

## Imagining and re-narrating regional identities

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**Abstract:** Human imagination, with all its institutional elements, is an integral part of regional identity construction. Considering regions ‘imaginative’ is not about underscoring the essence of fictiveness, but rather about emphasizing the relevance of the man’s power to imagine and narrate history in one’s own terms. This paper discusses the role of literature, especially literary humour, in the process of re-narrativizing regional identities, within the theoretical frameworks of Edward Said and Anssi Paasi. Through the analysis of Mikael Niemi’s breakthrough novel *Populärmusik från Vittula*, it is illustrated how the narrative identities of regions, in this case the region of Tornedalen in northern Sweden, can be contested, re-formed and complexified. Tornedalen is approached here as an imaginative region, with its own colonial history, while humour represents a unique textual method through which the ‘othered’ regional identity becomes re-negotiated.

### Introduction: Geography and imagination

The connection between human imagination, creativity and (socio)spatiality has been recognized and studied in human geography for many decades (Sharp 1904; Baker 1931; Meinig 1983). Spatiality, regionality, bordering, mapping – they all become meaningful, contextualized and conceptualized through human imagination. Imagination is not about fiction, about “inventing” new empirically non-existent subjects, but rather about the individual urge and creativeness of the human mind to narrativize the social, cultural and political environment within which we live. This is well illustrated in Anderson’s (1991) book *Imagined Communities* in which it is argued that the existence of the state would be impossible without a shared social imagination and that although the members of a nation will never know most

of their fellow-members, they nevertheless have a shared image and sense of belonging to the same community.

The key argument in this paper is that the spatial nature of human imagination, as well as the imaginative nature of space, is embedded in multiple ways in processes that are socially and politically charged. In Edward Said’s classic work *Orientalism* (1978) it is explicitly illustrated how literature, as a socio-cultural institution, functions as a powerful political tool in the processes of writing our histories. Said’s main argument concerns how the Orient, as an imaginative region, exists only by courtesy of Western power to imagine the history of the Eastern world to fulfil its own imperialist needs.

From a geographical point of view Said’s work has been particularly interesting since his main argument is that in geographical terms no such spatial entity as ‘the Orient’ would exist unless it had been imagined/

constructed by Western man as a colonialist and imperialist project. In *Orientalism* (1978) this turns into a question of how different cultural practices are maintained artificially, and how regions come to have unwarranted cultural and social features attached to them (ibid.: 4-5). Said underlines the arbitrary nature of Orientalism: “this universal practice of designating in one’s mind a familiar space which is ‘ours’ and an unfamiliar space beyond ‘ours’ which is ‘theirs’ is a way of making geographical distinctions that *can be* entirely arbitrary” (ibid.: 54). Orientalism is thus a process in which fictiveness, reality, artificiality and the representativeness of space interconnect through the artistic, political and scientific creativeness of the human mind.

The specific nature of an imaginative region can be exemplified through dissecting it against Paasi’s classic theory of the institutionalization of regions. Paasi (1986, 1997) perceives regions as historical processes which take their place within and through various social and cultural circumstances. Regions become established through the stages of 1) the assumption of territorial awareness and shape, 2) symbolic shaping, 3) institutional shaping, and 4) the establishment of territory (Paasi 1997: 42). By progressing through all these four stages, regions become identified, both internally and externally, as individual entities, as new independent parts in a certain territorial system. In the work of both Said and Paasi the role of institutions is emphasized. In both theories it is the institutions that ultimately legitimize ‘the assumption of territorial awareness’ or ‘colonialist imagination’. What these two viewpoints also share is an understanding

that institutional practices are essential in legitimizing different forms and courses of imaginations, with their privilege and power to exclude marginalized narratives from hegemonic narratives. The main difference between these two theorists is that while Paasi underlines that institutionalization is a process of territorial shaping, a process in which hazy imaginative assumptions attain their ‘official’ and clearly definable form, in Said’s *Orientalism* the stereotypes, though in part confirming the existence of certain territorial/regional units, still work primarily to keep the shapes and borders unclear and blurred.

