

The Alluring Past

Progressive Heritagisations of Traditional Sexual Poetry in the Field of Contemporary Folk Music in Finland

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Abstract: During the nineteenth century, the tradition of metered oral poetry, often referred to as “Kalevalaic” poetry or *runo* singing, became a fundamental and emblematic part of Finnish cultural heritage. The collections of metered poetry include hundreds of poems that discuss sexual relationships, the female body, and genitals. This article analyses the re-heritagisations of such poems in contemporary Finland. Through an examination of ethnographic interviews, media texts, and folk music recordings, I assert that the use of traditional sexual poetry reflects progressive values, such as the promotion of equality, social change, and diversity. Furthermore, the progressive contextualisation of these sexual poems is situated within transnational body politics, such as the #MeToo movement, and is closely linked to feminist viewpoints.

Keywords: Finnic oral poetry, Kalevala, #MeToo, progressive heritagisation, sexuality

The cunt is not made from evil, *hoi oi oi*
but neither quite from good, *hoi oi oi*
Made from fat, made from butter, *hoi oi oi*
from pure pork meat, *hoi oi oi*
the mother hole from Angel, *hoi oi oi*
the tongue from the flesh of Jesus, *hoi oi oi*
(Duo Pimperot 2017: *Ei pillu oo pahoista tehty.*)¹

Finnic oral poetry and *runo*² singing, which is based on the so-called Kalevala metre, was a form of ritualistic cultural expression in the transnational linguistic areas that are today mainly located in Finland, northern and western Russia, and Estonia. Finns, Estonians, Karelians, Forest Finns, and Ingrians shared this metrical form as a common element of cultural expression (e.g., Frog 2019; for



geographical information, see figure 1). After the Protestant Reformation, the practice of folk beliefs, to which oral poetry was linked, gradually disappeared in the Finnish areas but remained alive in Orthodox Christian territories, such as Ingria and Karelia.³ The quotation above is an incantation from the Karelian region: it may have been used by local *tietäjä* sorcerer-healers in ritual contexts to cure men of *vitun vihat*, “the wrath of the cunt”.⁴ The cunt was thought to possess *väki* (power), a potentially harmful and dangerous force (Stark 2012: 169–172; Stark-Arola 2001: 6–8).

During the modern period, the culture of oral poetry was separated from its Karelian and Ingrian roots: oral poetry was collected and archived by the elites from the capital area of Finland, who were motivated by national romantic ideals during the nineteenth century. This was done in order to provide Finnish speakers with a history, standard language, written culture, and modern future, since the Finnish nation lacked these elements (Anttonen 2005). The national epic *Kalevala* (Lönnrot [1849] 2005) was based on collections of oral folk poetry. It fulfilled the modern societal standard of having a stirring literary epic, which became the cornerstone of Finnish cultural nationalism and nation-building (Tarkka et al. 2018; Wilson 1976).

The archival collections from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century contain numerous premodern poems that discuss themes such as genitals, the female body, and sexual relationships. Many of these poems reflect the patriarchal and heterosexual norms of agrarian societies (e.g., Apo 1998; Stark 2012). Although *Kalevala*-metric poetry was celebrated as a significant symbol of Finnish national heritage in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the physical and sexual elements of the poetry were not publicly discussed or explored in folkloristic research. The collected poetic materials that touched on sexual issues were left largely untouched in archives such as the Finnish Literature Society (FLS) in Helsinki until the emergence of women’s studies in the 1980s (Mäkelä and Tarkka 2022).

The opening incantation in this article serves not only as a representation of the archival collections or as a vague textual reminder of premodern *tietäjä* traditions but also as an example of a contemporary song. In 2018, it was published by Duo Pimperot (roughly translated as “Duo Fannies”), a duo of professional female musicians. In its performances, Duo Pimperot incorporates traditional Ingrian melodies and archived sexual poetry using humour and idealised folksy-ness. The use of obscene language serves as a vehicle for contesting folklore and national heritage in an unruly manner. In February 2024, the song “*Ei pillu oo pahoista tehty*” was streamed 2,852 times on Spotify, which is a significant number of plays for a Finnish acoustic non-mainstream folk music group. About sixty years ago, it would have been impossible to publicly perform sex-related *Kalevala*-metric poetry, at least in upper- and middle-class contexts.

