

# Ghosts of Colonialism

Discursive struggles over memory and identity in Finland

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<p>The counterintuitive relationship between Finland/Finnishness and coloniality – traces of colonialism in contemporary society and culture – is an expanding area of academic research. This thesis contributes to the field by reflecting on this relationship with a focus particularly on manifestations of issues of coloniality in public debates on social media. On these platforms, contrasting political groups engage in discursive struggles over the construction of memory and identity narratives.</p> <p>The context of the research is the international wave of protests that started in the summer of 2020, which attracted vast popular attention to racism and inequality, and the colonial power structures lying behind them. The social movements began in North America and expanded to Western Europe, where the history of imperialism and colonization is apparent – but the debate also reached Finland, a country that has, until recently, rarely been associated with questions of colonialism and coloniality. This thesis aims to shed light on Finland's relationship to coloniality as a periphery-of-the-center space, which retains a share of colonial complicity, but also distinct differences <i>vis-à-vis</i> traditional colonial centers.</p> <p>The approach of the study is interdisciplinary, synthesizing features of postcolonial/decolonial theory, discourse theory and memory studies. The research identifies three of the dimensions in which coloniality is involved in discursive struggles in Finland: acknowledgement, reconciliation, and cosmetic decoloniality. In the research, these dimensions are represented, respectively, by three case studies: the <i>Afrikan tähti</i> boardgame, the public apology by MP Pirkka-Pekka Petelius to the indigenous Sámi people, and the rebranding of traditional consumer products exhibiting stereotypical orientalist names and imagery.</p> <p>Each case study includes an analysis of a social media discussion thread related to it. A central analytical framework is provided by Laclau's discourse theory applied to populist movements, which emphasizes the convergence of attitudes and values within a group following equivalential logic, and the construction of antagonistic frontiers between different groups. By means of qualitative analysis, the thesis reflects on these processes particularly as they pertain to discursive struggles related to coloniality in Finland on social media, where such polarizing features can be identified.</p> <p>Finland is, in its own way, embedded in coloniality, and issues related to coloniality are an increasingly contentious topic in Finnish public debate. Negotiations and struggles over narrative and identity construction can be seen to follow ideological lines to some extent, but there is plenty of nuance in the re-negotiation of Finnish identity in the comparatively novel context of coloniality. Further, more detailed and broader study of discursive struggles related to coloniality and decoloniality is in order, as these issues become ever more prevalent in Finland.</p>			
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<p>Tutkielma käsittelee Suomen ja suomalaisuuden suhdetta koloniaalisuuteen eli kolonialismin jälkiin nykypäivän yhteiskunnassa ja kulttuurissa. Erityisesti tutkielma käsittelee näiden aiheiden näkymistä julkisessa keskustelussa eli sosiaalisessa mediassa, jossa vastakkaiset poliittiset ryhmät käyvät erilaisten kohujen kautta diskursiivista kamppailua muistin ja identiteetin rakentamisesta.</p> <p>Kontekstina toimivat vuoden 2020 kesästä alkaneet kansainväliset protestiaallot ja niitä seurannut keskustelu, joka kiinnitti huomiota rasismiin ja sen taustalla häilyviin koloniaalisiin valtarakenteisiin. Yhteiskunnallinen liikehdintä alkoi Pohjois-Amerikasta ja laajentui Länsi-Eurooppaan. Molemmissa imperialismin ja kolonisaation historia on ilmeinen, mutta keskustelu on levinnyt Suomeenkin. Tutkielma pyrkii valottamaan Suomen suhdetta koloniaalisuuteen keskustan periferiasuutuna, joka on nähtävissä kolonialismin epäsuorasti osallisena, mutta siitä kuitenkin omalla tavallaan erillisenä tilana.</p> <p>Lähestymistapa on poikkitieteellinen: siinä yhdistyvät jälkikolonialistinen/dekoloniaalinen tutkimus, diskurssiteoria sekä muistin politiikan tutkimus.</p> <p>Tutkielmassa identifioidaan kolme ulottuvuutta, joissa koloniaalisuus tänä päivänä näkyy diskursiivisissa vastakkainasetteluissa Suomessa: tiedostaminen, sovinnonteko ja kosmeettinen dekoloniaalisuus. Näitä ulottuvuuksia edustavat mainitussa järjestyksessä kolme tapaustutkimusta: Afrikan tähti -lautapeli, kansanedustaja Pirkka-Pekka Peteliuksen julkinen anteeksipyyntö saamelaisilta sekä stereotypisoivia nimiä ja kuvastoa kantavien perinteisten kuluttajatuotteiden uudelleenbrändäys.</p> <p>Tutkielmassa analysoidaan myös kuhunkin tapaustutkimukseen liittyviä sosiaalisen median keskusteluketjuja. Keskeisenä analyttisenä kehyksenä toimii Laclauin diskurssiteoria sovellettuna eritoten populistisiin liikkeisiin. Teoriassa korostuu toisaalta tiettyjen arvojen ja asenteiden lähentyminen poliittisen ryhmän sisällä ja toisaalta siitä kumpuava eri ryhmien välinen vastakkainasettelu. Tutkielma pyrkii kvalitatiivisen analyysin kautta arvioimaan näiden ilmiöiden ilmenemistä nimenomaan koloniaalisuuteen liittyvissä väittelyissä sosiaalisessa mediassa, jossa mainittujen vastakkainasetteluiden on nähty kärjistyvän.</p> <p>Loppupäätelmässä nähdään, että koloniaalisuuteen liittyvät teemat ovat vahvasti esillä Suomessakin ja että niistä käydään useilla eri rintamalla paljolti poliittiseen ideologiaan perustuvaa diskursiivista kamppailua, vaikka monia nyanssejakin löytyy. Suhteellisen tuore tutkimusaihe ja -näkökulma ainakin Suomen kontekstissa kaipaa laajempaa ja kattavampaa jatkotutkimusta. Näin etenkin, kun suomalaisen identiteetin muovautumiseen liittyvät väittelyt saavat koloniaalisuuden ja sen kanssa tilin tekemisen kautta yhä enemmän jalansijaa julkisessa keskustelussa.</p>			
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## 1. Introduction

A specter is haunting Europe – the specter of colonialism. Since the summer of 2020, public debate and even upheaval particularly in Europe and the United States has hinged on phenomena that can be traced to open wounds of colonial pasts. The dominoes began to fall in the end of May, when George Floyd, a Black man, was killed by a white police officer in Minneapolis. Floyd’s death became a symbol of systemic racism and police violence in the United States, reinvigorating the Black Lives Matter movement nationwide into peaceful and violent protests. Soon, however, the protests assumed a much wider perspective. The historical roots of institutional racism were symbolically manifested in statues: initially those representing North American Confederate Generals and Spanish conquistadors, many of which were toppled by protesters as well as ordered to be dismantled by public officials. Once the anti-racism protests reached this side of the Atlantic, the issue evolved into a debate over how Europeans should reckon and reconcile with the continent’s colonial past – arguably at the root of many contemporary structures of racism and inequality. Defaced statues of Belgium’s colonizer-king Leopold II became the symbol of a difficult conversation to be had about the effects of Europe’s colonial history on contemporary societies. Many of the social and political issues that vex contemporary Western societies are echoes of the colonial world order, which solidified European domination worldwide for centuries and whose legacies continue to reverberate nearly a century after the system’s formal dismantling. Postcolonial and decolonial theory are more relevant paradigms through which to analyze contemporary social issues than perhaps ever before.

The ghost of colonialism is *coloniality*. The concept was introduced by Aníbal Quijano (2007) to explain how “in spite of the fact that political colonialism has been eliminated, the relationship between European – also called Western – culture, and the others, continues to be one of colonial domination” (p. 169). Quijano has written extensively about the *coloniality of power*, by which he refers to how, while formal colonialism was mostly dismantled in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, its ghost lingers on as the basis of power structures between and within nations. Besides subjugating people and extracting resources around the world, Western colonizers engaged in the production of meaning and knowledge on a global scale; therefore, a Eurocentric system of social and cultural power remains hegemonic to this day (Quijano, p. 169). Though European colonialism is a thing mostly of the past, colonial hierarchy rests at the foundation of our present reality.

This ghost of colonialism has now, more than perhaps ever before via recent protest waves, risen to haunt Western societies. I use the term *ghost* here as a nod to the theoretical framework developed by Richard Gilman-Opalsky (2016) as a paradigm for understanding what types of phenomena can act as, among other things, catalysts for societal disturbances and social movements. Gilman-Opalsky is primarily a scholar of social movements, but his concepts can be relevantly applied to postcolonial debates – especially where they have incited social movements. He argues that both individuals and societies are eternally haunted by ghosts, where “[t]o be haunted is to be troubled or followed by the presence of some invisible thing, some unseen entity that one nonetheless feels or knows to be present” (p. 30). All individuals are likely to carry ghosts in the form of so-called “baggage”, but collectively ghosts also haunt entire social bodies – especially through disturbing past events that have not been fully reconciled (p. 38). From the American perspective, for instance, the history of chattel slavery is a ghost whose haunting can be experienced today in systemic racism, institutional violence and mass incarceration of Black people in the United States, even though formal slavery has been abolished long ago. Thus, ghosts of slavery haunt the everyday lived experience of Black people both as individuals and a collective, to the extent that “the present society cannot rid itself of the ghosts of the despised, locked-up, and vilified” (p. 40). The death of George Floyd was the immediate catalyst of the most recent wave of BLM protests, but without all the ghosts haunting society, his death as a singular event would not have become the potent symbol it has.

The transatlantic slave trade would not have, naturally, existed without the practice of European colonization. Therefore, the spreading of BLM-inspired protests in Western Europe, with a distinct perspective on the bygone colonial practices of European imperial powers and their effects of contemporary societies was not much of a leap. In Western Europe, politics of memory directed at the reconciliation of World War II atrocities have been implemented widely and with difficult but cleansing results; however, in comparison, the history of colonialism and its myriad of victims have received less attention. This is perhaps because colonialism, unlike World War II or the Holocaust, was not a clearly defined event with a beginning and end, its victims were distant from European metropolises, and its reconciliation did not demand war-torn Europe’s immediate attention. Indeed, Gilman-Opalsky (2016) mentions imperialism as one of the forms of “ghosts of power and war”, in that imperialism (and, by extension, its practice of colonialism) has been the cause “of so much carnage throughout human history that [it] cannot but leave a legacy of ghost activity

along with the corpses” – these types of ghosts he also describes as the most deterritorialized (p. 46), which may go to explain the geographical vastness of the 2020 protests.

If coloniality is the ghost that haunts us, it is *decoloniality* which can be identified as its polar opposite. Gilman-Opalsky (2016) proposes confronting and thereby coming to terms with ghosts haunting the social body by means of social revolt (p. 53) – something that indeed has happened in the recent anti-racism protests and various grassroots movements in the United States and Europe in terms of colonialism and its reverberating aftershocks. Gilman-Opalsky, borrowing from Guattari, takes the issue of haunting one step further, in positing that those haunted by ghosts may themselves engage in the act of *becoming-ghost* as a form of revolt. Popular uprisings against power structures are means by which underlying social ghosts are presented for all to see in a subversive manner: “To haunt is to unsettle what was settled, to disrupt the semblance that there is nothing here to see. An active haunting shakes us and wakes us, making us see something that we didn’t (or couldn’t) see before” (p. 61-63). When applied to coloniality, the repertoires Gilman-Opalsky is proposing are not so very different from those employed by contemporary decolonial protest movements. A central academic school of this thesis is decolonial theory, which focuses less on the colonialisms of the past and more on colonialities of today. Besides seeking to raise awareness of the coloniality of power, decolonial theory is transformative by definition, for it works interconnectedly with social movements as it opens perspectives to deconstructing power structures and creating new futures (Keskinen, Mkwesha & Seikkula 2021, p. 50).

In this thesis, I consider contemporary issues of coloniality and decoloniality in the context of my native country, Finland, where the international BLM-inspired protests have awakened much public debate regarding colonialism, racism and power. As a semi-peripheral nation in global colonial power structures, Finland has a multidimensional and asymmetrical relationship with colonialism and coloniality. The relationship can be best described as a hybrid of colonial complicity, settler colonialism, and self-colonization. In the intersection of these colonialities, which I discuss in detail in the following chapter, there lies tremendous unease and difficulty regarding engagement with these issues, but also great prospects for a self-aware decolonial turn. However, even in a country with such an ambiguous relationship with colonial history, the memory politics involved are hotly contested social and cultural issues that are easily entangled with political identities. The current polarized social atmosphere, exacerbated by the mechanisms of the digital public sphere, make questions of coloniality and decoloniality fraught with deep and searing antagonisms.

In this thesis, I approach this multifaceted topic through the following three research questions:

1. What is the relationship of Finland and Finnishness to coloniality, and how have recent international anti-colonial social movements affected the remembrance of and coming to terms with this relationship?
2. How are narratives of memory relating to Finnish coloniality being constructed and reconstructed via discursive struggles in the digital public sphere?
3. Can conflicting attitudes on coloniality be understood through equivalential logic, i.e., how is one's recognition or rejection of Finland's colonial roles related to one's political identity in the current polarized atmosphere?

Addressing these research questions, respectively, in this thesis I argue that:

1. Finland and Finnishness, like much of the Global North, is embedded in coloniality. Throughout the early 21<sup>st</sup> century there has been some public discussion and debate over deconstructing features of coloniality in Finnish society, but the wave of international anti-racism social movements that began in 2020 has greatly accelerated both decolonial moves and their backlash. This heated juxtaposition shows how Finland is interlinked with international phenomena of coloniality and political identity struggles.
2. I identify three ongoing dimensions of discursive struggle related to coloniality as *acknowledgement*, *reconciliation* and *cosmetic decoloniality*. Through three case studies, I show how all these dimensions can be identified as happening presently in Finnish society. The process I outline is not linear, as the levels of discursive struggle happen simultaneously on different issues; also, the levels presented here are not an exhaustive account of all the discursive negotiations underway. The discursive struggles identified here are necessary but insufficient steps towards a new decolonial paradigm.
3. The digital public sphere, i.e., social media, is a central site for contemporary memory politics and related discursive struggles over Finnish coloniality, among other things. Contradictory attitudes can be understood, to an extent, through Laclaudian *antagonistic frontiers*, along which opposing political groups construct themselves in relation to one another, by using a *logic of equivalence* (Laclau 2005). Through a convergence of ideological values and attitudes (Mannserström,



et al. 2020) in this current polarized atmosphere, a persons' recognition or rejection of Finland's colonial roles is often related to their political identity.

My approach to the topics of this thesis is interdisciplinary and reflects my own academic background. My interpretative and analytic paradigm is grounded in features of postcolonial and decolonial theory as well as discourse theory and memory studies. Such a synthesis of academic schools in this context provides a novel and appropriately multilayered framework for theoretically reflecting on intricate processes of coloniality and identity, which are a relatively new field of research in Finland. In the following chapter, I approach theoretical perspectives of Finland's relationship to coloniality, memory, and identity, as well as tensions between political groups on these issues and their manifestation in public debate. Then, I introduce my methodology in detail, before advancing my analysis through three case studies that characterize Finnish dimensions of coloniality. The case studies are: (1) *Afrikan tähti*, a classic Finnish boardgame exhibiting colonial representations, (2) a public apology made by an MP to the indigenous Sámi people for his old comedy sketches depicting them unflatteringly, and (3) the rebranding of classic consumer products to rid them of colonial and racialized stereotypes. Through these cultural artefacts and phenomena, I consider processes of what I call acknowledgement, reconciliation, and cosmetic decoloniality, respectively. Integral to my analysis are three social media discussion threads, each one corresponding to one of the case studies. Through them, I consider discursive struggles around Finnish dimensions of coloniality as they relate to political memory and identity. My interdisciplinary approach in this thesis is not so much a traditional empirical case study research of cultural artefacts, or a straightforward discourse analysis of social media discussions. Rather, I employ my approach with more of a theoretical and reflective objective to identify and conceptualize discursive tensions linked to Finland, Finnishness, and coloniality.

## 2. Theoretical perspectives on coloniality and identity

### 2.1 Finland, colonialism and coloniality

During the year 2020, ghosts of the past that haunt the present were stared down even in some of the most unlikely of places. Black Lives Matter protests were even organized in one of the remote corners of Europe – Finland, which at first glance would seem far removed from the American history of slavery and even European history of imperial expansion. There weren't even any statues of colonizers in Finland for protesters to topple. Yet somehow, even in Finland it became clear that it was not possible to stand idly at the sidelines of the debate and turmoil. Due to the interconnected, web-like nature of human societies, it is highly questionable whether any nation or society has been untouched by such a far-reaching construction as coloniality. Therefore, one would be unlikely to find even a single cultural or social realm where the paradigm of postcolonial and decolonial critique would not be applicable. Employing a postcolonial/decolonial lens on society is furthermore highly useful, since it can help illuminate the intricate interconnections of colonial pasts and presents, even where they are not apparent. Lüthi et al. (2016) introduce the concept of *colonialism without colonies* to address more nuanced incarnations of colonialism in societies that lack the classical connection to colonialism yet retain tropes that manifest themselves in different ways. The authors use the concept to examine societies that “had an explicit self-understanding as being outside the realm of colonialism, but nevertheless engaged in the colonial project in a variety of ways and benefitted from these interactions” (p. 1). The authors aim to ask how more peripheral societies were attached to larger colonial constructions and how they may have profited from these attachments, as well as what are the differences of these societies' connection to colonialism from those of traditional colonial centers of power. Most relevant to the topic of this thesis, Lüthi et al. pose the question of “[h]ow do narratives of having been ‘outside of colonialism’ influence and complicate contemporary debates on the postcolonial heritage in these places?” (p. 1).

Indeed, the entanglements of non-colonial powers to colonialism have constructed power relations within and between even those societies that were not explicitly part of the colonial project. European societies not directly linked to colonialism still benefitted from colonial exploits in economic ways, and individual people partook in the endeavors of foreign colonial powers. Perhaps most relevantly these societies engaged in the reproduction of colonial discourses and power structures, taking the knowledge produced by the dominant

colonial discourse for granted (Lüthi et al., 2016, p. 2). Colonialism, after all, can be seen as “one of the most significant events structuring the world since the rise of Europe to global dominance since 1500”, and this reality makes it pertinent to examine the supporting and profiting roles of such societies (p. 4). This is not to mention the contemporary ramifications of colonial structures of the bygone era, whose ghosts can be seen today in debates over racism, inequality, immigration, and terrorism. These are politically contested issues shared by practically all societies of the Global North. Even those that did not partake in colonial domination directly now share the after-effects of centuries of colonial domination and the global reality this system has begotten. Against this backdrop, it is relevant to ask, “[h]ow did imperial formations influence the practices and thinking in everyday life, and how were they embodied in forms of citizenship or narrated in histories in countries without formal colonies?” (p. 4). Taking the concept of colonialism without colonies, as presented by Lüthi, et al. under consideration, one can begin to put together the far-reaching implications of colonial representations, knowledge, and discourses in the “ways in which colonial images and perspectives influenced and still do affect political, popular as well as scientific discourses in countries without formal colonies” (p. 5).

According to Keskinen, Näre & Tuori (2015), Finland has in multiple ways been entangled in colonial power structures and representations, for example by being part of the colonial imaginary of Europe as a cradle of civilization and progress in contrast to other societies (p. 2). Likewise, Finns have largely defined themselves in racialized terms in relation to colonized subjects, even though, as the authors argue, the position of Finns as part of the white European racial hierarchy was not historically inevitable (p. 2). Indeed, the authors call for an increased necessity of considering questions of postcolonialism and racialization in a Finnish and Nordic context, rather than through the prism of Anglo-American academia that has heretofore been applied widely but with limitations to its applicability to the Nordic context. The argument is relevant, for postcolonial critique has indeed been mostly developed in the context of the societies of previous colonial powers and subjects, not so much in those societies that have been more adjacent to colonial endeavors and can be better analyzed in terms of the colonialism without colonies concept discussed above. Racialized normativities exist in Finnish society, but due to a different historical context these normativities necessarily lend themselves to a different type of culturally specific postcolonial critique – a theoretical framework that has only in recent years experienced a tentative naissance in Finnish academia. Keskinen, Näre & Tuori argue that

critical analysis is needed to examine the role of Finland in the history of racialization and resulting construction of national identity based on Western white normativity – only this would make it possible to question and dismantle such normativities (p. 3). Likewise, Lehtonen & Löytty (2007) note that it should not be assumed that Finland has an identical relationship to former and contemporary colonies as former colonial powers do, and due to these historical differences, it is noteworthy that Finnish postcolonialism is distinct from, for example, British postcolonialism (p. 106).

Before turning to the Finnish perspective, it is useful to briefly consider the colonial connections of the Nordic region more broadly. Fur (2016) notes the discrepancy in the notion that “[s]eemingly untainted by colonialism’s heritage, the Nordic countries throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century maintained positions as champions of minority rights and mediators in global politics” (p. 12). According to Fur, postcolonial critique can and should be applied to the Nordic countries even though they lacked what are formally considered colonies of their own, because the power structures and discourses of colonialism have nevertheless influenced the Nordics. Indeed, the Nordics are inalienably rooted into the systems and discourses of European global dominance, yet their relative lack of formal colonial history allows them to wash their hands of the whole issue: “It may be argued that distancing themselves from European colonialism has allowed the Nordic countries to adopt an attitude of superiority that could well be regarded as its own form of colonialism – of knowing what is best for others” (Fur, p. 13).

