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Collective experiences of the Indigenous writing retreat

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Introduction

We three – Hae Seong, Wasiq, and Heidi – are a group of researchers from different geographical places, disciplines, and ontological spaces. The Indigenous Writing Retreat (hereafter “the Retreat”) in Gilbbesjávri/Kilpisjärvi brought us together and transformed our bounded ways of thinking about research, disciplines, identities and power relationships between them. The aim of the Retreat was to “provide the writers with an opportunity to develop their manuscripts, to extend Indigenous research networks, and to enable cross disciplinary conversations related to Indigenous research methodologies” (“Indigenous Studies Writing Retreat” 2019). In addition, the Retreat enabled us to explore the blurred boundaries of knowledge paradigms regarding what our relationships are towards Indigenous Studies and our presence in Sápmi. In this narration, we are relating to the latter experience with a multi-voice narration conducted with the methodology of walking ethnography. During the process our narratives flow from an individual to a collective level. We shared many experiences with each other in the Retreat, but also connected individually with other humans, land, animals, trees, plants and spirits. Afterwards, we arranged a workshop to discuss our experiences of the Retreat and analyzed the impacts on us. From there, we continued writing the three stories individually, then returned, as a group, to discuss the relationships and significance to Indigenous research. To cross the cultural and disciplinary barriers between us, we tested visual and participatory methods to achieve a collective form of communication. These methods also proved to enable a discussion beyond conventional (academic) terms, allowing us to communicate about our diverse experiences.




Figure 1. In the Goahti (© Heidi Konttinen). This image explores the ontologies and spaces between beings by breaking the borders (or refrain from breaking the borders). Choosing one form (triangle) to create the images of fire, people, lávvu, lake, trees, mountains and sky denotes the similarities and differences between beings. The image is based on our collective experience at the Indigenous Writing Retreat and aims to capture the feeling of the space and experience.

Situating Our Stories

As a group of researchers in this collective narrative project, our subjectivities are part of a significant engagement, for our perspectives must be underpinned by our diverse backgrounds. Hae Seong is a woman researcher from South Korea. Not only her Korean experience of colonisation and post-coloniality encouraged Hae Seong to empathise with Indigenous issues; but, also her Asianness – as a collective minority identity within Indigenous research in Australia and Finland – provided further clues to empathise and deeply share rapport with them.

Wasiq is an Indigenous researcher from Taiwan. She is finalizing her dissertation in political science that begins with re-searching, re-affirming and re-connecting to her Tayal identity. She navigates between dominant Westernized (Finnish), Asianized (Chinese) academic cultures and her awakening Indigenous identity, in search of a sense of belonging and truth.



Heidi's background is in design and sustainability; her passion for a sustainable life in the Arctic and work experience in Alaska shifted the focus from a sustainable design to enabling the diversity of local sustainabilities. In her PhD, she studies power relationships between global and local – both Indigenous and non-Indigenous – sustainabilities in seal hunting, crafts, and trade. On her personal decolonial journey, she explores a Finnish identity beyond (or before) coloniality and connects to her Karelian lineage by learning handicrafts at a Karelian elderly home. With our diverse locations in Indigenous studies, we endorse “self-in-relation” (Graveline 1998) and our situated stance in exploring ways of knowing at Gilbbesjávri and beyond.

Engaging with Gilbbesjávri

Our research draws from walking ethnography (cf. Ingold & Vergunst 2008) as a way to broaden our perspectives, in and around Gilbbesjávri. Walking ethnography relies on our corporeal and multi-sensorial practices to learn about the earth, the sky and the environment. We walked in and about the biological station, at the lake and sauna, on the trails to Sána and Malla. When we walked, it was like speaking with the surrounding beings. Our bodies had a resonance with unknown people and beings in the vicinity. We left not just footprints on the ground during the walk, but commenced an exploration of knowledge and relationships based on the interaction between our bodies and the surroundings. Walking ethnography brings us inspiration concerning new ways of knowing. However, we acknowledge that “walking” requires respect for other beings. To bridge our varying positionalities, our research has also drawn on the idea of ethical space (Ermine 2007), where we locate ourselves with respect, rapport and genuine understanding. However, sometimes it is not easy to move between knowledge systems and within disciplinary barriers, when there is no epistemological space to speak about multiple knowledges. We are contemplating different ways of knowing and we need a space to break away from our confined ways instilled in our disciplines and backgrounds. That is where ethical space comes in.

