

Resistance in Maxida Mäarak's album *Utopi*

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Abstract

In this article, the music, lyrics, and music videos of Maxida Mäarak's 2019 debut solo album *Utopi* (Utopia) are analysed using feminist, decolonial theories. The article discusses how the construction of resistance to colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist oppressions takes form on *Utopi*, and shows popular music's relationship to feminist and Indigenous resistance today. Lyrics, sounds, and images are analysed using discourse analysis, leading to the conclusion that *Utopi* holds ambiguous possibilities, of resisting settler colonialism, sexism, racism, and capitalism, while at the same time reinforcing neoliberal story telling tropes of individual success, and marketing Indigenous epistememes as goods. Currently the most visible Indigenous pop and rap artist in Sweden, Mäarak was born in Stockholm and considers Jokkmokk, in Sápmi, her home. She became famous for her music and political activism for Saami rights and Saami visibility in 2015, and reached a larger audience when she performed in the intermission of Melodifestivalen, the Swedish contest leading up to Eurovision, in 2018. During 2019, she released her first, full length album with songs about motherhood, land, class, love, sex, and loss. She sings and raps mainly in Swedish, and blends rap, pop, and Saami musical heritage. The conclusion of this article shows how land, and Saami feminine spirituality, are constructed as the basis for feminist, anti-capitalist, and anti-settler colonial activism in Mäarak's work.

KEYWORDS: Maxida Mäarak, decolonial feminism, Saami, popular music, resistance

Introduction

Female Indigenous artists have made significant contributions to popular music, and to feminist Indigenous activism. (1) For instance, in the 1960s, Buffy Saint-Marie's music and lyrics described the impact of settler colonialism on Indigenous communities in North America, highlighting substance abuse, violence, and environmental degradation for land and animals. Saint-Marie was also a

spokesperson for peace, most noticeably in her song 'Universal soldier'. In Sápmi/Norway, Mari Boine, and in Australia, Marlene Cummins, have also contributed both as activists and as musicians in hybrid genres where Indigenous music traditions are blended with folk rock, blues, or electronic dance music. Expressing Indigenous and feminist political issues through popular music has a continuous and internationally diverse tradition. Still, few of the artists combining feminist and Indigenous issues in their music have broken into the mainstream of popular music or been well-known outside of their national contexts and genres. Lately there has been a new generation of female and Indigenous identified artists combining activism and Indigenous music traditions with pop and hip hop. Artists like Hoodzy (New Zealand/Australia), Renata Flores (Peru), Kayala Truth (Australia) and JB The First Lady (Canada) are just a few examples of female Indigenous musicians addressing issues of power in the wake of the sexism, coloniality, and racism faced by their communities in different parts of the world. The current surge for Indigenous epistemes in environmental activism coincides with this wave of female Indigenous artists addressing social justice issues.

In this article, the debut album of Maxida M̄arak, a female Saami artist born in Stockholm, Sweden in 1988 is analysed. She has advocated strongly for Indigenous rights and epistemes in Swedish media, and became known to a larger audience when she performed in the intermission of Swedish Melodifestivalen (leading up to The Eurovision Song Contest) in 2018. During 2019 she released her first, full length solo album with ten songs about motherhood, Sápmi, the environment, love, sex, and loss, amongst other things. She sings and raps mostly in Swedish, and is also known for her joiks, a traditional Saami word-less vocal style. The album, *Utopi* (Utopia), is explored here for its possibilities of feminist and Indigenous resistance in popular music. Lugones (2003: 12), in her feminist decolonial writing, argues for ontological pluralism where oppression and resistance function as two realities, built on different logics. She writes (ibid.) that acting within the logic of resistance can make one incomprehensible within the logic of oppression; one may appear rude when refusing feminine gender expressions, still, the logic of resistance colors such refusal as a subversion rather than rudeness. Lugones (2003: 13) emphasises that 'the logics of oppression and resistance construct people's movements, interactions, desires, and intentions. A person may be both oppressed and resistant and act in accordance with both logics'. Methodologically, this article considers the articulations of the two logics of oppression and resistance in *Utopi*, and acknowledges the ambiguity of the album as decolonial. The guiding question through the article is: How are the logics of oppression/resistance of/to colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist oppressions expressed on *Utopi*? The lyrics, sounds, and images analysed here hold ambiguous possibilities, of resisting settler colonialism, sexism, racism, and capitalism, while at the same time reinforcing neoliberal story telling tropes of individual success, and marketing Indigenous epistemes as goods. The investigation of notions of oppression and resistance is here done through four themes: feminism, class, indigeneity, and land, where the last theme ties the first three together. In analysing *Utopi*, the article acknowledges that the gender systems of the colonised are not identical to those of the colonisers, or to what they were before colonial contacts. In relation to the gender system in Sápmi, Kuokkanen (2009) has concluded that the marginalisation of Saami women in the economy was an effect of colonisation, and with the impact of the nation state, colonialism transformed some structures of organisation for women's work while at the same time Indigenous knowledge was preserved locally. Saami feminism is, according to Kuokkanen, focused on honouring the land through Indigenous epistemes of the

