

Article

Fish, Fetishization, and Faith in the Arctic Ocean

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Abstract: The ocean is a site of energy, space, movement, depth, and extraction. The biblical creation account begins there, with the energy of movement of the Spirit over the Deep. The exploitation of the ocean can be read as a desecration of the Deep, of divine presence and creativity, where beings of the deep roam. Many of these beings are beyond human knowledge, known only to the Creator. Many disturbances of the ocean floor and ocean dwellers have already occurred; penetrating even deeper into the ocean is a form of sacrilege. Extractive politics in the Arctic Ocean and in Northern Sápmi continue following decades of overfishing, poaching, and repression of indigenous coastal traditions. The Sámi tradition and ecological theologies offer a different way of looking at coastal and ocean regions. As tools to counter the calls for endless extraction, we offer narratives that highlight the importance of the coastal Sámi oral tradition and a decolonial ecotheology of a protective apophasis of the Deep. Countering extraction involves rejecting a hermeneutics of commodity fetish that distorts the ocean and those that live and travel within it by framing them as endlessly extractable. This article seeks to resist the extraction of oceanic waters and remind us of ways to respect ocean-dwelling species, the ocean, and ourselves in a time where we are facing the sixth great extinction.

Keywords: extraction; Sámi traditions; fetish; theology of the deep; apophatic theology



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1. Introduction

As the Spirit of God hovered over the face of the Deep, the abyss became home to many creatures. Over time and space, ocean life developed and much of it is still mysterious and unknown to humans. The ocean is a site of energy, space, movement, depth, and extraction. Although many of the webs of relationships in the ocean remain unknown to humans, some seek to control its beings by fixating them as a resource for our survival and wellbeing. Respecting the limits of human knowledge, or the greatness of God, does not come easily. We write as two theologians whose work locates us in Norway. One is a constructive theologian working in Oslo, the other a theologian based in Kautokeino and Tromsø. Lovisa Mienna Sjöberg is part of the Sámi research community (and society) and fluent in the Northern Sámi language. She has worked in the field of Sámi theology, specializing in constructive theology engaging Sámi oral traditions. Marion Grau has published widely in the fields of postcolonial and ecological theology, and has in recent years focused on petroculture, extractivism, and the religious aspects of oil in contemporary Norway.

Together, we argue that continued plans for extraction from our oceans involves an irrational belief in “technoscientific salvation stories” (Haraway 1997, p. 8). Extraction fantasies continue the mindset of extraction in deep ocean waters during a crisis of biodiversity and when our oceans are in a critical, dangerously warming, condition.

We offer resources from constructive theology and the Sámi oral tradition that resist the commodity fetishism characterizing colonial resource extraction. An apophatic theology of the Deep engaging Catherine Keller’s apophatic remembering of the creative ocean abyss and A. P. Gumbs’ narratives of human relationships to fish and ocean mammals offer us a way of relating to the different species and the ocean itself in a time in which we are at the edge of extinction. Fetishization in this case refers to seeing other beings in creation

as resources. Traditional management of the coastal areas in Sápmi, on the other hand, is grounded in collaboration and reciprocity, not only between humans but also in relation to creation. The ethics embedded in these stories seeks to remind us of the necessity of sustainable relations between humans and other members of God's creation. Sámi oral traditions offer a non-extractive way of looking at coastal and ocean regions.

We argue that Norwegian actors' extractive fixation employs nostalgic heritagization, labor nostalgia, and techno-optimism associated with ocean and marine technologies to promote new forms of colonial extraction. Practices of commodification and fetishization build on a history of colonial encounters between white traders and African peoples that became a pattern for relating to brown and indigenous peoples, as well as other species.

2. Fetishizing Extraction

The concept of the fetish has a troubled history and arises as part of colonial representations of "the other". The genesis of the term fetish is discussed in William Pietz's classical essays *The Problem of the Fetish* (Pietz 2022). Pietz describes how Portuguese colonial merchants attempt to engage in exchange relations with the local population but are stumped by differing value systems. The term fetish became a tool to mark Africans as religiously deviant and materially confused. We draw upon Pietz to argue that one way of framing the discourse on the fetish is based on an intercultural misinterpretation of West-African indigenous culture and its forms of representation and value, especially as affected by the colonial encounter. We, like Pietz, see it as a "critical discourse about false values of a culture from which the speaker is distant" (Pietz 2022, p. 16).

