“If You Hide Your Own Roots” – Themes in Lyrics by Finnish and Russian Karelian Metal Bands

First, I’d like to thank everyone involved in the conference for organising and giving me an opportunity to speak.

Trigger warning: violence, oppression, censorship, authoritarian dictatorship, expletives

Now for the disclaimer: On Wednesday evening, a Russian presenter made statements about the relationship between Finno-Ugric and Russian peoples which I can only describe as misinformation and Russian government agenda. The issue has been addressed by the organisers and ISMMS board, for which I’m grateful. I would like to add that there is a tendency in various academic fields to misrepresent Finno-Ugric cultures and peoples. I recognise that this is usually not done from a place of malice, but a genuine unawareness and perpetuation of erroneous claims made in previous research. As someone who has spent the last 15+ years researching Finland, Karelia, and other Finno-Ugric communities this can sometimes be annoying and/or frustrating. I get it, we all make mistakes, I do too, and we can’t be experts on everything all at once. For Finno-Ugric scholars, however, there is often a tendency to be dismissed when pointing out these errors and this is extremely invalidating, especially in light of what is currently happening within Russia itself.

Now that this is out of the way, I would like to take everyone on an imaginary journey to the far North, to a place of dense pine forests and vast lakes. To Karelia. Karelia is not well-known outside of Finland and Russia. Yet, I hope to convince you today that Karelia is worth knowing about. Karelia’s nature is wild and beautiful yet harbours many secrets. Nowadays, the people who call themselves ‘Karelian’ also often identify as Finnish or Russian. Through centuries of oppression, forced assimilation,

cultural erasure, and ridiculing Karelian identity has become fragile and fragmented.

The first part of the title speaks to the centuries-long outsider pressure on Karelian identity. It is a line taken from the Karelian language song ‘Ajatella toisin šanoin’ (‘To think in other words’ 2021) by Russian Karelian band Zergeyth. The song does not only speak of consciously deciding to hide ethnic roots, but also mourns the loss of Karelian culture, language, and traditions.

Karelia is a transnational region, the Finno-Russian border runs straight through it. For a long time, it has also been a contested region with nine official border changes since 1323 (Kangaspuro, 2000, p. 38; Savijärvi & Savijärvi, 1994, p. 9). Only 5.5% of the population of the Republic of Karelia – the Russian side – labels themself as Karelian. However, many more consider themselves partially Karelian. The Karelian language is offcially endangerd and the exact number of speakers is unknown. The numbers on the slide are an indication.

Karelia is of immense symbolical importance to Finland (Kirkinen, 1982, p. 11). The poetry of Finland’s and Karelia’s national epic, the *Kalevala*, was mainly collected in Karelia. When published in 1849, the *Kalevala* provided Finland with the cultural heritage and linguistic legitimacy it craved in its quest towards independence from imperial Russia (Kangaspuro, 2000, p. 39). This is also an example of the cultural conflation of Karelia as Finnish. For many Finns, especially those with Karelian roots who resettled in Finland after WWII, Karelia has become a utopia (Sihvo, 1982, p. 25; Suutari, 2021, p. 73); a conceptual place of mythology, tradition, and untamed natural beauty.

As of today, sense of Karelian identity is fragile with few weak overarching aspects (Klementyev et al., 2010, p. 3; Sarhimaa, 2000, p. 237), hindered by the aforementioned centuries of repression, erasure, conflation, and ridicule. After the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, language revival was limited (Klementyev et al., 2010, p. 4). However, given the

current Russian government's stance towards minority identities, this has all but stopped. There is a risk of Karelian traditions, language, and culture, sinking into oblivion. However, the current situation is not completely hopeless.

Metal music artists of both Karelias – Finnish and Russian – are increasingly engaging with what it means to be Karelian. When I collected the data for this research project, I noticed several lyrical themes that reoccurred across bands. These are belonging, nature, history, and folklore. Besides the invocation of Karelia, the music also often refers to Finland, Russia, the North, and the (sub-)Arctic, reflecting the multiple identities that co-exist within the region as well as the larger geographical space in which it is located. As a side note, I have indicated on my slides whether a band is from Finnish Karelia with F-K and Russian Karelia with R-K.

