

Nordic Music Videos

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Chapter 4

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4 Naked, Natural

Female Body Positivity and Agentic Sexuality in Nordic Pop Music Videos

Anna-Elena Pääkkölä

Music videos are often derided as promoting sexiness or normalizing ‘porn chic’, which is unsurprising considering the prevalence of scantily clad bodies alluringly displayed in many popular videos.¹ Nordic cultural attitudes towards nudity in public spaces, however, are far more lenient than in anglophone global popular culture, which might lead one to assume that the same is automatically true of music videos. But this should not be taken for granted. It is necessary to examine specific cultural differences in attitudes about acceptable nudity when discussing sex and sexuality in music videos. This is the premise of my discussion of women artists from Finland, Denmark, and Sweden who exhibit partial or full nakedness in their music videos. With reference to the concepts of burlesque, naturalness, and Nordic exceptionalism, I will discuss what Paha Matami, Jada, and Tove Lo communicate about body positivity, sexuality, and female empowerment.² I posit that, while Nordic attitudes towards nudity and sexual expression are open-minded, they nevertheless also articulate normative Nordic conceptions of sexuality.³

In this article, I employ approaches from cultural musicology and music video studies together with feminist research on the Nordic region, the last of which casts important light on some of the intricacies of Nordic sexualities and nudity. Critical whiteness studies is also conspicuously relevant to these discussion, as Nordic whiteness is a highly idealized category of whiteness, which can all too easily fall into exotic stereotypes.⁴ This is not, however, an excuse to overlook research on whiteness or its significance to the region: whiteness exists as ‘normality’ and is visible even when people of colour (POC) are not present.⁵ In this article, whiteness is seen as an identity category that is constantly constructed, reproduced, and consumed in the public performances of artists and music video makers.⁶

Nordic Nude Bodies, Sexuality, and Whiteness

Traditionally, Nordic whiteness in Anglophone cultures has been framed as synonymous with Protestant tropes of purity and chastity.⁷ In popular culture today, in contrast, Nordicness is often aligned with ideas about sex positivity, even hypersexualization.⁸ This can be attributed especially to Sweden’s and Denmark’s global reputation of openness in matters of sexuality, a perception that is linked to the growth of the pornography industry in both countries in the 1970s.⁹ There are some concrete differences in attitudes towards sex and sexuality between anglophone

cultures and the Nordics. For example, in the Nordic context, the ‘sex wars’ which originated in the US feminist movement were more about pornography as a social problem attached to the oppression of women and sexual health rather than a sign of inherent vice, loose morals, or internalized patriarchy.¹⁰

The racialized repercussions of women expressing acceptable sexual liberty in the context of Nordic popular culture (and music) have been largely unexplored. To address this, I draw on research from whiteness studies to explore whiteness as a racial category instead of being a default state—in the words of Richard Dyer, ‘whiteness needs to be made strange’—in order to recognise how it functions as a site for privilege.¹¹ Exoticizing and stereotyping connotations of Nordic whiteness, which Kristinn Schrann calls borealist, could include stoic character, the toughness required to live in a harsh natural environment, poverty, and even barbarism. Borealist depictions, popularized especially within the last ten years, cast Nordic cultures in a special imaginary sphere comprising elements of fantasy and harshness, both of which have been exploited also by Nordic artists in their marketing strategies and aesthetic profiling.¹² Nordic whiteness is, moreover, sometimes connected with the notion of ‘Nordic exceptionalism’, which implies identity constructions defined with reference to the Nordic welfare state model.¹³ Values that (arguably) inform the Nordic welfare state model include antiracism, gender equality, and detachment from a colonial past. Attaching these qualities to Nordic whiteness therefore assigns to it the moral high ground, in contrast to other Western cultures, which supposedly exempts people in the Nordic countries from the burden of racist thinking.¹⁴ This is manifested in a specifically Nordic form of ‘white innocence’, which insists that skin colour ‘does not matter’ and that class-based inequalities are not present in Nordic social life or politics.¹⁵ Anyone suggesting otherwise can be perceived as ‘letting down the side’, or in the case of foreigners, failing to understand the nuances of the Nordic system—either maliciously or through lack of education. This becomes an excuse for Nordic countries to opt out of discussing systemic or structural racism, which would reveal whiteness as arguably the most important factor in determining social privilege: white equals Nordic, non-white equals non-Nordic.¹⁶