The African American cultural historian Charles H. Long follows Pietz, observing that through the process of fetishization, an extractive logic is put in place, which becomes part of a strategy to deny African bodies freedom and access to the emerging colonial capitalist trade (Carter 2023, p. 70). Colonial representatives often suspect black bodies of having questionable or ambiguous religious and material practices, and thus narratives of the category of the fetish emerge. They mark both ignorance and the arrogance of power. The term fetish was appropriated, in its already problematic form, by various modernist thinkers, especially Karl Marx, who made the concept central to his critique of capitalism (Pietz 2022).

In *The Anarchy of Religion: A Mystic Song* (2023), J. Kameron Carter follows Pietz and Long in arguing that the fetish signifies the "racial capitalist invention of religion" (p. 69) that was part of the epistemological structure of the legitimate colonial extraction of land and bodies. "Fetish religion" thus is equalized with "black religion", and thus marked as deviant in the framework of colonial whiteness (Carter 2023, p. 13). This initiates black religion's ambivalent relationship to the modern term religion, which has been a function of "racial capitalist individuation" (Carter 2023, pp. 8–9).

While Carter argues fetishization is a process of othering that is specifically tied to black religion, J. Lorand Matory in *The Fetish Revisited* (Matory 2018) argues that the pattern of reading can also be found in other intercultural encounters. We agree with Matory that colonial viewers projected their own extractive view of materiality and value onto their African interlocutors in order to facilitate their own extraction practices, and further that this is not a pattern unique to the particular encounters Pietz discusses, but a common pattern in colonizer-colonized encounters. It is these colonial practices of commodification and extraction that we seek to elucidate and contest. We find that the pattern of willful misreading and misrepresentation found in the historic production of the fetish resembles dynamics in the colonial extraction, the fetishization of land, people, and oceans.

Further, we argue that extraction is a form of fetishism that is used to shift the view of other humans and other species in such a way that they become extractible. Boetzkes and Diamanti's article on geofetishism seems to support our reading (Boetzkes and Diamanti 2023). They apply the term "geofetishism" to the dynamics of an "inhuman resource fantasy" (p. 10) related to the "mysterious appearance of the commodity" of metals like uranium in Greenland, where extraction of rare metals is sought. Geofetishism, they write,

“is an originary gaze”, a “schematic way of seeing and representing that is strategically cast by mining firms to redeploy a longstanding colonial imaginary in achieving its economic ends” (p. 11). This is a form of “extractive violence” (p. 12) seen in many contexts. This fetishizing logic has been employed to open Greenland up for extraction, as it “produces an environment that rationalizes open-pit mining” (p. 20). Thus, “[g]eofetishism does not merely conceal a colonial resource history, then; it is a retrospection of that history positioned with a view to claiming an imminent future” (p. 14).

2.1. *Resisting the Extraction of the Deep*

Fetishization is a technique of extraction, an “organized colonial fantasy production” (Gómez-Barris 2017, p. 46) turning human bodies, land, and ocean dwellers, including elements, into commodities for capitalist exploitation. In arguing for the preservation of the depths of the ocean from desecration, we seek to articulate a theological refusal to participate in the nationalist, racial capitalist extraction practices pronouncing a “Blue Frontier” (Han 2019) that extractive industries seek to exploit. Sámi and postcolonial Christian theological fragments help reveal the hermeneutic practices implied in the geo-fetishization and ocean-fetishization of extractive systems that are used to turn both humans and ocean dwellers into commodities.

Catherine Keller’s theological reflection on the first line of the Genesis creation narrative in *Face of the Deep* suggests respect for the *tehom*, the deep, turbulent waters of the ocean. The Deep is the unknown, “an icon of irreducible mystery” that is best captured by an “apophatic epistemology of unknowing” (Keller 2003, p. 201). The dark depths of the ocean are a metaphor for that “which exceeds our knowledge: the divine itself” (p. 201). An apophatic ecotheology of the divine deep, the ocean and the creative power that brought it forth gives us a different way to conceive of the ocean. The womb from which life emerged is in grave danger. Its inhabitants face constant disturbance and extraction. Furthermore, in these troubling times, we seek to commit to “staying with the trouble”, imagining new futures collectively (Haraway 2016, p. 25). Yet some ocean dwellers manage to evade and remain unconquered and close to undetected. It is here that Alexis P. Gumbs’ reflections in *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals* (Gumbs 2020) offer whimsical and resistant engagements with marine animals, urging us to let them remain undetected and hidden if they so choose.

