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# Challenging Representations of Sámi Characters in Fiction for Young Readers

*Abstract: This study focuses on challenging representations of Sámi characters and cultures in Swedish literary works for young readers: "Bamse möter Stallo" (Bamsy Meets Stállu, 2021), a cartoon intended for pre-literate and young readers, Lilli, Lávre och Saivofolket (Lilli, Lávre and the Sáivu People, 2021), a picturebook, and När vi var samer (When We Were Sámi, 2021), a graphic novel accessible for teenagers. The aim is to map how the Sámi characters and cultures are presented and represented, and by and for whom, using critical race theory. The research questions are: 1) How do verbal and visual elements in the analysed works contribute to the representations of the Sámi characters and cultures? 2) How might the critical race theory framework be relevant in the Swedish-Sámi context? The findings show how authors and illustrators use symmetrical, enhancing, complementary, or counterpointing interplay to pinpoint preconceived notions of Sáminess, inform the readers about historical and contemporary racism, challenge underlying perceptions that privilege Swedishness, and to tell stories and counter stories about Sápmi, the Sámi peoples, and Sámi cultures.*

**Keywords:** Sámi characters and cultures, Swedish literature, young readers, critical race theory, visual and verbal interplay

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In this study, representations of Sámi characters and cultures in three literary works for young readers are examined. We use critical race theory to identify how the Sámi characters and cultures are represented, and by and for whom in order to answer the following questions:

1. How do verbal and visual elements in the analysed works contribute to the representations of the Sámi characters and cultures?
2. How might the critical race theory framework be relevant in the Swedish-Sámi context?

The Sámi are the indigenous peoples of the European Arctic. While there are studies on representations of the Sámi in Nordic children's material (e.g., Conrad; Pankenier Weld), there are relatively few studies focusing on representations of the Sámi in contemporary Swedish literature for young readers (e.g., Heith; Hirvonen; Kokkola, Palo and Manderstedt; Palo, Kokkola and Manderstedt; Manderstedt, Palo and Kokkola; Kolberg; Brovold). Literature has the potential to provide readers with insights into the specificities of the cultures, languages, histories and beliefs, to invite "læseren til at mærke sin magt til at skabe mening" (the reader to use their power to create meaning) (Madsen and Allouche 19). Alternatively, literature may patronise readers or appropriate cultural material (Manderstedt, Palo and Kokkola 89). We propose that critical race theory can be used as a tool to enable readers to engage with representations that may be new to them, for instance, when reading stories containing Sámi characters.

Colonial practices within Sweden have led to the loss of Sámi languages. Consequently, many literary works depicting Sámi characters and cultures were written in Swedish by non-Sámi authors. Today, measures have been implemented to promote the production of national minority language literature in Sweden (Laurell) but literature depicting Sámi characters is still rare. In 2021, only four Swedish books accessible to young readers were published: one cartoon for children, one Sámi-Swedish picturebook, one graphic novel, not specifically marketed for but still accessible for teenagers, and one young adult novel. Our selection criteria were that 1) the literary work must be intended for or accessible to young readers, 2) combine verbal and visual narration, and 3) be published in 2021. The young adult novel, *Himlabrand* by Moa Backe Åstot, has no other illustrations than stylised reindeer antlers, and did not fulfil the selection criteria.

The resulting three works were 1) a nine-page comic strip “Bamse möter Stallo” (Bamsy Meets Stállu, 2021, hereafter “Bamse”) by Jimmy Wallin, illustrated by Tony Cronstam, 2) the twenty-six-page picturebook *Lilli, Lávre ja Sáivoálbmot/Lilli, Lávre och Saivofolket* (Lilli, Lávre and the Sáivu People, 2021, hereafter *Lilli*) with text by Elin Marakatt and illustrations by Anita Midbjer, and 3) the 347-page graphic novel *När vi var samer* (When We Were Sámi, 2021) by author-illustrator Mats Jonsson. The different genres (adventure story, family story and historical-political fiction), different formats (comic, picturebook and graphic novel), and different intended readerships (from pre-literate three-year-olds to young adults or older) could be perceived as problematic. However, representations of Sámi characters in fiction for young readers was the focus, not comparing genres, formats, or intended readers.

