



# “There’s a Hinterland in Me”: Ambivalent Place-Making in Popular Music from a National Periphery

By  
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## Abstract

Northern Norrland has a long history of domestic colonialism and internal migration. However, in the latter half of the twentieth century the region has seen a decline in population, job opportunities and welfare services. This study analyses how contemporary popular music from the region represents it and reflects feelings and thoughts on life there, and how identity, moods and sentiments are constructed and attached to place to uncover the rhetoric of place-making in popular music. The analysis shows a complex relationship between the local area and the surrounding country, featuring themes of ambivalence, resistance, dualistic nostalgia and transience responding to contemporary realities of the region. The lyrical themes and rhetorical actions performed in twenty-first century popular music evinces clear connections to literary depictions of the region throughout the last hundred years, indicating a reinterpretation of cultural memory in light of present conditions. These lyrics perform a rhetoric of re-membering which serves to reinforce the bond of people to place through music.

**Keywords:** Place-making, rhetoric, popular music, Norrland, re-membering, nostalgia, lyricism

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## **Introduction**

Many who live in national peripheries tend to have an uneasy relationship to the center. This is important for understanding the meaning of local cultural expressions. In this study, I analyze how place-making in popular music from northern Norrland, comprising the Swedish provinces of Norrbotten, Swedish Lapland and Västerbotten, reflects and makes sense of local life during a period marked by dwindling investment, reduced welfare services, and increased outward labor migration. Place-making can be understood as the social construction of geographical location and how its boundaries, properties and meanings are actively constructed through representation. The study takes an interest in the rhetorical functions embedded in these representations, asking what social actions are performed to an implied audience when singing about Norrland.

Research has shown that “music plays an important role in the narrativization of place, that is, in the way in which people define their relationships to local, everyday surroundings” (Whiteley, Bennett & Hawkins 2005: 2). While representations of place are typically contested—for example, by competing representations by local governments and outsiders, tourism information, etc.—locally produced popular music provides a unique bottom-up perspective due to its particularities as a cultural practice. It is typically a non-institutional practice, with few artists making their primary living from it. It is also a communicative form which allows for expressions of affect and sentiment with strong implications of authenticity, bolstered by the musical style.

This study contributes to both the knowledge of Norrland’s cultural history and to the theory of place-making by providing an account of how the entanglement of place and the outside world finds expression across the different communicative aspects of music. The place-making in the songs studied provides strategies for managing the ambivalence and possible alienation stemming from the changing surroundings of a reluctant nomadic subjectivity, addressing both the remaining locals and those who have moved away. I will describe how this is performed through rhetorically identifying subjects as nomadic yet firmly rooted in place, with artists performing both fluidity and fixity across different levels of communicative form and content. I also argue that these contemporary expressions are rearticulations of local cultural memory, as they concern themes of liminality and external influence similar to regional literature across the twentieth century.

## Literary place-making of Norrland, popular music and identification

Scholarship on representations of northern Norrland has taken a particular interest in the discursive interplay of place, identity, modernization and southern Sweden. Naum (2016) finds that early modern portrayals of the region allowed for projections of the enlightenment ideology, as in, rhetorical constructions that promoted “improvement”, development, and reform programmes. These ideals recur throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Contemporary portrayals of Sápmi,<sup>1</sup> “produced mainly by the tourist industry” as an “Arctic Arcadia of unspoiled nature and simplicity where one can experience life as it used to be”, connect to these early modern narratives (Naum 2016: 512). Norrland’s topography is often articulated as having a strong connection to the identity of its people, and it plays a key role in Swedish modernization discourses due to its centrality in Swedish industry through its natural resources. In turn-of-the-century literature, Norrland’s forests are intimately connected to the people, through narratives of the shared potential and victimization of forest and people under modernization, with the forest construed as either a place distinct from or sometimes embodying modernity, or a property of the people both in the sense of possession and attribute (Qvarnström 2017). These intimations are also present in the region’s contemporary popular music (Bruhn 2020). There are also recurring articulations that organise the landscape along ethnic lines, where Sámi people are relegated to the fells despite their presence across the various topographies of Sápmi (Buhre 2020).

These emplacements of people, both performed by the locals themselves and by outsiders, suggest a strong, place-bound Norrlandic identity. Yet, as the region’s history of migration suggests, this association may be confused in important ways. Based on Friedman’s (1998) theory that notions of identity and home are formed in experiencing roots through routes taken in intercultural zones, Öhman (2001) notes a shift from a nomadic identity expressed in early twentieth century literature to one of attachment to locality in the 1960–80s. These decades coincide with the apex of the Swedish social democratic welfare state project and inward migration in the region. Elsewhere, Öhman (2010) argues that literary depictions of Norrland from local writers typically contain a dualistic address to both a local audience and an audience located in the national center, in dialogue with both local experiences and external projections. While the Norrlandic subject may be a distinct category, it is therefore co-constituted by Swedish ideas of the region’s people. As I discuss throughout this analysis, the song lyrics in my material suggest the return to a nomadic identity expressed through nostalgic, ambivalent and uneasy sentiments. The ‘local’ subject is addressed as being *en route*, through a rhetoric that attaches mobile identities to place.

Research on music and place has taken an interest in local interpretations of global musical genres, both in production and consumption. Bennett argues that “individuals invariably draw upon a range of locally embedded images, discourses and social sensibilities centered around the familiar, the accessible and the easily recognisable” when justifying tastes in music, which serves as the foundation of “collective identities forged” through music (2000: 197). As an expression of a structure of feeling, popular music articulates sentiments about place and identity (Eyerman & Jamison 1998). When musical styles and subgenres develop around a “scene”, a local ‘sound’ can develop (Webb 2007).

Connell and Gibson (2003) write that musical expressions are characterized by how they negotiate fluidity and fixity by drawing on intercultural flows and influences, and conversely ideas of authenticity, roots and territorial belonging. One practice of fixity common in my material is singing in a pronounced local dialect. This emplaces a performer, through tacitly reflecting group identity and local heritage (van der Hoeven, Janssen, & Driessen 2016). It may also stress “difference and often marginality” (Connell & Gibson 2003: 134). The fixity/fluidity dynamic is typically pronounced in lyrics from rural communities, where themes of mobility and the fluidity of urban modernity are contrasted with the stability of the rural home (Connell & Gibson 2003, Halfacree 2018). As I will show, this roots/routes dynamic is a key element of the lyrics in my material.