In a similar vein, it can also be asked and debated whether the centuries-long dominance of the Swedish kingdom over Finland can be considered a type of colonization of adjacent territories. According to more traditional (and somewhat oversimplified) definitions of colonialism, a colony is separated from the metropolis by a swathe of saltwater (Fur, 2016, p. 13). In this traditional sense, Finland is not generally seen as a colony, although it was dominated by foreign powers – first the Swedish kingdom and then the Russian empire – during and preceding the era of European imperialism and colonialism. Finland’s historical position under foreign rule is not typically described as being a colonized entity per se, but the notion of being a comparatively powerless annexed territory striving for national independence sits tightly with the popular narrative of Finnish history that implies inevitable nationhood.

Finland's own entanglements in European colonial endeavors do not fit into the narrative of noble victimhood and overcoming foreign-imposed hardships through cohesive perseverance and *sisu*. A certain type of exceptionalism seems to pervade dominant narratives of Finland, in which Finnish history and nationhood is perceived as somewhat separate from global developments. Nevertheless, it is historical fact that hundreds of individual Finns took part in colonial projects in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, for instance as steamship engineers in the Belgian Congo and as soldiers in the French Foreign Legion in France's wars in its North African colonies. Furthermore, small groups of Finns established settlements in the Americas, and the Finnish Missionary Society established a comparatively large and long-lived mission in modern-day Namibia, a part of which was even briefly considered as a potential colony for the newly independent Finland (Kujala, 2019, pp. 11–13; Lehtonen & Löytty, 2007, p. 107). Indeed, these actions of individuals or small groups of Finns are hardly even footnotes in the history of European colonialism, but such examples go to show that narrative of Finnish neutrality in these issues is a simplification at best. This is to say nothing of the development of Finnish society thanks to the economic structures of colonialism – even without formal colonies of its own, Finland was and is part of the European and North American led global economic system, and Finland concretely benefitted from colonial-era international trade, for example in selling from its vast natural reserves of tar and lumber for the construction of British ships, or producing sugar and cotton from raw materials collected by slave labor in the United States and the Caribbean (Kujala, p. 13).

Migration is a hotly contested and divisive issue in public and political debate in Finland, as it is in most of Europe. These contemporary issues have their roots in the history of colonialism, for colonialism produced the present-day centers and peripheries between which streams of migration and ensuing tensions are largely taking place (Lehtonen & Löytty, 2007, p. 106). What is the position of Finland, then, in this center-periphery juxtaposition? Lehtonen & Löytty argue that modern-day Finland actually exists at the periphery of the center (pp. 110–111). In this sense, Finland is indeed neither a center nor a periphery, but partially both – albeit more aligned with the center. According to the authors, the reason for Finland's partially peripheral position comes from its geographical distance, small population, relatively specialized role in the global economy and its role mainly as an importer of cultural influences. Lehtonen & Löytty argue that Finland's cultural, political and economic modernization has mainly happened via the mimicry of Western centers. Similarly, Kiossev (2011) uses the concept of *self-colonizing* to describe colonially peripheral cultures

that were not directly colonized but nevertheless “had to recognize self-evidently the foreign cultural dominance and voluntarily absorb the basic values and categories of colonial Europe” (p. 1). Kiossev does not mention Finland specifically but argues that peripheral cultures succumbing to self-colonization also internalized conceptions of themselves as less modern and less civilized than those of the center, traits that needed to be overcome in their nation-building process striving for modernity (p. 8). Thus, while Finland was not colonized by Western colonial powers during the colonial era, Finnish ideas of modernity and Westernness, as well as the very conception of the self were adopted in an asymmetrical colonial paradigm.

To address specifically Finland’s role as a country that is neither a historical colonial center nor a mere victim of colonialism, nor an innocent bystander to colonial projects, Vuorela (2009) introduces the concept of *colonial complicity* (p. 48). Colonial complicity can be perhaps seen as a practice or result of colonialism without colonies. Interestingly, Vuorela justifies using the term *complicity* using similar ghost-terminology as Gilman-Opalsky: “it seems to provide a middle ground between feelings of ‘guilt’ and ‘innocence’ that keep haunting us” (Vuorela, p. 49). Complicity refers to “participation in a crime”, and indeed viewed through a postcolonial lens, Finland can be seen as participating in the acceptance and reinforcement of hegemonic colonial discourses as universal truths (p. 50). Vuorela argues that Finland has largely situated itself as an outsider to the colonial project, neither subjugated nor dominating, despite Finnish complicity in colonial knowledge production: “our minds were ‘colonised’ into an acceptance of colonial projects, and we took on board the then ‘universally’ accepted regimes of truth” (p. 52). One of the main reasons for Finland to act in a colonially complicit manner, Vuorela argues, was and is the temptation to gain access to centers of power through knowledge reproduction and reaffirmation (p. 71). Indeed, it is not difficult to deduce that a historically marginalized and peripheral country such as Finland would go to great lengths in order to be considered on the side of the “winners”, i.e. to align itself with its Western neighbors, which are not Finland’s historically inevitable reference group. Such an alignment would include adopting hegemonic colonial discourses of Western Europe during the centuries of colonialism and, through their repetition, reinforcing these narratives throughout the following decades. As one example, Vuorela provides Astrid Lindgren’s *Pippi Longstocking* books, central works in the Nordic literary canon, which naturalized for small children the colonial worldview “where riches could be gained from

abroad and the white man could be king do the natives... It did not even cross my mind [as a child] that there might be other views of the world” (pp. 57–58).

## 2.2. Narratives and cultural practices of memory politics

Even more relevantly than literature in the Finnish postcolonial context, a conversation about the prevalence of colonial imaginaries in Finnish cultural products cannot be had without focusing on *Afrikan tähti*, the iconic board game designed by Kari Mannerla in 1951. The game has the status of a cultural institution in Finland, and is ubiquitous in Finnish homes and schools, where Finnish children have grown for decades playing a game that quite literally depicts the conquest of Africa and its pillaging for natural riches through a hunt for the titular jewel, the “Star of Africa”. In the autumn of 2021, a controversy at the University of Helsinki sparked a national debate about the game.<sup>1</sup> A Black German exchange student opened the debate on social media by criticizing the game in general as colonialist and racist, and specifically how university students had dressed up as characters of the game in a freshman event. Over the following weeks, dozens of news articles as well as critical editorials, opinion pieces and fiery social media debate on the subject ensued. Student associations issued public apologies which were welcomed by some and ridiculed by others. The orientalist tropes of *Afrikan tähti* as well as online debate about the game is the first of three case studies of this thesis. Here I analyze an earlier social media debate that predates the 2021 university controversy, because it is more directly connected to the BLM-inspired protests that ignited the public debate over issues of coloniality in Finland, and because *Afrikan tähti* is only one case study in the discourse analysis I perform here. An analysis doing justice to the multifaceted university controversy would require a thesis of its own, but it is relevant to note here as a sobering example of how pervasive and emotional debates issues of coloniality can produce in Finland when Pandora’s box is opened.

Beyond cultural icons and into the realm of practice, another question entirely is official Finnish policy over the years toward Sápmi, the northern region of Lapland inhabited by the indigenous Sámi people. Vuorela (2009) identifies Finland’s policy toward the Sámi as

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<sup>1</sup> Koski, S. (18.10.2021). Rasismikohu Helsingin yliopistossa – riistoleikkejä ja Afrikan tähti -vitsailua: “Olen sanaton”. *Iltalehti*. <https://www.iltalehti.fi/kotimaa/a/c6584f8b-1314-46fb-aa1b-72ecbae5b461>

*internal colonization*, whereas Kanninen and Ranta (2019) use the term *settler colonialism* to describe official policies of annexation of land and assimilation of people. Kanninen and Ranta argue that the process by which the lands of the Sámi have merged into the Finnish nation state territory and the Sámi social structures have been gradually replaced by the structures and institutions of Finnish society is a prime example of settler colonialism in a Nordic context. The relationship between Finland and the Sámi has recently been identified as settler colonial by a number of scholars. For example, it has been argued that past Finnish assimilation policies towards the Sámi stemmed from a context in which Finns felt uncertain of their own modernity and civilization vis-à-vis European powers, and used the Sámi as an inferior foil against which to assert their own comparative superiority (Keskinen 2021; 84), and “when the Finnish nation-building project was at its height and its shared Finnish language, history, and culture were foregrounded, the Sámi became defined as an Other to Finns” (Merivirta, Koivunen & Särkkä, 2021, p. 20).

The historical treatment of the Sámi does not fit into the Finnish national narrative of a small, downtrodden and gutsy, cohesive nation. Cracks emerge into this simplified narrative when it is pointed out that Finns and the Finnish state have systematically oppressed and racialized indigenous people. The contradiction between these notions emerged in an explosive public debate at the end of 2019, when Green Party MP Pirkka-Pekka Petelius apologized for television sketches from the 1980s and 90s, in which he had performed the role of a caricaturized drunken and dim-witted Sámi man. While the Sámi community generally welcomed the gesture, many white Finns were deeply offended by Petelius’ apology, feeling that part of their cultural tradition, which they had grown up with and perhaps felt was being made in innocent jest, was now being publicly denounced. Perhaps they felt that they were being unjustly blamed for having thought the sketches were funny, and that through Petelius’ apology they were also being expected to apologize for something they did not feel the need to apologize for. The heated debate that emerged from the MP’s apology for its part exemplified the difficulty of coming to terms with less flattering aspects of Finnish history and their ghosts lingering in the modern day. Petelius’ apology and the ensuing online debate is the second case study of this thesis.

The colonial discourse has been internalized by Finns, like most other Western Europeans, partially through consumer products. The coloniality of everyday life has been evident in popular products such as “Negro kiss” chocolates, “Black Pete” cooking cream, “Eskimo” ice cream, “Geisha” chocolates and “Licorice Boy” sweets. Not until the 21<sup>st</sup>



century have the discourses reproduced by these products been problematized, and their decolonialization has been a slow process. The Licorice Boy, or *Laku-Pekka*, for instance used to be the name of a type of Fazer candy originating from the 1920s, which was marketed with the “imperial kitsch” logo of a Black African face that exemplified stereotypical colonial visual representations of otherness (Rossi, 2009, p. 347). According to Rossi, *Laku-Pekka* licorice was an exercise in Finnish colonial complicity, and this argument can easily be extended to the other products mentioned above as well. The use of caricatures is a typical tendency of visual colonialism, in that it portrays the stark differences between the self and the other, thus reinforcing a separation between us and them (p. 357).

The marketing, advertising and packaging of the so-called colonial goods have offered Finns an indirect, but strong link to the history of European colonialism. These goods have been sold with the help of pictorial representations, which have effectively rooted the colonial ideology in the everyday life of Finns. (Rossi, 2009, p. 359)

Thus, such symbolism deserves to be problematized. In the case of *Laku-Pekka*, this was done in 2008, when the name of the licorice was changed and the stereotypical logo was removed from its wrapper. The rebranding was preceded by some heated debate, since some Finns saw the image of *Laku-Pekka* as part of Finnish culture and tradition that should be left alone. According to Rossi, however, this traditionality by no means referred to an inclusion of Black people in Finnish society, but on the contrary, the “exclusion of the non-whites, and participation in colonial history, which is represented as part of the Finnish national heritage” (p. 348).

Notably, changes to Finnish products with colonial imagery were made in 2020, much due to the momentum of the international protest wave against racism, and these changes were accompanied by similar lamentation of meddling with Finnish tradition. The “Negro kisses” had deducted the word “Negro” from their title as early as 2001, but it was not until 2020 that the caricatured image of a kissing African couple in tribal outfits was removed from all the chocolate boxes. Similarly in 2020 the Eskimo ice cream, *Mustapekka* cooking cream, and Turkish and Bulgarian yoghurt were sentenced to undergo rebranding – and all were accompanied with a debate between the need to subtract racist imagery and the need to preserve “traditions”.<sup>2</sup> These products and the debates surrounding them are prime examples of how colonial discourses are relevant in Finnish everyday life up to this day, even though Finland was never a colonial power. The rebranding of these products in 2020 further shows

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<sup>2</sup> Mattila, M. (30.6.2020). Kun jäätelöpuikko tai suklaa vaihtaa nimensä, se herättää tunteita – asiantuntija: “20 vuoden päästä hämmästellään, että oho, millaista ennen oli”. *Yle Uutiset*. <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-11425902>

how Finland is connected to the international movement against racism and colonialism, and how its ghosts are relevant here as well. However, it is important to remain critical of the limitations of such rebranding efforts, lest they remain in the realm of metaphor (Tuck & Yang, 2012) and merely what I call *cosmetic decoloniality*. The rebranding of such consumer products and recent online debate about it is the third and final case study of this thesis.

National narratives in Finland are often in contradiction with critical examination of social processes through a postcolonial lens. Ahonen (2020) has investigated national myths in Finnish school history textbooks in the decades after World War II, and one of her findings is that Finnish history has been largely considered as separate from global processes; for example, colonialism is discussed, “but not as a phenomenon concerning Finland” (p. 350). It is also worth noting arguments claiming that the Sámi people have been marginalized further through their virtual invisibility in textbooks – with very little representation in the educational system, the history and culture of the Sámi have been further superseded by the hegemonic, homogeneous Finnish national narrative (Kuokkanen, 2007, p. 151).

In summation, what makes Finland an interesting and novel subject of postcolonial critique is a sense of *historical separateness*, that has to a significant extent crafted Finnish national narratives that have for long defied more critical introspection. The narrative of Finland as a small, noble and resilient victim of foreign powers and global tumult sits sturdily in the common consciousness and thereby makes it painful and somewhat provocative to point out less-than-noble historical facts and consider their more nuanced modern-day repercussions in a postcolonial paradigm – not to mention questioning the legitimacy of some of Finland’s most deep-rooted national narratives.

In this section I have attempted to provide a brief overview of Finland’s multilayered relationship with coloniality. The objective of this thesis, however, is not to unearth in what ways and to what extent Finland and Finns were historically intertwined with colonial projects. Rather, the objective of this thesis is to investigate, through the three case studies outlined above, some of the ways in which discourses and narratives of coloniality are used to construct conceptions of Finland and Finnishness, and how tensions related to these issues are intensified in public debates ensnared by antagonisms.

Although beyond the scope of this thesis, it is integral to mention here one more dimension of Finnish colonial identification that demands additional research. In recent years, Finnish forestry corporations, and by extension the Finnish state, have been accused of

colonialism for their operation of major pulp mills in Uruguay and Argentina (Teivainen, 2017, pp. 194–5). Incidentally, the forest industry has always been a central feature to Finland’s economic contribution to the colonial project. From the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Finland was a prime producer of wood that was used in the ships of European colonial powers, and after gaining independence Finland experienced an even deeper integration into global trade via lumber, plywood, and cellulose (Lehtonen & Löytty, 2007, p. 111). Finland’s connection to the global economy via its wood products, which began during colonial times, is then ongoing and intensifying in the present day. This is happening most notably in Uruguay, where the forestry corporation UPM has a massive pulp mill and an even larger one on the way, thereby receiving credit for economic and industrial development in the region but also criticism for extractivism and tax avoidance. As Teivainen somewhat hyperbolically notes, “in Uruguay, Finland is a superpower” (p. 192). Then again, in framing the actions of UPM as a neocolonial project, Uruguayan activists are representing the issue against the backdrop of the Latin American historical narrative, in which colonialism understandably plays a central role in explaining power relations.

Although the neocolonialism accusations of some Uruguayan activists have been mentioned in Finnish media, including in my own journalistic reporting, the dispute has not gained traction in Finnish public or political debate. This may be due to an inherent incommensurability between the tropes in Finnish and Uruguayan public debates. Finland, naturally, does not share the fixation on colonialism central to Latin American social and political discourse. On the contrary, in Finland, colonialism has traditionally been a non-issue – even entertaining the notion of asymmetrical power relations involved in UPM’s undertakings in Uruguay as possible forms of neocolonialism would require a significant paradigm shift in the Finnish self-perspective. Although the debate revolving around UPM in Uruguay will not be concentrated on further in this thesis, it is prudent to keep it in mind as a further example of colonial meanings ascribed to Finland in the present day. It goes to show that these considerations are timely and relevant on multiple planes, and perhaps the results of this research will inspire and inform further investigations into these dimensions of Finnish coloniality as well, as these questions evolve and our perceptions are challenged further.

### **2.3 Mediatized memory politics and national identity**

National and cultural memory are, by nature, fundamentally contested political issues:

[D]ominant discourses of society [...] are generally created by elites and counter-elites to justify themselves and to advance their political, economic and social goals. It is at once a top-down and a bottom-up process. In both directions, and at every level, the construction of memory is infused in politics. (Lebow, 2006, p. 4)

Memory studies is a broad academic field that investigates, for instance, the tensions involved in using memory to construct collective narratives of the past as a political project, for example through practices of commemoration or nostalgia (see Olick, 2007; Boym, 2007). On a more visceral level, memory studies have dealt with the lingering societal and cultural effects, and coming to terms with transgenerational trauma such as the Holocaust (see Hirsch, 2008), or chattel slavery, a feature of colonialism (see Dery, 1994). The narrative negotiations and struggles involved in remembering, and forgetting, are highly political practices performed by nations, states, and individuals.

Today, the digital public sphere and polarized political identities have made memory politics even more prominent than they were in the past. Social media has become the polyphonous site of struggles over memory politics, where the process is no longer only top-down or bottom-up, but also sideways and inside-out. “Social groups construct the past(s) they need for their collective identity”, argue Birkner and Donk (2020), who extend memory studies into a more contemporaneous zone through their research in the up-and-coming subfield of “social media memory studies” (p. 372). Social media is today arguably a central site of contestation of all types of meaning – be it social, cultural, or political. For years already, it has made little sense to treat social media as some kind of distinct realm from these realities. More and more, struggles over meaning have become mediatized and curated by social media platforms. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Tiktok, Youtube, and others have become embedded in our social reality; have become an integral – even primary – setting of our shared reality. As Birkner and Donk argue, these social media spaces are also used in the construction of pasts as a form of collective identity formation. The practice of memory politics in itself is by no means novel, but the medium is. These new forms of mediated participation also demand new ways of researching memory practices, as they are the new central site of contestation, where ghosts of the past return to haunt us in new contexts:

Social media has become a valuable instrument in political conflicts for those who are not in charge, for example, for non-elites or social movements. Thus, it is important to analyze the role of social media in political conflicts, which are referred to as questions of collective or social memory. (Birkner & Donk, 2020, p. 368)

The counter-publics involved in these conflicts can be conservative or liberal, and on social media struggles between these blocs and elite discourses can materialize in, among others,

debates over memory (p. 379). It is Birkner and Donk's fresh approach to social media memory studies that acts as the practical model for the research undertaken in this thesis on current colonial discursive struggles in Finland.

In their research, Birkner and Donk (2020) analyze the social media conversation surrounding a controversy related to memory politics in the German city of Münster. The debate revolved around the mayor and municipal council's initiative to rename Hindenburgplatz, a central square in the city, with a more neutral moniker – based on new historical interpretations re-evaluating President of the Weimar Republic Paul von Hindenburg's role in the Nazi Party's ascent to power, making the square's name problematic (Birkner & Donk, p. 368). In the heated public discussion that unfolded on social media, conservative citizens strongly opposed the new hegemonic narrative that problematized Hindenburg's role in German history and launched petitions and ultimately a popular vote to preserve the original name of the square (p. 369). The study also shows how intertwined social media struggles are with tangible social reality: in the Münster case, social media debate strongly predicated an official vote on the issue; in the BLM protests of 2020, viral posts and videos on social media were integral in fomenting uprisings in the streets. To further relate this to the topic of this thesis, can we not see a similar juxtaposition of social forces in the BLM and anti-colonial protests of 2020? To use somewhat simplified blanket terms for the sake of convenience, *culturally liberal* forces demanded toppling statues and renaming streets that carried heritage of slavery and colonialism; *culturally conservative* forces saw value in preserving these monuments as markers of shared national and cultural identity. Politics of identities are key in these struggles, and in this thesis, I analyze similar phenomena as they are manifested in public debates related to coloniality in Finland. How is memory narrativized and reconfigured in the social media realm when it comes to debates over Finland's colonial complicity, and how do these discursive struggles over meaning align themselves along political lines of ideology and identity?

A study in social psychology by Mannerström, et al. (2020) applies features of political identity to determining the ideological constellations of contemporary 18–29-year-old Finns. This study is especially relevant here, since it shows how young Finnish people today align themselves with ideological blocs primarily based on sociocultural values (instead of economic ones) and is therefore indicative of present and future trends in political ideology construction and reproduction. A similar development of identity politics as the main rift between political ideologies, replacing former economic divisions, can be seen more widely in Western liberal democracies at least since the 2010s. Here it should be noted that

the term *identity* as it is used in the social sciences has been strongly criticized for its ambiguity, where other concepts denoting different forms of *belonging* may be more precise (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). However, as identity politics has become a central concept in contemporary references to the ways in which sociocultural struggles happen on social media and in party politics, and those issues as they relate to memory practices are the focus of this thesis, I will be using the term identity, while aware of its limitations.

The study by Mannerström, et al. (2020) focus on divisions in Finnish society in their conclusion that sociocultural issues and values have become the primary demarcation of political identities (p. 26), i.e., a clear postmaterialist turn can be identified in the Finnish political arena. The polar opposites in these political identities can be identified as cultural liberalism (*arvoliberaalisuus*) and cultural conservatism (*arvokonservatiivisuus*), in which those identifying with the former support ethnic, cultural and sexual diversity, individual choices and strong nature conservation, whereas the latter tend to gravitate towards religiosity, traditional family values, limited immigration and nationalism as the main informers of their political views (p. 11). Mannerström, et al. argue that people tend to adapt to political-ideological attitude combinations that have been adopted by social groups (e.g. political parties), since these groups construct meaning and identity that help an individual interpret the world (p. 22). In terms of Finnish party politics, this shift from socioeconomic to sociocultural hegemony in shaping political ideologies can be seen in the rise of the culturally liberal Green Party and culturally conservative Finns Party as extreme opposites whose ideologies are constructed primarily around value-laden principles (p. 24). Most strongly of all the political issues studied that polarize young Finnish cultural liberals and cultural conservatives into opposing blocs is the issue of immigration (p. 22). Issues of immigration are linked closely to issues of racism, and these are both related to central contemporary manifestations of coloniality in modern societies. Therefore, if these issues are indeed the most polarizing shapers of political identities in Finland, as Mannerström, et al. suggest, then the debate surrounding colonial complicity is a seminal debate that demands to be studied.