foremothers. While other issues like equal rights for Saami women and social justice are important, the central position of fighting for land, to protect and preserve land from exploitation for capitalist purposes, distinguishes it from western feminisms (from liberal to socialist or queer). This introduction is followed by a literature review, before a section discussing method and material, and then the analysis and conclusions are divided into four sections representing the four analytical themes.

Indigeneity, gender and music

While gendered aspects of Indigenous culture and society form a large research area, the gendered aspects of popular music and indigeneity constitute a smaller field. One of its renowned scholars, Tina Ramnarine (2020), has discussed how decolonialisation processes are creative as well as historical and political, arguing that music can be a decolonial practice, resisting and reshaping coloniality. In her work on Saami musics, Ramnarine (2013: 166) has pointed out that Saami is a heterogenous group, in terms of languages, regions, music traditions, and gender identity. Ramnarine discusses how Saami vocal traditions in the practices of female singers from eastern Sápmi express deity and emotion. Her analysis focuses on interpretations of a matriarchal lineage and ecofeminism, where the musical traditions studied are describing mother earth as a central agent. Both *joik* and *leu'dd* are Saami vocal styles. *Joik* is performed in northern and central Sápmi, and *leu'dd* in eastern Sápmi, and they can be performed by men and women. Ramnarine (2013: 181) discusses how female singers thematise emotion and spirituality in stories that overcome a dual gender model. While many scholars agree that gender is not a fixed or binary entity in music performance, or in life, studies of indigeneity, gender, and music have also pointed out the possible pitfalls of interpreting gender identity in Indigenous communities as already-transformative (Werner 2017). Barney (2008) has found, in interviews with Aboriginal female identified artists in Australia, that sexism *and* racism are challenged in their musical production. Barney (2008: 13) acknowledges that stereotypes of indigeneity and gender interplay and create a shared cultural imaginary where sexism and racism aimed at Indigenous groups create stereotypical representation of Indigenous women; images that artists need to resist and transform. That such resisting and transformation of Saami stereotypes has been done by Mäarak and other Saami artists is recognised by Bladow (2019: 332), who argues that musical styles and hybrid art are tools for resistance for Saami artists. In her studies of Aboriginal men and music in Australia, Ottosson (2016) concludes that shaping masculine identity as Indigenous music artists also involves negotiations of the racism and sexism facing communities in the Northern Territory. Further, Bigenho (2005) discusses the hybrid nature of music making in Bolivia. Through her focus on female identified singers of mixed heritage ('mestizo-creole') in Bolivia during the 1900s, Bigenho (2005: 68) discusses how their singing careers were limited by husbands and the exoticization of Bolivian indigeneity, and also how Indigenous music was blended with other genres in their work to form what became Bolivian national music.

Many ethnomusicological studies of music, gender, and indigeneity have focused on female identified Indigenous artists and their music and lyrics, often interpreting representations of indigeneity, femininity, and resistance. This reflects an ethnomusicological tradition of cataloguing and discussing different music traditions around the world, and their performers. The field of study is important, and makes a relevant context for the article at hand that discusses a particular piece of Indigenous, hybrid music by a female identified artist. However, the music of

Märak has genre differences to the Indigenous musics often studied by ethnomusicologists. Her production is within the practices of Swedish mainstream pop music, with influences from Saami traditional music and hip hop. Notably, Märak is musically, and generationally, more comfortable in the context of Nordic hip hop than that of folk music festivals. Berggren (2014) has studied gender politics in lyrics by female Swedish rappers. He concludes that the rappers in his study use the roughness and insulting style of these genres as a means of delivering a feminist critique of the world in general, and of the genre they are working within in particular. Märak's earlier songs, 'Mitt största fan' (My biggest fan) and 'Dansa hur jag vill' (Dancing how I want to) address sexism in the music industry, and affirm her subjectivity to do what she wants to. They neatly inscribe their messages in what Berggren (2014) calls Swedish hip hop feminism. 'Mitt största fan' is also delivered in a fast and aggressive style of rap. Märak is an experienced battle rapper, a genre that is nationally (and internationally) male dominated, and is signified by insulting expressions for competitive purpose (Dankic 2019). Winning a rap battle is dependant on good lyrics, delivery (rapping skills), and appearing as the 'coolest' rapper. Therefore, insults are frequently used to throw the opponent off, and to stand out. Hip hop feminism has been widely discussed in music sociology, with many key scholars working in the US (Durham 2014, Pough, Neal & Morgan 2007), and this work rarely highlights Indigenous epistemes or environmental politics. Here I draw on both ethnomusicological knowledge and music sociology in order to analyse Märak as voicing Saami epistemes, and as using rap as genre for feminism and against racism. In Sweden, fellow vocalist Sofia Jannok is also voicing Saami rights in her music, but with a mixture of pop and Saami folk music. Märak is not the only Saami rapper; the Norwegian SlinCraze predates her career and popularity, but as a female rapper from Sápmi she is unusual.