There are striking thematic interconnections between early twentieth century literature from Norrland and contemporary popular music, implying that these songs are vehicles of cultural memory. Assmann and Czaplicka write that cultural memory exists both as a backdrop of historical context to draw on, and “in the mode of actuality, whereby each contemporary context puts the objectivized meaning into its own perspective, giving it its own relevance” (1995: 130). Songs may therefore interpellate subjects into a locative historical narrative and identify them with peers and predecessors, positioning audiences in ways that constitute a transhistorical collective subject. This works through implying and articulating shared substantive elements of identity, such as experiences, traits, or connections to place—it is an act of *identification* (Charland 1987). Bloomfield’s account of *imaginary identification* in popular music explains the strength of such constitutive rhetoric in terms of an ideology of authenticity mediating audience projections, the “(naive-)realist” assumption that music consumption *is* a communion of artist and audience and that aesthetic expression is authentic (Bloomfield 1993: 16f). Songs invite singing along—participation in constitutive activity—with experimental studies suggesting that singing with others facilitates collective bonding (Pearce et al. 2017).

Charland writes that constitutive rhetoric works through “rearticulating existing subject positions so as to contain or resolve experienced dialectical

contradictions between the world and its discourses” (1987: 142). Songs may express sentiments that resonate intellectually and aesthetically with audiences, putting words and affect to experiences in a perhaps better way than other available articulations, inviting the listener to think and feel certain things about themselves and their locality. This provides “equipment for living” (Burke 1973: 293–304), as in, a repertoire of ways for processing everyday experience. In this fashion, popular music produces social meaning and identity, as a source of ways of making sense of the self and, as is the focus of the following analysis, its entanglements with place.

## Method

This study employs a strategy of conceptually oriented rhetorical criticism (Jasinski 2001). The songs underwent a close textual analysis through place-making as a sensitizing concept, with a particular focus on the substantive elements of the identifying actions performed in them. Such hermeneutics ask *how* a song makes place and abductively infers what rhetorical and social actions the song performs to an implied audience. This approach is well suited for uncovering commonalities among different place-making practices.

The corpus was constructed using a purposive sampling strategy, designed to find artists recognized by audiences as representing the region. The music platform Spotify was searched for playlists containing the words ‘Norrrland’, ‘Norrrlänning’ and ‘Norrrländsk’. This yielded thousands of user-generated playlists of music ostensibly representing Norrrland, with some significant overlaps. From these, I selected commonly included artists that explicitly associated themselves with Norrrbotten, Västerbotten or Swedish Lapland in promotional material, interviews, or contact addresses. Only recordings published 2007–2021 were considered. This yielded a corpus of 266 songs from 9 artists, from which 50 songs were selected for close textual analysis on the principle of either containing a prominent locative reference in the title or lyrics or a narrative portrayal of Norrrland.

I will first discuss the genres, styles and ‘sound’ of the corpus. This is followed by the analysis of lyrical content, beginning with how the rural hinterlands are portrayed as nourishing but harsh, with formative roots entangled with both Norrrlandic identity and the surrounding world. Thereafter, I draw out common themes of transience, both attributed to subject positions and to place. These themes are then shown to be equally attributed to the urban area of Umeå as a site of struggle between Norrrlandic identity and late modernity. I conclude the analysis by pointing out how re-memoring, a practice of identifying subjects with place (Stewart 1996), is a key rhetorical feature of these songs.

## Local style, global genres

The corpus spans a wide range of genres that carry different affective registers and associations to cultural and locative contexts. Genre co-constitutes the identity and meaning of musical gestures, whereas *style* refers to aesthetic properties the artist uses to personalize their expression (Moore 2001: 441). While the analyzed musicians generally opt for a style seemingly attuned to Norrland, they perform in genres that connote other national peripheries or marginalization. Such elements are analogical or associative and may serve as a reinterpretation of self and place, allowing the listener to understand the region and local sentiment in terms of other peripheries (Bruhn 2020). Hip-hop artist Maxida Mårak reasons that “people know about the problems there [urban peripheries] because many raise those issues in the music ... Maybe that’s why hip-hop has become so big in Norrbotten: It thrives in places that have been forgotten” (Sundell 2015, author’s translation). Reggae, represented in the material by Glesbygd’n, is typically associated with Jamaica and the African diaspora (Daynes 2016), and Johan Airijoki’s blues sound implies affinities to the North American rust belt, working class marginalization and migration. The *visa*,<sup>2</sup> Swedish folk, world music and the country/Americana fusion of Euskefeurat makes complex associations to international and Swedish rural communities. This is simultaneously an outward and inward address, implying that Norrland is not alone or unique in its struggles or sentiments. Through their respective genre expressions, these songs identify Norrland with larger communities of rural and urban peripheries—a common substance of peripheral life defined by the ‘center’ as a constitutive other.

Within the corpus, there are several stylistic commonalities among the artists. Johansson (2020: 37) argues that music is typically perceived as Swedish if it includes “Lyrics in Swedish; References to Swedish conditions; ... A tonality and mood that includes melancholy, wistfulness and minor key; Swedish folk music ... or the *visa* tradition; ... Nature themes and rural romanticism”. These are all traits emphasized by the artists in my material.

Melancholy is a key component in the music, and this is sometimes explicitly attributed to Norrland. Glesbygd’n refers to their own style as ‘vemodsreggae’ (lit. *melancholic reggae*). With a few exceptions, the compositions prominently feature a modal contrast between melody and harmonies. Songs with a melody in a major key typically heavily feature minor and diminished chords and harmonies, and vice versa. It is common for these songs to switch mode between sections. Instruments are most often played in a dynamic range between pianissimo and mezzo forte, though Euskefeurat often opts for forte and Airijoki makes much use of dynamic contrast. Several of the vocal melodies focus on the supertonic in verses, which, in combination with the harmonies, lends a wistfulness and melancholy to the performances—a sense of ambivalence, sometimes a hopeful

sadness, embedded in the musical mood that cannot be attributed to genre. While the pronunciation of these musical traits varies across artist catalogues, they are prominent enough to be considered a key common stylistic element.

