The Blackening of the Crow

(De-)storying Sustainability

When story
(and truth)
is shared

Rámavuol Liisa-Rávdná / Liisa-Rávná Finbog

If there is one truth spoken into life on the wind, it is this: when the *bijagat* (evil spirits) or *birot* (devils) are set upon a person, they will sometimes send a bird, or take the form of a bird, particularly a *garjá* (crow) in order to reach their victim.[1] At first, you perhaps see a movement in the corner of your eyes, a sinuous gradient of blacks and grays that flickers in and out of your line of sight. Next, you hear them in the scatterings of loud and repeated caws that eventually traverse into a continuous loop of hoarse coos, rattles, and clicks. When the garjját are upon you, this truth becomes impressed on all your senses.

Britta Marakatt Labba, *Kråkene/Garjját (The Crows),* 2021. Textile. Photo by Hans Olof Utsi. This work references the Alta demonstration, when Sámi protested the damming of the Alta River. Here, crows are shown as they transform into police arriving to remove the Sámi protesters.

In the oldest memories of my people, gradients of black and gray, which are the absence of light, were as yet unknown. Instead, we knew the presence of the garjját as golden birds that had been dreamed into the sacred spaces of white. In the story (and thus the memory) of gold

[1] Johan Turi, *Muitalus sámiid birra*, trans. Mikael Svonni, SÁMIacademica, no. 3 (Karasjok: ČálliidLágádus, 2010), 141.

and white, the garjját were great friends who had been invited to become kin. Carried by Bieggolmai, who presides over the gentle breeze of summer and tempest alike, the garjját were delivered at the feet of Uhksáhkká, she who guards the door (and all the borders of the worlds). Here they appeared, the garjját in their splendorous plume of gold and the softest white down. My ancestors shared space at the *árran*, the hearth, where Sáráhkká reigned as Queen, and together we learned to share in the bounty of the land, what we call the *láhji*. In this guise (of beautiful gold and sacred white), the garjját dispersed many wonders of creation and creativity. In those days, we were kin, and in honor of our kinship, we held to the protocols and ceremonies of the land.

From our elders we have learned another truth: greed will inevitably lead to ruin.
As time passed, some (but not all) garjját saw the bounty enjoyed by the Sámi people, and blinded by their greed, they no longer saw their own láhjiid from the land. And so, seduced by an unquenching thirst, they sought to possess the land and all that she provides. In this selfish haze, and unwilling to share, they even tried to steal the succulent meat that my ancestors were cooking on the árran. But in the grasp of their desire, the garjját flew too close to the fire. Sáráhkká, judging them to be oath-breakers, brought her flames high. In her flames, the gold and white were washed away, replaced by gradients of black. To this day, the garjját carry the soot from their failed trial by fire.

This is the story of the blackening as it has been told to me, and it remembers when the colors of the gárja shifted from white and gold to black and gray; when our kin broke their oath and turned on the collective covenant between all beings that live on Vaja, she who was and is Eana, the land we live on.

This story is a memory

(but what does it really mean?)

The first time I heard the story of how the crow got its distinct black and gray plumage, I was already a young adult. That is not to say that the crow was unknown. The elders of my communities keep many tales of the crow, teaching us to be mindful of the crow's ambiguity, and as a child I listened to all of these because stories are valued tools of learning. As I knew the crow (back then), it sometimes presented as a dangerous creature, a possible foe to fear. But the crow, my elders cautioned, may also be your greatest friend, a trusted companion on life's journey. The dichotomy that is evident in the sometimes contradictory stories is no

surprise. In a Sámi way of thinking, a story, the *muitalus,*[2] is a sibling to both memory, the *muitu*, and to the act of remembering, or to *muitit*. In other words, within a Sámi understanding of the world, stories remember what has been, what is, and sometimes even what is to come. If we remember the crow differently, then is this simply not proof of how multifaceted our memories may be? The evidence, perhaps, that the experiences that have shaped us as people and communities vary greatly in both time and place?

