Department of Language and Culture

Gendered Agency and Subjectivity in Hanna Pylväinen's *We Sinners* (2012) and North American (Ex-) Laestadian Women's Life Narratives

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1 Introduction: Themes, Texts, Methodology

Autumn of 2012 was memorable in Sámi and Finnish American communities; online discussions of Hanna Pylväinen's debut novel *We Sinners* (Pylväinen) captured my attention as an online "lurker" seeking deeper understanding of my Sámi and Finnish ancestors' Laestadian faith —a system of beliefs my family from Finnmark Province abandoned several generations ago. The critically acclaimed and award-winning novel, released in the summer of 2012, was the first of its kind: it was a fictional and poly-focal narrative representing North American Laestadianism written from a secular standpoint. I cautiously engaged in both online and in-person discussions on the topic of the novel and on Laestadianism generally. Especially among (ex-) Laestadian women, these discussions centered on fundamental dilemmas for women born into Laestadian believer communities in North America. Through both online and face-to-face conversations, I was introduced to the resonance of the themes from the novel *We Sinners* in the lives of (ex-) Laestadian women. Some of the dilemmas *represented* in the fictional novel and *experienced* in the lives of (ex-) Laestadian women foundationally addressed questions facing many women in North American Laestadian communities: Should they stay in the community of believers, or should they leave? What are the consequences of staying (even if they don't believe in Laestadian doctrine)? What are the consequences of leaving (even if they lose their family, community, and culture)? Are there specific consequences for women who choose to leave? Are there specific benefits for women who choose to stay? What is the connection to the Sámi culture in Laestadianism? Where does Sámi culture end and Laestadianism begin? How do Laestadian and ex-Laestadian women grapple with all these complexities in their lives in modern North America?

Laestadianism is a form of pietistic Lutheranism —named for its founder, the religious reformer Lars Levi Laestadius. The religion took hold in Sámi reindeer herding communities in northern Sweden in the mid-19th century. The faith and lifestyle quickly fanned out east and west to the northern provinces of Finland and Norway "along Sámi reindeer herding migration routes" (T. Marttinen 69) and also south along settlements of the Tornio River Valley. Laestadian Lutheranism could be characterized by the following: a fundamental return to the teachings of Martin Luther; an obscured or "perverted" continuity with Sámi pre-Christian shamanism; austerity and humility in reaction to materialism and the "worldly"; strategic pronatalism as a matter of doctrine and to multiply the community of believers;

absolute abstention from alcohol; the tenet and ritual of forgiveness (Hepokoski; Korkalo and Valkonen 40-41; T. Marttinen; E. A. Suominen).

Beginning in 1860, Finnish and Sámi immigrants brought the faith to North America during the waves of emigration from the northern districts of Norway, Sweden, and Finland (Wagner-Harkonen; E. Niemi; Kurtti). There are at least 60,000 practicing Laestadians in contemporary North America (Wagner-Harkonen; Hepokoski). The overwhelming majority of Laestadians in North America would identify as "Finn" with distant or secondary Sámi heritage (Harkonen; Kurtti). One can only assume that outside of the Finnish and Sámi American communities, few North Americans have ever heard of Lars Levi Laestadius or Laestadianism; many secular and especially atheist Americans might find cause to disparage or judge this seemingly severe religion and its followers of large, Finnish-speaking, oftentimes economically disadvantaged, families. Due to various splits in the original directions or congregations that formed in North America during the immigration period of 1860-1920, there are currently seven different sects operating across the USA and Canada; some of the sects or groups refer to themselves as Apostolic Lutherans, while others refer to themselves as Laestadian Lutherans (Hepokoski). In the North American context, leaving the faith community, or "community of believers," and joining the "worldlies" or "unbelievers" most often implies breaking ties with one's family of origin and large communities and networks of "believers" (Paunonen; Valkoinen). Many people who choose to leave—in addition to the pain of leaving behind their families and communities—lament the loss of deep ties to a distinct Finnish and Sámi hybrid "tribal" culture. Many ex-Laestadians equate leaving their communities and culture with losing their "tribe" or "clan" (Möyrylä; Valkoinen). Others equate leaving with a profound sense of freedom, that is, that leaving empowered them in their own sovereignty and self-development, especially when leaving allowed them formal education (Leila; T.-L. Marttinen).

Pylväinen's novel *We Sinners* invites us to consider the dilemmas associated with remaining in the faith or leaving the faith through the story of a modern Laestadian family of eleven living in Michigan, USA. North American (ex-) Laestadian women's life narratives, both from the USA and Canada, reveal the processes by which the individual grapples with these dilemmas which they share in community with others, that is, by sharing their stories in the multiple virtual communities broadly devoted to ex-Laestadian issues such as Facebook groups, blogs, wiki sites, and other message boards.[1] On these sites, the overwhelming majority of participants who engage in autobiographical textual production are women

(Harkonen). In this study, I refer to both named and anonymous autobiographical textual production published on blogs in keeping with Brian Alleyne's definition "popular autobiography" (Alleyene 103-104); I theorize the phenomenon of the production and publication of popular autobiography through Sidonie Smith and Julie Watson's discussion of "automediality" (Smith and Watson 167-168). I use the term "prompted life narratives" for the written autobiographies (see Appendices I and II) and I rely on Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett's discussion of "personal narrative research as intersubjective encounter" as a methodological tool (Maynes, Pierce and Laslett 98-125).

Importantly, the overwhelming majority of online discourses and popular autobiographies related to Laestadianism address the benefits and consequences of "leaving the faith" while few, if any, address the question of "why women stay" (Harkonen). Thus, the novel *We Sinners* offers critical insight into possible reasons people "stay in the faith," especially in the chapters told from the points of view of Brita ("Pox"; "Rupture"), Pirjo ("Eyes of Man") and Paula ("The Sun and the Sow"). Thus, the "literary truth" (Lamargue 367-384) of the novel *We Sinners* and the "autobiographical truth(s)" (Smith and Watson 15-18) of life narratives of (ex-) Laestadian women mingle in North American communities. Together these multiple "truths" interact and form a complex, meaningful, poly-vocal (meta-) narrative that provides insight into gendered realities in an obscured, minority, religious community in North America. Reading the novel *alongside* these two forms of life narratives of (ex-) Laestadian women calls for a methodology to survey, interpret, and analyze various gendered realities — and specifically gendered agency and subjectivity —in the poly-vocal (meta-) narrative of North American Laestadianism.

In the novel, I focus attention on the four female characters Brita, Tiina, Uppu, and Gunnà: Brita, the oldest sister, represents a narrative of a woman who "remains" in the faith; Tiina and Uppu represent narratives of women who "leave" the faith; Gunnà represents the narrative of a woman living at the time of the inception of Laestadianism in Northern Sweden in the mid-1800s. The contemporary Laestadian community "that forms the setting of the novel" is the Laestadian Lutheran Church (LLC), one of the seven sects operating in North America, and one of the sects that maintain close ties to their sister organization in Finland (Korkalo and Valkonen 40).

The life narratives represent two forms or genres: two are prompted unpublished life narratives and two are popular autobiographies —that is, short vignettes of a person's life

published on blogs; the authors' names are "Leila," Myra, "Tarja," and "Aallotar." The two unpublished life narratives written by Tarja (a pseudonym) and Aallotar (a pseudonym) were produced through "intersubjective encounters" (Maynes, Pierce and Laslett 98-125); importantly, they chose their own pseudonyms for symbolic significance. Tarja and Aallotar grew up within communities from opposite ends of the spectrum in North American Laestadianism: Tarja is from the group considered to be the most "extremist" and farthest right of the movement, called The Old Apostolic Lutheran Church (OALC). Aallotar is from the group considered to be the most "liberal" of the movement and the farthest to the left, called the Independent Apostolic Lutheran Church (IALC). Tarja and Aallotar are the primary authors of their narratives; the narratives were "prompted" by open-ended questions from me, the researcher, compiler, and editor (Appendix I and Appendix II). Any suggested additions or edited content were approved by Tarja and Aallotar. Allowing subjects of research editorial authority over their own life narratives is in accord with the ethics and methodological approach of American folklorist Elaine Lawless' "reciprocal ethnography" (Lawless 197-205).

One of the popular autobiography blog writers uses her given name, Myra, and the other uses a pseudonym, "Leila." Myra's blog post includes several individual and family photographs (Möyrylä), and Leila includes one photograph of (presumably) herself as a child (Leila). Leila's narrative centers around her experiences as a sexual abuse survivor and the aftermath of reporting the abuse to her mother and preachers; like many other sexual abuse survivors, she faced the "abuse-forgive-abuse-forgive" cycle. Leila triumphantly and abruptly leaves the faith as a teenager and finds personal power in getting an education (Leila). Myra's narrative has an uplifting tone, and she is less direct about her specific church community and her reasons for leaving, rather, she refers to her tradition as a "Finnish church tribe." She relays her "church tribe's'" ties to Sámi culture, which she is still trying to understand, but attributes the sense of "tribalism" in family and community to their collective Sámi and Finnish immigrant roots. While she does not state directly that she has left her church community, one can certainly glean that from the use of the past tense and the language she uses to describe her current "spirituality." In contrast to the four narratives focused on in *We Sinners* and in the life narratives of Tarja, Aallotar, and Leila, Myra's parents encouraged her to get an education.

All four of the life narratives reveal common themes that circulate in online communities, including the themes of "shunning," "the taboo or secret of sexual abuse" in Laestadian

communities, and the obscured Sámi roots of the Laestadian movement. Shunning and the Sámi roots of Laestadianism are represented in *We Sinners,* but sexual abuse is not deal with. However, discussion of sexual abuse comes through in the narratives of Tarja, Aallotar, and Leila. While not specifically mentioned in Myra's narrative, there is another post on the same blog devoted to the topic of sexual abuse in a general sense. The blog-owner and author of the page comes from the same "Finnish Church Tribe" as Myra; thus one can speculate that the post is directed toward a North American Laestadian audience.

Many online discussions of Laestadianism focus attention on the widespread painful experience of being on the receiving end of shunning, characterized as a form of social control and emotional abuse. Pylväinen reflects shunning in the novel, especially in Simon and Julia's narratives in the chapter called "Total Loss" (Pylväinen 115-135). Subtle forms of shunning come through when the oldest sister, Brita, refuses to allow Julia, an unbeliever, to hold Brita's baby; Julie was also shunned when members of the church community refused her the requisite handshake and "Gods Peace" in the Church community. Perhaps the most tragic incident of shunning in the novel occurs when Simon's male partner, Christopher, dies in a car accident and the parents and three of the four "believer" siblings refuse to attend the funeral. In Laestadian tradition, Simon's "sin" of homosexuality was a "bound sin" that is, unforgivable and a sin for which he will be permanently shunned (I return to the concept of "binding sins" in later sections) (Korkalo and Valkonen 51-53). Despite Pylväinen representing occurrences of shunning in *We Sinners*, some (ex-) Laestadian women have been critical of what they interpret as the "overly sympathetic" portrayal of the church community in the novel.

In statements made in virtual or online communities, many (ex-) Laestadian women report having been on the receiving end of strategic shunning in their Laestadian communities, both before and after leaving the faith (Harkonen). Shunning can take a number of forms, but it is most commonly expressed through the refusal of a handshake accompanied with the salutation "God's Peace" (Pylväinen 123-124; Valkoinen). In other words, handshakes and "God's Peace" are symbolic of inclusion and religious and social cohesion; refusal of the handshake and "God's Peace" materialize exclusion and even ostracization. Other shunning tactics include deliberate social exclusion from group gatherings or events and treating the target as *persona non grata*; these forms of shunning are frequent topics of discussion among (ex-) Laestadian women and come through poignantly in the life narratives of Tarja, Leila, and Aallotar. Tarja and Aallotar shared experiences of traumatic incidents of shunning and

deliberate social exclusion. In the case of Aallotar and her young son, her female relatives and their children, in a concerted effort, strategically shunned Aallotar with cruelty. In the case of Tarja, at the age of seventeen, she was "at-once" shunned for refusing to ask the entire congregation for forgiveness for "the sin" of childbirth out of wedlock (Paunonen). Undoubtedly, experiences of social isolation can lead to profound psychological distress and even social paralysis for some North American Laestadian women which, in turn, may undermine their agency and warp their subjectivity. However, these painful events have also been productive resources imbued with profound transformative potential.

Some (ex-) Laestadian women have referred to the novel as "politically uncritical"; a major weakness, in their view, was the omission of representation of the rampant sexual abuse of women and children in some Laestadian communities. Obviously, sexual assault of the most powerless members of a group represented a profound lack of agency, and deliberate social exclusion of victims also limits agency and has an searing effect on subjectivity. It goes without saying that when a victim of sexual assault is shunned in response to speaking out, it can lead to extreme psychological trauma. Thus, I have included a space for life narratives that represent the silenced (in the church) topic of sexual abuse, and the frequent question of the discussion of shunning, in order for these topics to come through more fully in the study. Notably, the theme of sexual abuse and "preachers covering it up under the guise of forgiveness" is also a frequent topic of discussion in (ex-) Laestadian virtual communities (Women in the old Apostolic Church). On one of the most prolific and longest running (ex-) Laestadian blogs *Learning to Live Free: Life as a Former Laestadian,* there is a page devoted to abuse, in particular, sexual abuse, titled "Help Stop Abuse." The blog owner and guest posters frequently call attention to systemic sexual abuse of women and children, subsequent cover-ups, and victim-blaming and shaming (Learning to Live Free: Life as a Former Laestadian).

The prominent theme of the Sámi roots of the international Laestadian movement is another issue that circulates in online communities; Myra and Tarja explicitly address this theme in their life narratives and Pylväinen develops it in the chapters representing the narratives of Tiina and Gunnà, the chapters "We Sinners" and "Whiskey Dragon 1847" respectively. Sámi culture and diasporic Sámi identity in North America also form important points of discussion on North American (ex-) Laestadian blogs and in other virtual communities (Women in the old Apostolic Church).

Regardless of the painful experiences of shunning and trauma of sexual exploitation in North American Laestadian communities, the four chapters in the novel and the four life narratives reflect heterogeneity of gendered experiences in the lives of women. Despite the poly-vocal and complex nature of gendered realities that come through in the novel and life narratives, from the perspectives of secular society and mainstream feminism, the role or place of North American Laestadian women—in the "home," "social networks," and "believer communities"—would likely be interpreted as laden with patriarchal oppression. This study aims to complicate oversimplified interpretations of gender and agency in North American Laestadianism and presents several alternative, sometimes intersecting, interpretations exemplified through four female characters in *We Sinners* alongside four contemporary (ex-) Laestadian women's life narratives.

A methodological approach toward analysis *across genres* offers productive interpretation of multiple and entangled "truths," as well as tensions in gendered agency and subjectivity in North American Laestadianism. Explicating historical continuities and discontinuities of the gendered roles of women in the study requires an analysis of pre-figured feminine agency and subjectivity evident in the Laestadian movement's earliest inception vis-à-vis the profound departure from internal gender norms in Sámi society in Laestadius' later teachings which informed the subsequent doctrine of his followers. Further, analyzing gendered agency and subjectivity in four female characters in the novel alongside four (ex-) Laestadian women's life narratives reveals productive tensions and requires taking account of the dialogic of gendered historical trajectories and their continuities and discontinuities. Further, the study reveals both poly-vocal histories and "community" narratives, as well as highly individual narratives. That is, individual adherents must grapple with themselves, their consciousness, and their hearts, when they make the decision to stay or to leave Laestadian communities. Whatever their decision may be, it is almost always a decision made at the level of the individual.

Contextualizing *We Sinners*, the four life narratives, and gendered agency and subjectivity also requires insight into several, intersecting, historical events and themes: 1) the multilayered inception of the Laestadian movement in Northern Sweden, Gárásuovvon/Karesuando, Lapland Province, in the mid-19th century 2) the social and cultural factors that led to the rapid conversion of the Sámi, culturally and ethnically mixed Tornedaliens, and Northern Finns to the Laestadian faith and movement (Kristiansen 96-135) migration of Finnish and Sámi Laestadian adherents to North America (T. Marttinen;

Mattson-Schulz; E. Niemi; 4) fracturing within the North American communities, oftentimes referred to as “splits” or “Heresies” (Hepokoski;Valkoinen). These historical themes and events come through in multiple ways in *We Sinners* and in the life narratives in this study. In the novel, these themes and historical events are presented indirectly through literary allusion, intertextual references, and figuration. Alternatively, in the life narrative texts, these themes are dealt with in direct statements in the narrators’ own studied engagement with the history of Laestadianism broadly, and in their reckoning with their families’ and (ex-) faith communities’ histories.

We Sinners could be characterized as a short story sequence or a short story composite (Nicosia 173; Kennedy VII-XV). The novel is focalized through eight of eleven members of the Finnish American Rovaniemi family; some of the characters are developed as focalizers, while others are developed as “focalized objects” (Bal 132-154)[2]. The literary or narrative technique of focalization in the novel allows us to gain access to the minds and motivations of the multiple members of the Rovaniemi family as they grapple with their faith; importantly, Pylväinen also develops characters as “focalized objects” of other members of the family or characters. The Rovaniemi family consists of the parents, Warren and Pirjo, and children Brita, Tiina, Nels, Paula, Simon, Julia, Leena, Anni, and Uppu. The youngest child, Uppu, is not yet born in the first chapter entitled “Pox,” focalized by Brita, the oldest of the Rovaniemi family (3-23), and at the end of the novel, in the second-to-the-last chapter entitled “Jonas Chan,” Uppu is graduating from high school (152-172). The second-to-the-last chapter is focalized through Jonas Chan (hence, the chapter’s title), thus, we form our impressions of Uppu through Jonas Chan’s focalization with Uppu as the focalized object.

Each of the eleven family members grapple in one way or another with their Laestadian faith and way of life. Four of the siblings choose to leave the faith: Tiina, the second oldest of the four unbelievers, is most audacious, and often the family scapegoat; Simon comes out as gay and experiences rejection and shunning after he moves away to live with his male partner, Christopher; Julia, the “real Finnish beauty” of the family, moves away and experiences shunning by both Brita and church people when Julia returns for a visit; finally, Uppu seems to be the most honest with herself and others —especially with her boyfriend, Jonas Chan — about her disdain for the faith and its strictures on her life. The five siblings who choose to stay are the following: Brita, the oldest sister, clings closely to Laestadian ideals, yet still struggles with shame and ambivalence; Nels, one of two brothers, briefly goes astray and parties at college, then returns to be redeemed through the forgiveness ritual; Leena,

mysteriously gets pregnant, has a baby out of wedlock, and is thus “unmarriable” and destined for a lonely life; Paula, a socially awkward dreamer, works at a Jewish nursing home, falls in love with a co-worker whom she fantasizes about marrying, but in her heart she knows that even if his feelings were mutual, she would never be bold enough to leave the church; and Anni who does not appear often in the novel, but we learn through Julia’s chapter that Anni always tried the hardest to be “a good church girl” (130). The final chapter entitled *Whiskey Dragon 1847* is a retrospective of the Laestadian movement’s inception — presumably set in Northern Sweden —focalized through a Sámi reindeer herding woman named Gunnà.

Popular reviews of the novel provide only limited insight into deeper aspects of the religious movement and its contemporary manifestations, thus contextualizing the historical and contemporary manifestations of Laestadianism is important for the analysis (Garrison; Rich; Trapani). If one held sympathetic views of the religion, one might also detect a tendency in the reviews toward “othering” the adherents and their religious understanding, especially viewed through a modern, North American secular lens. This is evidenced in expressions such as “large —*very large* —families” when referring to pronatalism in Laestadianism (NPR) and “alienating religion” (Kirkus) which reflects the opposite of the author’s own characterization of alienation (Kirkus Reviews 2012). Life outside the church was sometimes alienating in contrast to the comfort, warmth, and familiarity of “home.” One review by Brice Ezell, however, reads like an insightful essay on the sociological, political, and cultural implications of the messages of the novel, signaled by the title *‘We Sinners’ is Timeless in Its Religious Implications and Political Relevance* (Ezell). Ezell also interprets the reason why all of the family members are portrayed sympathetically —because the Rovaniemis are loosely based on Hanna Pylväinen’s own family. In an interview with NPR’s Linda Wertheimer, Pylväinen reveals that she herself grappled with leaving her church community. She left once, only to return because she was not “emotionally strong enough.” Now she is an “unbeliever” (NPR). Pylväinen tells about leaving the community she loved, coming to terms with life “outside of the church” and her motivations for writing the novel:

> I had to actually leave the church twice. I left the first time and I wasn’t emotionally strong enough for it. It’s very hard to leave a loving community. It would have been easier if it had been a hateful community or if it had been a terrible childhood. But it wasn’t. And what was interesting is that when I left, I was treated by friends outside of the church as if I was liberated. I was free. I had

> thrown off the shackles of this oppressive church. I could, you know, do what I want and wear what I want and pierce my ears. And actually, I was going through a tremendous mourning. And I think it's that exact feeling that the rest of the world didn't understand, that to leave these communities isn't freedom. That is what made me want to write the book (Wertheimer, 2012)

"Freedom" in the sense or definition that Pylväinen attributes to the world "outside the church" is germane to a discussion of agency and subjectivity —that is, a manifestation of agency in the lives of the character is in the not-so-simple decision to "stay in the faith" or "leave the faith." Underscoring the importance of fiction in representing narratives that speak to the question of "why people stay" in Laestadianism, and in response to Wertheimer's question about how the Rovaniemis compare to Pylväinen's own family, Pylväinen responds:

> It does compare. I come from a very large family. My father is himself a minister and I do have siblings who are both in and out of the church. But I think, especially with debut novels and especially with the work of women, there's the temptation to want to find more autobiographical connections than there are. I mean, I think part of the question here is why not write memoir? And I had considered writing memoir, but the story of leaving, to me, is not the interesting question. The story, which is much more interesting to me - and part of the reason I didn't want to write memoir - was why people choose to stay. (NPR)

Importantly, Laestadianism as represented in Pylväinen's *We Sinners* and in the (ex-) Laestadian women's life narratives, is not merely a "church on Sundays religion," but a culture and way of life characterized by a community of believers, some of whom steadfastly manifest a return to the fundamental teachings of Martin Luther (T. Marttinen). Large networks of kin form the individual's entire social framework, especially in sects that practice strict avoidance of "unbelievers" and the temptations of modern America (Leila; T.-L. Marttinen;Valkoinen;). People who leave the church, community and faith are very often rejected —at least to some degree —by their families of origin, extended kin, and believer network. Ex-Laestadians frequently share stories about the almost universal experience of "shunning" and "rejection" —yet these themes are not as well-developed in *We Sinners* as in the life narratives of (ex-) Laestadian women. "Shunning" and "rejection" are major themes in three of the life narratives, and the power invested in "shunning" I; also germane to analysis of gendered agency and subjectivity.