2.2. *Sápmi—A Brief Introduction*

The Sámi regions stretch over four countries – Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia in the Arctic North. The Norwegian part of Sápmi has a long coastal line and in previous times the coastal Sámi people were known for their boat building and trading. During the 20th century, assimilation politics went hand in hand with industrialization and extractive politics, while much of the traditional knowledge and relative wealth withered away in coastal Sámi areas (Evjen et al. 2021).

The history of Christian faith in Sápmi centers around power relations between majority and minority but also power games between different sovereign states related to their respective borders. Christian faith was brought to Sápmi by way of missionaries, first by the Catholic church in the western parts of Sápmi and the Russian Orthodox church in the east.

After the Reformation, the Nordic Lutheran churches became part of the respective nation states. In this position, they became a useful colonial tool to claim Sámi land in what was then considered wastelands with unclear national borders. From the 17th century onward, building churches to claim land for the state and mark national borders went hand in hand with the arrival of Protestant Churches. Christian beliefs as such were brought into Sámi society both by force and choice. The national borders have been the site of many conflicts and tensions in the past, and still create conflicts today.

Today, the Christian faith is the largest religious affiliation in Sápmi, while religious patterns follow the surrounding regions in terms of the variety of congregations, secular-

ization, and other forms of religious practices (Sjöberg 2020). Many traditional practices and stories are interwoven with Christian practices, especially as they are practiced in everyday life. Truth and reconciliation processes are ongoing in various Nordic countries, except for Russia. These are formal and conducted on a state level. The Swedish report, however, is only a truth commission, leaving the work on reconciliation for an unspecified future. The Swedish Church is working through its own independent process, focusing on reconciliation (Guðmarsdóttir et al. 2021).

The truth and reconciliation processes tend to be undermined by the continuation of extractive politics in Sápmi, even while they are presented as sustainable and part of a “green transition”. Often these forms of extraction represent forms of green colonialism: Governments and industrial actors make claims to the sustainability of the extraction they propose. In recent times, the argumentation for claiming Sámi traditional land has been green washed. Arguments about minerals for energy transmission from fossil fuels to electricity have been used to obtain permission to mine. Another new argument has to do with building windmill parks on traditional Sámi land and reindeer pastures (Fjellheim 2023). The dominant society’s claims to being committed to truth and reconciliation processes are thus constantly undermined by ongoing extraction practices, the pollution that will arise from them, and the way in which permitting processes function.

It is relevant to this discussion to mention that blessing and creation are the same concept in the Northern Sámi language. The use of the word creation in place of nature in Sápmi is well established. The word *nature*—*luondu* in Sámi traditionally only refers to the character of a species or an individual, (e.g., the nature of the dog). The distinction between nature and culture does not exist in the Sámi languages. This means that the word creation is more suitable for translating nature/culture between Sámi and Northern European languages and the realities to which they point (See ex. Oskal 2000; Sjöberg 2018).

2.3. Multispecies Seasonal Migration in Sápmi

In indigenous societies, like Sámi society, the thought and knowledge about co-existing through a collaboration with different species is hardly new. Over the last few decades, these thoughts have received increasing prominence in Western traditions too, especially as the threat to our common existence becomes increasingly visible. In *Multispecies Studies*, van Dooren et al. draw attention to the latest movements in these discourses. By “transforming noticing into attentiveness—into the cultivation of skills for both paying attention to others and meaningfully responding” (van Dooren et al. 2016, p. 6) we can move both forward and backward, depending on our starting point.

One of the species deeply connected with the Arctic Ocean is the Arctic char. The Arctic char is an ancient species and has inhabited Arctic areas since right after the Ice Age (Olsen 2019). The Arctic char is an anadrome species (moving between fresh and salt water) known to thrive exclusively in cold waters. Thus, the fish is extremely vulnerable to shifts in water temperatures. From a biological point of view, it is the same fish as char, but instead of living all of its life in fresh water, it migrates back and forth from river to sea. In the Northern Sámi language and understanding, *valas* (Arctic char) and *ravdu* (char) are two different species. *Valas* is rare in northern Norway. Even though it has been around for longer than the *ravdu*, it is still a mysterious creature with a seemingly erratic behavior and hard to catch. The *valas* and other anadromes and travelers of the sea are affected by activities like deep sea mining, though we may not yet know how.

