

KUUK, SKRAP, AND THE RESISTANCE VERNACULAR

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Abstract

How are gendered identities enabled, contested, and performed through Nordic popular music? Building on relevant approaches in popular music analysis, this article offers an investigation into the function/s of language and musical style in enabling and engendering agency and subjectivity via two case studies in Norwegian popular music. Gender and language are crucial factors in this. In a global context of popular music, bands and artists who choose to sing in their local language may be seen to take up marginal positions compared to artists who choose to sing in English, as the choice of language would naturally limit their audience. I argue that this overlooks the efficacy of using one's local language to express points of view that are relevant on a local level; what is more, it overlooks the possibility of subverting globalized trends and using these to one's own ends.

In this article, I offer close readings of Norwegian-language albums by two all-female groups: the hip-hop duo Kuuk (Live fra Blitz) and the electronica duo Skrap (Atlantis). Applying Russell A. Potter's (1995) concept of the 'resistance vernacular' as it has been expanded and operationalized by Tony Mitchell (2004), I contend that the bands' use of their local language opens their music to a broader set of possibilities when it comes to subverting gender and genre norms at the same time as it enhances the music's political potential.

Working in discernible genres enables both bands to create music that expresses a feminist stance; in the case of Kuuk, deconstructing and subverting expectations of gendered behaviour through parodying hip-hop misogyny, and in the case of Skrap, drawing on strategic naïvety to steer clear of gender stereotypes.

Keywords: *Resistance; Language; Gender; Popular music*

Introduction

Popular music, as a global platform of popular culture that is ostensibly available to everyone everywhere, finds itself at the junction of a particular paradox. Music is produced locally, but according to ever-changing globalized norms; possibly the most important of these is that music has to be accessible to a large audience. Hence, English frequently appears as the undisputed standard, with all other languages seemingly relegated to the margins. In this article, I argue that this marginal position enables performers to resist the streamlining of music, chiefly by using their native language, and by extension shaping ideas of gender and subjectivity.

Central to this is the contention that lineages of styles and genres transport with them sets of assumptions (Hawkins 2002, 2) – that is, assumptions about what pop music is, which may overlook how pop is always 'shaped by social, political and cultural

conditions' (Hawkins 2002, 2). Hawkins suggests that this pertains to the legitimizing and privileging of trends, notably through discourses of music journalism. I would add that this is also central to language, as English no doubt shapes ideas of authenticity as well as gender, through the interplay of the language with aesthetics of style and genre.¹

Recent studies in popular music from the Nordic countries (Sandve 2015a, Holt and Kärjä 2017, Björnberg and Bossius 2017) frame the popular music of the Nordic region as distinct and competitive in a global context, but also as subject to a range of perceptions that would exoticize and maintain the Nordic countries' position as Other in a globalized, English-speaking world of popular culture. This process of exoticization, notably in how pop artists such as ABBA would be characterized by their Swedish accents when singing and speaking in English, highlights how gender and language are inextricably linked in popular music. This assertion opens for an investigation into how native language, rather than limiting bands' possibilities of creating music, enables critical musical modes of expression and of negotiating subjectivity.

My focus falls on two now-defunct Norwegian bands, Kuuk and Skrap. Both bands utilized stylistic traits from a number of genres belonging to the larger umbrella term of electronic music, such as hip hop and rap, which are discernible first and foremost in their vocal performances. In both cases, there is also a conscious use of their native language. Making use of expletives and the kind of self-aggrandizing that evokes machismo, Kuuk can be seen to deconstruct tropes of hypermasculinity, drawing on strategies of gender performativity that are exemplary of what Halberstam (1998) has interrogated as 'female masculinity'. Employing Potter's (1995) and Mitchell's (2004) theories of the resistance vernaculars of marginal non-Anglophone bands, I intend to unpack these concepts and apply them to analyses of albums by both bands.