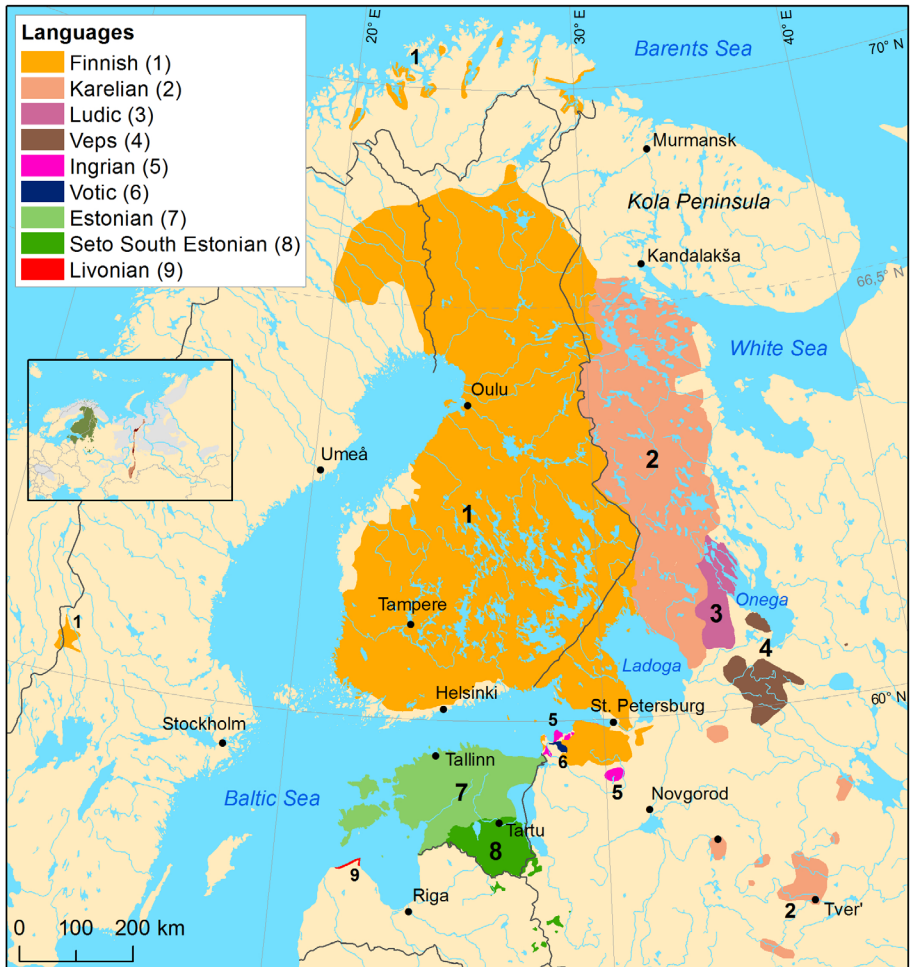


Figure 1. Finnic languages at the beginning of the twentieth century (Rantanen et al. 2021). CC BY-SA 4.0.

This was due to the Hegelian and Protestant Christian ideals of decency and family, which influenced the nationalised and heritagised processes of publishing, studying, and performing oral poetry (Mäkelä and Tarkka 2022). What has changed since then? What motivates Duo Pimperot and others to reinterpret nineteenth-century Karelian oral poems from the perspective of modern-day Finland, considering the differences in time, culture, and geography?

Finnish contemporary folk music is a professional field that has developed mainly within the Finnish music education system and education politics since

the 1980s. Higher-level education at the Sibelius Academy Folk Music Department was established in 1983 (Hill 2009; Laitinen 1994). Currently, the field plays a continuous role in Finnish musical life, despite suffering from a lack of funding when compared to classical music, for example. However, Finnish folk music education and practices are recognised in the UNESCO listing of intangible cultural heritage.

Older Kalevala-metric poetry is widely used in Finnish folk music, and some of the most well-known Finnish folk music bands, such as Värttinä, have utilised this genre. Musicians within this field emphasise that Kalevala-metric songs are an inspiring channel of creativity for modern performers. Folk poetry is considered a valuable resource for creatively embodying old traditions in contemporary times, and it is used to negotiate aspects such as Baltic-Finnishness, authenticity, and the past (Haapoja 2017). Many of the singers in this field are women (Haapoja 2017), and this perspective influences the use of sexual poetry as well: the songs and bands analysed in this article are performed by women, and womanhood is an important topic in these performances.⁵ However, traditional sexual poetry could also be interpreted in a masculine context, as the original poems were primarily performed by men for male folklore collectors (see, e.g., Timonen 2007).

This article examines the contemporary processes of re-heritagising sexual traditional Kalevala-metric poetry in the field of contemporary folk music in Finland. I ask: (1) To which societal discussions are these re-heritagisations related? (2) What types of connections are made between past and present singers? By examining ethnographic interviews, media texts, and folk music recordings, I argue that the incorporation of traditional sexual poetry into contemporary folk music is a progressive trend: the underlying intent of the musicians and their performances is to promote a discursive-material environment in which equality, social change, diversity, and LGBTQ+ rights are advanced and conservative Christian and far-right nationalist values are contested. Furthermore, the progressive heritagisations of sexual poetry are framed by transnational body politics, such as the #MeToo movement, and are tightly connected to feminist perspectives. As a result, sexual poems serve as a means of interpreting the sexual aspects of the past as both empowering and harsh, and they are used to build a past-conscious feminist future. The article is structured as follows: First, I discuss the theoretical frames of heritagising sexual poetry. Second, I introduce the materials and methods used. In the subsequent two sections, I analyse the contemporary heritagisations of sexual poetry in relation to the ideal of empowerment and #MeToo. Finally, I conclude by claiming that the uses of sexual poetry powerfully reflect ongoing transnational and somewhat polarised political discussions on womanhood and sexuality.