All three works combine verbal and visual communication as a strategy to gain forward motion and communicate stories (Schwarcz 23–24). Consequently, the visual and verbal elements, or iconotext (Hallberg 1), will be read together and not as separate units. Lawrence Sipe highlights the dynamic interplay that creates synergy effects when images and texts are interpreted together: readers fill “in some of the gaps in the verbal text of a picture book with information from the illustrations and [...] readers using information from the verbal text to fill in some of the gaps in the illustrations” (99). Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott provide a more nuanced account of the various image-text relations that are possible. They distinguish *symmetrical* interaction where words and picture convey the same information, from *enhancing* interaction where the images reinforce the meaning of the words or vice versa. They also note that image-text relations may be *complementary* (filling in one another’s gaps) or *counterpointing* if the image and text convey decidedly different interpretations of the situation (225–226).

We draw on these understandings of how images and texts connect, in our analysis of the three works, but we also use questions based on critical race theory to identify how the Sámi characters and cultures are presented and represented, and by and for whom. We begin by presenting the three works, and then combine critical race theory with picturebook theories to answer the research questions.

## Introduction to the Material

*Bamse* is one of Sweden’s most commercially successful comic series for children (Larsson 45). Bamse (Bamsy) is the world’s strongest

bear. His friends, the rabbit Lille Skutt (Little Frisky) and the turtle Skalman (Professor Shellback) join him on adventures. The cartoon is also published in North Sámi through E-Skuvla. In “Bamse”, the protagonist invites his friends to join him on a trip to visit his cousin, Biret, in Johkamohkki (Jokkmokk in Swedish). They fly northwards to Sápmi, the Sámi land, in Skalman’s hot air balloon and help Biret recover her missing reindeer. Biret has found huge footprints and concludes that “Stallo måste ha tagit dem” (Stállu must have taken them) (Wallin and Cronstam 7). Stállu is a mythological giant, well-known to Sámi children (cf. Conrad 204). The friends hide among Biret’s reindeer, wearing fake antlers to trick Stállu into thinking that they are reindeer. Once captured, they challenge Stállu to a competition, ending with a trick: Biret claims she can remove Skalman’s head by snapping her fingers. As a turtle, Skalman can pull his head inside his shell making him appear to be decapitated, which frightens Stállu into running away.

The picturebook *Lilli* is Marakatt and Midbjer’s second book about Lilli and her extended family. The *Lilli* books are published bilingually in pairings of Sámi languages with Swedish. The book can also be heard with a PENPAL audio device. The story starts with Lilli and her family picking cloudberries in “Sápmi, midnattssolens land” (Sápmi, the land of the midnight sun).<sup>1</sup> Lilli’s grandfather gives her a tin pail, which used to belong to her deceased grandmother, and their mother teaches Lilli and her brother how to ascertain which cloudberries are ripe. Lilli’s brother, Lávre, gets stuck in the fen, but is rescued by the mythological Sáivu bird which shows Lávre the Realm of Sáivu from his back before returning him to his family.

Mats Jonsson’s *När vi var samer* is an autofictional graphic novel divided into a prologue, seven parts, and an epilogue. One connecting narrative portrays Jonsson creating the book, seeking information about his family and their history. Another narrative depicts Jonsson growing up alongside his extended family. This narrative describes an uncertain, unknowing connection to Sámi culture, language, and concerns. At a family gathering, documents belonging to their late grandmother reveal their Sámi heritage. Jonsson’s discovery of his family history is interspersed with thirteen vignettes, summarising Sámi, especially Forest Sámi, history in Sweden, Sámi mythology and political strategies.

## Critical Race Theory in Relation to the Sámi in Sweden

In this section, we outline the central tenets of critical race theory and develop their applicability for challenging representations of Sámi

characters in literary works, and to read these texts as challenging representations. Critical race theory can be used to examine how society perpetuates systemic racism in areas such as law, policing, literary studies, medicine and so forth, with the intention of identifying and eliminating all forms of oppression. It is particularly relevant for those whose racial heritage has bestowed the privilege of not needing to think about race. Those who hail from such backgrounds often do not recognise how societally endorsed racism has advantaged them (cf. Nel 4–7, 67–106, 202–221). These truisms apply to the Swedish-Sámi context as much as the African American context whence they originate. Critical race theory has also been used in analyses of children’s literature.<sup>2</sup> However, to the best of our knowledge, critical race theory has not been leveraged to analyse the representations of Sámi characters and cultures.