Some artists draw on Swedish folk and Sami music, as in the song *Laplabama*, where joik samples are incorporated into a hip-hop beat (Erk & Imchibeat 2014). This song is a prime example of transnational references on several levels: Urban-coded hip-hop is performed with stylistic loans from local folk music, with a title that is a portmanteau of Lapland and Alabama—associating Norrland to the rural American south. These artists are borrowing traits of musical borealism (Bohlman 2017) in order to craft a locally distinct sound, insofar as they draw heavily on typically Nordic sounds and themes.

The interconnectedness of music and place is also captured in the sound design. Rickert writes that music as a “rhetorical activity generates its own landscape that in turn contributes to the always ongoing reshaping and revealing of the world” (2013: 28). Such an acoustic place-making is clearly present in the sound design choices in the corpus. Production commonly uses techniques where instruments and voices sound isolated, using reverb effects to paint an impression of the musicians being in large, open spaces. These effects often capture social constructions of how such an environment sounds, but a handful of songs in the corpus mimic landscape acoustics, like the dampness of snow-covered forests in the intro to *Tjufirsju* (Glesbygd'n 2009c). Several recordings use techniques mimicking distance in the auditory field, with instruments or vocalists placed far from the listener perspective. Such techniques provide an ambiance that bolsters the prominent mood of melancholy in the songs.

This musical hybridity implies an emplaced perspective on and in dialogue with the outside world. While providing clear examples of how the fluidity of intercultural influences become negotiated by local musical style, it also implies an outward mobility. The musical languages of blues, hip-hop and reggae work as symbolic analogies, characterizing the Norrlandic subject as having a common identity with the struggles of working-class migration, urban marginality, colonization, and diaspora. This is a symbolic means of expressing sentiments of contemporary Norrlandic experiences to both external and local audiences. The ease with which local and external influences are incorporated in these recordings complements how the lyrics connect Norrland to the surrounding world, while the melancholic style bolsters the prominent sense of transience, nostalgia, unease and ambivalence embodied in the lyrics.

## Globally entangled hinterlands

The hinterlands play a key role in Norrlandic lyricism. Not only is it a frequent narrative setting, but also the Swedish word ‘inland’ is used symbolically. The hinterlands are construed as the proper place of its people, oftentimes through familial figurative language. These intimations provide a focal language for feelings attached to both regionalism and relations to the outside world. Norrlandic experiences are presented to hearers by visual descriptions of the hinterlands, sometimes writ on the body through metaphor, reinforced through a consistent auditory style. In the song *Inland* (Airijoki 2014), the narrator describes a person in terms of hinterland landscape features: “The heart is the kiosk, closed but still there/ ... The eyes are deforested, a lonely pine remains/ ... there’s a hinterland in you”.<sup>3</sup> The substantive features of the hinterlands show great variety, both between and within artist catalogues.

The “Arctic Arcadia of unspoiled nature and simplicity” (Naum 2016: 512) occurs as a theme in several lyrics, celebrating a communion of people and place. The lines “In the forest no castle is needed/ the midges have woken up, but I shouldn’t complain/ for the light and sun warm my body/ like the berries, they’re ripening here by the mire” (Glesbygd’n 2009c) lauds simplicity as an identity trait that is both facilitated and constituted by the hinterland nature. Maxida Mäarak portrays this communion in *Kommer aldrig lämna dig* (2019), where the first verse paints an impressionist vision of a hinterland landscape, where she is “grabbing my rod, like I am holding your [the landscape’s] hand”.

Some lyrics feature natural mysticism. This is often the case in narrations of visiting or withdrawing to the hinterlands. The hinterlands are sung as a mystical place of healing from modern life. Several songs contain references to Sámi culture or heritage, while personalizing nature and attributing it agency. The song *Laplabama* narrates a withdrawal from the city, where “the fells graft inwards and begin to heal the wounds” and “the birch see us as living roots”. Urban life is ailing the narrator, with the first verse establishing that he is “horribly done with all your bureaucracy” but still noting that he, by living in Norrland “surely missed much, but cool, we drew that lot”. The final verse expresses a sense of being ill-suited for modern life and underscores how place induces resilience: “Maybe lost hope, but cool, we’ll sort it out/ Ducking the punishment, crofting,<sup>4</sup> let the character pay for the crimes/ A bit like the people, conquer all nature’s tests” (Erk & Imchibeat 2014). The ambivalent relation to urbanity underscored in these lines is a recurring theme across the corpus.

The hinterland nature is however also portrayed as a hostile environment. The winter cold, predatory animals, mosquitos, and midges are often referenced as inevitable but accepted elements of life there. This harshness is commonly transferred from landscape to people, as constitutive of resilience as an identity



trait. This can take positive and joking expressions, as in the lines, “and I feel ready for battle/ come on now, dammit, February/ you don’t have anything that can scare me” (Euskefeurat 2014a). It also takes dark undertones, as in the song *Kirkko*, which narrates a failed suicide attempt, as seeking “an embrace of ice, but you break my legs/ ... nurturing love, no doubt/ ... I was born, but you raised me”, implying the landscape (Airijoki 2018a).

The hinterland as a home is therefore infused with dualism. The summer nourishes, and in some cases explicitly gives the strength to endure the harshness of the land itself. Winter and the cold is threatening and requires resilience and survival strategies. Airijoki sings of logging and employment as safeguards against being cold (2017), and Glesbygd’n (2009c) sings that “Winter has come and the cold is burning/ the diet is sour fish<sup>5</sup> and the homemade”, and in Euskefeurat’s *Snöslungan* (2014f), the narrator trades his old moonshine still for a snowblower from a man who has decided to drink the winter away. Illicitly distilled spirits, “the homemade”, is a recurring reference, closely associated with the region in both local culture and national stereotypes.