In discussing the importance of a decolonial approach for Nordic Gender Studies, Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert and Knobbloch (2019: 294) argue that a decolonial, feminist approach using the work of Lugones, in the Nordic countries, importantly needs to learn from Saami episteme. Further, a Nordic, decolonial, feminist studies could also make a contribution to the larger fields of studies of the settler colonial contexts of North America, South America, and Oceania (ibid.). In this article, their call for more Nordic, decolonial analysis is answered, while asserting that cultural production is a crucial part of decolonialisation.

Material and method

The lyrics, music, and music videos from Märak's solo debut album *Utopi* will be analysed here using the tools of discourse analysis. Knowledge about media discussions surrounding her career and artist persona is used to contextualize the investigation. The album is Märak's first, full length album, despite her being active as a recording artist since 2014. She has also participated in movies and television shows, and has performed in rap battles and with performance art pieces, showing diversified talents as actor, rapper, singer, and performance artist. Märak is known for referring to Sápmi, and for speaking out about the oppression of the Saami by the settler colonial state (Sweden), and she spends most of her time in her house in Jokkmokk (Sápmi). A known collaborative partner is sibling Timimie Märak, who performs alongside Maxida Märak in the television program *Sapmi Sisters*. Maxida Märak and Timimie Märak are both known for their activism, advocating for Saami rights, gender equality, transgender rights, and fighting racism.

The discourse analytical approach regards lyrics, sounds, and visuals not as reflections of intentions or underlying meaning, but rather as constructing meaning in themselves by means of their organisation. The method of analysis used in this article takes inspiration from Laclau and Mouffe's (2001/2014: 99) understanding of discourse as manifesting itself around privileged nodal points. A nodal point is a sign that is central to the meaning making of a text, one around which other signs are ordered, and from which they derive their meaning (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2002: 26). The analysis in this article is therefore not about Mäarak's intentions or about Saami resistance as social action. It is, rather, about the meaning created in the language of this particular material. This organisation of meaning in cultural production is seen as providing a site for the logic of oppression/resistance. 'Language' here is conceived of as meaning construction in textual, visual, and audio elements, and those are analysed with a multimodal, discursive approach (Kress & van Leeuwen 2001). O'Halloran (2004: 111) has pointed out the cause-effect function, and the importance of sequence in the film medium that must be taken into account when analysing film (and here music video) using multimodal discourse analysis. In my analysis here, I take the specifics of genres, including music video into account.

The discourse analysis in this article is carried out by identifying nodal points concerned with resistance practices in the textual, audio, and visual materials. How meaning is arranged, around certain nodal points like land, spirituality, mothers, the rich, and right-wing politics, is described and discussed in the analysis through four themes: feminism, class struggle, indigeneity, and land. An intersectional approach, where power dimensions are seen as interplaying, is used throughout the analysis. The album's overall message is discussed in the conclusions, where the results of the intersectional approach for investigating oppression and resistance are presented and discussed.

Feminism

Mäarak has been described as a feminist activist, and as a Saami activist, in research and debate (Bladow 2019). Looking more closely at the lyrics on *Utopi*, one song expresses an overtly feminist political stance. In 'Kvinnosak' (Women's cause), the lyrics focus on oppressive practices based on gender, and a resistance to those, by a subject described as Mäarak's mother. The lyrics are in Swedish (here translated by the author) and describe Mäarak herself as the mother of a daughter that is 'made of gold'. The narrative of the verses describes injustices done to her mother, and to 'mother after mother', and the strengths and achievements of mothers, and later on her own love for her daughter, is expressed as being equal to the love her mother showed her. In the song, Mäarak raps the verses, but shouts 'stop calling it the women's cause' in the chorus, thus complicating the title of the song and the scenes described in the verses. The lyrics are suggesting that the issues raised here shouldn't be called the women's cause. The title of the song is exactly that (Women's cause) and the verses describe causes that are clearly important for women: being overlooked and pushed around in the workplace, caring for the home, paying bills, looking after children, and getting your period. Mäarak argues, by questioning 'the women's cause' in the chorus, that fighting sexism is something relevant to all, and not only to 'women'. She is also troubling the term 'women's cause' more profoundly. Since the lyrics are not describing women, but mothers and daughters, the 'woman' in the singular can be put into question by the song.