Theoretical background: Resistance vernaculars

Central to my methodological apparatus in this article is the concept of resistance vernaculars (Potter 1995). Significant in rap and hip hop as well as bands and artists from non-Anglophone regions, the idea of resistance vernaculars is indicative of a multilingual dexterity that situates the English language side by side with other languages in a context of popular music. However, Potter suggests that this situation is also characterized by a division of classes of vernacular languages: on the one hand, there are hegemonic vernaculars such as 'Received Standard English'; on the other hand, there are any number of resistance vernaculars that challenge and change 'the rules of "intelligibility" set up by the dominant language' (Potter 1995, 67-68). Extending Potter's theory to 'languages other than English in rap music outside the USA' (2004, 108), Mitchell argues that the global presence of this music corresponds to the formation of syncretic "'glocal" subcultures' and enables 'local indigenizations of

¹ Mitchell (1996, 2004) and Pennycook (2007) tend to assume a binary division of 'mother tongue' and English, where authenticity typically resides in the former. I would argue against this in that the English language carries with it assumptions about authenticity that become accessible on a local level, notably in the case of bands and artists who harbour ambitions of 'making it' abroad. See Hawkins and Ålvik (2019) for a discussion of a-ha in this context.

the global musical idiom of rap' (2004, 108). This sort of resistance enables artists to do 'linguistic damage' that is 'directed against the language of the colonizers' (Whiteley, Bennett, and Hawkins 2004, 13), thus indicating that the theory of the resistance vernacular originates from a postcolonial musical context where English is the dominant language.

In this sense, the theory of resistance vernaculars stems from Potter's (1995) idea of spectacular vernaculars. In his analysis of rap and hip-hop as radical postmodern music, Potter sees the multiplicity of black vernaculars in music as 'a condition of *the vernacular*'; taking inspiration from Luce Irigaray, he terms this linguistic situation as '*that language which is not one*' (1995, 63). Regarding hip-hop as 'a transnational, global artform capable of mobilizing diverse disenfranchised groups' (1995, 10), Potter also acknowledges the music's potential for resistance, 'forming and sustaining a culture *against* the dominant, using materials at hand' (1995, 108, all emphases in original). Paving the way for Mitchell's theory, Potter thus illuminates important facets of global popular music in general and hip-hop in particular, such as the mutability of language and the use of local means – the 'materials at hand' – to create music that may nevertheless be intelligible on a global scale. What is more, we may understand resistance vernaculars in a context of code-switching (Greenall 2015). In the case of Kuuk, the mix of English and Norwegian (read: not-English) signifies that which Greenall calls 'linguistic tattoos' that situate bands' and artists' identities and make them intelligible socially, historically, and culturally (2015, 161).

Notably, even though Mitchell does not explicitly state that 'doin' damage in my native language' is the prerogative of minority languages, his examples are still taken from the margins – non-English-speaking regions where people use English in ways that draw on globalised popular culture. Here, 'damage' could be read as implying that it is the dominant culture that suffers the damage. How, then, could this be carried out in a context of Norwegian popular music? What then happens when the artist who does the 'damage' does so without regard to being acknowledged by the dominant gaze? This is the point of entry for this article.

In the light of this, one obvious flaw in Mitchell's model of resistance vernaculars is that the mode of address depends on the mother tongue – in this case, English. Consequently, the reader will have to imagine the situation in a country such as Norway, where a large part of the popular music industry is based on communication in English, particularly in song lyrics. This exposes an essentialist strand in Mitchell's model, as the reader is obliged to imagine a situation where a language other than one's mother tongue has the status of carrier of meaning and authenticity.

It is my contention that Kuuk and Skrap go against this in distinct ways. Skrap use their native language to formulate resistance with regard to perceptions of gender. Kuuk use a mix of languages (Norwegian and English) and regional dialects as part of an audiovisual spectacle to spell out resistance on a number of levels; what is more, they effectively displace the authenticity of the English language by always already bastardizing both languages into their own idiolect.

Despite (or rather because of) this flaw, I find the theory of resistance vernaculars useful for my purposes here. I see the idea of 'linguistic damage' as an analytical tool

for engaging with the complex situation of language in Norwegian popular music. This would include interrogating ‘urban’ Norwegian language as both a minority vis-à-vis the dominant globalised English language and as a majority vis-à-vis regional dialects.² In the case of both Kuuk and Skrap, this difference between the urban (non-marked) and the regional (as different from urban) comes across in the music, notably in the singers’ performances of song lyrics.

Mitchell also takes up strategies of mixing languages, notably in the case of the group Zimbabwe Legit, whose 1992 EP ‘Doin’ Damage in my Native Language’ mixes English with the regional dialect, Ndbele. Mitchell suggests that the English expressions ‘serve two purposes for the Anglophone listener: they locate Zimbabwe Legit firmly in their country of origin’ and also ‘prioritize the group’s native dialect as the main source of their art of rhyming’ (2004, 108). Enquiring into what ends music might serve for the non-Anglophone listener (a notion which illuminates both the dominance of Anglophone culture and the simple binary oppositions of centre-margin that result from this dominance), I propose that the resistance vernacular also enables a use of one’s ‘native language’ that is not necessarily contingent on Anglophone listeners’ comprehension of it. This in turn opens for a view that resistance vernacular is not limited to language, but also encompasses musical style as well as audiovisual aesthetics, all of which feed into artists’ identity politics.

