

Vi var ingenting
In-betweenness, multilingualism, and cross-border identities
in Mikael Niemi's Tornedalian literature

Giovanni Za
University of Naples L'Orientale (<g.za@unior.it>)

Abstract

The Torne valley area, a geographically open space and melting pot of contamination and linguistic overlap between Swedish, Finnish and Meänkieli, is the focus of the work of Mikael Niemi (b. 1959), a contemporary Swedish author rooted in the area's peculiar multicultural condition. Using a geocritical research methodology, this article aims at tracing a hypothesis of deconstruction of the dominant Swedish discourse, thus reversing the established *anthropotopos*, a novel concept that is intended as spatialization of Anthropocene. As a result of the deconstruction, a new interpretation of *olotopos*, or Place for Everything, can instead be proposed. From these premises, representations of the intergenerational and linguistic conflicts in Niemi's oeuvre serve to bring out a deliberately decentralized picture, in which the rejection of a prevailing identity allows for the provocative opening to another, possible space in which multilingualism is a means of founding a Nordic *borderland* (Anzaldúa).

Keywords

anthropotopos/olotopos; borderlands; geocriticism; Mikael Niemi; spatial literary studies

Och jag kände en sådan lycka. En sådan innerlig, sårbar
lycka. Tornedalen. Det skulle alltid finnas.¹
(Niemi 2004, 9)

¹ «And I felt such happiness. Such heartfelt, vulnerable happiness. Tornedalen. It would always be there». Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.



1. Mikael Niemi and the Torne Valley

The Torne Valley, Tornedalen in Swedish, located in the northernmost reaches of the European continent and overlooking the Bothnian Bay, is a geographical region that straddles the national borders of two countries, Sweden and Finland, and is home to four distinct languages: Swedish, Finnish, Torne Sami and the local idiom, Meänkieli, which means «our language».

To this cultural area and multilingual context is devoted the oeuvre of Mikael Niemi, a Swedish writer born in Tärnaby in 1959, in the region of Västerbotten, in 1959, and raised in Pajala, Tornedalen.

Pajala has also been the spatial literary focus of Niemi's activity. The writer's debut was marked by the publication of the poetry collection *Näsblod under högmassan* (1988, Nosebleed during high mass). Subsequently, the author expanded the literary space by focusing on Tornedalen as a complex and multifaceted social, linguistic and cultural phenomenon (Linné, Leif-Lundgren 2006). Niemi has explored the region in both non-fictional works, including *Mitt i skallen!* (1988, In your face!), and *Med rötter häruppe* (1989, With roots up here), and again in poetry, with the collection *Änglar med mausergevär* (1989, Angels with Mauser rifles). However, he is best known for his novels, including the young adult fiction books *Kyrkdjävulen* (1994, The devil of the church), *Blodsugarna* (1997, The vampires), and the critically acclaimed *Populärmusik från Vittula* (2000; *Popular Music from Vittula*, translated by Laurie Thompson, 2003), *Fallvatten* (2012, Fallwater), *Mannen som dog som en lax* (2006, The Man who Died like a Salmon) and *Koka björn* (2017; *To Cook a Bear*, translated by Deborah Bragan-Turner, 2021). Tornedalen serves as a wellspring of inspiration for the short science fiction novels collection *Svålhålet* (2004; *Astrotruckers*, translated by Laurie Thompson, 2007). The stories are set in an undefined future and showcase a peculiar overlap between Tornedalians features as spatial periphery and marginal collocation of Earth and Earthlings in the context of deep space.

The literary works of Niemi are notable for their rejection of any stable definition of Tornedalen. Indeed, the author explores the region's trans-cultural and multilingual cultural domain, traversing the terrain of Finnish, Swedish, Tornedalians and Sami legacies; the peripheral location of this

region is thus set against the backdrop of major cities' «centralizing and accumulative powers» and individuates a paradigm of resistance to literary and socio-economical capitals (Ameel *et al.* 2015, 2; Bhattacharya *et al.* 2023, 4). Moving away from the literary description of older generations, such as Gunnar Kieri and Bengt Pohjanen, Niemi overturns the condition of instability and peripherality into the opening of a new personal development.

The main goal of this article is to examine the concept of in-betweenness and cross-border identities as they manifest in Mikael Niemi's literary works. In order to achieve this objective, a theoretical framework based on the analysis of literary space will be used. Furthermore, multilingualism will be employed as a conceptual standpoint to enhance Tornedalen's composite identity. As opposed to a civilization that is *either* Swedish *or* Finnish (Elenius 2001), Tornedalen is to be viewed as a cultural phenomenon that encompasses both languages and cultural traditions in a broader context, in a productive combination that gives rise to a distinctive new perspective. From this viewpoint, the Torne Valley is no longer perceived as a linguistic and cultural minority but rather challenges the notion of peripherality by resisting a unitary interpretation. It emerges as a Nordic *borderland*, «a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition» (Anzaldúa 1987, 3). Within this *borderland* two divergent interpretations of space eventually meet: *anthropotopos*, the place for human actions and Anthropoc establishment, and *olotopos*, the network that encompasses all forms of anthropic and natural existence in a tighter sense of interdependence.

Mikael Niemi's literature will be intended then as an uninterrupted journey from *anthropotopos* to *olotopos*.

2. Beyond the limit: a contextual analysis of Tornedalen's peripherality

In the initial sequences of the Swedish national television program *Hemvänderarna* (2024, *The Homecomers*), former inhabitants of the Torne Valley region are observed as they embark on a nostalgic expedition from their dwellings in Southern Sweden to their ancestral homeland in the northern territories. The travel functions in two distinct yet interconnected

ways: firstly, as a sentimental journey to one's personal past; and secondly, as a recollection of the cultural and multilingual complexities of the region.

The opening scenes of *Hemvänderarna* showcase a series of evocative images, including a forested landscape and a fluvial environment. Nevertheless, upon the eventual return of the inhabitants to Tornedalen, there is an absence of any indications of urbanization or of a consistent civilized society. Notwithstanding the fact that the subject of the documentary is affective *vóσtoc*, intended as a homecoming set in the contemporary era, there is an absence of any authentic societal depiction within the visual content. There is no representation of a smaller city or urban square, nor any indication of a vibrant human community.