This harshness of the hinterlands is only offered as an explanation for negative sentiments in a few cases. Far more common are dystopian narratives of modernization, portraying the hinterlands as ravaged by logging, mining and urbanization. Some tell stories of depression, anxiety and alcoholism among locals due to the realities of modernity. The aforementioned song, *Inland*, uses “deforestation” and “the closed kiosk” as symbols of how logging and urbanization has affected people. A similarly dystopian characterization is sometimes attributed to the city—an alienating place where “asphalt covers roots” (Airijoki 2015b) and concrete suffocates the forest (Glesbygd’n 2009b). In *Nalta frusse*, urbanization is implied as a root cause of alcoholism and depression among men in rural villages, as “it’s hard to build a future here by the mire/ since all women, they’ve moved to a bigger city” (Glesbygd’n 2008).

Among the songs that romantically celebrate the hinterlands as home and unspoiled nature, there is a tendency to include symbols that serve as reminders of Norrland’s entanglement with the outside world. These are sometimes subtle, as for example in a quick reference to tourism through “motorhomes filling the road” (Airijoki 2015a). Sometimes, they make up the key point of the narrative, as in *Himlen var blå* (Euskefeurat 2014d), where a berry-picking trip to a pristine mire is disturbed by “NATO’s bombers who apparently need/ someone to practice on”. Outside associations are however often invited, acknowledged or part of nostalgic emplacements. Such is the case in, for example, *Lyssna på Bruce* (Airijoki 2018b), portraying a childhood memory of a summer field framed by Bruce Springsteen, musically quoting the melody from *Dancing In the Dark* in a melancholic pentatonic minor rendition.

Several artists make connections between Norrland and other locations: North American peripheries are common referents in hip-hop lyrics that mention Alaska or “Laplabama”. The song, *Linjer på din hud*, sings that the environmental destruction of modernization extends “from China to Kirunavaara/ from America to Arvidsjaur” (Glesbygd’n 2013).

The hinterlands, both as place and cultural space, serve as a core constitutive node in how these songs represent and identify the Norrlandic subjects. It is portrayed as the roots of its people, providing a home and nourishment while fostering and demanding resilience. Most of these lyrics however imply that the hinterlands are deeply entangled with the outside world, with both place and people marked by external forces.

### Loss, memory and visits

The songs about the hinterlands are regularly nostalgic. Even in positive portrayals, lyrics often contain themes of threat or forgetfulness—attributed to external forces. Mäarak’s *Kommer aldrig lämna dig* for example, repeats the phrase, “please, let me always keep the place/ where I’ve stood and stand” (Mäarak 2019). The refrain of *Storspoven sjunger*, “I can’t tell you what grows around the house in our backyard/ It’s so sad to lack the names, to not really understand them” (Väärt 2019c), decries forgetfulness. *Alienation* (Glesbygd’n 2009a) begin with the lines, “Soon I won’t know who I am/ the forest has become a backdrop<sup>6</sup> to me/ lacking function beyond pure tourism”, decrying modernity through themes of alienation from rural life. These nostalgic themes are present across all these artists’ catalogues, and across the topographies of hinterlands and coastal cities. But they differ in terms of risking losing, being in the process of loss, and having lost.

A more subtle and ambivalent articulation of the relationship of hinterlands and urbanization are the recurring narratives of *visits*. While some artists like Glesbygd’n and Airijoki firmly emplace their personas in the rural hinterlands—with narrations of city life as being away from home—others imply a city lifestyle through singing about visiting the hinterlands as a place of origin. The aforementioned *Storspoven sjunger* is such a visit narrative. These tie into the dynamic of attachment and movement, as depictions of roots from a subject position *en route*. This is a common theme in Euskefeurat’s songs, where the hinterland villages are typically construed as the ancestral home. A third of the songs on the album *Sånger från Hotaheiti*<sup>7</sup> narrate visits, telling of meetings between the vocalist and quirky, canny and self-willed locals. While these locals are always familiar, named or given relational epithets, they are often construed as related to the past. The strongest expression of this is the song *Förut ligger nära* (2014b) with the refrain, “The past is nearby; I go there sometimes to visit/

... barely 200 kilometers/ between now and then". The song tells of nostalgia in a rural village where symbols of the Swedish welfare state (the grocery store, the post office, the social insurance agency) lie closed or have been replaced by struggling small private enterprises. The song *Hotaheiti* (2014e) tells of a distant place in the hinterlands where the modernization of Norrland happened through the plight of the people, as a reminder to a young man going out into the world of his past. These songs heavily draw on the Swedish *visa* style as a carrier of oral tradition and cultural memory. As Euskefeurat regularly expresses how the rural past is a necessary check on the contemporary mindset, there is an underlying subject position in between the past and the big city. A nomadic audience is addressed but from a narrative position that is moving *with* the times. Here, being *en route* is construed as much as a temporal movement as a spatial one. Euskefeurat's narrator's position is articulated as secure in this temporal movement, admonishing others not to move too far, whereas Mäarak, Väärt and Glesbygd'n express a distinctly more uneasy sense of being in motion.

These lyrics are not nostalgic for an unspoiled Arctic Arcadia but rather for modernity from the vantage point of late modernity. The welfare state and a more prosperous era is recurringly symbolized as part of the nostalgic past. These lyrics express a longing for both traditional lifestyles and a rural high modernity, with late modernity construed as a destructive force emanating from the south, as in the song, *Betong*: "The dream of future, starved and died/ With promises of welfare, they took the money and left/ ... the villages are bleeding, and the moving vans are going south" (Glesbygd'n 2009b). Airijoki (2017) sings that the mine has closed, leaving the narrator unemployed and in debt. Euskefeurat and Glesbygd'n routinely criticize cutbacks on welfare and Swedish rural policy. In this way, contemporary popular music both restates and continues the narratives of early twentieth century literature from the region, where modernity was dualistically construed as promise and poison (Qvarnström 2017). In the local imaginary at both ends of the century, influence from the south chips away at nature and the 'proper' lifestyles of Norrland, but these twenty-first century songs paint this as equally a ravaging of the benefits of modernity. The cultural memory of the hinterlands is construed as a lost age of modern promise more attuned to the local identity and lifestyles. Following Öhman's (2001) observation that attachment to place seemed strong in 1960-80s literature, the nostalgia in these songs seem to be about a time when a stationary lifestyle in Norrland was viable through integration with the center.