Critical race theory has five central tenets. The definitions of these tenets in Table 1 draws inductively on Colleen Capper to summarise these tenets (795–796).<sup>3</sup> The relevance of the tenets for the Sámi in Sweden has been interpreted from our previous studies of children’s literature depicting Sámi characters (Kokkola, Palo and Manderstedt; Palo, Kokkola and Manderstedt; Manderstedt, Palo and Kokkola).

Tenet and Definitions	Relevance for the Sámi in Sweden
<p><b>Permanence of racism</b> Both conscious and unconscious racism are permanent features of society.</p>	<p>Stereotypes of the Sámi are pervasive and limiting. Sámi culture is exoticised to promote tourism. Urban Sámi lives are under-represented.</p>
<p><b>Whiteness as property</b> Whiteness is considered a property. Whiteness is naturalised and afforded supremacy.<sup>4</sup> <i>Here, property refers to having privileges. In this study, Whiteness is understood as norms, and privileges, not primarily skin colour.</i></p>	<p>The conditions of Sámi peoples have historically been neglected.<sup>5</sup> The absence of acknowledging Sámi history, languages, and literature in Sweden equals <b>Swedishness as property</b>. <i>Norms afforded supremacy have been termed "Swedishness as property" in order not to focus on skin colour.</i><sup>6</sup></p>
<p><b>Interest convergence</b> Progress is only achieved for the minority when it converges with the majority’s goals.</p>	<p>Investments in Sápmi converge with investments in mining, energy and tourism that benefit the majority’s goals.</p>
<p><b>Critique of liberalism</b> Critiquing the idea that “we are all the same”, meritocracy, and the neutrality of the societal system.</p>	<p>Differences between Sámi groups, their languages, histories and cultures need to be revealed.</p>
<p><b>Counter storytelling</b> Storytelling that casts doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths such as national history.</p>	<p>The creation of stories that question stereotypical images of Sámi life.</p>

Table 1. The five main tenets of critical race theory

Three tenets of critical race theory are adopted here: 1. permanence of racism, 2. Whiteness as property (for this article modified into Swedishness as property), and 3. counter storytelling. The two remaining tenets were not useful for the analyses, as only one of the literary works to some extent dealt with interest convergence and critique of liberalism.

## Sáminess and Otherness

Verbal and visual representations of Sámi characters and cultures in literature for young readers illustrate what is understood as “normal” versus what is “different”. If, for example, Swedishness is an unmarked category and is reproduced, “the unmarked category [...] comes to be understood as being ‘normal’ whilst the marked category is ‘different’” (Kokkola and Van den Bossche 4; see also Flanagan 13–14). Sáminess is generally not the norm in literature for young readers, and therefore can be understood as different, or even racialised (Palo, Kokkola and Manderstedt 295–296). Stories challenging the stereotypical representations of Sámi characters and Sáminess, might also be read as “powerful means for destroying mindset – the bundle of presuppositions, received wisdoms, and shared understandings” (Delgado 2413). Furthermore, Karen Coats notes that “people locate visual images within existing schema, including stereotypes, more quickly than associated verbal text” (119), which underscores the importance of analysing works combining verbal and visual elements.

The first tenet – permanence of racism – draws attention to stereotyping. All three works are set in Sápmi, feature characters wearing traditional Sámi clothing, refer to Sámi folklore and mythology and include words written in at least one Sámi language. Some form of marking is necessary to evoke schema, but how this is done influences what readers perceive as being “normal” or “different”. The presence of an ethno-culturally specific item – such as a Sámi hat – is visually notable (cf. Coats). In addition, Lávre’s hat is named in Sámi, *diehppegahpir*, in the otherwise Swedish-language text, thus underscoring its particularity.