The theme of familial rejection plays out most prominently in the life of the character Simon, one of two brothers in the novel. In the chapter "Eyes of Man" (48-63), told from the point of view of the mother Pirjo, Simon comes out as gay when Pirjo catches him at the movie theatre in a romantic embrace with a young man. It becomes clear in later chapters that Simon left the church and family to live somewhere on the East Coast with his partner, Christopher. (All of the characters who leave the church and family eventually end up living on the East Coast.) When Christopher tragically dies in a car accident in "Total Loss" (117-135), the "unbeliever" sisters —Tiina, Uppu, and Julia —come to the funeral, along with the other brother in the family, Nels, himself at this time a believer. Nels remained in the church and married within the church; however, he had brief stint with partying while away at college, in the chapter entitled "Party Boy" (64-85). Nels returns to the church, asks forgiveness from his girlfriend whom he later marries, and is redeemed. The parents, Warren and Pirjo, as well as the oldest sister, Brita and her husband and children, Leena and her baby, and the youngest siblings, Paula and Anni, do not attend Christopher's funeral. The siblings, especially the non-believers, get drunk after the funeral and Julia eventually calls their parents and tells them off for so cruelly rejecting their own son, calling them "sanctimonious assholes" (134). Earlier in the chapter, Julia had been "shunned" by her sister Brita and by others in the church. Brita refuses to allow Julia to hold her son, in effect, shunning Julia as diseased for an unbeliever, "I don't want you holding my baby anymore" (131). Julie is also shunned at Church when believers pass over her, refusing the handshake and "God's peace" (124).

Forgiveness is a central tenet of the faith, and in most Laestadian sects, laypeople could absolve one another for their sins. The forgiveness ritual that absolves humans for sin, the mere idea of forgiveness and grace coupled with guilt and shame, are seminal themes in the novel. In the life narratives, the interplay of sin and forgiveness also manifest disempowered and powerful subjectivities and limit agency, especially when forgiveness is "weaponized" to gain social control over others. While Pylväinen describes the forgiveness ritual in a positive light, stating it was "done democratically," other North American (ex-) Laestadians describe it as a form of abuse and social control. It goes without saying that the weight of the "interplay of sin and grace" is signaled and gains full significance in the title of the novel: *We Sinners* (Korkalo and Valkonen 50)*;* sin and grace, reflecting central tenets of the religion, are also prominent themes in stories that circulate in communities of (ex-) Laestadians and Apostolic Lutherans online.

Other prominent themes that come through in *We Sinners* and life narratives, and which manifest aspects of gendered agency and subjectivity are the pain and (potential) power of shunning (doing the shunning) and being shunned (being on the receiving end of shunning) and familial and community rejection. Another theme is the doctrine of exclusivism or the commonly held belief among Conservative Laestadians that "their church represents Christianity in its purest form, and that outside their church there is no salvation" (Korkalo and Valkonen 40; E. A. Suominen 64). Some people leave because the church culture upholds systemic abuse (Leila;Valkoinen); or they leave to escape the "social compulsion" of Laestadian pronatalism or compulsory multiple-birth motherhood (T.-L. Marttinen; E. A. Suominen 89). Another reason people leave is because their conscience does not allow them to adhere to the "one true Church" doctrine, this is especially the case in the narrative of Aallotar (Valkoinen). Birth control, premarital sex, television, dancing, non-religious music, make-up and pierced ears, pride or pretentiousness, and *especially* the consumption of alcohol are all considered grave temptations and eternal sins (Korkalo and Valkonen 40). Ultimately, most people who leave Laestadianism in North America leave because the fundamental teachings of Martin Luther and Lars Levi Laestadius are hopelessly incompatible with modern American life. The disillusionment of many former adherents is perhaps best captured in (ex-) Laestadian, Ed Suominen's blog. In reference to his former Laestadian Lutheran Church (incidentally the same sect is in fact portrayed in *We Sinners*), he writes:

> This is just one weird little Protestant sect churning upriver against a flood of contrary facts, bearing its delusions of grandeur, its complicated set of mostly unwritten silly rules, and its steady fuel supply of new members popping into maternity wards and winding their way from day circle to Sunday School to confirmation class. There are many others like it with their own combinations of such features. The tiresome machinery of it all grinds inexorably on. (E. Suominen)

The dilemmas surrounding the disillusionment Suominen alludes to are part of a larger discussion in North American (ex-) Laestadian communities. The foundational questions—of staying or leaving the community—come through poignantly in *We Sinners* and in (ex-) Laestadian women's life narratives. Through an analysis of *We Sinners* and four (ex-) Laestadian life narratives, the aims of this thesis are to engage in this larger discussion from a gendered perspective. The gendered discussion breaks with stereotypical views of women as voiceless and powerless in fundamentalist religious sects; this study demonstrates the role of

women as active agents in shaping their own and others' lives and subjectivities and in re-producing cultural and religious norms in North American Laestadianism.

This thesis follows a four-chapter format. The first chapter includes the following: 1) a social, historical and contemporary contextualization of *We Sinners* and the four (ex-Laestadian) women's life narratives; 2) a review of the extremely limited scholarly and popular materials on the topic of Scandinavian and North American Laestadianism, a fact that has relevance for the study of the novel and life narratives; 3) a section explicating my justification for the methodological approach in the thesis, in view of the social, historical, and contemporary developments in the Laestadian movement. The second chapter includes interpretation and analysis of gendered agency and subjectivity in the narratives of four female characters in *We Sinners,* Uppu, Tiina, Brita and Gunnà. The third chapter includes analysis and interpretation of the four (ex-) Laestadian women's life narratives, Leila, Myra, Aallotar, and Tarja. The final chapter is a comparative analysis of the eight narratives, and a conclusion.

2 Sources and Context

2.1 Literature Review and the Problem of Sources

Despite the popular reception and critical acclaim in the North American literary establishment of *We Sinners* (Pylväinen), the novel has largely been ignored in scholarship. Regardless of its groundbreaking subject matter on modern North American Laestadianism, it neither captured the attention of literary scholarship, nor Gender and Nordic/Scandinavian Studies. To date, there has been one scholarly article on the novel from the Finnish Society for the Study of Religion entitled: “For ourselves and for each other —Politics of embodied religious belonging in the novel *We Sinners*” by Sandra Wallenius Korkalo and Sanna Valkonen (Korkalo and Valkonen 37-60). As the first article that sets in motion a scholarly discussion on *We Sinners*, Korkalo and Valkonen’s text is foundational in this study on gendered agency and subjectivity in North American Laestadianism. Especially relevant for a cultural and literary studies approach to *We Sinners* is the following quote:

> We claim that the book and its story are a part of the discussion about belonging in Laestadianism. Given this focus, the novel addresses various sensitivities and potential blind spots in the practices and consequences of inclusion and exclusion. As fiction, the work may also reveal themes that are otherwise difficult to broach. (Korkalo and Valkonen 41).

As the title suggests, Korkalo and Valkonen’s analyze the novel through “the politics of embodied religion.” The article presents a “mini-study” of the novel and interprets the following three characteristics of embodied belonging in *We Sinners:* 1) physical appearance and movement, especially with regard to dress culture, avoidance of adornment, and pushing the boundaries of dress by balancing individuality with modesty; 2) intensive togetherness, that is, the ways that physical space and privacy are highly structured in Laestadian family and community life; 3) and, the yoked embodiment(s) of sin and grace, especially with regard to sex and sexuality (37-60). All of these features are germane to the discussion of gendered agency and subjectivity. However, my interpretation of gendered roles, sexuality, and power relations, especially in the reproduction and reconstitution of the faith and family system,

diverges from Korkalo and Valkonen's interpretations; they maintain that patriarchal hegemony dictates the role of men and women in the community, as evidenced in the following:

> In the Laestadian community the expectations of what acceptable female and male bodies are derive from the prevailing conceptions of masculinity and femininity and the role of women and men in the community. Gender hierarchy is woven deeply into Laestadianism. The gender matrix of the Laestadian community has been described as hegemonic masculinity: women's lives and position in the community are strongly regulated by the movement's normative, conservative, and patriarchal doctrines [Hintsala 2012, 29-30: Ihonen 2001]. (Korkalo and Valkonen 44-45)

While one could certainly make the case that *We Sinners* and the four (ex-) Laestadian life narratives reflect and represent Korkalo and Valkonen's assessment of gender hierarchy in the community, I argue that *in spite of* "normative, conservative, and patriarchal doctrines" and their prescribed gender roles, *women still exercise agency in their lives and are highly influential in shaping the subjectivities of other women in Laestadian communities*. Crucially, women themselves uphold and reproduce the patriarchal doctrine or gender hierarchy, which is especially exhibited in the stories of the characters Brita and Pirjo in their pivotal roles as the mother and oldest sister in the family. Women in *We Sinners* and the life narratives are also agents of social change in their own lives and in the lives of other women and girls. Sometimes they are themselves agents in domination and in negatively shaping the subjectivities of women and girls deemed "lower" in the internal gendered (female) hierarchy. Perhaps the most obvious expression of the manifestation of agency in their own lives is in the act of choosing to "stay in the community of believers" or to "leave the community of believers."

As the life narratives demonstrate, even the women whose agency had been severely limited by the forces around them, upon leaving, they ultimately shaped their own destinies and subjectivities. Tarja, Aallotar, and Leila reported that it was their mothers (and sometimes other female relatives) who exerted pressure on them to conform to Laestadian expectations, sometimes in highly maladaptive ways. In contrast, Myra's account of her mother breaks with the experiences of the others in that her mother was supportive of Myra's effort to get an education "off the Finnish tribal reservation" (Möyrylä). A possible explanation for Myra's

parents' encouragement of her getting an education is their own experiences of poverty and their seeking to ensure that their own children avoid the same fate. Thus, the view that women are passive objects of "normative, conservative, and patriarchal doctrines" is not fully supported in the interpretation and analyses of the material in this study.

When it comes to literary texts in the Nordic countries, to date, there have been two novels published with Laestadian characters and themes that have appeared in English translations: *The Salt Bin* (Jenssen 1998), Roland Thorstensson's translation of the original Norwegian text *Saltbining* (Jenssen, 1981); and *Popular Music from Vittula* (Niemi 2004), Laurie Thompson's translation of the original Swedish text, *Popularmusik från VittAnula* (2001). The latter novel represents a Lule Sámi family in the 1950s set in Divtasvuona/Tysfjord, Nordland Province, Norway, where the overwhelming majority of local Sámi are practicing Laestadians. Told from the perspective of the father, Agnar, the novel follows the lives of Agnar, his wife Lisa, and their son Petter as they both endure and resist oppression on the part of the local majority Norwegian population. Similar to *We Sinners, The Salt Bin,* according to Johan Schimanski, was largely ignored by scholars, both when it first came out in Norwegian in 1981 and again when it came out in English in 1988. Also similar to *We Sinners* leading to heated discussions in the Laestadian communities in North America, *The Salt Bin,* according to Johan Schimanski, similarly led to "heated debate in Tysfjord County" (Schimanski 181-182).

Laestadianism is a running theme in *Popular Music from Vittula* (2011)*,* as the main character, Niila, comes from a Laestadian background in Pajala, Northern Sweden; Pajala is a community of predominantly Finnish-speaking Swedes, most of whom likely had Laestadian ancestors. Niila's father and grandmother are represented as intractable, yet hypocritical, in their Laestadian beliefs. In contrast to the sympathetic portrayal of Warren, the Laestadian father in *We Sinners,* who reflects sincerity when he apologizes for losing his temper*,* the father in Niemi's *Popular Music from Vittula* is domineering and brutish, and Laestadianism plays a major role in his abusive behavior. In one passage, his father's profound hypocrisy as a "believer" (who was cast out of his own Laestadian community) is characterized as somewhat comical and tragic:

> /…/But despite being abandoned, despite feeling hollow, he still regarded himself as a believer. He maintained the rituals and brought up his children in accordance with the Scriptures. But he replaced the Good Lord with himself. And that was the

> worst form of Laestadianism, the nastiest, the most ruthless. Laestadianism without God (M. Niemi 29)

Dimensions of Laestadianism as a faith or movement and/or Laestadian characters in the Nordic and Sámi contexts have also been represented in four Nordic films, including the film adaptation of the novel *Popular Music from Vittula,* released in 2004 (Reza Bagher), which followed closely after the extremely popular Finnish film *Pahat pojat/Bad Boys* directed by Aleksi Mäkälä, 2003 (Mäkelä). In 2009, the film *Kielletty hedelemä/Forbidden Fruit*, directed by Dome Karukoski, 2009, came out, but enjoyed less acclaim than the others (Bardy). The film that likely has had the greatest international appeal and distribution, especially in the North American (ex-) Laestadian communities, was Nils Gaup's 2008 film *Kautokeino Opprøret/Kautokeino Rebellion* (Gaup). According to Sofia Sjö and Andreas Häger in their article "Filmic constructions of the (religious) other: Laestadians, abnormality, and hegemony in contemporary Scandinavian cinema" these four films reflect various negative portrayals of historical and contemporary Laestadians and Laestadianism (Sjö and Häger). Developing their argument around Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, they conclude by arguing for greater (religious) media literacy. Notably, all of the novels and films discussed here have been widely consumed by the North American (ex-) Laestadian communities, and, not unlike *We Sinners,* all of them have led to discussions in virtual and in-person communities.

In the North American context, as a reaction to fear or avoidance of the "worldly" and "unbelievers," some communities have shunned the few former adherents who have dared publish works on the Laestadian movement in North America (E. A. Suominen). Some earlier texts were explicitly written from a biased perspective and appear to be defending an argument that their direction is the "one true Church." An illuminating example is provided by a book on immigrant history with a chapter titled: "Short History of Lestadian (sic) Immigrants to Sault Ste. Marie/Sault Ste Marian Laestadialaisten Lyht Historia":

> This church continues, unchanged, the doctrine and teaching of Jesus Crist (sic), the Aposteles (sic), Martin Luther and the prophet Lars Levi Lastadius (sic) (1800-1861) by whom Gad (sic) choce (sic) to restore living Christianity in the lean north contry (sic) Swedish Lapland, around the middle of the nineteenth century. (Kokkonen 15)

Several North American ex-Laestadians have sought to shed light on the movement's earliest inception in Swedish Lapland/Sápmi and its development and change over time, including in Warren Hepokoski's *The Laestadian Movement: Disputes and Divisions 1861-2000* (2002) and Edwin A. Suominen's *An Examination of the Pearl* (2012). Hepokoski's and Suominen's approaches to Laestadian subject matter diverge sharply. Written in a lyrical style, Suominen's text argues lucidly against Laestadian doctrine, while Hepokoski's text is written in academic prose and is often cited by Nordic researchers, including multiple times in Korkalo and Valkonen's "politics of embodied religion" article discussed above. Hepokoski presents an extensive, well-documented, accounting of the Laestadian movement in Northern Scandinavia and North America, beginning in 1800 with the birth of Laestadius, through the late 20th century (Hepokoski). However, as a known (ex-) Laestadian, despite Hepokoski's well-documented work, it likely still enjoys some scrutiny from both secular and Christian audiences. Suominen, on the other hand, clearly does not set out to present an unbiased historical account, nor does he attempt to appease believer audiences, as evidenced by the opening statement on his blog catalogued under "Personal." Here he writes that he left the Laestadian Lutheran Church (LLC) "via writing a book that was critical of it" (E. Suominen). Further, in the front material of the books, he describes his book as such:

> This book is an honest and unflinching examination of the pearl that Conservative Laestadianism puts on offer as the Kingdom of God. It is a study not just of that obscure revival movement from 19th century Lapland, but also of Martin Luther, fundamentalist and sectarian Christianity, and the Bible itself. (E. A. Suominen)

The production of and reception to Hepokoski's and Suominen's texts reveal that there is an empirical blind spot in scholarly writing on North American Laestadianism. Gaining insight into the North American Laestadian world and everyday reality is limited to the perspectives of individuals who have left their familial and believer communities and joined communities of "unbelievers" or the secular world. The obvious reason for this is that believer communities exercise avoidance of "unbelievers" and "worldlies," thus, non-Laestadian scholars would likely never gain access to Laestadian communities. Further, if a community holds steadfastly to the doctrine of the "one true Church," and missionizing is frowned upon for gaining new members, they would likely see little value in sharing the internal workings of their faith with academic researchers from outside the church.

As I have attempted demonstrate in this section, the topic of North American Laestadianism has largely been ignored by scholarship. Despite the popular and critical reception of the novel, *We Sinners,* and its illuminating subject matter, to date, neither the novel nor life narrative writing from Laestadian communities have been the subject of literary criticism or critical analysis. The only academic treatment of the novel, at the time of this writing, is Korkalo and Valkonen's article on religious embodiment. In this thesis, I seek to create a space for the study of this largely neglected topic in literary and cultural studies, and to analyze the material through a gendered lens.

2.2 Historical and Contemporary Context of the Novel and Life Narratives

Critical to understanding the worlds represented in Pylväinen's multi-focal fictional novel (Nicosia 176) *We Sinners* and life narratives of (ex-) Laestadian women are the historical roots of the Laestadian movement, immigration to North America, and the faith's contemporary manifestations in pluralistic North American life. Mainstream and secular audiences unfamiliar with the distinct cultural and historical *ethos* (Heandrick) of the novel and life narratives could be baffled by the allusions and direct references to particular passages of scripture and religious references, internal cultural norms, and the abrupt inclusion of Finnish phrases. Perhaps most confounding would be the references to specific historical moments and figures in the Laestadian movement's inception and eventual fracturing into different sects both in Europe and in North America. In the following sections, I will briefly introduce the major historical and cultural developments in the trans-Atlantic Laestadian movement.

2.2.1 Laestadius and the Laestadian Movement

Lars Levi Laestadius (1800-1861) was born into a family of preachers who served the Swedish State and Crown in missionizing the northernmost province of Sweden, a geographical and cultural area often referred to in historical texts simply as "Swedish Lapland." His mother was a Sámi, and like others in the area, he grew up speaking Swedish, Finnish, and Sámi. Later he would be notable in the development of both North and Lule Sámi in written forms. In addition

to his influential missionizing after his conversion to pietistic reform Lutheranism, he was also considered a foremost botanist, “Lapp” mythologist, and linguist (Kristiansen) (Kristiansen 104-109). We are introduced to Laestadius himself in the novel’s final chapter “Whisky Dragon, 1847” when the protagonist, Gunnà, listens to one of his sermons.

While most popular reviews of *We Sinners* often reference Laestadianism as a distinctively Finnish expression of fundamentalist Lutheranism, the events leading to the faith and movement’s earliest inception, or the roots of Laestadianism, are within the Sámi reindeer herding communities, villages, and *siiddat*[1] in Swedish Lapland/Sápmi. At the time of Laestadius’ conversion in 1844 (Kristiansen 111), the Sámi had been under intense pressure for many generations to abandon their shamanic way of life, called *noaidevuohta* (“the way of the *Noaidi/*shaman”) (Solbakk 19-25). In *noaidevuohta,* there was a powerful constellation of female deities which also prefigure feminine agency in Laestadian communities (I return to this constellation and analysis later in the next chapter). State and church authorities in all four countries that exercised sovereignty over traditional Sámi territories in Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Kola Russia had exacted oppressive taxes, developed mining operations in Sámi grazing and fishing areas, and encouraged increased settlement in Sámi territories. Earlier missionizing efforts directed at the Sámi were punishing and violent. Kingdoms and Christendom regarded the Sámi way of life as expressions of “the diabolical arts”; also revealing the dominant views of the time was the fact that the province of Finnmark, meaning place of the Sámi in Old Norse, was regarded as “the entrance to hell itself” (Hagen 51-54).

Many Sámi had undoubtedly internalized colonial views, and as a result, some repressed their outward expression of Sámi culture and ways of life. Laestadius was one of the few preachers of his time who broke with the prevailing disparaging views of the Sámi. He preached to the Sámi through the lens of their own worldview, in their languages, and brought his messages directly to Sámi herders on the tundra plateau. Bringing his message to the people in their languages —languages that had been referred to by colonial authorities and missionaries as “languages of the devil” —while insisting that the Sámi and Finnish languages were languages of God, would have an enduring impact on the Sámi culture and way of life (Heith 12; Kristiansen 96-135).

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[1] The plural form of *siida,* in this context a constellation of families who herd reindeer collectively.

The absolute abstention from alcohol as a tenet of Laestadianism finds expression in the novel *We Sinners* and is also a recurring theme in most texts representing Laestadianism, both in the Nordic countries and in North America. Alcoholism and the "evils of alcohol" as pronounced themes in these texts are rooted in the development of the faith; Pylväinen most fully represents these developments in the final retrospective chapter "Whiskey Dragon, 1847" (Pylväinen, 173-189). In the chapter, we abruptly depart from the setting of contemporary America and are thrust into the world of the early Laestadian movement, three years after Laestadius' conversion. Owing to this critical aspect of Laestadianism, the themes of alcohol and alcoholism are also sporadically represented throughout the other chapters in the novel.

For many decades leading up to the inception of Laestadianism, Swedish State Church officials, including ministers, had collaborated in efforts to exploit local reindeer herding Sámi through the sale/trade of liquor. In many Sámi areas, where the sale and trade of furs and meat was a lucrative business for colonialists, liquor would often be distilled and stored in the church cellars. As a result, abuse of alcohol and alcoholism became rampant in some reindeer herding communities, especially among male herders. The Sámi pastoralist way of life relied on reciprocity of labor, resilience, and the necessity to adapt to sudden changes in arctic conditions. Alcoholism threatened their survival, and it was often herding women who bore the brunt of the social and cultural problems related to alcohol abuse.

This is the world we find ourselves in with the final protagonist of the novel, Gunnà, who Pylväinen introduces us to in the last chapter. Gunnà's narrative provides a view into the historical conditions leading to Sámi women becoming some of the earliest and most influential adherents of Laestadianism. In other words, female agency accounted for the earliest proselytizing that resulted in the rapid conversion of reindeer herding villages, or *siiddat*, in the winter pasturing areas. The faith and movement spread to the coastal communities where herders grazed their reindeer in the summers. Undoubtedly, women also played a seminal role in the conversion of coastal Sámi and Kven women living in coastal areas.

We also are introduced to the history of reindeer herders in the early Laestadian movement in the chapter entitled "We Sinners," told from the point of view of Tiina, who left the movement and was living with her atheist, middle-class, cosmopolitan boyfriend, Mathew, in New York City. In a mild diatribe against the faith, Mathew says: "It spread because of reindeer/…/The migrations/…/In the summer, they went to the coast, and in the winter, they moved inland. So

you have all these Laplander nomads running around with their reindeer spreading this faith. Like a disease: (Pylväinen 94).

Marttinen has characterized Laestadius as an anti-materialist, and as such, that likely influenced the rapid spread of Laestadian Lutheranism to the Finnish side of the border, especially among the culturally and linguistically mixed Tornedaliens in Northern Sweden (T. Marttinen 69-70). Undoubtedly, his messages were especially appealing to the Finnish and Tornedalian "peasant classes" in the northern provinces. Laestadianism followed the significant tenets of Lutheranism founded by Martin Luther, but tenets and other beliefs that were especially appealing to the Sámi, Tornedaliens, and Northern Finns were the following: the clear anti-State Church stance and anti-materialism; the absolute abstinence from alcohol; personal belief alone was salvation; laypeople could absolve one another of their sins (grace); the belief that one should be humble; the belief that one should not take more from nature than one needs (sin of worldliness) (Kristiansen 100-104). In the novel and life narratives, the interplay of sin and grace and its manifestations of agency and subjectivities in the lives of women is especially relevant.