Whilst representations of this area concentrate on the interpretation of Torne Valley as a de-humanized natural reserve, the southern regions of Sweden are instead portrayed as a region of significant anthropization, characterized by the presence of railway infrastructure that functions as outposts of urbanization. The looming de-humanization of Tornedalen is further suggested by the voice of the narrator, who recounts that in the 1970s national governments implemented migratory policies. A further contributory factor to depopulation that occurred in the 1980s was the resultant unemployment that was caused by the decline of the mining industry (Liljenstolpe 2024, 12), which also led to a constant transfer of workers southwards:

Det var dålig bärighet på gården, familjen kunde inte producera vad som krävdes. Så skogsarbetarna började försvinna mer och mer. Det var ett sätt när mekaniseringen kom i gång och det gamla arbetssättet försvann. Och så reglerade dom det på det sättet så att de flyttade ner hela familjen. På så vis var det en avfolkning utav Tornedalen på 1960–1970-talet. Det var en trend att folk flyttade från Tornedalen, "det finns ingen framtid här" var det som sades. (SOU 2023: 68, 417-418)¹

¹ «The farm was in a bad state, the family could not produce what was needed. So, the forestry workers began to disappear more and more. That was one way when mechanization started and the old way of working disappeared. And so, they regulated it in such a way that they moved the whole family down. In this way, there was a depopulation of Tornedalen in the 1960s and 1970s. There was a trend for people to move away from Tornedalen, "there is no future here" was what was said».

Policies of relocation were implemented and managed by the Arbetsmarknadsstyrelsen (Swedish Labour Market's Board), AMS, popularly renamed as «Alla Måste Söderut», «Everyone must move to the South». The strategic relocation functioned in a manner that served to establish a narrative of marginalization of the Torne Valley, thereby reinforcing an opposing hegemonic narrative (Ridanpää 2014, 66). At the time, collaboration with Finland was minimal or non-existent, thus exacerbating the prevailing sense of isolation (Paasi, Prokkola 2008, 21).

To a varying degree, contemporary representations of Torne Valley, as exemplified by the SVT's documentary, allude to a regime of separation. The emphasis on a pristine environment and natural settings suggests a territory that is alternative to the anthropocentric concentrations of the highly efficient society of the South. The woods depicted in the documentary are intended to convey an image of a region that is regarded as an untouched territory, representing the natural state of the environment. This interpretation associates Nature with the sacred². Indeed, in Latin the word *sacer* indicates what is devoted to the divinity but also alludes to «something that must be protected from abuse for the common good, not because it possesses some mysterious power, but because it is an expression of the exceptionality of nature itself»³. *Sacred* is then what lies unspoiled and separated: for these reasons, the natural environment, as distinguished from human activity and *anthropotopos*, further differentiates Tornedalen from the epicenter of social dynamics.

This degree of separation, predicated on the economic, linguistic, environmental and cultural peculiarities of the Torne Valley, propels the territory beyond the limit intended by Aristotle (2004, 255): «πέρας λέγεται

² This connection is explored in more detail by David Thurfjell (2020, §. 1): «När du är ensam i naturen kan det nästan kännas som att du kommer i kontakt med något, inte Gud eller något sådant direkt, men ändå något utöver det vanliga, något djupare och större, något som har med tillvarons mening och gränser att göra» (When you are alone in nature, it can almost feel like you are coming into contact with something, not God or anything like that directly, but still something beyond the ordinary, something deeper and greater, something that has to do with the meaning and limits of existence).

³ Orig.: «Qualche cosa che deve essere sottratto all'abuso per il bene comune, non perché dotato di una misteriosa potenza, ma in quanto espressione di una eccezionalità che appartiene alla natura» (Chirassi Colombo 2013, 18).

τό τε ἔσχατον ἐκάστου καὶ οὐ ἔξω μηδὲν ἔστι λαβεῖν πρώτου καὶ οὐ ἔσω πάντα πρώτου...»⁴.

If Tornedalen is widely regarded as the land beyond the limit, as a significant albeit separated haven imbued with the spirit of spiritual and religious elevation, it can also be interpreted as representing complexity and multipolarity in opposition to linearity and singularity. To this extent operates Mikael Niemi's literary work, inaugurating a new and composite model for space that intertwines the human and non-human, urban and environment, borders and a *radical openness*. In a suggestive verse from *Näsblod under högmassan*, Niemi provides a fascinating description of the region:

Och detta är Tornedalen – / ett land där plogbilarna dundrar som drakar med röda vingar / längs vägrana och täljer snö över barnen som gömmer sig / i drivorna / en älv som kan många smugglarhistorier, som spränger isen / med sina bryska yxa på värarna, som svalkar bastuheta kroppar från två nationer och bär midnattssol och / tjuvfiskare på sin arbetarrygg. (Niemi 2001, 16)⁵

The Torne Valley is presented, firstly, not as a natural heaven or as a dream scenario of uncontaminated environmental beauty, but as a territory of overcrowded human activity. The region is distinguished by the presence of children, undocumented fishers, and bodily extensions of individuals from related populations. Indeed, Nature plays a dynamic role, with the river that «knows many smuggling stories» and binds together human and anthropocentric features with natural characters. Consequently, the river Torne does not function as a geographical border or line of separation, nor an Aristotelian *πέρας* is visible. Rather, the river serves as a connecting element, a *suture* of human and non-human⁶; in the opening novel of

⁴ «Limit is said to be the extreme term of each thing, i.e. that first term beyond which nothing of the thing can be found and beyond which there is the whole thing».

⁵ «And this is Tornedalen – / a land where snow ploughs thunder like dragons with red wings / along the roads and clear snow over children hiding / in the drifts / a river that knows many smuggling stories, which breaks the ice / with its brusque axe on the banks, which cools the sauna-hot bodies of two nations and carries the midnight sun and / poachers on its working back».

⁶ The river Torne is the actual border that separates Sweden and Finland, and manifests itself in everyday life and in the meanings attached to the local cultural environment, traditions, social habits and emotions (Paasi 1999).

Svålhålet (Niemi 2004, 7) the river shows for example «en rygg av vatten i evighet» and enables «miljoner år av vänskap» (A ridge of water stretching into eternity); «millions of years of friendship).