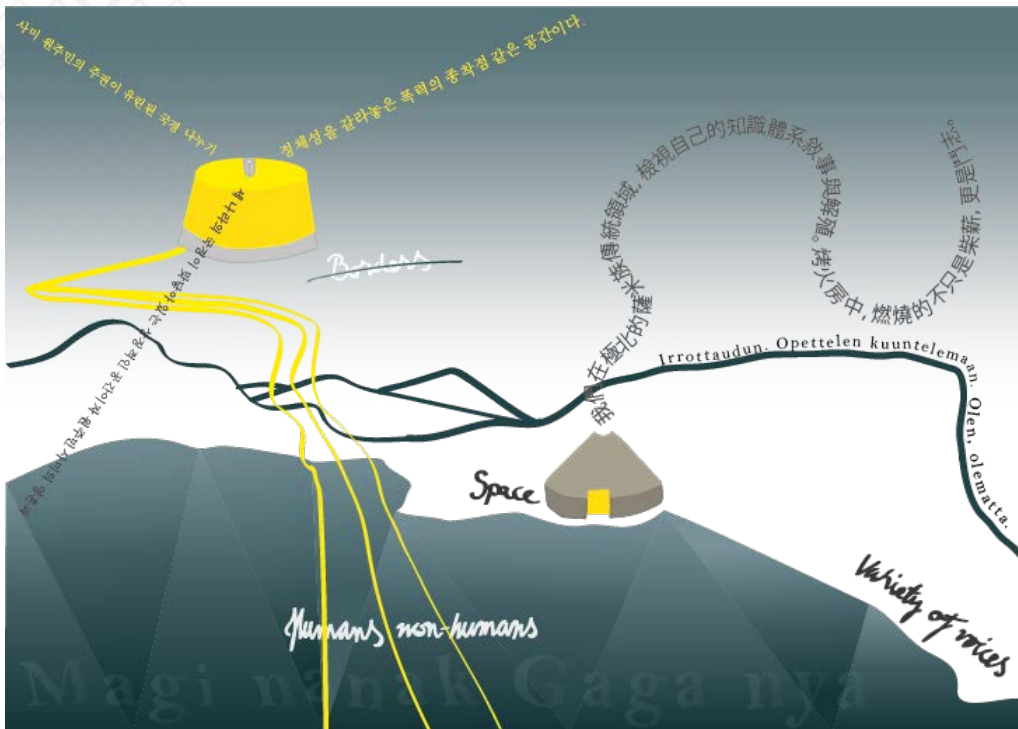


Figure 2. Collective experiences of the Indigenous Writing Retreat. With this visualization, we amplify how our layered languages, identities, and reflections are interwoven and consolidated during the Indigenous writing retreat. Walking with the sacred mountains, borders, waters and space, in and around Gilbbesjávri, made our encounter with Sápmi more profound and complete.

Multi-voiced narrations

We – the authors – knew each other before the Retreat in November 2020, but we never had an opportunity to collectively work together in order to produce any sort of interdisciplinary article. The journey to the Retreat was the first experience of our genuine exchange to grasp our difference, diverse knowledge, and passion within Indigenous research. It was also eye-opening for us to meet and talk to international Indigenous scholars and activists from all over the world in the historically meaningful space, Gilbbesjávri. Coming from varying disciplines – history, sociology, political science, design, geography, education, engineering, religion, cultural studies – our paths crossed around the warm fire in the goahti. Despite all geographical and political particularities among them, we learned the core and collective spirit of Indigenous empowerment. After the unforgettable Retreat, we thus decided to find a meaningful way to document our reflections at Gilbbesjávri.