In the cultural sphere, Nordic exceptionalism can be brought into dialogue with ideas about the inseparability of nudity from perceptions of Nordicness. Philip Carr-Gomm distinguishes ‘nudity’ from ‘nakedness’ as demarcating the difference between public and private states of unclothedness: ‘nudity happens in art, nakedness happens in your bathroom’.¹⁷ I would argue that this does not apply in quite the same sense to Nordic cultures, as public and private spaces become blurred in the context of sauna culture. This modified form of private-yet-public nakedness can also have nationalistic associations, such as purity and closeness to nature.¹⁸ Adding ‘white innocence’ to Nordic conceptions of nakedness is to see it as normal and to scoff at cultures treating it as spectacle or sexual titillation. A more precise differentiation between nudity and nakedness is made by John Berger:

To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order

to become a nude. (The sight of it as an object stimulates the use of it as an object.) Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display. To be naked is to be without disguise. To be on display is to have the surface of one's own skin, the hairs of one's own body, turned into a disguise which, in that situation, can never be discarded. The nude is condemned to never being naked. Nudity is a form of dress.¹⁹

Berger's distinction is similar to Carr-Gomm's, but with an important difference: nakedness has agency that nudity does not. Hence, we can assert that Nordic artists can readily claim that their artistic nakedness represents naked innocence rather than nude spectacle. Even if their nakedness is performed in public, you are *not supposed to* act as the desiring gaze-holder, because Nordic nakedness and sexuality are 'good and healthy'. If you do, you reveal yourself as not understanding the Nordic natural nakedness.

'Less acceptable' expressions of exaggerated, carnivalized, or parodied sexuality/nudity are also often frowned upon and seen as non-Nordic expressions of sexuality.²⁰ Different spaces, public and private, are structured around Nordic whiteness, and bodies that differ from this rule are considered deviant or dangerous.²¹ White privilege, fuelled by white innocence, affords the power to reject differing bodies from public 'white spaces', or to dispute experiences of racialized tension within them. The salience of this issue is hard to avoid when considering Nordic music videos, or indeed, the music industry, which are predominantly white spaces. Non-white Nordic artists are currently on the rise, but in searching for examples for this article, I noted that most women of colour don't reveal much skin in their music videos, even if their songs suggest it.²² The apparent absence of sexualized non-white bodies in current Nordic music videos might be explained by taking in account the feminist spirit that has engulfed popular culture since around 2015, with feminist musicians criticizing how women are still seen as sexual objects in the public eye. This seems to be doubly true of POC and immigrant women: no matter how obviously they parody sexism and try to avoid the male gaze, white privilege always assigns them as being public property through the objectifying, desiring gaze, even if they wanted to perform innocent, Nordic nakedness.²³ The question remains, however: is artistic nakedness an exclusively white practice in the Nordic region?²⁴

My task is to find Nordic strategies of challenging the male gaze in my examples while examining their intersectionality.²⁵ I've chosen three music videos from Nordic pop that feature some level of nude skin presented by body-positive artists. I problematize the performances of nakedness and observe how the artists' music production and voice politics contribute to their body-political messages. I treat the three examples as contextually and culturally bound examples, while approaching them through Nordic feminist theories and theories of Nordic whiteness. I discuss nakedness in these examples with the help of three distinct aesthetic strategies, which I regard as particularly relevant to the examples in question: burlesque and hip-hop aesthetics (Paha Matami), naturality (Jada), and Nordic exceptionality (Tove Lo).

Burlesque and Hip-Hop Aesthetics in ‘Träppäsin sun äijän’

Paha Matami (Juuli Linneo) is a Finnish hip-hop artist who caused a stir in the Finnish tabloid press with her first single, ‘Träppäsin sun äijän’ (2021) by exhibiting her twerking skills alongside two dancers. Twerking originally came to Finland in the latter part of the 2010s, becoming a topic of feminist critique when the artist and dance instructor Tinze (Tia-Maria Sokka) released the song ‘Bakara’ (a misspelling of the Finnish word for buttocks, *pakarat*; 2020). Her artistic contribution was limited to twerking; the music was performed by rap duo Teflon Brothers and rap artist F (Fanni Sjöholm). Later, F apologized for participating in the single, as the music video, featuring no POC dancers, was accused of being racist. The music video exemplified a problematic tendency in white logic: it simultaneously sexualized and erased black bodies. It was criticized by several black Finnish twerking instructors, who claimed that Tinze’s failure to respond to criticism delegitimized black experiences, diminishing twerking to a titillating dance technique for white people to use and monetize.²⁶