Mona Mörtlund (2007, 37), another writer from Tornedalen, alludes to the same role of the river Torne in her poetry *Oonhän meilä vielä kieli* (Still lives on the language with us): «Väylää myöten laulu kulkee / aalot vielä sanat kantaa» (Along the river, the song is carried away / the waves still carry the words). The river is charged with human attitudes and operates to unite, connect, bridge the local condition of separation, as the language and words of poetry are bearers of common sense of belonging that encompasses both sides and cultures.

To the same meaning of the river and the Tornedalian territory insists Mikael Niemi in his oeuvre, where contamination, cross-border interaction and socio-cultural interplay appear as distinguished features of the area. The land of smugglers, secret connections and a clandestine language is not only depicted as a remote periphery or «the backwater of modern urbanism» (Mohnike 2014) but rather as a challenging territory in which identities overlap and cultures produce a fecund interplay. In Tornedalen human and non-human entities converge in a state of mutual interdependence and necessary interconnection, thereby engendering a novel interpretation of space, termed *olotopos*, a «Place of Everything» that aligns Nature and civilization in an unwavering connection.

With a view to highlighting and better understanding Niemi's literary endeavors concerning linguistic and cultural contamination, this article will initially direct its attention to the historically prevalent Swedification policy enacted by national governments. It was against this policy that Niemi eventually found inspiration for his work. In the ensuing section, the concept of marginalization as it emerges in Tornedalian and Niemi's literature will be investigated. In the final segment, marginalization will be re-assessed and a novel interpretation of Tornedalen as *borderland*, shifting from *anthropotopos* to *olotopos*, will be proposed.

3. Language and assimilation in Torne Valley

Tornedalen was a fully incorporated part of the Swedish realm that was governed directly by the Swedish Crown until 1809. At that time, both sides of the Torne river shared the same cultural legacy and national belonging, as the area was under the governance of Stockholm. In the aftermath of the Finnish War, in 1808-1809, when Sweden capitulated to Russia, Finland was handed to the Tsar and the Torne river became the border between the two countries. This resulted in the separation of one traditionally and linguistically homogeneous entity and led to «cultural and political polarization between Scandinavian and Finno-Hungarian groups» (Elenius 2007, 56). The two social groups, which had been co-existing in the Swedish kingdom since the fourteenth century, underwent a gradual divergence as the Swedish language was granted a predominant role (Elenius 2001, 14-15).

Following the conclusion of hostilities, a new border between Sweden and Finland was delineated. The Tornedalian Finns were thus politically and linguistically distinguished from other Finns situated beyond the newly demarcated border (Lipott 2015, 4-5). The development of Meänkieli, a distinct language, was precipitated by the 1809 separation and happened in isolation from other fellow Finnish speakers. In Finland, though, the national language, designated as *oikeata suomea* (real Finnish), was assigned a higher status than Meänkieli, which is regarded as less prestigious (Winsa 2007, 79)⁷. Concurrently, from 1842 onwards – the year in which a comprehensive public education reform was instigated – Tornedalians were regarded as a minority within Sweden, and the use of their language was limited (Tenerz 1963, 35).

The process of assimilation was subject to an acceleration in the 20th century, presumably with the objective of establishing a unified cultural foundation and a sense of identification in the event of an incursion by Russia (Gröndahl, Hellberg, Ojanen 2002, 142). The implementation of Swedification was achieved through the introduction of a mandatory edu-

⁷ In this context, Standard Swedish was granted the highest status, while, at the same time, Tornedalians were socially and linguistically considered as foreigners in Sweden and guests in Finland (Winsa 1996).

cation system that incorporated the dominant language. As early as the late 1950s, Swedish had emerged as the primary language of communication among parents with their children (Kenttä, Weinz 1968), a development that prompted numerous Tornedalians to adopt surnames that bore a more Swedish-sounding character (Sandström 1991). The process of homogenization towards a predominant culture was further compounded by the concurrent requirement for a growing workforce in southern Sweden. Concomitantly, a rationalization of agriculture and forestry in the Torne Valley was initiated, which also resulted in a surge in regional unemployment (Alamäki *et al.* 1999).

The intention of the Swedish government was to extend a sense of national belonging. Indeed, the Swedish welfare system, known as *folkhemmet*, «the people's home» intended to establish a common dwelling where equality is regarded as the core value of the nation, as also stated by folkhemmet's political father and social-democrat prime minister of Sweden Per Albin Hansson (1982, 227): «Hemmets grundval är gemensamheten och samkänslan. Det goda hemmet känner icke till några privilegierade eller tillbakasatta, inga kelgrisar och inga styvbarn»⁸. The comprehensive Swedification of Tornedalen was then consistent with this concept, aiming to extend the boundaries of «the people's home» and incorporate those who were perceived to be marginalized. The implementation of compulsory Swedish-language education was not perceived as a deliberate policy of assimilation; rather, it was regarded as a catalyst for the realization of social equality.

The consequence of this policy was the perpetual translation of speakers from the dominated group into the dominant language and resulted in the growth of Swedish at the expense of Meänkieli and Finnish (Hyltenstam, Salö 2022, 11).

A determinant role in this process was obviously played by language teachers, who were the actual operators of this assimilation. In *Mannen som dog som en lax*, the process of assimilation through school education

⁸ «Cornerstones for this home are community and the sense of belonging. The good home doesn't acknowledge that some are privileged, and others are left behind, no favorites or stepsons».

is exemplified by the character Martin Udde⁹. Before his job as a Swedish teacher, he also operated as a toll collector at the border. His work, whether at school or at customs, is to reinforce barriers and establish borders, to build walls within which a hegemonic culture is defined and thus to separate, to create space by distancing different societies.