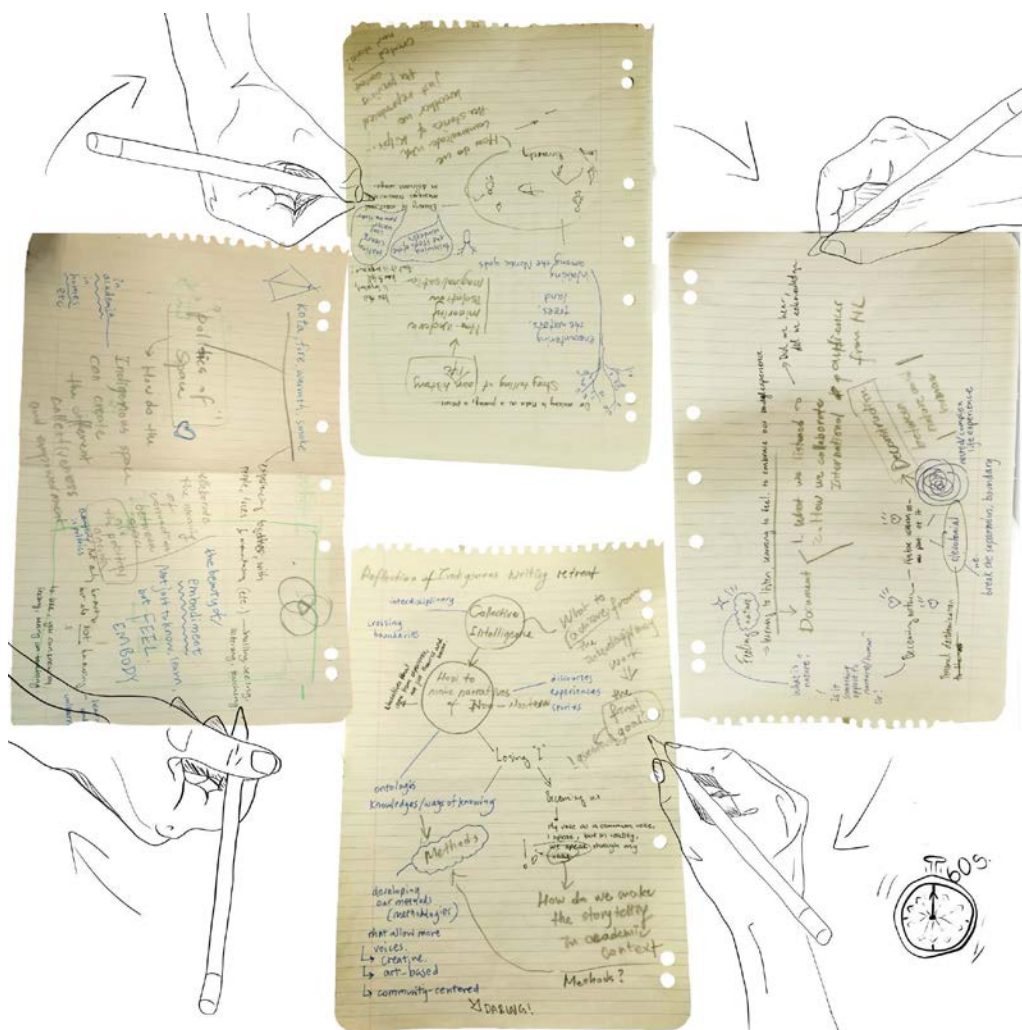


Figure 3. Participatory Workshop (© Heidi Konttinen).

