in Sámi. Stung by shame that they have to adapt to my poor understanding of Davvisámigiella, but still glad that I understand his question, I respond in Swedish.

‘Lite, bara några ord [A little bit, just a few words]’. The boy stops. He is quiet for a moment, thinking, seemingly wanting to ask another question. Instead he grabs my hand and leads me towards the other two boys who are still standing by the miniature fjord. He repeats, in Swedish: ‘Come and see what we are doing’. He is pointing at the water and takes my hand again to draw me closer, showing me where my attention needs to be. Nils, another boy, follows a yellowed spruce needle with his finger. The needle flows with the stream of meltwater through the fjord and the boys begin to explain what the spruce needles really are. In that moment I realize that this is their world, a world where Davvisámigiella is the expected language, their play world, and that they are inviting me into it, helping me to find my way in it, and I am a guest here. Their invitation, by addressing me in Swedish and showing me what they are doing, comes across as a welcoming act of kindness.

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These three Sámi boys take me on a journey into a mythological and at the same time very real world in which they explore various ways in which death is present in the everyday life of a child. By giving an account of this journey I will do two things in this paper. I will study how a philosophy of death enfolds in the stories that the children are telling in the world they have created and the environment to which they respond. I will do this in conversation with contemporary recurrences of traditional themes in Sámi literature as a way to explore how the children’s welcoming of me into their world creates a space for Critical Indigenous Philosophizing that can decolonize pedagogical conditions and outlooks.

Jurddaváuzzi: philosophers, word warriors and thought herders

What does it mean to decolonize pedagogical conditions? What is philosophy’s role in doing so? Or more specifically, how can the ways in which children philosophize decolonize pedagogical conditions? By decolonization, in this text, I think of the processes, practices, mentalities and lives in resistance, response and reaction to what Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012: 24) has called ‘the imperialism into “our heads”’. Smith, speaking for the colonized communities, continues, ‘we perceive a need to decolonize our minds, to recover ourselves, to claim a
space in which to develop a sense of authentic humanity’. Indigenous Philosophy has a role to play in such processes, in lives lived in decolonizing resistance. Lives lived by children.

Dale Turner has suggested that we can think of Indigenous Philosophy as specific Indigenous ways of articulating the world (Turner, 2006). These ways of knowing are unique to specific peoples, contexts and practices, both concerning the aspects of the world explored and how it is explored, and they are often related to particular practices (Meløe, 1995). For many Sámi it may involve a range of ways of approaching the world through working and living with reindeer, that are kept alive by tradition bearers and elders. The Sámi boys introduce me to their articulation of a world, a play world of snow and meltwater. These approaches to life, and the worlds they articulate, are challenging for philosophies, institutions and societies that are maintaining and maintained by colonial structures. In Sámi contexts they may also, as Nergård (2006) illustrates, result in conflicting existential voices within one and the same person, who lives with Indigenous Philosophies in colonial circumstances. In that sense the very idea of articulating Indigenous Philosophies can challenge colonial ideas and ways of life.

However, Turner introduces the term Critical Indigenous Philosophy for thought practices with a more forceful decolonizing emphasis.

A critical indigenous philosophy…engages different sets of practices; it arises out of a particular kind of cross-cultural dialogue between American Indian ways of knowing the world, of which American Indian spirituality plays an important part, and the legal and political practices of the dominant culture. These practices guide the politicized ‘discourses’ of American Indian rights, sovereignty, and nationhood that define the contemporary legal and political relationship tribes have with the American state. (Turner, 2007: 198)

For Turner, the Critical Indigenous Philosopher becomes a form of word warrior. A warrior who confronts the threats to the people, their traditions, stories and articulations of the world. The word warrior takes on the role of the warrior both by protecting the Indigenous Philosophies and by using that knowledge to challenge oppressive colonial structures. This requires knowledge of both Indigenous philosophical thinking and stories, and the laws and languages of the colonizing discourses, for example, western science, literature, philosophy, religion and law (Turner, 2006). Building upon warrior tradition, the Critical Indigenous Philosopher becomes a figure who goes into argumentative combat in order to decolonize philosophical discourses.