The re-heritagisations of sexual *runo* songs: Historical and theoretical perspectives

I use the term *re-heritagisation* to highlight the temporal (dis)continuities in the use and interpretation of Kalevala-metric poetry as a Finnish (national) heritage. Heritage is viewed as a performative and inherently political process of creating meaning (Smith 2020). These processes mediate various messages about what is worth remembering and forgetting. The *runo* songs have been intertwined with conflicting nationalistic movements for approximately 200 years in both Finland and Estonia. However, political upheavals have affected the traditional singing cultures and archival materials in slightly different ways in these two countries (see, e.g., Kuutma 1996). In contemporary Finland, the status of Kalevalaic oral poetry remains strong in the context of nationalistic constructions of Finnish identity. The language and culture of Kalevala are taught in comprehensive schools, and the national epic is celebrated annually on February 28. Recently, the *runo* song phenomenon was added to the National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage, coordinated by the Finnish Heritage Agency and the Ministry of Education and Culture (see Mäkelä 2022).

However, Karelian activists are currently questioning the heritagised and nationalised role of the genre in social media. They aim to challenge the colonial and historical power relations between the hegemonic Finnishness and subordinated Karelian-ness embedded in the practices of collecting, using, and re-interpreting poetry (e.g., Anttonen 2022). Although queer perspectives have been somewhat important in contemporary discourses on Karelian-ness (Koskelo 2021), these activists have not yet explicitly discussed poetic materials related to sex and sexuality. Furthermore, Finnish artists and musicians have questioned the nationalised role of Kalevalaic heritage by claiming that their music-making is open and non-nationalistic (Haapoja 2017: 111–128). These meaning-makings – which I describe as progressive – discussed in this article provide a foundation for understanding and illuminating the uses of traditional sexual poetry in contemporary Finland.

Historically, the relationship between heritagised Kalevala-metric poetry and sexuality has been ambivalent. The reception of traditional sexual poems has varied from absolute silence to enthusiastic admiration since the nineteenth century, depending on the historical and political context. The inclusion or exclusion of sex-related oral poetry in Finnish national narratives reflects society's changing attitudes towards the politics of the body, sexuality, and the past. As argued by Lotte Tarkka and myself (2022), the role of sex poetry in national heritage can be traced through three historical periods between 1818 and 1997: (1) These types of poems were incorporated into the Finnish folklore collections constructed by upper-class men, coinciding with the invasion of discourses of modern sexuality (see Foucault 1990) during the nineteenth century.

(2) Between 1820 and 1950, the archives exhibited a loud silence, influenced by the Hegelian and Christian ideals of indecency and bourgeois, Lutheran family values. However, unlike archival practices in Soviet Estonia (Kulasalu 2013), this silence was not actively maintained but rather passively forgotten. (3) Finally, the “sexual revolution” of the 1960s and the increase in folkloristic gender studies re-contextualised sexual poems and reformed the conception of folk into a more individual-centred and corporeal shape.

The presentation of sexual poetry in Finnish society underwent a change in the early twenty-first century. This change was primarily due to shifts in the media landscape. As noted by media researcher Sanna Karkulehto (2011), Finnish media imagery became more sexualised and pornographic, and non-heteronormative sexualities became more visible at the turn of the twenty-first century. Moreover, sexuality and sexual themes were not limited to the domains of entertainment and popular culture but were also present in fact journalism and fact entertainment (Karkulehto 2011). This discourse had an impact on the perceived formal and even sublime realm of Kalevalaic heritage, as the media started to take notice of the findings of the field of folkloristic women’s studies, particularly its ideas on sexuality and poetry. However, the media was not interested in folklore researchers’ attempts to contextualise traditional feminine worldviews and practices per se. The focus was mainly on the obscene language of the poetry, as well as the idea of having folk traditions related to sex, genitals, and sexuality in the first place. Folkloristic research thus became intertwined with the commercialisation and neoliberalisation trends of Western media (Karkulehto 2011: 94–102).

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, a new economic and cultural platform for discussing and exploiting national heritage emerged: Finnish media began to adopt the ideals of viral journalism and clickbait, which use affective, sensational, and anecdotal content in order to prompt viewers to click on articles, give responses, and share them with their networks (Bazaco et al. 2019). Clickbait is often presented in frames that aim to stimulate the reader emotionally. Therefore, so-called soft news, which focus on human interest, such as entertainment, lifestyle, crime, sports, touching stories, and anecdotes, are often preferred contexts for clickbait over hard news, which cover political, economic, and social issues (Bazaco et al. 2019).

The rise of clickbait in Finland can be linked to the inclusion of heritage in the category of soft news. In the early 2000s, Kalevala-metric poetry was introduced into the world of viral journalism and soft news, appearing in sections such as entertainment and culture. Despite its limited discussion outside academia, the topic of sexual poetry was prominently featured in clickbait-style articles and soft news about heritage, as it was considered sensational in the context of nationalist heritage discourse. The Finnish media revelled in the idea

of uncovering the truth: for instance, the headline of an article in the newspaper *Kaleva* on sex-related materials in the archives of the FLS introduced the idea of once hidden but now uncovered secret poetic materials: “The sex poems of Elias [Lönnrot, the Kalevala’s editor] came out of the closet” (Kauppinen 2005).