This paper discusses the role of literature, especially literary humour, in the process of re-narrativizing regional identities. Through the analysis of Mikael Niemi’s breakthrough novel *Populärmusik från Vittula* (2000) (Eng. *Popular Music from Vittula*, 2003), it is illustrated how the narrative identities of regions, in this case the region of Tornedalen in Northern Sweden, can be contested, re-formed and complexified through literary imagination. Tornedalen is approached here as an imaginative region, with its own colonial history, while humour represents a unique form of textual method through which the ‘othered’ regional identities are re-negotiated.

## Regions, narrative identities and literary humour

In contemporary regional planning, regional identity is commonly associated with regional competitiveness. Within this context identity discourses become mobilized in planning processes, mostly by political leaders, usually

with certain economically oriented interests (Zimmerbauer 2011; Paasi 2013). The role of human imagination is crucial in terms of how regional identities become established and meaningful: identities are narrations, constructed through imagination (Somers 1994). In the context of the present study, the institutional nature of literary imagination is interesting and important. Said (1978: 52), for instance, underlines how rather than through mimetic cultural artefacts, such as sculptures and pottery, in the West the Orient was learnt through literary imagination, through books and manuscripts. For Said, the Western literary imagination encapsulates a structural function through which regional injustice is established, a resource through which spatial and regional meanings are negotiated.

Over the history of the geographical study of literature, better known as ‘literary geography’, a number of approaches towards the connection of space and literature have been established. In the 1960s it was discovered in the context of regional geography how fluently novelists were capable of describing regional ‘personalities’ and how by that means literature can provide an invaluable research ‘database’ for geography (Gilbert 1960; Paterson 1965). Places become individuals with their own unique features and specific ‘personal’ characteristics. For a long time it has been argued that characteristic to all regional literature is its focus on man’s relation to his environment and the ‘everyday life of a locality’ (Darby 1948: 426).

Although Paasi, a scholar of regional geography and border studies, is not known for his interest in geographical studies of literature, in the 1980s and 1990s he

published interesting papers in which the connection between regional identity construction and literature was discussed (Paasi 1984a, 1984b; Karjalainen & Paasi 1994). Paasi perceives literature as a form of sociocultural institution and emphasizes how regionalist literature constructs and offers ideals and criteria about the spatial identity, stories about on what grounds ‘we’ are different compared to ‘them’ (Paasi 1984a: 56). Literature situated in a certain region is not only about reflecting and describing regional identity, but it also functions as an active participant in the processes whereby regional identities are socially constructed and mediated into people’s regional consciousness (Paasi 1984b: 114). In that sense the very idea of a region as an individual actor as well as regional consciousness are constructions which become established through literary narrations. In similar vein Tomaney (2007: 355) has emphasized the storied nature of regional identity and argues that “collective identities are not pregiven, but draw on discourses to which intellectuals, cultural producers, and political leaders contribute”.

When analyzing narrations, specific attention should be paid to the forms and styles through which the identity narratives of regions become structured and emplotted (see Ridanpää 2010a). Humour, a narrative ‘technique’ to provoke laughter, is in many ways connected to spatiality (see more about the geographical studies of humour in Ridanpää 2014a). What is underlined in this paper is that humour contains unique potential to contest prevailing power relations and hegemonic narrations, especially for re-narrativizing regional histories and identities (see also

Ridanpää 2007, 2014b). In this paper I pay specific attention to how humour is used as a narrative tactic in the re-construction of Tornedalen's regional identity. The intention is to dissect the connections between regional marginalization, narrative identities and the manners in which literary humour works in order to re-create unique and novel forms of imaginative geographies.