We organized an informal workshop¹ in February 2020 – four and half months after the Retreat in Gilbbesjávri – to discuss our collective experiences about the Retreat and our plan for this co-authored article. Having this time between the retreat and planning was useful, because we were able to reflect upon how the writing retreat has affected us and our work. For brainstorming and creating co-understanding of our experiences, we chose to use a method that is often used in the beginning of the design process to create innovative ideas collectively. In this method, each participant has a paper and pen to write down or draw an idea or a thought about the writing retreat. The timer is set for 1 minute and within this time, at least one idea has to be added to the paper. After 1 minute, the paper is rotated to the next person and again,

¹ We would like to acknowledge Susana Ortega as one of the key contributors in the brainstorming during the informal workshop. Her thoughts and reflections were important in forming the key topics of this piece.

there is one minute to add a thought. The difference from the first round is that, this time, the thought can connect to the thought that was added to the paper in the previous round. The paper continues to be rotated until no new thoughts are added. We circulated the paper a total of eight rounds. At this point, the four papers were filled with collectively built story-threads. After writing down the thoughts, we started discussing them. Each one of us presented the paper on which we had written our first thought, and from there the others shared their thoughts written on the paper. These discussions resulted in four emerging topics, including borders, the *goahti*² and the importance of space, the human-nature relationship, as well as the variety of voices and ways to listen to them. Figure 1, *In the Goahti*, aims to capture the feelings that rose from the discussion. From this collective work, each of us wrote a reflective piece (see the stories below), with which we reconnect again in the conclusion.

This participatory design method we used, in the workshop, shares a similar foundation with Indigenous methods, where knowledge is produced collectively. Heidi was familiar with this participatory method through her design background and to make the method to suit our purposes, we reframed the goal from creating products/services to creating narratives. Successful use of the method requires a safe and noncritical (both towards one's own and the other's ideas) atmosphere to support the most diverse and genuine thoughts. For this reason, the participants are encouraged to forget all physical boundaries that could limit imagination. In design, this enables wild and innovative ideas to take shape, but, for decolonial purposes this potentially allows the participants to feel safe to connect with their experiences beyond conventional academic terms and knowledge-making practices. Another important part of this method is to discuss the results together and select the most important themes. This way, the participants are given a chance to express themselves in diverse ways – writing, drawing and speaking – which is inclusive of people with varying preferences in communication.

² *Goahti* refers to a traditional Sámi dwelling in the North Sámi language.

Hae Seong's Story: Borders Drawn over the Sovereignty of the Sámi

The first International Indigenous Writing Retreat was held at Gilbbesjávri where Finland, Sweden, and Norway's borders meet in a cairn. Throughout the journey, I thought about how colonialism results in historical discontinuities; in particular, I considered how the partitioning of three national borders has influenced and shaped Sámi people's everydayness and contemporary identities in Sápmi. Drawing on my participation in the writing retreat, I was personally devastated by family issues, which led me to step aside from participating in the academic discussions. However, while it would be a vast injustice to try and recount the beautiful journey and stories from the Indigenous scholars and activists in a page of reflection, I want to draw on some thoughts and impressions that arose from the borders' cairn in Gilbbesjávri/Kilpisjärvi. I do this in order to share and sharpen my constant questions related to Sámi sovereignty, questions, such as, What the national identity has meant to Sámi people and Why the multi-national colonialism of Sámi people has been too generously described in history, or not?

Last year, I was in Inari for three months for my postdoctoral research project called "Social identities of young Sámi people in Sápmi." From the interviewing and hearing many tearful and shocking stories, the memory of one interviewee's father, which she shared from her youth, was still on my mind. She said that her father moved from the Norwegian side to the Finnish side of Sápmi, but that she had never even heard one word of the North Sámi language from her father in her youth, except for the day that she and her father travelled together to the Norwegian side of Sápmi. On that day, her father had to speak a little Sámi; the Sámi people in Norway could not understand Finnish. After the trip home, she remembered that her father started fasting for the sin that he had spoken the "dirty language." Even though several decades have passed since her father endured the colonial education and religious practices, she witnessed that the impacts and trauma of the assimilation policy on the Sámi children has yet to be mitigated.


Partitioning the borders between the four nations, irrespective of any genuine consensus by the Sámi peoples, the major changes to their ways of knowing and living have been regarded as unilateral. In an addendum to the border Treaty in 1751, the so-called Lapp Codicil, the three states, Norway, Sweden, and Finland confirmed traditional Sámi rights to use lands on both

sides of the border in an effort to preserve “the Lappish nation” (Lantto 2010). During the 19th century, however, this Lapp Codicil had been denied, neglected, and abolished by the forces of nationalism. Furthermore, the borders eventually became barriers to cross-border activities, such as the cross-border use of traditional resources and the Sámi people’s cross-border movement, especially, with their reindeer herds, in the 20th century.