Fictional Sámi characters run the risk of being essentialised and appropriated, or exotified. Carina Green et al. call for a greater focus on situated knowledge, the political and cultural circumstances in which Sámi traditions are performed (151–173). Their choice of the verb “perform” is particularly apt for reflecting on the connections between identity and cultural production. When working

professionally, the Sámi (like many other minorities) are expected to perform their culture in recognisable ways, for example, through clothing. Jonsson includes a vignette, which reveals his ambivalent feelings about such performances. He describes witnessing an artist being questioned about her origins until she “erkände” (admitted) that she is Sámi, at which point the non-Sámi women are thrilled to have met “en äkta, livs levande gårdstomt” (a bonafide living house elf) (182). Three years after he “kom ut ur garderoben” (came out) as Sámi (183), Jonsson depicts himself giving a speech at the August Gala wearing a suit and traditional, reindeer leather, beak boots. He wishes to display his sense of belonging to two cultures, but he fears that he wore the boots to the entertainment of Swedes who think of him as a house elf (figure 1).



Figure 1. Mats Jonsson, *När vi var samer* (2021), p. 187. © Mats Jonsson (text and illustrations), by permission from author-illustrator.

The naturalised perspective is the non-Sámi one, and the Sáminess in clothing marks the autofictional character as being different (cf. the five tenets of critical race theory). Jonsson's depiction of the character's fear of being cast as belonging to a cultural context without knowing whether he can claim connectedness, illustrates the supremacy of the non-Sámi culture that is pervasive in the Swedish society.

"Bamse", *Lilli* and *När vi var samer* address, albeit very differently, the subject of marking Sáminess through clothes. Biret in "Bamse" is dressed as though she were about to attend a celebration and the clothes are not suitable for driving a snowmobile or working in the fells. Her white hat, belt and soft beak shoes visually distinguish her as Sámi, but the effect is akin to presenting a modern-day Austrian in leather shorts. To be fair, Skalman, Bamse and Lille Skutt are not appropriately dressed either; despite stating that "[m]an får klä sig efter vädret" (one must dress according to the weather) (Wallin and Cronstam 4), they are barefoot. The non-Sáminess of Bamse and his friends' clothes serve as a contrast to the Sáminess of Biret's attire, making Biret's clothes look less natural in the context. In *Lilli*, the children, Lilli and her brother, are dressed in clothes that visually distinguish their Sáminess, while the grandfather and mother wear clothes that are unmarked, save for the grandfather's belt with a Sámi knife. The dead grandmother and the mythological Sáivu children, on the other hand, are dressed in clothes marking them as Sámi. The clothes seem more natural and less conspicuous in the context. In short, the depiction of traditional clothing is exoticized in *Bamse*, naturalized in *Lilli* and problematized in *När vi var samer*. Asking questions about "who wears what clothing, when and why?" provides an accessible route for thinking about "visual images within existing schema, including stereotypes" (Coats 119). In this way, complex ideas such as exoticisation can be made comprehensible to young readers.

In the works we analyse, Swedishness as property is most easily illustrated in relation to land ownership. *När vi var samer* explicitly challenges the incorporation of Sápmi into Sweden. In a vignette on "Statlig strid & inkompetens" (State struggles and incompetence), Jonsson explains that the Sámi were rarely forcibly removed from their homes (figure 2) but lost their livelihood when the legal system privileged the settlers.

Instead, the poor management of resources resulted in the Sámi being forced to leave their homes to make a living. He includes an example of a struggle which began in 1769, starting with a Sámi man living beside a lake. His fishing rights are imposed upon by newly arrived Swedes, and the court process stretches over sixteen years,