Some scholars have argued that Laestadian tenets, combined with a deeply emotional and expressive form of worship called *liikkutuksia/lihkudas*—like "talking in tongues," erratic movements, fainting spells, and fits of crying —especially resonated with the Sámi as it bore a likeness to earlier shamanic practices; other scholars have an alternative hypothesis, arguing that Laestadianism played a central role in erasure of local practices (Andreassen 70-89; Kristiansen 96-135; Minde 5-25). Marttinen posits that Laestadianism resulted in a "perversion of local practices" through incorporation of traditional Sámi beliefs (T. Marttinen). It bears mentioning that several of the chapters in *We Sinners* and the life narratives in this study describe aspects of expressive worship (*liikkutuksia*) as well as the long Finnish language hymns that form part of Laestadian and Apostolic believer tradition.

2.2.2 Laestadianism in North America

It is common knowledge in North American Laestadian circles that at least 60,000 adherents belong to one of the seven sects throughout the United States and Canada (Harkonen, 2010). The first Laestadian congregations in North America were founded shortly after the arrival of Finnish and Sámi immigrants to Cokato, Minnesota in 1872 (Alanen 79), and Calumet in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan in the 1873 (Laestadian Lutheran Church). Over the course of the immigration period, the Laestadian community grew and expanded to other states and into

Canada with the influx of new immigrants from Northern Scandinavia who were recruited to work in the North American mining industries (E. Niemi 127-156; Kurtti). Some Laestadian communities, like other State Church dissenters, may have migrated in groups to express their faith more freely in America.

There are three main divisions of Laestadianism, all of which have direct links to congregations in Norway, Sweden, and Finland. International summer gatherings — sometimes numbering in the thousands —are held in Northern Sweden, where some of the North Americans sects make a pilgrimage to the birthplace of Laestadian and the place of the inception of his movement in Karesuando (Tormanen). Some of the Laestadian communities or congregations in North America would refer to themselves as “Apostolic Lutherans” due to the various “splits” and “Heresies” in the movement (Harkonen, 2014). Pylväinen makes direct reference to “the Heresy of ‘73” in the chapter “His own house” told from the point of view of the father, Warren; Warren and his father had “gone to opposite sides [of a split]” and as a result, they had a strained relationship and hardly kept in touch:

> When the Heresy of ’73 had come, they’d gone to opposite sides, his father and mother and six siblings to the more lenient Apostolics, but Warren —even then in love with Pirjo, whom he’d met that summer at Finnish language camp —had followed Pirjo to the Laestadian side. (Pylväinen 26-27)

Emphasizing the trans-Atlantic character of the Laestadian and Apostolic Lutheran movement, there is also the explicit involvement of Laestadian leaders and “system of elders” from Finland and Sweden in the affairs of congregations in North America (Paunonen) (Hepokoski) (Harkonen) (Korkalo and Valkonen 40-42). North American Laestadians often travel to Finland to find spouses or Finnish Laestadians travel to America. This is also reflected in the first chapter of the novel, when the family stays in Pirjo’s cousin’s apartment who was away for the summer “trying to get engaged in Finland” (Pylväinen 8). In the North American context, the vast majority of Laestadians would identify primarily as Finnish Americans, and many also claim secondary Sámi heritage. Some North American Laestadians, and especially ex-Laestadians, upon uncovering the deep connections Laestadianism has to Sámi culture, become involved in the various Sámi North American diaspora communities.[3] Many would find it challenging to separate Sámi culture and Laestadian culture, especially descendants from the Northern Swedish parish districts and settlements along the Tornio River Valley (Wagner-Harkonen; Kurtti).

We Sinners reflects the interconnectedness of Sámi and Laestadian history in the final retrospective chapter "Whiskey Dragon, 1847" told from the perspective of Gunnà. Through Gunnà's tragic story of loss and alienation, we are introduced to Lars Levi Laestadius as he describes his fateful meeting with the historical and mythical figure "Lapp Mary" (Maija/Milla Clemetsdotter). In an interview with Washington Independent Books, Pylväinen reflects on her motivations for writing the final chapter as a historical retrospective:

> I knew I wanted "We Sinners" to be bigger than a book about a contemporary, Midwestern, fundamentalist family. I wanted "We Sinners" to ask a more difficult question, which is How have we [American Laestadians?] all become who we are? The story of Gunnà, while seemingly unrelated to the lives of the Rovaniemis, actually provides a parallel counterpart to the questions of the forbidden in her world and the forbidden in their world, as well as questions of family and community pressure. And of course, there's a cameo of Laestadius. That said, I began to write the chapter initially as a kind of experiment, since I had never tried historical fiction before, and only realized later that I wanted to deny the reader the satisfaction of finding out "what happens to the Rovaniemis" by telling them what happened to make the Rovaniemis, the Rovaniemis. (Rich)

Some of the various sects in North America share in the reverence for the sacred female figure "Lapp Mary"/Maija/Milla Clemetsdotter (Harkonen; Hepokoski). Maija/Milla Clemetsdotter was a key figure in the conversion of Laestadius to fundamentalism with its strong emphasis on forgiveness, belief alone is salvation, and the tenet of absolute abstention from alcohol. "And from this simple Lapp, he learned of his own unrighteousness. He had been saved from his own eternity of hell" (Pylväinen 187). (I return to Maija/Milla Clemetsdotter/"Lapp Mary" as a manifestation of prefigured agency and subjectivity later in the chapter.)

Pylväinen's reflection on her motivation for writing the chapter finds common cause with other (ex-) Laestadian women seeking to understand the roots of the faith and culture of their birth. While Sámi identity is, for the most part, repressed in Laestadian communities, expressions of Finnish culture abound. Brita and Pirjo both use Finnish word, phrases, and prayers in *We Sinners*, and Tarja and Myra make reference to the use of the Finnish language in their church and immigrant communities. Aallotar feels like she lost her Finnish culture when she left the church but has since visited Finland and reconnected with her heritage. In

many of the North American communities, sermons are held in both English and Finnish, thus, Laestadianism can be credited with the retention of the Finnish language in many rural Finnish American immigrant communities. It goes without saying that the tendency to resist linguistic assimilation in North America and the retention of the Finnish language in these communities can also be attributed to the Laestadian belief that Finnish (and Sámi) are "languages of God" (Kristiansen 121).

As mentioned above, in the latter half of the 20th century, there were several "splits" within the three original European congregations in North America, making the total number of distinct sects seven. Social taboos, "shunning," and uncomfortable silences characterize the dynamics of "splits" among and between adherents of the various divisions (Wagner-Harkonen). Outsiders lacking in knowledge of these dynamics within Laestadian/Apostolic congregations in Finnish American immigrant communities are confronted with awkward communication should they unwittingly make taboo inquiries. Often, each side of a split will refer to the other side as "the Heresy." Aallotar references splits and heresies in her narrative, and in the context of the following quote, she talks about the powerful female subjectivity of the "discerner:"

> As I said previously, women can have very powerful roles in the church. One matriarch, now deceased, was known to be a discerner. If a new congregant was called to preach, she in essence, was one of the people called to determine if he was "preaching in the spirit" because sometimes the right words were used, but the spirit was determined to be lacking. It didn't mean the preacher was an unbeliever (but it might, during a time of heresy!) but it meant that he didn't have "the gift." (Valkoinen)

Like many other pietistic and evangelical movements that flowed into North America from Europe, Laestadian congregations could be characterized as sharpening in their already fundamentalist character in local immigrant communities. In this context, women were and are "considered to be the sacred mothers" and were central to upholding, connecting, and forming the spokes and bonds of believers in communities that posit that they alone have the one "true faith" (Paunonen). Child-bearing and child-rearing—the role of the "sacred mother"—is especially germane when membership and continuity of the faith in North America comes through genealogy, and not through direct proselytizing or evangelizing (Hepokoski; E. Suominen). It is common for families in most of the seven sects in North

America to have many children and the mother is a full-time homemaker and the father the sole breadwinner. Ambivalence and even shame associated with coming from a family with nine children is reflected throughout *We Sinners*, especially in the first chapter, "Pox" focalized through the oldest sister Brita. However, later in the novel, Brita herself has six children and nearly dies after her seventh C-section in the chapter "Rupture."

Another critical dimension of Laestadianism in North America is "fear of the worldly" which limits contact with outsiders, especially non-believers; the world of the "unbelievers" is a prominent theme in the novel and life narrative texts. Some of the branches' insistence on their branch reflecting the "one true faith" and that only followers from their branch will enjoy eternal salvation are also prominent themes in some of the life narratives (T. Marttinen; E. A. Suominen; Valkoinen). Again, the novel and life narratives reveal the common experiences of being "shunned" for any number of reasons, including if one falls on the "wrong side of a split," if one has left the church and is considered an "unbeliever," or if one is deemed to be a particularly heinous sinner (unwed mothers, LGBT people, addicts, outcasts). The consequences of shunning are poignantly manifest in the life narratives.

As I stated in the previous chapter, researchers seeking to gain a nuanced understanding of Laestadian communities and congregations in North America will find scant, secular scholarly material. Thus, the material that provides the broadest insight, especially when it concerns gender roles and gendered agency and subjectivity, comes through oral tradition (Cruikshank 404-418) and "intersubjective encounters (Maynes, Pierce and Laslett 98-125). Also, short life narratives or vignettes published on blogs or other social media devoted to the ex-Laestadian or "unbeliever" communities are illuminating and provide forums for learning but also for the creation of "virtual communities" (Alleyene 108-109).

Finally, in many sources in North America, the use of terminology that indicates an Indigenous cultural connection, such as "tribe" and "clan" are commonplace and are not associated with an appropriation from local Native American meanings. Rather, references to "tribe" and "clan" reveal particular affinities in and continuities with "the old country." In some (ex-) Laestadian communities, as well as in some "believer" communities, one can find a tendency to view ancient Sámi cultural practices and worldviews on a continuum with Laestadianism and the Laestadian "way of life" (T. Marttinen) (Wagner-Harkonen) (Möyrylä). Common adages to this effect abound in various Laestadian and Apostolic "believer" and "unbeliever" communities: "we don't know where Sámi culture ends and

Laestadianism begins"; "my Church is my *siida*"; "my spiritual community is my tribe"; "my extended family my clan." Another adage especially germane to this study is: "my church is my refuge, and my church is my prison." Regardless of the particular North American Laestadian context, the role of women's agency and subjectivity is paramount to maintaining communities and webs of relations.

2.3 Tensions in Gendered Agency and Subjectivity in North American Laestadianism

Literary and cultural-textual representations of gender and Laestadianism in North America derive from complicated trajectories. Questions arise in relation to intersecting aspects of the gendered dualism in the roots of Laestadianism and the formation of a hybrid Christian/Sámi pre-Christian way of life alongside a fundamental return to the teachings of Martin Luther (T. Marttinen). Other important aspects include fear of and strict avoidance of the "worldly," material culture and modern life, as well as continuity and change in Finnish and Sámi immigrant Laestadian communities in North America (T. Marttinen). All of these questions are germane to a discussion of gendered agency and subjectivity in *We Sinners* and life narrative representations of Laestadian sects in North America.

Gendered analysis of agency and subjectivity in *We Sinners* (2012) and (ex-) Laestadian women's life narratives critically rely on tracing four intersecting historical and cultural trajectories in contemporary Laestadian contexts. Foundational to considerations of female agency and subjectivity, I first consider the "ancient antecedents" or prefiguration of pre-Christian gendered complementarity in Sámi culture manifested through the powerful constellation of Sámi female deities or helpers, the mother goddess, *Máttaráhkká* and her daughters *Uksáhkka* (goddess/protector of the door/home*) Juhksáhkka* (goddess/creator/protector of male fetuses) and *Sárákka* (goddess/protector/creator of female fetuses). In *noaidevuohta* (pre-Christian Shamanism), the constellation of goddesses was essential in aiding humans in childbirth, maternity, and in the protection of "home" and the domestic realm (Solbakk). Laestadius himself had collected and transcribed one of several versions of pre-Christian Sámi birth practices where he revealed how the constellation of goddesses was fundamental to all creation, humans and other living beings (see (Læstadius). Marttinen argues that Laestadius reconceptualized these ancient beliefs in the Sámi nature-

based genesis and conceptualization of birth, a reconceptualization that she writes is "graphically demonstrated in the *House Postilla Sermons/…/.* In this sermon, Laestadius addresses the sick before death and posits that 'the daughter of Zion was *born* contemptible' and her 'scarlet coloured sins' have flowed with her from the womb of her old mother…" (T. Marttinen). Further, she argues that some cultural continuity is evident, but over time Laestadius ultimately "perverted" the pre-Christian conceptualizations of birth and death:

> However, remnants of Sami culture remain, as childbirth and death are lifecycles depicted as female in Sami culture. Also, Sami in the past believed in the immortality of the soul and resurrection of the body after death. Nevertheless, Laestadius' redevelopment of ancient history created a view of women as incompatible, even hostile, to tradition. (T. Marttinen 12)

The next line I trace is the enduring prominence of the antecedent female figure in the Laestadian meta-narrative named Maija/Milla Clemetsdotter (affectionately referred to as "Lapp Mary" in English among North American Laestadians). Briefly described in the previous chapter, Maija was the young Sámi woman both revered and mythologized in the conversion story of Laestadius from mainline State Lutheranism to hardline Conservative or Fundamental Lutheranism in 1844 (Heith 51-67). Inspired by this conversation in 1844, as well as through influences of the eugenicists and botanists of his day, Marttinen argues that Laestadius would be instrumental to the re-configuration of traditional Sámi gender complementarity into a Christian gendered dualism (T. Marttinen 13). The somewhat striking contradiction in the conversion story, is the degree to which a young Sámi woman is credited with shaping Laestadius' subjectivity. The obvious influence Milla/Maija Clemetsdotter had over Laestadius —a man who would have been positioned high in the state and local structural hierarchy —is noteworthy. Thus, female agency and subjectivity in the re-configuration of pre-Christian gender complementarity, itself manifested through Laestadius' meeting with Milla/Maija Clemetsdotter, is confounding in its obvious contradictions.

Other important lines I trace are women's agency in the rapid spread of Laestadianism in the late 1840s as well as the prominent involvement of women in the violent uprising among Laestadian adherents against the State and Church authorities in the Kautokeino Rebellion of 1852. Finally, one must also trace women's role as the "sacred mothers" and the "spokes and bonds" of the contemporary faith, movement, and way of life (Hepokoski; T. Marttinen; E. A. Suominen;Women in the old Apostolic Church)

Scholarly debates abound on the profound impact of Laestadianism on Sámi culture (see: Andreassen 70-89; T. Marttinen 68-85; Minde 5-25); thus, one argument claims that Laestadius and Laestadianism could be “blamed for destroying Sami cultural beliefs" especially the pre-Christian ways of life. Others argue a more favorable view, that is, that Laestadianism preserved pre-Christian ways of life, especially by "integrating ancient symbols and allegories" (T. Marttinen 69) from *noaidevuohta.* Undoubtedly, Laestadius strengthened the position of the North and Lule Sámi languages at a critical time. Marttinen argues that “/…/even in trans-Atlantic context, there was a fusion of Christianity with previous local traditions, perverting those traditional cultures, especially as it evolved among Finns. Any discussion of trans-Atlantic Laestadianism must account for continuity and change over time (T. Marttinen). Insight into the entanglement or fusion of Sámi pre-Christian beliefs and ways of life and Western Christendom’s gendered dualism is critical in interpretations of contemporary gendered agency and subjectivity in *We Sinners* and the (ex-) Laestadian women’s life narratives.

Analogous to narratives of women in and out of the Laestadian faith is Rauna Kuokkanen’s analysis of notions of women and "tradition" in contemporary Sámi society. About the history of Sámi colonization and women, she writes:

> /…Laestadianism/…/introduced certain concepts of female piety and humility in addition to common Christian dualistic notions of women as either good or evil. Christianity and Laestadianism in particular, have affected Sami society for several generations. Therefore, contemporary perceptions of and attitudes toward women —including those of elderly women —in Sami society are a multilayered blend of influences of various origins and from different periods of time, making it relatively difficult to trace back the "traditions" around Sami upbringing or "traditional" views of women and girls. (Kuokkanen 440)

Marttinen’s research traces these multiple genealogies of Laestadianism, how the dualistic gendered view of Sámi and Finnish Laestadian women in the mid-19th century reveals the manifestation of Laestadius’ religious and gendered framework as even influencing early French and Swedish eugenics movements which ultimately pathologized female bodies and mind (T. Marttinen). Thus, any accounting of gendered agency and subjectivity in modern literary and life narratives in North American must take account of these entanglements and complexities in the analysis.

3 Gendered Agency and Subjectivity in Uppu, Tiina, Brita, and Gunnà

Agency in the novel is most powerfully manifested in the characters' decision to either remain in the faith and believer community or leave the faith and believer community. In its most rudimentary sense, I align the use of the concept of agency in this chapter in keeping with the following: "Agency is an actor's ability to make purposeful choices" (Wrede). In the case of the characters who remain in the faith in *We Sinner*s—Warren, Pirjo, Brita, Nels, Paula, Leena, and Anni—the choice to remain centers on belief in the tenets of Laestadianism, as well as social compulsion and fear of the unknown; staying in the faith also raises the question of whether one stays for oneself or for others. Alternatively, in the case of the characters who leave the faith—Uppu, Simon, Tiina, Julia—the choice to leave centers on a somewhat nebulous idea of freedom; the choice to leave ultimately raises the question of whether one is truly "free" when one leaves. What is the content and expression of "freedom"? Further, in what ways are gendered agency and subjectivity shaped and manifested differently in and out of the church community?

Iris Marion Young "sorts out" several theories of female subjectivities (or lack of subjectivity) in "House and Home: Feminist Variations on a Theme" (123-154) which form the theoretical point of departure in the analysis of gendered agency and subjectivity in the Laestadian world represented in *We Sinners*. Young follows various lines of argument from Heidegger's "universal ontology" of dwelling as "building"—which feminist scholars, including Luce Irigarey and Simone de Beauvoir, claim privileges male subjectivity—and "preservation" also viewed as the "the price that women pay to support man's subjectivity" (Young 123-124). By relegating women to "preservation," and what Young terms a "homey role" where women "serve, nurture, and maintain so that the bodies and souls of men and children gain confidence and expansive subjectivity to make their mark on the world," arguably, denies women subjectivity and agency (24). Irigaray describes this as a "male longing for fixed identity in a timeless tone" and characterizes the drive towards ever-larger houses and property acquisition as a particularly western and upper-class tendency to equate identity with commodities and accumulation of material belongings (24). Beauvoir also challenges Heidegger's "building and preservation" as male privileged and coined the

gendered division of labor in the home as a dichotomy where *immanence* reflected women's domestic labor, and *transcendence* man's contribution to the household configured as expansive and imbued with powerful structural subjectivity.

However, Young seeks to move beyond binaries and the "wholesale rejection of an ideal of 'home' for feminism" and posits that "//…the idea of home also carries critical liberating potential because it expresses uniquely human values. Some of these can be uncovered by exploring the meaning-making activity most typical of women in domestic work" (125). Crucial to a discussion of gendered agency and subjectivity in the novel, is the view that leaving the strict confines, yet comfort and meaning-making of the Laestadian home—the "home" that rejects the "worldliness" of the consumerist "house"—does not necessarily accord women the "transcendence" of a powerful structural subjectivity. Inspired by Young's theoretical distinction, in my analysis, I use a framework of juxtaposing "consumerist house as freedom" and "the Laestadian home as bondage" to reveal their continuities and relational contrasts in an analysis of gendered agency and subjectivity. This framework closely aligns with the adages I have heard in the North American Laestadian community, mentioned in the introduction: "the church (tribe) is my refuge and the church (tribe) is my prison."

From a narratological reading in the analysis or interpretation of agency and subjectivity exemplified in the female characters Uppu, Tiina, Brita, and Gunnà, I engage with Mieke Bals theory of narrative analysis as "an activity of *cultural analysis*":

> /…/cultural/.../constraints define each reader as a cultural being, as a participant in a continuous discussion about meaning /…/This turns narrative analysis into an activity of *cultural analysis,* for the subjectivity in analysis is a larger cultural issue. Subjectivity, understood as the crossing, in culture, of individual and social existence, also characterized the concepts themselves /.../ To talk about narrators, for example, is to impute agency to a subject of narration, even if this subject is not to be identified with the narrator. (Bal 10)

Pylväinen introduces us to the motivations of characters through focalization. Eight of the characters are developed as focalizers, while others are introduced and developed as the focalized, or objects of focalization. Focalization in the novel is a way of imputing "agency to a subject of narration" (Bal 10). Bal theorizes "three forms of narrative agency" and their relationship to focalization:

> Speaking, looking, or acting — the three forms of narrative agency — bring about motivation. The most effective, the most frequent, and the least noticeable form is motivation through looking. Motivation is, then, a function of focalization. The description is the production of what the character sees. (Bal 27)

In *We Sinners,* grappling with faith and the decision to stay or leave presents a dilemma for each of the characters; however, the characters, with the exception of Gunnà, reside in a world where they are structurally positioned with the capacity to make the decision to leave. In other words, the fictional setting of the novel, and the real world of the life narratives in the next chapter, are Western democracies characterized by capitalist economies—a world where white, able-bodied individuals are socially positioned to have access to education and gainful employment. Thus, the characters who leave the Laestadian home are socially positioned with the social and economic capacity to not only survive, but potentially thrive (at least economically). As will be demonstrated in the first section in this chapter, Bals' "three forms of narrative agency" (10) are especially relevant in the stories of Uppu and Jonas Chan: while Jonas is the focalizer and Uppu the focalized, Uppu moves the plot of the chapter along through the form of narrative agency of "acting." Through Jonas' "looking," or focalization, we learn about Uppu's brashness, and it is also through the eyes and heartache of Jonas that we learn about her bold move to leave the faith, family, and Jonas, in the middle of the night.

3.1 Uppu

The youngest of the nine Rovaniemi children, Uppu, is a baby at the beginning of the novel, and by the end she is graduating from high school. An interesting aspect of Uppu as a character is that we get to know her entirely through the focalization of her Chinese American boyfriend Jonas Chan; the title of the chapter also bears his name: "Jonas Chan." Our perception of Uppu and her motivations develop through the interiority of Jonas, and it is through dialogue and action that Uppu's departure from the faith is manifested—a departure that is straightforward, abrupt, final, and unapologetic. Precipitated by Jonas' conversion to the faith through the ritual of forgiveness on the evening of her high school graduation party, Uppu disappears in the middle of the night and drives straight to the house of her unbeliever sister, Tiina, in New York. In her unambiguous departure, the climax of the chapter, Uppu

takes command of the constitution of her own subjectivity and demonstrates a radical claiming of agency.

Outside of the confines of the "home" and church, it is Uppu who initiates a relationship with Jonas. Marveling at Uppu from a distance, Jonas thinks: "And it would have always been like that, his eyes tottering after her down the halls, except that she had sat by him in calculus and locked her arm in his and said—knowing perfectly well he couldn't disagree—that they ought to be friends" (152). Jonas' lonely life as an only child in "the consumerist house" is transformed when he meets Uppu; his subjectivity is shaped by his overachieving parents who seem to care more about his success than his happiness. Having recently relocated to the area from California, Jonas laments his lack of social contact and community, declaring "he wasn't nerdy enough for the nerds" and "there were exactly enough Asians for him to be different without being interesting." The only thing that seemed to set him apart was his musical talent: "But who wanted to be friends because you were a good violist? Uppu did." (153).