## **2.4. Antagonistic frontiers and equivalential logic**

This is the backdrop against which I analyze current tensions and struggles over postcolonial interpretations of Finnish cultural memory and national narratives. Let us begin with an example that compellingly illustrates these contrasting political identities and how

they can be antagonistically portrayed to serve political ends. On 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2021, Jussi Halla-aho, then-leader of the Finns Party, published a post on his Facebook profile and page; the analysis of which serves as a valuable gateway to the research at hand. The post was a response to an article by the editorial board of *Helsingin Sanomat*, Finland's largest daily newspaper, whose journalistic principles can generally be described as culturally liberal. The editorial board's article in question criticized as radicalism the calls of some Finns Party politicians to supplant values taught in school subjects with values of the party.<sup>3</sup> Without delving in the details of this debate too much – as it is mostly beyond the scope of this thesis – suffice to say that it is a good recent example of struggle over narrative hegemony. What is particularly relevant here is Halla-aho's response to the article on Facebook, as he links the discursive struggle to, among other things, the debate over traces of colonialism. As is typical for Halla-aho's posts on social media, he uses literary devices of heavy sarcasm and irony to make his point. The post unfolds as a satirical dialogue between *Helsingin Sanomat* and the Finns Party. A translation of the post follows:

Helsingin Sanomat: "*Finland does not belong to Finns, and Finns do not even exist. Blacks are good, whites are bad. Islam is good, Christianity is bad. Women are good [...], men are bad. Climate change is caused by Finns. Finland has a responsibility for colonial times. Greta [Thunberg] is the greatest thinker of our time. There are 100 genders. A man menstruates and he can give birth. Freedom of speech means responsibility for speech, and wrong opinions cannot be uttered. Equality means positive discrimination. Tweets by the far-right threaten social order. Throat-cuttings and child-rapes are isolated cases. Bearded Arabs are war children. We must tell this to children in school! Compulsory education should be extended so that these things can be told many times.*"

Finns Party: "Actually, that's not the way it is."

Helsingin Sanomat: "The Finns Party is radical!" (Halla-aho, 22.1.2021; own translation, italics added)

I include the following brief analysis of Halla-aho's post here, because it is an exceptionally lucid example at constructing a *logic of equivalence*, which here plays out in equating a certain set of issues with a certain political ideology – be it cultural liberalism or cultural conservatism. In colloquial terms, Halla-aho is here (to some extent ironically) using a so-called straw man argument by exaggerating supposedly liberal talking points and presenting his party, in contrast, as the voice of reason. On a more refined level, Halla-aho can here be seen reinforcing a type of logic of equivalence, which, according to the seminal theoretician of populism Ernesto Laclau (2005), is a central feature of any populist movement. According to Laclau, a populist movement uses equivalential logic to construct an

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<sup>3</sup> HS editorial board. (21.1.2021). Radikaalit ovat taas kouluopetuksen kimpussa. *Helsingin Sanomat*. <https://www.hs.fi/paakirjoitukset/art-2000007754770.html>

*antagonistic frontier* between supposedly opposing sects of society. The logic of equivalence unfolds as follows: a wide variety of unsatisfied social demands held by frustrated people are aggregated to form a common source of identification (Laclau, pp. 37–38). This can be explained through a simplified example of a hypothetical right-wing nativist political party, whose social demands may include closing borders from immigrants, preserving traditional family values and gender roles, curbing aggressive action to combat climate change, and so on. In the coming together of these various demands, we can see an example of how “all the demands, in spite of their differential character, tend to reaggregate themselves, forming what we will call an *equivalential chain*” (p. 36). In this process, “for the equivalential chain to create a frontier within the social it is necessary somehow to represent the other side of the frontier. There is no populism without discursive construction of an enemy” (p. 39).

Laclau (2005) argues that the populist discourse necessarily divides the society into two opposing camps: a narrative of the “power” versus the “underdog” (p. 38). It is safe to assume that in a situation where two opposing movements with populist tendencies arise, both of them will attempt to adopt the identity of the counter-hegemonic “underdog”, accusing the other of being allied with the hegemonic “power”. The rise of right-wing nationalist populist parties in various regions of the world over the last decade has clearly augmented internal social antagonisms in a way that has unfolded with much similarity across the globe. In the Laclaudian sense, proponents of cultural liberalism can also be seen as using populist repertoires in constructing antagonisms, although when visible in party politics, these views are generally to an extent adopted by some political parties rather than these parties being constructed primarily around these views. Populist tendencies can be identified in both, for according to Laclau, the most important question to ask is not whether a political movement is populist or not, but to what extent is it populist:

A movement or an ideology – or, to put it under their common genus, a discourse – will be more or less populist depending on the degree to which its contents are articulated by equivalential logics. This means that no political movement will be entirely exempt from populism, because none will fail to interpellate to some extent the ‘people’ against an enemy, through the construction of a social frontier. (Laclau, 2005, p. 47)

According to Laclau, such a frontier of antagonism is constructed around a signifier that represents the equivalentially chained demands of a certain movement or group. Applying this notion in a somewhat simplified way to the context at hand, I argue that coloniality is such a floating, or empty, signifier. Laclau notes that empty and floating signifiers largely overlap in practice, but given that a floating signifier is used to emphasize “the ambiguity inherent to all frontiers and of the impossibility of [...] acquiring any ultimate stability” (p.



43), it is more applicable in this context where I see coloniality used as a signifier for both opposing movements analyzed here, if not usually referred to by that name. When grouping around the signifier of coloniality, the culturally liberal group sees it as the racist/nativist enemy; on the other hand, the culturally conservative group sees questions of coloniality as attacks on traditional values and unwarranted accusations of guilt. “There is no populism without discursive construction of the enemy” (p. 39), and here we can see how opposing discourses and the frontier that separates them are thus constructed around the dichotomy represented by the signifier of coloniality.

Much of these contemporary discursive struggles take place on social media platforms. “From a discourse-theoretical viewpoint, media are seen not just as passively expressing or reflecting social phenomena, but as specific machineries that produce, reproduce and transform social phenomena” (Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007, p. 274) – and this is ever more the case in the current digital public sphere. Bail (2021) argues that social media works as a prism that makes users’ views become more radical through two processes: on one hand, users are surrounded by an excess of like-minded views, which normalizes and reinforces more extreme views, and on the other hand, this situation foments antagonism between groups by making the opposing group’s views seem more extreme than they actually are (p. 67). There is not a clear consensus for the reason why social media debates are often polarized – do social media algorithms generate polarization or facilitate existing polarization? These questions are beyond the scope of this thesis, but polarization of content and debates in the digital public sphere can be seen to reinforce the construction of antagonistic frontiers via equivalential chains.

That brings us back to Halla-aho’s post as a gateway to the research at hand. What especially interests me in the context of this thesis is the way Halla-aho explicitly includes the idea of Finland’s “colonial responsibility” in a long list of supposedly culturally liberal attitudes. Here we can apply Laclau’s theory of the logic of equivalence in a slightly modified form to attempt to understand the process this post is both reflecting and reproducing. Using equivalential logic, Halla-aho constructs an antagonism by aggregating a wide variety of issues (colonialism, racism, Finnishness, gender, climate change, etc.) into the supposed agenda of the culturally liberal forces and positioning his own culturally conservative party as its (rational) opposite. As we have seen above, in the study by Mannerström, et al. (2020), people do construct their political identities along the lines of these equivalential chains. What transpires is a somewhat absurd conflict between identities where, as Žižek (2020)

polemically puts it, “I am not sure which position we should take in a particular political struggle, but when we learn the position of our enemy, we automatically assume that our position should be the opposite one” (p. 149). What makes the issues of coloniality, racism, and Finnishness difficult to process is the fact that they are strongly politicized along these equivalential chains – they are construction blocks of opposing identities. Indeed, decoloniality is not merely a theoretical process within academia, but a political objective of many culturally liberal social forces. Therefore, culturally conservative social forces will naturally align themselves in stark opposition to such objectives. Halla-aho explicitly explains this dichotomy in his Facebook post by representing his party’s agenda as a reaction to unreasonable demands made by the liberal left. Issues of memory politics, such as colonialism, can thus be seen as partisan issues, and social media is the central space where these tensions of identity and ideology are struggled and negotiated over.

There is another reason for why debates concerning colonialism are emerging in Finland in the present moment, aside from being one issue among many to debate in today’s antagonistic atmosphere. The ghost of colonialism, demanding reconciliation, has risen to haunt the United States and Western Europe. In the vein of Gilman-Opalsky (2016), a ghost is a type of memory of a past horror that will not leave a society alone until it is reconciled with, and such reconciliation ultimately happens through revolt of one kind or another. Occasionally, to access a memory requires some kind of trigger or stimulus, prompting the memory to ‘come back to us’” (Gilman-Opalsky, p. 35), and it seems such a trigger was experienced with unprecedented intensity in the death of George Floyd in May 2020. A wave of international protests must indeed be intense in order to make questions of colonial pasts relevant in a periphery-of-the-center country like Finland, in whose national narrative colonialism has long been treated as a non-applicable foreign phenomenon. Yet this is precisely what is happening to a growing degree in academic, activist, public and political discussion. Today, as in most political issues, the main site of memory politics is shifting from school textbooks, literature, and even consumer products to platforms of social media, where narratives of Finnishness are debated and re-articulated. Identity politics and the operating logics of social media inflame these issues, but their roots and therefore the necessity to process them as a society lie much deeper. The specter of colonialism haunting Europe is extending to Finland; this much is clear from its increased relevance in the public sphere. This need not be a reason to fall into despair – on the contrary, Gilman-Opalsky sees ghosts as something integral to healthy societies, a sort of “active moral conscience” that

demands that exploitation and suffering of the past be faced and reconciled with: “An everyday life of generalized anxiety and despair could and should be haunted by the possibility of renewed pleasure and joy” (Gilman-Opalsky, p. 33). It is to these re-negotiations of Finnish identities relating to coloniality, and the discursive political struggles they beget today, that I turn to next.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research approach**

Putting all the aforementioned theory and reflection into practical use, I will continue by applying them to specific case studies and online debate concerning the issues these cases represent. The analytical part of this thesis takes place in the following way: I analyze three separate but interrelated cases providing different perspectives to the issues at hand – the relationship of Finland and Finnishness with coloniality – and along with each of these cases I analyze a corresponding social media debate, revealing the discursive struggle over memory and identity related to these issues.

In my approach to this analysis, I do not strive for total impartiality and objectivity – if such things even exist. Setting my analysis of the research material in a critical postcolonial and decolonial, as well as discourse theory paradigm entails certain core assumptions that lead to certain interpretations. Central to the diverse theories is the notion of power inherent in colonial relations and the discourses constructed in these realms. A central tenet of this power as pertained to colonialism and coloniality is the power to define and represent the Other. To these classical theories I add the somewhat distinctive position of Finland in the realm of coloniality, as well as the contemporary social issues and movements these questions have raised as they intersect with memory politics. The analysis of power structures takes center stage in my scrutiny of the case studies mentioned above; the power relations involved in each cultural artefact or phenomenon itself on the one hand, and the discursive struggle of contemporary re-evaluation as it appears in each related social media debate on the other.

Reflecting my own academic background, my analysis is interdisciplinary; it is grounded in features of postcolonial and decolonial theory as well as discourse theory and memory studies. In my analysis of the social media debates relating to Finland's relationship to colonialism, I will be drawing from relevant concepts in Laclau's (2005) discourse analysis, particularly as he has applied it to populism, as well as Birkner and Donk's (2020) methodology on researching social media memory studies. By synthesizing these approaches, the first of which is more theoretical and the second more practical, I aim to show some examples of how the power struggles related to coloniality manifest themselves in contemporary Finnish society, where polarization between political identities is increasingly the greatest source of antagonism affecting practically every social issue. To relate this to

Laclaudian theoretical concepts, my thesis investigates coloniality as a floating signifier around which prevailing political antagonisms are grouped. As social media has become the central arena for social and political debates, i.e., discursive struggles, I examine how this particular discursive struggle takes place in the polarized digital public sphere.

To recap, I approach these topics by engaging with the case studies and social media material with the following research questions in mind:

1. What is the relationship of Finland and Finnishness to coloniality, and how have recent international anti-colonial social movements affected the remembrance of and coming to terms with this relationship?
2. How are narratives of memory relating to Finnish coloniality being constructed and reconstructed via discursive struggles in the digital public sphere?
3. Can conflicting attitudes on coloniality be understood through equivalential logic, i.e., how is one's recognition or rejection of Finland's colonial roles related to one's political identity in the current polarized atmosphere?

### **3.2 Research material**

The research material of this thesis is derived from three case studies, which are all related to dimensions of coloniality I have identified above. I analyze each cultural artefact and phenomenon itself from a postcolonial/decolonial perspective, and then move on to analyze a lengthy social media discussion thread related to each case. The cases have been selected based on their relevance to the topic and perspective of my thesis. Such a selection makes possible a qualitative analysis of Finland's relationship with coloniality through a few specific examples. The objective is to use the case studies and research material to trace a wider phenomenon of the construction of Finland and Finnishness via colonial relations, as well as the discursive struggle of re-evaluation and re-articulation of these constructs in the present moment. The cultural artefacts and phenomena I study here are analytic facilitators, which are not meant to be representative of issues of Finnish coloniality or antagonistic public debates around them as a whole, but rather nodes of discourse that provide an opportunity for theoretical reflection.

The first case study exemplifies a dimension of coloniality I identify as acknowledgement, and relates to the boardgame *Afrikan tähti* – a ubiquitous and enduringly

popular game reliving the conquest of Africa. The social media conversation that I analyze this issue through is one started by a 2020 Facebook post by the comedian Iikka Kivi, who is an active political commentator known for his provocative style on social media. *Afrikan tähti* is an appropriate starting point because it sets the scene for an analysis of broader colonialist and specifically orientalist worldviews ingrained in Finnish culture. The boardgame was not subject to widespread public critique or heated debate until the controversy stemming from the University of Helsinki in the autumn of 2021, and only a handful of academic articles and blog posts have been written over the preceding years exploring the problematics of the game's aesthetic and its position in Finnish culture. Analyzing the issue through the online debate started by Kivi is fitting for the objectives of this thesis, as he has been known to explicitly emphasize the dichotomy between cultural liberals and cultural conservatives on political issues. On Facebook, Kivi's page "Koomikko Iikka Kivi" has over 46 000 followers (as of April 2022). The post I analyze here received over 1 600 reactions, 125 shares, and 360 comments.

The second case study exemplifies a dimension of coloniality I identify as reconciliation, and relates to the incident in 2019, when former actor and current Green Party MP Pirkka-Pekka Petelius extended his apology to the Sámi people for starring in discriminatory comedy sketches. The apology generated a sizable public debate, and so it makes sense to pick a strand of this debate for further analysis of the discursive struggle it ignited. The particular social media conversation I have selected for analysis is the one that began from Petelius' apology on Twitter, published simultaneously with his party's more detailed press release on the subject. This case is a logical next step in my analysis because it brings the topic of colonialism within Finland's own borders and opens the public debate to the rituals of public apologies, righting historical wrongs, and becoming aware of harmful cultural representations that commonly held racial attitudes have reinforced – and vice versa. On Twitter, Petelius has over 14 000 followers (as of April 2022). The post I analyze here received nearly 3 500 likes, 147 retweets, and about 260 comments/replies.

The third and final case study exemplifies a dimension of coloniality I identify as cosmetic decoloniality, and relates to rebranding traditional Finnish consumer products that have exhibited colonial tropes in their names and imagery. The most recent wave of rebranding began in 2020, with a number of companies acknowledging that the anti-racism and anti-colonial protests ignited by Black Lives Matter were behind the latest effort to decolonialize foodstuffs. This case study provides an example of how the international

protest wave has in practice affected issues of representation of the Other in Finnish everyday life and poses the question of how meaningful such rebranding efforts actually are. A suitable social media debate to analyze this issue through is a Twitter thread begun by Finns Party MP Ville Tavio, in which he marvels at the renaming of Eskimo ice cream and explicitly reinforces an antagonistic frontier by presuming that “the green left must be rejoicing”. On Twitter, Tavio has nearly 22 000 followers (as of April 2022). The post I analyze here received over 500 likes, 25 retweets, and about 250 comments/replies.

### 3.3 Methods of analysis

The analysis in each of the three following chapters takes place in two parts. First, I analyze each case study from a critical perspective, applying features of postcolonial/decolonial theory and discourse theory outlined above. Using the defined cases I consider the power structures of representation involved in Finnish coloniality and relate them to the wider frame of memory politics. I also use them to illustrate some of the ongoing dimensions or processes of reckoning with coloniality in Finland, which I identify as *acknowledgement*, *reconciliation*, and *cosmetic decoloniality*. Second, I analyze a social media conversation thread corresponding to each of the three case studies. Here I employ concepts from Laclau’s (2005) critical discourse analysis that he has related to populism and which I have discussed in the previous chapter, such as *logic of equivalence*, *floating signifier*, and *antagonistic frontier*. On a more concrete level, I also use Birkner and Donk’s (2020) social media memory studies theory of how online debate over issues of remembering relates to political identity narrative formation, and how social media is the main site of these contestations today.

In approaching my topic, I apply discourse theory as a loose interpretive frame, similarly to the way demonstrated in Carpentier & De Cleen’s (2007) and Carpentier, et al.’s (2021) application of Laclaudian discourse analysis. The discourse analysis employed here works at a broader level of reflecting on hegemonic structures and discursive struggles over narrative construction, rather than a detailed coding and parsing of language. Such an approach is appropriate for the objectives of this thesis, since “DTA [discourse-theoretical analysis] becomes especially valuable for analyses that are aimed at deconstructing the complex relationships between representations, practices and identities, and the way they contribute to the generation of (old and new) meanings” (Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007, p.

278). In this vein, I employ the theoretical frameworks outlined in the previous paragraph more as sensitizing concepts to help understand the social and political phenomena at play in the discursive struggles, rather than as a rigorous methodology. Bowen (2006), for example, has argued for the merits of sensitizing concepts as “starting points” in qualitative research: “Sensitizing concepts give the researcher a sense of how observed instances of a phenomenon might fit within conceptual categories” (p. 20). Using such a loose methodological framework allows me to approach the ambiguous and fluid topic of my research with an appropriately malleable method. Since the selection of case studies and research materials has been made to fit the objectives of this thesis, so it makes sense that the research approach is selected similarly. This does not, by any means, imply that I would be twisting the results to fit a predetermined argument; rather, my objective is to shed light on a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that has been little discussed in this context, and requires an approach that does not shy away from bending and synthesizing schools of thought and method to produce a more holistic perspective.

Although somewhat of a simplification of complex political-ideological contingencies, the categories of culturally conservative (*arvokonservatiivinen*) and culturally liberal (*arvoliberaalinen*) are useful as demarcations of groups on opposing sides of the antagonistic divide of sociocultural issues in contemporary Finnish society. As detailed in the previous chapter, Mannerström, et al. (2020) have identified these as the two most defined and polarized contemporary political groups, and from the attitudes they represent it can be deduced that in general terms, cultural liberals favor the idea of deconstructing colonial power structures, whereas cultural conservatives are opposed to this and/or deem the whole issue irrelevant. In analyzing the social media threads, I hold this theory of polarization, where a number of attitudes and values are seen to converge around political groups, as a backdrop when considering how clearly commentators can be divided into these two contrasting groups of political identification. I also attempt to gather similar arguments under subheadings of these groups and possibly other emerging groups. From this I mean to analyze what types of common denominators exist between cultural liberals and cultural conservatives and how they are in opposition to one another on this plane of contention. With what arguments do they either recognize or deny Finnish colonial complicity, and what are the reasons and implications behind these recognitions or rejections?

In purely practical terms, my qualitative analysis of the hundreds of comments in the three social media threads involves coding and grouping of the comments into categories.



First, I read through the entire comment thread to get a general idea of the debate, and the argumentation and rhetoric involved. Then I begin by coding the comments that are clearly antagonistic, i.e., those constructing an antagonistic frontier by means of equivalential logic that establishes a clear dichotomy of ‘us’ vs. ‘them’. In the context of social media, these are most often set up by using such rhetorical devices as straw man arguments, sarcasm, or outright verbal attacks. These antagonistic comments can be culturally liberal or culturally conservative, as I have defined the attitudes in accordance with the floating signifier of coloniality. The antagonistic comments are the most important part of my analysis, but I then go through the material again and code those comments that less antagonistically either agree or disagree with the original poster’s view, as well as those comments which cannot be clearly categorized as one of the two opposing discourses but which bring a different kind of case-specific perspective to the discussion that warrants separate analysis of Finland’s relationship to the ghosts of colonialism.

Once the coding and categorization has been done, I analyze the contents of the comments more closely, especially to find common and contrasting themes and arguments in them. With dozens of comments in each category, it is possible to make some generalized observations related to how the discourses are constructed. Throughout my analysis I draw parallels with previous case studies and the social media debates related to them, thereby building and advancing my argument every step of the way. In my concluding discussion I briefly summarize my main findings, relate them to the overall theme and present my main arguments as they pertain to my research questions.