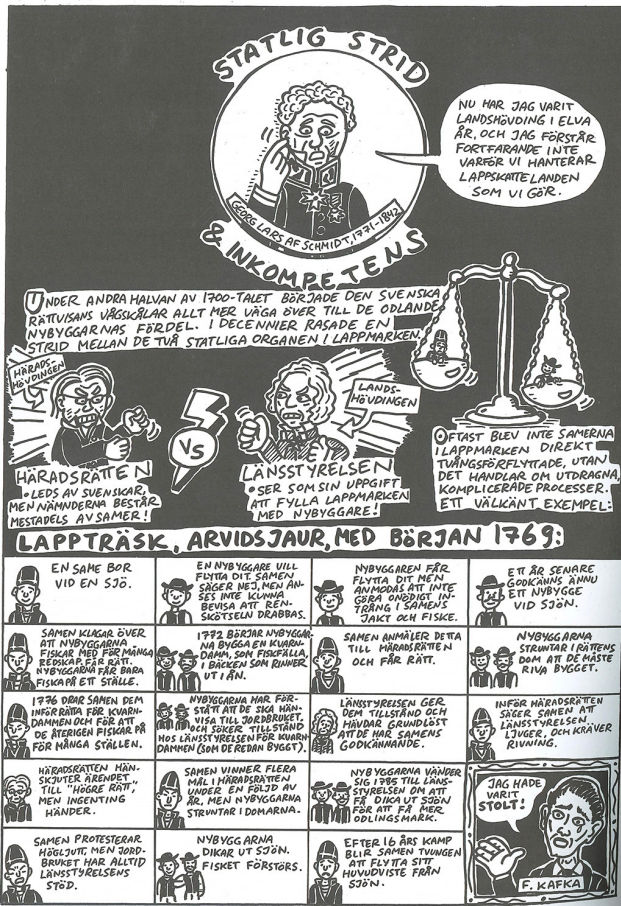


Figure 2. Mats Jonsson, *När vi var samer* (2021), p. 168. © Mats Jonsson (text and illustrations), by permission from author-illustrator.

until the Sámi man is forced to move away to seek a new livelihood. The failure to recognise Sámi relations with land – even the so-called tax-lands (skatteländ) on which the Sámi paid taxes to the Swedish government – as a form of ownership resonates well with the notion of Swedishness as property. The name of part four of *När vi var samer* is “Vuorbejaur”. Vuorbejaur was Jonsson’s family’s tax-land comprising 32,000 acres, which was lost due to encroachments of the kind that Jonsson portrays. By inserting the Franz Kafka figure in the last panel, saying that he “skulle ha varit stolt” (would have been proud) (168), Jonsson’s story about the Kafkaesque legal process that led to the Sámi man being made to leave his home creates a distancing effect, and challenges the reader to think about the institu-



Figure 3. "Bamse möter Stallo" (2021), p. 4. © Egmont Publishing, Malmö. By permission.

tionalised permanence of racism and Swedishness as property expressed in the novel. The verbal communication portrays, in a rather matter-of-fact manner, the steps in the process leading to the removal of the Sámi, starting with one settler encroaching the Sámi man's land, followed by another. The panels enhance and complement the verbal narrative (cf. Nikolajeva and Scott), showing first one Sámi versus one settler, then one Sámi versus two settlers.

Expecting a nine-page cartoon strip or a twenty-six-page picture-book to manage the same degree of details as a full-length graphic novel would be unreasonable. Nevertheless, both *Lilli* and "Bamse" promote ideas about Sámi-land relationships that can be analysed with the help of the tenet of Swedishness as property. In "Bamse", Johkamohkki is named in both languages but never visualised. From Skalman's hot air balloon, no roads or other signs of infrastructure are visible, thus, implying that Johkamohkki is peripheral (figure 3).

The map of Sápmi published on the Sámi Parliament's website, on the other hand, places Johkamohkki at the very centre of Sápmi ("Området Sápmi"). Postcolonial scholars use the concepts central and peripheral to expose how ingrained colonial thinking is in geographical descriptions (e.g., Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin). Readers might not grasp the nuances of postcolonial terminology but reading the Sámi parliament's map alongside the presentation of Sápmi in

“Bamse” offers the potential for counter storytelling, or even reading against the grain. In “Bamse”, Johkamohkki is visually depicted as sparsely populated and rather isolated, and verbally as a place where “inte alla mobiltelefoner [...] fungerar” (not all mobile phones will work) (Wallin and Cronstam 5), thus enhancing the visual narrative (cf. Nikolajeva and Scott). On the other hand, the maps of “viktiga platser” (important places) (Jonsson 6–7) in *När vi var samer* show Vuorbejaur, a place of importance to Jonsson’s family and other Sámi people in the area, while the Swedish name of Vuorbejaur, Dammbacken,<sup>7</sup> implies that the production of hydroelectric power is the main purpose of the place. Thus, the interplay is counterpointing (cf. Nikolajeva and Scott) between the importance conveyed verbally and what is conveyed visually, challenging readers to perceive the permanence of racism that obliterates the Sámi name and history.