This article considers the concept of sexuality inherently modern, as argued by Michel Foucault (1990). Therefore, it is anachronistic to discuss sex, sexuality, and Kalevala-metric poetry in the context of premodern poems. The performances of sexuality in that era were dissimilar, differently verbalised (or nonverbalised) and perhaps experienced differently than they are today (Löfström 1998). Hence, it is a rather challenging task to describe what premodern sexual poems are: such poems may include personifications of genitals or charms that do not align with modern notions of erotic or sexual themes but may have had ritualistic functions in agrarian societies (see Apo 1998; Stark 2012; Tarkka 2013). As Lotte Tarkka (2013: 265–301) demonstrated, some sexual poetic materials were used in insulting, pejorative, and offensive ways.

Instead of assuming that contemporary interpretations are closely connected to the premodern *runo*-singing cultures, I suggest that these poems are heritagised and tied to the same types of modern and contemporary discourses on sexuality, gender, fleshy nakedness, and visual nudity as other Western sexuality-related heritage phenomena. These include the ways works such as the Sanskrit *Kama Sutra*, first published in English in 1883, have been a source of exoticising the colonial reading of the sexuality of otherness (e.g., Puri 2002); Palaeolithic “Venus figurines” found mainly in what is now Europe and Eurasia have been interpreted as having pornographic connotations (Voss and Schmidt 2000); archaeological sites such as Pompeii and its erotic paintings have served as spaces for discourses that encourage tourists to interpret ancient sexuality as heteronormative, unchanging, and lascivious (Levin-Richardson 2011); and, lately, tourists who take nude selfies at well-known heritage sites and post them on Instagram have tried but not completely succeeded to question the established views on heritage and nudity (Immonen 2023).

As demonstrated in this article, the contemporary use of sexual poetry can be contextualised within the framework of *progressive heritagisations* of folklore. The term refers to ongoing discussions on *progressive heritage performances* (Smith 2020: 71–79) and *progressive nostalgia* (Smith and Campbell 2017), which aim to understand the affective practices related to the past that promote social justice, empathy, and future-oriented agendas of collective actions in, for instance, museums. In the field of folk music, these tendencies are present in discourses that embrace diversity, multiculturalism, transnationalism, and globalism (see Haapoja 2017: 111–134). These negotiations interpret folklore on a global scale while also reflecting national and local perspectives (see also Karkabi 2018; Slominski 2020: 14–18, 153–178). As I show in this article, the

progressive heritagisations related to sexual poetry emphasise the solidarity and togetherness of women while also exploring the harsh experiences of the female body in the past and present.

Materials and methods

To comprehend the use of sexual themes in contemporary folk music, I have analysed all albums, songs, music videos, and visual materials of contemporary folk musicians that incorporate sexual content published within the last decade (Duo Pimperot 2017; Träskelin and Korva 2017; VPPJ 2020; Anonymised 2023⁶). In addition, I conducted two interviews with the members of the bands VPPJ and Duo Pimperot in the spring of 2023. I have a background in contemporary folk music and have studied it from an autoethnographic perspective (see Haapoja 2017); therefore, I knew the musicians personally. Considering the sensitive nature of the topic, I carefully selected the interviewees. The individuals interviewed are established adult musicians with whom I have built trusting relationships. They have also read the manuscript of this article. However, in this article, I will refer to them only as members of a band, without mentioning their names.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the role of sexual poetry in contemporary societal discourse, I have analysed a wide range of texts that provide insights into the reception of sexual poetry in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. This background material includes over forty media texts published in Finnish newspapers, magazines, websites, and social media between 2005 and 2023. The materials comprise poem anthologies, books, and academic research on sex-related Kalevala-metric poetry and folk belief (e.g., Kuusi and Timonen 1997; Lampinen et al. 2015). Additionally, two interviews were conducted in the autumn of 2021 with folklorists Lotte Tarkka and Senni Timonen, who are leading experts in nineteenth-century Karelian and Ingrian oral poetry in Finland (I1 and I2). This set of materials provides a background for contemporary discussions among folk musicians in Finland.

During my analysis, I read and listened to the materials side by side, observing similarities and differences in the discourses, as well as in their discursive, material, auditive, and visual aspects. For the poems found in records and books, I traced them to the original archived materials they referenced and scrutinised how contemporary representations reinterpret them on a textual and musical level. As a result, I analysed two themes (empowerment and sexual violence) that shed light on the heritagisation of traditional sexual poetry in twenty-first-century Finland.

Creating a community of empowered individuals

In this section, I examine the heritagisation of sexual poetry in relation to the concept of (female) empowerment. The term “empowerment” refers to attitudes and practices that challenge male-centred perspectives of knowledge production while also promoting individual confidence, self-reflection, and a better quality of life (e.g., Ramazanoglu 1992).