Ironically, in the 21st century, the symbolic place where the cairn marks the meeting point of the three nations’ borders near Gilbbesjávri has become a tourist attraction. Tourism hides the historical agony of the partitioning of Sápmi, the Sámi people’s land. While I was hiking along the physical border between Finland and Norway, I was thinking of the intense efforts to create barriers, to force disconnection, and to draw lines over Sámi people’s sovereign lands. Two centuries after the political revolutions that overthrew the absolutist monarchies of Europe, Michel Foucault has argued that in the field of political thought we have not yet cut off the king’s head (Rose & Miller 1992). The kingdoms that collected heavy taxes from the Sámi people have transformed their bodies into the 21st century’s modern nations. They disrupted the unified identity of the Sámi people, and now they celebrate the colonisation of Sápmi by drawing borders with a sword of injustice.

Wasiq’s Story: Re-searching Indigenous Voices

I heard about Saana (Sána in North Sámi), the sacred mountain in Sápmi, for the first time at the International Conference on Indigenous Peoples’ Rights to Cultural Heritage at the University of Helsinki in 2017 and I always confused it with the Finnish woman’s name Sanna. It was the year that the Finnish government planned to light national “recognizable landmarks” with blue and white lights to celebrate its centenary, and Saana was one of them. This was criticized by many, for Finland seemed negligent of its own colonial legacies (cf. Kuokkanen 2017). As an Indigenous researcher from Taiwan, who has lived in Finland for almost a decade, it was shocking to find that any substantial discussion about the Sámi has been hardly visible in the University of Helsinki, and in Finnish society as a whole. The awareness of and dialogue about Finland, as a colonial power, has been immensely significant. The dominant Finnish society remained oblivious to its colonial past and present. For example, in a Finnish language course for foreigners, I still remember the instructor insisted on using “lappalaiset” (lit. Lapland folks, it is an old term with negative connotations), not saamelaiset (the Sámi people).



Unfortunately, the idea of Nordic exceptionalism has dominated the narrative within Finnish society (Keskinen 2020). Saana, in the state's gaze, is no more than a pile of rocks that mark the boundary of national land.

The Indigenous Writing Retreat gave me a new opportunity to engage with the land, and with the knowledge and power that originated from the Sámi ancestors. Finland's view on Saana as a "recognizable landmark" seems too meagre, if we contrast it to the Indigenous perspective. It reminds me immediately of the Taiwanese government's view of *Papak Waqa*, the holy mountain of the Tayal people, as a destination for forest recreation for the busy city people. This view completely ignores what we, the Tayal, mean when we speak of land. For us, land is not just a landmark; rather, the land is an extension of ourselves. Many Tayal words for body parts have dual meanings for the environment. The term *hbun* means the centre part of the chest where it is sinking inward, it also means confluence; *kalaw* means human rib and mountain ridge; *l'ux* means shinbone, also mountain slope; *qolu* means throat and crossroad; *punga* means navel and stone caves in the mountain wall (Kuan 2013, 87-88). I am thankful to have had the opportunity, together with the seekers of partial truths from the writing retreat, to enter the space to revisit and rename what relationships we have with the environment around us, and how our lives, cultures and lands are entangled as an inseparable whole.


From the blazing hearth in the *gohti/kota* to the chilling water in Gilbbesjávri/Kilpisjärvi, I saw myself standing at the doorway of re-centring and re-searching what Indigenous approaches to social science means. Every evening I sat with people from the writing retreat around the fire and thought that our collective intellect seemed to transform each and every one of us in a small but profound way. Growing up in a village by the river, I particularly enjoyed the moment swimming in the lake. Swimming is preferable, but not necessary, after the sauna; it was great. The colours and textures of the lake are completely different, depending on whether you are watching it from afar or being within its embrace. When I was in the water, I felt connected. Time seemed to flow at a different pace, and I heard the rhythm of my heartbeat matching the breathing of the land. I realize that conceptualizing in Indigenous ways is not breaking away from social science. Instead, Indigenizing research is a way to connect science to what makes us human on a deeper level. As the Tayal say, the ancestral land and forests are the places where our lives begin. Indigenizing research is the means through which our renewed lives of re-searching begin.