The sense of loss is articulated as a byproduct of urbanization and modernization. While the hinterlands are directly and physically threatened in lyrics concerning deforestation, mining and global warming, it is equally often threatened as home and as a cultural memory by the pull of urbanization. While

modernity is sometimes represented as an existential threat, it is also presented as a welcomed constitutive element of the hinterlands through industry and the welfare state. However, the optimism detectable in early modern local narratives is scarce in twentieth century song lyrics. While there are positive emotions connected to the hinterlands, such as nourishment and homeliness, these lyrics all embed them with a strong sense of transience—often from a narrator in motion.

### **Coastal cities at the intersection of Norrland and urbanity**

While the hinterlands are portrayed as a place of nourishment and origin, the coastal cities are located on the boundary to the outside world. While narratives of loss under the influence of the south are also common to the coastal cities, they are portrayed as sites of struggle or negotiation between a Norrland identity and an urban Swedish lifestyle. While artists like Glesbygd'n and Johan Airijoki denounce city life, others articulate the relatively small coastal cities as proper Norrlandic places. Euskefeurat hails from Piteå, which has about 24 000 inhabitants. Luleå has 49 000. Umeå is the largest city of the region, with 92 000 inhabitants, and as both the cultural and political center of the region, it figures most prominently in my material. Umeå is described as in a state of transience, in many respects like the hinterlands, albeit in a different sense of losing a unique character as a city to late modernity. This is the central theme in the song, *Drömälva* (Väärt 2019a), as its ambiguous lyrics intimates Umeå and an unnamed person. Lines like “But you are looking smarter, and it scares me, when did you change your style?/... All the flukes that got you here, but also the other stuff which gnaws away” capture an ambivalence toward how positive development in Umeå comes at the cost of identity.

Change is depicted as driven by a top-down or external force. This is hinted at in Fricky's verse on *UÅ* (Random Bastards et al. 2014, 12 contributing rap artists), where he raps, “Sounds like just another tourist attraction/ Sorry, I have a problem praising the city where we live when/ half of RB [Random Bastards] and Hoop [Hoopdiggas] have nowhere to live”, critiquing the city for catering to the external tourist. One of the strongest expressions of such sentiment is the song, *Apa utan berg* (Glesbygd'n 2017). The title, which means “Ape without a mountain” alludes to Apberget (*Ape mountain*), a popular meeting spot in Umeå that was demolished to install utilities for a shopping mall and a hotel, which met with local protest (Brodin 2013). The song narrates how Umeå has taken on traits of anonymous urbanity. The symbolism of Apberget is poignant: It was a public speaking platform and an important site for local democracy and youth culture. This is not mentioned anywhere in the lyrics, and the song title's allusion is a tacit reference to the local discontent with the demolition. In this fashion, the song

co-articulates several different local experiences. The final verse of the song goes “above the heads of those like you and me/ ... they sing ‘I love this city’/ but let every decision hammer in the same phrase:/ I hate Umeå”. These songs capture recurring themes of regional place-making throughout the last century. Late modernity is construed as an alluring poison emanating from a constitutive other, seeping into both rural communities and cities, unwelcomed by locals who either adapt to this influence, withdraw, or resist. It invites the audience to identify as an agent subjected to negative outside forces.

Resistance is articulated as intimately connected to Norrland and its history. Erk’s verse on *UÅ* ties it to the resilience constituted by nature as “Laplabama, laid back and used to mosquitos”, and these lines by Academics implies a history of creating contemporary cultural resistance through graffiti and music: “100-year-old ashes mixed with the dirt in the air we are breathing/ since the city burned, we have built it together”. While embodied in urban expressions, resilience is articulated as emanating from the regional nature and history, contributing to the rhetorical constitution of an urban version of regional identity.

Umeå in particular is therefore articulated as an intersection of Norrland and the Swedish center. It is a property of Norrland shaped by its nature and history, while simultaneously a site of the struggle with outside influence that changes both place and residents. The coastal city is articulated as a qualitatively distinct place from the hinterlands, in that it is a shared space of the two constitutive forces of contemporary local life—the peripheral origin and the centric influence. The coastal city is represented as transient through a dialectic of rural and urban influences—a liminal place between two modes of being. It is simultaneously a contemporaneous home, a place where rural people migrate connected to the peculiarity of Norrland as well as a national urbanity—regardless of whether this is construed as a source of alienation or of opportunity. Greater Sweden is at home in Norrland’s cities as opposed to the hinterlands, where it is portrayed as an intruder or as having caused the diminishing of industry and the welfare services it once brought.

## Re-membering as a rhetoric of resistance

The nostalgic depictions and rearticulations of cultural memory discussed above remind the local audience of roots and heritage. It is a rhetorical activity to counteract the risk of losing identity by leaving. The sense of transience—seemingly driven by southbound work migration and outside influence—is however responded to through a more subtle rhetoric of emplacement. Stewart analyses how locals in West Virginia articulate place in everyday life. She identifies a constant practice of *re-membering*: Discursive rituals of placing

and reconnecting people in familial and geographical networks, embedding them in locality (Stewart 1996: 148f). It is a *re*-membering as it is reminding of and reconfirming social membership, through reminiscing about connecting experiences. Airijoki makes a passing reference to the lack of such re-membering practices as a trait of urbanity when he sings, “The city’s asphalt under your feet/nobody asks you, ‘Whose boy are you then?’” (Airijoki 2015b). Such re-membering is a rhetorical activity identifying people with place, and making place by verbally (re)populating it—even with absent people on the move. My material contains a strong presence of such rhetoric, which performs important functions toward the implied nomadic audience.