The Sámi child taking my hand, leading me into his (play) world, and involving me in the story that he and his friends are creating shows a different way to engage in Critical Indigenous Philosophy. Even if the children’s invitation into this story is a philosophical act of decolonization, it is hardly a form of combat. Besides, the figure of the warrior does not exist in Sámi traditions. The closest to the position of the warrior in many North American traditions among reindeer herding Sámi is perhaps the reindeer herder. Keeping reindeer is in many ways, although not exclusively, a form of work that upholds and protects Sámi ways of life and thought. Keeping reindeer is a way to connect to the land and to places, a way to relate to each other, including animals, but also a way to uphold a life that contrasts with how the majority of Scandinavians relate to the land. It is a way of life that concretely challenges industries such as mining, hydro plants, wind plants and rights to land for tourism, hunting and fishing as colonial techniques that exploit and conquer the land and its life as a resource.
Sámi literary scholar Harald Gaski calls Indigenous scholars and authors who challenge colonial structures and discourses ‘change agents’ (2013: 118). Change agents build upon, reform and reconnect Sámi knowledges and scholarly and artistic expressions locally, across Sámi languages and traditions in a pan-Sámi community, and by creating Sámi approaches to a cosmopolitan ethos (Gaski, 2013). This involves movements inwards towards Sámi communities, exploring, establishing and transforming its lived values, and outwards towards the world, challenging the conditions of being human.

My concern here is to find ways to think about Sámi children as change agents, as critical Sámi philosophers, that emerge from Sámi cultures and ways of life. I will consider how the Sámi children I met can be seen as such by reading the philosophical poetry of Sámi multi-artist Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, or Aillohaáš (1943–2001).

Reflecting on encounters like the one with these children and my impressions of the work of Aillohaáš I find myself searching for a word, a word that can capture the various kinds of critical thinking that resonate in such situations. ‘Philosophy’ is a Greek word burdened with heavy traditions and discourses of Western literature and academia. I want to say that what resonates in the encounters with these children is philosophy, but only if there are ways to think of philosophy in which the Sámi children’s articulations of the world, their approaches to the conditions of life, are taken seriously, where they can be considered philosophers on their own terms.

This approach to philosophy requires that we allow ourselves to play with language in a way that poeticizes philosophical and pedagogical practice, where we recognize that we sometimes are invited by how words and life take on their own journey and our job simply becomes to acknowledge the possibilities that playing at language gives us. So, if a Sámi approach to philosophical thinking can be found in the figure of the reindeer herder, let us play with that figure as a philosopher. In this essay, playing with the figure of the thought herder means walking with Aillohaáš’s words about thinking with and in the vastness of Sápmi as we meet the ideas of a child, foreigner, or the unexplored corners of ourselves: ‘And what rich gazing/lands for new thoughts/meet different people, different thoughts/strange customs, a wealth of colors’ (Valkeapää, 1994).

In Davvisámigiella, the north Sámi language, reindeer herders who keep their own reindeer often are called boazovážzi, combining two words, ‘boazu’ meaning reindeer, and ‘vážzi’, meaning someone who treks, walks or walks with, a wanderer, trekker. The reindeer herder, boazovážzi, is someone who walks with reindeer, boazu. So, can we think of one who cares for thoughts, for Sámi ways of articulating the world and life, as someone who walks with thoughts, and so as a thought herder, Jurddavážzi? ‘Jurdda’ means thought and is used in constructions such as ‘jurddašaddat’ (thinking through something slowly), ‘jurddaséepmí’ (consideration/deliberation), ‘jurddahit’ (to think), or ‘jurddašanvuohki’ (a mindset or way of thinking). Jurddavážzi is meant to build upon the notion of boazovážzi. Just as someone who keeps reindeer by walking with them, jurddavážzi can be someone who is looking after thoughts by walking with them, who thinks through the walks of life.

The concept jurddavážzi can bring together aspects of a Critical Indigenous Philosophy, involving (a) the idea that Indigenous philosophical thinking takes place in practice, in the walks of life, through the stories told and emerging in and through the transmission of practical knowledge, and (b) the notion that the Critical Indigenous Philosopher works from traditions and traditional knowledges, and keeps those traditions, while at the same time using those traditions to challenge colonial assumptions and structures? In this sense the thought herder can literally be a philosopher of life, who walks with the thoughts involved in
the living traditions of reindeer herding, but also a figure who poetically suggests a form of thinking that follows the movements of thoughts and engages with them as one would a reindeer herd. As Mazzulu and Ingold contend, ‘life – at least for Sámi people – is lived not in places but along paths’ (Mazzulu and Ingold, 2008: 32). Thinking for a jurddaváuzzi, like other aspects Sámi life, is both metaphorically and literally a form of walking, a walking with the land.