Märak thus destabilizes the category 'woman', asking if there is a binary gender division, and even if all mothers are addressed in the song. It is still not clear here if all mothers are women. The lineage of 'mother after mother', and Märak's situating of herself in a feminine (not female in a simple, essentialist meaning) foremother continuum, as described by Saami female singers (Ramnarine 2013), suggest that 'Kvinnosak' is a song about Saami lineage from mother, to daughter to daughter, as well as about the struggles of mothers.

Anti-essentialist claims that there is no 'woman', or 'Indigenous' subject, in the way realism would have it, certainly complicates our understandings of who the subject of resistance is, and what the act of resisting can be. While Märak is questioning the category 'woman', she is simultaneously building on a feminine lineage discourse in Saami vocal tradition. Postcolonial feminists were instrumental to the dismantling of the unified 'woman' of feminism. Mohanty (1988) famously argues that 'third world women' tend to be essentialised as one in feminist research, while in reality the subjects and topics of feminism in the 'third world' are marked by difference, by for example class, ethnicity, race, and sexuality. When discussing the conceptualisation of resistance in feminist research, Mohanty (1988: 80) critiques how resistance is seen as cumulative. Strategies for resistance to colonial power have, for Spivak (1999: 398), been imagined to be possibly both symbolic and complicit. At the same time as the woman's cause is being deconstructed by Märak, feminine agency, in the hands of mothers, is still at the heart of the song's message. It is a mother that is shouting the chorus, resisting the oppression described as facing mother after mother.

Developing Marxist decolonial theory, Lugones (2007) departs from the critique of postcolonial reason to outline a theoretical understanding of the intersecting structures of power in settler colonial societies, and the impact of coloniality on gendered culture. While the dehumanizing of Indigenous populations, and the imposition of a normalised heterosexualism impacted on all colonised people, the gender systems of settler colonialism impacted differently on individuals, depending on their (assigned) gender (Lugones 2007: 188). Thus, the intersections of race, ethnicity, and gender were transformed locally within colonial processes, according to Lugones. Koukkanen (2007) has argued that, in the case of Sápmi, the masculinisation of local governance and financial power is a form of gendered coloniality developed in relations between Saami and settler coloniality, a system that limited Saami women's earnings and work, where they had previously had access to areas such as, for example, herding reindeers and forging knives. Lugones' (2007) focus on locality and resistance, in relation to a re-formulation of gender as colonial, departs from modernity and western thinkers, and focuses on Indigenous knowledge systems and their relation to settler colonialism. The Saami episteme and spirituality will be discussed in the third thematic section of this analysis.

The lyrics of 'Kvinnosak' relate mothers to both political action and care work, when looking after children, and wiping their noses while holding flags high in parades are both actions described in the song. While the payment of bills and a growing number of costs are acknowledged as pressure on the mother, she is portrayed as the one that pays while also dealing with the child care, and 'forging knives with two kids in her arms'. The way the bills, and the growing pile of them, is addressed implies that there is not a lot of money in the home. This adds a class perspective to the mother's struggle. The forging of knives, a Saami handicraft that Märak learned from her mother, also points to a side business providing income. The knife forging in the lyrics, therefore, plays on pre-colonial work divisions, and questions the gender system imposed by settler colonialism.

The main element in the song that signifies the racial belonging of the mother is when Mäarak's mother is described as having 'loco' (crazy) black hair: 'my mother had loco black hair'. Black hair is a racialising sign in the Swedish imaginary, in which blonde, beautiful, and serene femininity is often understood as a national trait. To be a 'svartskalle' (black head) is, in Swedish, a racist slur for immigrants, and the racist history of ideas about Saami has a long tradition in academia and in public debate in Sweden. To have black hair is a marker of standing outside Swedish national femininity as racially other, and when that hair is described as crazy, the outside position can also be seen as resistant. The crazy black hair, in the context of Northern Sweden, is also specifically understood within historic racism against Saami peoples, where the shape of the skull, facial features, and black hair were seen as racial signifiers of Saami in the early 20th century. Categories of gender, class, and ethnicity/race are addressed together in 'Kvinnosak'. They all make up the struggles of the mother.