The bands and recordings analysed here are partly related to the aforementioned clickbait phenomenon, as the Finnish media often discuss the albums, concerts, and work of professional folk musicians in Finland. However, I propose that the field of contemporary folk music has also prompted the media to discuss sexual poetry from a more social perspective; over the past ten years, musicians have brought forth progressively charged ideas about folklore, gender equality, and sexuality. In this context, the past is seen as an authentic, non-national, multicultural, and liberating space through which sexuality is seen and experienced as empowering, especially for women. Musicians often negotiate the idea of womanhood and the transnational and transtemporal connections between women and women’s bodies. These discussions are mainly pro-Karelian, pro-postcolonial, anti-racist, and even anti-nationalist (Haapoja 2017; Mäkelä 2021). In recent years, this has significantly changed the way sexual poetry is discussed in public.

The genre of professional contemporary folk music emerged in the 1980s after the vibrant transnational folk music revival of the 1960s and 1970s. In Finland for the past forty years, one of its main stages has been the Folk Music Department of the Sibelius Academy (now part of the University of the Arts Helsinki). As ethnomusicologist Juniper Hill (2009) notes, Finnish professional folk music training has, from the beginning, been dependent on the rather progressive ideas of avant-garde and creative freedom. It is not surprising, then, that the current discussions of sexual poetry are linked to progressive body politics and activism in social media that emphasise gender equality and body rights on a global scale. As Anna Rastas and Elina Seye (2019) illustrate, Finnish professional musicians in all genres have been forced to negotiate a changing society and the meanings of, for example, race in their work due to rapid demographic changes. Similarly, singers in the field of folk music have increasingly contested the modern folkloric ideals of nation, race, and national identity (Haapoja 2017: 124–135).

The performance of sexual poetry is one of the arenas in which the progressive ideals of folk music are expressed. Sexual poetry is used to negotiate issues such as the female body, sexual harassment, social injustice, and, above all, female sexuality, which is supposed to have been freer and more unrestricted in the world of the past, into which folk poems provide a keyhole. For example, the ensemble VPPJ, whose concert series “Blood, Porn and Propaganda,

GODDAMMIT!” has been awarded the “Phenomenon of the Year 2020” prize by the Centre for Folk Music and Folk Dance in Finland, addressing issues of sexual diversity, feminism, social justice, and female corporeality. The jury that awarded the prize explained their choice as follows:

The phenomenon of the year has brought a breeze of courage to the field of folk music, renewing old opinions, and daring to be openly feminist and provocative. . . . They are bringing long-awaited content and passionate language to folk music. . . . [They] explore both cultural history and the present moment from a female perspective. (Etnogaala Facebook 2020)

The VPPJ band, which includes musicians of Finnish and Finnish–Karelian backgrounds, has used sexual poetry that includes vagina-related themes and incantations related to ancient Karelian love magic (*lemppi* raising). Their compositions and lyrics mix the conventions of rap, Kalevalaic poetry, and *tietäjä* cultures:

[In the old days,] they didn't talk about *häpy* [genitals]
 because *häpeä* [shame] had nothing to do with cunt
 it was a word of magic, an asset
 a treasure between the thighs
 I am fucking powerful
 totally fucking competent
 shame does not bother me
 I am full of cunt's *väki* [power]
 (VPPJ 2020: “Voi vittu! -kimara”, author's translation).

Vittu, intended by the band to have the meaning “cunt”, is a central poetic and corporeal source of female empowerment in the band's work. Premodern traditions and sexual poetry are seen as areas where modern shame about nudity and sexuality is absent. Through sexual poetry, a one-way transtemporal and transnational emotional and bodily connection can be constructed between women now and then. A band member of VPPJ explained this connection as “a cultural history of women” in our interview:

The VPPJ project was built on the idea of the cultural history of women, what it is and what kind of controlled areas there are in relation to womanhood and the female body. And corporeality in the first place: sex, pregnancy, blood, and everything. It felt natural to draw from that. The traditional materials are so fascinating

Unbelievably great crystallisations have been stored in this folk poetry, not just sexual poetry. There are delicious images, and it felt natural to study those. If one thinks of the cultural history of women, there is sexuality and the control of sexuality. What fascinated me in those Kalevala-metric poems was some kind

of sex positivity: there is the joy of sexuality and fertility, or pleasure. The depth of them, that there is the rich language and all those *lempi* and dick-raising charms and everything. They have been important in the survival of humans. Even though the poems sometimes feel strange and make us giggle, there are also familiar things. (I3, 31 January 2023)

In addition to the field of contemporary folk music, various spiritual movements in Finland have highlighted the femininity of folk poetry and beliefs, as well as the empowerment of women. These actors have also incorporated sexual poetry into their work (see, e.g., Mäkelä et al. 2024). The empowering element in this type of poetry is believed to be strongly related to the concepts of *väki* (power) and *vittu* (cunt), as expressed in VPPJ's lyrics. Although studies of folk poetry have explored the possibility of phallic and misogynistic aspects (e.g., Apo 1998; Stark-Arola 2001), discourses of female empowerment tend to overlook these. The discourses of contemporary folk music intertwine somewhat with popular Western New Age and spiritual discussions on femininity, sexuality, and the past.