In their unfolding friendship, turned romantic relationship, Uppu is not transparent with Jonas about her church life, an omission he finds perplexing and even hurtful. He finally asks Uppu about it, and the exchange reveals Uppu's negative perception of Laestadianism, a divergence from the reflection of ambivalence we see in the other characters:

> "How come you never talk about it? he said. "Your church."
>
> "It's just that insanity is so dull. Nothing to say."
>
> "But what kind of Christianity is it, even?"
>
> "Well," /…/It's called Laestadianism. It's a kind of Lutheranism where everyone is much more hung up on being Lutheran than all the other normal Lutherans. End of story."

In the confines of the "Laestadian home" and church, Uppu's agency was limited, and her subjectivity heavily prescribed—and proscribed—by Laestadian norms: her home life reflected "bondage." Uppu, like the other characters could be interpreted as struggling with the duality of the "prison" and "refuge" dilemma of family and church. However, in contrast to the other women in *We Sinners,* Uppu compartmentalized her "Laestadian home" subjectivity and her subjectivity outside of the church and home —a contrast that is strikingly realized in her relationship with Jonas. We see this contrast clearly when Uppu's father

Warren, suspicious of Jonas, commands him to come to their house for a visit. Uppu, having lied to her father about Jonas's interest in the faith, listened silently as Warren grilled Jonas for two hours. This exchange reflects the manifestation of, or rather lack of, agency through the lens of the "Laestadian church as prison" and the "Laestadian home as bondage":

> "So when you say you're interested in the church, do you mean you're going out to coffee with my daughter or that you're having casual sex?" "Um," Jonas said. He cleared his throat/…/The conversation took two hours. Uppu sat through the whole thing, unwilling, uneasy. She was a different being: silent, almost statuesque/…/He started going to church, in part to uphold Uppu's lie but also because it was a way to spend time with Uppu. (158-159).

In the church setting and especially during services, Uppu lacks agency, and her feminine subjectivity is conscripted, not only as a young woman in a Laestadian church, but also as the youngest of nine children, and likely always under the watchful eyes of parents, older siblings and in-laws. Earlier in the chapter, when Jonas shows up at the church unannounced, Uppu "sat with her sisters in the back and folded her arms, her crossed leg beating out a nervous rhythm" (155). Uppu, angry at Jonas for this infraction, "reamed him" and "spent three days not speaking to him at all" (156). Imploring him never to come again and exclaiming that "she was humiliated and that now everyone thought they were going out and her parents had lectured her about not dating school boys and it looked like she had invited him and everything about it was insane…" (156):

> "You don't understand," she said. "You didn't grow up with this, I grew up with this. It's not just Church, it's not just anything. I love," she said, "that you have nothing to do with it. Don't ruin it, Jonas, please, please." And then she kissed him. (156-157)

In Uppu and Jonas's relationship, an expression of Uppus's agency is manifested when she is the one who initiates both the romantic and sexual relationship with him. To her disappointment, Jonas resists her sexual advances because of feelings of guilt over "sins of the flesh" (162), a guilt that takes form and sharpens after he begins attending her family's church services regularly. Uppu appears to be apprehensive and even nervous when Jonas is in the presence of her family and church, especially in view of the "woman who ate marshmallows during Church," named Peggy (162). When he compares his stilted, high-

achieving parents and his status as an only child to family life in the Rovaniemis, he is drawn to their warmth and interconnectedness. He begins to find the simplicity and emotionalism of their faith appealing; at times he felt like the minister, Pastor Rovaniemi and Uppu's father, was "speaking straight at him" in his sermons (162). Jonas continues to grapple with the loneliness and disconnect from his parent's "consumerist house," and he finds love and comfort in the "Laestadian home." After his graduation party, which the Rovaniemis attended, he thinks: "The Rovaniemis left and their relatives went home and they left behind a backyard of quiet that no one could fill again. He felt it again, the largeness of them, at Uppu's graduation then the entire church showed, every room filled, even the stairs/…/" (167). Life with the Rovaniemis is characterized by "largeness," and he seems to want this life, even if it means forfeiting freedom, a sacrifice he seems willing to make out of devotion to Uppu.

Meanwhile, Uppu believes he is feigning belief in order to be with her, only to witness—to her distress—him going through the conversion ritual, conducted and encouraged by her mother, of asking forgiveness for his sins and receiving the grace of repentance. This happens at her graduation party, right there in front of a hundred church guests in the Rovaniemi home "Jonas has just received the grace of repentance," Pirjo said quietly (169). Uppu, betrayed by Jonas inability to see her as her own self-constituting subject and disillusioned by the profound strictures on her life, disappears in the night. The next day, the family waits for news, together with Jonas, now a believer:

> Uppu's sister called, Tiina, the unbeliever, in New York. Uppu had driven through the night without stopping to Tiina and Perry's place on the Upper West Side and now Tiina had given her two sleeping pills. Uppu was not coming home. Uppu was not going to the church college. Tiina would try to make her call later. (171)

Jonas, in exercising his own agency by trading the "consumerist house" of his parents for the strictures of the "Laestadian home" of the Rovaniemis, loses the one person who cared for him without conditions. The Rovaniemis' condition was faith in order for him to experience belonging, while his parents' condition was his unlimited success for their love. In the final scene in the chapter, the distraught Jonas has been coming to church, every weekend for two years, hoping that Uppu might have returned and was sitting in the aisle, "but every week she was not, and every week he was full of a great grief, but every week he came back, and every week he was forgiven" (172).

3.2 **Tiina**

The chapter with the same name as the novel "We Sinners" is focalized through the second to oldest sister, Tiina, the same sister living in New York who Uppu drives to, all night, when Uppu makes her dramatic departure from the Laestadian faith and Rovaniemi family. In contrast to the other characters who leave the faith—Uppu, Simon and Julia—Tiina's focalization introduces us to a more intimate and direct reflection on the ambivalences when leaving the family and church. Tiina's story reveals her contemplations of life in the secular world as we follow her from her premeditated departure from her "Laestadian home," both literally and figuratively, and into the "consumerist house" of her secular and atheist boyfriend, Matthew. (As an aside, by the time in the novel that Uppu escapes to Tiina, Tiina has a partner named Perry.) The full significance of the title of the chapter is revealed in the end of the chapter and poses the questions: Does life in the "consumerist home" entail "freedom" or liberation? What is the price Tiina pays for freedom?

We first become aware of Tiina's transgressions against her parents—the Laestadian home—in the chapter "Keepers." Tiina's departure is foreshadowed in this chapter when she reveals that she has an "unbeliever" boyfriend. The focalizer of the chapter is Leena, a middle sister, who is afraid of making any tangible moves toward autonomy, even though she occasionally "sins." Tiina, on the other hand, sneaks out at night and parties, returning home just hours before Sunday services. Leena, always the helper, gives Tiina gum to cover up what we might assume to be the odor of alcohol on her breath. In church, Leena catches a glimpse of a note Tiina is reading with the word "pussy" underlined. Leena is envious of Tiina's audacity, and her natural beauty (although it is the sister, Julia who is considered *the beauty* in the family):

> In the middle of the sermon Tiina unfolded a note, not meaning for Leena to read it, but Leena saw it: Did he really call your thing a pussy? The word *pussy* was underlined, like something proud and important. Tiina folded the note back up, quickly/…/Leena felt herself flush, just reading it. How did Tiina do it? How did she just sit there? She wondered. (41)

When Leena follows Tiina out to the family van, Tiina, nursing a hangover, is face down in the back seat. Leena covers her with a sleeping bag, Tiina responds to Leena's gesture: "Little

Leena"/…/ "you are too sweet." Later in the novel, Leena becomes pregnant at the age of eighteen and Julia, reflecting on Leena's tendency to people-pleasing says: "She should have used protection,"/…/ "I feel like she did it just because she was so relieved to have someone like her" (114). Leena never reveals the name of the father of her child and she ends up raising the child alone, but with her family's forgiveness and support.

The chapter "We Sinners" opens with Tiina attending services, and in her private musings she is belittling church people, especially the much sought after Karvonen boys: "What do I want with a Karvonen? She would not think of it. It was futile to give the Karvonen's, or Arnie, or anyone at church, even an extra minute of thought" (87). This is her last service before she intends to lie about where she is headed, and then come out as an unbeliever, over the phone, later in the week. "In one week, she would leave the church" (87). Other family and church members characterize Tiina as smart and musically talented. In another foreshadowing to Tiina's departure, in an earlier chapter "Eyes of Man," the father, Warren, visits Tiina at college out east when he is on a business trip. He remarks to the mother, Pirjo, that he worries about the influences of college life on Tiina's faith. Pirjo believes they must trust their own children (54-55).

In the days leading up to her planned departure, Tiina thinks about how she was "glad she was going to get out." She observes the women in the community, their multiple births and conscripted lives, "the sad fathers and mothers" (88). As the time approaches for her to take the final step, the day she was to depart the church, her ambivalence comes through:

> But when the week had passed, and the right lies had been told at the right time, and the conference clothing had been exchanged in the airport bathroom for a revealing top, she felt afraid. She felt no thrills of liberation. She'd painted her fingernails a bright green—tropical tango—and when she walked toward the baggage claim she knew the nails were a puerile rebellion against the church, and when she saw Matthew, his haircut too new so it rode up above his ears, she wanted to crawl back to the plane. When Matthew saw her he was suddenly eager and she was suddenly shy. She saw that they had each thought too hard about what they wore. (88-89)

When we meet Matthew, Tiina's mainstream, upper-middle class boyfriend, he has a veneer of being some sort of liberator, vacillating between reciting Greek philosophy and bragging about his money and worldly possessions, all the while he repeatedly exclaims that Tiina's

departure from the church and all of its hypocrisy was the right thing to do. Nonetheless, by day three, Tiina starts to enjoy life outside the church: "By the third night at dinner she had given in entirely to the feeling that this was what life outside the church had to offer her, and it was good" (90). But Tiina has not yet called her parents to tell them that she is not coming home, that she is leaving the faith. Mathew pleas with her to be with him, and just him; his pleas for her to tell her parents she had joined the secular world, his world of atheists, become more urgent:

> Once the fanatical need for sex had worn itself out some, the objective of leaving the church became paramount. The barrage began. Matthew had long taken it upon himself to initiate her into the art of atheism, but now he threw himself wholeheartedly into convincing her that Laestadianism was, as he put it one afternoon was: one, like all religions, entirely man-made and fabricated; two, as religions went, a particularly painful form of emotional abuse; and three, practically speaking, an unlivable lifestyle in the modern-day world. (93)

Tiina struggles to tell her family. Mathew implores her to tell her family, all the while, Tiina feels guilty for the pain it will inevitably bring to her mother. But at this point, Tiina is totally dependent on Mathew, financially and emotionally. Mathew shows no compassion for Tiina's feelings of guilt, the turmoil, she is experiencing at the thought of hurting her parents and the loss of the familiarity of the Laestadian home—"the old and familiar binding of her family":

> She thought then about what Matthew had said, about just doing things. People always said that things were easier said than done, but that didn't make sense if the saying was the doing; if, within the space of a few words, she was about to swiftly and single-handedly dissolve the old and familiar binding of her family, irreparably and inconsolably. She thought about her parents, if she knew them well enough to foresee what their faces would do when they heard the news/…/ But she couldn't picture them when she told them—would her dad just withdraw, would he cry and shake and hold her mom? What does the loss of a child look like on a face? How is it shown? (97)

Later in the chapter, Mathew begins to talk about Laestadius and the Laestadian movement. In a particularly jarring reference to the Sámi reindeer herder's involvement in the early movement he says:

> "You know what my favorite part is?" he said. "It spread because of reindeer. The migrations" he said. "In the summer, they went to the coast, and in the winter, they moved inland. So you have all these migrating Laplander nomads running around with their reindeer spreading this faith. Like a disease." (94)

While he is reciting this diatribe, Tiina looks out the window of his impossible and too expensive apartment, paid for with borrowed money, and his collection of toilets that were supposed to be a "…postmodern commentary on the nature of patio furniture, but to her they looked like too many old toilets in a backyard" (94).

Ultimately, Mathew positions himself as a liberal and liberator, but his affected style could be interpreted as cloaked paternalism—he is just as guilty of limiting (although arguably unsuccessfully) Tiina's agency as the church he rails against. Thus, Mathew's behavior parallels the very oppressive tendencies he claims to be challenging or "protecting" her from. In the final scene of the chapter, two years after Tiina officially becomes an unbeliever, she cheats on Mathew. Lying in bed, she laments that she is not forgiven, neither in the Laestadian world nor the secular world: "we sinners, we are just lying to ourselves, we are just alone."

Tiina leaving the confines, yet comfort, of the Laestadian home—the "home" that rejects the "worldliness" of the consumerist "house"—embodies the "preservation" concept of feminine subjectivity as outlined by Young. Crucially, while embodying a liberating potential and agency when leaving the Laestadian home and its "meaning-making potential," Tiina does not necessarily gain liberation with her secular, consumerist partner. Her life is prescribed by another set of rules, and her subjectivity is yoked to Mathew's "transcendence." Her situation is represented as the win-lose, lose-win emotional and subjective double-bind in Laestadian communities: those who leave the Laestadian home, still yearn for some of the comforts of the "uniquely human values" of their childhoods, and those who stay, yearn for that nebulous idea of "freedom" and some of them even long for a more "expansive subjectivity."

3.3 Brita

In the first chapter of *We Sinners* entitled “Pox” we meet Brita, one of the five Rovaniemi children who stays in the faith. Of all of the Rovaniemis, Brita seems the most ambivalent about her life, but nonetheless, her life unfolds not unlike her parents. She constructs her own “Laestadian home” by marrying young, and by the end of the novel she has had seven children, all boys. One can argue that the social compulsion of Laestadian norms coupled with her own fear are the only factors limiting her agency. In her position as the oldest child in the family and in fulfilling the role of the “sacred mother,” she actively shapes the subjectivity of others, especially her younger siblings. Yet, her ambivalence about her own subjectivity as a mother is manifested through dreaming of another life, dreaming of another husband—she dreams of the “consumerist house.” When she is gifted with a grand piano after almost dying in childbirth, the piano serves as a painful symbol of her repressed longing for a subjectivity shaped by the fineries and ease of “consumerist house”—a stark contrast to the drudgery and endless work of the “Laestadian home.”

Brita is the only character who focalizes two chapters, the first chapter, “Pox,” and a later chapter “Rupture.” Her role in shaping the subjectivity of Julia is also manifested in the chapter “Total Loss,” thus, she is a seminal focalized object in other chapters. The very first scene of the first chapter sets the course for the main dilemma in *We Sinners*, and by extension, the main dilemma in North American Laestadianism: “She should have told him already about the church but she hadn’t” (3). Jude, the one she should have told about the church, asks her to the high school dance. Brita wishes he had not asked her and had rather kept up the innocent flirtation so she could daydream about a life with him. She thought about making an excuse and considered lying about why she could not go to the dance. She chose to “confess her faith”:

> But in her mind a minister warned that she should always confess her faith, and it occurred to her, Jude watching her, that confession was what it was. And she confessed. She said things about the church, her voice shaking out of time with her

> knee, she listed, idly, some things she couldn't do—nail polish and movies and music with a beat. (4)

Jude makes a disparaging comment, walks away, and does not talk to her again, but Brita still daydreams about going to the dance with him: "She imagined what it was like to accidentally step on Jude Palmer's polished shoe, to smell his father's cologne in a darkened gym. Probably stupid, she decided, probably it was better she wasn't going anyway." The family is getting ready to move and she resigns herself to spend time with church friends, rather than unbelievers friends (whom she only saw at school anyway): "She was seeing already that everyone was right, that believing friends were better, if only because you suffered together" (7). And Brita does suffer in *We Sinners,* in fact, Brita is the character that could be interpreted as suffering the most, she is the long suffering older sister, mother of seven, fulfilling the role of "sacred mother" and constructing the walls of her own bondage in the "Laestadian home." Her agency is limited by her own compulsion.

Later in "Pox," the Rovaniemis are moving to a new house but they have to spend the summer in the one-bedroom apartment of Pirjo's cousin who had gone to Finland looking for a believer husband. Brita is embarrassed when the neighbors catch wind of the size of the family, and by the numerous disturbances the Rovaniemis bring to the apartment complex. All seven of the children came down with chicken pox, the baby cries all the time, and the noise bothers the downstairs neighbor, Steve, whom Brita had developed an interest in. Her subjectivity is shaped by her status as the oldest child and daughter in the family. She has a lot of responsibility and her summer days are filled with child-rearing and chores and all along she reveals her ambivalence. When the landlord's dog bites the five-year-old, Julia, the landlord tries to make it up to the family by making some small repairs in the apartment. He contracts chicken pox from the family. Steve knocks on the landlord's door to complain about the Rovaniemis and the noise, this is in earshot of Brita, who incidentally had been sitting outside hoping to cross paths with Steve. She had shaved her legs and committed the small sin of using concealer on her "pox." The landlord collapses after taking Steve's noise complaint, and a few days later, the landlord dies in the hospital. The family becomes fed up with the apartment, and having nowhere to go, they end up staying at the church for the remaining days before they get to move into their new house. Brita is horrified by these events, the title of the chapter "Pox" signifies not only the death of the landlord, but Brita's sense of the Rovaniemi family's difference, they are *marked*, a pathology, like pox.

As the novel progresses, Brita marries Jimmy, a carpenter from Minnesota, and has child after child. The only other Rovaniemi daughter who is a mother is Leena, who gets pregnant at the age of eighteen and never reveals the father. The chapter "Total Loss" is focalized by Julia, one of the Rovaniemis who leaves the faith and moves to New York. Julia returns for a visit and observes the two mothers in the family, Brita and Leena: "Leena had come over so her boy could play with Brita's boys—they were always together now, the two mothers—and they sat at the kitchen table and criticized all the new baby names in the church newsletter" (124). In one of the few chapters that explicitly represents the widespread social practice of shunning in Laestadian communities, Brita shuns Julia for leaving the church and allowing Anni, one of the younger siblings, so watch a movie with her on Julia's laptop. In the following dialogue, Brita reveals a striking contradiction between her outward expression of a subjectivity shaped by the role of the "sacred mother" in the "Laestadian home" and her internal ruminations about her profound ambivalence on that role:

> "You don't do things like Tiina, right? You don't, like, drink and stuff? I mean, you've always been—you were always good. Tiina was always in trouble, she was always sneaking out, but you were good. You were good in high school. I made you Paulie's godmother, once."
>
> "I'm still Paulie's godmother," Julia said, but it stung.
>
> "What happened?" [Brita says]
>
> "Nothing happened. I don't believe anymore."
>
> "Why not? Why can't you?" [Believing is a choice, a reflection of agency]
>
> "I don't know." She didn't know how to say, I don't want to. [Julia chose not to]
>
> "What are you going to do? Are you going to get married? Are you going to—what—just have, like, two kids or something?"
>
> "I don't know, Brita, I don't know any of these things."
>
> "I don't want you holding my baby anymore," Brita said softly.
>
> "Brita—" They were both talking quietly, so as not to bother Nick.
>
> "Just leave me alone," she said.
>
> "Brita, don't say that."

> "You already have Tiina and you already have Simon, and you can't start taking the little kids, you can't take anyone else, you can't have Anni, too."
>
> "It doesn't work like that—"
>
> "It does work like that. There are sides, Julia."
>
> "No—"
>
> "can't take anyone else, you can't have Anni, too."
>
> "And don't you ever, ever think you are doing that to my boys. They are always, always—" she said, her voice breaking.
>
> "I'm your sister," Julia said, but Brita just walked into the living room and sat down at the leather couch." (131)

In this extended exchange between Julia and Brita, Brita manifests agency through her role as the older believer sister, one who lives according to Laestadian norms. Brita shapes Julia's subjectivity as an unbeliever, but Julia, like Tiina, lives with a partner in a "consumerist house." Also, like Tiina, Julia still hopes to maintain ties to the "Laestadian home." Julia is wounded when Brita's shunning takes on a tone of pathologizing, Brita does not allow Julia to hold the baby, like being an unbeliever was a dangerous contagion. Later in the chapter "Total Loss," Simon's partner, Christopher, is killed in a car accident and most of the family boycotts the funeral, including Brita. Julia's sense of alienation from the family and church had also intensified after she was shunned in the church setting. In the climax of the chapter, an intoxicated Julia calls the family from Simon's apartment after Christopher's funeral, demanding: "Why aren't you guys here?/…/Why aren't you here? Why do you have to be such sanctimonious assholes?" (134).

Regardless of Brita seemingly fulfilling the description of "sanctimonious" in the chapter "Total Loss," her consciousness reveals her intense ambivalence in a later chapter entitled "Rupture." The significance of the title of the chapter is evident: Brita's uterus ruptures in her seventh cesarean birth and she nearly dies from hemorrhaging. Brita is the focalizer and the chapter opens with her visit to her sympathetic obstetrician, Dr. Schwartz, while he gives her an ultrasound. Dr. Schwartz treats her with the dignity she has been denied by others in the medical profession, thus, she feels comfortable with him. Brita seems resigned to her seventh pregnancy, yet somehow disembodied: "As a rule she dealt with pregnancy by not dealing with it at all. She never looked at her belly, never admired her profile in a mirror. This late in

the game you could almost see the baby through the scar, Jimmy said, but she never checked" (136).

Dr. Schwartz represents the male figure of the "consumerist house." Over the course of her seven pregnancies, Brita develops a rapport with him. He worries about her seventh cesarean and foreshadows the rupture of her uterus. She mentions that she is a teacher, a piano teacher, when he prescribes her to avoid heavy housework. Hearing that she is a piano teacher, he invites Brita to his home to give his daughter a trial lesson. Brita is uncomfortable with this arrangement, but nonetheless, she drives to Dr. Schwartz's enormous house, arriving in her old van that embarrasses her. In this scene, she marvels at the expanses of the "consumerist house" and the piano, while trying to be inconspicuous:

> Dr. Schwartz appeared, all warmth, doing the introductions, and Brita couldn't stare at the house like she wanted to. She wanted to turn her head up to look at the spines of a chandelier in the two-story foyer, and she wanted to touch the stalks of some exotic grass that rose from a glazed pot. Instead she removed her sandals and padded after him, the tiles strangely dry under her bare feet.
>
> In the library, Dr. Schwartz pulled a black sheet off the top of the piano, folding it. The piano was a Steinway grand, in full glisten, its legs unnicked, its belly free of fingerprints. "What a beautiful piano you have," she couldn't help saying. (140)

Dr. Schwartz's daughter, Jenna, goes through the motions of the trial lesson, but makes her disinterest known. Brita leaves feeling ashamed of her van, of her seventh pregnancy, and insists on not accepting payment for the trial lesson. On her drive home, she ponders what a different life might be like and returns home to her modest home, complete with used furniture that she has had to repair multiple times, the floor she painted gold, and her boys running around naked in the backyard, "Their white penises dangled about the yard as they ran. She sat on a chair and still she did not cry." (143). When a check arrives for the trial lesson, she does not want to cash it, but Jimmy, her husband, telling her, "Your own pride stinks," (143) and absconds with the check and deposits it in the bank. A reflection of Brita's anger at her lack of agency manifests when she thinks: "She hated that, sharing a checking account, that he could sign checks for her" (143).