### **3.4 Reflection on the research process**

The processes and phenomena I aim to scrutinize are intricate and often intangible, which provides many opportunities but also poses challenges. The social media threads analyzed here are by no means representative of Finnish public debate in general, or even fully representative of the public debate on colonial memory narratives in Finland. Such an approach would necessitate a quantitative analysis of social media posts and comments on various platforms, news articles and opinion columns in traditional media, as well as comments sections on journalistic media platforms. However, mapping the entirety of the fragmented popular discussion on coloniality as it relates or does not relate to modern-day Finland is not the objective of the analysis I perform here. Rather, I use the specific case

studies and online conversations they have generated to performs an in-depth qualitative analysis of the ways in which Finnishness is articulated and struggled over when relating it to the remembrance and performance of colonialism, and what these discursive struggles reveal about political identities. Through this micro-level analysis, I am able to scrutinize the discourses in more detail, and from such an analysis it will be possible to hypothesize larger patterns and design more quantitative future research.

Certain inherent limitations are related to the research material collected from Facebook and Twitter. Social media platforms have been seen to tend to polarize debates by, for example, normalizing extremity in one's own group and exaggerating extremity in the opposing group (Bail, 2021), and disproportionately encouraging engagement against opposing political groups by rewarding the expression of negative emotions and opinions over positive ones (Rathje, Van Bavel, & van der Linden, 2021). People who take part in the debates analyzed here are likely people with strong opinions on the matters, which again limits the representativeness of the material in terms of society at whole. On Facebook, users who open a conversation thread can delete or hide comments, and on both platforms commentors themselves can later delete, or on Facebook also edit their own comments, which to some extent skews the research material available. For example, Iikka Kivi has stated that he is in the habit of deleting comments and blocking users he deems disrespectful. Also, Facebook and Twitter follow different operating logic and are therefore not directly comparable. For example, on Facebook, posts show up primarily on the feeds of people who have liked or followed a page, whereas on Twitter posts can circulate more widely – thus it is safe to assume Facebook posts tend to reach more people who agree with their contents, whereas tweets can also be seen by many people who do not agree with them, thus facilitating more divisive debate. Furthermore, a major limitation with analyzing the content of social media comments is that it can be challenging to interpret the meaning of certain commentors; in particular, it is sometimes genuinely impossible to detect whether a person is being sarcastic or not. In such cases, I have omitted the comment from analysis.

The social media threads analyzed here are in Finnish, and I have translated some of their content to English for the purpose of this research. All social media posts and comments quoted in this thesis are translated by me. This entails the risk of minor inaccuracies, for example in that some culturally specific meanings could be lost in translation. When necessary, I do my best to explain such cultural connotations, and include Finnish words and concepts in parenthesis when available English translations are imprecise.

Regarding the collection and use of the research material, there are some minor ethical concerns that can arise from analyzing social media posts and comments of individual people. I have taken these possible concerns into account in a number of ways. All the social media threads analyzed in this thesis are public. I do not mention the names of specific commentors unless they are public personas; in this case namely national politicians, and a comedian who actively engages in political debate and has shared personal details both in public social media posts and the news media. Even between these personas, the level of publicness is arguably different, with a senior politician naturally being more of a public figure than a stand-up comedian. However, here I primarily concentrate on the content of the public posts or statements analyzed, and only bring up personal backgrounds when relevant to this research from an ideological or political standpoint. I particularly respect the privacy of private citizens, which comprises nearly all of the commentors, even when they make their own views public. Besides, the identification of individual citizens would be irrelevant for the purposes of this research. I do make direct citations of some of the comments, so a reader of this thesis would have the possibility of connecting a specific comment to a specific person. However, this is of minor ethical concern. I have translated the citations from Finnish to English, which makes a direct online search more difficult; and I have referenced the URLs of the public threads in my sources, so an interested reader has the possibility to explore my primary sources anyhow.

For the sake of transparency, I here make note that I have written published journalistic articles – a handful of news and feature articles as well as one opinion piece – about Finland’s relationship with colonialism, thereby slightly contributing to the public discussion I analyze here. My own articles or the online conversations they generated are not included in this thesis, to prevent any possible conflict of interest or the semblance of it. My interest in the topic is, however, personal, academic, and professional, which gives me ample background understanding and the knowledge needed to consider the issues comprehensively from multiple perspectives. Considering the topic of this thesis, as well as the politicized nature of identity today, it is also essential that I declare my awareness of my own position as a researcher whose intersectional identity consists of many of those traits which colonial discourse has deemed default and neutral, and against which the Other has been defined: such as white, European, cis-gendered, straight, male. In colonial terms, as a Finn, my perspective may diverge from these so-called standards to an extent through my national identity, which can be described as semi-peripheral vis-à-vis colonial centers. The researcher’s awareness of

their own position and possible resulting bias within ideology and discourse is vital, as is their tireless effort to maintain balance despite the inherent narrowness of each individual's personal perspective.

While I have noted above that in my analysis I do not strive for strict impartiality – which is incommensurable with a critical postcolonial/decolonial approach and dubious as an academic objective full stop – I do strive to understand and appreciate and be equally critical of the differing motives that people have for promoting a certain narrative. I reject any implicit notion that ordinary citizens support colonialist narratives out of maliciousness, and I do not believe that all arguments that present themselves as criticism of colonialist narratives are justified postcolonial critique either. Reasons and processes behind contrasting political views and ensuing societal antagonisms are complex, subtle, and above all the result of contingencies. At the very least, both sides need to be heard and understood – albeit not necessarily accepted at face value – to dismantle antagonisms and the equivalential logic that emphasizes them. Decoloniality cannot take place in an atmosphere of antagonism, polarization, and contempt.

## 4. Reckoning with dimensions of coloniality in Finland

This chapter constitutes the main analytic portion of my thesis, in which I analyze three cultural artefacts and phenomena, and related social media discussion threads, as case studies that I have identified to exemplify three dimensions of coloniality in Finland: acknowledgement, reconciliation, and cosmetic decoloniality. In the first section (4.1), I begin with a reflection on the construction and re-construction of Finnishness vis-à-vis the rest of the world and external otherness, via the boardgame *Afrikan tähti*. In the second section (4.2), I take a step nearer by analyzing these issues in relation to internal otherness and political rituals of regret and reconciliation, via the Sámi sketch apology case study. In the final section of this chapter (4.3), I delve into issues of coloniality in contemporary everyday life and calls for its re-evaluation in the context of the most recent anti-colonial social movements in Western Europe and the United States, via a recent wave of rebranding consumer products exhibiting colonial representations. Following each subsection concentrating on the cultural artefact/phenomenon itself is another subsection concentrating on a related social media discussion thread, which I analyze to uncover patterns of equivalential logic and antagonistic frontiers, suggesting discursive struggles related to each dimension of coloniality. Throughout this chapter, I synthesize theory and case studies to identify features of Finnish coloniality and the discursive tensions they produce or are a part of. My reflection on these issues advances progressively from one case study to the next, with each subsequent section building upon the previous ones. The structure of my analysis in this chapter can be best visualized as an inverted triangle  $\nabla$ . Through an analysis of the case studies, I gradually move from the more general and conceptual to the more specific and tangible.

### 4.1 Acknowledgement: *Afrikan tähti*

#### 4.1.1 A critical analysis of the boardgame

Considering the extent of its cultural significance and ubiquity, there have been surprisingly few published studies on the colonialist and specifically orientalist tropes of *Afrikan tähti* – the iconic board game that has become imprinted in Finnish culture over 70 years and become a cultural artefact *par excellence*. The game was published in 1951, designed by the young Kari Mannerla (1930–2006), and has since become an enduring staple in Finnish

households and schools. One would be hard-pressed to find a Finn who has not played the game from their early childhood. According to the Finnish Museum of Games, some 3.6 million copies of the game have been sold over the last seven decades, half of them in Finland and half internationally. In its presentation of the game, the museum notes that the inspiration for the game did not stem so much from African reality, but from Humphrey Bogart films and alluring, wrinkled maps of the continent – leading to later criticism of the game’s colonialist worldview.<sup>4</sup> In this section, I analyze the game’s representations through the lens of postcolonial and decolonial critique, especially by examining the orientalist discourse it reproduces, and considering its implications.

In one of the few published scholarly discourse analyses of the game, Nummelin (1997) argues that *Afrikan tähti* invites Finns, who historically had very little to do with the colonization of Africa, to live out the fantasy of conquest of the dark continent and empire-building for themselves. The idea of Finland as a periphery in relation to the rest of the world and the history of colonialism comes out in Nummelin’s analysis: *Afrikan tähti* was published around the time of the Helsinki Olympics, so at the same time when Finland was put on the world map, Finns could fantasize about taking part in colonial conquest – albeit that colonialism was already drawing its last breaths at the time (Nummelin 1997). According to Nummelin, in transporting the player-conqueror to the heyday of imperialism, *Afrikan tähti* legitimizes imperialism. In a more recent article discussing Finland’s game culture, Ylänen (2017) briefly touches upon the enduring stereotypical imagery and colonialist stance of the game. She ponders how at the same time as black natives clad in loincloths have disappeared from commodity products and school textbooks, the tribal dance continues unchanged on the board of a game that has been elevated to the position of a national institution (p. 3).

Another type of reflection on the game took place in the milieu of the ethnographic Helinä Rautavaara Museum’s 2008 exhibition *Afrikan tähti – pelilaudan kääntöpuoli*, which sought to contextualize the game in relation to Africa’s real history and modernity, and was partially sponsored by the game’s current publisher, Martinex. The exhibition’s guidebook by social anthropologist Katja Uusihakala (2007) is mostly an overview of parts of African history, culture and society directed for primary school children, along with reflective exercises. It is noted that a great many Finns are familiar with the African map thanks to this

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<sup>4</sup> Vapriikki – Finnish Museum of Games. (2016). 100 suomalaista peliä. <http://vapriikki.fi/pelimuseo/pelit/>

game, and that the game has, for its part, molded Finnish conceptions of Africa as an uncharted, wild, and pristine continent (Uusihakala, pp. 4–5). Besides educating museumgoers about Africa’s place in the global economy and colonial history, the exhibition also includes a section about Finnish missionaries working in present-day Namibia since the 1870s (pp. 38–41), and the tradition of Finnish mass tourism to the Canary Islands since the 1960s (pp. 47–48). Contextualizing the game in this educational manner, and even connecting Finland to Africa’s colonial past – albeit discussed rather cursorily – is a valuable step toward a more holistic understanding of interconnectivity and contingency in world history, as well as colonial imaginaries in our everyday life. The fact that the game’s publisher was a sponsor of the exhibition naturally casts some questions about the possible limitations of critical reflection on the topic. To be sure, the exhibition was in the commercial interest of the publisher: the guidebook includes a full-page advertisement for “Finland’s most popular games”, *Afrikan tähti* and its newer sister game set in South America, *Inkan aarre*, with an invitation to “dive into adventure” (p. 37, own translation).

The aesthetic of *Afrikan tähti* is a textbook example of the representational power structures Edward Said (1978) discussed in his seminal theory of orientalism. Although parts of Said’s original theories have been critiqued and developed by other scholars in the intervening decades, they are applicable in the scrutiny of *Afrikan tähti*, for the game is chronologically situated in that very tradition of colonial representation that Said originally criticized. Orientalism is, at its core, a power relation deriving from the marriage between knowledge and power, where one has the power to know the Other, and thereby represent and define the Other and thus have power over the Other. Orientalism, as Said discusses it, is an intricate edifice of thought stemming from European colonization of other countries, and the ensuing power to define and represent the colonized Other in relation to the colonizing Self.

Knowledge means rising above immediacy, beyond self, into the foreign and distant. The object of such knowledge is inherently vulnerable to scrutiny; this object is a “fact” which, if it develops, changes, or otherwise transforms itself in the way that civilizations frequently do, nevertheless is fundamentally, even ontologically stable. To have such knowledge of such a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it. And authority here means for “us” to deny autonomy to “it” – the Oriental country – since we know it and it exists, in a sense, as we know it. (Said, 1978, p. 32)

Orientalism, then, is a system of representation developed into truth that not only rationalizes but also justifies and legitimizes Western colonial rule (Said, p. 39). Indeed, the binary between ‘us’ and ‘them’, here represented by the West and the East, the Occident and the Orient, is not a natural fact; it is constructed and reinforced throughout society and culture (Said, p. 3). A central implication to the construction of this binary, however, is not merely

the definition of the Other, but more importantly, the definition of the Self in relation and contrast to the Other. After all, “Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, ‘us’) and the strange (the Orient, the East, ‘them’)” (Said, p. 48). In this juxtaposition, “the Oriental is irrational, deprave (fallen), childlike, ‘different’; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal’” (Said, p. 40).

The ascription of these opposite characteristics to each side of the binary gradually developed a discourse that legitimized colonialism in its time, and still serves as the basis of many public attitudes and social structures, of the West as superior and all others as inferior. The knowledge production Said (1978) describes has stemmed from the asymmetrical power relations of colonial history, and *Afrikan tähti* is, for its part, both a product and a reinforcer of this discourse. Said theorizes how orientalism has informed the construction of a whole intricate system of knowledge built upon the basic assumptions of the us–them binary. The bulk of literature, art and science produced and published within the orientalist discourse reinforces a certain consensus of how things are, and thereby makes it seem like it is objective truth (Said, pp. 201–202). *Afrikan tähti* is a product of this discourse, for it is well known that Kari Mannerla, 19 years of age when he first envisioned the game, had never traveled to the African continent himself; his imaginary of what Africa is was formed by the dominant discourse of the time. *Afrikan tähti* is an exceptionally effective reinforcer of the orientalist discourse, for it has reproduced these very tropes to a large audience for decades.

In the vein of Johannes Fabian (2002), an intellectual descendent of Said who has applied orientalist critique to the way in which the Other is constructed in anthropology, it can be seen how *Afrikan tähti* is also an exercise in the *denial of coevalness*. What this means, at its most basic, is the construction of a temporal boundary between the Self and the Other; in that while both exist in the same time, their contemporaneity is effectively denied by presenting the Self as modern and the Other as primitive. In Fabian’s words this refers to a “persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse” (p. 31). Applied to the way in which the boardgame constructs and reproduces discourse, such a temporal disconnection between modernity and primitivity can be clearly detected. At the northern, hence top of the board is the modernity of the 1950s, in which the game was published: a clearly mid-20<sup>th</sup> century steam ship and airplane. Some sort of civilization can be seen in the northernmost parts of Africa, Tangier and Cairo, which were under colonial rule during the publication of



the game, and who are still represented as something clearly Other via a mosque and pyramids, respectively. The people here are different mainly due to their attire, but still somewhat familiar. There are some buildings and an insinuation of commerce in the form of a caravan of dromedary, but south of Timbuktu all morsels of civilization and modernity are discarded. Untamed jungle abounds in its natural state, dominated by wild animals and a distinct lack of civilization. The people here are depicted as stark caricatures in their primitive state – compared to the inhabitants of Northern Africa, who are depicted as humans, the inhabitants of Sub-Saharan Africa are very far removed from the modern human, and instead depicted as some primeval humanoid. Off the coast of Capetown there is a full-rigged sailing ship, which is obviously European but from an entirely different, earlier century than the steam ship in the northwestern corner of the map. The voyage in *Afrikan tähti* is therefore not only geographical but temporal: the deeper into Africa one goes in the game, the further back in history one also travels.

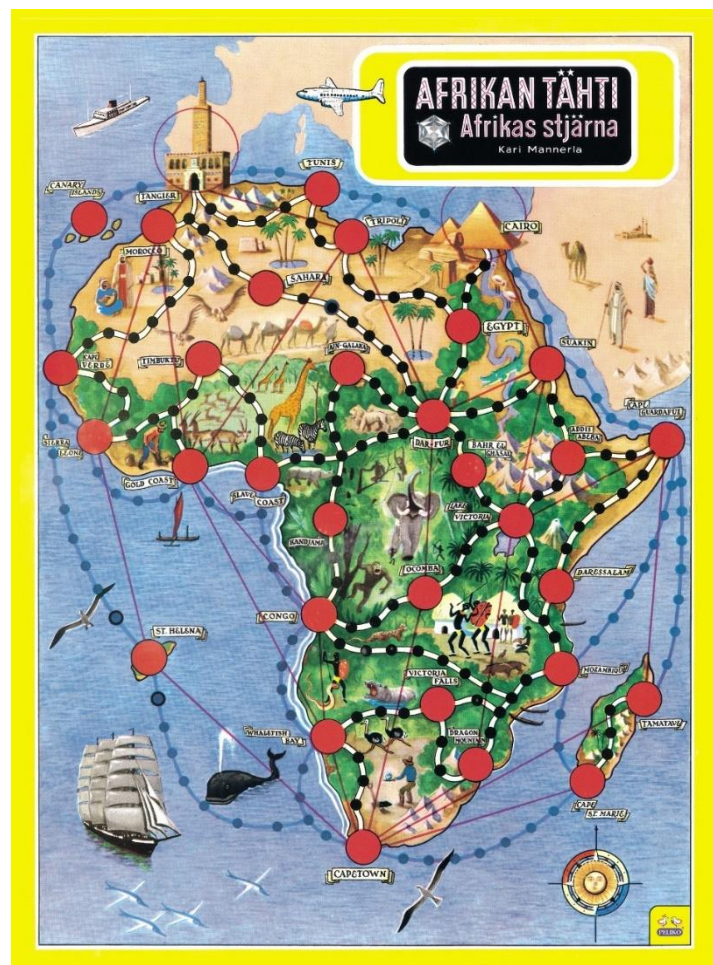


Image. 1. *Afrikan tähti* board, 1951. Photo: Martinex.

Orientalism is, of course, discourse – and for all intents and purposes in this context discourse can be compared to ideology; in the psychoanalytic sense of the term. For the purpose of this thesis, it suffices to approach discourse (e.g., Said, 1978) and ideology (e.g., Glynnos, 2001) as analogous concepts, in the sense that both constitute the paradigm of our social reality. In the film essay *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* (Fiennes, Wilson & Žižek, 2012), Žižek analyzes John Carpenter's 1988 sci-fi film *They Live* as an example of a critique of ideology, which can also be applied here. In the film, the protagonist finds a pair of sunglasses which expose the hidden real message, in bold imperatives, beneath the components from which our everyday life is built: advertisements (“OBEY”), consumer products (“NO THOUGHT”, “STAY ASLEEP”), money (“I AM YOUR GOD”), and so on. The film's anti-capitalist critique may not be very nuanced or subtle, but Žižek uses this example to compellingly argue that ideology (or discourse) is not something that is distorting our vision, like sunglasses that should be taken off to see clearly. On the contrary, ideology is such an integral part of our shared reality that we are required to put sunglasses *on* to expose the true meaning of our perception: “Ideology is not simply imposed on ourselves. Ideology is our spontaneous relation to our social world, how we perceive each meaning and so on and so on. We, in a way, enjoy our ideology” (Fiennes, Wilson & Žižek, 2012). Ideology and discourse exist at the very core of our society, at the core of our conception of reality. Now, let us put on our postcolonial/decolonial sunglasses and see what messages lie within the orientalist discourse of *Afrikan tähti*.

For most white Finns, *Afrikan tähti* is likely their first encounter with the African continent. And what would be the takeaway for a Finnish child who sees and engages with the concept of Africa for the first time through this game? Probably something like this: Africa is a large, faraway, singular monolithic entity. Africa is dangerous, exotic and exciting. The top half of Africa is desert, the bottom half is jungle – there are hardly any cities or civilization to speak of. The local population consist of people who are wildly different from the typical player, and their otherness increases in correlation with geographical distance. The people on the periphery of Europe still wear clothes and build rock buildings, but the deeper into Africa one ventures the more savage, strange, and primitive the natives become. Are they even really human at all? Certainly not at the same level of humanity as you and I. And really, these people are quite an inconsequential part of Africa, because mostly it is populated by fantastic and dangerous beasts. Besides uncivilized, Africa is lawless; thieves and pirates are lurking behind every turn. But there are enticing

opportunities here, as beautiful jewels await ripe for the picking of the explorer-adventurer-conqueror. Incidentally, the only familiar-looking European figures on the game board are doing just what the player is doing: excavating the land for precious jewels. This is the only possible role the game ascribes to a European in Africa. Later in the person's life, their conception of Africa will likely become more diverse and nuanced. However, the orientalist discourse of Africa, and the Other in general, which *Afrikan tähti* effectively reproduces, will be at the subconscious core of one's conception.

One could pose the counterargument that *Afrikan tähti*, while still immensely popular, is a product of its times – its representations are indeed old-fashioned, but what can you expect from a game designed in 1951? However, that is not the case, as the game has not only been reprinted over the decades, but has also begotten all new games that reproduce the original representations. In 1996, Mannerla re-imagined *Afrikan tähti* as a card game, and in 2005 he designed a lesser-known sister game called *Inkan aarre*, which operates with similar logic as the original, but takes place in South America and revolves around hunting for a lost Inca treasure and transporting it to Machu Picchu. The legacy lives on even after Mannerla's passing: as recently as in 2014 a brand-new expansion game to the original called *Afrikan tähti: Retkikunnat* was published. In this version, the orientalist and colonialist representation and setting are even more explicit than in the original game. In the old version, the Western colonialist is not explicitly present – the colonialist is only alluded to via the game's context and objective, and even the player's avatar is nothing but an amorphous plastic token. The original does depict the native inhabitants of Africa in a questionable way, but even these representations are in a relatively minor role. *Retkikunnat* is something different: it makes the implicit explicit.



