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Duodji Matters

Comments on 'Decolonizing Production: Healing, Belonging, and Social Change in Sápmi' by Natalia Magnani and Matthew Magnani

Monica Grini, Art Historian and Senior Lecturer in Media and Documentation Studies, Department of Language and Culture, UiT The Arctic University of Norway.

Central in Natalia Magnani and Matthew Magnani's article is the assertion that material production matters: It has the power to generate social and political change, also when it occurs outside traditional political arenas and governing institutions. Studying practices, practitioners, and products of *duodji*, a Northern Sámi concept often translated as art and craft, the Magnanis argue that *duodji* can be a vehicle for Sámi self-representation and restoration, and therefore, decolonization. Although they state that *duodji* challenges simplified divisions between art, craft, and cultural objects, they do not linger in conceptual deliberations, and use craft and *duodji* interchangeably. Thus, they barely touch the many different ways to conceive of *duodji* that exist within Sámi societies (see for example Guttorm 2004; Grini 2017; Nango 2018).

However, in contrast to the many generalizing descriptions of Sámi issues, the Magnanis' article is exemplary in its contextualizing approach, being a case study of *duodji* production in the village of Anár, on the Finnish side of Sápmi or the Sámi areas. They succeed in exposing complex entanglements of Sámi matters in the politics of the states that Sápmi transcends. The Sámi homelands stretch across four countries, Finland, Norway, Russia, and Sweden, and cover about 400 000 km^2 of highly diverse geography and around two million

inhabitants with multiple identities and languages. In Finland, Norway, and Sweden, three Sámi parliaments officially represent and administer Sámi politics, whereas in Russia there are ongoing efforts to organize a similar parliament. These parliaments are subordinate to the national governing bodies, and many of their members desire more Sámi self-determination and territorial autonomy. Statutory decisions concerning Sámi issues are implemented differently in each state and the International Labour Organization Convention no. 169 has been ratified only by Norway. Moreover, the legislation of Sámi electoral membership differs significantly between the states. As the Magnanis explain, the definition of Sámi identity and its legal status has been disputed in Finland ever since the founding of the Sámi Parliament there in 1995. At stake are the right to usage and ownership of land and water, as well as struggles over personal identity, indigeneity, and community ties.

While the background and the theoretical considerations are important for understanding the specific situation in the Finland-controlled areas, I miss a more elaborate presentation of the actual activities and materials that the article intends to discuss. It takes some time before the reader reaches the wooden table in Sami-Ásllat's workshop in Anár and meets actual *duodji* objects, like the *guksi*, a drinking vessel made of birch burl, and the *niibi*, a knife with a handle of birch and a sheath of reindeer antler, and gets a glimpse of the process of making them.

Undertones of sorrow and confrontation characterize the personal stories mediated in the article, for example in Sami-Ásllat's qualms about working with silver. Silver has a long history in Sápmi. According to the ethnologist Phebe Fjellström (1962), the category "Sámi silver" stems from the 16th and 17th centuries, when income from trade with furs, stockfish, and various reindeer products materialized in the form of silver spoons, heavy silver cups, and jewellery. Objects were made to order for Sámi customers by silversmiths in places like

Jiellevárre/Váhtjer, in the Swedish part of Sápmi, and Duortnus, on the Finnish side. In many cases, the results were solid silverware adapted to a nomadic lifestyle, embellished with traditional Sámi and Christian symbols and patterns (see Dunfjeld 2006). A rich and distinct tradition developed, and is revitalized today by Sámi artisans like Sami-Ásllat's father, Petteri Laiti, and his pioneering work (Sámi Center for Contemporary Art 2020). Silver is found naturally in the mountainous parts of Sápmi, linguistically and historically in Sámi place names like Silbbatjåhkkå and Sillbanássja, and materially in the archeological traces from mining operations in Sámi areas (Nordin 2012). For Sami-Ásllat, silver primarily embodies the exploitation of land and labor in an unceasing global hunt for raw materials, a hunt that in the case of silver happens mainly in the Americas today. Like many contemporary Sámi silversmiths, he uses recycled silver, but he does not wear a mask or use ventilation to prevent the inhalation of poisonous particles. The anthropologists explain this as a conscious act to connect "the invisible and noxious process of silver work to equally concealed and pernicious political and social structures reproduced by all actors" (21). They recount how Sami-Ásllat ends up withdrawing from silver making to focus on wood and antler *duodji*, that is, to work with what he experiences as more healing materials.

Tactics of renunciation and recognition surface also in the portrayal of Sunná. She shows resistance through choosing to wear specific fabrics or garments, and disavowing others, gradually giving up the silk scarf that adorns so many Sámi dresses. Silk is imported fabric, not tied to the natural elements of the region like silver, but like silver it travels through ancient trade routes and present-day networks that relates to colonialism and exploitation. As a performative statement, she wore the *gákti*, the Sámi dress, every day for a full year, communicating her project on social media with the hashtag #gákti365. The authors make a

point of how she describes the *gákti* as “a second skin”, which affords her an ethnical marker that she considers lacking in her bodily features.

The article is a timely effort to address contemporary autochthony debates and emotionally and politically charged questions of belonging. It does so by pointing to the role of materiality and performative operations as political and restorative acts. Even if the authors shy away from the thornier topics related to the rights to perform such gestures in Sápmi (for more difficult discussions, see for example Bydler 2017; Schilar and Keskitalo 2018), parts of them emerge between the lines in paragraphs like this one: “who gets to wear the dress and how they wear it has become increasingly more guarded in a political climate of contestation over Sámi and Indigenous status. Wearing dress ‘wrong’ conspicuously indicates non-sanctioned use and lack of belonging” (28). A question that remains is how to decolonize without reinforcing the binaries and authenticity claims that originate in and underpin colonialism both historically and today.

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