The emphasis on femininity and its empowering sacredness can be traced back to radical feminist interpretations of the British–American New Age movements of the 1960s (e.g., Salomonsen 2002). Currently, Finnish social media has seen a rise in phenomena such as the Wicca and Goddess spirituality movements, particularly among young feminist women (Sarasti 2019). Various neo-pagan movements have advocated for women's liberation, sexual freedom, and LGBTQ+ rights (Kraemer 2012). While contemporary spiritual movements have been criticised for their individualistic and neoliberal tendencies, some researchers have highlighted their feminist values of solidarity and collectivism (Longman 2018). Similarly, the emphasis on female traditions in the folk music field highlights not only individual empowerment (“I am fucking powerful”, as VPPJ sings) but also the collective and supportive relationships between females. These connections are also transtemporal, and women from the past are brought into these negotiations.

However, some folk musicians who use sexual poetry do not promote female empowerment as strongly as VPPJ. For example, the band Duo Pimperot, which released the album *Piika huusi pinkotinta* [The maiden cried for cock] in 2018, included traditional obscene Kalevala-metric and stanzaic rhymed songs found in the Finnish archives.⁷ Instead of promoting female empowerment, they focus on (feminine) sexual humour and the amusing, comical, and humorously dirty aspects of the poems' language:

We [the band members] just had a conversation a while ago because there had been a discussion on Facebook about us and how this [music] is empowering and feminist and great and everything. And of course, this is fine for us, but we

did not have such missions. We have this pretty selfish starting point that this is just so fun and extremely interesting (*laughter*), the language use and everything. It's so interesting and hard to ponder how people talked about sex and sexuality some 300 years ago. But how other people interpret this and what kinds of levels they find – we did not even think about that! (14, 22 February 2023)

It is intriguing that the band did not highlight the feminine and allegedly empowering aspects of their performances. As noted by Jenny Sundén and Susanna Paasonen (2019) in their study on contemporary online media, laughter and humour may be used as affective feminist assets. However, Duo Pimperot did not explicitly use this unruly internet age tool for this purpose. Furthermore, they did not establish a transtemporal connection to empowering elements of the past but rather to the language, phrases, and words that are today interpreted as comically vulgar.

Duo Pimperot's performances consist of a unique blend of highly skilled professional singing, archival sources, and the use of carnivalistic costumes, expressions, and sounds. The performances create tensions in at least two dimensions. First, they question and retell the image and story of a non-corporeal woman of nationally charged Finnish heritage. Second, they challenge the historical, oral poetry-related, heritagised performances of white bourgeois femininity (e.g., Mäkelä 2022; Valenius 2004). Duo Pimperot also breaks new ground into an area traditionally dominated by male musicians. In the past, humorous folk music groups and albums that incorporated sexual poetry were typically created and performed by men. For instance, the album cover of the popular *Isojen poikien lauluja* (Songs for big boys) (1971) underlines that "Every Finnish man who has gone to the school of life knows at least half a dozen lustful songs that have been learned in the army at the latest". Under the former narrative of national heritage, sexual poetry, if discussed, was often considered to be part of masculine humour, whereas femininity was figuratively and often pejoratively present, despite its physical absence (see also Mäkelä and Tarkka 2022).

Today, the (rather rare) male singers in the field seem to identify themselves with the aspect of masculine humour (see Träskelin and Korva 2017). However, a male singer interviewed by Finland's largest newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat*, in 2018 emphasised the empowering aspects of past sexuality, as explained by the journalist who interviewed him about his album:

The [erotic folk] songs that I [the journalist] know personally seem pretty awful from a woman's point of view. Often, the songs feature prostitutes or women who are spoken about in a submissive and contemptuous tone.

But [the interviewed male singer] surprises: he says that the songs do show a surprisingly healthy worldview. The men and women in the songs [of the singer's album] are surprisingly equal. Both women and men want sex, as do lords and

ladies, maids and maidservants. According to [the singer], depictions of sexual acts convey an image that is natural and free from the distortions of Western porn culture. (Koppinen 2018a)

The quotation above suggests that empowerment is a shared ideal among all genders in the field of contemporary folk music: the male singer in question stresses equality and a “healthy worldview” of the past. Yet, the original materials also reflect a patriarchal society in which women and men had distinct roles (e.g., Apo 1998). Queer readings of Finnish archival folklore materials have been infrequent. However, as researcher Jan Löfström (1998) argues, pre-modern folklore may have had a broader representation of gender: the roles of men and women were interpreted through patriarchal family norms, but the polarity between the sexes was not as rigid as in the earlier modern era (approx. 1860–1970). Therefore, various queer phenomena may have been left unverballed, as binary gender categories did not exist in a modern sense (Löfström 1998). The feminist field of folk music hearkens back to the norms of Finnish women’s studies of the 1980s and 1990s, which focused on women’s roles in poetry. In the future, there may be more queer interpretations in both the study of and artistic work related to Kalevala-metric poetry.