Thinking of philosophers as jurddaváuzzi is actually not totally foreign to ways of philosophizing that are meant to challenge the essentializing tendencies of both Anglo-American and continental traditions of Western philosophy. Think of Wittgenstein, whose philosophy, just like many Indigenous Philosophies, is hard to place in contemporary philosophical traditions:

When philosophers use a word – ‘knowledge’, ‘being’, ‘object’, ‘I’, ‘proposition’, ‘name’ – and try to grasp the essence of a thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used this way in the language in which it is at home?

What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use. (Wittgenstein, 1953: § 116; original emphasis)

In this passage Wittgenstein is suggesting that what he does is something quite different from what other philosophers do. Philosophers, he claims, tend to project the notions they are interested in contexts foreign to the role they have in everyday life. In everyday life a notion such as ‘I’ is quite straightforward. We say things such as ‘I love you’, ‘I can dance’, ‘I am sick’ and so on, unproblematically. We simply do not need to grasp the essence of what an ‘I’ is, what a ‘self’ is, or any other cousins to the notion of ‘I’, in order to use the word. Philosophers tend to metaphysicalize certain concepts in ways that, as Wittgenstein puts it, withdraws them from the circulation of language, out of everyday life, without noticing that they are giving them a different meaning by doing so (Wittgenstein, 1953: § 500). Philosophers want to ask what the ‘I’ is, but to Wittgenstein that is not a relevant question. Instead, we should simply follow the words and acknowledge their roles in the everyday movements of our lives.

Interestingly, in Davvisámigiella, it is common to not use personal pronouns, to leave out the acting subject, since the way verbs are used can take the role of pronouns; a strategy sometimes used in Sámi storytelling (Cocq, 2008: 204). And speaking of pronouns, who is Wittgenstein talking about when he says, ‘we bring words back’? Philosophers are essentializing, but we are doing something else, we are bringing words back. ‘We’ seems to implicate Wittgenstein and his readers – we who are engaging with Wittgenstein’s thought. But it also seems to implicate us, all of us, when we are not philosophizing, when words are brought back to their everyday use. This exemplifies the power of the decolonizing possibilities of Wittgenstein’s thought. For example, one of his main critiques of Frazer’s The Golden Bough is that Frazer seems to lose track of the role rituals, myths and a range of ancient and contemporary religious practices had and still have in the lives of the people for which they have meaning. Instead Frazer looks at these practices from the perspective of modernist science, trying to explain the beliefs involved in those practices (see Wittgenstein, 1993: 115–155). Again, examples of Sámi storytelling show a range of different ways of living with rituals and myths. When Johan Turi tells stories show a range of different ways of living with rituals and myths. When Johan Turi tells stories of how Sámi began to sacrifice at different sites, he does so in a language that does not entail cause and effect explanations
of how a sacrifice may increase a reindeer herd (Cocq, 2008: 203; Turi, 1931: 22, 1987: 16). Moreover, some scholars claim that in many traditional Sámi storytelling practices folklore classifications and distinctions between stories people believe – legends – and stories they do not believe – fairy tales – simply does not work very well. Stories have been believed and not believed at the same time (Pollan, 1997: 36). Often the storytelling becomes a form of pedagogy, a way of teaching that forms a way of being in a particular place and practice (Nergárd, 2006).

So maybe the ‘we’ who live with words and thoughts are jurddaváuzzi, herders of words and thoughts. Stanley Cavell’s reading of Wittgenstein’s passage gives us reason to consider such a possibility.

It would a little better express my sense of Wittgenstein’s practice if we translate the idea of bringing words back as leading them back, shepherding them; which suggests not only that we have to find them, to go to where they have wandered, but that they will require listening to them. But the translation is only a little better, because the behaviour of words is not something separate from our lives, those of us who are native to them, in mastery of them. The lives themselves have to return. (Cavell, 1989: 35; my emphasis)

Taking my hand and leading me into a play story Aslak, the Sámi boy, seems to do something like this. They are bringing the philosopher into their lives. As I have been watching them play, the dangers of the water have been an apparent theme in their play, but also the life of the water. They have been play fishing, making fires to smoke fish, and simply exploring the sounds and splashes of throwing snow in the water. Now they are leading my thoughts, and to some extent my life, into the everyday of their narrative. Here, children’s lives as jurddaváuzzi is manifest in a pedagogical gesture: ‘Come and see what we are doing’.