Several songs connect people in networks attached to named places. Euskefeurat’s lyrics typically have this function, in their narratives of named people, where they have been and what they have done there. The song, *Helt utan egen förskyllan* (2014c), tells a story of how seven men painted an abandoned house in reflective paint, giving names of people, locations where they later moved, where they found the paint, and a detailed roadmap to the house. It is a prime example of how re-membering is captured in song, common in the Swedish visa tradition and hip-hop. The song *UÅ* contains several such re-memberances of distinct places around Umeå. Whereas Stewart describes re-membering as emplacement through questioning who a person is through bonds to people and place, these songs typically affirm such bonds.

This networking of people and place performs identification via interpersonal and topographical connecting points. It invites the audience to re-member themselves through affinities to place and by identifying as, or with, the specific people sung about as proxies. The dual address here has a function of distinction: local listeners can interpret the lyrics through lived experiences. An outsider may follow the ideas, even identify with the politics and sentiments of peripheral regionality, but this would be a looser sense of identification. There is a palpability of place that is brought into music from shared memory and experience, as with the aforementioned allusion in the song title, *Apa utan berg*, which requires significant member resources to decode. The line, “Who began to sing<sup>8</sup> the first 16 under the bicycle bridge?” (Random Bastards et al. 2014) would be understood as ‘coming into one’s own’ by most swedes but would be a case of re-membering for someone familiar with the particular Umeå bicycle bridge. This serves a grounding function toward the local audience *en route*, who are re-membered to the community through implicit emplacements.

These re-memberings respond to the ubiquitous theme of domestic migration and the recent decades’ population decline in Norrland. While implicit in the criticisms of the receding welfare state and the loss of jobs and industry, the moving away of people is sung about as a central constitutive force on place—

including Umeå, which is the gist of the chorus of *UÅ*: “I do it for you who stayed/ and you who pissed off from the city/ There’s new water under the bridge and a new sun rises over Plaza, sis’ come back/ ... Of course there’s moments when you’d rather have left everything, some leave, but the memories remain, patriot”.

These portrayals of people leaving and having left relate to an ambivalent construction of late modernity—bringing promise, but it is potentially poisonous. The lyrical re-membering typically fills an antidotal function. Several of Euskefeurat’s songs portray local youths moving south, becoming corrupted and alienated from Norrland. Euskefeurat’s lyrics typically have a humorous slant, which plays with established stereotypes including the idea of how the people of Norrland view Stockholmers as greedy and effeminate. There is nevertheless a serious undertone to their lyrics. While some songs decry the tragic loss to an alien and urban identity, other songs such as *Hotaheiti* are preemptive warnings to those moving to remember where they came from—a hortatory bonding to their native place.

This bond is articulated in a more affirmative manner in some songs. The chorus of *UÅ* also implicates those who did leave as patriots in absentia. Cleo’s verse on the track affirms a retained membership from the perspective of someone who has moved. Väart’s *Stannar ändå kvar* (2019b) comprises a re-membering to the rural home of two narrators who have moved to the city. The lines “I have lived here [city] for four years now, and I am not going to move/ My friends came and picked me up, said ‘Let’s go [home], quit your rambling”” strongly imply that membership remains even though the person has become affected by city life. The song’s ambiguous refrain, “Go, because I’ll stay after all”, capture this identification of roots and life *en route*. While it may be taken as a farewell to friends, that the narrator will stay in the city regardless, it may also be read as an affirmation of connection— “staying” expressing a spiritual affinity to roots. It is a melancholic expression of the ambivalence of a preferred life away from home.

This rhetoric of re-membering bears witness to how transience is a central affective struggle in Norrland. While places are themselves portrayed as changing—temporally in motion—people who move away is a palpable theme and the largest threat and source of nostalgia in my material. Leaving is often meant in a real and physical sense, but in these lyrics, this is often equivalent to the risk of forgetting—losing identification with the ‘real Norrland’. This is however an ambivalent construction. Someone leaving is sad but understandable. The chorus of *UÅ* captures this ambivalence eloquently, reminding those who “pissed off” they are missed by those who stayed. *Stannar ändå kvar* implies that leaving may be a good decision, in the line “Grandpa said the boy’s out of his mind, but look at me now, I’ve made it”. Alienation and loss are ever-present threats, and the re-membering

of the place serves as a rhetorical resistance—addressing lost friends and leaving relatives as well as the self.

These themes of leaving are present across the artists' catalogues, regardless of where they situate 'home'. Those from the hinterlands may leave not only for Stockholm, or more plainly, the "south", but also for the coastal cities. But as the portrayal of coastal cities attests, even the people of the urban areas of the region leave and change under outside influence. The reasons for leaving are only incidentally recognizable in the lyrics as unemployment, a lack of opportunity, a retreat of the welfare state, and depopulation itself. In general, these song lyrics suggest an uneasy, ambivalent nomadic identity. They employ a rhetoric of identification through the reminding and re-membering of place, as a means of resisting displacement—if not geographical displacement, then the psychological effects of a community and an identity in motion.

### **Discussion: Ambivalence, nostalgia and liminality**

The songs in the corpus all imply a speaking subject and an audience *en route*. Places in the Norrlandic topography are also represented as being in motion, while those that are constructed as static or unchanging are consistently portrayed as threatened or contrasted with a moving subject. The force driving this motion is consistently implied to be emanating from the outside. This materialized as the modernizing agents, logging and mining companies, in early twentieth century literature, but in this study, it is a more nebulous constitutive force. Late modernity and the national center are construed as affecting Norrland physically through intrusions in and devastation of the natural and cultural landscape. Urbanization is portrayed as a force detaching people from place, both figuratively and literally in narratives of people leaving and forgetting home. But it also drains the hinterlands of modern institutions and suppresses the local heritage of the coastal cities. In these songs, urbanization both displaces people and affects rural life. As this analysis shows, many of the songs are attempts to meliorate these forces through rhetorics of resistance and re-membering.