Heidi's Story: A Walk with Sána

I climbed on Saana – a popular day hike destination for travellers in Northern Finland – for the first time in 2006, which was also my first visit to Lapland. I was twenty-years-old and had very little understanding about other onto-epistemologies than my own, which had been shaped in Kajaani, 64° North in Finland. Since then, I have passed by the mountain a few times, but it was not until the Indigenous Writing Retreat that I had an opportunity to reconstruct my relationship with Sána. This time, the national-romantic perspective of Finnish Lapland was replaced with awareness of my Finnishness in Sápmi. This decolonial journey that I entered was shared with and shaped by the Indigenous and non-Indigenous fellow participants, and also with nonhumans, such as Sána. For the most part, decolonisation was a process of learning to listen, detaching from the limits of western methodologies of knowledge production and worldmaking practices (Fry 2017, 10-11, 24-26), and seeking ways to connect with human and nonhuman beings beyond colonial relationships.

During the past few decades, the homogenous ontological foundation of knowledge production in academia has been increasingly criticized by decolonial scholars. Previously, *culture* has been mobilized for explaining the differences in the interpretations of a real world. However, the decolonial discourses argue that the assumption of a *real world* – that can be observed and objectified by humans – is already itself based on the western ontology which separates humans from nature and nonhuman beings. (Blaser 2013.) Elina Helander-Renvall – one of the preeminent Sámi scholars on Sámi animism – disrupts the modern divisions of nature and culture by shedding light on the ontology and animism, for the Sámi people. She explains that while humans and non-humans are divided into different categories, they form close, reciprocal relationships by sharing the same space. For Sámi, land, animals, and spirits are alive and have their own agencies and cohabiting the space requires negotiation between the actors and respect for the rules. Helander-Renvall connects Sámi ontology with Tim Ingold's (2000) theory of "ontology of dwelling," emphasizing a Sámi participatory approach to the world, instead of considering it as a separate entity. (Helander-Renvall 2010.) For Sámi, like the Māori, Sána is a living being.

As mentioned earlier, the content of the writing retreat extended beyond simply writing. For me – as an early career researcher – it formed a safe space to connect in decolonial discourses



on a personal level. Gathering in the *goahti* daily and learning about Māori, Tongan, Sámi and Tayal ways to perceive the surroundings around us and the experiences of Indigeneity in and outside of academia led me to questions about non-colonial Finnish identity and non-colonial relationships with non-humans. How could I “delink” (see Mignolo 2007) the hegemony of modernity – and through that coloniality – from my Finnishness and reconnect with humans and non-humans without universal ideas about my knowledge and being, and acknowledging my positionality as a person from Kainuu? My intention is not to be self-centric with these questions, but rather to explore the geopolitics of knowledge and the relationship between universalism and positionality on a personal level.

In one of our meetings, Mere Kepa described her morning discussion with Sána. I have learned to believe in the agency of all beings, but despite this step away from anthropocentrism, my knowledge does not explain to me how to listen to non-humans, only how to observe them (connected to the nature/culture discourse). Although Indigenous peoples are pioneers in this and I can be influenced by their knowledges I do not think that I – as an outsider – could reach the same level of understanding and become Sámi or Māori. Instead, I had to find my own way to listen, which is free from coloniality.³ I was anxious to learn to connect with Sána by other means than by conquering it. I read articles on the hillside, spent time, there, taking photographs, breathing, and looking at the view from Sána . I walked up and on mountains besides Sána. On one of the mornings, I sat by Gilbbesjávri to meditate. I crossed my legs, looked at the water and after a while I burst out laughing. In the middle of repeating the Kwan Um School of Zen mantra “What am I? Don’t know,” I realized that only concentrating on differences would not help me to connect. This ontological dilemma should be approached