Brita is scheduled for a cesarean when they determine that the boy's lungs are well-developed enough, Dr. Schwartz exclaiming "Brita/…/ I live in terror your uterus will just rupture on its

own. To be frank" (143). On the way to the hospital, she remembers the check Jimmy cashed: "She remembered about the check, about the shame of cashing the check. There were too many shames" (144). While she is on the operating table, she looks at her husband, his dress reveals his profession, she thinks *"car-pen-ter, car-pen-ter."* She reminisces about the past, about her engagement to Jimmy, and then turns away from him:

> She turned her cheek to the side, away from Jimmy. She did not let herself cry. What should she dream about. She realized she had run out of fantasies—out of husbands to imagine, homes to build, pianos—there was nothing, only life itself, only long and hard and always more of it, always more. She forced herself to open her eyes and she studied the medical equipment, its complications—she liked complicated things, complicated machines—and craning her neck she saw the end of a cart, bags of blood hanging like deflated lungs, collapsed balloons, and their readiness paralyzed her. (146)

These tortured ruminations reveal Brita' ongoing ambivalence about her life—"only life itself, only long and hard and always more of it." There are no reflections on joy in the "Laestadian home" to provide counterbalance to her fantasies about life in a "consumerist house." Moments after these ruminations, her uterus ruptures, she has a severe hemorrhage and she slips into a coma for four days.

She awakens to family and community surrounding her with love, but she is still in sustained despair. Her survival is touted as a miracle, and Dr. Schwartz calls her the "miracle mother." Her son's name is Lars (indeed, one cannot help but ponder if he is named for Lars Levi Laestadius himself), but she cannot find joy in him. When all her boys are visiting her at once, greeting their new brother, her extended stream of consciousness reveals that she herself limits her agency, which ultimately shapes her warped subjectivity as a Laestadian mother. At this juncture in her narrative, her self-hatred seems to reveal that she is psychologically incapable of embodying the role of the "sacred mother":

> I almost left them without a mother, she thought, looking at them, but instead of feeling more tenderly for them she could only despise herself. She felt insane. Or, rather, she felt as if she must have been insane before and had woken from the coma with a new brain, one that could think things through, one that gaped at the woman who had let herself be pregnant again, who hadn't had the nerve to sneak the birth

> control pills Dr. Schwartz always offered. When she fed Lars his bottles she did not want to think the worst question of them all, but the question was all she could think—was he worth it?—and each time she thought it, she hated herself a little more for thinking it.

In the final scene of the chapter, Brita lamentably goes home, as Jimmy is driving she again drowns in dark ruminations. "Too soon there was the sight of their house, and she seemed to see this anew, and newly terrible: a small ranch, the brick painted white, the brushes thin and failing in front, the driveway's cement splintered with weeds, toys strewn under the trees" (150). Her boys and mother were there waiting for her on the front porch. Her negative feelings about her role as a mother are renewed "/.../already they tired her, already they were so needy." She slowly makes her way into the foyer, and before her in her living room is a Steinway grand piano. Shocked and somewhat elated, she also "felt a wave of bitterness." The piano is too large for the room, too expansive, and a reminder of "too many shames" (144) about her life as a Laestadian mother, in the "Laestadian home" of her own making:

> "Well, go on, play," Jimmy said.
>
> Brita lifted the cover of the keys. Inside they lay clean and clammy. She looked up, and she saw the sun running off the top of the piano, and as if still in the morphine world she saw not a piano but a table, herself flat upon its back, wanting to get up and never able, the rest of her life stretching across its planes. Always there would be more to give, always it would be she who would have to give, and she had nothing left to give at all. For her there would only be the pittance of others' pity. That poor mother, they would all say. You poor mother, the piano said.
>
> "Mom, play something," Paulie said, and he bent his knees up and down.
>
> Obediently she touched her fingers to the keys, the reflection of her fingers shaking. She pushed a key so slowly it made no sound at all. (151)

In this heart-wrenching scene, Brita's subjectivity manifests as a mother of seven is manifest, living in poverty—a subjectivity imbued with profound shame over her (mostly) self-imposed limits to her agency. In stark contrast to the imagery of the warmth of the "Laestadian home" that Jonas feels when he converts and that Tiina and Julia remember fondly after they leave

the faith, Brita feels “the pittance of others’ pity.” The piano itself, revoltingly, pities her, the poor Laestadian mother.

3.4 Gunnà

In the final chapter of the novel, entitled “Whiskey Dragon, 1847” we are thrust into the deepest roots of the Laestadian movement where we meet our final female protagonist, Gunná, a Sámi reindeer herding woman. Like many other herding women of her time, Gunnà was experiencing the extreme pressures of Swedish colonialism that disproportionatley impacted Sámi women. Some of those conditions come through in the chapter. Thus, Gunnà’s agency and subjectivity are shaped by entirely different social and cultural conditions than the other female characters in *We Sinners.*

I have chosen to include an analysis of Gunnà due to Pylväinen’s motivations for writing the chapter which are also suggestive of questions that many North American (ex-) Laestadians raise in relation to their faith: “How did we [North Americans Laestadians] get this way”?[4] Undoubtedly, as an (ex-) Laestadian herself, Pylväinen has likely embarked on her own studied engagement on the roots of the Laestadian movement. When an interviewer asked Pylväinen about the purpose of the retrospective chapter, “Whiskey Dragon, 1847,” Pylväinen responds:

> I knew I wanted *We Sinners* to be bigger than a book about a contemporary, Midwestern, fundamentalist family. I wanted *We Sinners* to ask a more difficult question, which is How have we [American Laestadians?] all become who we are? The story of Gunnà, while seemingly unrelated to the lives of the Rovaniemis, actually provides a parallel counterpart to the questions of the forbidden in her world and the forbidden in their world, as well as questions of family and community pressure. And of course, there’s a cameo of Laestadius. That said, I began to write the chapter initially as a kind of experiment, since I had never tried historical fiction before, and only realized later that I wanted to deny the reader the satisfaction of finding out “what happens to the Rovaniemis” by telling them what happened to make the Rovaniemis, the Rovaniemis. (Rich)

Through Gunnà's narrative, we also gain insight into prefigured gendered agency and subjectivity in the complicated historical trajectories of the Laestadian movement. In addition to the chapter "Whiskey Dragon, 1847," a critical aspect of the movement's roots are also reflected in the chapter entitled "We Sinners" with Mathew's disparaging characterization of Laestadianism spreading with "reindeer nomads" "like a disease" (94). (As an aside, Mathew, the "worldly" unbeliever atheist, is perhaps the *least sympathetic character* in the novel). Thus, in historicizing and interpreting the chapter that Gunnà focalizes, I consider the introduction to the study and the earlier section on "tensions" and "entanglements" in gendered agency and subjectivity in North American Laestadianism.

As the title suggests, the year is 1847 when the chapter opens; this is two years after Laestadius' "re-awakening" which occurred after meeting the influential Sámi woman named Milla Clemetsdotter (affectionately referred to as "Lapp Mary" or "Mary of Lapland" in North America). This was during the historical period when there were growing problems with alcoholism among reindeer herders, particularly in the northernmost parishes and *siiddat* around Gárrasovan/Karesuando, Čohkkaris/Jukkasjavri and Pajala. Alcoholism was ushered into Sámi communities through colonial processes, some of which Laestadius stridently resisted, while others assisted (T. Marttinen 68-85). Milla Clemetsdotter, having been influenced by the Anabaptists and "readers" from protestant reform movements in Europe, "preached to the preacher" about the evils of alcohol and about forgiveness, that is, *she converted Laestadius*, demonstrating the radical transformative influence this one structurally powerless woman, Milla Clemetsdotter, had on the subjectivity of a structurally powerful man, Lars Levi Laestadius.

In "Whiskey Dragon, 1847" we are presumably in Northern Sweden, in Lapland Province. Gunnà marries Aslak, another reindeer herder, out of desperation rather than love—the first indication of her limited agency. The imagery of the narrative is reminiscent of the film *Kautokeino Rebellion* (Gaup) especially in the scene where Gunnà implores her husband, Aslak, to come home from the Inn—that is, the local drinking establishment run by colonial authorities and merchants. The chapter also has direct intertextual references from *An Account of the Sámi* by Johan Turi, particularly in the part about yoiking, or "singing" as Pylväinen writes, with the words *Voia, Voia, Voia, Nana, Nana, Nana* (Turi 181-191). However, the references to yoiking in Turi's 1910 book invoke courtship and humor, whereas the references to yoiking and *Voia, Voia, Voia, Nana, Nana, Nana* in Gunnà's "singing" invoke a sense of

melancholy, as she yoiks[5] her feelings about her husband drinking and his fecklessness after she gives birth and suffers a severe illness:

> For two days they sat and she rested. Her mother washed the baby three times a day in the snow, and she pampered Gunnà, mixing her sour milk and herbs, giving her the softest furs to lie on. But they could not wait, and on the third day Gunnà stood and they packed the small tent and began the walk. As they walked Gunnà sang. Voia, voia, voia, nana, nana, nana, my poor witless husband, she sang, voia, voia, voia, nana, nana, nana, what will become of us, when will we reach the reindeer, when will come the end of this suffering? (179)

Finally, Gunnà finds joy in her daughter, Little-Bell. Gunnà is devastated when Aslak smothers the infant to death when he rolls on top of her in a drunken state. Gunnà goes into deep despair; she grieves alone, tends the animals alone, and sleeps alone. All the while, Aslak drinks alcohol which he pays for in animals from their ever-dwindling herd. Encouraged by some other women and her mother, she attends a sermon by Laestadius. Together with Aslak and some other drinkers, they arrive in the churchyard to this unfolding scene:

> When their sledges had stopped they climbed out and made their way to the crowd. A man all in black—Laestadius, she saw, who had married them—was dumping large barrels into the snow. Whiskey, she saw, she could smell it; even in the cold, it carried to her nose. At his feet and puddling down the small hill whiskey was pooling, turning the snow a deep brown, and men scattered at his feet, on their knees, eating the snow with their hands. He lifted men from their knees, making them stand. "Are you an animal? Are you not made in the very image of God?" She looked to see what Aslak was doing. He stood, watching, sullen, not with the shouting men or the quiet women, just watching, like he did not quite get what was happening. "Animals!" the priest said, and without speaking he began to walk, briskly. When he began to move others began to move, and the men on the ground did look like animals, worse than animals. (185)

Gunnà attends the sermon while Aslak goes to the inn and drinks. She hears the story about Laestadius' conversion that was manifested through his meeting with Milla Clemetsdotter (referred to as "Maija" in the "Whisky Dragon, 1847"): "And from this woman, this simple

Lapp, he had learned his own unrighteousness. He had been saved from his own eternity of hell" (187). He preaches about the atoning blood of Jesus, a precursor to the ritual of forgiveness, and Gunnà witnesses the *liikkutuksia/lihkudas*: "Around her, women rose from their seats and raised their hands. Women clutched at their necks. A whining, strangled sound swelled through the hall. Behind them a woman rose and stood on the pew" (188). While all the women go through the ritual of forgiveness, Gunnà is ambivalent. She is not convinced the ritual will ease her heartache. Gunnà leaves the church and goes "into the inn, where she finds Aslak drinking" (188). He refuses to leave and she gets into the sledge and looks up at the church where she hears "…singing, not like the wandering songs of the Lapps but like a slow steady melody with a straight point and a clean end." She "flicks the reins" and yoiks (sings) and flies off into the night singing (yoiking): "take me to my Little-Bell, take me home" (189).

In this final scene, Gunnà's destination is uncertain. Is she headed for church to sing and partake in the ritual of forgiveness and join Laestadius' community of believers? Or is she riding off into the tundra, into the unknown, all on her own?

In this chapter, we witness the limits of feminine agency which seem to parallel women also claiming agency. The powerful presence of Laestadius is juxtaposed with the powerful subjectivity of women in the movement—women were in attendance at the Laestadian meetings, while the men were at the "inn" drinking "like animals" (185). Women are the purveyors of forgiveness, and women seem to view the conversion of their alcohol-addicted male cohorts as the key to their survival on earth and as entrance to eternal salvation. Through Gunnà's story, and the historical meta-narrative of this chapter, we gain a deeper understanding of the fervency of the doctrines of abstinence and forgiveness, and women's subjective positions in the Laestadian movement, both in Scandinavia and in the diaspora adherents across the Atlantic. Thus, it provides a framework for understanding, through tracing back, the foundations of Laestadianism and its expression in *We Sinners* and in the five (ex-) Laestadian life narratives.

4 Gendered Agency and Subjectivity in (ex-) Laestadian Women's Life Narratives

From the outset, I begin this chapter by returning to a brief introduction of the purpose of reading four life narratives with their distinct genres alongside Pylväinen's novel *We Sinners*. Namely, I opted to include life narratives in this study for their rich contribution to illuminating gendered agency and subjectivity in North American Laestadian contexts, especially with regard to common experiences in the community that are often discussed on social media. Some of the issues in (ex-) Laestadian communities that are discussed on social media, but less evident or not dealt with in *We Sinners* are systemic sexual abuse and shunning. As a starting point for viewing agency and subjectivity in life narrative writing, I subscribe to Maynes, Pierce and Laslett's argument: "/…/ that personal narrative analysis, through its capacity to emphasize and problematize socially and culturally embedded subjectivities, provides insights to the understanding of human agency" (Maynes 44).

As stated earlier in the study, texts that specifically address the North American Laestadian communities are sparse and the vast majority of texts that focus attention on North American Laestadianism are written from a sect-specific Christian bias or written by (ex-) Laestadians. To date, there are no comprehensive studies or scholarship on North American Laestadianism from a secular standpoint. If one has an interest in learning about the conditions of life—the world of North American Laestadianism—one must inevitably look to social media in all of its manifestations. In virtual communities on social media, *We Sinners* led to productive discussions where individuals and communities "worked out" aspects of their individual and collective realties, that is, communities engaged with the novel inter-subjectively in an effort to better understand themselves. Reflecting on community engagement with the novel as a work of fiction, Pylväinen herself stated in an interview:

> There's an important reason *We Sinners* isn't memoir—it's fiction, and it's not meant in any way to convey any particular individual I know, or their stories. To the extent that it reveals anything about anyone, it reveals the most about myself—my psyche, my relationship to forgiveness, to family love, to grief. Of course, people read themselves into your work, and I think that it true for all authors; I've been approached by people who are not even from the community who think one character or another is them. Of course, I could not have written this book without having lived

> parts of the lives I write about, but in sacrificing truth I have, I hope, extended the advantage of the fictional arc to create not merely anecdotes of an unusual background but rather characters who are people first—and a novel which is a novel first. (Rich)

In this study, I argue that narrative forms of knowledge—both fiction and autobiographical statements and accounts generated on blogs, social networking sites, or virtual communities—are epistemologically on par with knowledge produced in academia in their value for teaching us about the realities of North American Laestadianism. As such, I have referenced the life narratives that are analyzed in this chapter also as sources throughout the thesis, that is, I engage with them both as sources and as "empirical material." The North American Laestadian community has been obscured in popular and scholarly representations, not only as a result of misinformation or stereotypical representations, but also by what could appear to be indifference. Part of this research also acknowledges that people in a community are experts on the realities of their communities, and I seek to open up spaces for their voices to come through in scholarship. This is especially the case with women, as one (ex-) Laestadian woman said: "You're never going to know anything about this community without the stories of women, the stories of women have to be told" (Anonymous).With that in mind, I posed a question to several (ex-) Laestadians about why they think scholars have not taken an interest in North American Laestadianism, and several respondents answered something to the effect of: "They don't care." Ed Suominen's pithy blog statement cited earlier in the introduction might reveal the perceptions atheist and secular scholars might also share which could lead to indifference:

> This is just one weird little Protestant sect churning upriver against a flood of contrary facts, bearing its delusions of grandeur, its complicated set of mostly unwritten silly rules, and its steady fuel supply of new members popping into maternity wards and winding their way from day circle to Sunday School to confirmation class. There are many others like it with their own combinations of such features. The tiresome machinery of it all grinds inexorably on. (E. Suominen)

The four life narratives could be interpreted using Shalyn Clagget's discussion of "narrative identity" (Claggett 353-359). In a discussion of a study on the use of life narrative writing among patients receiving psychotherapy conducted by Jonathan Adler, Clagget writes that

Adler observed that "people tend to really like the realization that they are not only main characters in their stories, but they're also the narrator,"/…/ (Claggett 356). She reflects on the relevance of the findings of Adler's study for feminist and queer narratology. Of particular value for the life narratives in this study are her following conclusions:

> By the very fact of its existence, particularly when in defiance of heteronormative or patriarchal values, autobiography forcefully announces individual agency /.../ The significance of such a finding for feminist and queer studies is twofold: it is possible for individuals belonging to historically marginalized groups to claim agency within oppressive systems. Second, it identifies narrative as the tool through which self-actualization may be achieved. (Claggett 355)

Thus, in viewing agency and subjectivity in (ex-) Laestadian women's life narratives, it is important to emphasize that writing one's life is in-and-of-itself a reflection of agency; crucially, through acts of writing themselves, autobiographical authors are agents in constructing their own subjectivities. Germane to the life narratives in this study, Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett argue that personal narratives:

> "/.../operationalize subjectivities in a multidimensional way: Agency is embodied in persons who evolve in context; people's stories build upon their lived experiences over time and in particular interpersonal, social, cultural, and historical settings that they in turn continue to work through and transform in their present.
> (Maynes 33)

On social media, I witnessed people's processes of "working through" "lived experiences" to transform the present, including the authors of the prompted life narratives, Aallotar and Tarja. I met them both in the broadly intersecting Sámi diaspora and Finnish American communities, and I have known them both for several years. I also knew that they were both actively engaged in educating non-Laestadians online, sometimes through sharing their own stories. They were also active in supporting others, especially women, who had either left the faith, or were considering leaving. Aallotar and Tarja have both written texts in other contexts, and they both have a higher education. Neither of them had written a narrative of their lives in a cohesive document before this project. However, as stated above, they had participated in sharing aspects of their lives in (ex-) Laestadian online communities which "strung together" the semblance of a life; this form of sharing "life narrative" Alleyne refers to as the "Facebook story engine":

> Facebook has potential narrativity with respect to the journaling functions it affords, in part because journals (and scrapbooks and blogs) possess narrativity to some degree. Of the various features of Facebook, two stand out as being directly of relevance to think about it as a tool for narrative construction: the ability to jump to stories from your past, and the ability to represent and engage with the user's community. (Alleyene 108)

After reading Aallotar and Tarja's vignettes of their lives as (ex-) Laestadian women on various Facebook pages and in having follow-up private conversations with them, I asked them if they would write a life-narrative for this project to which they both agreed. Through a series of conversations or "intersubjective encounters" (Maynes, Pierce and Laslett 98-125), I devised an open set of prompts for their life narrative writing, although, I told them they were not "interview" questions, but rather, just ideas or prompts that developed from what they had already told me over the course of many "intersubjective encounters." I also specifically told them about the project, but that the purpose of writing the narratives was not to "respond" to *We Sinners,* but rather, give an accounting of their own lives as (ex-) Laestadian women. The questions or "prompts" were about their families' immigration histories, the history of the particular Laestadian sect they were born into and what precipitated their "leaving." After reading the first drafts of the narratives they produced, I followed up with them on aspects of their stories that they had shared with me in the past, that is, experiences that they had told me about which were not included in their prompted life narratives. After these follow-up conversations, they added details of these experiences to their narratives. I also did some editing in terms of formatting, structure, and basic proofing. The narratives that appear in Appendix I and Appendix II are the final versions that Tarja and Aallotar approved for this project. They asked to remain anonymous, and they have chosen their own pseudonyms, however, neither of them precluded publishing their narratives on their own in the future (as an aside, I encouraged them to publish!).

Another important part of my research was reading blogs devoted to (ex-) Laestadian communities, or, blogs that had content that was relevant to the topic. The blogs contained both "encyclopedic" information, and narrative accounts. Crucially, all of the blogs were maintained by (ex-) Laestadians, that is, one would be hard-pressed to find public blogs written by practicing Laestadians, presumably because "believer" communities avoid "the worldly." Some blogs were private, that is, intended for a particular audience, ostensibly they were intended for (ex-) Laestadians from their own particular sect. I spent the most time

reading *Learning to Live Free: Life as a Former Laestadian* (Learning to Live Free: Live as a Former Laestadian) and *Ed Suominen's Shitty Little Blog* (E. Suominen). The former has an anonymous owner who uses the nick-name "Free" and allows for discussion and commentary, as well as guest posts; the latter has, as the name suggests, a single author, and does not allow for commentary.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in their seminal text, *Reading Autobiography*: *A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* write that life storytelling in diverse visual and digital media, such as life narrative writing on blogs, could be viewed in/…/"a theoretical framework"/…/ called/…/ "*automediality*, a concept that Jörg Dünne, Christian Moser and other European scholars of life writing developed to expand the definition of how subjectivity is constructed in writing, image, or new media" (Smith and Watson 168). Germane for the study of gendered agency and subjectivity and self-representation on social media or virtual communities on blogs, is the following synopsis of the developing study of automediality:

> Theorists of automediality emphasize that the choice of medium is determined by self-expression; and the materiality of a medium is constitutive of the subjectivity rendered. Thus media technologies do not simplify or undermine the interiority of the subject but, on the contrary, expand the field of self-representation beyond the literary to cultural and media practices. New media of self revise notions of identity and the rhetoric and modalities of self-presentation, and they prompt new imaginings of virtual sociality enabled by concepts of community that do not depend on personal encounter. (Smith and Watson 168)

It stands to reason that "automediality" also enables subjects to tell their stories to diverse audiences unencumbered by the publishing industry and economic interests, thus, automediality is a democratization of autobiographical practices, enabling authors to manifest agency and co-create subjectivity in community with others with a collective history or heritage, for example (ex-) Laestadian virtual communities.

The "popular autobiographies" (Alleyene 102) in this study—the narratives of "Leila" and Myra—may be conceptualized as "automediality" (Smith and Watson 168). I found Leila's narrative among other short narratives on the *Learning to Live Free* blog under "Personal Stories"; I have never met her or connected with her online. I chose to include her narrative in this analysis to provide a space for the often-silenced topic of systemic sexual abuse in

Laestadian communities to come through. In reading the commentary from readers of her narrative, I observed that people supported her and shared similar experiences. In sharing the traumatic aspects of her history, I argue that her narrative represents a radical claiming of agency, not only in the act of leaving her abusive family and Laestadian church, but by taking command of her own subjectivity on "new media" (Smith and Watson 168). In this virtual context, she has opened up for others to share their experiences, thus, breaking the isolation of sexual abuse trauma for entire communities; thus, "Leila" was also instrumental in transforming the gendered subjectivities of other (ex-) Laestadian women.

I have chosen to include Myra's narrative for its divergences from others in the ex-Laestadian community. Myra herself sent me an email with a link to her blog text which I had not specifically solicited. I met her briefly in person while visiting her community in July of 2015 at which time I told her that I was interested in the stories of ex-Laestadian women. In contrast to many other narratives of women in the (ex-) Laestadian communities, Myra's parents encouraged her to move away from the community—a breaking with Laestadian norms—and get an education. After getting an education, Myra returned to the community to work and she lives in proximity of where her "Finnish church tribe" operates. Her narrative also includes her personal journey to becoming a counselor and healer and providing services in her community.