While the feminism of 'Kvinnosak' is lyrically obvious, another important aspect of the song is its position in a hip hop continuum of rapping about one's (resistant, strong, wonderful) mother. The meaning that the word 'mother' takes on, as a nodal point for constructing resistance in *Utopi*, is dependent on these previous songs about mothers and their meaning. Chaney and Brown (2015) have systematically investigated how black mothers are depicted in US hip hop and R&B songs. They (Chaney & Brown 2015: 29-30) conclude that two central themes in hip hop and R&B songs about black mothers are: recognition of their struggles, and celebration of them as empowered. Chaney and Brown (2015: 33) conclude that black motherhood, in these songs, is recognised for coping with poverty and racism, and that mothers are celebrated as strong and important. Their selection of hip hop songs about the struggles of the black mother included 'Dear Mama' and 'Keep ya head up' (Tupac), and 'Hey mama' (Kanye West). These three songs can also be seen as part of a neoliberal, feminist discourse individualising gender oppression, perhaps even trivialising it, since the black mothers are managing well (or are expected to manage well) despite all the hardship, dealing with the problems facing the racialised poor mothers of the world on their own. When Mäarak is describing mothers as strong and able to manage, that could also, from a critique of the neoliberal feminist position, be seen as just such an individualisation of the overcoming of oppression. Especially when the lyrics focus on one mother – Mäarak's mother – who is handling her challenges well, they risk trivialising all the mothers that do not cope, blaming them for their failings.

Mäarak is expressing several core feminist issues when meaning is constructed around the nodal point of 'mother' – she is supporting and putting forward the oppressed feminine subject, questioning a unified, essential woman, furthering a lineage of Saami foremothers, and promoting individual overcoming rather than systematic resistance. Is this last meaning to be understood as individualism in neoliberal terms? That would depend on what reality it is inhabiting. From the perspective of the logics of oppression, individualism and the idolising of motherhood are presented, while from the logics of resistance, the mothers are revolting against not only sexism but also racism and poverty.

Class struggle

So far, the discussion has focused on 'mothers' and expressions of a Saami feminist continuum. Mothers are ascribed positive value and resistant subjectivity by Mäarak. Negative oppressors are also present in the lyrics on *Utopi*, and sometimes they are

only mentioned in passing, like those pushing Mäarak's mother in 'Kvinnosak'. The construction of those that are not 'with' Mäarak are clearer in the song 'Fel sida om slottet' (Wrong side of the castle) where the power in need of fighting is found 'to the right'. Mäarak raps 'put your hand a bit higher, so I can see that it's waving to the right' after describing rich people in less positive terms, and before she mentions Björn Söder, a right-wing politician from the Sweden Democrats (a right-wing racist political party). The persons described as 'waving to the right' are also described as having money and a lavish lifestyle, kicking poor people already lying on the ground.

The title of the song, repeated in the chorus, refers to the differences in income levels between Stockholm areas, where the southern suburbs are poorer on average than the northern suburbs, and the castle is located in the middle of the city. This is, of course, a generalization; there are wealthy areas in the south and vice versa. However, Mäarak's chanting 'wrong side of the castle, wrong side of the bridge, wrong side of the city' does metaphorically describe social segregation in Stockholm. The social segregation is also closely tied to the racialisation of immigrant communities, when Swedish whiteness is defined as being located outside of the poor areas (Hübinette & Lundström 2011). Mäarak describes the areas on 'the wrong side' as 'ghettos', a word that describes specific racial segregation. However, when the song focuses on the actions of the rich from 'the right', 'right' functions as a sign around which Mäarak's description of (undesired) political statements and ideas are organised. The song starts out by identifying a 'slippery', rich, and unreliable group of people; they are the ones whose hands are waving to the right. Since the political right is critiqued, one must assume that loyalties are constructed as preferably to the left. The left, however, is also problematised in the song, when Mäarak expresses a preference for hipsters from a radical, leftist middle-class area in Stockholm over Björn Söder. Still, the intonation seems to imply that anyone would be preferable to him. Thus, the song is constructing the hipster as also in opposition to the south of poor suburbs and the 'real' class struggle. While 'the ghetto', a term used by Mäarak in the song, suggests the racialisation of the southern suburbs, the main opposition in the song is between the poor and the rich far-right. Further on in 'Fel sida om slottet', the narrative shifts to deal with the lack of empathy for the poor on the street, where the song constructs right-leaning people as lacking empathy for the poor. Thus the poor people on the street are not included in the construction of the 'we' in the song. 'Fel sida om slottet' connects wealth to the far-right, and the lack of money to racialised suburbs and poor people on the streets, where the un-named 'we' occupy the subject positions of class struggle and social segregation. Mäarak has, in an earlier song 'Järnrör' (Iron pipe), also addressed the politicians in the Sweden Democrats as racists, thugs, and violent men. The masculinisation of the class oppression in 'Fel sida om slottet' is not as clear as in 'Järnrör', except for the mentioning of Björn Söder that guides the listener to imagine white men waving to the right. The Sweden Democrats are numerically dominated by white men, both in political representation and among the voters.