### **Mikael Niemi's Vittula: Where is our identity?**

*"For there is no doubt that imaginative geography and history help the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far away." (Said 1978: 55)*

Although being acquainted with the sociopolitical discourses behind humorous narrations is not necessarily a prerequisite for laughter, it may offer additional dimensions to the story, perhaps even a completely new viewpoint for perceiving the history of a territory in which the narrative, in this case Niemi's *Populärmusik Från Vittula*, is situated. When Finland was incorporated into Russia in 1809, the border between Sweden and Russia was placed at the Tornio River, in the middle of a culturally coherent, Finnish-speaking region. A part of the Finnish-speaking population was left in isolation beyond the border, their Finnish developing into a language of its own called Meänkieli ('Our language'). From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Finnish-speaking regional minority on the Swedish side of the Tornio

Valley was subject to powerful linguistic and cultural integration pressures (see Elenius 2002), being regarded as representing an ethnically inferior population, an 'other'. This reverberated in several social practices, as for instance speaking Finnish/Meänkieli in schools was forbidden during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (see Júlíusdóttir 2007: 41). The hostility continued throughout the early 20<sup>th</sup> century until relations with an independent Finland improved (Hult 2004: 188).

Although the issue of the social status of the Meänkieli-speaking minority had been a subject of much debate and work at the local and regional levels (Prokkola & Ridanpää 2011), the region aroused little national or international interest until Mikael Niemi, a novelist from the small community of Pajala in Tornedalen, published *Populärmusik Från Vittula* in 2000. *Populärmusik Från Vittula* is a humoristic story focused on a young Finnish/Meänkieli-speaking boy Matti and his friend Niila growing up in Tornedalen. The story follows life in Pajala in the 1960s and '70s, and as the title of the book already alludes, the main focus is on the arrival of influences of modernity into the young boys' life in an overtly conservative and backward Laestadian village. The story is not just funny but also sarcastic in several ways, the irony stemming from features characteristic of the local and regional culture, such as respect for religion (Laestadianism), patriarchalism and masculinity, and also stereotypes concerning Finnishness with its primitive qualities. Therefore, being familiar with the discursive history of the Tornedalen definitely helps to understand Mikael Niemi's irony.

Conventionally it has been considered that the content of literary descriptions of regions stems from the positive feelings of regionalism, as a form of love (Brace 1999). In this sense regional identity comprises not all the features from the region but rather those selected few which people who identify themselves with it can be proud of. Although anti-regionalism is not the emphasis of Niemi's novel, his manner of representing Tornedalen through sarcasm is overwhelming throughout the story. Niemi's Tornedalen is something to be ashamed of, a narration about what being different, in a negative way, means in everyday life:

*"We gradually caught on to the fact that where we lived wasn't really a part of Sweden. We'd just been sort of tagged on by accident." (...)*

*"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. Our last names were unspellable, not to mention being unpronounceable for the few substitute teachers who found their way up north from the real Sweden." (Niemi 2003: 48-49)*

I have previously argued that Niemi's Tornedalen is a narration about a region with no identity (Ridanpää 2014b). In the previous excerpt this becomes stated literally, "we had enough to get by on – but a lack of identity", but the matter of lacking or possessing an identity is probably not as simple as the quotation implies. In fact, through pessimistic sarcasm Niemi constructs a pretentious identity narrative

for Tornedalen by simply turning the logic of how regional identities should be expressed upside-down. The classic form of irony, to express something that differs radically from the actual intention of the argument in a literal manner, thus works as a tool with which regional stereotypes can be re-narrativized (compare with Ridanpää 2010b). In order to succeed, or be emancipatory, irony/sarcasm needs to provoke its readers to figure out and ponder the discursive nature and structure of the arguments stated in narration. The above passage continues:

*"We were useless at conversation, reciting poems, wrapping presents, and giving speeches. We walked with our toes turned out. We spoke with a Finnish accent without being Finnish, and we spoke with a Swedish accent without being Swedish.*

*We were nothing." (Niemi 2003: 49)*

In this excerpt the narrative identity of the Tornio Valley is constructed by sarcastically over-emphasizing the differences between 'them' and 'us'. The word 'we' is used here 24 times, and the word 'our' six times, within one page. There is no doubt that *Populärmusik från Vittula* is a narrative about the sense of belonging to a community with the use of regional scale. Although it has been argued that Niemi's Pajala is far cry from traditional regionalism, but rather some form of 'fictive geography' with its own fictive world named 'Pajala' (Carlson & Leppihalme 2010: 170), Niemi's novel directly confronts the question of what living in an internally othered region actually means for people living there. In the lives of the young boys, being the other within