4.1 Myra[2]

The title of Myra's narrative is "Transmute Grief, Betrayal, and Hurt Into Lifelong Growth and Development"; it is a guest post on a travel and personal development blog owned and maintained by a woman named Evelyn Helminen who comes from the same sect as Myra, or as Myra writes "the same Finnish church tribe." In several posts Evelyn refers to having grown up within a fundamentalist or conservative religion and gives accounts of her life that indicate that she is not an adherent, although it is also evident that she maintains ties with her family and community. Most of Evelyn's blog posts relate to her life as a writer, traveler, and life coach. She also has a series on the broad topic of sexual abuse, where there are

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[2] Myra's narrative can be read here: http://travelingev.com/2015/08/myra-moyryla/#comments

anonymous guest posts from sexual abuse survivors. In the sexual abuse series, under a section for resources for sexual abuse survivors, Myra is listed as a counselor. Neither Evelyn nor Myra explicitly name their particular Laestadian sect, nor do their narratives explicitly refer to a dramatic departure from their faith or sect, rather it is strongly implied that they are not believers and that they live and work among non-Laestadians. They both come from the geographic location of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan where several Laestadian and Apostolic sects currently operate. Importantly, the Upper Peninsula ("the U.P.") is also the location of one of the first Laestadian congregations in North America and it has a large Northern Finnish American population; some would argue that this area is the heart of Finnish America, and among the Finnish and Laestadian population there are many people of Sámi ancestry (Kurtti).

Myra begins her short life narrative with the following illuminating statement: "I was raised quite tribally, and our family clan was highly valued." From the outset, referring to her background as "tribal" signals her sense of the interconnectedness of Laestadian community belonging, thus, a critical dimension of manifesting subjectivity. We can glean from her description of her grandmother—a loving Finnish grandmother who was the clan's "head matriarch"—that her grandmother was an important figure in the family and in Myra's memory of family life. The "head matriarch" fed her grandchildren and held a sauna for the the family every Saturday, which Myra writes was "an expression of love for us." Her grandmother had a farm and working on the farm every weekend as children likely instilled a strong work ethic and sense of independence in them—Myra also reflects this sense of independence in her narrative. One can infer from her account that the grandmother was an active agent in shaping the subjectivity of Myra, her siblings, and cousins.

Finnish heritage is an important feature of her narrative. She relays that they spoke English with a Finnish accent, and that she and others experienced anti-Finnish "racism" in her high school.[6] These experiences engendered compassion in her for other people's experiences of discrimination, especially discrimination against children. Along with a historical photograph of Sámi people in Sápmi dressed in traditional garments with a lávvu (tent, akin to a Native American tipi), she refers to seeking to gain a better understanding of her mixed "tribal" Sámi and Finnish roots, which because of the "monoculture in family and church and culture is so tightly stapled together it is hard to study them apart." One can conclude that cultural continuity and discontinuities and belonging are important themes in her life, and also important in shaping her subjectivity.

Her family struggled with poverty when the copper mine shut down where her father worked. She writes: “I was in high school during our years without hot water and central heating. We used wood to heat our kitchen, and I would have frost on my covers in the morning. My parents grew up in raw survival, so our lifestyle was not such a shift for them.” Perhaps her parents resigned themselves to supporting their children in getting an education as a way out of poverty. Myra’s parents did not attempt to limit her agency when she chose to leave the community to go to college—a process she herself initiated and completed. However, people in her community reacted to her breaking with local Laestadian norms:

> It was still deemed pretty risky to have a child go off to college within our church because of fear the world would change you and take away your faith; it was also more risky if you went alone, and even more risky if you were a girl. While I was going I did hear a few rumors about me that reflected those fears but I was lucky to have built a pretty cast-iron self esteem by then. (Möyrylä)

Myra did not give in to the pressures of social conformity laid down in the prescribed unwritten rules of many Laestadian communities. When she was away at college, her father tragically died, the first of three pivotal tragedies which eventually led her to becoming a counselor and healer. After completing her education, she and her husband moved back to their community. But the use of the past tense signals that she was likely not an active member of her “Finnish church tribe”—that is, she was not in regular attendance. In her late-twenties, she had the traumatic experience of having two stillborn babies, two years apart, coupled with traumatic birth experiences. She writes: “That all being said I couldn’t use my stoic ‘I can do this alone’ template of coping by the end of that third crash in my life.” As a result of these three tragedies, the untimely loss of her father and two infants, she turned to the alternative healing practice “Intuitive Kinesiology” for support which greatly influenced her life. After working through her own trauma, she learned the technique and offers services to others in her community.

Her narrative ends with an uplifting reflection on her family—her nine-year-old-son and husband—alongside a family photograph and some final thoughts on her “spiritual journey”

> I believe the spiritual journey is about learning to come from unconditional love and compassion for others under deeper and deeper pressure, as we grow and develop the love and compassion for ourselves through life experiences. (Möyrylä)

When it comes to agency and subjectivity in Myra's narrative, perhaps it is signaled in the title of the post: "Transmute Grief, Betrayal, and Hurt Into Lifelong Growth and Development." After a series of tragic losses, she transformed her own subjectivity and as a practitioner of alternative healing, she provides services for others in her community, thus, also effecting the subjectivity of others. One could trace her spirit of giving back to the community and a sense of independence to her Finnish (possibly Sámi) grandmother who gave to others as an expression of her love.

4.2 Leila[3]

As noted above, Leila's narrative reflects a radical claiming of agency in her swift departure from the Laestadian community and family where she had been subjected to systemic sexual abuse. Her narrative was published on the *Learning to Live Free* blog in two parts; in part one she narrates the events precipitating her swift departure from her family and Laestadian church, in part two she describes her life and coping strategies after her swift departure. As a genre, this form of "popular autobiography" could be understood as "automedial" life-journaling in its temporal divisions (Alleyene 103). In addition, her narrative includes a climax at the end of part one (the dramatic departure), followed by a "to be continued" and then resolution in part two, forgiving her family and healing, continuing her education, and constituting a joyful life for herself.

Leila came from a church system where there was systemic sexual abuse. I define systemic sexual abuse as abuse that is upheld by a system—in this case, a religious system—that creates and maintains an environment where perpetrators repeatedly offend and are not held accountable within generally understood legal, moral, and ethical frameworks. In systemic abuse, victim/survivors are often forced to accept responsibility for the abuse, or they are silenced, not believed, or worse, blamed for the abuse. Such was the case with Leila.

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[3] Leila's narrative is written in two parts, part I can be read here:
https://extoots.blogspot.com/2017/08/leilas-story-part-one.html
Part 2 can be read here: https://extoots.blogspot.com/2017/08/leilas-story-part-two.html

The perpetrator was a member of the same congregation. After he repeatedly sexually abused Leila, she was repeatedly told to offer him forgiveness. She writes: “When the abuse recurred, I went to my mother again, and we went to the preacher, and I got the same advice—this pattern repeated itself again and again until I stopped talking about it altogether.” Her mother and preacher upheld the abuse by way of the Laestadian tenet of “forgiveness” and “the fear of hell.” The cycle of “abuse-forgive-abuse-forgive” continued. An understandable consequence was that Leila developed severe depression and withdrew—yet she found comfort and distraction in learning and excelling in her schoolwork.

> The abuse and my increasing sense of alienation caused extreme depression to take hold. I devoted all of my energy to school and maintained a 4.0 GPA while isolating myself further and further from those around me. My depression deepened. Finally, the preachers advised me to see a therapist to "find it in your heart to forgive the abuser, for we all sin and all sin is created equal.” They believed my symptoms were the result of a guilty conscience.

This double-bind of being forced into an extremist paradigm where victims had to atone for their own abuse is an extreme form of limiting agency. However, in contrast to the church as prison/church as sanctuary duality, it is only fitting to view Leila’s experience as a form of imprisonment, especially when one has been told that they will go to hell if they do not forgive an unrepentant abuser. Naturally, a trained therapist hearing about the abuse recommended that they press criminal charges and leave the faith. The systemic nature of the abuse and the profound erasure of Leila’s agency is evidenced in the next “scene” from her narrative:

> Shocked, my mother called the therapist and said she had no right to speak poorly to a young, "mentally unstable" girl about her faith in God. She moved me to another therapist, and another after that, but they all had similar, unsatisfactory advice.
>
> When therapy “failed,” I was told to seek help from a medical doctor. My mother and a preacher accompanied me to the doctor visit, explaining my symptoms (without mentioning the abuse) and asked for me to be medicated. At age 14, I was prescribed high doses of antidepressants, anti-anxiety medication, and antipsychotics.

In spite of Leila experiencing repeated violations to her body and being strongly compelled to take high doses of medication, she had to endure the systemic stigmatization by individual members of the Laestadian congregation who worked in the medical profession. Yet, despite these disturbing events, sustained abuse, and erasure of Leila's agency in her church and family system, she continued to excel in school and she began attending therapy on her own. The therapist offered her free of charge sessions and referred her to a medical doctor who helped wean her off medication. When she was nearing the age of graduation, she applied to universities and her top grades and high scores in college entrance exams assessments got her accepted to a prestigious university with a full scholarship. Her mother and one of the preachers tried to persuade her not to go, making dubious claims about the dangers of the world for her faith and that it was especially dangerous due to her "mental conditions." And here comes the plot twist: Leila's radical claiming of her agency:

> Neither my mother nor anyone else was aware I had stopped taking medication.
>
> I didn't follow that preacher's advice.
>
> While my mother cried, I packed all I could into my car and drove to California.
>
> My new life had begun.

The obvious conflict leading up to the swift departure was systemic sexual abuse. Leila refused the subjectivity of victim and refuses the rigid, even imprisoning, strictures on her agency and subjectivity. In part two, she tells of her continued healing, continued education, and of forgiving her mother. She also "takes on" the Laestadian church, or in her case, the "OALC" (Old Apostolic Lutheran Church"—the same sect that Tarja came from). She does not let them off the hook, while also acknowledging that not all congregations are the same. Her narrative reaches a pivotal point with her shedding the doctrine of hell and damnation, a doctrine often used as a tool to limit agency and warp subjectivity (or at least that is the outcome of the doctrine). The process is concluded with the bold declaration: "I feel free. The constant fear of hell has been lifted."

Like the other women, especially Tarja, who claim their agency and leave Laestadian (or other fundamentalist) sects, Leila's key to her "freedom" and happiness was getting an education. The last lines in her narrative reveal the transformative potential of education:

> With my law degree, I hope to bring sexual offenders to justice and make more people aware of the pervasiveness of covered-up sexual abuse. No child should experience the isolation and helplessness I did!
>
> Without books, I may not have survived this far. I am glad I did, and I am glad I can share my story, and remind people that everyone is important. You matter, you are beautiful in any form, and help is out there, so never give up.

The most striking feature of these last lines of part two are that it reflects her self-presentation as a survivor, that is, as an active agent in shaping her own destiny. She reveals the human capacity to direct negative experiences toward productive support of others, thereby, affecting the subjectivity of other victims/survivors of systemic sexual abuse.

4.3 **"Tarja" (Appendix I)**

Tarja is the only life narrator in this project who comes from Canada. Her grandfather was the founder of one of the first OALC congregations in Ontario. The community where she grew up, Sault Sainte Marie, shares a border with the Unites States, specifically the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Laestadian communities on both sides of the border frequently travel back and forth, especially when seeking marriage partners with other "believers"—a practice that Tarja says leads to marriages as a young as seventeen as the congregation's way to "cope with teenage sexuality." Tarja's grandfather had emigrated from Finland to Canada, together with over twenty of his children (from two wives); one of his children was her mother. In that particular branch of the OALC, history and the beliefs were largely transferred orally and the role of the preacher was passed down from father to son. Her uncles were passed down the preacher role, thus also became prominent in the movement. Having descended from the founder and having come from a prominent family undoubtedly shaped her subjectivity; however, Tarja's mother had left the faith as a young woman to marry Tarja's father, only to return again after divorce. This would have a lasting effect on her experiences in the congregation. Her mother having left the faith and returning, even after asking for "redemption," cast them in a negative light in the community; Tarja and her siblings were

stigmatized and experienced sustained shunning, despite their ties to the founder and other prominent members of the congregation:

> Even though my mother had remarried in the congregation to a man with some social standing, the stigma and mark of shame followed us—neither remarrying within the congregation nor being the child of the founder was enough. As children we were shunned and shamed for our mother's earlier "debauchery." Shunning took the form of exclusion from social events or gatherings with other families. This was especially isolating when the majority of our friends were our cousins and relatives within the congregation.

Her prompted life narrative shares several themes with Leila's narrative, they were both born into the OALC (Old Apostolic Lutheran Church), considered to be the most conservative branch in the North American movement. They both swiftly departed the faith and left their families as teenagers and they both pursued higher education: I argue that these acts of resistance constitute a radical claiming of agency. While Tarja does not specifically mention personal experiences of sexual abuse, she shares details about patterns of abuse in the OALC congregation from her childhood. Reporting the abuse to adults negatively impacted her social ties in the community.

In terms of narrative style, Tarja alternates between an academic writing style, and a storytelling writing style. This conveys her sense of the importance of educating readers from multiple audiences about the realities of women in First Born Laestadianism. From the outset, she tells us that she has obtained a higher education and that a crucial dimension of her field of study is to gain a better understanding of the colonial impact of Laestadianism. "Few people know anything about First Born Laestadianism that emerged in 19th century northern Sweden as part of European colonial processes." Her emphasis on educating, while sharing her own story, supports earlier claims in this study that North American Laestadianism has been obscured in scholarship. Another aspect of Tarja's narrative is her emphasis on the history of the Sámi people and women in the Laestadian movement:

> At my local I studied Canadian Indigenous colonization and recognized in my experience parallel structures and events that existed among Canadian First Nation and Métis. This prompted me to learn about Lars Levi Laestadius' historical role in the cultural assimilation of Sámi people and impacts on women.

The negative impacts of Laestadianism on women is poignantly exposed in her narrative. Her story reveals how sect-specific gendered norms and expectations played a crucial role in limiting her agency and how women were purveyors of social belonging which shaped her subjectivity, but also led to her swift departure and her radical claiming of agency. Her critique of the role of the "sacred mother" and how the "church government regulates women's personal freedom through paternal structures that compel adherence to tradition and promote social isolation" is manifest in her narrative. These patterns of social isolation and control figured prominently in the major turning point in her narrative when she, herself, became pregnant as a teenager.

Prior to this dramatic turn in her life narrative, Tarja had broken the unspoken "vow of silence" on sexual abuse in the local community. When she reported to her mother that she knew of incidents of sexual abuse in the community, she was punished by male authority figures. However, women were instrumental in creating and maintaining networks, and they generally were in control of social events and visits to the homes of other congregant families:

> There was a large family from the congregation who had fourteen children/../They had a big house with a pool and a sauna in the basement. All the kids in the congregation wanted to be invited to go over there. I found out that there had been incidents of sexual abuse involving members of the family and I told my mother. When the father of the house found out that I broke the unspoken code of silence, he forbade me from visiting the house, but the mother and the sisters defied him and "snuck me in." If the father came home, I had to hide in the basement/…/ Women had some control over who was invited into the home and women were also instrumental in congregational events like baby showers, baptisms, confirmations, and graduation parties. In many ways, they held the keys to the domestic realm and defined the boundaries of women's social networks within the congregation.

In this situation, Tarja was the recipient of good-will on the part of women, that is, of women who were positioned with authority over other women in an internal hierarchy. However, she was not met with such acts of solidarity when she became pregnant at the age of sixteen with a young man who was not from the congregation—an unbeliever or a "worldly." Similar to Leila's narrative of her mother and preacher violating her personal integrity and stripping her of her agency, Tarja's mother and a preacher sought to arrange a marriage between Tarja and her partner. This would have undoubtedly entailed him joining the congregation. It was not

going to happen. She relays a heart-wrenching, yet touching series of events in relation to her teen pregnancy, which reveal the limits and boundlessness of family and community, as well as the profound impact shunning could have on young women's subjectivity:

> Shunning began already when my mother and aunt threw a baby shower for me and only two of my aunts attended. Normally such events would involve large extended families or networks of women. The gifting at such events would ensure a new mother had what she needed for her baby. I will never forget when two of my male cousins came to visit me the day after the baby shower. One of them brought me a baby sleeper and the other gave me a handful of cash. He may have even taken donations from some of the other boys. They took me for a car-ride and we listened to music, which was a sin, of course. They must have heard about the group-shunning and wanted to make amends, perhaps out of embarrassment or compassion for me.

This passage demonstrates a point that I have addressed several times throughout this study: women are active agents in reproducing Laestadian norms, and women's behavior toward other women can have a definitive role in shaping subjectivity. This is also the case in the moment that led to Tarja's swift departure from her Laestadian community and family, precipitated by her refusal to "ask for forgiveness for her sin" (of childbirth out of wedlock) at the event of her daughter's baptism:

> The events of the day of my daughter's baptism will remain with me for the rest of my life. My aunt had crocheted her a beautiful, white, baptism dress. After the baptism ceremony, I was supposed to stand before the congregation and ask the congregation for forgiveness "for my sins." My mother had coached me in advance. I did not do it. I refused. I knew from that moment that I was done. By refusing to ask for forgiveness, I knew that my life in the congregation was over. I was right—the shunning began already when the coffee and cakes were served after services. It was that immediate!

Tarja ended up raising her child alone, with only limited support from her mother, aunts, and family. In choosing to leave her entire network of support, she gained "freedom." Living in poverty, she writes, was a small price to pay for freedom. "I would choose the struggles with poverty over controlled and oppressive life in the OALC." When her daughter was in kindergarten she went back to school and eventually earned a degree, and recently completed graduate studies in Europe. In the same style of balancing storytelling and scholarly writing,

and the commitment she signaled in the beginning of her narrative of educating a wider audience about the history of Laestadianism and its impacts on women and Sámi people, I end with the final paragraph of her narrative:

> As an ex-Laestadian woman I have insight that the world is shaped by mortals and can be changed. I am beginning to understand Laestadius' role in the colonization of the Sámi and non-Sámi women. Before I went to graduate school in Europe, I had a meeting with my mother. I said: "Mom, Laestadianism really fucked us over. We're all really hurt by it. Mom, we've really just got to let it go." Importantly, I recognize the history of Swedish colonisation and its impact on women. It is a history that needs to be told so I share what I can here.

Here, she returns to her mother and seeks to educate her about the history of the OALC, thereby becoming an active agent in seeking to undo the harm that was done to both of them, as well as other women, in the Laestadian movement.

4.4 "Aallotar" (Appendix II)

There are several features of Aallotar's narrative that sets her narrative apart from the other life narratives. First of all, even though she left her Laestadian community, she still considers herself a Christian, which she explicitly mentions in her narrative, while at the same time questioning some of the specific tenets in her Laestadian sect. Another feature that sets her story apart is the excessive abuse she suffered under what could be defined as a *familial matrix of female domination*—a cast of characters that included her mother, sisters, and cousins. While her sect is supposedly the least restrictive of the sects operating in North America, she seems to have experienced exceedingly abusive attempts to limit her agency and warp her subjectivity—all at the hands of other women in the *matrix*. The methods of social control included the exploitation of the "interplay of sin and grace" and the concept of "the bound sin" which manifested profound shunning (Korkalo and Valkonen 100-105). Aallotar is transparent about the gendered double standards of the "interplay of sin and grace," that is, that men benefited disproportionately from the "sea of grace" and that women were disproportionately bestowed with the power to offer grace. Thus, women could be the purveyors of grace. Finally, Aallotar points to the powerful social position of women in

deciding over the webs of belonging in the community. Finally, there was also the matriarchal figure referred to as a "discerner" who had power in social matters, and even had power over spiritual matters.

Aallotar begins her life narrative by giving an overview of the IALC's (Independent Apostolic Lutheran Church) history and their (previous) ties to Finland. While the IALC have fewer restrictions than the other sects in terms of outward appearance, they seem to exercise a rather extreme position when it comes to the ideology of exclusivism:

> When I asked about our origins, I had heard this mythical story about how the true faith had been passed along from group to group since the days after the death of Christ, that it was always only a small group of saved people, and that now it rested in the hands of our small sect. Whew! Such a heavy responsibility to keep that "spark" of faith, smaller than a mustard seed, alive! I imagine at the time I was a small child there might have only been about 1500-2000 people in the Independent Apostolic Lutheran Church (IALC), but I would estimate there must be between 3000-4000 in 2018.

In addition to the double-standards with regard to the allotment of "grace" and the special "dispensations" that some members of the community were granted, while others were not, there were also unwritten codes and rules, for example, on church attendance. Again, women in her family seemed to be in the business of "taking attendance," that is, punishing her psychologically if she did not attend.

The shunning she experienced took on a particularly cruel character when the *matrix* concluded that she had committed "bound sin" that is, a sin that was unforgivable and a sin for which *they* had the power to bind (not God). The "sin" was that she had divorced a philanderer who had taken up with another woman and then Aallotar had married an "unbeliever." The subsequent shunning appears to have been a coordinated and concerted effort on the part of the women in her family which undoubtedly led to profound psychological distress. She relays that she chose to endure the abuse and shunning for many years because she thought the community was of benefit to her young son. However, it became clear that her son was also targeted for abuse, an apparent intergenerational "transfer" of the "bound sin." Shunning directed at her child was the moment of her transformation: she left the church, in this extended passage she tells about being driven out, as opposed to

dramatically leaving, and also reveals what many (ex-) Laestadians and fundamentalists refer to as “spiritual abuse”:

> I only wish I had left when I was in my early twenties, when once I had already begun to make a plan to bolt. At that time, I couldn’t deal with hurting my grandmother, so I stayed.
>
> My mother told me if I left, I couldn’t really be part of the family anymore. I took her seriously, and disengaged, which upset them/…/ I asked my mother to apologize for saying such a thing to me, but she doesn’t feel it is necessary. In fact, she sent me a twisted scriptural reason for that, that no one ever has to apologize to anyone we have sinned against, only to God. I know if I was to take this to an IALC minister, that it wouldn’t even pass their sniff test, but what is the point? She can’t ever admit she is wrong, and she’s not going to start now.
>
> I feel I was actually driven out of the church rather than making the choice to leave, and I feel like I was driven out by my mother and my sisters as primary agents, in retaliation for remarriage to an unbeliever. In other words, they used the notion of the “bound sin” – a sin that was unforgivable – to punish me. But binding sins are inconsistent and based on the personal feelings of a powerful church member or family member toward "the sinner." I would be punished by my family through shunning. There was no grace for what others determined was a “bound sin.”

Despite the sorrow she undoubtedly experienced as a scapegoat in a dysfunctional family that was emboldened by the Laestadian church system, the way she writes her narrative—that is—with a sense of irony and poise, is undoubtedly a reflection of her refashioning her own subjectivity; she refused the continued imposition of the *matrix* and took command of her own subjectivity. Her narrative compels her audience to see the absurdity of her church and family system, while at the same time embodying a bold move toward claiming her agency in the act of writing. Undoubtedly, her natural sense of humor and creativity enabled her to survive in the face of systemic psychological abuse.