Cavell says ‘shepherding words’ is just a slightly better translation of Wittgenstein’s ‘führen die Wörter’ than ‘bring words back’. Thinking of reindeer herders rather than shepherds we may even want to look even further for a vocabulary for what we do when we philosophize, what these children are doing with me. Many Sámi categorize animals not only by species, but also according to their luondu, the abilities they have and the conditions in which they live, which is also determined by the relation between humans and animals. Luondu can signify both the nature of a particular species, for example my luondu as a human, and the nature of a particular individual, for example the special nature I have as a person (Mienna Sjöberg, 2018: 134). Within their own specific luondu everything has its own form of agency, the characteristics that give it an ability to act. For example, there are two different words for reindeer that express two different kinds of luondu: goddi, wild reindeer, and boazu, the reindeer that live in the herds that are looked after by reindeer herders. In these cases, the luondu of the reindeer is determined by its biology and physical conditions, but also its relationality, especially its relation to humans (Mienna Sjöberg, 2018: 155). There are three major relations between animals and humans that make up a crucial part of our and the animals luondu: completely free wild animals, free animals and domesticated animals. These categories have themselves several other categories. Free animals do not have the same close relations to humans as domesticated animals. But both free and domesticated animals and humans act together in a common contract. Completely free animals and humans live in a communicative relationship of common respect, but the relation is not contractual (Mienna Sjöberg, 2018: 152). This means that how humans and animals live together is as important, or even more important, than the biological category for how to understand what a particular animal is. Goddi behaves and lives
differently than *boazu*. Life with *boazu* is characterized as living with a free animal, which is quite different from life with sheep, a domesticated animal. Life with *boazu* certainly involves the herder leading animals and watching over them as they move through the landscape, like Cavell’s shepherding, but it also involves just following the animals, simply walking with them.

By taking my hand Aslak invites me into a world of thought, a world in which I see him and his friends leading thoughts throughout a landscape of both imagination and concrete conditions, melting snow, mud, fir needles. When we are in this landscape, the thoughts, like a herd of reindeer, are wandering freely in relation to the landscape and we can walk with them. The children become *jurddaváazı* and teach me new modes of walking with thoughts; it becomes our *huondu*. We, in a way that perhaps Cavell was looking for ways to express, walk with life. The boys’ story is a philosophy and pedagogy not so much *about* life and the world, but about *living* a life *in* the world. The children as *jurddaváazı* are pedagogues of thoughts, in this case leading my thoughts, the thoughts of the philosopher. A new ‘we’ is taking shape as a result of the children’s invitation.

**Adam’s children and a questioning faith**

The children lead me into a world that is populated. When the boy points at the fir needle floating in the flowing water of the fjord pool, he explains: ‘It is mini people on a boat’. Another boy, Máhte, points at a small snow formation where several needles are amassed at the edge of the water. ‘There, look over there, it’s an entire city’. Where do the needles come from? There are a lot of fir trees around, but none are close to the yard and the streaming water where the children are playing. It is truly wondrous what snow brings and discloses when it begins to melt.

Aslak, the first boy, notices something. ‘Somebody is drowning here’. He seems fully convinced that the mini people fall off their boat when the needle arrives at a place where the current gets stronger. At the same time, two of the boys notice that when the current is stronger bubbles appear in the water. Nils reflects on the lifespan of the bubbles: ‘If it becomes a bubble it will burst and die’.

For a while the boys follow various fir needles that flow through the water. Numerous times the mini people drown on the risky journey through the perilous fjord. Some needle boats get lost; the boys can’t find them when they arrive in the larger, deeper pool. Other boats are lost where the current is stronger. In the story that emerges as the boys narrate what happens to the needle boats and their inhabitants, death close to the water is constantly present.

Who are the mini people? Where do they come from? How do the children have such a lively understanding of them and their vulnerability to dying in the currents of the meltwater? Nils-Aslak Valkeapää’s use of Sámi myths and stories in his poetry helps me to follow the children’s story further.

> Was it like this
> that Adam’s children
> who were born secretly
> ended up below the ground?
> (Valkeapää, 1994)

Among the Sámi there are various stories about the people underground, the subterraneans in the Sáivu world, a people invisible to the ordinary world. Sometimes the Sáivu people are
referred to as those of Adam and Eve’s children whom they hid from God in Eden. But Áillohaš is not so sure.