Anadromes and other migrating species travel across large swaths of water, ranging across great distances and returning periodically to coastal water. As a mirror of the people living on the land, migrating with their animals, anadromes are familiar with different types of landscapes and seasons adapting to a life within shifting surroundings. These fish migrations are a way of living in the world that recognizes the importance of the various spots and locations in the wide and deep ocean. So far, some of the anadromes are escaping extraction.

3. The Economization of the Ocean and the Fetishization of the Deep

The extractive politics in northern Norway and the Arctic are an ongoing issue, while the United Nations has proclaimed a red alert for climate change, and, as a consequence, the end of human society as we know it. Having pushed aquaculture to a point at which Norwegian salmon and cod 'production' are being questioned by local populations throughout the world, the extractionist approach to marine life in the Norwegian context appears systematic. These narrative and physical practices transfer the fetish of extractive technology from fishing and whaling first to oil extraction, and now to deep sea mining.¹ Few governmental restrictions are attached to these forms of extraction. At the same time, the self-understanding of Norway as a seafaring nation and the cultural and identity formations of coastal life and fishing nation are primarily used to legitimate extraction without meaningful restrictions.

Untried and non-scalable techno-mirages such as carbon capture and storage in depleted oil and gas fields, and the electrification of oil platforms are narratives that come from the forge of oil mythology that seeks to enable the fetishization of extractive energy systems, whether they are hydropower, cold water oil and gas extraction, or deep sea mining in fjords, along with the damaging marine technology of salmon farming. The Vikings traveled across the ocean to extract silver, slaves, and other forms of wealth from other coasts.

Overfishing and aquaculture are other forms of extractivism: not only are natural fish stocks down, but they are also no longer the fish they were—"many of the great cod stocks of the world have been overfished to the point of being near extinction, but the cod family is also being added to, through efforts to breed and farm the Atlantic cod. Hatched in the laboratory, bred in onshore tanks, and in net pens in the sea, these domesticated cod are the result of about seventy years of scientific experimentation and research" (Asdal and Huse 2023). The extraction not only affects the cod caught but has invaded the entire life cycle of the fish. Cod and salmon stocks have been denied the ability to drift and be caught up by waves and currents; their gene pool has been manipulated, and their physical makeup changed. Asdal and Huse call this part of "the great economization of the ocean", where "the very status of nature" is transformed (Asdal and Huse 2023, p. 2). The coastal waters of Norway were partitioned into "exclusive economic zones" and the division of the Norwegian seabed into blocks for petroleum drilling, and cod went from being a 'wild species' to being a "species of biocapital" (pp. 3–4). Thus, "the ocean in its various formations, depths, surfaces and environments is part of the 'nature' being modified, along with the cod" (p. 7).

Today, the social license to operate is mostly granted by the quasi-spiritual power of economic gains to be had, which serves to legitimate the use of politics and administration for the destruction of ocean life itself, for "alongside the domestication of ocean beings, we find also the ocean is sought to be transformed. It is being sculpted into becoming more like a farmland, a place to be cultivated and set up for production" (Asdal and Huse 2023, p. 12). For even though "there are no cod that are truly wild, nor is the ocean a place of pure wilderness", even if the ocean is a place where "'promiscuous' topolog[ies] of wildlife" (p. 231) take place, where is there room for respect and for the sacredness of these fish, apart from them being a cost and a gain on a spreadsheet?

The cold arctic waters, in our case in the northern Norwegian sea, thrive with species now threatened by rising sea temperatures and the interventions of humankind in oceanic regions, wide and deep. One of the oldest species traveling the deep sea as well as the fjord, rivers, and lakes of Sámi shoreline is the *valas*. Surrounded by mystery, it sometimes makes itself visible to us, sometimes not. Sometimes we are able to catch it, and it is known to be one of the most delicious-tasting fishes, a popular catch among both anglers and traditional fishermen. Social anthropologist Olsen (2019) explains that the stories about *valas* in northern Norway, based on material from a range of Sámi and Norwegian informants in rural areas, differ from stories about other species of fish. The experiences shared are not about the hunting/fishing in itself—the fishing techniques are the methods

employed with similar species—but the stories about *valas* are stories about the mysterious fish in itself. The stories revolve around how and where the *valas* appears, and why; as such, it represents in many ways the not known or unknown. We do not know much about the relational nets and mutual dependencies between different species in the deep sea and how, in different relational patterns, they are connected to the coast. So far, it seems to be able to escape detection, and therefore human control.