His death is therefore highly symbolic because his tongue - the instrument with which he performs assimilation - has been removed. The murder takes place at the very moment of Pajala, «Norrbottnens största sommarmarknad, över trettio tusen besökare. Folk kommer hitresande från hela länet, ja från södra Sverige också» (Niemi 2006, 17-18) (Norrbottnen's largest summer market, with over thirty thousand visitors, people come here from all over the county, and even from southern Sweden). At this moment of the year, Pajala ceases to be a remote location outside *πέρας* and instead attracts population from other places, becoming for a short time a country of (temporary) immigration and no longer a territory of (permanent) emigration. The murder of the assimilator is contemporary with the institutionalization of a condition of *radical openness*, during which the border does not function as a barrier, but rather as a membrane or a «profound edge, where new meanings can be produced and unstable identities can flourish» (hooks 1989; 2015, 149). In this condition of openness, Esaias Vahankoski, a suspect in the murder investigation and main character, establishes a connection with Therese Fossnes, which leads to the development of a new romantic relationship.

Esaias is suspected of being the murderer because of his clear opposition to Martin Udde and his role in the process of 'normalization' of Tornedalen, which reduces polyform multilingualism to rigid monolingualism. That transformation and reduction have influenced him directly, since Esaias' parents were already convinced of the necessity of Swedification:

Esaias hade inte förstätt finska. De hade inte lärt honom. Mamma och pappa måste ha beslutat det vid något tillfälle. – *Pojan kansa met puhuma aivan ruottia.* Vi pratar bara svenska med Esaias. Vi bor ju i Sverige och då talar vi svenska så går det lättare för Esaias i skolan. Ungefär så. Det var inte på något sätt ovanligt.

⁹ The novel is a detective story centered on the murder of teacher Martin Udde, for which is accused Esaias Vahankoski. Main enquirer is the detective from State Criminal Police Therese Fossnes.

Under den här tiden måste det hänt i hundratals, kanske tusentals tornedalska familjer, både hemma i byn och hos de utflyttade. Man ville bli en vanlig, svensk familj. Och man tillhörde den första generationen i övre Tornedalen som hunnit lära sig en hygglig svenska. [...] På bara en generation skedde språkbytet. [...] Ett land, ett folk och ett språk. (Niemi 2006, 180-181, emphasis in the text)¹⁰

Consequence of this normalization is the establishment of a social hierarchy, where every infraction of the Swedish canon is deemed as a sign of social subalternity. This also emerges in Mikael Niemi's non-fiction works. In his account of a school year in Luleå, the formation of a hierarchical system between older (and more Swedish-educated) students and newcomers emerges as a natural consequence:

Ärade och kära NOLLA! Du ska vara hjärtligt välkommen till Midskogsskolan som en lydlig och snäll lite sketen NOLLA! [...] För att ta det från början: ni är från och med nu nollor, dos ingenting. Ni är intellektuellt underlägsna varenda en av era kamrater som går i någon av de högre årskurserna (Emphasis in the text; Niemi 1988, 11).¹¹

Education works differently in Niemi's most acclaimed novel, *Populärmusik från Vittula*¹². Here the main characters encounter at their school Greger, a teacher with a different attitude:

Greger hade en annan märkvärdig förmåga. Han kunde tornedalfinska. Som skåning hade alla tagit för givet att han var *ummikko*, alltså okunnig i ärans och

¹⁰ «Esaias had not understood Finnish. They had not taught him. Mum and Dad must have decided that at some point. – Pojan kanssa med puhuma aivan ruottia. We only speak Swedish with Esaias. We live in Sweden and we speak Swedish so it's easier for Esaias at school. Something like that. It was in no way unusual. During this time, it must have happened in hundreds, perhaps thousands of Tornedalian families, both at home in the village and among the expats. They wanted to become an ordinary Swedish family. And they belonged to the first generation in upper Tornedalen who had managed to learn a decent Swedish. [...] The language change took place in just one generation. [...] One country, one people and one language».

¹¹ «Honoured and dear ZERO! You are warmly welcome to Midskogsskola as an obedient and kind little shitty ZERO! [...] To start from the beginning: from now on, you are nobody, i.e. nothing. You are intellectually inferior to every single one of your peers in any of the higher grade».

¹² The novel is a *bildungsroman* set in the Torne Valley. The formation of the two main character Maatti and Niila encompasses love for international and rock music.

hjältarnas modersmål, men nu kom bekräftelser från flera oberoende källor» (Niemi 2000, 148).¹³

Indeed, the «neutral observers» are incorrect in their assumptions. Another customer officer, who has already served in Helsingborg, in Scania, and is now employed in Torne Valley, corrects the interpretation: Greger does not use Tornedalen's Finnish, but speaks «a Skandian dialect strikingly muddy in character» (Niemi 2003, 124). This is not a reason for mutual incomprehension, as the custom officer understands: despite the fact that Greger and other residents of Torne Valley speak a different dialect or language, they are able to establish a mutual understanding. Here the custom officer does not build or monitor the border, as did Martin Udde in *Mannen som dog som en lax*, but instead is the key figure in overcoming the language barrier.

The encounter between different languages can be regarded as a productive meeting of different perspectives. Indeed, in Niemi's work, multilingualism is depicted as the natural condition of the Tornedalians, with monolingualism being portrayed as the consequence of a colonialist approach perpetrated by the Swedish government (Rantonen, Savolainen 2002). The approach was intended to mitigate disparities; however, it resulted in the establishment of a discernible hierarchical structure among neighboring languages, thereby marginalizing the population of speakers. An example of this phenomenon can be seen in the context of linguistic education in schools. Meänkieli was offered as an additional subject only in the city of Haparanda, located in close proximity to the Finnish border, and was prohibited from being taught in the other schools in the area (Wande 1989, 37-40)¹⁴. In addition to that, in the 1970s Finnish was reintroduced

¹³ «Greger had another remarkable talent. He could speak Tornedalen Finnish. As he was from Skåne, everybody had taken it for granted that he was an *ummikko*, in other words, ignorant of the mother tongue of glory and heroism; but confirmation of the fact came from several neutral observers» (Niemi 2003, 148).

¹⁴ Haparanda is a twin city with Finnish Tornio. Since 2005, the two cities have shared a common identification as Haparanda-Tornio, and they constitute one of the Euroregions, transnational socio-political structures that operate in neighboring territories.

as *hemspråkundervisning* (native language teaching), as if it were a foreign language¹⁵.

Against the backdrop of this process of conversion from multilingual to monolingual area finds its core Mikael Niemi's literature. In his oeuvre, the consequences of the colonialist approach to Torne Valley are demonstrated not only in linguistic matters, but also in the consideration of space.