The story of the crow's blackening is, I believe, an important inference about kinship. Not simply because it is an etiological story, explaining the reason behind the crow's coloring. Rather, the value of the story expands from the fact that as a narrative, it engages with a deep philosophical understanding that has, since time immemorial, collectively enacted a world in which sustainability—as a concept—did not exist. In pre-colonial Sápmi, which is how we name the land that the Creator imagined into being, sustainability did not exist as a concept because capitalism (the great scourge) was yet unknown and unnamed.[3] After all, colonization is the bosom friend of capitalism, which is the liege that sustainability has sworn to serve.[4] In the following, I will use the crow's blackening as an allegory to discuss the (un)holy trinity that is colonization, capitalism, and sustainability, but from a perspective born of a Sámi way of life. In this endeavor,

I begin with kinship.

Although it is not explicitly stated as such, the narration of the crow's blackening reveals that Sámi society, at its core, expresses itself in multiple mutual relationships. Over time, these shared connections of existence and care have been articulated as a system of kinship that honors everyone and everything as beings of intent; whether land, water, people, animals, or other-than-human beings, we all possess a subjective will.[5] From here, the landed—or

---

[2] A note on language: in this text I employ both the South Sámi language (which is my Native tongue by way of my mother's clan) and the North Sámi language that I have inherited from my father's clan. On the whole, the terms and expressions that I have employed are cited in the latter language, but whenever I employ South Sámi terms, I make explicit mention of this in the text itself.

[3] I recognize this statement for what it is: a generalization. There are archaeological sources that point to the development of a stratified structure in Sámi communities as early as the 8th century (see, for example, Inger Storli, "'Stallo'-boplassene: spor etter de første fjellsamer?" Instituttet for sammenlignende kulturforskning (Oslo: Novus forl. Instituttet for sammenlignende kulturforskning, 1994)). These communities were situated in close proximity to the Norse settlements, and by said proximity, were actively engaging in trade abroad.

[4] Solen Roth, "Can Capitalism Be Decolonized? Recentering Indigenous Peoples, Values, and Ways of Life in the Canadian Art Market," *American Indian Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (2019): 306–38, here: 307, https://doi.org/10.1353/aiq.2019.a729678.

[5] Solveig Joks, Liv Østmo, and John Law, "Verbing 'Meahcci': Living Sámi Lands," *The Sociological Review* 68, no. 2 (2020): 305–21, here: 308, https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026120905473. Mikkel Sara, "Land Usage and Siida Autonomy," *Arctic Review* 2, no. 2 (2011): 148, https://arcticreview.no/index.php/arctic/article/view/25.

grounded[6]—“normative” of Sámi perception understands that humanity is but one of many, neither central to existence nor obsolete from it. In the language and cultural (as well as aesthetic) practices of my *tjidtjie*’s (mother’s) clan, this is an understanding that materializes as the *guelmiedahke*,[7] which is an expression that articulates the need for there to be “reciprocity in all our relations.”[8] As a concept, the guelmiedahke thus calls for a duty of care, and extending from this duty, also initiates what we might understand as a relational accountability. In the words of the Opaskwayak Cree scholar Shawn Wilson, this means that you must be accountable “to all your relations” in order to fulfill “your relationships with the world around you.”[9] We care about what surrounds us, that which is *biras*, because we are cared for in return.