Or have people changed the story
about who ended up where
And from what Clan man has originated
(Valkeapää, 1994)

He introduces an uncertainty about who actually lives and comes from where. With this uncertainty he recalls many other common figures in Sámi stories.

An abandoned child cries in a ptarmigan’s shape
the loon cries in the summer night
What do the mermaids ask
what did the spirits tell
And the beautiful girl who disappeared to the underworld
Why is there among the Sámi a Sáivu
a good world
the underworld
where clear cool clean springs burst forth
from Earth’s heart
the spring’s silver veins
(Valkeapää, 1994)

Why are there such stories among the Sámi? One answer clearly lies in their livelihood, where the quirks of nature, of places with particular meaning, demand a respectful engagement, a respect for nature and for the land as alive, something we are related to and in relation with. Stories of the Sáivu world are a way to engage in such a relationality. Thus, a few pages later, after pictures of First Nation Peoples of North America, Áillohaš returns to the question of the tradition-bearers’ role as story tellers and what the stories can do.

the ancestors our ancestors
our great-grandparents
our grandmothers and grandfathers

you taught us
and your teaching were good and wise
for a dignified human life
among other lives
You taught us a great deal
and we thought it was sufficient
on the journey of life
(Valkeapää, 1994)

These teachings are then further emphasized by Áillohaš’s listing of gods and mythical or holy beings. He plays with the connection with the name of the goddesses, Mättar-ákkhu, Juoks-ákkhu, Uks-áhkku, Sár-áhkku, and the grandmother, ‘áhkku’ meaning grandmother.
in Davvisámiegiella, who taught the Sámi. This connection is a recurring theme in Áillohaš’s work, which includes telling titles such as The Sun, My Father (1997) and The Earth, My Mother (2017).

Áillohaš gives the Sáivu world here. It is the beginning of life, even ‘life’s all’. Stories about an invisible people living underground are nature’s way of teaching.

But another world roared
over us like thunder
a terrible noise
still fills our ears
This was no longer natural fate
Was this teaching of nature
What do we do now
(Valkeapää, 1994)

The world of these stories is threatened. There is a different voice roaring through the land, building dams, mines, train tracks, drowning áhkkuid ja āddjāid jietnat or the voices of the grandmothers and grandfathers, overriding the stories of a land populated by people guiding us in how to live in relation with nature. Thus, comes the question:

What do we do now
why why why
are not the Ulddat visible any more
have the Sáivu people disappeared
(Valkeapää, 1994)

Ways of life, languages and practices, stories and faiths are vulnerable. As participants in a way of life, we humans, as Jonathan Lear puts it, ‘inherit that vulnerability’ (Lear, 2006: 6). Áillohaš expresses a form of cultural vulnerability in the processes of losing a way of life, a lost livelihood, a lost relation to nature, a lost world. The Sáivu people are not visible, do not show themselves, when the stories are not told, when that life is not lived. Loss of faith.

Thus, the poet continues, his voice expressing worry and sadness, loss.

when one does not believe
it is not what one does not believe
it is what one believes in
it is not for the one who does not believe
but for the one who believes
when one loses faith in believing
this faith has lost its power
if one has faith in the faith
the faith has power
and it is valid and true
the Sáívu people the subterranean
Háldit and Ulldat
the U lda peoples’ reindeer herds graze on the tundra
And the beautiful girl
Whom you were not allowed to let out of sight
(Valkeapää, 1994)