Synopsis

In view of this discussion of gendered agency and subjectivity in female characters in *We Sinners* one can argue that Tiina (and Julia), while embodying a liberating potential and critical expression of agency when leaving the Laestadian community and "the meaning-making potential" of home, do not necessarily gain "liberation" with their secular, consumerist partners. Life inside and outside of Laestadianism can be interpreted as a win-lose, lose-win, emotional and subjective double-bind. Those who stay, like Brita (Paula, Leena, Anni), are ambivalent and yearn for some other meaning-making in their existence outside of the "Laestadian home"; they long for their idea of life in the "consumerist home." Critically, "home" for some of the characters who stay, does not necessarily imply Young's concept of "liberating potential because it expresses uniquely human values" (125). Crucially, Jonas seems to recognize the "uniquely human values" of the Laestadian home most strikingly, while Brita, who must perform the work of creating that "home" despises it. Those who leave seeking "freedom"—like Tiina and Julia—still yearn for some of the comforts of the "uniquely human values" of their childhood homes. In contrast to Tiina and Julie's ambivalence after leaving, Uppu, the youngest of Pylväinen's characters, leaves and seems to break entirely with the church and family. In her place, is her ex-boyfriend, Jonas Chan, who betrayed her in the worst way possible: he joined the church through the ritual of forgiveness.

In the two genres of life narratives represented in this study—prompted life narratives and popular autobiographies—a claiming of agency comes through in multiple ways, the most obvious in the mere act of writing. Myra, while experiencing less pressure to conform than the others, takes command of her own healing process after several tragedies in her life, and supports others in her community. While not explicitly mentioned in her narrative, it is clear from the blog where her narrative is published, that she supports sexual abuse survivors in the community, thereby, supporting women in their process of re-fashioning their subjectivities after trauma.

Leila and Tarja both came from the most conservative Laestadian sect in North America and they both made a “swift departure” from the faith; Leila’s departure was precipitated by systemic sexual abuse and Tarja’s was precipitated by abusive shunning after she became pregnant as a teenager and refused to ask for forgiveness. Both Leila and Tarja, in leaving as teenagers, gaining an education, and building a life of their own making manifested a “radical claiming of agency.”

Finally, Aallotar’s narrative reveals powerful subjectivities Laestadian women can have vis-à-vis their sisters, cousins and daughters. The figure of the discerner is also particularly indicative of the main topic of this study: despite popular perceptions—going back to the earliest inception of the Laestadian movement—women in Laestadian communities have power and agency, they claim agency, and they both degrade and support the subjectivities of other women in their communities.

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Appendix I: Breaking Free from First-Born Laestadianism ("Tarja Paunonen")

Few people know anything about First Born Laestadianism that emerged in 19th century northern Sweden as a part of European colonial processes. I was born into the Old Apostolic Lutheran Church (OALC) in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, Canada and found out about its political role in the Swedish conquest of Nordic Sámi—long after leaving the movement. At my local university, I studied Canadian Indigenous colonization and recognized in my experience parallel structures and events that existed among Canadian First Nation and Métis. This prompted me to learn about Lars Levi Laestadius' historical role in the cultural assimilation of Sámi people and impacts on women.

I emphasize I was born into OALC because in First Born Laestadianism in North America, not many non-believers (or "worldlies" as they are called internally) join the pietistic religion with its hybrid Lutheran, Sámi shamanistic (seen in the "grace marks" of older members and Laestadian doctrine), and Finnish immigrant values. There is no formal missionary outreach and church membership is maintained by inter-marrying other Congregationalists in international networks and raising large families. There are some exceptions where non-Laestadians form kinship ties with the First-Born community through conversion and marriage.

The role of motherhood is the sacred duty of women in OALC, since it is integral to the continuance of the "First Born" believed to be the "pure seed" of Christianity. Notably, the church government regulates women's personal freedom through paternal structures that compel adherence to tradition and promote social isolation. This is achieved primarily through a lack of support and practically limiting women's opportunity for education and contact with the outside world. As a caveat, Laestadianism evolved locally and the role of women has been transformed over time. Today, some women attend university and work in trade-based professions until they have children. Others maintain jobs, social relationships, and activities outside the religious community if they are unable to participate in Laestadian family life. This highlights the effectiveness of ideology in preserving colonialism in new social contexts.

Communal family existence is the chief organizing feature of the First-Born church in Canada and the United States. Marriages of members occur as early as seventeen years old to cope with male and female sexuality. This facilitates women having multiple births—and up to twelve children is not uncommon. Women seemingly accept that motherhood is a sacred duty in the patriarchal religion, while men oversee their families and lay community. In common with other fundamentalist groups, OALC identity is closely monitored, particularly among women. As mothers, women are expected to be chaste and submit to the authority of husbands and church government or "elders."

My grandfather, Emil Tanninen, was an elder in the Laestadian movement, which was dominated by Finns after the early twentieth century. He emigrated from Lahti in Finland to Toronto, Ontario in 1951 with his second wife and ten children. My own grandmother—who gave birth to eleven children—had died. My grandfather remarried and together with his new wife, had eleven more children. Two of his twenty-two children died as infants. In 1952, the family—his wife and seventeen of his children— moved to "the Sault" (Sault Ste. Marie, or sometimes referred to as "the Soo") where my grandfather held home-based church meetings. During missionary visits, elders from northern Sweden conducted services from Laestadian texts, until an old school was purchased with donations. In the late 1960s, my uncle succeeded my grandfather and became one of two "prayer keepers" over an expanding congregation with the arrival of other Finnish Laestadians. In the OALC, succession of preachers is patrilineal, that is, from father to son.

Traditionalist Laestadianism may be considered a way life, rather than a religion, it is more than attending church on Sundays. That is, a literal interpretation of the teachings of Laestadius is integrated into daily practice. The behaviour of followers is regulated through customs that identify them as a community of believers holding steadfast onto the authority of Laestadius as a spiritual leader and prophet.

Laestadian services were one and a half hours long. There was a "Finn preacher" and an "English preacher." The Finn preacher read from Laestadius' postillas and did some free-style preaching. The English preacher would translate. The preachers had a cadence when they preached that was solemn and hypnotic. There were long pious hymns, but absolutely no instruments. All women wore skirts and dresses and headscarves, pants were banned for women in church. The old-timers and sometimes others would go into hysterics at the forgiveness sessions. There would be loud wailing, sometimes spontaneous. It used to scare

me as a child. I did not understand where this came from until I learned about the Sámi in Laestadianism in the 19th century.

As a regional development OALC in Sault Ste. Marie is a family-based organization. My grandfather had fathered twenty-two children, thus his family approached five hundred individuals at the time of his death over a decade ago. This means that boundaries between family and church are blurred—and it was difficult to achieve personal autonomy as a young woman in the movement. Luckily, my mother left Laestadianism to marry, and even though she returned, we were permitted social freedoms that others were not. As children we could not watch TV, listen to music, or go to parties, however, we were allowed to interact with non-Laestadian school friends and maintain a sense of self outside the church. This was significant, since it "opened up" the austere social space created by Laestadius, which was perpetuated by family followers.

When someone, especially women, leave the community and marry outside of the faith, they are systematically shunned. My mother sort of "lucked out" when she returned after her marriage to my biological father ended. It must have been painful to return, but she was redeemed enough to be "taken back" into the congregation, and she later married another congregationalist. (He was a Finnish speaker and the language in our home was "Finn" growing up.) Even though my mother had remarried in the congregation to a man with some social standing, the stigma and mark of shame followed us—neither remarrying within the congregation nor being the child of the founder enough. As children we were shunned and shamed for our mother's earlier "debauchery." Shunning took the form of exclusion from social events or gatherings with other families. This was especially isolating when the majority of our friends were our cousins and relatives within the congregation.

Sexual abuse was a particularly taboo subject, and women often bore the brunt of both enduring the abuse and "owned the sin" by way of Laestadian doctrine. Victims of abuse rarely came forward, but girls and women might whisper about incidents behind closed doors. There was an incident where I broke the taboo of silence around sexual abuse, and as a result, I was punished. There was a large family from the congregation who had fourteen children. The father was a carpenter and fared well in the local economy. They had a big house with a pool and a sauna in the basement. All the kids in the congregation wanted to be invited to go over there. I found out that there had been incidents of sexual abuse involving members of the family and I told my mother. When the father of the house found out that I broke the

unspoken code of silence, he forbade me from visiting the house, but the mother and the sisters defied him and "snuck me in." If the father came home, I had to hide in the basement. One time when a group of us were hanging out in the basement, the father came downstairs to take a sauna and I had to hide in one of the bedroom closets. The women and girls talked openly about sneaking me in. We just accepted that this was how it was, it was normal. Women had some control over who was invited into the home and women were also instrumental in congregational events like baby showers, baptisms, confirmations, and graduation parties. In many ways, they held the keys to the domestic realm and defined the boundaries of women's social networks within the congregation.

In OALC a religious confirmation ritual signified it was time to think about selecting a partner and marrying. Courting rituals entailed travel to the United States for church meetings. I did not think about marrying because I was too young. However, I dated outside the church and adopted so-called "worldly" habits when I was sixteen years old. This marked a period of ongoing disparagement for paying attention to my appearance, which I now understand reflects the colonial regulation of Sámi culture. In retrospect, control over my dress and behaviour drove me further away from Laestadianism. On the contrary, most others accepted the rules and accepted their future roles narrowly defined as mothers.

Despite not wanting to embrace Laestadian motherhood, I became pregnant at sixteen in 1980. Suffice it to say, this was a major crisis in my local First-Born community. The pastor (not my uncle) at OALC attempted to intervene and arrange marriage between my young partner and me. This was not feasible. Shunning began already when my mother and aunt threw a baby shower for me and only two of my aunts attended. Normally such events would involve large extended families or networks of women. The gifting at such events would ensure a new mother had what she needed for her baby. I will never forget when two of my male cousins came to visit me the day after the baby shower. One of them brought me a baby sleeper and the other gave me a handful of cash. He may have even taken donations from some of the other boys. They took me for a car-ride and we listened to music, which was a sin, of course. They must have heard about the group-shunning and wanted to make amends, perhaps out of embarrassment or compassion for me.

After my daughter was born, my mother sought to ensure that I would stay in the community and that I would be "redeemed" and "forgiven" for my "sins." The events of the day of my daughter's baptism will remain with me for the rest of my life. My aunt had crocheted her a

beautiful, white, baptism dress. After the baptism ceremony, I was supposed to stand before the congregation and ask the congregation for forgiveness "for my sins." My mother had coached me in advance. I did not do it. I refused. I knew from that moment that I was done. By refusing to ask for forgiveness, I knew that my life in the congregation was over. I was right—the shunning began already when the coffee and cakes were served after services. It was that immediate.

I left the church and raised our child alone. This was extraordinarily difficult because leaving the church created upheaval in my family. It led to sustained "shunning" by the First-Born Community. As a defining feature of OALC, they did not mix with non-believers, even if you were family. Choosing to leave my childhood faith meant giving up kin relationships and the support of a large network. It remains a pre-requisite that membership in the church is necessary for meaningful relationships among First-Born families. (However, this may not be the case for other sects of the movement that adapted more readily to modern times.) The loss of communal ties has had a long-term impact on my life and the life of my child, since it set us up for poverty. Of course, in the end everything worked out. I figured out how to manage after an upbringing that left me unprepared for navigating the world. For instance, when my child went to kindergarten, I went to university. Education became an alternative support that made it possible for me to me reshape my life. If asked if I would change anything in my life, I would say "absolutely not." I would choose the struggles of poverty over controlled and oppressive life in the OALC. I truly loved school and getting an education.

As an ex-Laestadian woman I have insight that the world is shaped by mortals and can be changed. I am beginning to understand Laestadius' role in the colonization of the Sámi and non-Sámi women. Before I went to graduate school in Europe, I had a meeting with my mother. I said: "Mom, Laestadianism really fucked us over. We're all really hurt by it. Mom, we've really just got to let it go." Importantly, I recognize the history of Swedish colonisation and its impact on women. It is a history that needs to be told so I share what I can here.

Appendix II: The Narrative of Aallotar: A Woman from the Far-Left Branch of the Laestadian Movement ("Aallotar Valkoinen")

According to Bengt Pohjonen, an author, playwright, Meankieli language rights activist, and a general cultural interpreter of Laestadianism from Swedish Lapland, I was born into the far-left branch of the movement. When Bengt first told me this, I thought how that could be, because we were still quite far right of the Lutheran WELS or the Missouri Synods. The Synod peeps drank beer and danced and even had women teaching Sunday school.

My grandmother's father's family was from the Swedish side of the Torne River Valley in Sweden, and her mother's side was from the Finnish side of the Torne River Valley. Places like Korpilombolo, Vittangi, Tervola, and Tornio all place prominently in that side of the family history. For a time, my great-great grandfather lived in Varanger Fjord before moving onto Calumet, Michigan, to Copper Country, a common immigration destination of my family. They settled in Copper Country in 1870, and lived in Cokato, Minnesota and a couple different localities in the Dakotas before finally arriving, the next generation, in Northern Minnesota.

My maternal grandfather's family was from Northern Ostrobothnia, near the border of the Lappi province, and they had been fairly successful farmers with enough money to resettle their whole family along with two dozen young men in their village, who were escaping from czarist conscription. The family is considered one of the pioneer families in the village of Menahga, Minnesota, a strong Laestadian enclave with the presence of 5-7 Laestadian sects.

My father's father was not of Nordic or Laestadian background, but of mixed Northern European descent, though he had a Finland-Swede stepmother. He was not enthusiastic about the faith and never in my memory attended services with the family. His mother's mother was from Kainuu, a region in Eastern Finland that has a smaller Laestadian presence. His mother's father was from Southern Ostrobothnia, on the border of Savo province, and his family has never been Laestadian. He was converted in Copper Country. Perhaps his first wife was a Laestadian, or he was exposed to the doctrine working in the mines. I descend

from his second wife, who had been the nanny hired to help out after his wife died leaving him with several children. He had become a preacher and was said to be strict, but at least half of his children left the faith and relationships between my grandmother and her unbelieving or marginal sisters and alcoholic brother were contentious, full of strife and drama.

In any case, both my parents were from families deeply entrenched in the IALC. None of my parents' siblings ever left, except for one troubled brother of my father who left briefly in between marriages. My parents have always been a lifeline to him, as he divorced a young and beautiful wife with whom he had two small children. He and used marijuana and other drugs, and often had live-in girlfriends after the divorce. It is always interesting to me to note that my parents always accepted this brother, but were so prone to criticize and marginalize me, their own daughter, in their family, despite that I have never been that kind of "rebel." Again, I lacked a certain organ and chromosome for that kind of grace.

Many sermons alluded to this "sea of grace" that was available for any believer, no matter how base the sin was, we could repent and have our sins washed away. As a middle age adult, I believe in such grace, but have personally, never experienced that grace extended to me in my own highly dysfunctional family and only rarely from the women in my community.

Apparently in the 1920s, the group referred to as "Eastern" Laestadians (as opposed to "Western," which are headquartered in Gällivare, Sweden), had a split into three groups. The largest of the three former groups from that schism, which I could call the SRK equivalent, was located in Calumet, Michigan (only that group split into two in the 1970s). But my group, the smallest of the three in the schism, which began to call itself Independent Apostolic Lutheran group, though religious scholars often referred to us as or the Pollarites, after the preacher John Pollari. Our group was still very opposed to drinking and dancing, but we took liberties considered to be sins in the SRK-equivalent group, mostly around clothing styles, family size, and lipstick.

Before I had even started school, my parents moved away from a rather industrial rust belt Laestadian community where my paternal relatives lived, to the opposite side of the state, where we had no relatives at all. In this place, the Laestadian community consisted of us and one other family and an old lady who was the aunt of my mother's brother-in-law, but she was part of a raw schism from a decade earlier. Consequently, we had nothing to do with her nor her visiting relatives, which was a pity.

As early as the first grade, I remember my mother's warnings that we should not be friends with unbelievers. Unbelievers could never be real friends, but placeholders in which to bide our time until we could move into a locality where we could have more everyday believers in our lives. As a very young child I took these statements at face value. I remember turning down requests to play with other children at recess times and declining play dates on weekends, fearing that I would be led astray. I noted my siblings didn't seem to have those fears in their early years but retreated more socially when they reached their teens. Whereas I relaxed and had more close associations with "unbelievers" by the time I hit my teens. Once my mother criticized me, and noted that I was much more fun, natural, and playful around my unbeliever friends and seemed cautious, reserved, and timid around people at church.

She meant it as a way to convey that there was something wrong with my spiritual house that I hit it off with unbelievers and had difficulties fitting in with believers. But the truth was, it was nothing like that. I simply didn't fear the kind of judgment from non-church folks than from church folks. My sisters were always spying on me and reporting back to my parents about my activities, such as smoking, which at least one sister was prone to do, though ironically, she was first to tattle on me.

I didn't understand that there were several other branches of Laestadianism, and I didn't understand that we even were Laestadians. I did not know that there was even an historical figure out there named Lars Levi Laestadius. When I asked about our origins, I had heard this mythical story about how the true faith had been passed along from group to group since the days after the death of Christ, that it was always only a small group of saved people, and that now it rested in the hands of our small sect. Whew! Such a heavy responsibility to keep that "spark" of faith, smaller than a mustard seed, alive! I imagine at the time I was a small child there might have only been about 1500-2000 people in the Independent Apostolic Lutheran Church (IALC), but I would estimate there must be between 3000-4000 in 2018. Since they don't really have actual membership rosters, it is hard to count. But I digress.

Two of my great-grandfathers were important preachers at the time that the IALC was separating from the now-SRK group based in North America. It seemed to me, they too had mythical status. Present-day preachers often referred to their previous sermons as a touchstone. To me, they seemed as valid as the testimonies of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and I thought of them as our "tribe's" Abrahams and Noahs. Very seldom did anyone refer to any preacher before the time before the split, and I was very unaware of the other

groups who existed in some of the same places and nearly the same spaces as some of our group's localities. Every now and again, my grandmother would mention some of the Esikoinens (meaning firstborns) who I now know of as the Old Apostolic Lutherans (OALC). We understood the OALC had some rules we deemed quite silly. For example, they couldn't have curtains, the men shouldn't wear neckties, they couldn't have a Christmas tree, the women wore long skirts with their hair in a bun, and they had ginormous families, sometimes with 15 or 19 children. Their kids couldn't be in school sports, and they had no televisions, eschewed all modern secular music, etc.

My paternal great-grandfather didn't see much wrong in affecting a modern experience, nor in women bobbing their hair in the 1920s, nor the use of cosmetics. "Why shouldn't the brides of Christ be beautiful?" he said, and so from then, aside from a few *huivi*-wearing (headscarves) old women, in our group we have stayed quite contemporary.

One of the reasons I didn't know we were Laestadians is our isolation from the Laestadians in Europe. I've heard that when the IALC group split from the Conservative Laestadians in North America, a tiny remnant remained with us in Europe, although that could have been sheer speculation on the part of people who wanted to believe their relatives over there were "still in faith." I recall a sermon in the 1990s in which a minister announced that the "last believer in Finland has died." In any case, Pojhanen said he knew of some IALC'ers, whom he referred to as Pollarites, in Sweden and Finland, so there may have been a few of them over there. But largely, the message was that there weren't really believers left in Europe, since they all went with schisms and were going to burn in the same hell fires as Catholics and ordinary Lutherans, not to mention agnostics and Atheists.

The IALC didn't have any missions and we were loath to explain how we were religiously affiliated when asked. So, we certainly didn't evangelize or try to spread our message.

We, on the other hand, were sort of "Laestadian Light." We wore make-up, dyed and permed our hair, wore earrings, and dressed rather normally and in a middle- class manner, but some of the kids from industrial areas dressed more working-class, ala Bruce Springsteen. We could listen to secular music, and some folks even attended concerts, though not everyone approved of it. Our families were preferred to be larger than the norm, and instead of the American average of 1.7 children we probably had families that ranged between three and six children, with four or five seeming to be the optimal amount. Even today, I know of families

of my generation who have eight and eleven children. I recall when I was in my teens there was still controversy regarding contraception, with some folks still yet against it, with the argument that pregnancies can happen even after sterilization and vasectomies if it's "God's will" without noting that we now had families that were half the size as before.

As far as I could tell, our group preferred to operate under the radar of non-believers, who were considered to be everyone not of our group, including people of other schisms. In fact, it always felt to me like people from other schisms were avoided even more strenuously, because believers (the term I will use from now on to describe IALC members) didn't like to be reminded that there were people who were quite similar to us, as they threatened our feelings of superiority and uniqueness. We were the only ones "like us," and we were God's chosen people and perfect together but at the same time, we often held deep inferiority complexes. We were prone to humble-bragging.

Even though our lifestyles would have been considered worldly in OALC and among Conservative Laestadians, our group was quite serious about enforcing the rules we did have, though it always felt to me that people from influential families were often able to navigate around them. For example, no dancing, no drinking, no living in sin (though I know for certain there was still plenty of premarital sex).

Still, there were a few young marriages in which babies arrived six to seven months after the wedding later, and no one, at least on the surface, seemed to make a huge hairy deal out of it., but I can imagine in some dysfunctional families, however, such a happening might bring out sideways comments and opportunities for shaming in order to put another person in their place.

Again, who gets judged would depend upon who you were, and what family you were from. When my eighteen-year-old cousin got pregnant and had a rushed wedding, the feeling in my family was to feel sorry for the young couple and to help them out as much as possible, helping them to buy a home and to get a more solid footing in the world. The in-laws even bought them a honeymoon in the Bahamas, considering that such luxuries could be years away for them, wishing they have a little fun.

But that wasn't the story for everyone. One of my peers got pregnant out of wedlock, and the boy (not from church) who had impregnated her beat her up when she refused an abortion.

One of her relatives slapped her and called her a "whore." She left the church at a young age and has not had an easy life, but it seems she had the support of her immediate family.

An important rule was always to make every church service unless you could demonstrate serious illness. (This last rule was one I wasn't good at, being someone who occasionally needed alone-time and who suffered from migraine headaches). Well, sometimes I was just sick of it and couldn't take the hours-long meetings, which droned on from 10am to 3pm one Sunday a month, preceded by Saturday night services and Sunday school the preceding day. During one of those monthly church marathons, I would have listened to six, forty-five-minute to one-hour sermons, and have eaten two meals and two snacks. Not to mention all the shopping and food prep that was expected of women before the meetings. And there were hours-long exhausting stints in the kitchen.

When I was a sophomore in high school, my sister, a junior was voted in as Prom Queen. It was interesting to note that my parents seemed to have little hesitation allowing her to fulfill that role. We lived in an outside community, and so it wasn't something most of them would have been aware of as this occasion occurred. My mother took my sister to a small city nearby to purchase a fancy dress and shoes. I don't recall them, however, taking a photo of the occasion. Only later did I reflect that there was a huge disparity in the way I was treated in my family vs. how my sister was treated. For example, I had to purchase my own confirmation dress with babysitting earned at $2.00-hour rates, whereas my sister received dancing dresses bought and paid for by my parents. Later I learned both my parents had attended the occasional school dance and my dad had been the king of his Homecoming dance.

