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Emptinessⁱ

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The scene is a few years ago, in the mid-2010s. The Norwegian government has been collecting expert opinions to form the basis for a *renewed economic development strategy* in its northern territories. The exercise is about *economic growth*, of course: about *job creation* and drumming up *investor interest* in the *natural wealth* and *business opportunities* of a thawing Arctic—a *resource frontier* that successive administrations have drilled into the national imaginary as a site of near-unlimited wealth, of profits yet to be extracted, of potential, opportunity.

The public is cordially invited to a presentation of the findings. The venue is a business hotel on the harbour front in Tromsø. I have never been to this particular hotel before, but the shape and texture of it is familiar: a smooth, faux-neutral corporate that encodes *smart business* down to the smallest, most expensive detail. The space is bland, masculine, conservative: men in blazers hold forth while younger women laugh at their jokes, always a little too loudly. The drone of paid consultants is incessant; the air hums with the anticipation of wealth.

A succession of speakers have lined up through the day to present, under the bright overhead lights. Hour by hour, graph after graph re-inscribes the same shape across the flickering screens: variations of the same sharp, unstoppable rise. Employment will rise, revenues rise, tourism rise; the only thing that will not, it seems, is unemployment. Projections border on the hallucinatory: economic growth of three thousand percent, across all sectors, by 2050—if the *growth potential* in *unrealised sector synergies* is *optimally leveraged* for *maximal yield*. There is a *space of action*, a *space of possibility*, a *space of effect*: time hovers in the light of the screens like a geometric solid, suspended and predictable, made of diagrams.

Outside, the glaciers melt and the seas rise: a massive planetary extinction event has been underway for some time but in here, the elements are choreographed to create an expectation of growth so smooth, so wild and unlimited that it seems to override any sense of constraint, any limitation that physical reality might put in its way. Dissonance pours from the air-vents, flooding the room.

Halfway through the day, a representative from the indigenous Sámi parliament is scheduled to speak, addressing a panel of politicians. We are in Sápmi after all, ancestral homeland of the Sámi—although from the programme so far you would not have much idea of this, or of what it meant.¹ In an audience of suits and *smart business casual* the speaker is the only person in gákti, the traditional Sámi costume; she cuts a solitary figure.

On her way up to the stage she stumbles, briefly, drops her papers. Seconds pass as she tries to pick them up, fumbles awkwardly, more papers fall out. The panel watches. The whole

¹ The ongoing project of northern colonialism in Sápmi is well documented, but still under-recognised. For a recent overview see Kuhn, *Liberating Sápmi*.

room watches. The moment seems interminable, awkward, violently overdetermined by the relations it encodes—centuries of colonial violence and persecution, forced assimilation, racist ideologies, cultural erasure.² Formality, weaponised along ethnic lines.

Finally she collects her papers and begins to speak, reading her prepared statement—in Norwegian, not Sámi. The statement is bland, her voice possesses none of the luminous certainty that has animated the succession of capitalist testimonials we have witnessed so far: none of the faith, none of the force. She seems thin and uncertain, ill at ease among the polished graphs and proof-like demonstrations of infinite growth. Her statement praises the government, pleading that *traditional indigenous enterprise* not be *forgotten* but be *brought along* into the bright future that is being conjured in the room. This future that others are making in her homeland.

When she finishes, it is as if she never spoke.³ She shuffles back to her seat, unheard. The conversation moves on without her and for the rest of the day, nothing more is said of her—or of Sápmi.

Up on the stage, during her talk, the Norwegian minister of finance has been drumming his fingers, gazing into space, impatient. He is the guest of honour here, the most powerful name in the room and up on the stage it is as if space itself folds around him, centring his body and placing him, radiant, at the heart of events. As soon as the Sámi speaker finishes, the chairs swivel back to him—hungrily, as if the earth were resuming its rotation. As if about to be fed.