4. Against the Fetishization of Marine Beings

In her meditation on black feminist life lessons from marine animals, Alexis Gumbs writes that “[g]iant beaked whales [...] are a major whale mystery”. Their conservation status is “data deficient” (Gumbs 2020, p. 91). The whale is “so mysterious that it has never been seen alive”. Gumbs, a descendant of island dwellers, continues that “there is a difference between being shy and being selective”, that “sometimes when someone is avoiding you, they are just avoiding you. We have the right to be obscure. It is not an invitation to colonize us. It is not seduction. Boundaries can also be beautiful”. In the same way as the *valas*, these big mammals, and possibly also their *Máddu*, choose to live a life mostly hidden from human measurements, glances, and extractive desires: Hidden in the deep.

In Sámi tradition, all animals have a *Máddu*, an ancestral mother. Stories about *Máddu* are well-known all over Sápmi as part of contemporary storytelling. The *Máddu* of each respective species is large and somewhat frightening. If you torment one of her children, hunt more of her descendants than is your share, or disrespect her in other ways, the *Máddu* will show itself to you and bad things might happen. It is probably the *Máddu* of the mysterious *valas* that decides how many of her children she can share with us, when we get a glimpse of them and where. What the *Máddu* is willing to share with us is deeply connected, if not dependent on, our behavior. How we treat this ancient species, and its habitat is connected not only to our own possible catch but also to ancient history since it was around long before humankind traveled these waters and lands. Even though it is rare, it is still its own species. Unlike the cod, it has not been modified, cultivated, or otherwise colonized by human greed. It evades detection and extraction.

Sámi oral storytelling encompasses both personal remembrances of individual or shared experiences, situated in specific places with particular individuals, as well as collective memories featuring well-known characters. Both forms are referred to as *muitalus*—meaning story or remembrance in the Northern Sámi language.

Listening to Sámi traditions on their own terms, without the distortion of colonial perspectives, offers a countervision to the fetishization of human and interspecies relations. We have chosen two narratives that warn of the consequences when relationships between humans and the beings living in the sea are not based on respect and reciprocity. These stories reflect everyday life in two coastal Sámi areas.

In the first one, we meet local Sámi fishermen and a Norwegian merchant. The merchant represents a different, extractive way of handling fish by treating it as a resource and by relating to it as a fetish. The experience was written down by Erik Solem, a professor in legal studies that studied Sámi legal opinions during the 20th century (Solem [1933] 1970). He described places and people, but in this story, we do not know the names of those involved. Solem’s work on Sámi legal opinions is a valuable source for studying recent history in Sápmi.

In the second narrative, two fishermen share their experiences with the sea *hálddit*²—invisible human-like beings with whom we share the earth and sea. The *hálddit* function much like the *valas*, who sometimes show themselves to us but otherwise live a mysterious life. The story discusses the unknown, or the not fully known. This story was told by the Sámi fisherman and storyteller Efraim Pedersen in the beginning of the 20th century. It was written down by a Norwegian professor, Just Qvigstad, who collected Sámi stories from northern Norway. Qvigstad’s collections are a valuable source of oral traditions from these areas, especially since they are written in a Sámi language. We have been using the original

story in Sámi since one of us is fluent in Sámi languages. Central to these stories, as in many Sámi oral traditions, is the idea of reciprocity, probing how humans might cooperate with other species while showing mutual respect and proper attachment. The main Sámi concepts here are to *juogadit*—to share, and to *soabadit*—to get along.