4. From linguistic minority to spatial marginalization

The marginalization of the language has had the greatest impact also in the literary representation of space of Torne Valley. In 1974 Gunnar Kieri published the first in a series of novels that followed the main character, Lars, from his early school years to his struggles as an adult. In the second book of the series, *Av dig blir det ingenting* (1976, Nothing will become of you) the protagonist is subjected to harassment and ostracism by his peers because he speaks the Finnish language. Upon reaching adulthood, he ultimately relocates to Southern Sweden, where he experiences a sense of estrangement. The return to Tornedalen is accompanied by a sense of discord from the territory that he had previously inhabited, as he exhibits emotional detachment from his birthplace and a comparable deficiency in sensitive connection to other locations.

This condition of nothingness is also exemplified in Bengt Pohjanen's *Och fiskarna svarar Guds frid* (1979, And the fishes answer the peace of God). Depending on the perspective from which he is observed, the main character, a teacher named either Polemalm or Polonen, is situated between two conflicting identities. This results in an identity crisis that ultimately leads to the loss of any clear sense of self. As the narrative progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that the crisis is irremediable:

¹⁵ The inception of *hemspråkundervisning* can be traced back to 1968, with the program initially devised to provide steadfast instruction in the pupils' native language. The underlying principles of the program were twofold: firstly, to furnish support for those who had recently migrated and were not able to master Swedish, and secondly, to serve as a bulwark against the erosion of cultural and linguistic diversity. The idea of Meänkieli as foreign language stresses the idea that Tornedalians are a minority in the country of Sweden and their language an exception to the canon.

Han tänker att hans problem är att han kommer från en miljö präglad av den stränga læstadianismen å ena sidan och stalinismen å andra, Finland å ena och Sverige å andra, finskan å ena och svenskan å andra och hans själv mitt emellan, en gränsbo, en gränsvarelse som är på väg varken till himlen eller till helvetet. (Pohjanen 1979, 165)¹⁶

The conflict engenders a state of inertia in which any action appears to be counterproductive. The teacher Polemalm/Polonen remains stationary, akin to the rootless Lars depicted in *Av dig blir det ingenting*. As a direct citation of Kieri functions a passage in *Populärmusik från Vittula*; here Matti manifests his and the Tornedalians' space as a condition of inbetweenness and rootlessness:

Det var en uppväxt av brist. Inte en materiell sådan, där hade vi så vi klarade oss, utan en identitetsmässig. Vi var inga. Våra föräldrar var inga. Våra förfäder hade betytt noll och intet för den svenska historien. [...] Vi bröt på finska utan att vara finnar, vi bröt på svenska utan att vara svenskar. Vi var ingenting. (Niemi 2000: 49-50)¹⁷

3.1 Theoretical developments of the condition of marginalization

This sense of nothingness is indeed also connected with an interpretation of space in Tornedalen. When considered in isolation from the influences of urbanization and civilization, space results in a static realm of nature, devoid of human presence and therefore considered less significant. This interpretation is consistent with the prevailing theoretical framework of spatial literary studies. According to Eric Prieto (2012, 13), indeed, a place «designates any geographical site (of any size, scale, or type) that is

¹⁶ «He thinks that his problem is that he comes from an environment characterized by strict Laestadianism on the one hand and Stalinism on the other, Finland on the one hand and Sweden on the other, Finnish on the one hand and Swedish on the other, and himself in the middle, a border dweller, a border creature who is on his way neither to heaven nor to hell».

¹⁷ «Ours was a childhood of deprivation. Not material deprivation — we had enough to get by on — but a lack of identity. We were nobody. Our parents were nobody. Our forefathers had made no mark whatsoever on Swedish history. [...] We spoke with a Finnish accent without being Finnish, and we spoke with a Swedish accent without being Swedish. We were nothing» (Niemi 2003, 37).

meaningful to someone, for whatever reason. [...] A site does not become a place until a person comes along and enters into a meaning-generating relationship with it». In this environment, space is defined solely by human interaction, whereby objects and nature assume an exclusively passive role, activated by human mediation. In the absence of humanity, the world remains uncontaminated and static.

A place subtracted to the rational functionalization becomes an unoccupied receptacle to which humankind, the agent of 'historical space', can nevertheless turn and assign a meaning through an inaugural act of anthropic origin¹⁸. In this domain, the imprint of human energy becomes manifest, and the individual's organizational, productive, and connective capacities are observed to be in action.

Adopting this line of argument, Tornedalen, a territory with a low population density where the capacity for meaningful relationships between humanity and nature is limited, is propelled beyond the confines of the 'historical space' and becomes an unoccupied and void receptacle. The conclusion to which Matti, the protagonist in *Populärmusik*, arrives is the exclusion of Tornedalen from the sphere of 'historical space':

Det fanns bara en utväg. En endaste möjlighet om man ville bli någonting, om så det allra minsta. Nämligen att flytta. Vi lärde oss att se fram emot det, övertygade om att det var vår chans i livet, och vi lydde. I Västerås skulle man äntligen bli människa. I Lund, i Södertälje. I Arvika. I Borås. Det var en jättelik evakuering. En flyktingvåg som tömde vår bygd, och konstigt nog kändes helt frivillig. (Niemi 2000, 50)¹⁹

¹⁸ The concept of 'historical space' was coined by Henri Lefebvre and is intended as place of civilization and human agency. It is opposed to 'absolute space', which, according to the definition, «consiste en fragments de la nature, en lieux élus pour leurs qualités intrinsèques (caverne ou sommet, source ou rivière) mais dont la consécration aboutit à les vider de ces caractères et particularités naturelles» (1974, 59).

¹⁹ «There was only one way out. Only one possibility if you wanted to be something, no matter how insignificant. You had to live somewhere else. We learned to look forward to moving, convinced it was our only chance in life, and so we moved. In Västerås you could be a person at last. In Lund. In Södertälje. In Arvika. In Borås. There was an enormous evacuation. A flood of refugees that emptied our village, but strangely enough it felt voluntary» (Niemi 2003, 49).