#MeToo and the possibility of violence and harassment in the past and the present

In the materials used in this article, the discussion of sexual harassment and violence is powerfully intertwined with sexual poetry. The issue of sexual harassment gained significant attention after the #MeToo social media movement, which was originally a debate started by activist Tarana Burke. An October 2017 tweet from actress Alyssa Milano sparked the discussion: the tweet addressed sexual harassment and assault and went viral. The movement was quickly adopted in the Nordic countries and gained popularity, particularly among women in the entertainment industry (Pollack 2019). Gender scholars have since noted the ambivalent nature of the movement, as many of those who participated in the discussions and shared their experiences were wealthy, privileged, and members of the political elite (Zarkov and Davis 2018). Like the #MeToo movement, discussions on traditional poetry have also been influenced by the ideals of having a voice, giving a voice, and breaking the silence, as the musicians articulate in the materials of this article.

The #MeToo movement has had a significant impact on the field of contemporary folk music in Finland. During 2018–2020, cases of sexual harassment were reported at the Folk Music Department of the Sibelius Academy (Riihinen and Tiikkaja 2020). These cases were also discussed by folk musicians on various social media platforms.⁸ The events and subsequent media

coverage have had a significant impact on the field since the department has established its principles of safer space, following the example of the umbrella organisation Promotion Centre for Finnish Folk Music and Folk Dance (KEK) (Kansanmusiikin ja kansantanssin edistämiskeskus 2022; University of the Arts Helsinki 2023). The #MeToo movement has influenced discussions on women's roles in the field and reformed the teaching practices in Finnish folk music. Additionally, the concept of safer spaces has prompted a re-evaluation of the physical spaces in which people play music and sing together.

This change in discourse has also been reflected in acts of performing and practicing *runo* singing. In our interview, a member of the VPPJ group spoke of the “dark stories” that sexual poetry tells. According to her, abortion, unwanted pregnancy, miscarriage, and rape are discussed in this type of poetry, and the past is not only empowering but also frightening and harsh:

I think it is good that there are not only these kinds of [contemporary] works of art where people are like “[in the old days] they were so lovely and empowered and just wanted to have sex with everybody” because that is not true. For me, it was very important to read about other things, too, what kind of sexuality-related things there were. There are these poems where a thief comes out of a birch grove and steals “gold from her eyebrows”, which I think is a metaphor for rape or some other kind of sexual violence. Similarly, there are these beliefs that have to do with birth control or which berries to eat to abort the baby or to take some mercury or whatever. These are dark stories to me, and sadly, they are not just history but living reality in many parts of the world. (I3, 31 January 2023)

The newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* also acknowledged these “dark stories” in its 2018 interview with the VPPJ band. Interestingly, the band member in our 2023 interview spoke about women's history more generally, but the newspaper article interpreted her “dark stories” as inherently Finnish. This creates an interesting tension between the ideal of the women's community and the former sublime heritage discourse in which Kalevala-metric poetry was persistently interpreted as national: “[In folk poetry,] there are also a lot of unpleasant things about sexuality: abortions, unwanted pregnancies, difficulties getting pregnant, miscarriages, rape. . . . The [VPPJ] concert's mission is to dust off the history of women and assumed females and to consider what the future could be” (Koppinen 2018b).

After the band's feminist ideals and “dark stories” were discussed in the Finnish media in 2018, the band was heavily criticised in the comment sections. In particular, the emphasis on female sexuality was seen as a false premise in the comments section of the above newspaper article: “I am a man who has seen thousands of gigs. I've never thought of such a thing, so it's complete nonsense. If only we would concentrate on the issue instead of all the gender

bashing in the world, especially when it is the man who suffers most”. Another commentator continues: “This performance seems more like a provocative riot of the artists’ own egophilism than a way of bringing back fine old poems to be heard, wondered at, admired”. Overall, the comments seemed to emphasise that the feminist interpretation was too political and that the poem and songs should be performed neutrally, “as they are”. These negotiations demonstrate the sensitivity surrounding the intersection of traditional poetry and sexuality: the progressive interpretation of sexual poetry is occasionally met with resistance, especially from those outside of the folk music community, particularly when issues of masculinity and nationality are involved.

After the aforementioned discussions in the media and on Finnish manosphere discussion boards, where the *Helsingin Sanomat* article was shared, the band responded with a song titled “Nön nön nöö” (Bla Bla Bla) in 2018. The song’s lyrics are a combination of the derogatory comments the band received. The song is a counterpart to the aforementioned song “Voi vittu! -kimara”, as it also revolves around the word *häpeä* [shame], but from a sarcastic perspective:

Shame, shame on you women
 shame shame, okay
 be ashamed
 Sick decadent culture
 Shame, shame on you women
 shame shame, okay
 be ashamed
 They should be ashamed
 No charming woman should feel the need to go up on stage to cry cunt and ass
 . . . They don’t arouse my interest
 these vulgar, aggressive, badly behaving
 mentally and often physically ugly present-day Finnish women. (VPPJ 2020)

“Nön nön nöö” participates in politically polarised discussions related to traditional poetry and mythology in Finland: as Heta Aali’s (2022) study shows, Finnish conservative discussion boards generally emphasise the masculine, tough, and nationalistic aspects related to Kalevalaic mythology and symbolism. To address the clashing interpretations of traditional poetry, the female body, and sexuality in the past, contemporary folk music has employed the use of humour, which, in the case of VPPJ, originates from feminist resistance. At a broader level, the clash of opinions represents the conflict between the conservative and the progressive, in which folklore elements from the distant past serve as tools for reinforcing present identities and belongings.