The terms Sáívu, Háldit and Ulldat have a complex etymology and have been used in various different ways throughout Sápmi. As a rule of thumb, the Háldit are sometimes called the subterranean, Ulldat are the invisible, also sometimes translated as gnomes (Näkkäläjärvi and Kauppal, 2017: 119), and Sáívu is sometimes referred to lakes who mirror the parallel invisible Sáívu world and sometimes to refer to the people who live there. The Sáívu world is like our world but a little better, everything flourishes a little more in that world. In traditional Sámi stories, lakes, mountains, rivers and a range of sites in the land are borderlands to the invisible worlds that are populated with Sáívu people, both Ulldat and Háldit (Bäckman, 1975). The stories about the Háldit, Ulldat and Sáívu people lose their meaning when faith in belief has been replaced, when there are no cultural places for telling the stories or no connection to the land where the stories are told. So why, why, why, are the Ulldat not visible anymore? Why have the Sáívu people disappeared? One simple answer is simply that the lives, the nomadic lives of the reindeer herders, is not lived to the same extent anymore. Another answer is that fewer people speak the languages in which these stories have been told. But perhaps it is simply hard to find a role for these stories in a world where the tonality of life is set by the rationales of modern science, industry and economy. In a manner of speaking, the stories about Ulldat, Háldit, or Sáívu people have, for many, both Sámi and non-Sámi, been taken out of the circulation of ordinary everyday life. Telling them now is connected to extraordinary events, making what was once central to a culture into a spectacle, very much like what Wittgenstein claims philosophers are doing when philosophizing about concepts like ‘knowledge’, ‘being’, ‘object’, ‘I’, ‘proposition’, ‘name’, or ‘meaning’ (Wittgenstein, 1953: § 116). Àilloha’s question is an encounter with a lived philosophical problem of the Wittgensteinian form: ‘I do not know my way about’ (Wittgenstein, 1953: § 123). Or perhaps better: ‘I do not know how to live with these stories’.

In a brief conversation in the forest while working with a group of children, the Sámi storyteller and tradition-bearer Elli-Karin Pavval paused for a few seconds, looked me in the eyes, and said words that I somehow seemed to have heard before: ‘The world needs to listen to its Indigenous peoples’. I was so moved by the way she said this, with a sense of authority, as if a plea, asking me to pass that vision along, that I did not know how to respond. There was an urgency in her voice and body language addressed to me in her simple message. Reflecting on the role of stories in connecting to the land, to nature, in
traditional ways of thinking, it is perhaps not surprising that Elli-Karin, a master storyteller, emphasizes this message. Stories about the the Sáivu, the Háldit and Ulldat give a sense of finding one’s way in the land, with nature. Stories are told about, and often in, particular places to recall the need for the kind of respect and way of being fit for that place, they are told as a map to orient oneself in the landscape, to convey moral understanding, to give a sense of interconnectedness with the land and nature, to recall tragedies and joys, to handle depression and anxiety and much more. Perhaps what we need are jurddavázzit, thought herders, who can walk beside these stories, watch over the birth of new stories, follow them, lead them, simply live beside them.

**Following unna-olmmos, the mini people, and finding radical hope**

The boys’ invitation for me to be a part of their walk with a story in the making shows that there is soil where traditional Sámi stories can grow. In these children there are rich grazing lands where thoughts wander, and herders that walk with them. The boys let a story emerge in response to the places where they live, both the snow piles and pools of meltwater on the ground surrounding the early childhood centre, as well as their life in a small village in Sámi families. Their story, like so many traditional Sámi stories, engages with the conditions and dangers of living a life in nature. The story about the mini people could be a story about these children, living close to the large Lule River and the Lesser Lule River (a fair-sized river, especially in spring and early summer, that connects with the Lule River). Their story is a mirror world, like the Sáivu world; but the world of the mini people is more dangerous, even deadly, for the people populating it, whereas the Sáivu world is more dangerous for humans.

Still, the mini people find places where they can live flourishing lives. After a while the boys look around. Their gaze moves towards the corner of the main building of the early childhood centre where rippling water from a drainpipe has created another, much smaller pool. The boys move over there, leading me by the hand.

‘Here’, the boys tell me, ‘the mini people have a complete life. The mini people can move to this place and there is a lot of fish in the brownish muddy water.’ There is a lot of debris in the water, small half-mouldered leaves, fir needles and other things floating on the surface of the water. These become rafts upon which the mini people live. At first their lives seem to be safe. However, soon this place becomes just as dangerous as the fjord. Nils puts a small piece of birch bark in the water.

‘The mini people can get on this’, he explains. This is much like the stories of the Háldit, Ulldat and Sáivu people. In many of those stories the Sámi help them. Nils points to the drainpipe and exclaims:

‘Here is the waterfall. It is very dangerous!’ Nils’ voice conveys that he is facing a very real problem. But there is a solution.

‘A piece of bark! A large raft’, Márhte says, and points to a larger piece of birch bark floating in the water. Then he turns to me to explain. (Márhte later gave me the piece of birch bark for me to remember both him and their story.)

‘Viktor, it is hard to tell when they drown. There are hundreds of vortexes here, hundred vortex.’ He is right, there are small swirls in the water, caused by the waterfall from the drainpipe.