When it comes to identity, I take the approach that identities are socially constructed, subject to continuous change, and reproduced in and influenced by popular culture and everyday life (Billig, 1995; Edensor, 2016). The negotiations of identity by Russian and Finnish Karelian metal artists aid in cultural and linguistic revitalisation. They challenge negative stereotypes of the culture and language as well as introduce both to a new cultural domain. Thus connecting Karelian culture, history, knowledge, and language to a globalised genre of music: resulting in identity exploration and the export of a little-known Indigenous community's culture. Revitalisation can be considered an act of decolonisation, a site of resistance, reclamation, community healing, and creating a stronger sense of identity (Stebbins et al., 2018, pp. 3-6).

A sense of belonging is often found through nature. This concurs with a previous finding that Karelians often describe themselves as rural, despite many Karelians living in urbanised areas. In the song ‘Enkä jakša kaččuo muuvvalla’ (‘And I cannot stand to see anywhere else’ 2021b) by Zergeyth, the listener is told about Karelia that: *Tämä on paraš paikka miula’* ‘This is the best place for me’, whilst descriptions of nature abound.

On the other side of the border, similar ideas about nature and belonging are conveyed and reflect ongoing changes to Karelia’s climate. The Finnish lyrics of Häive’s ‘II raina: Virvatuli - Metsäpeittöön’ (‘II strip; Will o’ the wisp - Into the cover of the woods’ 2007a) speak of an unidentified change leading the narrator to not recognise their own region: ‘En tunnista omia rakkaita mantujani’ (‘I do not recognise my own beloved soil’). The narrator describes the destruction of nature and their former home with: ‘näille tuntemattomille tiluksille’ (‘towards these unknown lands’). In this way, the song connects identity loss to climate change and human destruction of nature.

For Russian Karelians, identity and belonging can be closely connected to an unspecified oppressor. The song ‘Naslazhdeniye’ (‘Pleasure’ 2009) by Meti Bhuvah refers to carriers of death ruling the land. It is entirely possible that the ‘carriers of death’ refer to the Russian government. However, given the government’s current censorship in all but name agenda, it is impossible to say. For artists living in Russia, various counterstrategies are employed to protest what is going on. One of these is ambiguity. In the case of Meti Bhuvah, the lyrics can be read as a criticism of the Russian government or not.

A song with a similar message is Zergeyth’s ‘Pohatterit betonikoropoista’ (‘The Rich Ones Living in Concrete Boxes’ 2021). The song contains an ‘us’ and ‘them’ group. The latter is defined by living in built-up and fenced-in areas, far removed from nature. The ‘us’-group lives a contrasting life: closer to and with nature. The ‘us and them’ dichotomy is prevalent in metal music, think of your average Viking metal or pagan metal song and

it’s usually there. Finnish metal inspired by the *Kalevala* often also conveys a message of pagans (us) against Christian proselytisers (them). Yet, in the case of Russian Karelia, it is difficult to not read this as protest. Especially because nature and the rural are two of the few markers of Karelian identity that reoccur in various Karelian language outlets, from newspapers (Tanczos, 2015, p. 99) to metal music.

The tension between urban and rural also appears on the Finnish side of the region. Here, a strong preference for natural surroundings is emphasised by stating how villages, towns, and cities, are empty of meaning, such as in Häive’s ‘V raina: takaisin koskemattomaan metsään’ (‘V strip: back to the untouched woods’ 2007b). Nature, in contrast, is imbued with a sense of belonging. This concurs with Sellheim’s (2016, p. 511) finding that the North often functions as a place of belonging in Black and Viking Metal. This same sentiment is found across metal subgenres in both Finland as a whole – so including the provinces of North- and South-Karelia – as well as in the Russian Republic of Karelia.

In various instances, Russian Karelian artists turn to history in search of events in which they were victors and independent. A good example of this is Zergeyth’s ‘1187: Hyvästi, Sigtuna!’ (‘1187: Farewell, Sigtuna!’ 2021c). This song tells of the plundering and burning of the Swedish town of Sigtuna in 1187, which is reported in some Swedish annals, such as the Eric Chronicle (Carlquist et al., 2011, p. 52). Although there has been academic debate on the identity of the attackers, in Zergeyth’s song they are clearly Karelian: ‘Ei vielä koittan Sigtunašša, kun nousi karjalaini šotajoukko’ (‘The day had not dawned yet on Sigtuna, when the Karelian war party rose’).