Against this background, I read a selection of songs by Kuuk and Skrap as resisting sexist stereotypes, to different ends. These examples come across as relevant on multiple levels. Kuuk may be perceived as deconstructing masculine swagger and macho jargon to their own ends, framing a sex-positive attitude via an appropriation of stylistic traits of US rap music and an effective use of their native language. Skrap, on the other hand, employ strategies of resistance in a frame of low-key electronic music, where they eschew song structures and demands to theoretical competence and also take a pronounced feminist stance in their songs.

‘Piss in my ear and call me a man’: Kuuk

For reasons I have discussed above, I find Kuuk a pertinent example of a band that uses resistance vernacular as part of identity politics. Fronted by rappers and songwriters Mira Berggrav Refsum and Ragna Solbergnes, Kuuk are characterized by a name that is a designation of the male organ (and, as such, a phallic symbol), and also an expletive, commonly used disparagingly as well as lovingly. Crucially, the band’s use of this word not only exposes the constructed-ness of gender stereotypes but also flaunts the humour in the choice of band name. The visual style of the band is no less sensational: their trademark attire on stage and in videos included exercise outfits imprinted with the American flag (Figure 1). By way of distinction, Refsum wears a swimsuit while

² Even though English is inevitably the dominant language of several aspects of global popular culture, notably popular music, this does not mean that there is one monolithic, immutable ‘English’ that dominates the world at any given time. Rather, as Pennycook suggests, we may view the global English in the plural, as a set of global ‘Englishes’ that change with the context and become *localized* – a language being in the world (Pennycook 2007).

Solbergnes wears a sports brassiere and boxer shorts (Sandve 2015b). Any use of a nation's flag could well be seen as offensive, not to say sacrilegious. Then again, the Stars and Stripes flag has long been used to decorate (read: sell) clothing to Norwegian consumers.³ In the case of Kuuk, the use of this flag arguably also pertains to musical style, considering the status of rap and hip-hop as African-American music.



Figure 1: Kuuk. Front cover image for *Live fra Blitz*. Photo by Linn Heidi Stokkedal. Reproduced by permission of Bangles & Brass Records.

Characteristic of rap music, the band's lyrics are laden with expletives. While the lyrics are in Norwegian, Refsum and Solbergnes as a rule mix English words and phrases into the narratives, drawing on an impression of rap as globalized music, notably through the sort of language mix that Mitchell (2004) would call linguistic damage. Two more views may be added to this. On the one hand, the resulting mix of Norwegian and English recalls Dai Griffiths' concept of the anti-lyric, where song lyrics move away from resembling structures of poetry – being *like* poetry – and 'tend towards being *like* prose' (2003, 42). This enables 'anti-lyrics' where words work within the verbal space

³ One especially relevant example of how the Stars and Stripes are used on clothing in US popular culture is the DC Comics cartoon character, Wonder Woman. This provides a link to popular music via Lady Gaga's video for 'Telephone' (2010), where Gaga and Beyoncé are seen wearing Wonder Woman outfits. In their analysis of the video, Burns and Lafrance point out that Gaga and Beyoncé's hyper-able-bodiedness is reinforced by the superhero costumes and that the protagonists are themselves represented as superheroes, 'a force for good in society' (Burns and Lafrance 2014, 143).

of a song (2003, 43), and, I argue, where the resistance vernacular also gains efficacy in that the lyrics are not necessarily bound to any one understanding of language or style, but are contingent on performance.

On the other hand, the extensive and seemingly arbitrary use of English catchphrases in Kuuk's songs exemplifies Greenall's concept of code-switching. As examples of this, terms such as 'high five' ('10 000 high fives') and abbreviations such as 'HTG' (hard to get) pervade the lyrics, making the songs polyvalent.