Coloniality

So far, feminism and class struggle have been addressed as themes on *Utopi*, and on Mäarak's website the album as a whole is described as her contribution to 'do right' and become free and happy. She also claims her Saami ethnicity, by saying

it does not need to be claimed, it is always with her. (2) There are few obvious Saami-focused songs on the album, but the themes of indigeneity and Saami culture are stronger in the music videos. In 'Letar lite ljus här' (Looking for some light here), the first song on the album, and the first music video released, Mäarak raps that she is lying with her face in the ground, filling her mouth with soil to grow and be stronger. In the music video, we see her lying on a bed of soil, and in another scene she is spreading her arms while looking out over a northern landscape of forests, mountains, and rivers without any signs of inhabitants. The land, and more specifically the soil, is returned to in the second music video 'Akta dig' (Watch out/Watch yourself) where Mäarak is lying on the floor again while an older woman spreads soil around her body. The scene describes a spiritual ritual, when Mäarak and the other woman enter a trancelike state connoting representations of shamanic rituals. (3) In Saami traditional beliefs, the earth, the stones, the wind, and other natural elements have agency and communicative power. These are not seen as distinctly other from humans, and can therefore not be 'owned' or controlled but rather related to or collaborated with. Also, soil or stone may be of spirit, or of spiritual importance. This background of Indigenous knowledge systems contextualises contemporary issues around land rights in Sápmi, where land was claimed by settler colonial states (Finland, Norway, Russia, and Sweden). Kuokkanen (2019: 49) has argued that Saami Indigenous knowledge is relational, and built on relations to others but also, importantly, to the land and the foremothers. This knowledge, according to Kuokkanen, can be understood as having been passed down through a female relational lineage, and restructures relations of domination in community and in land rights discourse (ibid.). The land's affinity to spirituality and foremothers can also be seen as a source of decolonial resistance (Lugones 2007) where rituals, songs, and actions of political protest are part of the same struggle. Land, soil, water, and rituals involving soil are reoccurring images in the two music videos analysed here. The soil and forests are not only agents, passed down through generations; they are described as giving Mäarak strength and making her grow. In the lyrics of 'Letar lite ljus här', further on in the song she is climbing over barbed wire, an activity that is constructed narratively as something she needs strength from the soil to be able to do.

On Mäarak's website, in her biography, she is presented as making hip hop where 'Sápmi always is the norm'. Mäarak raps: 'the signs on my drum, three worlds, the sun shows the time, rest in peace'. The drum, a traditional Saami instrument, connects her spiritually to the land, in three dimensions: the earth, the world of the gods, and the underground, as imagined in Saami spirituality. The drum was traditionally used by a spiritual leader seeking advice, and in curing illnesses, and was forbidden by settler colonialism as it was perceived as dangerous, anti-Christian. The drum is therefore both a spiritual tool, and a symbol of Saami resistance to settler colonialism. The soil and the 'three worlds', including spiritual worlds, are constructed as intertwined with Mäarak's political force, and her awakening to look for 'some light' – the improvement of social conditions. Her agency takes on a threatening force in the music video 'Akta dig' where danger is established by dark colors, images of the older woman, and Mäarak in trance-like states or experiencing seizures, images of Mäarak screaming (silently) and discovering an animal skull in a creek and kissing it, carrying the skull through a landscape without people. Stone, water, land, and animals, in the music videos, are entities that take on meaning as strengthening Mäarak; making her stronger, keeping her going, and posing a threat.

The two music videos seem to have been recorded at the same time, since the sceneries are the same. There is one significant difference however: the first one shows Mäarak in white looking for some light, while the second shows her in black clothes, and the video is shot in black and white; lyrically, it is warning us to watch out for her. They could be read as twin videos, together describing the hope of working through resistance for social change, as well as the anger and despair of dealing with oppression.

In several of the songs on *Utopi*, Saami-ness is at the center of meaning production. The land, and Mäarak's spiritual connection to it, is the nodal point around which Saami meaning is organized. In the ideas constructed in the songs, land, soil, and earth do things, and the earth is addressed as a being. This is most clear in 'Kommer aldrig lämna dig' (Will never leave you), where Sápmi becomes someone Mäarak will never leave. This relational approach towards land, spirits, and animals, is part of Indigenous knowledge traditions that can, in accordance with Kuokkanen (2019), be a resistance to coloniality. However, the musical quality of 'Akta dig', in relation to the images and the lyrics, complicates these interpretations. The chorus has a pop hook that is similar to a schlager or chart hit song, in which Mäarak sings 'if you want to know who I am / you can try to watch and learn / but watch out, watch out, watch out'. This part of the song is a contrast to the verses that are rapped with a monotonous flow. When threats are posed in a cheerful pop hook they take on a double meaning: the pop tone may either take the edge off, or indeed underline the meaning of the lyrics stating that she is really dangerous.