Swedish society and the nation-state of Sweden means distance from modernity, especially from popular culture. In the novel, the clash with modernity ultimately begins when a new school teacher with all sorts of modern influences, especially the electric guitar and popular music, arrives to Pajala from southern Sweden. However, this does not mean that there wouldn't be anything to laugh at:

*“Greger had another remarkable talent. He could speak Tornedalen Finnish. As he was from Skåne, everyone 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. Old men and women swore blind they had conducted long and informative conversations in meän kieli with this outsider with the burr.” (Niemi 2003: 148)*

The new teacher from the south is a gateway from marginality to modernity, to popular culture and popular music, but still it is the differences in language that are the key markers of differences between regions: “Then he went over to blues, and pretended to sing like a black man – which was easy for him as he came from Skåne” (Niemi 2003: 151). As Agnew (1999: 92-93) has highlighted, defining regions as exclusionary through the ontological perspective of realism, or through its ‘counterpart’ constructionism, does not make any practical sense, since, as in the case of Niemi’s Tornedalen, linguistic borders are in terms of realism the cultural ‘facts’ through which the regions become constructed.

According to Vainikka (2012: 600), “the personal, existential dimension of spatial identification is largely fastened to smaller-scale localities and municipalities, and as a contextual phenomenon it is influenced by numerous attributes, such as childhood and everyday landscapes, social networks, the generational viewpoints, cultural traditions, mobility and media.” It is important to emphasize that Niemi’s novel, which firmly addresses the logics of regionalism, is not an identity narrative situated only on the regional level but also on the local level – a level which in the novel is split into several smaller spatial units, consisting of a few short roads. Spatial identification happens simultaneously on and over many spatial layers, through various sociocultural practices, which all have their own unique meanings for different people.

## Discussing a step further

This paper has discussed the imaginative nature of an ‘othered’ region, while less emphasis has been paid to the role of borders and bordering (about the borderland identity of Tornio Valley, see Paasi & Prokkola 2008; Prokkola 2009). The reason for this is simple: as mentioned at the onset, if in Paasi’s theory of the institutionalization of regions the process of attaining formally legitimized bordered shape is crucial, in Said’s Orientalism the haziness of regions, as an outcome of colonialist endeavours, is underlined. Niemi’s narration of Tornedalen is, naturally, not the only version of Tornedalen’s ‘othered’ identity. Another interesting narrative work is Bengt

Pohjanen's 'Meänmaa (Our land) project', in which art, mostly literature and folk opera, is used to catalyze the institutionalization of regional identity (Prokkola & Ridanpää 2011). Since 2008 it has been possible to buy a Meänmaa Passport and acquire citizenship in a 'country' which also publishes its own "official" newspaper informing about and reporting on various activities and events in the region. However, Pohjanen's Meänmaa does not possess an established role in the national region systems, and although even the map of Meänmaa with its hazy territorial shape has been published, the region does not have fixed boundaries, a prerequisite for common institutionalized regions such as the provinces of nation-states (see Paasi 1991).

Although one would not imagine that the regional identity of Niemi's Tornedalen would be anything to be proud of, local actors have nevertheless taken advantage of the success of Niemi's narration of the marginalized region. The success of Niemi's novel, and especially the film adaption, has turned Pajala into a 'literary place', a tourist destination staged for pilgrims hungry to step into the footsteps of their favourite author (Ridanpää 2011). These 'literary pilgrims' can pick up maps and leaflets at the local tourist office which guide the visitor through the roads of Pajala to places and sites familiar from Niemi's novel. The map consists of a brief sketch copied from the local map, filled out with amusing drawings and short excerpts from Niemi's novel, in which the main character, Matti, in performative manner describes what these sites had personally meant for him. Still, heritage work is not only about taking

money away from enthusiastic tourists, but also plays its own unique role in the process of converting literary imagination into a tangible part of people's regional identity and self-consciousness. With a little humour, of course.

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