Tornedalen functions in two distinct capacities. Firstly, it serves as a material resource base for the workforce, which is relocated to the southern region. Secondly, it acts as a source of natural elements, which are exploited for national interests based in the south. In *Fallvatten*, this condition is metaphorically presented as economic colonization²⁰: the national energy company Vattenfall builds a dam in the area of Suorva, on the northern border of Tornedalen. As Nilsson Skåve has noted, this implies a hierarchization: «a hegemonic central power naturally lays claim to natural resources and labor in what were considered more peripheral parts of the country»²¹. The dam functions as a garrison of power that subordinates the territory to overarching strategies of exploitation.

Moving from these considerations on the marginality of Tornedalen, Niemi is instead interested in promoting another perspective. According to Lefebvre's theorization, 'historical space' and 'absolute space' are opposed concepts, with everything that is not anthropized being devoid of meaning within this context. The etymology of the term «forest» offers some insight into this distinction. Derived from noun *flos*, *floris*, which translates to 'flower' (and subsequently 'foresta' in Castilian), the medieval Latin form *foresta* shares a common root with the adverb *foris*, signifying the state of being «outside». Therefore, 'absolute space' can be defined as that which is 'outside'. But so is Tornedalen, whose most recurrent setting is indeed the woods, a land 'outside'.

In this context, then, Niemi theorizes a new interaction between human and nature, as it appears in his novel *Koka björn*²²:

Människan kan leva så, utan att skövla och söndra. Utan att egentligen finnas till. Bara vara som skogen, som sommarens lövmassor och höstens förna, som

²⁰ The novel's narrative is centered upon the disastrous failure of a dam and the subsequent flood in Northern Sweden, and can also be read from an ecocritical perspective (Za 2023).

²¹ Orig.: «en hegemonisk centralmakt med självklarhet gör anspråk på naturtillgångar och arbetskraft i vad man betraktat som mer perifera delar av landet» (Skåve 2019, 52).

²² The novel develops as a detective story, whose main characters are Jussi, a wandering Sami boy and his mentor, pastor Lars Levi Læstadius, founder of laestadianism.

midvintersnö och de oräkneliga knoppar som kläcks av vårsolen. När man till sist en gång försvinner är det som om man aldrig varit här. (Niemi 2017, 13)²³

The concept of disconnection from societal frameworks and the subsequent establishment of a more straightforward connection with the natural world is articulated by Deleuze and Guattari (1980, 179-180) through the theoretical framework of *assemblage* (*agencement*). Within an *assemblage* subjects and objects enter into a relationship of association that takes on substance and is structured into enduring forms. The concept of territorial connections posits that bodies and signs are united to form territories, or systems of customs and habits. In this paradigm, the convergence of humanity and Nature transcends the conventional boundaries of 'absolute space' and 'historical space', thereby challenging the prevailing conceptions of these entities as discrete: «it is about freeing from representation of hierarchies and rigid categorizations and realizing that there are neither clear borders nor center» (Morton 2007, 5). Interconnectedness is a consequence of this *suture* between 'absolute' to 'historical space' and the emerging of *olotopos* as Place of Everything: «all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations. And in a knotted world of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself» (Bennett 2010, 13).

5. From marginalization to difference

In consideration of the aforementioned elements, a multifaceted interpretation of the author's literary endeavors can be proposed. To a vast *olotopos* indeed points the writer in the literary space of his novels and poems. In the concluding poetry of the collection *Näsblod under högmässan* an actual *assemblage* man-nature is indeed proposed:

²³ «It is possible for humans to live this way, without damaging, without disturbing, without really existing: being like the forest, like a host of summer leaves and autumn detritus, like midwinter snow and myriad buds opened by the sun in spring. When it is finally time to leave, it is as though you have never been here» (Niemi 2021, 9).

Här stannar jag / kliver ur min hylsa, lämnar nycklarna på sätet / sakta går jag in i skogen / det är sommarvarmt och jag ser gud / stå och beta i gläntan / granarna, mina viskande fastrar / har synliga gröna kjolar / trollsländor stora som slidknivar / fångar mygg kring mitt huvud / snart når jag tjärnen / som en bottenlös natthimmel / jag drar av mig kläderna / sänker mig till hakan i den svarta svalkan / naken, drömlig / svävar jag ut över djupet. (Niemi 2001, 54)²⁴

The poet departs from the established boundaries of civilization and the Anthropocene, embodied by the vehicle that has facilitated his journey to the woodland environment, and engages in *olotopos* as he sinks in an *assemblage* with nature. Read in this light, nature is no longer a site deprived of any meaning-generating relationship with humanity but is instead the Place of Everything where every element, human and non-human are finally interconnected. Urban and non-urban are *kin* in the sense provided by Bennett, as it also emerges in the opening pages of Niemi's young adult fiction *Blodsugarna*: «Mukkakangas passerade med sina utströdda gårdar i tallgläntorna. Sedan Autio, Erheikki, Juhonpieti, Peräjävaara. Små tornedalsbyar insprängda i de ändlösa skogarna» (Niemi, 1997, 10; Mukkakangas passed with its scattered farms in the pine glades. Then Autio, Erheikki, Juhonpieti, Peräjävaara. Small Tornedal villages nestled in the endless forests). Forests, human dwellings and non-human agency are all imbricated in the endless continuity of an *assemblage*. Consequently, nature is no longer perceived as a static backdrop; rather, it is regarded as an organic and agentive entity with which humanity is inextricably intertwined.

Nature as driving and concrete force is a key element in Niemi's young adult fiction novel *Kyrkdjävulen*. In this particular instance, the protagonist Matti encounters a statue of a devil within the confines of the Pajala church. This finding evokes the presence of supernatural forces believed to inhabit the riverbed. These, in turn, summon winged beings – termed *devils* – as a consequence of the presence of evil. Nature, indeed, is not only a spiritual

²⁴ «Here I stop / get out of my capsule, leave the keys on the seat / slowly I enter the forest / it's summer warm and I see God / standing and grazing in the clearing / the borders, my whispering aunts / have visible green skirts / dragonflies big as sheath knives / catch mosquitoes around my head / soon I reach the pond / like a bottomless night sky / I pull off my clothes / sink to my chin in the black coolness / naked, dreamlike / I float out over the depths».

otherness, but it encapsulates the good and the evil, is indeed an *olotopos* intended as Place of Everything.