We may add another crucial point to Kuuk's use of language. Central to the band's lyrics and vocal performances is Solbergnes' use of her regional dialect. Originally from Rossfjord, Solbergnes has also lived in Tromsø, where she was part of the scene around the venue Blårock (Moe 2014, 21). Importantly, this signifies on two levels: that of 'authenticity' via origins, and that of 'authenticity' in language. Moreover, her use of dialect situates Kuuk in a context of a number of Norwegian bands, and also in an intersection of styles: the broad Northern Norwegian hip hop scene that includes Tungtvann and Sirkus Eliassen, Northern rock groups such as Senjahopen, and rural rap groups such as Side Brok. Notably, these groups share a dexterity in language that is also characteristic of Kuuk, exemplifying a resistance to globalized stylistic traits in popular music that circumvent any simple demands to intelligibility (read: English lyrics) in favour of a broad range of vernacular expressions.

On Kuuk's album *Kuuk live fra Blitz*, resistance vernaculars are realized on several levels, notably language, vocal performance, and gender politics. A recording of a live concert by the band, the album showcases the rappers' interaction with their audience as well as with their backing band.⁴

My focus falls on the songs 'HTG' and '10 000 high fives'. In 'HTG', Solbergnes troubles clichés of machismo by shouting out spoken lines such as 'Er det noen som vil bli penetrert her?' (Is there anyone that wants to be penetrated here?) Refsum, in the song's chorus, engages with ideas of correct feminine behaviour in stating that she 'æ'kke en sånn jente som flørter / Jeg bare squirter' (I'm not a girl who flirts / I only squirt), with Solbergnes interjecting shouts of *aah* that underpin the point. The sex-positivist attitude is here flaunted as a shameless pride in the ability to achieve squirting orgasms, in a vocal style that signifies excess in that the performers avoid conventional singing styles in favour of shouting and belting techniques. The troubling of gender is further emphasized in that the women turn the idea of playing 'hard to get' around, instead enticing the antagonist (ostensibly, a man) to join in: 'Ikke prøv å leke HTG / når jeg vet du vil være med' (Don't try and play HTG / when I know you want to join in). Further destabilizing conventional gender binaries, Solberg's microphone technique employs close-up noises and near-feedback, again signifying the sort of excess that

⁴ The choice of venue for the concert is also significant in a context of resistance vernaculars. Starting out as an illegal squat in the early 1980s, Oslo's Blitz later became a legal cooperation for actors on the radical left, as the location for a concert venue, a vegetarian café, and notably radiOrakel, an all-female-run radio station with a feminist stance. See Eide et al. (2012) for a comprehensive history of radiOrakel and the significance of Blitz for the Norwegian feminist movement.

resists categories of normative behaviour, expanding the idea of resistance vernacular to also include the voice itself.

Resistance to regulating and limiting ideas of acceptable behaviour are even more pronounced in '10 000 high fives'. A bass line that is as cheeky as it is funky underpins Solbergnes' assertive, gender-bending opening lyric line: 'Piss meg i øret og kall meg mann' (Piss in my ear and call me a man). Even though she immediately bends it back again, in the line 'Æ brøle sånn som bare damer kan' (I roar like this as only women can), the linguistic damage has in a sense been inflicted already. Despite the essentialist trap of speaking on behalf of 'all women', Solbergnes makes the valid point that she is not afraid to be called a man, thus appropriating a role that connotes agency and power.

Sandve has noted that Refsum and Solbergnes utilize opposites in their interplay, both musically and visually. The performance mode of the two rappers, which includes hypersexualized dialogues that are chock-full of expletives and that showcase a clever play with language that includes dialect and a relentless mix of Norwegian and English words, highlights a playfulness that in turn alerts us to the space of possibilities where the performers operate – a space that accommodates gendered identities that are not easily categorized in binary oppositions (Sandve 2015b). The idea of a resistance vernacular is made to function as a deconstruction of machismo, where language and vocal performance become tools for destabilizing masculinity via markers of Anglo-American popular culture.

Sandve also suggests that we see Kuuk as exponents of what Halberstam has termed female masculinity (Sandve 2015b). In Halberstam's work, this pertains to a number of identities available to women, from butch to drag king, and also enables a critique of male masculinity as 'the real thing'. According to Halberstam, masculinity 'inevitably conjures up notions of power and legitimacy and privilege', and, in patriarchal logic, is also simultaneously made to function as a natural trait of biological men; consequently, a critical interrogation discloses masculinity as legible 'where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body' (1998, 2). In Kuuk's project, this goes all the way to the naming of the organ, which however becomes a palindrome,⁵ disabling any straightforward reading.