In Marakatt and Midbjer’s *Lilli*, the description of the berry-picking in the fen includes birdsong, dwarf birches, and insects. The reader learns that “[m]arken doftade starkt av alla växter” (the ground smelled strongly of all the plants), and that it sways under Lilli’s feet. The verbal and the visual images interact to emphasise and enhance sensory engagement with nature; the land seems animated. The mother guides the children on the specifics of how to look, taste and touch the berries. Lilli’s grandfather observes that there are “extra mycket bär på vår myr” [unusually many berries in our fen] (emphasis added). Lilli’s family has had an intimate, embodied connection to the land for generations; they know the fen, and it nourishes them. The deceased grandmother’s presence in the fen is verbally and visually shown through the mentioning of her granddaughter’s continued use of her bucket, and through the image of an almost transparent Sámi woman in traditional clothes (figure 4). As the verbal text does not explicitly state that the deceased grandmother is present, while the image does, the interaction between text and image is complementary (cf. Nikolajeva and Scott) reflecting “the permeable and indeterminate boundaries between the human and natural worlds” including the spirit worlds (Kuokkanen 33).

Admittedly, picturebooks for young readers often focus on the protagonists and their close families. However, neither “Bamse” nor *När vi var samer* present such a worldview. Counter storytelling questions stereotypical images of Sámi life, and *Lilli* does not portray the Sámi family as oppressed or having lost their connection to Sámi culture. On the other hand, the story does depict some images of Sámi life that could be perceived as stereotypical, for example the presence of reindeer, and the depiction of Sámi life in *Lilli* is not put into a wider societal context.

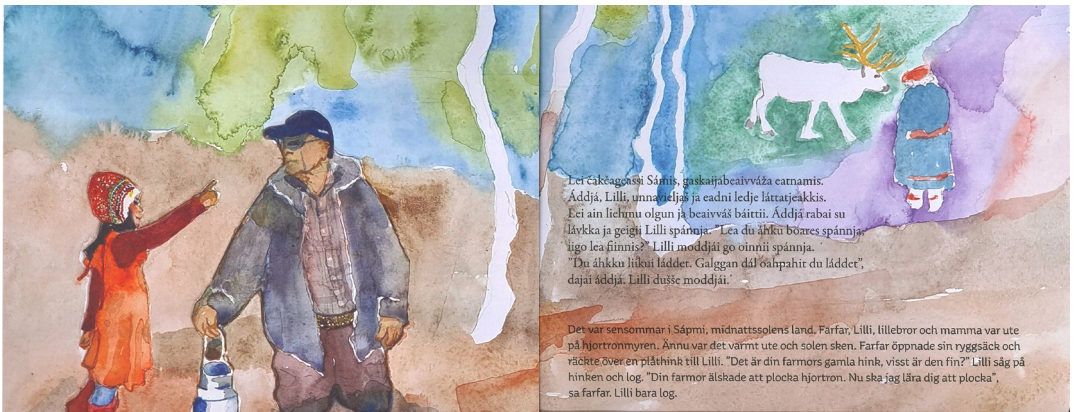


Figure 4. *Lilli, Lávre ja Sáivoálbmot/Lilli, Lávre och Saivofolket* (2021). © Elin Marakatt (text), Anita Midbjer (illustration), by permission from author and illustrator.

On two double page spreads, the primary world is presented beside a spirit world. The Realm of Sáivu is naturalised both visually and verbally: there is nothing threatening or sinister about the meshing of the Realm of Sáivu and the fen. On the contrary, when Lávre is stuck in the fen, the Sáivu bird rescues him (figure 5). Visually, Lávre on the back of the Sáivu bird recalls the illustrations of Nils on the back of Akka from *Kebnekaise*, the wild goose that takes the protagonist across Sweden in Selma Lagerlöf's *Nils Holgerssons underbara resa genom Sverige* (*The Wonderful Adventures of Nils*), first published in Swedish in 1906–1907. In *Lilli*, however, the Sáivu bird takes Lávre into a realm that “få människor hade sett” (few human beings had seen), and Marakatt and Midbjer's book shows a Sámi boy, not a Swedish one. As in “Bamse”, the encounter with the mythological element underscores the significance of the Sápmi setting. These images show the blurred borders between the lived Sámi world and the worlds of the ancestors and mythology.