³ Wasiq’s reflection: This reminded me of the poem contest of early Chinese zen Buddhism development. The master said that the best poem that reflects the essence of mind will be the Sixth Patriarch. Popular apprentice wrote, "The body is the bodhi tree. The mind is like a bright mirror's stand. At all times we must strive to polish it and must not let dust collect." The master was not happy with the poem but the popular apprentice couldn't come up with anything more. In the middle of the night, someone came up with this poem that is somewhat based on the previous poem, but challenges the essence of mind: "Bodhi originally has no tree. The mirror has no stand. The Buddha-nature is always clear and pure. Where is there room for dust?" That someone was Huineng (in Japanese Eno), who became the Sixth Patriarch.

with a not-knowing-mind⁴. Acknowledging positionality but listening (or perceiving) with a not-knowing-mind became my practice for the rest of the retreat.


After the writing retreat, the co-authors of this reflection and I went for a two-night hike to the mountains. Almost every time I turned back to see the view, I saw Sána. Seeing her – no matter what turns or climbs the trail took – created a feeling of safety, like sharing the journey with an old friend. The continuous presence of Sána in the landscape made me feel her importance – not as a mountain to conquer, but as a *being* that has a significant role in her surroundings. This narrative that emerged from sensing and a not-knowing-mind is not a universal observation of “nature,” or attached to colonial narratives of magical and untouched Finnish Lapland. It is a personal relationship between Sána and me, which is based on respect and awareness of non-human beings, Sámi and Sápmi. Detaching from the colonial narratives creates blank spaces in identity and knowledge. This journey was my endeavour to patch these blanks without appropriation and through unlearning and learning.

Reconnecting (conclusion)

Indigenous research is about privileging relationships in the whole process of research. In the Retreat and in this multi-voice narrations we explored self-in-relations and the relationships between ideas, worldviews, and boundaries. We reflected on our relationships with Indigenous peoples and their ancestral territories to define our positionalities and what Indigenous research means to us.

The Retreat was a place to get together to learn and reflect on what Indigenous research means to us. Hae Seong’s story reminds us that Indigenous research is not an extension of theories based on Western rationalism. It is radical. Hae Seong argues that colonial trauma has been very much alive among the Sámi and through the manifestation of the national borders. Thus, she argues that this violent, illogical, and vicious power in the form of colonialism should not continue ruling over Sápmi. In addition, Wasiq’s story informs us that Indigenous research is not external to us. Instead, it is embedded in our everyday practices. Wasiq reflects that

⁴ ‘Knowing by not-knowing’ was later discussed at Hanna Guttorm’s lecture 11.2.2020 at the University of Helsinki, which has potentially impacted the way I write about it here. See also the Sámi concept of *gulahallat*, a “body-heart-soul meeting the environment” (Guttorm, Kantonen, and Kramvig 2019, p. 159).



coloniality is very much still alive in Finland and suggests that the Writing Retreat provided an opportunity for self-reflection and collaboration, which are strategies for decolonization. Echoing that, Heidi's story explicates that Indigenous research is not one-size-fits-all. Instead, the process of doing Indigenous research is unique to our positionalities and entanglements with colonial discourses. Heidi further explores the relationships between humans and non-humans, using Sáana as an example, to articulate ways of reconciliation with land and detaching from the colonial narratives embedded in Finnish identities.

The “walking ethnography” together with the participatory methods (the Retreat, workshop) enabled us to connect with each other and the land in decolonial terms. The benefits of these were embedded in the multiple forms of communication, which supported the use of all senses during the whole process. For us, the “Indigenous Writing Retreat” is a method to reconfigure our relationships with Indigenous research. When thinking beyond ourselves and weaving our stories collaboratively, we come to appreciate that our lives are interwoven, and that one person's story is everyone's story, and that everyone's stories form a circular story of one united consciousness.

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