5. Sámi Traditions of Co-Working in and with Creation

The coastal Sámi areas are mostly located on the Norwegian side of Sápmi, due to the long Norwegian coastal line. These coastal regions have traditionally been under the jurisdiction of various Sámi groups and communities. In these coastal areas, we find both sea/coastal Sámi communities and migrating reindeer herds and herders having their summer pastures on the coast. The migrating Sámi reindeer herders have traditional migration routes from both the Finnish and the Swedish side of Sápmi. Due to the closing of national borders after the establishment of the Nordic nation states, this changed and is in process. The migration routes have shaped forms of collaboration between different Sámi groups, other ethnic groups, as well as certain forms of co-working with creation. The land is shared by different groups of people, animals, and plants. The sea shores and fjords are populated by water-dwelling species that are more settled and others that are migratory fish populations. Some sea animals may visit annually to spawn, while others, like the big sea mammals, follow the schools of fish into the fjords on shorter or longer visits. The lands and waters are shared and this way of living, a kind of ‘time share system’, forms how human beings bond and negotiate with their natural surroundings (Olsen 2019; Joks 2015).

The concepts and practices of *juogadit*—to share and *soabadit*—to get along are central Sámi ideals concerning how we should live in and with the creation and in relation to other beings (e.g., Oskal 2000). These are formulated in various ways in the rich oral traditions but are also reflected in management practices, as has been formulated by Sámi scholars such as Solveig Joks and Nils Oskal (see ex. Joks 2015).

We chose these two stories because they represent coastal areas and serve as typical examples of narratives that explore the relationship between humans and other species in Sámi contexts. The stories reflect embedded ethical ideals. While these two specific examples might not be widely known within their respective communities, they are recognizable to people living in Sámi society or to those with an interest in Sámi storytelling. Both represent typical examples from everyday life containing advice and clues about what is right and wrong, as well as information about how our surroundings might work and interact with us.

Professor of legal rights Erik Solem, known for his studies on Sámi traditional legal perceptions, mentions fishing for salmon or seine fishing for *sáidi/coalfish* as examples on how the catch was distributed in the community. There are examples from different communities along the coast. Different methods of seine fishing were usually a collective activity. Everyone that helped with the seine fishing was entitled to a share of the catch. This was common even if they were guests and applied also when there was no need for extra hands and guests and locals helped anyway. Children that were present also received their share of the catch. This also applied if they arrived late and had only laid a hand on the fishing gear. The person responsible for the fishing team at any given time decided how the shares were distributed.

At one particular time at the beginning of the 19th century in Ivgu/Lyngen, a traveling merchant was in charge of the fishing team. A merchant is typically a person interested in business and profit. This particular merchant was also preoccupied with the idea that whatever share you got has to be in relation to the effort you put into the work process. As usual, there were many people involved in the seine fishing activity; some were there from the beginning, while others arrived later. When the fishing was completed, the merchant, who this time had the roll as the team leader, forbade the fishermen from sharing with the part of the team that had not been a part of the fishing team from the start. The custom in *Ivgu* was to share with everybody, as was also the custom in most other Sámi communities. The people then said that the blessing of God could not be following a greedy man like this,

who chose to break old customs, and only share with a few (Solem [1933] 1970). Embedded in this story is the assumption that creation is a gift from God. This is in sharp contrast to extractivism and what several researchers refer to as cheap nature. It also refers to other explanations causing loss, however. The resources may or may not have been emptied, but there is also a possibility that creation is no longer willing to share with us, because of how we treat its gifts, with greed instead of patience and gratefulness.

The blessing of God here needs to be understood within the blessing traditions of Sápmi. In these traditions, blessings are related to how humans manage their relations with creation, and also what the creation gives back to you. Blessings are reciprocal. What creation gives in terms of food are often called *Ipmila láhjit*—the gifts of God. This refers to the Christian God, even though you might bless without referring to any God at all but directly to creation itself, by being grateful and respectful. The Christian story of creation is deeply rooted in Sápmi, with its own modifications. In this particular case, with the seine fishermen and the merchant, blessing might include asking for permission from the fish and the river before you start your fishing activity, and the fish is then able to give itself to you. If you treat it well and eat all of it and share with others, the fish and its *Máddu* will notice, and the fish might give also itself to you next time you go fishing. Blessings last for generations, so an area treated well, where human beings have asked for permission, showed gratefulness, shared with others, and in other ways respected that place and its inhabitants, will last for generations (Sjöberg 2018). These reciprocal negotiations are central ethical ideals in Sámi tradition and help understand the *Ivgu* fishing team about the merchant and his loss of possibility for a blessed—and reciprocal—relationship with the sea or river and the fish. This is much like when Robin Wall Kimmerer describes how we as human beings can choose what to do with the gifts of the earth, share them with others or monetize them (Kimmerer 2013).