Paha Matami, whose artist name loosely translates as ‘bad big/old woman’, emphasizes body and sex positivity by promoting her own bigger body as sexually alluring and agentic. Matami’s music video also borrows from black (hip-hop) culture and sexualizes twerking, but unlike Tinze’s, it features a black dancer. The video depicts ‘alpha women’ going out at night and picking up a shared man for sexual endeavours.²⁷ Matami’s video could be seen as empowering all bodies while respecting cultural heritage. Showing a combination of big white bodies and black ones in a body-positive manner overturns a doubly offensive stereotype about sexuality, which sees black or big female bodies as ferocious and sexually insatiable; in other words, these are bodies that are both equalling the Hottentot Venus stereotype.²⁸ Depicting black and/or fat sexualized bodies as strong and agentic, then, threatens the patriarchal logic of ‘acceptable’, passive female sexuality. For example, the video’s lapdance sequence (1:13–1:26; see Figure 4.1) happens between the artist and one of her female backup dancers, who switch the positions of ‘twerker’ and ‘twerkee’ in different shots. It could be argued that this



Figure 4.1 Paha Matami’s lapdance sequence.

performance panders to the male gaze by toying with lesbian sexuality.²⁹ On the other hand, the performance democratizes the power balance between artist and backup dancer, since both are delivering and enjoying the choreography. This creates a safe space for exhibiting their sexuality, the emphasis being on female collaboration and body/sex positivity.

Matami combines hip-hop aesthetics with burlesque in her use of sports clothing, fishnet stockings, and feather poufs. Combining the two affirms the big body as sexy but also keeps the performance in the sphere of Nordic 'good' sexuality. H el ene Ohlsson has examined how Nordic opera divas working in the United States in the nineteenth century constructed their public images as either 'angelic' or 'sporty' to avoid sexualized, femme fatale types.³⁰ The same logic applies today: pop performances by female artists, if not aiming for sexual representation, often rely on markers of (camp or girly) naivete or sportiness. Burlesque aesthetics grant the artist agency: 'burlesque performance redefines the fat body as an object of sexual desire and as a home to a desiring sexual subject'.³¹ Therefore, combining burlesque with sporty hip-hop clothes and sneakers affords Matami some authority: this is not 'mere' smut, but instead it allows the bigger body the respectability of being a body working out. The sexualized twerking movement is also a body experienced in specialized muscle work, sanitizing sexual connotations up to a point.

This brings us to themes of 'respectable' versus 'sleaze' concerning women's sexuality. Matami makes her art shocking through the use of deliberately 'dirty' sounds in the song. The four-bar loop relies on a downward-swooping analogue synth bass pattern which ties in with the hip-hop beat. Other sonic features include alarm-like synth sounds which create a noisy rhythmic cage for the song. I have previously suggested that Nicki Minaj 'envoices' her buttocks using specific drum sounds in her music video 'Anaconda' (2016).³² Similarly, the constantly downward-swooping bass finds its visual counterpart in the twerking buttocks of Matami and her dancers. The sharp alarm sounds are meant to cause sonic irritation, while Matami's soft yet mocking rapping with explicit lyrics exhibits confidence, agency, and pride. The artist has commented on how incredible it is that sexually agentic adult women are still seen as anomalies and shocking.³³ The song, then, is a challenge to passive feminine sexuality. This is similar to black US hip-hop artists' criticism but with a distinct difference.³⁴ While female US rappers are calling out 'misogynoir', Matami's criticism remains in the context of the white Finnish culture, extending only to class, not skin colour. Merl Storr aligns the discussion of 'sleazy' sexuality with class differences, or how the lower classes embrace sleaze while the higher classes vie for respectability.³⁵ Matami's performance invokes class differences through her use of thick Helsinki slang, implying lower-class status, while her sporty attire also makes her sexual performance relatable in relation to working-class logic.³⁶ If this sportiness excuses her lower-class connotations, the only reproachable theme remaining is the 'sleaze' or less acceptable sexuality, which in the Nordic understanding implies the unrestricted exhibition of sexuality and, perhaps, the 'non-Nordic' sounds of hip-hop and anglicized slang in the lyrics.

Performances of agentic feminine sexiness in hip-hop are often based on the ways black women artists articulate sex positivity. Most emphasize breaking

taboos about women's supposed passivity, but they also contest stereotypes of insatiable black women. For example, twerking need not be understood only as a sexual invitation; Adeerya Johnson claims that the movement also connotes 'joy, laughter, and pleasure that emerges from Black girl play and creativity'.³⁷ Seeing the movement as only sexual titillation 'comes from how the white hegemony and white mainstream culture has socially categorized all Black physical bodies as hypersexual and "freakish"'.³⁸ Comparing this to Matami's music video, even though one of her dancers is black, reveals a deeply embedded pattern of structural thinking. In Finnish hip-hop, and perhaps extending to Nordic cultures, combining female sexuality with black codes is acceptable if the performance is done with mainly white bodies. While Matami's treatment sanitizes twerking through homosexual codes and sporty attire, the music and the lyrics suggest a 'white ratchet' sensibility where black feminist messages are appropriated to the Finnish context, disregarding racial tensions.