Also building on Halberstam's theory, Marita Buanes Djupvik has investigated the idea of female masculinity as staged through popular music. Suggesting that strategies of blurring, e.g. through female masculinity, help women gain access to masculine-coded roles in music, Djupvik analyses rap vocal practice and expressions of attitude. In her research into Missy Elliott's music, she suggests that Elliott succeeds in appropriating 'the necessary degree of raunchy braggadocio' and thereby 'reclaims all the privileges that come with male power' (2017, 123). This is arguably also significant in Kuuk's project, notably in '10 000 high fives'.

What is more, Kuuk may be seen as exponents of a sex-positive feminism, which also enables a critique of stereotypes of sex. As Kath Albury suggests, 'the misrecognition of [heterosexual] desire serves a dominant culture of heteronormativity – the subtle or not

⁵ The spelling of the band's name as 'Kuuk' adds a U to popular spellings of the word.

so subtle enforcement of particular kinds of heterosexual identity as the norm', adding that, if we argue that 'most men are sexual aggressors, and most women are sexually put-upon, we support normalising stereotypes where Male = Active/Strong/Desiring, and Female = Passive/ Weak/Desired' (Albury 2002, xxi). In the light of this, Kuuk's broad-legged postures and lyrics that emphasize sexual bravado may be seen to turn this model on its head, or rather destabilize it, exposing the constructedness of gender roles but also grounding this destabilization in sex-positivism, with an emphasis on pleasure.

On the one hand, this pertains to what Cecilia Björck terms 'claiming space'. Notably, this pertains to taking the opportunity to turn up the volume, both literally and figuratively: both making loud music and taking a stance against what Björck calls middle-class notions of moderation and discipline (Björck 2011). This brings to mind Fabian Holt's critique of the concept of 'Nordic cool' as being characterized by ideas of control and restraint (Holt 2017). Moreover, loudness, in Björck's analysis, is also about finding one's voice and thereby deconstructing the connection, chiefly in rock music, between masculinity and authenticity (Björck 2011, 129). In this, Björck's analysis entails a critique of how ideals of femininity seem contingent on and policed by masculine ideals. This makes the case for Kuuk, where pleasure is closely related not only to sex-positivity and destabilizing gender norms, but also to what Björck calls a 'transgression of stereotypes of sound and gender', as exemplified by 'women who growl' (Björck 2011, 129) – a vocal technique which would sit well as a description of Refsum's and Solbergnes's vocal performance.

On the other hand, the emphasis on sexual pleasure that characterizes Kuuk's songs recalls Mireille Miller-Young's concept of the 'illicit eroticism' of rap music (Miller-Young 2008). In her investigation into black sexualities in hip-hop, Miller-Young suggests the intersection of hip-hop and pornography, where 'illicit eroticism' becomes a sexual economy that offers up possibilities of pleasure, agency, and power. As an analytical tool, illicit eroticism enables critical analysis of hegemonic white definitions of non-normative black sexuality and opens inroads into subverting such constructions and producing 'new spaces for desire and pleasure through counter-fetishization' (Miller-Young 2008, 275).

Importantly, Miller-Young asks whether pleasure, particularly sexual pleasure, can 'become an anti-racist and anti-sexist platform' (Miller-Young 2008, 286); following this, we may see how the pleasure of Kuuk's music may also accommodate a potential for change.

'Man or not': Skrap

I now turn my attention to the duo Skrap. Consisting of pianist Anja Lauvdal and tuba player Heida Jóhannesdóttir Mobeck,⁶ Skrap originated in the fertile environment around the music conservatoire at the University of Trondheim, colloquially known as the *Jazzlinja*. Like Kuuk, the band's name has several layers: the Norwegian word *skrap*

⁶ In addition to their main instruments, Lauvdal and Mobeck are both multi-instrumentalists, as evidenced in their participation in jazz, electronica, and pop-rock bands such as Moskus, Skadedyr, and Broen.

translates into English as garbage (e.g. scrap metal), but also designates sounds such as scratch or scrape (pertaining, for example, to the sound of the needle of a record player as it slides across a vinyl record, or a snow shovel scraping across gravel). Their music is similarly multi-layered, drawing on jazz and electronica, and utilizing strategies of improvisation and voice manipulation. In addition to their own records as a duo, Skrap have worked with Trondheim Jazz Orchestra, further highlighting the creative dimension as well as the opportunities for artistic cooperation enabled by the jazz community in the region of Central Norway, with Midtnorsk jazzsenter as their base.⁷