It is important to note that the two songs on *Utopi* that use the most references to the Saami imaginary are also the songs with music videos. These two combine elements of Saami traditions, land, and spirituality with politics and depictions of femininity. Mäarak herself and the older woman with long white hair are the main human agents, and are portrayed as feminine. The older woman also mimes the lyrics, and mirrors Mäarak in several of the scenes: Mäarak stands in a street in a small northern town, then the older woman does the same; Mäarak holds her arms out overlooking the flat mountains of northern Sweden, and the older woman does the same. The woman could be seen as symbolically filling the position of foremother or spiritual leader, or a being from one of the other two worlds. In this way Saami-ness is visually connected to femininity as well as to the land.

In 'Letar lite ljus här' the Saami vocal style of *joik* is used in a bridge. The *joik* is a traditional Saami vocal style without lyrics, where the meaning of the *joik* is vocally constructed in the tonal language rather than a language as such (Ramnarine 2013). As Ramnarine (2013) has pointed out, it is also a regional Saami singing style, most associated with Western Sápmi including the area around Jokkmokk. Mäarak's *joik* therefore does signify local situatedness within Sápmi, as well as Saami-ness in general. Mäarak has previously released whole *joiks*, for example 'Mimies jojk' and 'NikeSunnas jojk', songs without any rapping or singing. Therefore, it is maybe surprising how few *joiks* there are on *Utopi*. The closing song of the album 'Kommer aldrig lämna dig' includes two sections of joiking that last for about 15 seconds each, in the middle and at the end of the song. It also has a background vocal with *joik* in the chorus. This last song of the album has lyrics (in the rapped and sung sections) that evolve around a metaphorical Sápmi: for example, by referencing shooting in clear-cut areas (kalhyggen), breathing in mosquitoes, fogs dancing over the ground, and a land where there are no roads. Mäarak is not rapping or singing in Saami, but in Swedish. Musically this connects her to a thriving (but diverse) scene of hip hop in Sweden, usually performed in

Swedish (Dankic 2019). It also makes her understandable for a larger group of listeners, since Scandinavian languages are similar, and she may also be understood in Norway, Denmark, and in the Swedish speaking population of Finland.

When global warming and the environment are addressed in 'Låt det rasa' (Let it fall down), Mäarak states in the chorus that 'the ice is melting', while the persons described in the verses are living their lives with 'ten trips to Dubai'. The rich are, also here, associated with negative actions like the speeding up of global warming through air travel. In this song, it is the lifestyle of western, neoliberal society that is critiqued, and the term FOMO (fear of missing out) is used, when a luxury life style is compared to Russian roulette. The chorus which, 'sings to the most beautiful I have ever seen', includes creeks and breathing freely and, again, is juxtaposed against the verses about the rich. It actualizes land, soil, and earth as beautiful and valuable, playing on a common trope of consumerism versus preservation of the earth. Environmental activism has been important for Indigenous communities in different parts of the world for a long time. But it has gained more exposure in mainstream media during recent years, for example in the reporting of the activist action at Standing Rock (US). Also, land rights have been in focus lately in Sápmi where the reindeer herders of Girjas won a court case, in Sweden in 2020, making them the exclusive holders of the rights to fish and hunt in a strip of land previously accessible to the settler colonial state. (4) 'Låt det rasa', together with 'Kommer aldrig lämna dig', are the last songs on *Utopi*. These songs re-address the centrality of land for resistance practices on this album, and widen the idea of oppression as global. They also re-connect to the first song, 'Letar lite ljus här', that presents meaning around soil, land, and Saami feminine spirituality for analysis. At the end of the album, Mäarak states that she will stay with the land.

Conclusions

I would like to return to how the whole album *Utopi* is framed on Mäarak's website: as her contribution to spreading hope in a society that is cold and moving too fast, she wants us to be happy, and for us to do right. The vagueness of the aims put forward resonates with any socially conscious advertisement, and Mäarak is presented as an individual, rather than as part of a collective struggle. A neoliberal or capitalist hijacking of political resistance, in which feminism is used as a branding strategy, or anti-racism becomes a hashtag, is sometimes hard to distinguish from resistance to oppression. Is Mäarak doing enough? Ambiguity in the relationship between the logics of oppression and resistance is, according to Lugones (2003), inherent in resistance to coloniality. Lugones argues that the vantage point of interpretation can create two understandings of the same thing. Following her argument, *Utopi* can be two things, depending on the logic within which we read it.