Motion driven by external forces is therefore a central motif of the place-making in my corpus. As a *motive* for rhetoric it is colored by the often-expressed ambivalent attitudes toward this external influence. In so far, my analysis suggests that place-making in this case is rhetorically working through the ambivalences of a changing rural community. Naum (2016) noted that the region has been the object of rhetorics of "improvement", development, and reform throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The songs studied here consistently critique how such improvement played out for local inhabitants. But this critique has two distinct targets. One concerns how external forces ravaged the local nature and



lifestyles. The other concerns the *retreat* of development from the region and the hardships following the loss of opportunity articulated in the narratives of people leaving. This can be taken as nostalgia for the modernization of Norrland, typically represented in symbols of decaying industry, welfare and labor. This is noticeably entangled with place, history and regional identity in these lyrics while also historically entangled with the industrialization that is the target of the former criticism.

In this way, these songs construct a nostalgic vision of a time when the region was less peripheral, an era of prosperity and integration when a settled rural lifestyle was viable, as well as decrying Norrland as transcending into an assimilated “southern” urbanity. The alluring poison conception of modernity, which is traceable in narratives throughout the region’s early modern history (Qvarnström 2017), is present in contemporary songwriting, rearticulating cultural memory in ways fitting contemporary life. Early twentieth century writers imbued modernity with both threat and promise for Norrland, animating a struggle between traditional and modern identities. Early twenty-first century musicians articulate an existential ambivalence between a nostalgically constructed, rooted rural modern lifestyle and a contemporary nomadic one, where the former is hard and decreasingly viable, and the latter trades promise for the risk of losing identity. Väärt captures this ambivalence in the line “all the flukes that got you here, but also the other stuff which gnaws away”. While these songs voice a strong sense of regional distinction, local culture and identity, they are entangled with a larger Sweden that is simultaneously unwelcome and sought communion with. This negotiation of fluidity and fixity, common in rural popular music (Connell & Gibson 2003), is a rhetorical management of an uneasy relationship. My analysis therefore suggest that the ambivalences of center-periphery relationships may be important constitutive factors of rural place-making.

The liminality that follows on this complex, dialectical relationship is substantive to all the lyrics in my material. The here and now of these songs is fleeting—both spatially and temporally caught in-between, but importantly, in motion. This is also a theme in early twentieth century literature about the region, equally depicting loss, promise and change under modernization. Popular culture from Norrland is therefore the site of a counterdiscourse which emphasizes the experiences of transience under modernization. A key component of this transience is how Norrland has historically been a site of mobility. In the early twentieth century, there was inward migration and upward social mobility through an influx of capital, people and ideas. In the corpus, urbanization and rural decline is the driving force of motion, but its source in the national center also hold the promise of positive change and opportunity. It is a contemporary mode of expressing what seems a defining cultural memory and established tradition

in the local poetics of place, narrating change, ambivalence, and liminality as the experience of the dialectic between peripheral locality and outside influence.

These songs articulate an uneasy nomadic identity marked by melancholy, strongly attached to place. While the proper sound for singing about Norrland seems to be melancholic compositions with contrasting major to minor harmonies, cautious dynamics and auditory isolation and distance, these songs all include musical and lyrical gestures toward the outside world. Regional distinctiveness is maintained in both lyrics and musical style, but this is not separatist or insular. It is a local expression of a general sentiment of marginalization that is common in genres such as blues, reggae and hip-hop, which lyrically and stylistically voices affinities to a broader Swedish identity. These artists are in clear dialogue with the surrounding world, simultaneously implying that Norrland is analogous to other peripheries and voicing Norrlandic experiences in forms familiar elsewhere, similar to what Öhman (2010) recognizes as a dualistic address of both local and external discourses in the region's literature.

My analysis indicates some rhetorical functions of place-making that are distinctive, albeit unlikely unique to my corpus. These songs primarily address and identify a subjectivity *en route*, set in motion by the dialectic of local roots and outside influence. The uneasy nomadic identity they imply addresses Norrland's inhabitants, as well as those who have moved away from home. This nomadic identity is constantly recalled and coupled to place through re-remembering expressions. This rhetorical action, while clad in melancholy, affirms roots in the home. Complementary to a constitutive rhetoric articulating subject positions that may be modern, even urban, it reaffirms their intimate connection to Norrland. The most salient trait promoted by this rhetoric is resilience. Nature's harsh winters, mosquitos and the midnight sun strengthen the subject in the face of trials. The hinterland inhabitants are canny and self-willed. The narrators resist the center through pranks, outlaw lifestyles, the homemade, solidarity, and sharp criticism that refuse assimilation. This resilience is a counterforce to external influence, articulated as rooted in nature, place, and community.

These articulations are responses to the existential threat of displacement and forgetfulness, and while the songs span from pure lamentations to somewhat hopeful sendoffs, they all provide coping strategies for working through the changes of Norrland and its people. These songs express a nomadic attitude in musical form, performing a cultural fluidity while rooting it in the fixity of local narratives, nostalgia, dialect, sound and emplacements. In this way, they exemplify the negotiations of a globally entangled Norrlandic subject.

These songs put words and music to the conflicting emotions arising from the liminality of life in or away from the Norrlandic home. Sharing such sentiments through song can provide equipment for living, as it may help process feelings

of loneliness and alienation. These songs offer communion through emotional sharing between people remaining and people on the move, even if this is “merely” imaginary identification (Bloomfield 1993). The ambivalence captured in these songs may not resolve the experiences of “dialectical contradictions between the world and its discourses” (Charland 1987) or between roots and the pull of urbanization, but it provides some tools to work through them. The lyrics can help make sense of an uneasy nomadic lifestyle under urbanization, and the music allows for it to be the focal point of a space where melancholy can be acknowledged and felt. The constant re-membering identifies people *en route* with place—affirming and reinforcing their bonds to the community and what is ostensibly their true home.

## Author

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## Endnotes

- 1 Cultural and geographic region inhabited by the Sámi people.
- 2 A *visa* comprises rhymed lyrics driving melody, to accompaniment that is not integral to the song. A *visa* is typically a narrative but is sometimes descriptive of a mood or place. While similar to folk songs, a *visa* can be performed in a range of genres and styles.
- 3 My translations emphasize content and therefore loose meter, rhyme and dialect. Stanzas are marked with /. Translated lyrics are included in appendix 1.
- 4 The verb 'torpa' (lit. *to croft*: withdrawing to a rural cottage) is recurring slang in Norrlandic hip-hop.
- 5 Fermented herring.
- 6 The Swedish word 'kuliss' implies the forest as a simulacrum of itself.
- 7 *Songs from 'Hotaheiti'*, idiom for a very remote place.
- 8 Orig "tog ton" is idiomatic, meaning to 'assert oneself'. The '16' here denotes the common number of musical bars for a rap verse.