When care is understood and implemented in this manner, it gives rise to a collectivity of thought, reason, and living that acknowledges a universal truth: every choice we make for ourselves, we also make for all our relations. As a fundamental ethic in Sámi culture, the guelmiedahke thus generates a good way of life, and it is this life that has given rise to what we understand as *bearkadidh*. This word is an articulation of practice and philosophy, reflecting that if you want to have a good life and to be a valued member of society, you must have balance in all things—in your personal life with regard to your interpersonal relationships, but also with the land and waters, other-than-human beings, and the spirits.[10] This word, and its Northern Sámi counterpart, which is *birget*, defines what in a Sámi way of life is sovereignty.[11] The maintenance of this good life rests on the understanding that in the lack of excess, there is also a lack of scarcity.[12] The ethic of the guelmiedahke and the way of

[6] See Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition,* Indigenous Americas (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).
[7] Liisa-Rávná Finbog, “Seeing the Unseen,” in *Čatnosat: The Sámi Pavilion; Indigenous Art, Knowledge and Sovereignty*, ed. Liisa-Rávná Finbog, Katya García-Antón, and Beaska Niillas (Oslo/Amsterdam: Office for Contemporary Art Norway (OCA)/Valiz, 2022), 25–37.
[8] Maja Dunfjeld, *Tjaalehtjimmie: Form Og Innhold i Sørsamisk Ornamentikk* (Snåsa: Saemien, 2006), 90. Jorunn L. Jernsletten, “Bissie Dajve: Relasjoner Mellom Folk Og Landskap i Voengel-Njaarke Sïjte” (Tromsø: Universitetet i Tromsø, 2010), 168.
[9] Shawn Wilson, “What Is Indigenous Research Methodology?” *Canadian Journal of Native Education* 25, no. 2 (2001): 175, here: 177.
[10] Jelena Porsanger, “Indigenous Sámi Religion: General Considerations about Relationship,” in *The Diversity of Sacred Lands in Europe: Proceedings of the Third Workshop of the Delos Initiative: Inari/Aanaar, Finland, 1–3 July 2010* (Gland, 2012), 32.
[11] Ragnhild Nilsson, *Att bearkadidh: Om samiskt självbestämmande och samisk självkonstituering* (Stockholm: Statsvetenskapliga institutionen, Stockholms universitet, 2021), 156.
[12] Gunvor Guttorm, “Árbediehtu (Sami Traditional Knowledge) – as a Concept and in Practice,” *Working with Traditional Knowledge*, edited by Jelena Porsanger and Gunvor Guttorm (Guovdageaidnu: Sámi University of Applied Sciences, 2011), [59]–76.

bearkadidh (which has been inspired by our ethics) reject the capitalistic values of an imperial (or colonial) society, and in so doing, make the concept of sustainability redundant.

Because sustainability is also a story

The crow's blackening may be viewed as an allegory of transition. In its plumage of white and gold, the crow is an aspect of a world governed by kinship maintained by care and reciprocity. When the crow enacts its visual metamorphosis into black and gray, however, it expresses new and corrupt values that support the consumption that is enacted through capitalist imposition. And because land is both the means as well as the profit of production, colonization becomes intrinsically linked with capitalism. Typically, the premise of colonization is to divest the land from those who already inhabit the space by invoking what the Indigenous scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson defines as the white possessive,[13] a term that draws heavily on Cheryl Harris's work, which highlights how property, through settler colonization (and slavery), has been racialized. "Possession—the act necessary to lay the basis for rights in property—was defined to include only the cultural practices of whites."[14] It is from this context that the idea of sustainability is cultivated.

The story of sustainability is understood as the ability of something to be maintained at an even rate or level over a long period of time. Regardless of the specifics—whether it is a question of economy, climate and biodiversity, or social and cultural issues—the general assumption is that sustainability ensures that products, energy, or processes develop in a manner that is both continuous and ethically renewable. This conceptualization was first developed in the 18th century, when the Saxon accountant Hans Carl von Carlowitz penned a treatise on forestry.[15] In it he discussed his worries about the forested regions of Saxony that were slowly disappearing due to the mining industry and suggested forestry practices that would ensure both long-term and renewable use of the natural resources. He referred to such practices as *Nachhaltigkeit*, or sustainability.[16] This notion of sustainability coincides with the