‘Here is their city’, Aslak says, directing our attention elsewhere by pointing to a pile of mud by the side of the pool.
'They have to move or they will die', is Nils' response. He points towards a large mountain-shaped pile of snow a few metres away. This is striking. Not knowing how aware the children are about how their grandparents or great grandparents may have come to move to this area, the children’s story reminds us of the history of many reindeer herding Sámi families, with stories of having to move, forced by the state or by the changing conditions, but also of their possible future, perhaps being forced again to move or to abandon their livelihood due to the exploitation of the land.

The lives of the mini people are vulnerable to the conditions of nature. They need the help of the children. But this vulnerability of the mini people shows the strength and the hope in the children’s story. The culture of the mini people is in constant danger so, like the Sámi with their long tradition of nomadic life, they move and they change. The danger of losing the stories that teach how to engage with nature, how to live, as well as the risk of losing a way of life in its transformation, is philosophically explored by these children as they move between pools of melt water and mountains of snow.

Jonathan Lear’s account of the life of Plenty Coup, chief of the Crow Nation, takes us through some of the Crow culture’s most devastating transformations. Lear explores how Plenty Coup leads his nation through a cultural landscape where the radical change to ways of life destroys the meaning of the culture’s most fundamental practices, ‘a collapse of happenings’. Plenty Coup acknowledges the destruction of its meaning, but still decides to dance the Sun Dance. In doing so he opens up ways to link the present and the future of his nation to its ancient traditions (Lear, 2006: 152–154).

There is hope here, a radical hope: where we do not exactly know what to hope for. It is a hope that is grounded in the continual re-telling of the story, and in the acknowledgement that we do not know what these stories may become or where they will take us. There are children here, open to both listening to and creating of stories in response to the nature in their environment. When listening to the worlds of Indigenous peoples we should not forget that we must also open our ears to the children. Plenty Coup was just eight years old when he had the first dreams that he used as narratives for how to create a radical hope for his nation. These Sámi children are four and five years old. Their position as jurddavâzzi can instil pedagogical hope in pointing towards new futures of Sámi stories and the lives with such stories (Stewart-Harawira, 2005: 160–161). As they follow the thoughts of their story, they respond to Áilloha’s questions: ‘What do we do now/why why why/are not the Ulddat visible anymore/have the Sáivu people disappeared’ (Valkeapää, 1994). There is still room for faith in their grandparents’ stories.

While the boys are climbing up the snow mountain Nils continues their story.

‘The mini people say that this is the highest mountain in the world.’ On the mountain the children discover that the snow is filled with small pieces of mouldered wood and leaves. Pointing to them, Nils turns to me again.

‘Can you see the splodges?’ he asks. ‘Those are the mini peoples’ doors.’ It is evident that like the pools of water the snow mountain is full of life. The mini people live here too. As in traditional Sámi stories, the landscape, especially its sacred mountains and lakes, is populated (Bäckman, 1975; Rydving, 2010: 123).

The boys slide down the mountain and say that it is the mini people driving snowmobiles, clearly like Sáivu, mirroring their own everyday life. My discomfort at affecting the children’s play language, and the fact that they are adjusting to my presence by speaking Swedish rather than Sámi, is taking over and I ask them how they would say ‘mini people’ in
Davvisámigiella. Perhaps it will also help me understand more about who the mini people are.

‘Mini-olmmoś’, MÁhte anwers.

‘Or unna olmmoś’, says Aslak. It is not very clarifying, but my sense that ‘unna olmmoś’ has a somewhat deeper meaning for them remains. Aslak, however, has more to say:

‘There are large mini people who drop sticks that turn to firewood in the winter.’ I am struck by this sentence. It reminds me of a scene from Solveig Joks’ ethnographic film Ailo Sets Out North (2007) in which Sámi boy Ailo finds driftwood on the beach. Ailo explains that the driftwood could belong to someone else, Sáivu people or Háldit for example, and that therefore, one should sivnidit – bless the wood – before using it by cutting three marks in it with a knife. In Nergård’s (2006) accounts of Sámi stories this is also a recurring theme. Things found in nature is not just for the taking. Rather, it is an economy of receiving gifts and giving back (Kuokannen, 2007). The stories about Sáivu people, Háldit and other beings populating nature reinforce that sense. It is not as if one has to believe that there are mythical beings in the world; in Sámi story telling belief is often de-emphasized. Rather, as Áillohaš reminds us, to have faith in the stories and their mythical characters is important, that is, as I read him, to live as nature where populated by Ułddat, Háldit and, yes, ‘unna olmmoś’. Aslak’s promptly reminds us of that. Nils, however, returns to the vulnerable life of the mini people and asks me. ‘Shall I show a funeral?’ He is quick to revoke the question by adding, ‘I will make a funeral’. Nils is looking around and picks up something from the ground. It looks like a thin piece of pine bark, the size of fingernail. He is holding it to show me and the other boys.