When Matti is attacked by those devils, his reaction is again that of an *assemblage* between humanity and nature:

Jag tittade in i det lilla dåsiga ansiktet. Den gåspade stort och blinkade flera gånger. I en snabb rörelse stack jag in skallen i min mun och bet av den vid halsen. Sedan knäckte jag det tinna kraniet som en nöt mellan mina kindtänder och tuggade allt till en fin massa. Till sist svalde jag. (Niemi 1994, 85)²⁵

In *Populärmusik*, the characters' movements are defined by a perpetual flux, as they transition in and out of Pajala, traversing the forest and subsequently re-emerging within the confines of the urban agglomeration. This perpetual movement is further compounded by the absence of clearly delineated borders: all of the protagonists are enveloped in an *olotopos* which interconnects them all. Again, in *Kyrkdjävulen*, Matti and fellow protagonists Malin and Simon are coming back home after the visit to the church. Simon sustains superficial injuries following an accident with his bike. The bleeding is then halted by a mysterious healer, whom they meet there and who recites a formula in Finnish. As he takes his leave, he poses a question to Matti, enquiring about the identity of his father. «Vahnakosken Nilsis», answers then the boy (ivi, 12)²⁶. Multilingualism, which was considered as a sign of cultural rootlessness, is instead the key to a broader and more productive understanding of *olotopos*, as Matti learns in *Kyrkdjävulen*: «Naturen häruppe förstår inte svenska. Om du pratar med älven måste du säga väylä, annars lyssnar den inte» (ivi, 101; Nature up here doesn't understand Swedish. If you talk to the river, you have to say *väylä*, otherwise it won't listen). Consequently, monolingualism appears to

²⁵ «I looked into the little drowsy face. It was panting heavily and blinking several times. In one swift movement, I stuck the skull into my mouth and bit it off at the neck. Then I cracked the tiny skull like a nut between my molars and chewed everything to a fine pulp. Finally, I swallowed».

²⁶ «Son of Nils Vahnakoski». The answer is linguistically interesting: «Vahnakosken» is the genitive form of the father's surname in Finnish, while «Nilsis» is the possessive form of the father's first name. The expression therefore refers to a dual identity, Swedish and Finnish, and implies a hybridization.

be a choice of voluntary deprivation: «Vi är tornedalingar, det är skillnad. Visst är det bra att kunna svenska, men de språk som fanns här först var finska och samiska» (*ibidem*). (We are Tornedalians, there is a difference. Of course it's good to know Swedish, but the languages that were here first were Finnish and Sami»).

Multilingualism is instead richness and implies a *radical openness*, as it appears also in *Populärmusik*. Niila, who is the friend of the main character and narrator Matti, can be considered an archetypal figure of the Tornedalian people. His father, Isak, is a Laestadian, and Niila himself appears to exhibit a resigned and hopeless demeanor. Notwithstanding his capacity for verbal expression, he never speaks. His silence may be regarded as a metaphor for the silenced population of Tornedalen.

He then starts to speak on a very special occasion. A priest from Congo, who has arrived in Pajala, makes an appearance at the church together with the local pastor. The Congolese minister attempts to communicate with the attendees through the use of Swahili, Bantu, Creole, and Flemish, but is unsuccessful. In the face of the failure of all previous attempts, the priest persists, attempting one final linguistic approach. Niila responds, uttering an apparently incoherent language he had previously used with Matti, which is subsequently identified as Esperanto. Niila, like other Tornedalians, is not isolated from the global community; rather, he speaks a language that is understood across the globe. He does not sit in the peripherality of *anthropotopos*, the Place of Anthropocene, but erodes its centrality by creating a novel interpretation of space and identity, *olotopos*, where «everything comes together, [...], subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious» (Soja 1999, 56-57). Niila's Esperanto overturns marginalization, inaugurating «a new politics of difference, distinctive features of which are to trash the monolithic and homogeneous in the name of diversity, multiplicity and heterogeneity» (Soja 2009, 48).

This difference is further accentuated in the context of the two historically coherent social groups in Tornedalen. In *Populärmusik*, Matti and Niila find themselves positioned between two distinct cultural groups. On the one hand, there is a clear disassociation from the preceding generation, which

is typified by a conventional and patriarchal cultural milieu. Conversely, they are also distant from the laestadians, representing a more conservative and traditionalist branch of Christianity.

Indeed, most of male adults in *Populärmusik* adhere to the notion of *knapsu*:

I början diskuterade jag ofta med Niila om vårt rockspelande kunde anses som knapsu. Ordet är tornedalsfinskt och betyder kärringaktigt, alltså något som bara kvinnor håller på med. Man kan säga att mansrollen i Tornedalen går ut på en enda sak. Att inte vara knapsu (Niemi 2000, 203)²⁷

Knapsu is connected to a traditional and conservative perspective over life in Tornedalen. In the novel, it represents a comic force that is other than the norms of behavior, functioning as an excess (Mohnike 2014; Ridanpää 2014). According to Satu Gröndahl (2002), this functions as «ethnic reason» for the novel's success, together with the irony employed to deconstruct its rhetorical discourse.

On the other hand, Laestadianism is employed in the novel as a source of containment and sorrow, especially in the person of Isak, father of Niila.

Isak, indeed, has interpreted the teaching of pastor Læstadius as a permission to control and manipulate his family:

Han höll på ritualerna och uppfostrade sina barn enligt föreskrifterna. Men i Herrens ställe placerade han sig själv. Och det var den värsta formen av laestadianism, den kyligast, den mest skoningslösa. Laestadianismen utan Gud. (Niemi 2000, 29)²⁸

Isak's objective is to construct additional boundaries that have the effect of excluding his offspring from life in the broader *olotopos*: «Niilas farsa Isak försökte hejda sönerns pubertet genom att slå dem. Just större de blev,

²⁷ «In the early days Niila and I often discussed whether our rock music could be regarded as knapsu. The word is Tornedalen Finnish and means something like "unmanly," something that only women do. You could say that in Tornedalen the male role boils down to just one thing: not being knapsu» (Niemi 2003, 171).