[13] Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816692149.001.0001.
[14] Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1707–91, here: 1721, https://doi.org/10.2307/1341787. Within Scandinavia, the white possessive materialized in the fact that Sámi people from the mid-1800s were prohibited from buying land, a restriction that lasted well into the latter part of the 20th century; see Tor Falch, *Bruk Av Land Og Vann i Finnmark i Historisk Perspektiv: Bakgrunnsmateriale for Samerettsutvalget*, vol. NOU 1994:21, Norges Offentlige Utredninger (Oslo: Statens forvaltningstjeneste, Seksjon statens trykning, 1994), 95.
[15] Hans Carl von Carlowitz, *Sylvicultura Oeconomica, oder Haußwirthliche Nachricht und Naturmäßige Anweisung zur Wilden Baum-Zucht* (Leipzig, 1713).
[16] Still, the conservation of resources is an old idea that we see prior to the conceptualization of sustainability.

(Western) birth of what was later named capitalism, an economic system that bases itself on the private ownership and appropriation of both the means as well as the profit of production[17]—often to the benefit of the very few on account of the many. Within this context, and as defined by von Carlowitz, sustainability is what ensures the viable replenishing of the resources necessary to uphold said system. More to the point, sustainability is only necessary because it tempers the unquenchable thirst for profit that is characteristic of capitalism. Conversely, capitalism is only maintained by the infusion of sustainability.

(De-)storying sustainability

The formation of sustainability, as articulated by von Carlowitz and implemented through capitalism, is today considered the norm, maintaining the needs and interests of the capitalistic society of the West, which is inherently a colonial existence.[18] A good example of this is when the United Nations, in response to the global concern over increasing pollution from an ever-expanding industrial society in the 1980s, commissioned a report titled "Our Common Future." In it, sustainability became a core tenet, defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."[19] Sustainability was to be embedded at all levels of human existence, weaving together the fabric of society. However, in the context of the report, the necessity for initiating sustainability was not so much a solution to the increasing pollution so much as a necessary amendment to ensure that the quality of life to which we had all become accustomed in the West could be maintained. Multiple critics from non-Western and Indigenous nations were quick to point out that the report, as such, should be viewed as a Western strategy to influence non-Western countries and nations, stressing that although the report presented a genuine wish to ensure viable industrial development, it also maintained the colonial structures established with the imperial and thus colonial practices of Europe.[20]

[17] Liah Greenfeld, *Spirit of Capitalism: Nationalism and Economic Growth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 12. I want to stress that capitalism, as coined by Karl Marx, uses the industrial development of Western nations as the foundation for reflection and as such the term itself is very much contextual, bound up in specific times and spaces, even if it has been implemented elsewhere through Western imperialism.

[18] Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409, https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240.

[19] World Commission on Environment and Development, ed., *Our Common Future* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 54.

[20] Helge Ole Bergesen, "Reformism Doomed to Failure? A Critical Look at the Strategy Promoted by the Brundtland Commission," *International Challenges* (Lysaker, Norway) 8, no. 2 (1988): 6.

Said critique—for some, at least—might be difficult to grasp. But the manner of difficulty depends, as it so often does, on the eye of the beholder.[21]

If we look to most Indigenous societies, and certainly one that is Sámi, the ontologies that shape our epistemologies, values, and morals are very different from a Western understanding. While the former celebrate community and collectivity, the latter idealizes the individual—how else would systems that help the few on account of the many be allowed? To put it bluntly, Indigenous ways of being (what we might term ontology, the realities we live in), of knowing (what we might term epistemology, how we produce and maintain knowledge), and of doing (or axiology, which are the values and meanings guiding our way of living) have always been sustainable, and so the need to conceptualize sustainability was not present in our communities and societies prior to colonization. With the onset of colonization, however, Indigenous ways of life were violently put aside. As such, whenever the term and concept of sustainability is impressed upon Indigenous societies from a Western place of understanding, it is also a reinforcement of capitalistic values promoted in the West—which are also the values that supported and governed the colonization of our homelands.