In this story, the merchant manifests the capitalistic ways of living in the world and making relations. He calculates the share of the catch the individual can claim according to the effort they have put in. The catch is not a gift from God and the fish is not an actor on its own that might or might not give itself to you. The number of fish one catches has to do with competence and maybe a bit of luck. This could be understood as a way of monetizing the gifts of God instead of sharing them. The story of the merchant shows how the relationship between fish and people can become one of fetishization of ocean dwellers.

The merchant's unwillingness to respect the reciprocity of give and take with the land and the ocean represents the extractive zone, capitalism that "violently reorganizes territories and perpetuates inequalities that delimit indigenous sovereignty and national autonomy" (Gómez-Barris 2017, p. xviii). An extractive zone names "the violence that capitalism does to reduce, constrain, and convert life into commodities" (p. xix). Extractive zones are "geographies where coordinated forms of capitalist power advance" (p. xv) and where life is reduced to "capitalist resource conversion" (p. xvi). Colonial resource extraction "violently reorganizes territories" and "perpetuates dramatic social and economic inequalities" (p. xvi).

Sámi traditions are based upon the prerequisite that there is more than one sphere of reality: the visible and that which is not visible, at least not as an everyday experience. The other sphere also has its own inhabitants, and stories about them can be found in all Sámi areas. We are not able to command them; they decide when they make themselves or their animals visible to us. Sometimes they warn us, sometimes they fool us, but they are a part of God's creation. Stories about them are present in the oldest written sources we have about the Sámi religious past. These narratives, about new and old encounters with them, are also present today. In oral traditions, stories about them flourish (e.g., Sara and Sjöberg 2023). The other sphere and its inhabitants are one of the uncertainties to which human beings must always relate.

One story from a coastal Sámi area, as told by the fisherman and storyteller Efraim Pedersen a century ago in the area of *Ivgu/Lyngen*, serves as an example of the relationship between humans and the invisibles. The story goes like this: two men went fishing, seine

netting from the shore. They had a rowboat and rowed back and forth to the shore several times. Each time they put the net in the water, they saw people on the shore, close to the end of the fishing net that was tied there. These people disappeared when the men reached the shore again.

During a coffee break, they heard people laughing, apparently from the direction of a nearby rock. The voices remarked that it had been a long time since they last drank coffee. The third and final time they went out with their nets, they got lost at sea. A thick fog surrounded them, but they saw the lights of another boat nearby. They tried to follow the light, but each time they got close, the boat vanished. After many hours of rowing, the fog lifted. They were near their fishing spot, but the tide was out, so they had to wait for the flood tide before they could reach the shore again.

Later on, one of the fishermen dreamt about *hálddit* visiting him in his sleep. They revealed that the reason they had pranked them several times was because they had not shared their catch, not even the coffee, with them. They decided to make them row the boat in circles just to scare them. The fishermen were then advised to share their catch and show respect to the invisibles next time, promising that fishing luck would follow. And so they did (Qvigstad 1929).

The story incorporates both the concept of *juogadit*—to share, and *soabadit*—to get along. We do not know much about the Deep of the water around us, or how this web of relationships functions, but the stories about the Deep are many. Stories about *hálddit* or other Invisible Ones are also numerous, even though we really do not know much about them. In a way, stories about the Invisible Ones help us to cultivate our attentiveness as some researchers in the field of multispecies studies encourage us to do. At the same time, we have to cultivate our attentiveness and ways of meaningful responses (van Dooren et al. 2016). This might also include other entities than animals, lands, and waters; it may also include *hálddit* or other beings that are not always visible to us. The response to other species or creations might also be better attuned to creation, knowing from the beginning that at least half of the world is hidden to us in the first place. Stories about *hálddit* also remind us of that we do not know whom we are sharing with in different settings. Therefore, we should always pay attention. Paying attention is also closely linked to stories about the arctic char, a fish that is as mysterious as the *hálddit* in the Arctic Ocean. It appears all of a sudden, unexpectedly, and it might, for example, stand still on groundwater for a long time, leaving us wondering why (Olsen 2019). If we do not respect the webs of relationships, also in relation to species or creatures we do not understand, see or comprehend, bad luck might follow us, and we might get lost in the fog. Or even worse, the *máttut*—the ancestral mothers of various species, will refuse to share with us since we take more than our share and pollute their habitat.