There is plenty of space up here the minister intones, with solar magnificence, throwing out his arms, affable and assured—a refrain he has repeated again and again through the day and that he will repeat, again and again, in years to come. Should a site or two be destroyed, he seems to say, there are many others. There is *so much more* space up here, after all, so much more landscape, more fjords, more rivers, more mountains, more tundra, more places to go—and in any case, he says, *most people* will be not be affected.

Who is he? Certainly he is not *most people*; certainly he will not be affected. The minister can command the sacrifice, after all: he is the one who sets the terms. The impatience in his drumming fingers is his own, that of a middle-aged white man with power: the impatience of someone who does not enjoy waiting for others of lesser standing to speak their turn. It is also the impatience of the room, this impatience of a moment in which vast, impersonal forces drum their fingers with him, poised to refashion the land to their liking and profit but arrested in their forward surge—held back, inexplicably, by this woman who dropped her papers, who shuffles them nervously on stage.

Who is she? His fingers drum the impatient tattoo of capital, quiet and violent, predatory, eyeing site after site through the inland and the coast. Why this delay? Why are we waiting? Who is she, who are *they* to hold us back?

There he is, the minister, drumming his fingers—and her before the stage, fumbling her scattered papers, trying to pick them up. Scattered papers, fingers drumming, seconds tick and tick and the moment seems to go on forever, excruciating and dilated, passing instant of a violence that refuses to pass but just hangs there in the air like a shape, feeling of pressure, overwhelming and familiar: an affect of the periphery, formed by centuries of *progress*.

² For an introductory overview on the Norwegian forced assimilation policy towards the Sámi, see for example Minde, "Assimilation of the Sami—Implementation and Consequences."

³ As Linda Tuhiwai Smith captures it, elegantly: "without missing a beat / they resume where they had dropped off their previous conversation." <https://pantograph-punch.com/posts/and-the-warriors-came>. Thanks to Rachel Douglas-Jones for the reference.

"This is how they empty the land," I think. By the ten thousand cuts, by the ten thousand systemic indignities that pave the way, opening the land to the grinding machines that labor in this supposed emptiness which somehow always overflows with wealth, too, this emptiness where *history itself* is always about to begin⁴ — or so they keep telling you, in ten thousand spaces like this. *Plenty of space*, the minister says.

There we are, the three of us: her, him, me. Right in the heart of this land that the minister describes, this land where there is *so much space*—this land that he evacuates with such colonial largesse, one grand sweep at a time, as if gifting it back to its people transformed already into raw material, lining for the pockets of unseen investors; investors who are his friends, perhaps he went to school with them. Certainly he did not go to school with anyone here, up in the emptiness. *Plenty of space up here*, the minister gestures, in the vast availability of this *new frontier*: space enough and more because like frontiers everywhere, this one too is a mechanism of sacrifice⁵—a metabolic edge where land is overlaid with emptiness and consumed, digested into profit.

"There is no such thing as empty space,"⁶ of course. The concept is a weaponised fantasy, a disorder of the Western imagination, violently put to work⁷—but as a political device, as a technology of the imagination, it is immensely powerful. *Empty space* offers little resistance, after all: you see nothing and the nothing lies there—passive and available, to be annexed, *developed, improved*. Expended. Consumed. Sacrificed.

In the emptiness violence has no object, past and present have no heft. A political ecology of the shadow place⁸ invites attention to this emptiness and to the life of it, to the sites where it is fabricated. Sites like this smart harbour-front hotel in Tromsø—in that awful and interminable gap between a woman who collects her papers and a man, up on the stage, distractedly drumming his fingers.

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⁴ Reinert, "The Midwife and the Poet."

⁵ Reinert, "Notes from a Projected Sacrifice Zone."

⁶ See section 4, "The Aesthetics of Silence" in Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will*; Cage, *Silences*, 8; Harley, "Silences and Secrecy," 71.

⁷ Within the extensive literature on this, see particularly Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country*.

⁸ Plumwood, "Shadow Places."

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ⁱ Reinert, Hugo. "Emptiness." *An A to Z of Shadow Places Concepts* (2020).
<https://www.shadowplaces.net/concepts>

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