‘I have found a funeral stone.’ With the small headstone in his left hand he climbs the snow mountain again, but on his way up the mountain he seems to have lost the headstone. He looks at me and smiles, ‘The mini people took it. They lifted it with an airplane. The mini people can eat a whole giant person and a hundred-year old, you know’.

I am not sure what he means by this last sentence. Still, it makes me think. The mini people are not just vulnerable, in need of our assistance, they are, just like the Sáivu people and Háldit, also dangerous. There is no time to dig deeper into this. Parents are starting to show up at the early childhood centre and it is time for me and my colleague, Ylva Jannok Nutti, to say goodbye to the children for this time. I was elated by the mini people adventure the boys took me on. They said their good-byes by warmly hugging me.

Sámi children’s decolonizing philosophy of death

I describe the children’s invitation to follow their story telling thought walk as a pedagogical gesture. Perhaps it could also be thought of as a pedagogical reversal (cf. Johansson, 2013: ch. 11). Their invitation is an act of teaching. If I let them, they can teach me how to play with death, with the perils of rivers, vortexes and snowy mountains, the dangers of their immediate environment. They teach me how playing out their particular story can be a way to relate to facts of death, but also how storying the world can connect us with it. It is a pedagogical gift. Nonetheless, their gift, their gesture, is empty without a response, without the pedagogical gesture of receiving their gift. A story needs listeners, close listeners, a story needs someone walking with it. Listening and acknowledging the children’s story as having philosophical weight, as a philosophical response to their world, listening to them as jurdda-vážzi, involves me walking with them. Listening to children as thought herders is a pedagogy of herding thoughts. It requires more than pedagogical listening as a didactic approach,
common in early childhood education practices. Walking with the children’s thoughts is also matter of listening philosophically, letting their thinking challenge us existentially.

After years of reading existential philosophers – the Greeks, Kierkegaard, Sartre, Beauvoir, Heidegger – I am confronted with children who simply let a philosophy of death emerge out of melting snow, their experiences and their imagination. Their playfulness with the concept of death gives a sense of hope in the face of this general human problem, but it also gives us a hope that children in cultures working their way out of colonial oppression, struggling to keep its language, stories, traditional practices and livelihoods alive, philosophize in ways that simply sidestep colonial cultures, creating thoughts and ways of thinking that invite reflections on and with Sámi traditions. The children invite us to explore the kind of hope Āillohaš seemed to be trying to create, where we remember how stories about Hálđit, Ulddat and Sáivu people teach us how to live in nature, and where the world listens to Indigenous ways of connecting to the world.

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Notes
1. The Sámi are an indigenous people who live in northern Scandinavia. Sápmi is the Sámi term for the area in north of Norway, Sweden, the Lake Inari region in Finland and the Kola peninsula region in Russia. It is sometime translated Samiland or Lapland. Samiland is the preferable term since Lapp is often used as a derogatory term when speaking about the Sámi.
2. All the names of the children are fictitious to keep the children anonymous. The names chosen are a play with common Sámi names and Nils-Aslak Valkeapää. In order to keep the children anonymous details about the name and location of the pre-school are left out.

3. Elli-Karin Pavall has given me permission to use her real name in order to recognize her as a Sámi tradition bearer and her ownership of the wisdom and knowledge she shares. This follows Smith’s (2012) recommendations for ethical research in indigenous contexts.

4. For examples of the philosophical and pedagogical role of the stories referred to in Áillohaåvå’s poem see Nergård (2006, 2019). For a collection of stories from the northern parts of Sápmi see Pollan (1997). For examples of stories to children and how they are told to children see Tapio and Tapio Blind (2017) or the children’s book Čiežain ćáziin (Gaski and Nordström, 2002).

5. For a discussion of Indigenous logics of gifts see Koukkannen (2007).

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