With this song, Zergeyth reverses various roles. Swedes – both inside and outside of metal – are often associated as pagan Viking warriors, and the common perception of Karelians as victims of Soviet terror and Finnish erasure is wholly absent in the song. Instead, the Swedes are docile and obedient Christians who experience ‘happiness and fun’ (‘ilo ta lyšti’) before the (‘šiälimättömät pakanat’ ‘ruthless pagans’) aka Karelian arrive who only bring ‘pain and suffering’ (‘kor’ua ta tuškua’). The song subverts

traditional and long-held perceptions of Karelians and Swedes, indicating a desire for Karelians to be seen as the victors and those to be feared. The song can also be read as a legitimisation attempt; set at a time when Swedes were no longer pagan and conquering and plundering various parts of Europe and beyond, the Karelians were still pagans. To quote System of a Down's 'Cigaro' (2005), Zergeyth's song is telling everyone: 'my cock is much bigger than yours'.

On the Finnish side of the border, an emphasis is placed on historical trauma. As noted, the classic pagan versus Christian narrative exists here too. It often appears in connection to Karelian-Finnish folk poetry. However, these narratives can usually not be pinpointed to an exact time or place. Those songs dealing with historical injustices and trauma can. In 2021, the black metal band Darkwoods my Betrothed released the concept album *Angel of Carnage Unleashed*. The album tells the story of Finnish soldiers and peasants during the Great Northern War (1700-1721), a war fought between Sweden and Russia about control over large parts of Central, Eastern, and Northern Europe, including Finland. A shorter period, known in Finnish as *isoviha* ('Great Wrath') refers to the occupation of Russian imperial forces from 1714-1721. As indicated by the Finnish name for this period, the tsar and his army were extremely hostile towards the Finnish population. One song in particular, 'Massacre', retells the brutal treatment of Russian Cossacks on the island of Hailuoto. On the night of September 29, 1714, 800 Finns were brutally murdered. There are many bloody episodes and tales of oppression in Finnish history which frequently appear in lyrics by Finnish heavy metal bands. However, the oppression and violence that Finns have historically waged against other minorities, such as the Sámi or Karelians, are notably absent.

In the introduction, I noted Karelia's vast lakes. You might be familiar with Finland's tourist slogan – and Amorphis' 1994 album which invokes it – 'The Land of the Thousand Lakes'. In truth, Finland is selling itself short with this slogan, as there are around 188,000 lakes. The larger lakes are located in Finland's east – including North- and South-Karelia – and also in

the modern Republic of Karelia in Russia. As is evident from the slide, lakes play a prominent role in the titles of songs and albums by Karelian metal bands. Ladoga is Europe's largest lake, and, as such, central to various songs, including Second to Sun's 'Ladoga Master' (2018). Europe's second largest lake, Onega, is also in the Republic and is used by Minuala for the title of one of their songs Онего ('Onego' 2024). Finland's largest lake, Saimaa, holds a prominent position in Finland, not least because of Saimaannorppa – the Saimaa ringed seal – one of the few freshwater seals and a critically endangered species. Häive's instrumental EP *Saimaata ei sanoilla selitä* ('Saimaa cannot be explained in words' 2010) encapsulates the sense some people have when visiting Saimaa. Even though Saimaa cannot be explained in words, I'm going to try. In summer, the lake has calm waves lapping at the shore. Extend your gaze and you will see that Saimaa is dotted with dozens of small islands on which pines and birches grow. The colours of the region – the deep blue lake, the dark green pines, and bright blue sky – as well as its soundscape – waves at the shore, wind through the trees, birdsong – and the smell of the forest surrounding you – can be all-encompassing. Saimaa, and the other lakes, are also connected to Finnish Karelian folklore, as is exemplified in Auringonhauta's 'Kalastuslaulu' ('Fishing Song' 2014). The song is based on traditional fishing songs and illustrates how fishing was a central occupation in pre-modern times. The lakes of Finland and Karelia were places to source food from – a real scarcity so high up North in pre-modern times. The lakes were also a link to the wider world as many rivers connected the lakes and functioned as trade routes. Therefore, the numerous referrals to Finnish and Karelian lakes not only function to geographically locate these bands but also to connect to the past and folklore. The referrals to lakes are quite obviously connected to Karelia. However, more implicit references to nature and identity can also be made. This can happen in various ways, for example, when bands refer to cranes – the birds.