Against this background, which spans a wide variety of genres and approaches, Skrap appears as a project where the musicians' exploration of styles and themes is intrepid, but also subdued. Notably, vocal performances are characterized by a laid-back singing style that avoids the full chest voice in favour of more ordinary-sounding voices that resemble speaking registers or *Sprechstimme*. Taken together with the band's avoidance of conventional song structures (i.e. verse/chorus), this furnishes Skrap's style with a quirkiness that arguably creates an impression of untutored, do-it-yourself (DIY) music. Reynolds and Press argue that this vocal strategy may be seen as adhering to a 'DIY ideology' that 'agitates against acquiring musical technique' (1995, 327). A discernible trait of this ideology is the presence of 'untutored, artless voices' (1995, 367). As I will demonstrate in my analysis, Skrap may be seen to utilize their vocal style to defy musical as well as gender conventions.

On Skrap's album *Atlantis* (2018), the two musicians operate as singers and multi-instrumentalists, exploring electronic music that draws on strategies of improvisation. Starting with 'Vær så god', I offer analyses of three songs from *Atlantis* that may be understood as enabling alternative subject positions in various ways.

Drawing on intertextual connections to two children's songs, 'Så gjør vi så' and 'Bjørnen sover',⁸ 'Vær så god' invokes stereotypes of heteronormativity and masculinity. The former song is re-written so as to illuminate how gender is contingent on categorical differences ('Så gjør vi så når vi setter hverandre i bås' (This is what happens when we put each other in boxes)), while the latter brings up questions of fear of failing, but also fear of knowledge, and possibly the 'dangerous female' or even vagina dentata ('Vi er ikke farlig[e] / Bare du går varlig' (We are not dangerous / You just tread carefully)).

Skrap also use the children's song 'Bjørnen sover' to indicate a chorus-like section in a song that is otherwise exemplary of the band's method of avoiding pop-song conventions of verse/chorus. This is also exemplified in the band's use of programmed drums that rhythmically displace the phallic snare drum (Hawkins 2002, 56) in that the vocals do not necessarily follow the 4/4 logic of the drum machine. Hawkins makes

⁷ Midtnorsk jazzsenter: <https://midtnorsk.jazzinorge.no> (accessed 15 April 2018).

⁸ 'Så gjør vi så', also known in a festive (Christmas) version as 'Så går vi rundt om en enebærbusk', is a Norwegian translation of the English nursery rhyme, 'Here we go round the Mulberry bush'. 'Bjørnen sover', a popular song in both Sweden and Norway, utilises the melody of 'Gubben Noak', an 18th-century Swedish traditional song with lyrics by the composer Carl Michael Bellman. The lyrics function as words of subtle warning, indicating that the bear will not wake up and harm you if you tread carefully.

reference to McClary's argument that the options available to woman musicians in rock are 'especially constrictive, for this musical discourse is typically characterized by its phallic upbeat' (quoted in Hawkins 2002, 56-57). In the light of this, Skrap open up possibilities via their vocal performance, enabling a subject position that is not constricted by conventions that may appear as masculine in a context of popular music.

This strategy is also identifiable in the lyrics. The line 'Du lægg' for stor vekt på min vagina' (You put too much weight on my vagina), sung by Mobeck, adds to this by employing regional dialect. This includes a shifting of emphasis on syllables, as Mobeck places emphasis on the first syllable in the word 'vagina'. As in the case of Kuuk, this use of dialect furnishes the song with a sheen of authenticity, in that it provides Skrap with a grounding in the use of dialect. Equally important, though, is the resistance that is discernible in the singer's admonition of the antagonist for their preoccupation with her biological sex.

Using double-tracked vocals that are joined by harmony vocals, the voices express an attempt to disappear in order to avoid the antagonist's definition of the protagonist as woman: 'Jeg prøver å forsvinne / Vil ikke bli sett på som din definisjon av kvinne / Uansett hva vi gjør / Vi deles inn i mann eller ikke' (I try to disappear / Don't want to be seen as your definition of woman / Whatever we do / We are divided into man or not). The idea that society operates at any given time with the categories of men and 'non-men' (read: nothing), in effect giving the man priority over the woman, invokes a lineage of feminist thought that may be traced at least as far back as Simone de Beauvoir's 1949 book, *Le Deuxième sexe* (The Second Sex). In line with this, the song signifies individual disidentification with expectations directed at women.⁹ To this end, Skrap formulate a critique of categories and adherent social norms that recalls Toril Moi's theory of the fallacy of inferring from biological sex to gender norms: '[The] best defence against biological determinism is to deny that biology grounds or justifies social norms. If we consistently deny this, we do not have to assume that the idea that there are only two sexes must be steeped in sexism and heterosexism' (Moi 1999, 113).