Image 2. *Afrikan tähti*, 1951. Photo: Martinex

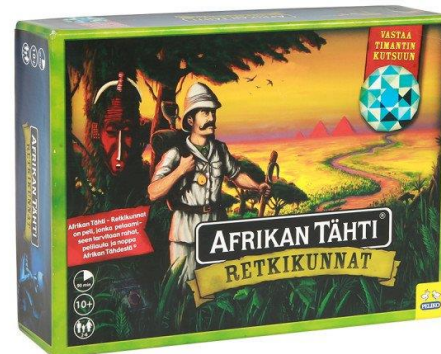


Image 3. *Afrikan tähti: Retkikunnat*, 2014. Photo: Martinex.

A central difference in representation and perspective can be seen from a comparison of the two games' covers – the initial impression the game makes. In the 1951 game, the subject of the cover image is Africa – an orientalist and wildly simplistic representation of a primitive and mysterious continent, for sure, but based on this image alone, Africa is the centerpiece of the game. Or, as Nummelin (1997) reads it, the untamed and paradisiacal African continent rests between barbarity, represented by the tribal mask, and immeasurable riches, represented by the diamond. On the other hand, even with the literal absence of the colonizer, the colonizer is present: the player who opens the box and spreads the map before them is the first conqueror of a continent untouched by civilization (Nummelin 1997). In the 2014 game, the tangible subject of the cover image is the European colonizer, wearing a pith helmet no less, a potent stereotypical symbol of colonialism derided in many former colonies today. Africa itself is in the background: the Egyptian pyramids and the jungle are impossibly part of the same vista, waiting for the colonialist-protagonist to tame. The tribal ceremonial mask, which in the original game is mysteriously and exotically inviting, is also present in the new version, but here it has an ominous quality, lurking behind the colonizer and adding a sense of danger to the quest. This change – or rather, specification – of the protagonist's perspective is further exacerbated in the gameplay.

*Retkikunnat* begins with each player choosing one of ten characters to play with. All characters are white Europeans, with identities such as adventurer, explorer, baroness,

archeologist, artist, scientist, teacher, and so on. Short aphorisms printed on the character cards give us a peek at the inner thoughts and motives of the characters:

What could offer a greater adventure than the mystical continent of Africa and its indescribable treasures ... Mapping our creation is the greatest mission of a natural scientist ... What could be a better source of inspiration than the amazing Africa ... Every individual has the right to knowledge. A teacher wants the people of Africa to receive their share of civilization. At the same time, she herself can also learn something ... The explorer alone dares go where no civilized human has ever gone before. (*Afrikan tähti: Retkikunnat*, 2014; excerpts from character cards, own translation).

Bringing education and civilization to Africa, studying and mapping the continent, finding artistic inspiration and adventure, and of course extracting natural riches, which is still the main objective of the game. Africans are also represented in the new game to a far greater extent than in the original; however, they are not playable characters like the Europeans, or actually characters at all, but instead entities that either aid or threaten the colonizers on their journey. Players must overcome, for example, threats posed by a malicious tribe, a witch doctor's curse, black magic, warring natives, and bloodthirsty cannibals. On the other hand, players can also be aided in their quest by hiring a local guide and carriers. Visual representations of Africans in the 2014 game are, at least, more realistic than the caricatures of the 1951 game. Nevertheless, the game does not depict the Europeans and Africans as equals, but reinforces age-old orientalist binaries of 'us' and 'them': the former still represent modernity, science, civilization, and domination; the latter primitivity, magic, barbarity, and subjugation.

One can only speculate at the motives of the expansion game's developers. Was the idea to create a game for modern audiences that is critical of the European colonization of Africa? Perhaps. Pirkka-Pekka Petelius, whose apology for his bygone Sámi sketches I analyze in the next chapter, has said the intention of the sketches was never to make fun of the Sámi people, but on the contrary, of *Finnish stereotypes of the Sámi people*. This may very well have been the intention, but it was likely not a common interpretation of viewers, and likewise there is nothing in *Retkikunnat* that would evoke an understanding of the game as a postcolonial critique of the phenomenon it re-enacts, or, for that matter, of the original *Afrikan tähti*. Whatever the intention may have been, the game from 2014 strongly reinforces orientalist discourses to a degree far surpassing that of the original game from 1951. The original *Afrikan tähti* remains extremely popular – much more so than the expansion game. Taken on its own, this fact demonstrates that a game built of conspicuous orientalist representations has over decades solidified its status as a central Finnish cultural artefact, opening up questions as to why a 70-year-old boardgame remains so influential, and what are

the implications of this. The case of *Retkikunnat*, however, shows that the orientalist discourse is not a thing of the past, but a system of thought that is alive and well even in Finland, a country with very little direct connection to European colonial history. On the other hand, recent public discussions, debates, and even fiery controversies revolving around the game demonstrate steps towards acknowledging the existence of such orientalist discourse.

#### 4.2.2 Online debate: A racist game?

On May 28<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the stand-up comedian and avid social media political commentator Iikka Kivi published a statement on Facebook and Twitter, in which he extensively criticized *Afrikan tähti* as a racist game. Three days earlier George Floyd had died in Minneapolis at the hands of a white police officer, sparking an immediate protest movement in the US and fiery debate over racism internationally. In the Facebook post Kivi criticizes the colonial representations visible in the popular board game. He argues that the game reinforces colonialist narratives, which are inherently built on the racist notion of racial hierarchies. These problematic power structures, he argues, can also be seen as the root of contemporary global social and economic inequalities. Kivi says he is not calling for a ban of the game, but instead wants to awaken deeper understanding and discussion of the narratives the game constructs and reinforces, which are generally accepted as self-evident and taken for granted without questioning. Despite its ubiquity in Finnish culture and everyday life, the game had indeed not been the topic of notable public debate when it comes to coloniality and racism, and thus Kivi's post provided a fresh perspective that also generated much online conversation in the thread.

Iikka Kivi is also an interesting social media character to consider in the light of the antagonisms between cultural conservatives and cultural liberals investigated in this thesis, since based on his own words this dichotomy has also been internal. Kivi has spoken openly in interviews and on social media about his history as a supporter of the far right and said he used to be a racist and a devotee of Jussi Halla-aho.<sup>5</sup> Making a stark turn in his political

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<sup>5</sup> Seppänen, A. (25.6.2017). Stand up -koomikko Iikka Kivi katu höyrähtämistään Halla-ahon ajatuksiin – ei voi olla “vähän kuin ilta- tai viikonloppunatsi”. *Helsingin Sanomat*. <https://www.hs.fi/kulttuuri/art-2000005267051.html>

identity, he now seems to hold generally culturally liberal views and regularly disparages the Finns Party and its presumed supporters. Since 2019 he has also vocally criticized policies of the country's center-left government, often for not being leftist enough. Kivi is known for his provocative tone when discussing politics on social media<sup>6</sup>, and thus his confrontational post about *Afrikan tähti* provides fertile ground to analyze the construction of antagonisms and the use of equivalential logic.

Judging by Kivi's Facebook post, he anticipates that his statement will provoke strong reactions. In the beginning, middle and end of the lengthy post he directly addresses presumed opponents. Immediately after beginning the post with the statement "*Afrikan tähti* is a racist game", Kivi digresses: "Wait, wait. At least read the whole text before you allow the buzzing between your eyes to take control of your mind and bend your fingers towards the letters to spell 'IS NOTHING ALLOWED ANYMORE'." Later in the text, Kivi addresses questions posed by imaginary critics of his statement: "'Well but nobody thinks about stuff like that when they play *Afrikan tähti*', someone cries out [...] 'So should the game be banned then?', asks another". The first thing to note is that in his rhetoric, Kivi is using a straw man argument to construct his perceived opponents – very similar to the device used by Halla-aho in the post analyzed earlier, in which Halla-aho described an imaginary dialogue between *Helsingin Sanomat* newspaper and his Finns Party. In contrast to Halla-aho, in Kivi's post, a logic of equivalence is not explicitly identified; after all, in this text Kivi does not name his opponents or explicitly connect their supposed attitudes concerning *Afrikan tähti* to a broader frame of reference. However, judging by the context of Kivi's other writings, such a logic of equivalence is at least strongly implied via the dichotomy he often identifies and reproduces between cultural liberals (us) and cultural conservatives (them). At least the assumption of an underlying antagonism in relation to questions of racism, colonialism and *Afrikan tähti* is central to Kivi's rhetoric. There is clearly a strong assumption here that the alleged racism or non-racism of *Afrikan tähti* is an issue that will spark debate between opposing sides of the antagonistic frontier. Through the articulation of this strong assumption, he himself also sets up such an antagonism, finishing his post with the words: "There. Now to read the comments of all those who've started clamoring after reading

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<sup>6</sup> Vistilä, M. (13.4.2021). Koomikko Iikka Kivi nostattaa somemyrskyjä, mutta ajattelee, ettei maailma muutu ilman empatiaa. *Voima*. <https://voima.fi/artikkeli/2021/koomikko-iikka-kivi-nostattaa-somemyrskyja-mutta-ajattelee-ettei-maailma-muutu-ilman-empatiaa/?cn-reloaded=1>



only the first sentence. From those comments you can see that the colonialist attitude I've described lives and prospers among average Finnish taxpayers". Let us now move on to analyze the ensuing discussion to see if that is indeed the case here.

A good overview of how the social media audience reacted to Kivi's initial argument may be deduced from the post's 1 600 Facebook reactions. The overwhelming majority of these reactions were "likes", along with 94 "loves", which can be interpreted as agreement and support. Due to the context and the serious nature of the post, the 65 "haha" reactions can mostly be interpreted as critical, sarcastic, or jeering. It is, of course, presumable that the majority of Kivi's followers on social media are predisposed to agree with him on issues, which skews the results in a certain direction. The post also garnered 360 comments, and an analysis of this material also showed that the majority of commentors generally agreed with Kivi's initial premise, that *Afrikan tähti* is problematic due to its colonialist tropes and representations. However, hardly anyone went as far as Kivi in judging the game as racist. Apart from a few exceptions, the conversation was quite thoughtful and constructive – content moderation by the original poster may have played a part in this. There was also quite a lot of debate about the merits of different board games, which I have excluded from my analysis as irrelevant. Here I will concentrate on arguments that see the game as problematic, and on those that do not see it as problematic.

People who agreed with Kivi's premise brought up the stereotypical, uncomplimentary, and questionable representations in which Africa and Africans are depicted in the game. Especially the common conception in the West of the entire African continent as an exotic, strange and monolithic entity was something some commentors recognized in themselves and traced back to the game's map. One even mentioned Edward Said's concept of orientalism as a useful lens to analyze the game's representations through. Several pointed out that the game indeed reflects the time in which it was first published, when the worldview purporting colonialism and racial hierarchies was still widely accepted, but that especially from today's perspective the game is problematic.

Some pointed out that while the intention of the game's designer or players may not be malevolent, the perspective of people whose oppression and suffering have inspired and been distilled into a fun family game should be empathized with. A member of a white Finnish family living in South Africa noted that local friends always comment on the game's colonialist objective and imagery. Likewise, another commentor writes that their Nigerian



colleague finds it very strange that a game with such a Eurocentric view of Africa is still sold today. Several commentators brought up the 2005 sister game *Inkan aarre* set in South America. They noted that while it was no wonder that a game like *Afrikan tähti* was designed and published in 1951, it is very surprising that a new game that repeated the colonialist tropes of the original was published over 50 years later. One commentator also wondered how it was possible that upon publication *Inkan aarre* did not receive any popular backlash, but on the contrary was a popular commercial success: “So if it is understandable that in 1951 people did not recognize the game’s racism, apparently people were none the wiser in 2005”.

Some commentators who had played the game as children recognized the effect that the game had had on the development their own conception of Africa and its people. Commentors connected the worldview of *Afrikan tähti* to other representations of Africa and Africans they had encountered as children, such as in the Brunberg “Negro kiss” chocolates that have since been rebranded, or in an old primary school ABC-book, where the letter N was introduced along with a picture and poem of a tribally-clad African person washing their “dirty” black face to no avail. Some people who brought up their own childhood memories about the game said these were good memories, but later in life they had learned to understand these representations in a more nuanced context. One commentator even mentioned it is a relief to realize that their own harmful conceptions and biases have been learned through cultural processes and texts, not from their own imagination: “The white man’s burden today is probably in realizing how many people one has hurt through their own lack of understanding”. On the other hand, as another wrote: “Even as a child, I wondered who those jewels should really belong to. I still own and play the game, I don’t see how the world would change for the better even if I would throw it in the garbage.”

A discontinuation of the game did not gain support among commentators. Indeed, a common perspective offered by several commentators was that today *Afrikan tähti* is a valuable educational tool for children to learn about the history of colonialism and its traces in contemporary society. Playing the game with children, many commentators argued, gives the opportunity for parents to instigate conversations about colonial history, racism, and morality. Some mentioned as an example how children could be prompted to consider questions such as who the extracted jewels in the game rightfully belong to, and how the profits should be divided. Some parents mentioned how they aim to bridge the gap between the historical world of the game and the real modern world, by speaking with their children about how

colonial power structures continue to exist in today's world too, for example in the extraction of natural resources.

People who disagreed with Kivi's premise completely or to some extent in the thread were fewer in number, but some commonalities in their arguments could be identified. Some commentors indicated that the whole question of the game's colonialist tropes is irrelevant, arguing that it is a non-issue, because players don't think of the game in such a way: "Finns definitely don't think about colonialism in relation to *Afrikan tähti*" ... "It has never even crossed my mind that a colonial master would be adventuring in the game" ... "The good thing about being a child is that a child doesn't give things meanings like adults do, unless someone put them in my head ... *Afrikan tähti* is an adventure, not a statement". Indeed, the popular argument of several of the commentors who disagreed with Kivi was that "the game is just a game", and at least that is the way its prime audience – children – experience it.

A few of the commentors questioned the postcolonial interpretation of the game, asking why it is assumed that the players' characters are white Europeans, as their background and motivations are not explicitly spelled out in the game. One asked why is it assumed that the money from the jewels will end up in European coffers, when players might just as well be representatives of a charitable organization; another pointed out that the objective of the game is to take the Star of Africa to Cairo or Tangier, which are still located in Africa – although these too were centers of colonial rule in the time of the game's inception. The latter commentor took the issue clearly into the realm of modern identity politics and questions of (unreasonable) guilt: "Where does it say that the player's avatar is a European straight white man, the one who is always guilty of everything? I apologize to everyone who I have oppressed, I am sorry for my existence".

Another common argument was that *Afrikan tähti* was first published in 1951 and is a product of its times. Commentors drew different conclusions from this: one said the game is racist from our contemporary perspective, and it is worth being aware of the racist worldview of the past, even if the game may not have been seen as racist at the time it was developed; another noted that the world has changed in the last 70 years, old injustices should be remembered and can be taught to children, but the game can be considered just a game. Yet another denied the game's supposed racism: "I wouldn't say it is a racist game. I would say it is set in the bygone colonialist world, which was racist ... but the game clearly does not support, defend, or even accept racism ... I propose that the word racism be used only when

speaking of the oppression and maltreatment of real living people today, so as not to cause inflation of the concept”.

Some commentators also pointed out that the game is for children, it is supposed to be an exciting story of adventure and treasure hunt and need not be overanalyzed. One commentator in particular wrote extensively about their concern in causing anxiety for their children by talking about the dark history and injustices the game represents. A child, they argued, should not be tasked with the burden of such issues: “I really don’t believe that a small child would be left with certain attitudes. Isn’t it possible that the child just thinks it is fun to play together, have an adventure in Africa looking for the biggest diamond, and nothing else?” Interestingly, this commentator drew an equivalence between postcolonial interpretations of *Afrikan tähti* and climate activism: “There is a time and place to speak about these things, but let’s not ruin *Afrikan tähti* for a child by telling them horror stories so that they would grow up to be a good climate activist.”

The logic of equivalence was thus at least implicit in a couple of the comments – in the assumption that climate activism and postcolonial critique are correlative attitudes, and in the evocation of intersectionality of the one commentator, who felt guilt-tripped for their whole identity as a white, European, heterosexual male. Also, a few commentators who seemed to agree with Kivi did offer sarcastic parodies of their assumed opponents’ outraged reactions and slippery slope arguments to the issue, e.g. “Soon all of the games will probably be collected and burned in a bonfire”, with a North Korean flag emoji for good measure. Overall, however, there was not much explicit evocation of antagonisms, except in the initial post by Kivi, as discussed above. The relative absence of outright conflict and antagonism in the thread, despite the original post – which even some of those who agreed with Kivi found needlessly provocative – may have partly been due to comment moderation. Even so, the discussion was mostly constructive and thoughtful. Nobody called for banning the game; the consensus among those who agreed on its colonial problematics was that the game can and should nevertheless be played and can be put into practical use as an educational device to have discussions about difficult topics and make children aware of the context. This, if anything, can be commended as an aspiration toward healthy memory politics and, in the context of this analysis, an acknowledgement of Finland’s colonial roles. Such an aspiration has its own open questions as well, as one commentator put it: “I don’t quite understand why, if we are to say *Afrikan tähti* is a racist game, is it okay to play it, since doing other racist things is not acceptable”.

Finally, a surprising finding in the research material was that several commenters throughout the thread were inspired to point out resemblances between the colonial pillaging of Africa and the operations of foreign mining companies in present-day Finland. Several people directed the conversation to these mining operations, criticizing foreign companies for extracting valuable minerals from the Finnish bedrock, while enjoying tax benefits and leaving a tarnished natural environment in their wake. Based on these actions, some commentators claimed that Finland is presently being colonized, and called for legislative reform in the mining sector to combat such phenomena. A couple commentators even brought up a double-colonial perspective, pointing out that much of this mining happens in indigenous Sámi territories. Someone even posted pictures by the Sámi artist collective Suohpanterror, who has engaged in culture jamming campaign by publishing maps of the colonized Sápmi in the vein of the board of *Afrikan tähti*. Others argued that current mining practices in Finland are in quite a different ballpark than the colonialist extraction of resources in Africa, which included slave labor. While these conversation threads diverted from the main topic to quite an extent, they show how conceptions of the roles of perpetrator and victim, colonizer and colonized overlap and constantly evolve, depending on the context. Furthermore, these ambiguities in colonial roles provide a bridge to the next section and case study, in which coloniality and expressions of remorse are brought closer to home.

## **4.2 Reconciliation: The Sámi sketch apology**

### **4.2.1 Political rituals of regret**

Let us begin this section with a thought experiment. Imagine that Kari Mannerla – assuming he were alive today – would issue a public apology to all Africans for his board game’s harmful effects in reproducing and reinforcing uncomplimentary images of Africa and Africans in the minds of Finns for three generations. What kind of reactions would this provoke in the general population?

Luckily, we need not merely speculate, for there is a recent comparable instance to be dissected. In November 2019, longtime actor and newly elected Green Party MP Pirkka-Pekka Petelius made a public apology for a series of popular comedy sketches he starred in from the late 1980s and early 1990s, in which he played the character of an indigenous Sámi man. The recurring sketches, broadcasted by the Finnish public broadcaster YLE, featured Petelius

and his colleague Aake Kalliala in costumes mimicking traditional Sámi clothing, and wearing brownface. The comedy was derived principally from the characters being drunk and dim-witted. Increasingly in the last decade or so, these sketches have been criticized for reproducing and reinforcing stereotypical and racist representations of the Sámi. Some 30 years after acting in the role, the newly elected MP felt it was time to take an official stance on the issue. “I want to extend my public apology to all Sámi people. I am sorry for the harmful effect that the sketches have had. I understand my responsibility as a Member of Parliament and a cultural influencer,” Petelius commented in his party’s press release (Vihreät, 21.11.2019, own translation).

Petelius’ sentiment was welcomed by many Sámi people and presumably by supporters of the Green Party, who tend to be young and culturally liberal-minded in general and would likely be troubled by some of their new representative’s past television roles. But this statement was also met with widespread and strong criticism, particularly on social media, by people who thought the apology was unnecessary, ridiculous, or both. Many adult Finns today recall the Sámi sketches from their own youth or childhood, when they presumably were amused by the comedy without interpreting it – or especially their own amusement – as racist. A reassessment of such popular and definitive cultural products can understandably cause complex emotions of unease and even offense. Of course, a direct comparison between *Afrikan tähti* and the Sámi sketches is not entirely commensurable. While the boardgame’s aesthetic is undeniably an orientalist depiction of a colonial past, it does not overtly mock and ridicule its subject, unlike the sketches. On the other hand, while popular in their time, the Sámi sketches do not enjoy an enduring status of cultural importance in any way comparable to that of *Afrikan tähti*. The thought experiment I propose is, however, illuminating of wider political debate and antagonisms related to Finland’s colonial complicities. If a public apology for sketches that include overt ridicule of a specific group of people but that are not considered especially high pop culture artifacts generates fiery antagonistic debate, what can be expected of a hypothetical apology for a game that holds all the problematics discussed in the previous sections, but does not include explicit ridicule and is considered a cultural icon? In this section I analyze the Petelius apology in the wider context of political acts of remorse and regret, as well as the popular reactions and debate his apology ignited.