Sáivu is portrayed as a happy place, where children in traditional Sámi clothes play with white reindeer, symbolising happiness. The watercolour illustrations of *Lilli* and the verbal narrative centre on the impermanence of the boundaries between the child's lived world and the spirit world (cf. Kuokkanen 33–35). The bleeding watercolours convey the idea that the worlds mesh. Sámi beliefs are brought into view, as the presence of ancestors and Sáivu is normalised in *Lilli*'s and her family's lives. This normalisation of what Rauna Kuokkanen terms a Sámi episteme (58) functions as a form of counter storytelling for non-Sámi readers: it does not suggest that the events are a fairy tale, or that Lávre will waken from his dream.



Figure 5. *Lilli, Lávre ja Sáivoálbmot/Lilli, Lávre och Saivofolket* (2021). © Elin Marakatt (text), Anita Midbjer (illustration), by permission from author and illustrator.

Sáivu is part of the fabric of the children’s lives. The family does not just value the fen for the berries they can pick, but also because it spiritually connects the living with their ancestors and Sáivu. Helping children understand these connections undermines notions of land ownership, and thus aligns with the tenet of critical race theory regarding questioning the naturalisation of norms, in which Swedishness is the norm and Sáminess is the marked category (cf. Kokkola and Van den Bossche; Flanagan).

### The Need for Stories about Sápmi, Sámi Characters and Cultures

Counter storytelling refers to the act of recovering the stories of silenced, racialised peoples. This can involve rewriting colonial classics from the point of view of the colonised, but it can also be a deliberate reading strategy. This involves identifying racialised peoples in a text and reimagining the narrative from their perspective. This has a pedagogical potential when faced with materials such as “Bamse”. “Bamse” is accessible to children who have no experience of Sámi stories. Indeed, the cartoon’s explanations as to the location of Sápmi, the languages of the Sámi as well as the Stállu myth all indicate that the intended reader needs scaffolding. The permanence of racism and Swedishness as property can be uncovered by counter storytelling, promoted by asking questions such as “whose story is this?”, “who has knowledge?”, “where did their knowledge come from?”, “how do we know?”, and “what use can be made of this knowledge?” Posing these questions to the story

reveals that although the story is named after Bamse, he is only a minor character in this narrative. The key players are Skalman and Biret, although they do not have equal power. Biret knows that Stállu stole her reindeer because she has seen the footprints. Skalman insists that he only believes in things for which he has evidence. However, later he reveals that his knowledge comes from reading Sámi tales. That is, Biret has the empirical evidence that Skalman claims to value, whereas Skalman's knowledge comes from books. Biret and Skalman defeat Stállu together, but Biret understands the problem and Skalman has the solution.

*Lilli* is a picturebook for Sámi and non-Sámi readers. Not only does the PENPAL device enable pre-literate readers to engage with the story, but the audio device also addresses the loss of Sámi languages due to centuries of colonisation and the privileging of the Swedish language. Parents may not be able to speak the Sámi language well enough to pass it on to their children (see Anika Lloyd-Smith et al. on language use and competence in the Sámi populations of Norway and Sweden). The audio device makes it possible for Sámi young readers to listen to the story in both their heritage language and Swedish. Thus, *Lilli* is part of a larger endeavour to revitalise the Sámi languages and, depending on the readers' reading competence or level of language acquisition, the interplay of the verbal text in writing and audio can either be symmetrical, enhancing, or complementary (cf. Nikolajeva and Scott). Posing the same questions to *Lilli* as to "Bamse" produces different answers. Lávre plays the main role in the plot, but the collective title reflects the content: this is the whole family's story. Grandfather and mother know the fen, and actively teach the children to engage all their senses when experiencing it. Knowledge is passed down the generations through actions and words; it is lived knowledge that is embodied and enacted in a specific setting. The Sáivu bird is a source of knowledge and support for Lávre. Knowledge is practical, but a sense of wonder prevails throughout the narrative. In *Lilli*, the Sámi worldview and Sámi languages are highly relevant, integrated aspects of selfhood.