## Appendix 1: Original song lyrics with translations

Quoted and translated lyrics are here included in their original Swedish form, in order of citation in the article. Parts excluded through ellipsis in translations are included here in brackets for context. Lyrics are here reproduced as published on the artists own websites, except in the case of Random Bastards et al. (2014) and Erk & Imchibeat (2014). Those lyrics are quoted as published on lyrics aggregation websites genius.com, lyrics.lyricfind.com and musixmatch.com. All transcriptions have been manually checked for their correspondence to the published recordings.

(Airijoki 2014)

Hjärtat det är kiosken som är stängd men än står kvar/ [Ryggraden den svajar som en knotig gammal gran]/ Ögonen är kalhyggen en ensam fura kvar/ [Avståndet här mellan oss det tar någonting av dig/ Ett helt inland inom dig] finns ett inland inom dig

(Glesbygd'n 2009c)

å ut i skogen behövs inge slott/schvidarn ha vakna men i sko it klaga/För ljuse o soln dem värm upp min kropp/som bären dem mogna här vi myra

(Märak 2019)

Greppar min stav som jag håller din hand

(Erk & Imchibeat 2014)

Fjällen graverar inåt och börjar bota såren  
björken ser oss som levande rötter  
Fruktansvärt över med all eran byråkrati  
Säkert missat mycket men de cool vi drog den lotten  
Kanske tappat hoppet men de' e cool vi donar bort det/Duckar straffet, torpar,  
låter karaktären sona brottet/Lite som folket övervinner alla naturens prövningar/  
[Sakta men säkert känn oss odödliga]

(Euskefeurat 2014a)

och jag känner mig redo för strid/ Kom igen nu för fan februari/ du har inte  
nånting som kan skrämna mig

(Airijoki 2018a)

[Klart jag vill vila] i en famn utav is men du bryter bena på mig/ [Slår axeln ur led  
slår ut tänderna sen]/ Fostrande kärlek helt klart/ [Jag ligger på rygg mot en sned  
gammal gran/ Den här kodan flyter också i mig/ Spretiga rötter som pumpar runt  
blod]/ Jag föddes du uppfostra mig/ [Barna-född men du uppfostra mig]

(Airijoki 2015b)

Stadens asfalt täcker över rötter

(Glesbygd'n 2008)

he val hart å få en framti här vi myr'n/ för åll fjällern dem ha flytta åt:n större ort

(Airijoki 2015a)

Husbilar som fyller vägen/ [Stannar till för sameslöjd]

(Euskefeurat 2014d)

[Det som låter där högt i det blå/ Är] NATOs bombplan som visst behöver/ några  
att öva sig på [och här hos oss/ har dom nu fått en chans]

(Glesbygd'n 2013)

från Kina till Kirunavaara/ från Amerika till Arvidsjaur

(Väart 2019c)

Kan inte berätta för dig vad som växer runt huset på vår bakgård/ Är så sorgligt att  
sakna namnen, att inte förstå dom på riktigt

(Glesbygd'n 2009a)

Jag vet snart int vem i jer/ skogen ha för mej blitt en kuliss/ som saknar funktion  
utöver ren turism/ [den är inte vad jag lever av]

(Euskefeurat 2014b)

Förut ligger nära, jag åker dit ibland och hälsar på/ [Åker med min bil]/ knappt tjugu mil/ mellan nu och då

(Glesbygd'n 2009b)

Drömmen om framtid, svält ihjäl å dog/ Med löftet om välfärd, dem tog peninga å drog/ [Marknadsliberaler och tysta sociokrater,/ kostymklädda soldater, försvarar detta spektakel]/ Byarna dom blöder och lassen går åt söder

(Väart 2019a)

Men du är prydligare och det skrämmer mig, när var det du bytte stil/ [Början en prick hitom bergen, resan en färd ifrån sotet/ Drömälvs, du som jag förändras alltid/ Drömälvs, jag som du kan inte stanna]  
[Flera vänner är borta nu, är enklare att glömmas bort här/Vad är det som förändrats mest, om inte ytan så inuti]/ Alla lyckoträffar som tagit dig hit men också det andra som tär

(Random Bastards et al. 2014)

**Fricky:** Ännu en turistattraktion som det låter/ Förlåt men, har svårt att hylla stan där vi bor nu när/ Halva RB och Hoop inte har någonstans att bo [men]

**Erk:** Lapplabama, bakåtlutat och myggvana

**Academics:** 100 år gammal aska är blandad med smutsen i luften vi andas/ Sedan stan brann har vi byggt upp den tillsammans

**Broder John:** Vem tog ton första 16 under cykelbron?

**Chorus:** Jag gör det för dig som stanna kvar/ Och du som stack och brann från stan/ Det rinner nytt vatten under bron och en ny sol stiger över Plaza, syrran kom tillbaka/ [Jag gör det för dig som aldrig drog/ Bror är en UÅ-patriot]/ Det är klart det finns stunder då man helst hade lämnat alltihop, vissa drar men minnena finns kvar, patriot

(Glesbygd'n 2017)

Ovanför huvena på dem som du och jag/ [Deras sällskapsdanss skin kapp i kvävens glans]/ Dom Sjung "jag älskar denna stad"/ Men låter varje beslut hamra in samma fras:/ Jag hatar Umeå

(Airijoki 2015b)

Staden asfalt under dina fötter/ Ingen frågar en vems pojke är då du



(Väärt 2019b)

Jag har bott här nu i 4 år och jag tänker inte flytta/ Mina vänner kom och hämtade  
mig, sa vi åker, sluta svamla  
Åk, för jag stannar ändå kvar  
Farfar sa pojken är inte klok, men kolla på mig nu har ju lyckats