Within the reality of decolonial resistance, the methods to transform a society that is cold and moving too fast, where the rich kick the poor, and the land is used up, are constructed twofold through political activism and Indigenous spirituality. But, importantly, political activism is constructed by Mäarak as thriving through Indigenous spirituality, and by inspiration from a feminine lineage of foremothers and mothers. Lugones (2003) states that resistance is always enacted inside the relations of domination. She writes: "when one is acting in accordance with the logic of resistance, one may act with intentions that are incompatible with the logics of oppression and that may thus be very difficult to communicate within an

oppressive reality” (Lugones 2003: 12). Lugones conceives of subjects as well as realities as multiple, and she has (Lugones 2007) expanded on how the organization of gender, class, and race in coloniality is formed by multiple oppressions. This can be compared to how Crenshaw (1991), in intersectional, black feminist thought, discusses the importance of resistance, addressing several intersecting orders of power that she labels ‘political intersectionality’. For Crenshaw, political intersectionality is required to achieve social change, and implies that sexism cannot be addressed without also making racism and capitalism accountable. In Crenshaw’s understanding of oppression, it is not possible to separate oppressions by their grounds in sexism, colonialism, racism or capitalism, and therefore any resistance cannot deal with these oppressions separately. Sexism, colonialism, racism, and capitalism must be combatted together.

On *Utopi* the relationship to the land, the valuing of the land, and sometimes the feminisation of land and land rights, when Mäarak, her mother, and the older woman in the music videos walk the land, are central. It is through land and feminization that Saami Indigenous knowledge traditions are constructed here. In the logic of resistance, this is revolutionary, decolonial, and representing a different episteme than that of western, left-wing political activism in general.

Still, Mäarak’s appeal and popularity in Sweden could also be interpreted in the context of a growing popularity of environmental activism and land claims. The activism becomes a selling point, and being environmentally conscious is sellable in a capitalist society, for example in ‘greenwashing’. Castro-Gómez (2010, p. 295) has argued that Indigenous knowledge about land and environment has received recognition, but that this recognition is pragmatic rather than epistemic. He argues that some Indigenous episteme is used, but within a capitalist system, not to transform that system but to slow down climate change for the preservation of capitalism. Therefore, the recognition of Indigenous episteme is not destabilizing coloniality or capitalism, but is seen as a complement, where Indigenous knowledge systems may be useful merely for the conservation of the environment (ibid.), rather than being seen as a (real) alternative to the dominating knowledge system of western science. Reading *Utopi* from the perspective of the reality of oppression, again using Lugones (2003), it can seem as if the use of Indigenous episteme and the plea for social change are complementing a current system, possibly invoking reform for some. Or, worse, the political statements can be agreed with and then left behind without action. While collectives and groups are implied on *Utopi* – the poor, women, Saami, the inhabitants of the suburbs, the homeless – these collectives are not constructed as agents of change able to challenge oppression together with Mäarak. Resistance becomes a solo activity on *Utopi*. While there are many other female and Indigenous identified rappers expressing their opinions on similar issues, these are not collaborators. Within the logic of oppression, Mäarak’s persona, her reach, and her popularity highlight a trend, marketable in a time of environmental debate around climate change.

Endnotes

1 So have Indigenous artists of minority genders (Da Silva 2019) while they are not in focus in this article.

2 <http://www.maxida.se/>

3 The music videos have footage from the exact same places. Implying they were shot at the same time. They therefore have many similarities, but also some differences that I will return to.

4 Orange, R. 2020. Indigenous reindeer herders win hunting rights battle in Sweden. *The Guardian*, 23 January. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/23/indigenous-reindeer-herders-sami-win-hunting-rights-battle-sweden> Accessed 22 December 2021.

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Discography

Maxida Mäarak. 2019. *Utopi* (Utopia), Playground Music Scandinavia PGMCD102 (CD) / PGMLP102, 7332181094657 (Vinyl). (<https://www.discogs.com/Maxida-M%C3%A4rak-Utopi/master/1606894>) including 10 songs in the following order:

"Letar lite ljus här" (Looking for some light here)
"Lova ingenting" (Promise nothing)
"Kvinnosak" (Women's cause)
"Skjuter den som sjunger" (Shooting the singer)
"Mayday"
"Svettig" (Sweaty)
"Akta dig" (Watch out/Watch yourself)
"Fel sida on slottet" (Wrong side of the castle)
"Låt det rasa" (Let it fall down)
"Kommer aldrig att lämna dig" (Will never leave you)

Online video

"Letar lite ljus här" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7TgFHFp7l2E>)
"Akta dig" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k4mUcecRQMI>)