²⁸ «He maintained the rituals, and brought up his children in accordance with the Scriptures. But he replaced the Good Lord with himself. And that was the worst form of Laestadianism, the nastiest, the most ruthless. Laestadianism without God» (Niemi 2003, 20).

desto mera stryk» (Niemi 2000, 179)²⁹. It is evident that Isak has transformed Laestadianism into a destructive pattern of control and submission that is potentially annihilating his children: «Djupt inom sig ville Isak döda sina söner» (Niemi 2000, ; in the translation of Laurie Thompson: Deep down, Isak wanted to kill his sons, cf. Niemi 2003, 151).

Matti and Niila, however, move away from these marginal positions and attempt to establish a place within the broader context of *olotopos*. Upon the advent of rock music in Pajala, Matti and Niila perceive themselves as integral to a global community that has finally transcended the isolation of Tornedalen. Furthermore, they do not merely consume this music of modernity; they also perform rock and roll at the school party. Their agency is thus productive, binds Tornedalen to the rest of the world, re-interprets contemporaneity and finally demonstrates the hidden interconnectedness of Pajala and all things. While knapsu-culture and Isak's corrupted Laestadianism only *destroy*, Matti and Niila create new music, explore new spaces, subvert peripherality and are consistently engaged in minor yet significant everyday epics. As Thomas Mohnike has already observed, Matti and Niila eschew any stable identity. While adults are characterized by a fixed state of being either drinkers or penitents, Matti and Niila are characterized by forward movement, transitioning from a state of anonymity and progressing towards a state of universal significance in the ever-evolving *olotopos*.

Concurrently, in *Koka björn*, the same Lars Levi Laestadius, the founder of the religious movement and the primary character in the novel, is portrayed as a pivotal figure in a spiritual renaissance (Aschenbrenner 2017). However, he is also depicted as a counterforce to the prevailing disposition of power and the exploitation of the territory, embodied by Sheriff Brahe, a symbol of governmental control, hierarchization and the submission of Tornedalen to prevailing centralized dynamics.

²⁹ Orig.: «Niila's old man, Isak, tried to put a stop to his sons' puberty by beating them. The bigger they grew, the more he beat them» (Niemi 2003, 150).

5. Conclusions

The primary objective of this article is to concentrate on the literary works of Mikael Niemi and to interpret them in the context of the de-marginalization of Tornedalen. Niemi's approach differs from previous interpretations of the Tornedalen region as a peripheral space – provided, for instance, by authors of the previous generation – and aims to redefine the literary representation of the region as multifaceted and intricate.

The interweaving of references to both Swedish and Finnish culture and language serves to illustrate the interplay between the subjective experiences of the characters and the objective reality of the landscape. Tornedalen represents a *borderland*, a liminal space where cultural and social boundaries are blurred. Here the stability and centrality of *anthropotopos* is finally questioned, thereby challenging the prevailing colonial interpretation that constrained the dynamic nature of social involvement and personal engagement to the southern and other regions of Sweden.

As Gloria Anzaldúa (1987, 73; 78) posits, such spaces are characterized by a dynamic interplay of contamination and contact, hybridization and possibility, openness and cross-border interaction: this liminal territory is «living in a state of psychic unrest, in a *Borderland*, is what makes poets write and artists create [...] From this racial, ideological, cultural and biological crosspollination, an 'alien' consciousness is presently in the making [...] It is a consciousness of the Borderlands». The interaction posited by Niemi can be thus interpreted as a «counter-hegemonic cultural production», which through an anti-assimilationist perspective has the capacity to evoke the possibility of transitioning from a condition of exclusion and social constraint to affiliation with a wider network (hooks 2015, 1). In these new conditions, Tornedalians, such as Matti in *Populärmusik* or main characters in *Kyrkdjävulen* and *Koka björn*, engage in a perspective that is no longer considered as minoritarian in respect to literary or economic capitals, but stand in the condition of difference and self-consciousness. Building on these considerations, Tornedalians can be thus re-interpreted in Niemi's works as 'hyposubjects', individuals resistant to the logic of submission to unitary modes of interpretation, «a weak, fragile entity that could go extinct, that is

made of other entities that aren't you, and that you coexist with these other entities and utterly relate with them» (Morton, Boyer 2021, 28).

Together, hyposubjects dwell in «the shared space and feeling of 'yearning'» opened up on «the possibility of common ground where all these differences might meet and engage one another» (hooks 2015, 13).

Intended as *Borderland*, Tornedalen meet antipoles and juxtaposes contradictions, creates value and produce a cross-border identity, as Mona Mörtund explains:

Tornedalen för mig är [...] pingstvännen och læstadianer, kommunister och högerman, pizza och köttsoffa. Det är mörker och ljus, allvar och humor. Det är att se världen från olika håll och inte tro att det bara finns en sanning. Det finns ett ord som mer än något annat symboliserar Tornedalen för mig. Det är ordet och. Det är det mitt Tornedalen är. Och. (Mörtlund 2007, 37)³⁰

To the same crucible of exceptions and possibilities refer Mikael Niemi and Tornedalian literature. In the introduction to his anthology of Finnish-Tornedalian Literature, Bengt Pohjanen writes: «När jag talar meänkieli hör jag till detta folk. Mitt fädernesland är Meänmaa och mitt moderland är Sverige» (2019, 17; When I speak Meänkieli, I belong to these people. My fatherland is Meänmaa and my motherland is Sweden). In-between these two cultures, movement and experience are free: «Den har alltid funnits i oss / en resa utan gräns / inte gjord av människohand / älven / älven har alltid funnits / den förenar, skjier oss inte åt» (*ibidem*) (It has always been in us / a journey without boundaries / not made by human hands / the river / the river has always been there / it unites, does not separate us).

From the absence of any visible border or separation, a novel interpretation of Space as *olotopos* finally arises.

³⁰ «Tornedalen for me is [...] Pentecostals and Laestadians, communists and right-wingers, pizza and meat soup. It is darkness and light, seriousness and humor. It's seeing the world from different directions and not believing there is only one truth. There is one word that symbolizes Tornedalen for me more than any other. It is the word 'and'. That is what my Tornedalen is. 'And'».

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