Like Moi, Skrap do not deny the existence of biological facts, notably with regard to female anatomy in 'Vær så god'; however, this may be read as in line with Moi's observation that 'invocations of nature usually come wrapped up in sexist or heterosexist ideology' (Moi 1999, 113). Moi emphasizes that it remains a necessary feminist task to point out the pervasive presence of this ideology. As such, 'Vær så god' may be interpreted as alerting the listener to structural obstacles in music and elsewhere, with a musical backing that does not insist, but sustains the listener's interest via strategies that eschew conventional song structures.

⁹ I take the term *disidentification* here from José Esteban Muñoz. Building on feminist theory as well as cultural studies, Muñoz suggests disidentification as a tool for resisting unfavourable identification with any group and being Othered as part of being categorized (Muñoz 1999). Linking this to pop music's potential for 'articulating traits of gender and sexuality' in music, Hawkins employs Muñoz's concept as a tool for analysing how pop productions can 'entail resistance, facilitating disidentification within a specific system' (2016, 218). I see this as a valid understanding of Muñoz's ideas that is also applicable to my own analysis of both Kuuk and Skrap, as both bands can be seen to disidentify with conceptions of the 'female musician' in various ways.

Similar strategies are employed to different ends in ‘Marianna’. Here, Skrap seemingly utilize a more conventional song structure, with the recurring vocal hooks, ‘Digger når du smiler’ (I like it when you smile) and ‘Du er bra slik du er’ (You are fine as you are), implying a verse/chorus difference. However, the stop-start mode of the music complicates this, with the programmed drums entering and exiting at salient points in the song, and the irregular metre of the lyric lines creating the impression of a monologue or even a love letter. The synthesizer sounds (which recall dance-floor music as much as anything else) contrast this, destabilizing not only the song structure but also the protagonist’s subject position. This helps Skrap avoid locking the song into any one position, instead opening the song’s address to more listeners than the antagonist, who is the obvious recipient of the words.

Ostensibly, the song is a declaration of friendship or maybe a love song to the title character (Marianna), but also takes up questions of self-esteem: ‘Du er bra slik du er’ is easily perceived as a declaration of support. This is underlined by the fact that the name of the title character is sung by double-tracked voices or by two or more voices in harmony. This way, the protagonist’s subjectivity becomes multi-layered, not easily pinpointed as either friend, lover, or authority.

What is more, in the lyrics, Skrap employ a variety of gazes to visualize Marianna in time and space: imagining them as growing old ‘with flowers in your hair’ and as dancing with a (male) character, but also delight in seeing their smile. Then again, the gaze is not only individual, as in the line, ‘Du forstår at du er dritbra / Når du ser på deg selv gjennom dine venners øyne’ (You will understand that you are great / When you see yourself through your friends’ eyes). The heteronormative dimension of the lyrics, where the protagonist wishes for Marianna to find a man, frames the narrative; however, the protagonist’s cordiality and the gaze suggest that attention is firmly focused on the title character. In addition, there is nothing in the lyrics that suggests that Marianna is or is not a trans woman; this observation leaves the lyrics more open to interpretation, and, I would argue, to notions of both resistance and disidentification.¹⁰

As factors in identity politics, markers of authenticity are neither universal nor unambiguous. Skrap provide an example of this in the song ‘Allerede da’, where they ostensibly criticize the ivory-tower quest for knowledge that characterizes universities. Via a series of images that include old hypotheses and ancient texts about nature and the elegance of physics, and a dropping of names that includes philosophers Democritus and Spinoza, Skrap convey an image of theory as remote and irrelevant to their modus operandi: the insistent repetition of the decree to ‘read, read, read’ positions theoretical knowledge as antithetical to the band’s sense of self.

A series of questions that are apt to confuse, and to complicate identity (‘hvordan da, hvilken vei, hva er hva’ (how then, which way, what’s what)) is underlined by a violin that sounds subdued and non-virtuosic, complementing the voices and creating a counterpoint, both to the voices and, by association, to the ‘stressful’ accumulation of intellectual knowledge.