Both Wigura (2017) and Olick & Coughlin (2003) see these types of public apologies as political acts and rituals whose modern history can be traced to the aftermath of World

War II and the Holocaust. Over the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “declarations of political forgiveness and remorse [... became] an integral part of European politics [... and] were placed at the heart of the newly reforming European identity” (Wigura, p. 18). Olick & Coughlin have coined the term *politics of regret* – “a major characteristic of our age, an age of shattered time and shifting allegiances” (p. 56) – to describe the trend of recent decades in which learning from the lessons of past injustices and atrocities has been on the public agenda of today so that history has often been viewed as shameful and something to come to terms with (pp. 37–38). Both the discourse of universal human rights and transitional justice for the victims of former oppressive regimes partially lie in the background of such a politics of regret, insofar as they have become the justification for calls for acknowledgement, apologies and reparations for past wrongs in cultural, social and judicial terms (p. 42). Olick & Coughlin are, however, not content with merely these and other arguments they see more as descriptive than explanatory, such as the proliferation of counternarratives via new mass media platforms (p. 45). They argue that the underlying reason behind regret’s development into an integral part of modernity lies in a rise in and transformation of *historical consciousness* over the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

the appropriate frame for explaining the recent rise of regret is a historical-sociological one that sees regret as part of the transformation of temporality and historicity that is tied up with the decline, rather than the triumph, of the nation-state ... we thus see the contemporary wave of regret as an embedded social product and not as the coming into self-consciousness of a world-historical idea. It may indeed be appropriate and desirable, but like all moral codes and practices, it is socially conditioned. (Olick & Coughlin, 2003, p. 56)

Indeed, the authors identify politics of regret as a paradigm for coming to terms with the past by learning from it and making amends for it, in order to make sense of the present and future in an increasingly splintered reality. Their argument was published nearly 20 years ago, but it has become all the more relevant over the last decade of increased polarization, instability, and digitalization of the public sphere.

Most recently, public declarations of remorse have been extended – and faced demands to be extended – from war crime reconciliation to seeking amends for colonial pasts. The turn of the millennium brought forth a wave of public apologies from former colonial and settler societies to indigenous people around the world, resulting in a more globalized trend of apology and forgiveness (Wigura, 2017, pp. 18–19). Perhaps it was to be expected that societal introspection and a newfound prevalence of politics of regret would widen its scope geographically and temporally as decades went by. However, one of the reasons for the extension of these rituals to spaces of coloniality may be the fact that in

postmodern and post-structural times, social narratives have been more readily broken down and contested, resulting in a situation where “disenfranchised groups produce alternative historical narratives that call elites to account for historical wrongs; across societies, subjugated peoples in the periphery challenge the arrogance of the centre” (Olick & Coughlin, 2003, p. 45). This process was seen when the ghosts of colonialism rose to haunt Western societies in the summer of 2020. Inspired or pressured by the popular anti-racism demonstrations, Belgian king Philippe expressed his “deepest regrets”<sup>7</sup> – conspicuously not apologies – to the Democratic Republic of Congo for the atrocities committed by the reign of his predecessor Leopold II. This acknowledgement of guilt and indeed *regret* was an example of how historical consciousness has just recently extended to colonialism on a large scale, through the current momentum of the anti-racism debate that seeks to uncover and demand reconciliation for past injustices as a tool to confront present marginalization and oppression.

Against this backdrop I now turn to analyze MP Petelius’ Sámi sketch apology, which preceded the anti-racism, anti-colonial protests of summer 2020 by just over six months. Over the last few decades, declarations of political forgiveness and remorse have become more and more prominent in European politics (Wigura, 2017, p. 19), and Petelius’ November 2019 apology can well be considered to be part of this continuum. Wigura sees public apologies and forgiveness as an outright political ritual and institution with a script that includes a set of three basic premises. To situate the Petelius apology into the context of these modern European rituals, let us evaluate it through the lens of these three premises outlined by Wigura.

Firstly, Wigura (2017) argues that in the postwar era politicians “began apologizing not only for their own crimes but mainly for those of the communities they represented” (p. 19). Indeed, due to the public office politicians hold, they have been in a natural position to act as a moral representative of the community whose apology is deemed appropriate. The Petelius apology is slightly different in this regard. Petelius is first and foremost asking for forgiveness on behalf of his own personal actions, and only by extension on behalf of the larger community. Specifically, the apology concerns “the harmful effect that the sketches have had” (Vihreät, 21.11.2019, own translation), not so much larger and more difficult

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<sup>7</sup> BBC. (30.6.2020). Belgian king expresses ‘deepest regrets’ for DR Congo colonial abuses. *BBC*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53232105>

questions of the settler colonialist history that lies behind the representations reinforced by the sketches in the first place. Words such as racism, oppression and colonialism are not mentioned in the statement, although these are words that a number of contemporary activists and academics have used to describe the relationship between the Finnish society/state and the Sámi people. In this sense Petelius' apology is only partial, but on the other hand it is highly personal, perhaps even unusually personal in the context of public declarations of remorse. This may even make the gesture more effective, for as Wigura notes, guilt, remorse and forgiveness are by nature highly personal emotions, and public declarations of these are more authentic if they are backed by private experience (p. 18). On the other hand, as Petelius himself notes, he is also a representative of the larger Finnish community – previously culturally and recently also politically, which gives his apology more weight.

Second, “in the modern declarations of political forgiveness and remorse there is a tacit acceptance of responsibility of both a group that declares its remorse and of a group that accepts, and possibly forgives, the former for its past crimes”, leading to a distinction between the “perpetrators” and the “victims” (Wigura, 2017, p. 19). In the press release, Petelius notes that the intention of the sketches was actually to parody Finnish prejudices against Sámi people, but adds that he now understands how discriminatory the sketches in fact were (Vihreät, 21.11.2019). Indeed, if the intention of the comedy routines really was to inspire Finnish audiences to engage in deep self-critical reflection upon their own subliminally ingrained attitudes towards the Sámi, the effect was largely the opposite. Petelius acknowledges that the Sámi have suffered from the negative effect the sketches have had on conceptions and attitudes of Finns – admitting the sketches actually reinforced the prejudices they were allegedly criticizing. Although hedging the apology by saying the sketches were “a product of their time”, much in the same way that *Afrikan tähti* has been defended, Petelius welcomes contemporary critique of the sketches, which shows that “times have changed” (Vihreät, own translation). The apology statement indirectly but plainly identifies the Sámi as the victims, but the question of identifying the perpetrators remains quite ambiguous. Besides noting that the sketches affected the prejudices of Finland's “ethnic majority” (*valtaväestö*), Petelius' only other reference to the larger community is rather unspecified: “Today we understand better than before the structures in our society and culture that discriminate minorities” (Vihreät, own translation). Public apologies are a delicate business fraught with potential controversies, and this apology is worded extremely carefully in a manner that lays minimal blame on the community Petelius represents: the upholders of



these discriminative structures. One could go even as far as to say Petelius is acting as a surrogate by taking upon himself the collective sins of the nation – perhaps because disparaging constituents does not bode well for political careers.

Third, “apart from representing a moral collective and of acknowledging a shared responsibility, present-day declarations of forgiveness and remorse imply the continuity of a nation” (Wigura, 2017, p. 19). In Petelius’ apology, such continuity is not limited to implication. The MP explicitly connects the past to the present to the future. He notes that it is important to address “historical mistakes”, and on a personal level his apology to the Sámi community is his way of showing he has learned the lessons of history and is seeking atonement (Vihreät, 21.11.2019). This gesture acts as a representation of a call to broader reconciliation, as Petelius gives his endorsement for the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to “deal with events of Sámi history and learn of the difficulties experienced by the Sámi people beside the dominant culture” (Vihreät, own translation). In his own parliamentary work Petelius says he is working on current political issues to improve cultural and language rights of the Sámi, as well as restrain deforestation and heavy industry in Sápmi. Nearly two years after Petelius’ public apology, in October 2021, after many years of preparation, the Finnish government appointed the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Concerning the Sámi People. Petelius’s apology invokes continuity of history, present and past throughout, but especially in its endorsement for the TRC, which has since transpired and begun its work.

This contextualization demonstrates that Petelius’ apology to the Sámi community can indeed be situated quite securely within the paradigm of modern history’s public declarations of remorse and politics of regret, although it does have its own peculiarities in that the apology mostly limited to a very specific case and individual “perpetrator”. In the situation where such apologies to the Sámi as well as the wider societal conversation on the issue were still quite novel, such a metonymical apology may have been a more comfortable way to raise the issue in the public and open the door for wider social and political introspection. Public apology also opens the door for public forgiveness, something that Wigura (2017) sees as just as complex an issue as the apology itself. Forgiveness as a representative political act can be precarious because it may be that not all individual victims or their descendants are ready or willing to forgive (p. 20). It also introduces complex questions of what forgiveness entails and means. Is all forgiven and forgotten, or is public apology and forgiveness merely a gateway into more open memory politics?

The Sámi Parliament of Finland did not make an official statement or public declaration of forgiveness concerning the apology at the time, though then-president Tiina Sanila-Aikio did say the apology was welcome and reflective of societal change, when asked about it by journalists.<sup>8</sup> According to the press statement of the Greens, which included the apology, the day before apologizing Petelius had a meeting with Sámi influencers working in areas of education, culture and science. While the interlocutors were not named due to the “sensitivity of the issue”, this palaver implies that a common understanding between representatives of the ‘perpetrators’ and ‘victims’ on the issue has been sought, even if it has not resulted in official public declarations on both sides (Vihreät, 21.11.2019). When looking at the Sámi Parliament’s endorsement of the creation of the TRC, which was published in December 2019, less than a month after Petelius’ apology, it can be deduced that possible forgiveness may transpire through this avenue. In the Sámi Parliament’s statement, it is noted that the TRC is an extreme instrument that had become necessary because acceptable reconciliation for transgenerational trauma and still ongoing assimilation policies has not happened through other avenues (Sanila-Aikio & Ruotsala-Kangasniemi, 17.12.2019). With the establishment of the TRC in 2021, a potential door for forgiveness has been opened, but as Wigura (2017) reminds us: “Political forgiveness, we should remember, does not happen overnight but is a process, just as it is between individuals” (p. 23).

A further complicating issue of Petelius’ apology – or any public declaration of remorse – is the following: does the community that is being represented in the apology agree that there is cause for remorse? According to Wigura (2017), this is often not the case. Taking the example of history’s arguably most famous public declaration of regret, German Chancellor Willy Brandt kneeling at the Warsaw Ghetto Memorial in 1970, Wigura notes that at the time it “initially caused an outrage in West Germany because it was the first symbolic act that positioned German guilt at the very heart of the country’s *raison d’État*” (p. 22). Petelius’ apology to the Sámi also caused commotion in Finnish public debate in the news and social media. While many in the ethnic majority joined most Sámi in welcoming the sentiment, many others were vocal in deeming the apology unnecessary, and even expressed outrage at the gesture. It is telling of the contrary narratives involved that one of those who said they saw the apology as unnecessary and even “ridiculous” was Aake Kalliala, Petelius’

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<sup>8</sup> Pikkarainen, A. (21.11.2019). Petelius pyytäneekin anteeksi myös romaneilta - kertoo lähestyneensä: ”Olen valmis keskustelemaan”. *Iltalehti*. <https://www.iltalehti.fi/politiikka/a/7c1d80ac-f2a4-4f58-b3fd-72c83665ef92>

co-actor in the controversial sketches.<sup>9</sup> In the following section I turn once again to analyze a social media thread exemplifying what Petelius' apology revealed of Finland's relationship with colonialism, as manifested in the digital public sphere and its antagonisms. These controversies and antagonisms notwithstanding, it is still worth remembering that as time goes by, Petelius' apology may be regarded as a symbol that ushered in a paradigm shift, even if at the time the feeling of remorse was not shared by all that were represented. Indeed, "the presence of a certain extra-political and extra-national form of communication can transform the declaration of forgiveness or remorse into a potent symbol for a whole culture of remembrance" (Wigura, 2017, p. 21).

#### 4.2.2 Online debate: reactions to the apology

In this section, I analyze the Twitter comment thread that was opened by Pirkka-Pekka Petelius on November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2019. He started the thread with the following post, published simultaneously with the Green Party's press statement: "I extend my public apology to the Sámi. I am sorry for the harmful effect my sketches have had." The Twitter post garnered thousands of reactions and hundreds of comments and was referenced in the news media in articles concerning the controversy the apology had awakened. Delving into this thread, it is useful to note the results of an opinion poll commissioned by the newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* soon after the apology became a public issue.<sup>10</sup> According to the poll, 57 percent of Finns thought Petelius should not have apologized to the Sámi, while 29 percent thought apologizing was the right thing to do. Those who most strongly deemed the apology unnecessary were most likely to be middle-aged male supporters of the Finns Party, whereas those who most strongly agreed with the need for apology were most likely young, highly educated supporters of the Greens and Left Alliance. Around this issue, the formation of groups on opposing sides of the antagonistic frontier, via the equivalential logic of culturally liberal and culturally conservative is therefore clear from the outset.

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<sup>9</sup> Waris, O. (21.11.2019). Aake Kalliala oudoksuu Pirkka-Pekka Peteliuksen anteeksipyyntöä: "Kuulostaa ihan älyttömälle". *Ilta-Sanomat*. <https://www.is.fi/politiikka/art-2000006315894.html>

<sup>10</sup> Sutinen, T. (20.12.2019). Enemmistö suomalaisista katsoo, ettei Peteliuksen olisi pitänyt pyytää anteeksi saamelaisilta. *Helsingin Sanomat*. <https://www.hs.fi/politiikka/art-2000006349588.html>

As can be expected from a public controversy that makes news headlines, there was antagonism involved in the public debate, and dozens of the comments in the social media thread analyzed here also exhibited antagonistic tendencies. Unlike the Facebook post by Iikka Kivi analyzed in the previous chapter, Petelius' tweet did not contain any antagonistic elements; however, it provoked much more antagonistic responses than the former. This is likely due to Petelius' status as a famous actor and an MP representing the Green Party, which is at the culturally liberal end of the polarized political identity spectrum, and the practical fact that the issue gained significant news media attention. In my analysis, I have considered antagonistic those comments that attack Petelius' gesture by critically equating it with the policies of his party, the whims of city elites and general "green left" ideology, or by more directly accusing Petelius of being a "sellout" to the Greens to achieve personal political gain. In this vein, dozens of commentators for example derided Petelius for "contracting a sickness called the Greens", "sacrificing your life's work on the altar of the Greens", subscribing to the "deranged ideology of the green left bubble", being a "spineless mollusk ... bowing in front of the thought police", being "subordinated ... so that you can no longer say anything due to your gender, skin color, age and social status", and the like. Petelius is not criticized directly for the apology, but rather the gesture is extended to his party, for it seems to be strongly assumed that Petelius' apology did not transpire of his own accord. Instead, the new MP either apologized to pander to his party and constituency, or he apologized because his party pressured him to. In both scenarios, which overlap in the comment thread, the apology to the Sámi is equivalentially condemned first and foremost as making a pledge to the culturally liberal ideological system represented by the Greens.

Antagonism from the opposite perspective – drawing an equivalence between racism and certain political parties – was also present, but only in a very small handful of comments. The only direct use of this type of equivalential logic was in the unprompted comment: "Many in the Finns Party could follow [Petelius'] example". This comment assumes that supporters or politicians of the Finns are inherently most likely to disagree with Petelius and the importance of apologizing for the Sámi representations. The lack of culturally liberal antagonism can be expected here, since people on the culturally liberal end of the political spectrum would be generally assumed to agree with Petelius' gesture and the party he represents. As demonstrated in the next sections, a Twitter thread started by a culturally conservative politician may be more likely to garner antagonistic comments from the opposing political side. For this reason, most of the comments in this thread that express

agreement with the apology do so in a non-antagonistic way. Most of the comments praise Petelius for extending the apology, stating that it is important and most welcome, even something that has been expected for some time. Some say they used to laugh at the sketches decades ago, but have since realized the harmfulness of such representations. Others express hope that Petelius' apology will pave the way for deeper national conversation and understanding of the past and present injustices experienced by the Sámi. There do not seem to be many Sámi people taking part in the conversation, but at least two who identify themselves as Sámi thank Petelius – however in different ways. One thanks Petelius, saying his gesture is wonderful and hoping it will add understanding in the public; the other thanks Petelius for the sentiment but adds that they have not suffered from the sketches and do not require an apology. This goes to show in a small way that when it comes to public demonstrations of remorse, the “victims” are not a monolithic group and should not be considered as such. It also exemplifies the tendency of representatives of the dominant culture to speak on behalf of the marginalized group, even when promoting the empowerment of said group.

Additionally, there are dozens of commentators who are not antagonistic towards the apologizer and his assumed group per se, but strongly hold that there is nothing to apologize for. A commonly held opinion in the comments of this category is that the sketches are old and unserious “products of their times”, and thus issuing an apology for them is simply redundant. Several of these commentators write the sketches off as harmless humor and lament at how “nothing can be laughed at nowadays”. These arguments have some similarities with those rejecting criticism of the coloniality of *Afrikan tähti*, as analyzed in the earlier section. Such arguments are related to how the cultural product is innocent: not meant to be offensive or racist, and anyway, times were different when it was produced.

Both Petelius and YLE, the broadcaster of the sketches, maintain that the intent of the comedy was in fact to parody Finnish misconceptions of the Sámi, even though the effect was very different.<sup>11</sup> Four commentators in the thread wrote that this was also the way they interpreted the sketches. All of them separately point out that what made the sketches funny was actually that they allowed ethnic Finns to laugh at themselves and their own stereotypical and, one adds, racist misconceptions of the Sámi. As one of them surmises: “Those sketches were damn funny at the time because they confronted our prejudices by bringing them to

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<sup>11</sup> Rytsä, P. (21.11.2019). Hymyhuulet: Nunnuka-nunnuka-lai-lai. *Yle Elävä arkisto*. <https://yle.fi/aihe/artikkeli/2007/06/13/hymyhuulet-nunnuka-nunnuka-lai-lai>

light using humor. In that sense, they were an important step in processing those prejudices. There's nothing to apologize for." These commentators subscribe to the notion that the sketches were indeed a form of meta-critique that used hyperbolically stereotypical representations of the ethnic minority as a mirror lifted in front of the ethnic majority. This is a compelling argument. Perhaps seeing such an exaggerated and ridiculous portrayal of one's prejudices laid bare can indeed prompt an individual to critically examine their own attitudes. One of the commentators even notes that they were amused by the parodical nature of the sketches and subsequently became seriously interested in the status of the Sámi minority in Finland. As I have noted above, however, I remain critical of the notion that this would have been the effect for very many viewers – as, seemingly, does Petelius and YLE, who both note that the sketches did not have their intended effect. Many Sámi people have stated that demeaning and racist actions they have encountered over the years have been inspired particularly by the sketches and the catchy “nunnuka”-tune featured in them. Of over 250 comments in this specific thread, only four presented such a perspective on the issue. A similarly small amount of commentators implied that the Sámi should actually be thankful for the sketches, since they “put them on the map”. These commentators argued that without the popular comedy routines nobody would have given the Sámi people any thought whatsoever.

A particularly interesting phenomenon in this thread was more specific to the act of apology itself. On this, Petelius was criticized on opposite fronts: both by those who believed that the apology to the Sámi alone was insufficient, since he had mocked other ethnic minorities in other sketches over the years; and those who made a sarcastic slippery slope argument by demanding that if he is going on “the road of apology”, Petelius should apologize for every character he has ever played. At least 30 separate comments throughout the thread exhibit a variation of this statement: *If you are starting to apologize to people you've made fun of in the past, then you should also apologize to Savonians / Ostrobothnians / Swedes / Estonians / Hungarians / disabled people / the mentally ill / hunchbacks / army officers / skiers / people named Pesonen / all Finns*. The comments are, of course, facetious, and their attempt is to argue that the apology to the Sámi is pointless because of these absurd implications of everybody being entitled to an apology. It is interesting how so many commentators independently arrived at such a similar argument. A sort of construction of antagonism via equivalential logic can be identified between the lines here as well, when considering oft-repeated phrases insinuating that people are too sensitive in taking insult, i.e., are “snowflakes” (*ammattiloukkaantuja, mielensäpahoittaja*). With this phrase and

hyperbolically listing all those who supposedly deserve an apology, people who reject Petelius' gesture are referring to a wide range of contemporary demands for reconciliation and decolonization, and deeming them ridiculous and excessive.

Some of the commentators who voiced their agreement with Petelius' apology to the Sámi noted that there is a difference between punching down by mocking marginalized ethnic groups, and making fun of, for example, regional differences of ethnic Finns who are all part of the dominant cultural and ethnic majority. This shows an awareness of the power structures involved in coloniality, even if not directly articulated as such. The slippery slope argument of *if you apologize to one, you'll have to apologize to everyone* was made by many sarcastically, but Petelius' apology did in fact incite lots of serious calls for additional apologies to the Roma minority. A number of these demands for further apologies were made also in the Twitter thread under scrutiny here. About a dozen of the commentators asked Petelius why he is apologizing specifically to only one of the two Finnish ethnic minorities he has overtly made fun of in his sketches. A few of the commentators demanding this apology say they are Roma themselves. One of them says that he experienced bullying as a child because of Petelius' sketches. Another Roma person says that the apology to the Sámi is commendable, but the fact that the Roma were excluded makes her induce that the apology was more related to the Greens' political ambitions towards creating the Sámi Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Such comments, of which some were written by representatives of the minority in question, go to show that public declarations of remorse are gestures that are indeed craved by at least a part of the "victims", and individuals in the society at large may see it the same way. When one group that has experienced racism due to the sketches received an apology, another group with similar experiences may become more convinced that they, too, are entitled to an apology. This feature shows just one more of the precarious dimensions of public apologies: its motives are immediately, and fairly, questioned when reconciliation is offered to one group of "victims", but for some reason not to another comparable group.

Weeks after the Sámi apology, Petelius did issue a similar apology to the Roma people as well, for the harmful effects sketches in which he portrayed Roma characters had on the community. Some may have seen this as evidence that Petelius had indeed stepped on a slippery slope and would be henceforth issuing monthly public apologies for every character he had ever portrayed in his comedy routines over the years. On the other hand, it may be seen as a sign that this political ritual of remorse was something that not one but at

least two marginalized ethnic groups saw as desirable, even integral for the process of reconciliation. It may have, for its part, opened a door to consider endemic Finnish racism and coloniality on a much wider level than ever before. In the Twitter thread I have analyzed here, colonialism was not mentioned once in relation to the Sámi. It has been touched upon in other social media debates related to Petelius' apology, but the thread under scrutiny did have a wide array of opinions and hundreds of comments, and colonialism did not come up at all, directly or indirectly. Much of recent Finnish scholarship, which I have reviewed above, considers the relationship between the Finnish state and the Sámi as one of settler colonialism. It will require lots of time for this interpretation to gain popular traction, let alone ever become a hegemonic paradigm of understanding of Finland and ethnic Finns vis-à-vis smaller ethnic groups in the modern state's territory. Processes of both acknowledgement and reconciliation of the coloniality of power are paramount in paving the way for such an understanding, and ultimately entering the realm of decoloniality.