Special dispensations were given out in my family. For example, my dad was given a special dispensation to occasionally drink wine by my mother. We didn't really know about the wine until we found an empty bottle hidden underneath the sofa cushions. We were shocked, because we thought of wine as something only bad unbelievers did, and there it was...in our house. My mother explained that my dad was a believer who could occasionally drink wine and keep his faith, but that we should never, ever try it. In fact, it turns out, my dad was able to a lot of things we were strictly warned against, even multiple extramarital affairs, without losing his wife nor his family in the process, or even his faith. In fact, except for presumably some side glances, no one even admonished my father for stepping out on mom, not even the time he took his twenty-six-old love out on an out-of-state conference when he had several

grandchildren and was well into his 50s. Oh, that special dispensation having a penis or being popular brings!

It never occurred to me to be jealous of my sister. I understood she had a special place in my family, and it felt like I understood intuitively that I was expected to go along with all of the rules, no special dispensations for me!

In writings about the Laestadian movement, I have run across many references about the ability of believers to forgive sins, and also to bind sins, which seems to be a feature unique to the Laestadian movement. In fact, it appears that one of the reasons the IALC separated from Conservative Laestadianism in the 1920s was around the ritual of forgiveness of sins. Apparently, the group of preachers who split off from the Conservative Laestadians thought that the practice of needing another believer to forgive every sin was being overemphasized and that going to communion on a regular basis was enough, and that no one would need to go to hell should they have an unconfessed sin on their conscience.

However, in practice, it was stated that one had the option of going to another believer if a sin weighed greatly on one's conscience and that confession then can be a relief as one can receive absolution and assurance. I don't think it is done very often, but certainly, vestiges of this practice remain, especially in the concept of binding sin. Sometimes, there are particular people who judge others as being unbelievers. Sometimes it can be over a divorce or remarriage, alcohol consumption, or simply, not attending church enough.

I knew one woman who quit greeting her sister when her sister, who attended church in her home congregation regularly, quit attending big meetings. She was a single mom and found the traveling and expense stressful without a partner. The same woman reported to me that there were several people who refused to greet her because she was divorced without a Biblical clause; i.e. her husband, who was abusive, hadn't cheated on her.

I also knew a woman who decided that a seventeen-year-old boy, who died in an automobile crash, was an unbeliever. She stood up during the funeral and cried out that the boy was in hell, which felt traumatizing to me, as this boy was my cousin.

I would argue that the church I attended did, indeed bind sins, through refusal to greet people who sinned in various ways, but shunning is also a form of binding sins. Shunning can take various forms besides refusal to greet. It also happens when people don't want to sit by you

anymore during lunch, who walk by you without meeting your eyes, and through verbal jabs and slights, which I dub as "death by a thousand paper cuts." Certain communities of color have another way of framing this behavior as "microaggressions."

A woman I knew had an affair with the husband of a woman from a very wealthy and influential family. In the aftermath, I recall her friends insulting and laughing at her; they didn't bother hiding it. The other party was voted in as the chair of the congregation the next year. I give her a lot of credit for hanging in there, which I am certain was because of her father also being an influential man and her family, kindly and supportive and forgiving of her. However, in absence of a supportive family and friends, walking into the church can feel like walking into a psychological battle zone.

Attending is a double bind. If you show up, you know you will be the recipient of social feedback that illustrates your status of being an "in" or an "out." Once, after not attending for over a month, even the biggest drunk in the congregation, having completed several treatment programs and failed them, actually chastised me for not being in church!

But yet I stayed for forty years, and I stayed for many reasons. There were many things I liked about the religion. I liked the simplicity, the ascetic appeal of an unadorned church, the singing in acapella, the simple pulpit with a single lace cloth adornment, the simple message of forgiveness of sins. Laestadianism doesn't encourage strong literary interpretation of the Bible, it is enough to believe it is all true, without having to read into it too deeply, --that work is for the preachers. When I was young, that Shakespearean language contained in the King James version was positively daunting, even to English-language bent persons such as myself. I was relieved that beyond confirmation school (my locality precluded Sunday school, which were taught by Bible-ignorant people anyway) I didn't have to study the Bible and try to decipher the odd prose. We were taught that believers have a special kind of love for each other, and sometimes I did feel that love extended to me, like as a teen when I was traveling around and visiting people at their homes. Some of those parents were really nice to me, and when things were miserable in my home life, I'd think about those people and smile.

I had a friend who got involved at a young age with drinking and drugs, and she had to go to rehab more than once, and her parents were nothing short of loving to her...and to me. So, I knew that some of the parents in our group were not like my parents, though I do believe that her parents would have been absolutely devastated if she had ever left the church. I also know

that she had brothers and cousins who fiercely loved her and would have fiercely defended anyone who would have shamed or maligned her behind her back.

I also understood from a very young age my parents were both physically and emotionally abusive. I often argued with them and told them their behavior was not acceptable. My dad often physically abused me and my mother verbally and emotionally abused me and told me I was schizophrenic and the cause of all the problems in the family. My parents seemed to consider themselves above any kind of reproach. I have never heard either one of them apologize, for anything, or ask anyone for forgiveness of anything, not ever. I understand that some Laestadian groups are like that, that they ask for forgiveness when they transgress others, but I didn't grow up in that atmosphere, and as an adult, when I became a parent, I vowed not to be so righteous.

I didn't leave because I was afraid to go out in the world. I didn't know much of anything about worldly people. Who could I trust, and who could I not trust? I didn't know how to get my car fixed if it broke down, or how to tell when people were good or bad. Before, the only criteria I had to determine good people from bad people were if they went to my church or if they were unbelievers. The fact is, some unbelievers were in actuality, bad people, who raped children and stole money from other believers. And some unbelievers were good, honest and trustworthy people. I feel like my internal compass was messed with, and when I was told bad people were good, and good people were bad, I was taught to ignore my gut so much that it didn't work anymore.

I liked aspects of the church though. Many of the sermons resonated with me. I liked some of the speakers, and much of the message. I wasn't fond of the fire and brimstone sermons, but they didn't always happen every service. I never believed in the exclusivity of the church, but I did fear if I was to leave, I would lose all of my support network. How could I find another church that was true? I now think that if I had left when I was younger, I might have found the wrong crowd of people or a controlling or manipulative church environment.

There are still many people over at the IALC who I like and trust and consider to be "good people." I mean, I am actually happy to see them. Some I have to avoid because their only mission in speaking to me at all seems to be is to bring me back to the fold. I made the mistake once of confiding my conflicts with the church to a friend and made her promise not to talk to my parents about our conversation. But she betrayed me and the very next time she

saw my parents, she told them she had spoken with me and about the content of our conversation.

The reasons I chose to leave are not very complicated, really. In a nutshell, it had a lot to do with female relational aggression, particularly from my mother and my two sisters. To some degree they have always treated me like an outsider in the family. However, when I married an unbeliever who converted, they liked him, so I was hopeful I would gain admission into my own family. Only a couple of years into the marriage, after having a son, he began gambling and engaging in sexually maladaptive behaviors, visiting nudie bars, sex shops, and perhaps on occasion purchasing sexual services. Some of the stuff I didn't figure out until years later, when a friend who had worked with girls getting out of prostitution suggested that my ex's police warning for loitering in an area of high drugs and prostitution was usually given to johns who were seen with a known sex worker getting out of their vehicle. I know my ex frequented one area like this so often that he was told by the police that if they saw his service vehicle again, he would begin getting real tickets instead of warnings.

I tried to tell my family what was going on, but they either didn't seem to believe me, or they felt like marriage should be forever regardless of what is actually going on. And in any case, one of my sisters and my mother have been married to men who have repeatedly engaged in unfaithful behavior. My ex had an affair with a woman he met online on a site for married people looking for an affair partner. He said he wanted to be with her, so we arranged a quick divorce, despite the consternation of the sister who felt that I should just "hang in there for at least five years and wait for him to file in case he wants to come back."

I was sternly warned not to marry again, and that there was no use in dating, because dating would provide too much temptation to have sex, given I was used to a marital relationship. There had been divorces and remarriages within the church but given the fishbowl atmosphere and my female relatives' obsession with controlling my life, I didn't try to date in the church. I knew that if I did, my mother and sisters would try to ruin it for me. So, I concentrated on making a life for me and my son. I thought I would try to learn Finnish, and started studying the language, which I never learned, but it led me to meet my now-husband, who was born in Finland and spoke Finnish as his first language.

We married after several years of dating. Upon beginning to date my husband, a full-on shunning from my sisters and my cousinly peers began. They barely spoke to me. I felt

obligated to go to big meetings, but I wandered around alone. I was left off the invitation list for cousinly get-aways and people ignored me at our summer gatherings. My sisters would walk by me as I arrived to extended family events, not even meeting my eyes as they passed me by, as if I were a stranger. Any attempts at setting boundaries were reported communally. If I crossed my mother or one of my sisters, it was as if I had crossed the whole bunch of them, with them calling each other and gossiping about me and then came attempts to get me back into line where I could be controlled. I sometimes felt like the patient in the mental institution in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, the patient knew the whole institution was dysfunctional but didn't quite know how to escape.

The women have their power in determining social constructs. Though women in the community are not allowed to preach or teach Sunday school, the women often determine which families socialize with which, and they have a lot of much influence over who their children become BFFs with. My exclusion meant my son was excluded, too. I noted that when we arrived at family reunions at the lake during the summer or at big meetings, some of my cousins' children excluded and ignored, and at worst, mocked my son openly, enough so that I was able to pick up on them doing it. Regardless, my son had a huge desire to fit in with my family and to be part of the clan. He didn't collect slights and I have always admired his ability to shake the dust off his feet and carry on. Because he found the community so valuable, I didn't want to take that away from him by pulling the plug.

I noted that women often determined who was in and who was out. My first husband, not a Finn, was a little bit in with them, and my family liked him. Women are social power-brokers, and their relationships usually determined the men's' friendships too, and whose houses are socialized in. My sisters used to vex and complain about a certain unofficial social club that gathered monthly, and why they weren't included, but that my sister's sister-in-law had been invited, and she who had just moved back into town. They were quite butthurt about it. I laughed at them, and said, listen: "If you two were suddenly included in that club, don't fool yourself, because neither one of you would ever, ever invite me." Well, sooner or later, they both wheedled their way in, and yes, I was never invited, except the time my sister wanted me to come over and help her prepare some food for her guests. And I did that for her, because I loved my sister.

One also has to understand that my church was not only my heritage, it was my culture, and essentially, my substitute hometown. I grew up in a town we were not bonded to. I could

draw you many maps of locations in small scattered midwestern towns where my church friends lived, but I can barely point out the homes of 10 of my 50 classmates in a school system where I attended K-12. I barely knew anyone in my hometown, though my family was well regarded because we were polite, well-mannered children and good school citizens, and we were considered to be hardworking and "very smart."

Leaving it felt like leaving my only roots.

But eventually, I did jump, though it was rather in a straw that broke the camel's back episode. My son went to a high school dance. He was fifteen. I didn't know he was going to a high school dance, but he had his father take him without my knowledge. Frankly, at this point, I was peeved enough I would have probably let him, but I can only speculate on that. I certainly lived in fear that my mother or sisters would find out, so perhaps not.

I didn't find out that my son attended the dance until several days later when my Prom Queen sister called me. I picked up the phone. She didn't even bother to make small talk. She went right into it at once. I picked up the phone. Hello? I said.

"How come you never told Sonny Boy we don't dance?" my sister accused, without the nicety of saying, "Hello, how are you doing, God's Greetings" first. I should have reminded her about being the Prom Queen and the times she and a believer friend would visit clubs during their single days. But I couldn't. I just told her I was fed up and wasn't coming back to the church.

The vexing part was my other sister had boys of similar age, who lived just 2 km from us, and who often attended youth events and wouldn't invite him or give him rides when he asked if he could go. Apparently, my son and I were from some metaphorical wrong side of the tracks, so I decided to jump trains. My son opted to stay. After I had been gone for nearly a year, my nephews begrudgingly began including him, likely due to my speaking out about the hypocrisy of criticizing him going to a dance with worldly people while simultaneously being excluded from activities with "believing" youth. I was clear to my friends from church what happened and that it was a final straw for me. It upset my family that I was exposing their hypocrisy toward me and my son, even though it was to a very limited audience, as I immediately lost most of my social connections the day I left the church. Sadly, I really lost all of my friends. And some of those who hung around only stayed to relay things I told them

back to my family, and then my family was angered that I was out discussing with anyone how they had been treating me.

Some of the greatest challenges of leaving were the shunning, but also, the loss of my identity. My Finnish identity became a bit painful for me, as I associated my Finnish-American identity with the church. It is hard to start over at forty; I was newly-married to my Finnish husband, who isn't from a Laestadian background and could not identify with the angst. Multiple visits to Finland did restore my cultural identity and I am grateful for those visits. My son also has a strong Finnish-American identity that doesn't seem to be contingent upon being a member of the church.

I only wish I had left when I was in my early twenties, when once I had already begun to make a plan to bolt. At that time, I couldn't deal with hurting my grandmother, so I stayed.

My mother told me if I left, I couldn't really be part of the family anymore. I took her seriously, and disengaged, which upset them. I know some people who leave experience love-bombing, but I didn't really get any of that, only peoples' anger and disdain. I asked my mother to apologize for saying such a thing to me, but she doesn't feel it is necessary. In fact, she sent me a twisted scriptural reason for that, that no one ever has to apologize to anyone we have sinned against, only to God. I know if I was to take this to an IALC minister, that it wouldn't even pass their sniff test, but what is the point? She can't ever admit she is wrong, and she's not going to start now.

I feel I was actually driven out of the church rather than making the choice to leave, and I feel like I was driven out by my mother and my sisters as primary agents, in retaliation for remarriage to an unbeliever. In other words, they used the notion of the "bound sin" – a sin that was unforgivable – to punish me. But binding sins are inconsistent and based on personal feeling of a powerful church member or family member toward "the sinner." I would be punished by my family through shunning. There was no grace for what others determined was a "bound sin."

As I said previously, women can have very powerful roles in the church. One matriarch, now deceased, was known to be a discerner. If a new congregant was called to preach, she in essence, was one of the people called to determine if he was "preaching in the spirit" because sometimes the right words were used, but the spirit was determined to be lacking. It didn't mean the preacher was an unbeliever (but it might, during a time of heresy!) but it meant that

he didn't have "the gift." Women were more prone to rejoicing, the liikutuuksia, though we didn't call it that. We called it "rejoicing." Men who rejoiced were more often called to try preaching, as their rejoicing was evidence that they "felt the spirit."

Our rejoicing was seen as evidence that we were in the right group, because of some old preacher who was not named (who I now suspect as Juhani Raattamaa) who said when rejoicing leaves the church, that is evidence that the faith is dead. We understood that our branch of Laestadianism was the only one with the rejoicing, though it may be that the OALC's forgiveness of sins ritual might be considered a kind of liikkutuksia. But ours fell at any old time, like during communion, during the middle of a sermon, or during singing. As a child it could be rather scary, but I got used to it, and sometimes it could also be very joyful!

If there was contention between two parties, such as a divorce, a discerner might tell others that one party wasn't in faith any longer. To me, it was often clear that it was often determined that the woman had lacked forgiveness or had hard-heartedness, because she didn't want to live with an abuser, cheater, or a pedophile husband any longer and had filed for divorce. Though sometimes, more rarely, the woman was given the grace and the husband was out in the cold. My troublesome uncle's former mother-in-law was the main discerner in her locality of the IALC, and he was the one considered to be the unbeliever when the marriage between her daughter and my uncle dissolved. Frankly, he was a troubled man, and it was probably his fault, and she was a lovely woman, but the sea of grace didn't wash over him either, and he found himself the black sheep and outcast in our family and in the church, where he is regarded by some with suspicion and disdain even until today.

A couple of years ago, an online support group was created for ex-members of the IALC, and it seems to me well over half are women who have had to divorce or decided to divorce and found themselves marginalized by the community. The other half are people who determined, at a younger age, in their teens or early twenties, that they didn't want to come to church anymore.

I tried to remain a part of my family in reduced contact, but it was very difficult. There was always a feeling of hostility under the surface, and there were times a sister or my mother, getting me alone, said some truly heartbreaking, ruthless and cruel things to me. I am almost totally estranged, and a couple of years ago, my son decided to leave too. This means his cousins rarely engaged with him, and we are on our own. We are free, but sometimes lonely.

I would take the loneliness of leaving over the kind of malevolent social control I was under. I do not want to say that my experience is typical, but rather indicative of a family with multiple members who are in some way, mentally ill or personality disordered.

I know people who leave whose families remain consistently kind, whose parents support them, who still have summer reunions with their relatives. But few, if any, visit the church except for a funeral of a parent, grandparent, an especially beloved uncle or aunt, or a wedding of a nephew or niece – and sometimes, not even then. It is difficult for me to attend without my spouse or my son. Even going to the bathroom alone means I may be ambushed by a well-meaning person who asks me to come back before it is too late. Such interactions make me cry, not because I think I have any greater chance of going to hell than they do, but because I still have guilt for leaving my own people behind, and because I love and I miss them. I have lost so many friends because of leaving, that anyone from that community showing me any love at all makes me feel like caving in and returning. Only I know if I returned, I'd face the tyranny of not only my mom and my sisters, but the flying monkey cousins who observe me and bring back gossip to them that they use against me to keep me in line. These things are "spiritual abuse." Since this has been going on in some form since my teens, ramping up in my thirties, it has become such a habit in their lives that I have no hope of it ending in my forties or fifties. Simply, it would be misery on my part to return.

There are people there who abuse alcohol, men who are habitually unfaithful husbands or womanizers, people who smoke pot and use drugs, and somehow, those people escape their notice, but anything that I do, is demonized. And I know my narrative sounds like that of a victim, but really, in leaving their world, I feel less and less like a victim and more empowered to live my life on my terms. I think of them all, less and less.

I still don't drink or dance. It was never their lifestyle I was escaping, as I am more of a homebody who likes the quiet pursuits of homemaking, gardening, etc. And I don't hate the church, but it is more of a love/hate relationship than one of pure affection. I have noted that in people who are part of other sects, or who descend from Laestadians, I have much more cultural affinity than for people of other backgrounds, even other people of Finnish descent. It is a good and bad thing. I have also found that if you cross a woman of Laestadian background, they are keenly able to intuit how to get a circle of people against you and do it in such a way they appear to be the innocent party. They come off like they're a blameless victim and you're some kind of perpetrator. It's best to have only superficial, casual

relationships with such people. I’ve even encountered a former Laestadian from another sect, who, in mistaking a social incidence into something it was not, became enraged enough she went completely outside of her network to get into contact with a member of my family, repeating confidences I had told her about my leaving experiences.

I understand that is why some folks “pull a geographical” when leaving Laestadianism, and I think they are wise. They move someplace devoid of any presence of Laestadian networks and do their best to catch up what they missed socially, and never mention their background to new friends and colleagues. There is a lot of catching up to do, believe me. For example, if you have never been to a non-Laestadian wedding, served a toast, or mingled at a cocktail party, there are a lot of conventions that someone raised in the community simply doesn’t know, and it can sour new friendships innocently, as it is easy to do the wrong thing or commit social gaffes without knowing the conventions. We have talked about it a lot in my support group, but also note that people can also be really kind, especially if you relocate to an area with different conventions, because people are more likely to chalk up your differences as being Midwestern rather than rudeness.

In my work life, in my small department at a large organization, there has been several other current and former Laestadians at my workplace. We observed a sort of “don’t ask/don’t tell” arrangement where we really didn’t reveal we were from an odd Finnish religious sect, though one was related to me through marriage, so we used that relationship to explain our connectedness. One woman was from my sect, and she loved to drink and party it up and, in her youth, she was a beautiful, blonde young woman. She had left many years before and had told me one of the reasons she never married was because her grandmother, who she dearly loved, told her that she had to marry another believer. She wasn’t networked into a gang of believing youth, and was on the college track after high school, not the marriage track, and so didn’t get any opportunity to marry anyone from our group. In her early fifties, she loved children and was sad she never had any of her own. She was happy with her life in that she had experienced a great career, was able to travel internationally, and had many fulfilling wonderful friends. She attended a Lutheran church, and when they sang psalms that were included in the Laestadian songbook of her youth, she told me that she sees her current church community as having a similar meaning, except that the cultures of the churches were different. For a long time, she didn’t attend any church, but she wanted the experience of being part of a faith group again and singing in church. Her feelings are the same, even with drinking beer and attending the ELCA. Who knew?

After several years out, I feel the same way. I am indeed, happy I left, though I regret that there couldn't have been a way I could have received the most rudimentary respect from my family and had it been possible to have a more cordial, if not closer, relationship with them. However, as my therapist says, they were not kind to you when you were with them, following most or all of their rules, so how can you expect them to be kind to you now?

I hate to quote Oprah Winfrey, but I will, because one thing she once said resonates with me so deeply. She said that "forgiveness means giving up all hope of a better past." I think I am almost there. I don't regret the way I was raised, and there are parts of it I have a longing and nostalgia for. There are sometimes I still feel sad and carry resentment for the injustices that my son and I had to endure there, and I feel sorry for those trapped there who don't fit in, and will never fit in, and for those who won't leave because they can't endure being all alone. But I don't wish it all away. I am still a Christian, a believer yes, and no one can ever take that away from me, no matter how hard they try to shun me.

But I am beginning to see that their shunning was indeed the best thing that ever happened to me, because my love for my family, community, culture, and faith was so strong that I could have never left out of my own sheer will. I now believe God wanted something better for me.

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[1] There are even two "Wiki How" pages devoted to leaving Laestadianism in North America, one is called "How to Leave the Laestadian Lutheran Church" (https://www.wikihow.com/Leave-the-Laestadian-Lutheran-Church) and another called "How to Leave the Old Apostolic Lutheran Church" (https://www.wikihow.com/Leave-the-Old-Apostolic-Lutheran-Church).

[2] Focalization reveals through whose eyes we see and in whose consciousness or minds we gain access in narratives. The focalized object is that which is perceived, or under the scrutiny, of the focalizer.

[3] Noteworthy, there are at least 100 direct descendants of Lars Levi Laestadius himself living in Finnish American communities. The majority of Laestadius' descendants are scarcely aware of him and his profound impact on their ancestral regions in Sweden and Finland (Tormanen). Some of the lack of knowledge on their part is attributable to the various "splits" and "Heresies" among the founders but is mostly attributable to the significant number of individuals in North America who chose to leave the faith and its history behind.

[4] The gravity of this question was posed rhetorically in a conversation I once had a bar. With levity and earnestness, the young man named 'Les' asked: "What the fuck happened over there in Lapland? How did we [North American Laestadians] get like this?"

[5] An important ontological distinction must be made evident here with regard to yoiking vis-à-vis singing: a song is sung about a subject, but a yoik *is the subject.* One does not yoik about the subject of the yoik, one simply yoiks it. A yoik can also embody an emotion or sense, like Gunnà's melancholic short narrative with yoik sounds.

[6] In this context it is important to contextualize "race and racism" in North America with relation to Finns. While Finnish Americans are coded white in North American racialized logics, historically, Finnish

immigrants were racialized as inferior to Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians. The majority of Laestadians are Northern Finns. Racialization of Northern Finns could be attributed to their mixed Sámi and Finnish background from within Scandinavian communities. Within the internal hierarchy among Nordic immigrants, the Finns were at the bottom and were often referred to as “mongloids.” Of course, the Sámi immigrants would have been lower than the Finns, but the vast majority of them blended in or where intermarried with Scandinavians upon arrival to North America. Prejudicial treatement of Northern Finns was also attributable to many of them belonging to the Laestadian religion and to their status as working class miners.