Once, we shared the hearth, our *árran*, with the *ga*rjj*á*t. They were friends then. When the colonizers first came to the land of my ancestors—before we knew them as colonizers—they were friends as well, welcomed at the hearth. Many gifts were given because in a world governed by kinship, the practice of gift-giving is how you acknowledge strangers as kin. This is a "logic of the gift that applies not only to human relations but to the entire kinship with the world."[22] Having no understanding of the precious offering given, the colonizers believed the gifts to be tribute.[23] In their greed, they saw what the Sámi had, and they devoured. Was it the colonizers, then, whom we now name *stálut*, who taught the *garjját* to break their oath? Or did the garjját precede the colonizers? No one really knows. To me, however, the movement from gold and white into grey and black is also a narrative of colonization. And today, the greed that followed said transformation is destroying the land.

[21] See, for example, Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2007).

[22] Rauna Kuokkanen, "What Is Hospitality in the Academy? Epistemic Ignorance and the (Im)Possible Gift," *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 30, no. 1 (2008): 60–82, here: 66, https://doi.org/10.1080/10714410701821297.

[23] Lars Ivar Hansen, "Norwegian, Swedish and Russian 'Tax Lands' in the North." *Taxes, Tributes and Tributary Lands in the Making of Scandinavian Kingdoms in the Middle Ages*, ed. Steinar Imsen (2011), 295–330, here: 296.

Now we hold another truth

If we understand capitalism as a system, then sustainability is one of the components that keeps it going—the grease in the machinery, so to speak. But here is the conundrum: the machinery that we call capitalism is not meant to last eternally. On the contrary, the very essence of capitalism is consumption, and by virtue of sustainability, this consumption is prolonged. Even when incorporating sustainable practices, the core values of capitalism remain the same, and it is these values that in many ways have left our world on the brink of collapse. In the face of decreased biodiversity—the exception according to the 2019 UN report on biodiversity being lands under Indigenous guardianship[24]—and the increasingly palpable pressures of climate change and efforts to re-theorize or, better yet, decolonize the capitalistic market and its attendant systems are progressively being instituted. Practically speaking, this process often consists of various engagements with the ecological knowledge of Indigenous peoples and communities, often through the lens of sustainability, seemingly asserting values of equity and climate justice.

Adapting our knowledge, however, is not climate justice. It is what Indigenous scholars Marie Battiste and James (Sákéj) Youngblood Henderson refer to as a "cognitive imperialism," which is the colonial extracting of our minds and of our knowledge.[25] Indigenous knowledge takes part in sophisticated systems, or epistemologies, that have been developed in very localized spaces and over enormous lengths of time. The reality of human existence, as perceived within the spatial locations of collective existence together with land, waters, beings-that-do-not-speak-and-do-not-breathe, and spirits, has in time produced specific frameworks for everyday life and practice (which I have tried to make evident by discussing the philosophies and ethics of my own people). These frameworks, in turn, ensure an equitable way of living that focuses on balance and a decentering of humanity. From within the structures of our current mainstream society (which in large part has been founded on capitalistic principles and ideas) this knowledge is deemed "sustainable," and so, in the spirit of sustainability, this knowledge is extracted and forced to fit within a very different worldview in which humanity always comes first. The fact of the matter is that when

[24] IPBES, "Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services" (Zenodo, 2019), https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.6417333.

[25] Marie Battiste and James (Sákéj) Youngblood Henderson, *Protecting Indigenous Knowledge and Heritage: A Global Challenge* (Saskatoon: Purich, 2000), 12–13.

Indigenous knowledge is co-opted in the name of sustainability, it is severed from the systems that produced it, only to be re-imagined and re-named, often as “sustainable” practices. The epistemology, in other words, is dispossessed and alienated from the ontology it is beholden to.

The stálut are still the stálut. And the garjját remain black and gray. Greed is what they know and practice—but today they disguise it with the concept of sustainability.