### **4.3 Cosmetic decoloniality: Rebranding commercial products**

#### **4.3.1 Decoloniality of the everyday life**

I return once again to *Afrikan tähti*, which in 2021 received more publicity than perhaps ever in its history. In October, as I have outlined above, the Finnish mediascape was filled with the “scandal” that began from a Black German exchange student's criticism of one of the University of Helsinki's student union's *Afrikan tähti* cosplay during freshman week, and the exchange student's demand that the whole game be discontinued due to its racism.<sup>12</sup> An editorial in one of Finland's largest newspapers, *Iltalehti*, expressed the opinion of presumably the majority of Finns by saying that the game should absolutely not be discontinued or censored. The editorial used the familiar argument of the game being “a product of its times”, and offered a striking understatement: “In addition to cultural interaction, the colonial era and colonization performed by European countries also caused

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<sup>12</sup> Koski, S. (18.10.2021). Musta vaihto-oppilas haluaisi Afrikan tähden pois kaupasta – näin vastaa valmistaja. *Iltalehti*. <https://www.iltalehti.fi/kotimaa/a/aab8748f-33de-41eb-af42-bf311f36c536>



many bad things, such as economic exploitation and human suffering”.<sup>13</sup> However, the argument of the editorial is clear: cultural products such as *Afrikan tähti*, although questionable today, should not be forbidden, but an understanding of their background and context is desirable. The October 2021 *Afrikan tähti* debate is well beyond the scope of this thesis, but these contrasting arguments involved in it provide an opening to the final chapter and theme of this thesis: decoloniality. Once problematic representations have been acknowledged and public apologies have been issued, what should be concretely done to improve the situation: Should outdated representations be condemned, forbidden and hidden? Should the past representations be preserved as is, but appended with a contextualizing disclaimer? Or should these representations be revised and updated to suit more contemporary, culturally sensitive standards? In this chapter, I consider these questions and their implications through the lens of decoloniality, using the case study of recent rebranding of Finnish commercial products.

Earlier in 2021, *Afrikan tähti* had the perfect opportunity to answer these questions – an opportunity that it wasted by choosing a fourth way to deal with problematic representations: it ignored the issue entirely. In April, the iconic game celebrated 70 years since its first publication. To mark the occasion, the game’s current publisher Martinex commissioned an artist to design an all-new limited edition of the game. In its implementation, the company broadcast an hour-long celebration ceremony, in which the new edition was presented to the public (Martinex Oy, 17.4.2021). There was no mention whatsoever of the problematic, antiquated or orientalist representations of the game. The purpose of the new edition was visibly not to modernize or question the original game; rather, it was to pay homage to the original. Furthermore, the company’s representatives made clear that this was only a limited edition, and the original version remains canonical and supreme. The presentation broadcast included much rumination on the history of the game and its special place in Finnish culture, but the most interesting points came up during an interview with the artist of the new board. He describes the original board as “iconic [...] a holy thing [...] a monument”, and his approach to the daunting task of re-imagining this behemoth through a naïve artistic style, as: “the old game was quite dark, I wanted to make it more child-friendly [...] with animals and adventure” (Martinex Oy, 17.4.2021, own translation).

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<sup>13</sup> Karvala, K. (20.10.2021). Pääkirjoitus: Afrikan tähteä ja muita oman aikansa kulttuurituotteita ei pidä kieltää. *Iltalehti*, own translation. <https://www.iltalehti.fi/paakirjoitus/a/dc66c9cd-263e-4722-b7f5-6486c657ad12>

The design of the new board has taken away all the humans and signs of any form of civilization, except for Cairo and Tangier, and filled the continent with colorful storybook animals. At the behest of the event host, the artist revealingly speaks about his own knowledge of and relationship with Africa. It does not seem to be radically different from that of Kari Mannerla, who based his original design on second-hand colonial imagery. The artist of the new edition says he never learned about Africa's geography in school and has only traveled to the continent once, to Capetown in South Africa. He recounts his thought process regarding his artistic creation in the following way:

Africa – what do I know about it? The animals, topography, should there be something contemporary? [...] When you think of Africa, you have some mental image of it. You think of the map and certain clichés, but its somehow so huge – who would know very much about it? (Martinex Oy, 17.4.2021, own translation).

The result of this artistic process poses a whole set of new problems to the game's representations. The new image of Africa is ahistoric, fantastic, something that has been completely removed from any semblance of reality and transplanted to the realm of make-believe. The dangerous and mysterious Africa of the original is replaced with a fuzzy and friendly Africa. If in the original the people of Africa are represented as racialized caricatures, in this new version they are not even granted the courtesy of having their existence acknowledged. The deliberation behind leaving all humans out of the game was not elaborated on by the artist or the publisher. But then again, the artist says it is first and foremost a family game, and the point was never to make it realistic, but to “give space for fantasy, even though Africa is a real continent with many things that are worth knowing about”. While no one would guess it just by looking at the new board, the event host reminds viewers that the real African continent encompasses “hundreds of languages, hundreds of cultures, dozens of countries”. The host and artist muse on this point, but in the world of *Afrikan tähti*, this has never mattered and does not matter now. As the artist points out: “*Afrikan tähti* is its own world” (Martinex Oy, 17.4.2021, own translation). Indeed, that is true: it is an imaginary world created by an orientalist and colonial gaze, and the game's new celebratory edition demonstrates that the gaze has not changed even when the world around it has.

Perhaps Martinex didn't get the memo, but during the year preceding the publication of the *Afrikan tähti* 70-year edition, an international wave of rebranding consumer products exhibiting coloniality was well underway. Since George Floyd's killing in May 2020 reinvigorated anti-racism and anti-colonial protests across North America and Western

Europe, many old popular brands started undergoing a revamp during that same year. In the United States, corporations were compelled to rename and rebrand products such as Uncle Ben's, Aunt Jemima, Eskimo Pie, and many others that were heavily founded on racial stereotypes.<sup>14</sup> This trend was quick to reach Finland as well. In the summer of 2020, when the BLM inspired protests were at their height, Finland's largest dairy manufacturer, Valio, announced its plans to rebrand a number of its products whose names and logos referred to different ethnicities and cultures – a change the company said had already been a year in the making.<sup>15</sup> Valio said it had updated its marketing policies to specify that its products cannot be marketed in a way that could promote discrimination of people based on their nationality, ethnicity or religion. These new policies affected, for instance, stereotypical representations on the containers of Valio's Turkish, Bulgarian and Greek yoghurts, which had up until then featured drawings depicting orientalized representations of the peoples of these countries. Since then, the yoghurts have retained their names, but the human characters are gone, replaced by vaguely exotic symbols and floral patterns. During the same year, Valio also renamed its peppered cooking cream, which had traditionally carried the name *Mustapekka*, or "Black Pete". Today, the cooking cream is known by its less derogatory new name, *Pippuri-Pekka* – "Pepper Pete". Around the same time, rebranding was happening in other companies as well. Days before Valio's announcement, ice cream manufacturer Froneri Finland said they were changing the name of Eskimo ice cream to *Pingviini* – "Penguin", along the lines of the similar US brand (Froneri Finland, 19.11.2020). In March 2020, only months before the BLM protest wave, sweets manufacturer Brunberg announced it was finally changing the illustration on the last of the boxes of its infamous chocolate kisses, replacing the caricatured kissing African couple that had previously given the treat its name with the more culturally and geographically appropriate drawing of Porvoo, the city where the company is based.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Nittle, N. (25.2.2021). Why Did It Take So Long for Food Companies to Rebrand their Racist Products? *Civil Eats*. <https://civileats.com/2021/05/25/why-did-it-take-so-long-for-food-companies-to-rebrand-their-racist-products/>

<sup>15</sup> Pitkäranta, P. (27.6.2020). "Valio uudistaa jogurttipurkkien pakkauksia – Turkkilaisen jogurtin stereotyyppisestä kuvituksesta luovutaan". *Yle Uutiset*. <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-11421940>

<sup>16</sup> Mattila, M. (30.6.2020). "Kun jäätelöpuikko tai suklaa vaihtaa nimensä, se herättää tunteita – asiantuntija: '20 vuoden päästä hämmästellään, että oho, millaista ennen oli'". *Yle Uutiset*. <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-11425902>

In all of these recent food product instances, whether the change concerned the name or the illustration, rebranding followed a similar logic: ridding the product of its orientalist or racist representations. The Valio yoghurts retained their names, since they referred to the style of yoghurt, but subtracted the stereotypical human characters. The others took caricatures completely out of their names or illustrations, as these had nothing to do with the content of the product itself. All these revamps were preceded by, if not an apology or act of reconciliation, at least some sort of acknowledgement by each company about how the old name or imagery was inappropriate. In this manner their rebranding differed starkly from *Afrikan tähti*, whose publisher did not acknowledge any problems with its representations even with the fallout of the BLM movement in the background, published a stylistically naïve limited edition of the game with its own new problems, and then went back to manufacturing and selling the old version from 1951.

Revisiting Quijano's (2007) theory on the coloniality of power illustrates why these depictions are problematic. Quijano sees coloniality as a justification for considering the West modern and rational in comparison to others, to this very day. The discourse of such an inherent and natural inequality differentiates between rational subjects and inferior objects, which Quijano sees as the main relation between Western culture and other cultures, respectively (p. 174). The underlying ideology in which other cultures "only can be 'objects' of knowledge and/or of domination practices" (p. 174) is reproduced in everyday life through board games, yoghurt containers and ice cream sticks. When colonially marginalized people and cultures are exoticized and orientalized for commercial purposes, they are reduced to objects once again. The deconstruction of these discourses in our everyday life can happen partly through the critical reflection and update of cultural products, in this case through rebranding commercial items. But even when the problems of coloniality are acknowledged, and possibly especially then, to what extent is the rebranding merely clever marketing and PR in a social climate that appreciates and demands it? In such cases, are such rebranding campaigns merely cosmetic changes; are they in danger of reducing the process of decolonization/decoloniality to the realm of mere metaphor?

There are many intersecting and overlapping aspects to decolonization, both geographical, institutional and mental, but some have warned that the concept is in danger of being reduced to a mere token or, indeed, a merely cosmetic change. Tuck & Yang (2012) emphatically argue that "decolonization is not a metaphor", but a practical, tangible change. The authors provide examples of how the "too-easy adoption of decolonizing discourse" (p.

3) can undermine the whole objective in different scenarios, but to apply this to the case at hand, if a problematic name or image is replaced by something else on your favorite box of cereal because the company has been criticized or fears criticism for it, or wants to project an image of cultural awareness and social responsibility, but underlying issues are not addressed, the so-called decolonization of the cereal box is reduced to metaphor, and therefore is not actually decolonization. Tuck & Yang seek to draw attention to the problem of how “when metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future” (p. 3). Tuck & Yang analyze the issue from the perspective of settler colonialism in the United States, i.e., the colonization of indigenous peoples and lands of the region. Their theories can be applied in Finland in relation to the colonization of the Sámi people and Sápmi land, when this relationship is considered through the lens of settler colonialism, but the theories can also be applied more broadly on a conceptual level when considering problems related to both decolonization and decoloniality. The authors see contemporary decolonization as a very concrete and defined project, which in their research context “specifically requires the repatriation of Indigenous land and life” (p. 21), not improving society in general (p. 3).

Tuck & Yang (2012) identify a set of “settler moves to innocence”, by which they mean “those strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all” (p. 10). These are precisely the type of processes, the authors argue, make a mere metaphor out of decolonization. Applying this theory to the recent wave of rebranding consumer products in Finland, this process can be seen in terms of one of these moves to innocence: “Free your mind and the rest will follow”. By this the authors ponder whether fostering recognition and critique of coloniality as a primary objective can result in the actual objective of decolonization being forgotten:

The front-loading of critical consciousness building can waylay decolonization, even though the experience of teaching and learning to be critical of settler colonialism can be so powerful it can feel like it is indeed making change. (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 19)

Rebranding of commercial products may very well be, at least partially, this kind of a move to innocence. Changing a name and picture can be done for the right reasons, but if the underlying issues are not addressed, the change is indeed only cosmetic and remains in the mind. Indeed, acts that remain on a metaphorical level can act as diversions and distractions which relieve colonial guilt but have little concrete effect (Tuck & Yang, p. 21). In addition

to rebranding, some type of reconciliation in the form of apology or a donation of proceeds to an organization working with hands-on issues advancing decolonization may be some practical ways of taking the act beyond metaphor. On the other hand, as Tuck & Yang also note, the idea of decolonizing the mind as the first step towards dismantling colonial power structures dates as far back as Frantz Fanon's seminal postcolonial critiques in the 1960s (Tuck & Yang, p. 19). Therefore, reducing coloniality from our everyday life by taking it out of our contemporary material culture does have value that should not be underestimated, even if it is just one step towards a more equitable society.

Just as I have drawn a distinction between colonialism and coloniality, this thesis concentrating on the latter, here it is essential to draw a distinction between decolonization and decoloniality. Perhaps concrete decolonization as Tuck & Yang (2012) see it has the best chances to be advanced in Finland, for the moment, via the Sámi Truth and Reconciliation Commission, whose findings may one day affect future state policy towards the Sámi and their historical land, as well as extend the practices to other incarnations of Finnish coloniality as well. Decoloniality is also strongly related to this, but it differs in that it can be advanced wherever hegemonic colonial discourses are deconstructed and faced with counternarratives, leading to new paradigms of understanding (Keskinen, Mkwesha & Seikkula, 2021, p. 68). While they do overlap, decoloniality can be considered as something more conceptual than decolonization, and for that reason it is decoloniality that is the appropriate denominator of what can be the most desirable effect in the case of rebranding everyday commercial products. Quijano (2007) defines decoloniality as “epistemological decolonization”, which I take to mean an approach that specifically aims to deconstruct the power of knowledge production and hegemonic discourses seeped in coloniality: “Decoloniality is needed to clear the way for new intercultural communication, for an interchange of experiences and meanings, as the basis of another rationality which may legitimately pretend to some universality” (p. 177). Building on these theses, Maldonado-Torres (2016) develops the process of decoloniality as

efforts at rehumanizing the world, to breaking hierarchies of difference that dehumanize subjects and communities and that destroy nature, and to the production of counter-discourses, counter-knowledges, counter-creative acts, and counter-practices that seek to dismantle coloniality and to open up multiple other forms of being in the world. (Maldonado-Torres, 2016, p. 10).

From these ponderings it can be concluded that yes, rebranding and updating everyday commercial products to strip their meanings of overt coloniality is a necessary but insufficient step in the process of decoloniality (and, to some extent, decolonization). These

attempts may have unhelpful repercussions if they are done in “bad faith” and reduce the necessary changes to a metaphorical level, thus undermining their full potential. Still, however limited, these actions’ value in generating public debate and fostering wider social critical consciousness on these issues should not be understated. Something more is needed, however. As both Quijano and Maldonado-Torres define it, decoloniality is an ongoing process of deconstructing discourses and constructing a new paradigm. In this process, stripping coloniality from material culture is part of the deconstructing phase, but it cracks the door for the emergence of a new paradigm, under construction by counter-discourses that have the potential to be seen and heard and engaged with on a much larger scale than ever before.

### 4.3.2 Online debate: Renaming ice cream

On June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2020, Ville Tavio, Finns Party MP and Chairperson of the party’s Parliamentary Group posted a news article about plans of ice cream manufacturer Froneri Finland to rename the classic Eskimo ice cream, which Tavio attributed to the alleged “racism” of the Eskimo brand name. “The green left [*vihervasemmisto*] is surely overjoyed again?” Tavio commented on the article he shared on Twitter.<sup>17</sup> At this time, the international protests catalyzed by the killing of George Floyd were at their height in the United States and Western Europe, including Finland. Tavio does not situate the renaming of the product in this broader context, but introduces it as a project of his party’s political adversaries, the “green left”. The rhetorical devices used by the MP construct an antagonistic frontier on the ice cream front, by using equivalential logic to insinuate that the opposing political group must be behind the ice cream manufacturer’s rebranding decision, or at least that such a commercial facelift is aligned with that group’s objectives. As is to be expected, the post garnered hundreds of reactions and comments. In the long thread, I have identified less than ten comments which echo Tavio’s antagonistic rhetoric, in that they directly blame the brand change on supporters of Finnish green and left-wing parties, “snowflakes” or “rainbow

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<sup>17</sup> Incidentally, the timing and content of both Froneri Finland’s announcement and Tavio’s tweet shows just how globally interconnected these issues and the political debate and antagonisms around them are. Only two days earlier, it was reported that similar US ice cream brand Eskimo Pie was changing its name. The US president’s son Donald Trump Jr. shared an article concerning that decision on Twitter along with the comment: “The bullshit never ends.” <https://twitter.com/DonaldJTrumpJr/status/1274363081003601920?s=20>

people”. “I am nearly in a state of rage over how the green left is groveling in front of foreignness to the detriment of us Finns,” one such commentor writes, for example. “That sick green left, how sick can things get. Finns are quietly accepting all this shit,” writes another. Such comments frame the issue as part of a stark dichotomy between foreign green left ideals threatening Finnish culture and nativist components that are attempting to preserve and protect Finnishness. These types of antagonistic comments are, however, a small minority in this thread. Much like the thread started by Green MP Pirkka-Pekka Petelius analyzed in the earlier section garnered a great number of antagonistic comments from his opposers but hardly any from his supporters, so is the case in the thread begun by Finns MP Tavio.

In contrast, nearly thirty comments in the thread attack Tavio’s suggestion using directly antagonistic rhetoric. The most common accusation used by these commentors is that Tavio and his supporters are racists: “Do you want to uphold racism?”, “Your party has no concrete policies besides racism”, “Your whole ideology is based on fear and your actions on racism”, and so on. Some commentors who showed support for Tavio were also called racists by others. Using the word racist as political rhetoric to label a large group of people in effect has a similar result as calling someone a snowflake: it deepens the divide between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and invalidates any argument that group may propose, because they are “racists”, and all their words and actions are seen by the opposing group through this lens. Additionally, a couple commentors retort by demanding that the Finns Party change their name, because of the “disgrace” it brings to Finnish people: “As a Finnish person I do not want to be associated with racists and the far-right,” one commentor says, re-establishing the antagonism of binary groups in Finnish society and politics. Other commentors deride the Finns Party for using such issues as a “straw man” to push their populist agenda against, but it is noteworthy that many commentors also make a straw man out of supposed positions of the Finns Party and its supporters. In addition to the outright antagonistic comments, many of the commentors rejecting Tavio’s hypothesis retort with heavy sarcasm, some of which do their share of reinforcing an antagonistic frontier: “As long as they don’t change the name of Finland Liquor (*Suomi Viina*)”, by which the commentor seems to equate Tavio’s political party with uncomplimentary connotations of backwardness, alcoholism and redneck aesthetic. Another sarcastic commentor seems to satirize Tavio or his supporters in exaggeratedly lamenting how the traditional, pastorally romanticized oatmeal mascot “Elovena girl was raped, Negro kisses were forbidden, and now the penguins are being halal-slaughtered”. These antagonistic



and sarcastic comments, which together make up the lion's share of the thread, offer an example of how equivalential logic is used in the social media public sphere to bolster both sides of the antagonistic frontier between political groups.

Naturally, much of this thread also includes more thoughtful and less aggressive comments for and against the ice cream rebranding issue. A number of those in the thread not agreeing with Tavio's remarks arrange their words more constructively, such as the commentator who writes: "I'm not particularly overjoyed, but it's about time to update this brand. Oppression, discrimination and exoticization of ethnic backgrounds is a thing of the past". Another describes the issue in a relatively nuanced way, but antagonistic rhetoric seeps in through the insinuated dichotomy between civilized and, supposedly, uncivilized people: "Civilized people understand that a brand name is never 'just a name'. A person cannot think of a brand without its connotations, because those form the thought – but a person can learn to think of their way of thinking". On the other side of the coin, many expressed agreement with Tavio's sentiment, but in less outright antagonistic terms than the MP. Most of them stated that there is nothing racist about the word Eskimo, and therefore a name change is unnecessary. In a very similar way to their interlocutor, the person writing about civilized people (as opposed to uncivilized people), one person wrote about commonsensical people (as opposed to people with no common sense): "A person with normal common sense understands that there is nothing racist about this. It's ridiculous that everything needs to be labeled as racist, discriminatory, etc.". Even when antagonism is not direct, it is almost always clear which group a person sees themselves as a part of, and which group they see as their opposite pole; showing how ingrained the equivalential divides truly are.