In *När vi var samer*, readers learn about the history and culture of the Forest Sámi alongside the autofictional narrator. It is not until page 116 (ca. one third of the book), that Jonsson discovers he descends from Forest Sámi. He presents reactions he has received, the most common being Jonsson's own: ignorance. By learning alongside the narrator, readers are never made to feel ashamed that they know little or nothing about the Forest Sámi, but they are shown how to ask the right questions – for example, "Why is so little known

about the Forest Sámi?" – to critique the naturalization of their absence. The main narrative ends with Jonsson visiting the site of his grandparents' home reflecting on the knowledge he has gained over the past three years. He recognises that a lack of knowledge is a form of genocide; he reflects on the fact that the Forest Sámi "inte glömts bort. Det är mer som att skogssamerna aldrig funnits" (haven't been forgotten. It's as though the Forest Sámi never existed) (321).

The reflective and problematizing nature of *När vi var samer* makes the book accessible to teenagers, both those who need to recover their own family histories and non-Sámi youth who might be ignorant of Sámi history. Readers see Jonsson start his library search, selecting from the few books available. He recognises that rebuilding the history of the Forest Sámi and of his family must rely on very limited information. The historical vignettes provide readers with insights into how the Swedish state carried out a "kulturellt folk mord" (cultural genocide) (232–233).

As our analysis has shown, the visual narratives that only contribute to symmetrical or enhancing interpretations of the verbal text are less useful to discover elements of racism. In fact, they can portray stereotypes that are not questioned at all and thus normalised. When the visual elements are complementary or counterpointing, the possibility of problematizing the depictions is considerably higher. Presenting challenging visual representations is important but not enough. Jonsson displays the dialogue needed to start the process of addressing problems. At the end of part seven, Jonsson's first person character takes stock of his experiences from the journey towards discovery, he concludes that he can tell a story: "Och om det är något som Sápmi behöver, så är det såna som berättar" (And if there is one thing that Sápmi needs, it is storytellers) (326).

## Critical Race Theory as Reading Strategy

Using critical race theory as a lens to view representations of Sámi characters involves raising awareness that many portrayals of Sámi characters remain stereotyped. Adopting critical race theory as a reading strategy lens, reveals the permanence of racism and can make the notion of Swedishness as property visible even to young readers who have the privilege of not needing to think about race (cf. Nel). The visibility of racism and the supremacy of Swedishness could enable young readers to engage with the representations of Sámi characters and cultures. Thus, reading through a critical race theory lens invites readers to use their power to create meaning (cf.

Madsen and Allouche). The theory can be used as a tool to make readers go into dialogues with representations, and, in doing so, address underlying preconceived notions and get insights.

Telling stories, as Lilli's grandfather and Jonsson's main character do, may challenge representations, as well as the permanence of racism and Swedishness as property. More Sámi stories are needed, but critical race theory can also be a reading strategy. Reimagining "Bamse" by putting Biret's knowledge and experience in the foreground would be a way to provide a counter story. One might also place Sápmi in the centre and/or show Biret bringing her knowledge and skills into Bamse's world. Counter storytelling is a less useful reading strategy for *Lilli*, mainly because the book is a quiet celebration of family life in an everyday Sámi context. The non-Sámi world is rather peripheral. *När vi var samer* is a counter narrative that highlights diversity within the Sámi community, challenging the grand narrative that all Sámi herd reindeer in the fells wearing traditional clothing.

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## Notes

1 Marakatt and Midbjer's picturebook is unpaginated.

2 Examples of critical race theory used to analyse children's literature can be found in Roberta Price Gardner's article as well as in Lindsay Pérez Huber, Lorena Camargo Gonzalez, and Daniel G. Solórzano's article.

3 See Gloria Ladson-Billings, "Just what is critical race theory", for a more thorough overview.

4 Cf. Noel Ignatiev on how racial stereotypes enabled Catholic Irish in the United States to raise themselves above African Americans, thereby "becoming White" (41, 59, 112).

5 The quality of Sámi education and living conditions in Sweden was generally haphazard and sub-standard. To address the problems as well as the widespread poverty and hunger in the region, boarding schools were established in the early twentieth century. In these schools, children were separated from their language, families, and culture (Palo, Kokkola and Manderstedt).

6 The Sámi scholar Harald Gaski has described the Sámi as "the 'White Indians' of Scandinavia" (115).

7 The names Vuorbejaur and Dammbacken are both used in the graphic novel; the Sámi name when retelling the history of the Sámi people, as well as in the name of the chapter and the name on the map, while the Swedish name is used when depicting the contemporary life in the area, after the Swedification process.

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