¹⁰ I am grateful to Kate Maxwell for this point.

This indicates the possibility of reading 'Allerede da' as sustaining a simple dichotomy of academics and musicians, where the remoteness from the 'real life' of the former is set against the anti-intellectual (read: authentic), and possibly populist, poise of the latter. To this end, a banal idea of academic knowledge is used as a straw man. Notably, the lyrics name-check several male theorists, but do not mention any women. The absence of female theorists may be seen as adding to the populist notion of theory that is pitted against real life in a binary opposition, and arguably creates an impression of strategic naivety as a facet of the musicians' personae (Ålvik 2017).

However, in the light of songs such as 'Vær så god', Skrap also open the song to interpretation in the light of a gender binary that positions man as the universal subject (Butler 1993), who bases his understanding of the world on theories invented by 'ancient Greeks with beards'. While such an understanding, as part of the band's identity politics, would certainly be contingent on strategic (fake) naivety, we may also favourably read Skrap here as negotiating a feminist position that is not subordinate to theoretical (read: masculine) hegemony.

In their songs, Skrap create characters that signify in contexts where they are encouraged to live up to expectations. In 'Marianna', the protagonist/narrator is supportive of the title character, but also advises them to see themselves through the eyes of her peers, implying a gaze that conditions and controls. The protagonists of 'Allerede da' offer an alternative to rigid and irrelevant 'theory', but run the risk of placing themselves in an anti-intellectual position that locks in both themselves and the Others they appropriate. The song nevertheless lends itself to interpretation as an attempt to negotiate identities that are not bound by expectations of knowledge and submission to norms, a suggestion which is underlined by the songs' avoidance of unambiguous song structures and regular repetitive metre in the lyrics.

The dexterity with which the musicians perform lyrics within the loose structure of the songs is likely a result of improvisational skills, considering the musicians' broad background and professional musicianship. As such, Skrap's employment of resistance vernaculars encompasses a range of details in their work, including genre and form, thus enabling a feminist stance and a use of language that goes with this.

We may perceive of this stance as an attempt to formulate women's experience in music, albeit not in any formulaic or otherwise limiting way. Rather, we may well interpret Skrap's project in the light of Renée Cox Lorraine's theory of feminist aesthetics in music. Engaging critically with concepts of 'women's music', Lorraine suggests that, rather than 'attempt to separate ourselves completely from male concepts of the feminine', feminists – and, by extension, feminist research – 'could expose these concepts or images and reformulate them in a positive light' (2001, 15). To this end, Lorraine calls attention to the critical possibilities of music research: 'What is critical is not so much what we call women's experience or the feminine in music, but rather what are a work's or an era's perspectives on women or the feminine, on how what is regarded as feminine is approached and handled in a particular social and historical context' (2001, 16). As trained and skilled musicians in a Nordic context where one effect of Metoo is the expansion of music spaces to accommodate women's stories,

Skrap use their music to voice experiences that may well be of relevance in broader contexts.

Concluding thoughts

In this article I have argued that gendered identities are enabled, contested, and performed in Nordic popular music, notably through the use of language and by troubling gender stereotypes. Following both Potter and Mitchell in their work on resistance vernaculars, I contend that language is especially central to these processes. Seeing as language carries with it sets of assumptions on a par with music, it is worth asking not only how language shapes ideas of gender and sexuality, but also what role music plays, and what the significance of musical codes may be.

In the cases of Kuuk and Skrap, I have expanded the idea of resistance vernaculars to include not only language as a fundament for song lyrics, but also vocal performance and musical style. This way, the notion of resistance is broadened to encompass musicalized subjectivity and agency, and, by implication, identity politics.

Concerns with authenticity inevitably become part of the discussion. In Mitchell's model, where English may be perceived as the global norm, other languages are always in danger of becoming Othered, essentialized, in ways that differentiate works with regard to identity. However, through their consistent engagement with questions of gendered identity, Kuuk and Skrap avoid this contingency on their Otherness in an Anglophone global context, not least because they can both be seen to make a conscious effort to dissolve any binarisms that lock self and Other in their respective positions. Negotiating individual and group identities through a myriad of audiovisual factors, both bands provide the kind of resistance that may open non-normative projects to critical scrutiny as more than just peripheral phenomena in a global context of popular music.

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