Although this thread inspired a comparatively low number of blatantly antagonistic comments from those who agreed with Tavio's sentiment, more than a dozen commentators sarcastically posed slippery slope arguments very similar to those that reigned in the previously analyzed Sámi sketch apology thread. Two of the sarcastic commentators situated the rebranding of the ice cream in the context of the ongoing BLM protests: "Will the next thing be #eskimolivesmatters [sic]", "Pingviinilivesmatter". People speculated that rebranding would also be in order for Geisha chocolates, Italian pasta and panini brands, and "racist white supremacist" White System toothpaste, and some said all products should just be wrapped in generic white paper or sold by serial number, to make sure no one is offended. The Finns MP Ville Tavio chimed in with a joke about the necessity of renaming penguins "Antarctic birds". A few commentators wondered whether another old Finnish company,

known for its Eskimo brand kitchenware, would soon be compelled to change its product's name as well. In fact, the kitchenware company later said it had already updated its brand name and logo months before for similar reasons,<sup>18</sup> a point that would have validated the slippery slope commentators, though it appears this rebranding was not generally known of at the time. The rhetorical objective of these comments seemed to be much the same as those in the Sámi apology thread: to make the issue look ridiculous by presenting the imaginary extents to which such rebranding will supposedly inevitably lead to. And naturally, an indirect antagonism is present in such comments as well, through the equivalential logic used to construct a binary between the reasonable, sensible 'us' and the unreasonable, volatile 'them' with absurd demands.

The thread also included many comments which argued that it is a private company's prerogative to rename their product if they want to, and that the market economy actually makes it good business sense to change a name that some customers may find offensive. A crucial perspective was missing, however. As in the Twitter thread about the Sámi apology, hardly anyone mentioned the perspective of the group of people actually affected by the brand name. One commentator says that the word Eskimo is a Western term used to refer to many groups of people, most of whom do not appreciate the moniker, while another says that the Inuit Circumpolar Council has recommended replacing the word Eskimo with Inuit in public discussion. It may be unlikely that a person who has been unwantedly called an Eskimo would end up commenting in a Finnish MP's Twitter feed, but hardly any of the Finnish commentators, even those who said they supported the rebranding of the ice cream, brought up the perspective of the people who have been racialized with the word. This goes to illustrate how rebranding can indeed end up as merely a cosmetic change done for business purposes, when the underlying prejudices are not properly addressed. The decolonialization of an ice cream remains a metaphor when its main effects are brushing an awkward product name under the rug and being used by opposing political forces to deepen antagonistic divides around yet another distracting issue. Then we are not talking about decoloniality. And for that matter, neither was there any talk of coloniality or colonialism in this Twitter thread. The word racism was thrown around to great extent, but underlying structures of racism

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<sup>18</sup> Laakso, A. (1.7.2020). Perinteisten Eskimo-keittiötuotteiden nimi muuttui jo keväällä: 'Olemme olleet tietoisia brändinimen haasteista'. *Yle Uutiset*. <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-11424099>

embedded in coloniality, and their deconstruction through the process of decoloniality, were not even touched upon. Decoloniality can begin with rebranding, but it is, at best, only the beginning.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Ghosts revisited

Throughout this thesis, I have referred to coloniality as both a ghost haunting contemporary Western societies and a floating signifier used in discursive struggles between antagonistic political groups. These are ephemeral qualities of a specter-like concept, or memory, or feeling, that does not allow itself to be forgotten. The reason why coloniality has not retreated into the obscurity of history is, of course, the fact that the history of colonialism is the basis for a massive swathe of today's global modernity. While it is not reckoned with, it will not go away, but continue to lift its head in forms of social movements, polarization, inequality, racism, and revolt.

All kinds of atrocities can haunt individuals and societies, but Tuck & Ree (2013) relate haunting specifically to colonialism. In their iteration, haunting

is the relentless remembering and reminding that will not be appeased by settler society's assurances of innocence and reconciliation. [...] Haunting doesn't hope to change people's perceptions, nor does it hope for reconciliation. Haunting lies precisely in its refusal to stop. [...] For ghosts, the haunting is the resolving, it is not what needs to be resolved (Tuck & Ree, 2013, p. 642).

The authors thus hold that resolution is not even the objective of the ghosts of colonialism; rather, the ghosts are something that refuse to go away, perhaps desiring retribution above reconciliation. This is in line with the tangible decolonization that Tuck & Ree call for, namely "returning stolen land" (p. 647). Yet, as the authors contend with reference to the eminent scholar of postcolonial theory, Frantz Fanon, "decolonizing the mind is the first step, not the only step" (p. 647). In the context of Finland and coloniality, as I have presented the issue in this thesis, the tentative first step is presently being made. In the next three sections of this final discussion, I summarize my main arguments and address my three initial research questions.

### 5.2 Addressing research question 1

*What is the relationship of Finland and Finnishness to coloniality, and how have recent international anti-colonial social movements affected the remembrance of and coming to terms with this relationship?*

Coloniality is haunting Finland as well, but in a manner distinct from those societies most associated with historical imperialism – the colonizers and the colonized. As I have outlined regarding my review of theoretical literature from multiple perspectives on the subject, Finland’s position vis-à-vis the colonial world order can be described as peripheral of the center. Finland has its own settler colonial history of Sápmi, and in the wider scheme of things overlapping processes of self-colonization, colonialism without colonies, and colonial complicity can be identified in Finnish history and culture. These intersecting processes have led to Finland retaining its own fair share of coloniality, even without a substantial history of formal colonization.

Over the last two decades or so, there has been some public discussion and debate in Finland regarding features of the culture’s coloniality, although mostly not referred to by that name. I have given examples from the early 2000s of controversies regarding “Negro kiss” chocolates and “Black Pete” licorice, which were subsequently renamed years ago. Such public debates relatively long ago suggest that coloniality has made itself visible through haunting even in a temporal context where these issues were nowhere near as widely polarizing as they are today. While coloniality has, until recently, been a non-issue in broader self-understanding of Finland and Finnishness, the tensions have raised their head now and then. Another controversy slightly predating the social movements of 2020, but clearly linked to the broader mood of the times, was the public apology to the Sámi made by MP Pirkka-Pekka Petelius for his old comedy sketches.

Since the international social movements of 2020, these issues have become much more prevalent and the terminology of colonialism and coloniality has begun to take hold in public discourse and debate, rather than merely in the lexicon of certain activists and academics. At the moment, this shifting paradigm pertains especially to the Sámi, whose oppression by Finland and Finns can perhaps be most clearly seen and admitted as a local phenomenon – more so, at least, than Finnish culture’s entanglements with seemingly more distant manifestations of global, discursive colonial complicity.

In this thesis, my analysis of the cultural artefacts and phenomena – a boardgame, a public apology and commodity rebranding – shows how coloniality is becoming a larger part of Finnish memory politics in the present era, where similar issues are being *glocally* discussed and debated all around Western Europe and North America. Heightening tensions and discursive contestations around these three cases, and others that are beyond the scope of

this research, demonstrate a budding change towards more nuanced self-conceptions of Finland and Finnishness and their place in a more global context. I argue that in these discursive struggles we can see fragments of an uncomfortable process of self-recognition going beyond decades-old nation-building narratives of cohesive, gutsy homogeneity.

However, social processes are not linear, and at this moment it is not clear where the discursive struggles catalyzed in Finland by the international anti-colonial movements will lead. As the newer versions of *Afrikan tähti* so acutely demonstrate, coloniality sits deeply embedded in conceptions of the Self and the Other. Furious backlash to attempts to rearticulate Finnishness in the context of coloniality go to show that decoloniality, even just of the mind, is far from an inevitability. Still, the very existence of such a dichotomy over how we should and want to see ourselves strongly indicates that Finland does not and cannot stand apart from issues of coloniality, and the political identity struggles that they stir.

### 5.3 Addressing research question 2

*How are narratives of memory relating to Finnish coloniality being constructed and reconstructed via discursive struggles in the digital public sphere?*

Throughout the analysis of my cases studies and research material, I have identified three ongoing dimensions of discursive struggles related to Finland and coloniality. These struggles are related to (1) *acknowledgement*, as exemplified by *Afrikan tähti* and the controversies surrounding it, (2) *reconciliation*, as exemplified by Petelius' apology to the Sámi and ensuing debate, and (3) *cosmetic decoloniality*, as exemplified by the newest wave of rebranding consumer products, and vocal public opinions about it. These dimensions of coloniality and related discursive struggles overlap in the cases examined, but for clarity's sake, I have presented them separately and drawn parallels and connections between them while advancing my argument and analysis. I do not claim the three dimensions of coloniality I have identified to be an exhaustive categorization of these processes; they reflect my interdisciplinary theoretical framework and the case studies exemplifying recent colonial controversies. While a different approach would undoubtedly uncover different perspectives and other dimensions, my study identifies these three dimensions as some of the fronts in the current contestations over constructing and reconstructing Finnish memory politics of

coloniality, and by extension, Finnish national identity in this watershed moment of increasingly diverse self-realization.

The struggle over acknowledgement, as I call it, is best expressed in *Afrikan tähti*, the ubiquitous boardgame that can be found in practically every Finnish household and school. This cultural artefact is so important in the process because it has been such a familiar and ordinary part of everyday life for generations that few would even think to spontaneously question it. Learning to look at *Afrikan tähti* through a postcolonial and decolonial lens leads to acknowledgement, as using such a lens takes the attention away from ‘them’ and shines the light on ‘us’. Acknowledging the coloniality of the game necessarily leads to a realization that the game is not really about Africa at all; it is about Finnish (Western) fantasies about Africa, and about how we see ourselves in contrast to this imagined Other. This is understandably an uncomfortable process, which opens the door to consider what other parts of our collective culture reinforce similar colonial narratives. Acknowledgement is also not something that necessarily follows from such a process – as recent public controversies have shown, strong and vocal groups in Finnish society are not open to redefining Finnishness through acknowledging the role of coloniality in its culture.

Happening simultaneously with the struggle over acknowledgement, but also to some extent dependent on acknowledgement, is a second discursive struggle over a dimension that I have identified as reconciliation. Petelius’ apology for his old Sámi sketches exemplifies this struggle most appropriately, because it brings issues of coloniality to a more tangible level by acting as a political ritual that opens possibilities for actual political action. Where cultural discourses solidifying coloniality may feel distant and quixotic, the Sámi question is a more concrete domestic issue, and the idea of settler colonialism in a geographically near context can perhaps be more easily recognized than colonial complicity in global knowledge-power structures. In offering his apology to the Sámi (and then the Roma) for his personal actions, Petelius set himself as a surrogate for Finnish society and state’s historical and contemporary mistreatment of the Sámi. This symbolic gesture turned a new leaf in discursive struggles: the issue under debate was no longer that much over whether something happened, but whether what happened warranted apology and reconciliatory practices. A realignment of the relationship between Finland and the Sámi is underway through shifting narratives. It requires deep and painful self-reflection on the Finnish role in the history of Northern Europe as more complex than merely a pawn of greater powers. Public apologies

and the inauguration of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission show that this process is already moving from theory to practice.

The third dimension of discursive struggles I have identified is recent decoloniality in the form of rebranding certain consumer products, which in many cases is in danger of being limited to merely cosmetic decoloniality. Renaming food products to cleanse them of colonial tropes has been a broad international phenomenon in the wake of the 2020 BLM-inspired protests, and several Finnish companies have engaged in such rebranding as well. Building on Tuck & Yang's (2012) concerns, I have pointed out the danger of these principally laudable exercises amounting to only cosmetic changes if coloniality is merely swept under the rug as a "move to innocence", rather than confronted and reckoned with. As I have shown, some Finnish companies have very recently made this necessary but insufficient choice, while others have missed their chance to do even that. Reluctance of companies to face the impacts of their products on the discourse of coloniality over the years and decades, even if they are changing their imagery now, and emphatic backlash from politicians and citizens, demonstrates that decoloniality of everyday Finnish life is still very much a work in progress.

While I present these discursive struggles as an evolving process progressing from broader, conceptual questions to narrower, practical ones, it is important to stress that the discursive struggles over coloniality in Finland are all happening simultaneously and in different ways, of which I have only concentrated on three specific examples in this thesis. Furthermore, while I have identified three levels of discursive struggles, the process is non-linear: discourses and narratives produce counter-discourses and counter-narratives, and there is no way to know which of them, if any, will emerge as hegemonic. The discursive struggles I have identified have the potential of leading Finland towards a new, decolonial paradigm, but this is not an inevitable outcome, and we are only experiencing the tentative first step of such possible memory reconfiguration. These questions are so important because most of the debate is not really even debate about the specific issue at hand, but rather a struggle over who has the right to define absolutely foundational concepts such as what it means to be 'Finnish', what it means to be 'racist', what it means to be 'us', and what it means to be 'them'.



## 5.4 Addressing research question 3

*Can conflicting attitudes on coloniality be understood through equivalential logic, i.e., how is one's recognition or rejection of Finland's colonial roles related to one's political identity in the current polarized atmosphere?*

In my thesis, I have sought to demonstrate that the discursive struggles involved in the issue of coloniality can be understood, to an extent, through Ernesto Laclau's (2005) theories of populism, which involves the erection of an antagonistic frontier between two groups whose identity is constructed along equivalential chains of logic. Based on research identifying different political identity factions in present-day Finland (Manneström, et al., 2020), I have here concentrated on two rough groups that are most juxtaposed in current political issues: cultural conservatives (*arvokonservatiivit*) and cultural liberals (*arvoliberaalit*). These groups conflict on a wide range of political and social topics, one of which is coloniality, which I have here concentrated on through a few example threads of online debate on Twitter and Facebook. My objective was not to record the amount of antagonism identifiable in these controversies, which would have required a much broader set of research material, but rather to shed some light on how antagonisms, and other discursive processes, are manifested in the cases and contexts focused on here.

My analysis of the three lengthy social media threads showed that much antagonism was involved in the debates concerning coloniality. Overt antagonism, i.e., construction of an enemy group via equivalential logic, was to be seen in the text of two of the three original posters (comedian Kivi and MP Tavio), as well as in two of the three comment threads (Sámi apology and Eskimo ice cream rebranding). In my analysis I have shown how the populist construction of the 'us' group in relation to the 'them' group consistently happens in some form or other in all the three cases. Upholding the antagonistic frontier is used on both sides of the discursive struggle to justify one group's demands and concerns in the face of the presumed enemy. Laclau (2005) has argued that all political movements are populist to some extent (p. 47), and my qualitative analysis, while limited in scope, provides some examples of both cultural conservatives and cultural liberals engaging in similar rhetorical practices. Labeling the rival political group on social media as racists or snowflakes also aims to silence the others and make their arguments unjustifiable, rather than engaging in constructive debate.

Although an in-depth analysis of its reasons and effects is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is vital to keep in mind the polarizing qualities of social media, which have been seen to affect heightened antagonism between opposing political groups (Bail, 2021; Rathje, Van Bavel, & van der Linden, 2021). While a certain amount of populism is a feature of all political movements and groups, this tendency is amplified to a great extent through the operating logic of the platforms controlling the digital public sphere. Coloniality debates are only a miniscule part of the polarizing nature of social media, which has been widely criticized for provoking engagement through the amplification of antagonisms corrosive to political and social fabrics. As social media is a central site for contemporary memory politics, among other political struggles, it is important to be aware of the possible ways in which the platforms themselves direct the discursive struggles.

The findings in my thesis support the argument that in this polarized atmosphere, a persons' recognition or rejection of Finland's colonial roles is, to an extent, related to their political identity. This was clear especially when analyzing the antagonistic comments in the social media threads. Those who advocated recognition of Finland's colonial roles tended to reveal their support for culturally liberal values by labeling their opponents as racists or Finns Party supporters (*persu*). Those who rejected Finland's colonial roles, on the other hand, tended to reveal their support for culturally conservative values by labeling their opponents as libtards (*suvakki*) or snowflakes (*ammattiloukkaantuja*) or green left supporters (*vihervassarit*). In this manner, dichotomies indicative of broader polarization were injected into debates over issues of coloniality. Antagonistic political identities were thus tacked on to the controversies at hand, indicating precisely such a contingency and convergence of attitudes on a variety of issues. This convergence in turn suggests an even broader societal grouping based on the logic of equivalence, although the scope of social media data in this qualitative study was narrow.

My study of the social media material provides some examples of the logic of equivalence and resulting antagonisms being constructed around the coloniality debate. Laclaudian antagonism was indeed a major feature, but by no means the only feature of the social media debates analyzed here. The threads also included much thoughtful and balanced discussion, as well as novel perspectives concerning Finland's relationship with coloniality. Although not the main focus in this study, it is yet another reminder of the intricate interplay of discourses and counter-discourses that by its nature defies absolute categorization and

identification. It is also comforting to notice that antagonism and struggle is not the only way in which narratives are negotiated and formed.

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1 Limitations and further study

In this qualitative analysis of a few cultural case studies and corresponding social media debate, my aim was to shed light on issues that can be identified in current Finnish discussions related to dimensions of coloniality, and in negotiations and struggles over memory politics in the digital public sphere. While appropriate for the objectives of this thesis, such a narrow sampling obviously has its limitations. Firstly, each of the case studies would benefit from much more in-depth analysis than what was done here, where the main objective was to demonstrate connections and mutual processes between the cases. Individual, more detailed analysis would provide deeper understanding of the positions of these cultural artefacts and phenomena in Finnish discourses of coloniality. Secondly, while I argue that the social media threads included in my study are indicative of larger patterns of discursive struggles, the scope of a Master's thesis allows only a scratch of the surface.

In the material I have analyzed, the most antagonistic voices are predominant. This may be partially due to social media algorithms promoting such engagement, and it is vital to remember that even traditional media largely follows the logic and rules of social media platforms today to reach audiences. Here I concentrated mostly on comments constructing antagonistic frontiers, but as I have mentioned, these are only a part of the process of narrative negotiations happening in the digital public sphere. Further study could entail quantitative research, in which thousands of comments from different threads from different times could be collected, coded and categorized to provide details on how prevalent these dichotomies are and what types of arguments and phrases are the most commonly used and in what ways. Research should also be extended to other social media platforms, such as Instagram, Jodel, Youtube and Tiktok, which are all also sites of narrative negotiations and discursive struggles, all facilitating political debate and discussion in different ways.

To broaden the picture, there are plenty of recent public controversies related to coloniality in Finland that would deserve their own research projects. These include the October 2021 *Afrikan tähti* controversy that started at the University of Helsinki, as well as the November 2021 so-called “woke controversy” that started from an argument on a YLE

talk show episode dealing with racism and “cancel culture”<sup>19</sup>. Studying social media discussions, opinion pieces, newspaper columns, news articles as well as article comment discussions related to these controversies would provide valuable insight into the anatomies of colonial discourse struggles that have gained immense traction. My employment of Laclaudian antagonistic frontiers and equivalential logic to help explain such controversies relating to discursive struggles could be fruitfully applied on a larger scale to these recent public disputes over coloniality.

## 6.2 A decolonial turn?

In the Facebook thread related to *Afrikan tähti* that I analyzed in this thesis, there was one comment that stood out. It painted an ideal picture of a possible decolonial counternarrative, to be reconstructed from the deconstructed remains of a cultural artefact that has defined Finnish conceptions of the Other for decades. The comment read: “Maybe one day we will see an anti-colonialist version of *Afrikan tähti*. Something along the lines of: start in Soweto, go to prison, and eventually free your country from the yoke of the white oppressors.”

Perhaps we will. When Quijano (2007) speaks of decoloniality, he is clearly speaking of a paradigm shift: “What is to be done is [...] to liberate the production of knowledge, reflection, and communication from the pitfalls of European rationality/modernity” (p. 177). The wave of protests that began in the summer of 2020 drew international attention to precisely the need for such an emancipation of narratives, knowledge, and memory. As I have argued, *Afrikan tähti* is the prime example of knowledge and power in the context of Finnish coloniality. Therefore, it would seem like the perfect place to begin rearticulating national narratives of ‘us’ and ‘them’. We have not seen an anticolonial African adventure yet, but we have seen acts of *détournement*<sup>20</sup> that are bringing decoloniality to the Finnish consciousness by countering the country’s most beloved colonial symbol. In August 2020, after the protests had been going on for some months, the culture jamming project Häiriköt-päämaja and Sámi artist collective Suohpanterror published *Lapin hippu*, a familiar game-like depiction of the

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<sup>19</sup> Sannikka, M. (19.11.2021). Esko Valtaoja ja Renaz Ebrahimi ottivat rajusti yhteen nykyaktivismista Sannikka-ohjelmassa perjantaina. *Yle Uutiset*. <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-12195118>

<sup>20</sup> Beautiful Trouble. Culture jamming. <https://beautifultrouble.org/toolbox/tool/culture-jamming>

pillaging of Sápmi from its culture and natural resources.<sup>21</sup> And in January 2022, a man from Vantaa publicized his own perspective on the classic game, *Pohjolan aarteet*, inspired by the University of Helsinki controversy and depicting foreign mining companies excavating for treasure from the Finnish bedrock.<sup>22</sup>

The new narratives articulated in these *détourned* versions, and hopefully future reiterations of *Afrikan tähti* by also subaltern and marginalized voices, demonstrate new ways of understanding degrees of coloniality in this semi-peripheral land. Roles of colonizer, colonized, and complicit intersect in an intricate web, producing a new panoply of memory, identity, and self-awareness. We are haunted, yes, but perhaps that is not a bad thing. How else would we be driven to question, negotiate, and struggle to reckon with ourselves over the past, present, and future? Learning to think in terms of decoloniality requires a paradigm shift, which can be uncomfortable and even painful, but once we are beyond it, there will be no need to look back. As Gilman-Opalsky (2016) eloquently phrases it: “*The existing world cannot rid itself from ghosts without becoming something else*” (p. 65).

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<sup>21</sup> Tamminen, J. (27.8.2020). Lappi – Suomen oma siirtomaa. *Voima*. <https://voima.fi/hairikot/artikkeli/lappi-suomen-oma-siirtomaa/>

<sup>22</sup> Sinisalo, S. (2.1.2022) Vantaalainen Antti Laiho suunnitteli Afrikan tähti -kiistan inspiroimana lautapelin, jossa pelaajat ovat Suomea pala palalta valtaavia kaivosyhtiöitä. *Helsingin Sanomat*. <https://www.hs.fi/kaupunki/vantaa/art-2000008501338.html>

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