Cranes, like bears, swans, and bees, have a seminal role in Finnish and Karelian cultures. Cranes appear in various folk poems, in some they

convey helpful messages (*Kalevala* 42: 293-333; *Kanteletar* 1:201) or act as a judge on other birds (*Kanteletar* 1: 91). The importance of cranes was underscored during the Golden Age of Finnish Art (1880-1910). This period was strongly influenced by all things Karelia. Composer Jean Sibelius wrote 'Scene with the Cranes' during this period, with the call of cranes recreated by a B-flat clarinet. Esa Holopainen – guitarist for Amorphis – once told me: 'if you listen to Sibelius and look at paintings by Gallen-Kallela (Finland's most celebrated painter) you will understand Finland'. This is quite true, except that it omits the significant role Karelian culture has played in this identity formation of Finland. Eino Leino, a contemporary of Sibelius and Gallen-Kallela, also incorporated this culture in his poetry, for example in the poem 'Kurjet' ('Cranes' 1949). Therefore referrals to cranes in Finnish and Karelian metal music are not without cultural precedent.

Furthermore, cranes are not widely recognised as 'metal' animals – such as wolves or eagles – which strengthen the interpretation of cranes as signifying something specifically Karelian and/or Finnish.

There are various songs in which cranes appear, such as 'VI raina: Kurjat kurjet' ('VI Strip: The Wretched Cranes' 2007c) by Häive, 'Kurjen laulu' ('Song of the Crane' 1998) by Mokoma, and 'Kurren kižad' ('Dance of the Cranes' 2013) by Zergeyth. In these songs, cranes symbolise melancholy and sorrow – two states of mind closely associated with Karelian Finnish folk poetry. Häive's and Zergeyth's lyrics both allude to the ancient folk belief systems where young cranes learning to fly and departing for the south announced the end of summer. 'Kurren kižad's narrator observes cranes teaching their young to fly.

When the cranes leave, the narrator watches their departure: 'Minä seižoi, tusku vacaz' ('I stood, pain in my belly'). The narrator of Häive's song describes the departure of the cranes in a similar manner: 'Yksin seison ja käännän teille selkäni' ('I stand alone and turn my back against you'). These expressions of melancholy over the end of summer are connected

to the harsh winters of the sub-Arctic when the sun hardly rises above the horizon for months and food would be hard to come by in premodern times. However, ‘Kurren kižad’ and ‘Kurjat kurjet’ both end on a positive note relating to the cyclical nature of life, whereby seasons change, and better weather will arrive eventually.

The narrator of ‘Kurjat kurjet’ ends the song by addressing the cranes directly: ‘Tulettehan taas kuitenkin keväällä takaisin!’ (You will come again in spring after all, will you!’). In ‘Kurren kižad’, the cranes leave with a message of hope for the listener: "Keviäv meidy vuattakkua. Tuome siiviy suvituuled, lämmän tänne päiväzen." (‘Wait for us in spring. We bring the summer’s breeze on our wings, bring the warm days here’).

Conclusions

Despite the massive societal and political differences between Finland and Russia, lyrics from Karelia share various themes. Obviously, divergence can be observed sometimes, but it is striking how often lyrics convey the same or extremely similar emotions and perceptions. Artists look at history for events that sometimes express superiority and at other times give a voice to the historical trauma. Celebration of a sense of belonging as well as the mourning of a lack of a sense of belonging indicate the contradictory feelings many Karelians have towards their identity and the confusion that exists over this identity. Nature is frequently referred to in lyrics by Karelian artists – with many alluding to natural aspects specific to Karelia, such as the lakes.

Given the weak sense of Karelian identity and the endangered status of the language, the continued allusions by metal artists to aspects that can be connected to Karelian culture are acts of identity exploration and negotiation. These identity investigations share similarities with decolonial identity expressions elsewhere, such as the global south. In this case, they are acts of resistance against an authoritarian dictatorship. On the Finnish side of the border, similar expressions are less politically loaded and come

with less risk on the part of the artist. However, Finland’s past attempts to assimilate Karelian and Finnish cultures, mean that for Finnish Karelian artists, expressions of Karelian identity reflect the dual identity many Finns with Karelian roots have, exploration of their ancestral roots, and the tensions that exist between the two identities.

Before I finish, I want to note that the oppression of indigenous and minority communities within Russia is directly related to what is currently going on in Ukraine. So, therefore: Slava Ukraini!