6. Remembering the Ocean as a Space of Movement and Sharing—Ocean Co-Dwellers/Creators

In many respects, the Deep remains unknown or little known to humankind, and we must place our trust in cooperation with our co-creators instead of fixating on extraction for short-term purposes. Stories and practices from the Sámi past and present could present thinking tools helping to lead us in a different direction than extractivism. Instead of clamping down on our relationships and pinning our co-creations into unmovable fetishes, we can cultivate co-operative thinking. We might travel like the arctic char, open to interpreting chains of events in new or old ways, escaping traps set for us, and seeking to remain undetectable. We might cultivate our own humility before we act, remind ourselves about all the things we do not know or see, respecting the water and the lands and all their webs of relations that have been around for far longer than we have.

For Gumbs, the hidden existence of a rare species of whale is a cause for celebration, not only for the whale but also for her own black body: “I celebrate your journey however deep, however long. I respect you as so much bigger than my own understanding. And me too. I don’t have to be available to be eligible for breath. I don’t have to be measurable in a

market of memes. I don't have to be visible to be viable on my path" (Gumbs 2020, p. 92). In the same way that Gumbs celebrate the acts of the beaked whale, we might celebrate the *valas* and other ancient species. This also has an impact on how we behave and understand ourselves as human beings.

To be able to *soabadit*—to get along, and *juogadit*—to share, we need to accept that we cannot know everything about creation. Creation is the work of God, and God is irreducible and beyond human reasoning and descriptions, as is creation. As Keller writes, "[t]he time/space of the universe then matters theologically as the very dynamism of incarnation. Incarnation could become rule rather than exception in the grammar of creation" (Keller 2003, p. 56). We share this place and space with others that always remain hidden from us to some extent, whether they are big mammals, *máttut*, *hálddit*, or something else. We share the same habitat, and it is our human responsibility to protect these living spaces, since humans are the only being able to destroy for all others. Mysterious creatures like the *valas* teach us to marvel about the wonders of creation. We should cultivate our attentiveness towards other beings and accept reciprocity as a condition to strive for. We are allowed to take our share as long as we make sure that also others have their share, which means that we cannot and should not be greedy, if we want to continue to exist. We have also fostered our impulse to explore, explain, and extract, making other beings fetishes, as if they were created not for their own sake, but as resources for us to extract. Instead, we could cultivate a flexible mood of openness to our shifting surroundings and acknowledge the limits of our knowledge, and also accept that we cannot have full knowledge about all of creation.

It is also important to stress co-creation—we are all invited to be co-creators with each other. Being co-creators does not mean relating to these species by counting them, measuring them, and calculating them as a resource for our own survival, but celebrate them in their uniqueness. We should protect their surroundings and habitats, respect their age, and let them continue to be unexplored and not fully explained, only cooperating on their own initiative. We could let ourselves marvel about their sudden appearance and mysterious ways of traveling the seas, accepting that creation is not only for our benefit. Maybe this will also help us to shape our understanding of ourselves as human beings a little differently, a little less as a resource and a little more as an image of God worthy of respect, even though we sometimes choose to avoid one another, or not to put everything out in the open.

In the beginning, the Spirit of God hovered over the face of the Deep, and the abyss became home to many creatures. Over time and space, ocean life developed and much of it is still mysterious and unknown to humans. The ocean is a site of energy, space, movement, depth, and extraction. The depths of the Ocean are hidden and mysterious, a last frontier that proves difficult for humans to penetrate. And will hopefully remain so, despite plans for deep sea mining.

Keller has retrieved the deep of the ocean's abyss and engaged it through the tradition of negative theology. The apophatic tradition expresses the unknowability of God, and the inability of human reason or power to access or control the divine. It is one of the ways to mark God's otherness and irreducibility, which is connected with the sacred: that which needs to be protected and left intact. Our ignorance should be a barrier that prevents us from violating the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.

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Notes

¹ <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-023-02746-8> (accessed on 1 October 2024).

² In this story they are called *hálddit* i northern Sámi. They might appear with other names in other texts since they have many names, and there are also some differences between different dialects. We have chosen to use the concepts in the studied version of the text.

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