Concluding remarks

In Finland, the national romantic ideals of Kalevalaic heritage and national folklore have been dominant for centuries, and sexual poetry has been consistently interpreted through this lens. This article demonstrates that (mainly female) folk musicians use sexual poetry for at least three new purposes: (1) to participate in ongoing large transnational movements, such as #MeToo; (2) to connect with the bodies and mental environments of past singers, which leads to feelings of empowerment; and (3) to address sexual harassment, violence, “dark stories”, and other difficult topics from both the past and present. Musicians in this field often interpret sexual poetry from progressive and liberal perspectives, highlighting values such as multiculturalism and LGBTQ+ rights. However, this can sometimes clash with conservative and nationalistic viewpoints expressed outside of the field – for instance, in online discussion forums. These conflicts are addressed in the materials of this article, for instance, by negotiating the clash of conservative and progressive values in the lyrics of songs, as VPPJ did. Sometimes, the use of sexual poetry is justified by referring solely to the laughter-related affective response generated by the lively expressions of the poems.

As I show in this article, the heritagised practices of using sexual poetry have the potential to construct large transtemporal communities and foster a sense of belonging, especially among women. However, the participation of singers from the past is, of course, only imaginary. Furthermore, masculine perspectives are not emphasised in the current field of folk singing, and the few male singers have highlighted the empowering aspects of sexuality and equality in the past. The empowering creation of the transtemporal one-way relationship with the idealised past is closely related to progressively nostalgic museum practices that Laurajane Smith and Gary Campbell (2017: 613) describe as “unashamedly overtly emotional way[s] of [using] the past to contextualise the achievements and gains of present day . . . and to set a politically progressive agenda for the future”. Similarly, the use of sexual folklore elements in folk music often addresses current social and political issues, with a focus on building a past-conscious feminist future. These progressive heritagisations are likely to fundamentally change how Finnic traditional poetry is interpreted and how people relate to it. For instance, in the case of sexual poetry, the older ways of silencing corporeal aspects will gradually vanish, but at the same time, they will likely be a battlefield of colliding identities and polarising interpretations.

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Notes

1. The original poetic material was collected in 1828 from Northern Karelia at the border of Finland and Russia. Lönnrot [1849] 2005: Lönnrotiana 17:143; SKVR 1997 XV: 414. Translation after Stark 2012: 171–172.)
2. There is no established way of translating the name of the genre into English; the anachronistic way of speaking of “Kalevala-metric poetry” is sometimes replaced with the vernacular expression *runo*, and “song” and “singing” are used to underline the sung nature of the traditional performances (see also Kallio et al. 2017).
3. Karelia, the border area between Finland and Russia, was an important region for collecting oral poetry due to the perceived richness and length of the oral poems in the area. However, during this process, Karelian culture was assimilated into Finnish culture, resulting in a low status for the Karelian language in Finnish society (e.g., Tarkka et al. 2018).
4. I translate the word *vittu* here with the non-academic and offensive word “cunt”, as *vittu* is used in aggressive slang in contemporary Finnish. However, the use of the word in agrarian Karelian societies may have had other, more positive connotations as well. I would like to thank the oral poetry researcher Kati Kallio for discussing the topic with me on 27 February 2024.
5. Similar themes have been identified in contemporary Irish and Celtic traditional music: womanhood, gender, and sexuality are currently important topics in the field (see, e.g., Cusack 2021; Slominski 2020).
6. The 2023 album is anonymised, as the artist has announced that the album discusses sexual harassment in the field of professional folk music (see the section “#MeToo and the possibility of violence and harassment in the past and the present”).

7. The album includes, for instance, the title song “Piika huusi pinkotinta”, which combines poetic materials collected by Elias Lönnrot in the 1820s from the Finnish Karelia and a traditional Ingrian melody sung by Valpuri Vohta and choir in 1937: “The maid cried for cock / Jussi the long-prick and hard-dick / came and fucked her / The maid sat on a stone / looked at her pie: / ‘oh my poor buttered pussy, / you have been battered with a leather rod / visited by the red worm” (Original materials, see SKVR 1997: XV 390, 391, 392, 395a).
8. The accounts are not mentioned in this text due to ethical reasons.

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Anonymised 2023: LP anonymised for ethical reasons.

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11. Interview with Senni Timonen. 4 October 2021.

12. Interview with Lotte Tarkka. 13 October 2021.

13. Interview with VPPJ. 31 January 2023.

14. Interview with Duo Pimperot. 22 February 2023.

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