This is not necessarily a deliberate racist strategy. Ben Pitcher remarks that thinking about race beyond racism is to acknowledge that 'racial meanings are not the property or possession of certain groups and individuals, but rather they belong to the realm of culture within which we all operate'.³⁹ Therefore, global understandings of hip-hop could also allow white women (and Matami) to explore play and experience embodied pleasure through twerking. However, the video exemplifies a 'white logic' where positioning white bodies in relation to non-white cultural markers assigns these bodies as sexy simply because whiteness is 'pure' and non-whiteness is 'smutty'.⁴⁰ As noted earlier, the white body does not have to remain in the realm of smut, as it can escape it as soon as the carnivalized performance is over; black bodies, however, struggle with this process because the racist imagination always/already sees them as smutty. Concerning Matami's body size, black coding enforces the stereotypes of hypersexuality but this is then thwarted through connotations of sportiness and respectability. In this way, Matami's performance of Nordic whiteness remains within the remit of Nordic 'good sexuality'.

Naturally Naked in 'Keep Cool'

A defining feature of Nordic identity is the ubiquity of the sauna culture; so much so that it is sometimes indistinguishable from national identity.⁴¹ The sauna features in folklore in most Nordic countries and has special meaning as a social meeting place for friends, families, and even strangers. It is also a venue for acceptable, even nationalistically encoded, nakedness.⁴² The sauna is commonly regarded as a desexualized place motivated by hygiene, relaxation, social interaction, physical well-being, therapy, and/or spiritual experiences.⁴³ Nakedness is therefore seen as innocence, a sign of sincerity, and comradeship. Here, I consider the sauna as a white space, motivated by Nordic innocence which sees the sauna as nonsexualized. Richard Dyer discusses the symbolic meanings of whiteness as implying a lack of materiality: as cleanliness (without dirt), morality (without sin), chastity (without sexual connotations), and universality (without cultural markers).⁴⁴ The sauna easily meets the first three criteria and perhaps the last one as well,

because the sauna is expected to be enjoyed by everyone. Not enjoying the sauna reveals a lack of normative Nordicness, extending perhaps to surreptitiousness and untrustworthiness. In Finland, the concept of ‘normalcy’ is played out in the sauna through the saying, ‘everyone’s equal in the sauna’; refusing to go to the sauna or being finicky about nudity will therefore set you ‘above everyone else’, putting on airs or thinking you are ‘better’ than the rest.⁴⁵ Seeing the sauna as a white space is further illuminated through a simple thought experiment. Adding deviant bodies to this space—for example, a male one to a female-only public sauna—reveals the sauna as a highly regulated, white, cis-, and heteronormative space. It also reveals nudity as white privilege: a person of colour in a public sauna is likely to make other users tense or self-conscious.

Jada’s debut single and music video ‘Keep Cool’ was met in Denmark with positive reactions. It was called a strong R’n’B song with ‘grooves, boobs and hella Nineties vibes’.⁴⁶ Many noted the music video’s positive atmosphere, in which women present themselves in the sauna and spa areas, enjoying their bodies without clothes, make-up, or pop choreography. Jada codirected the video with Stephanie Ståhl and commented on how she tried to recreate the women’s ward in spas as a place where people can do good things for themselves.⁴⁷ In a fitting gesture that exemplifies the tensions between Nordic and non-Nordic understandings of the appropriateness of nudity, YouTube soon flagged the music video as R-rated.

At this point, I would like to introduce the concept of ‘implied nudity’ as opposed to direct nudity to convey an important facet of music videos: while they might have a reputation for being overtly sexual, very few display actual nudity or nakedness. Instead, they are rife with implied nudity: skin-licking clothes, carefully selected fabric patches on sexualized body parts, or ‘offending’ body parts covered with props. This is similar to burlesque performances creating a narrative of undressing, which establishes a desire in the spectator to ‘see more’. However, the ‘end result’ is never quite seen, only implied, which becomes more titillating than actual nudity. Indeed, Barthes referred to a fully stripped woman as ‘desexualized’.⁴⁸ In performance studies, actual nudity is often seen as a mask, de facto the opposite of revealing everything.⁴⁹ There is, however, unresolved tension between Nordic and non-Nordic understandings of actual nudity, because ‘freeing the nipple’ or even breastfeeding in public means different things in Nordic countries to elsewhere.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, being confronted by naked breasts in music videos does not occur often, even in the Nordics. Jada’s music video presents women in their most relaxed state, showing their nipples to the camera and facing the audioviewer, not necessarily confrontationally, but still directly and without shame. Notably, the artist joins her fellow women in the same space, equally uncovered, although showing nipples for a shorter period than others.

Throughout the song, Jada’s singing is relaxed and soft, relying on R’n’B delivery and use of the head voice. Even the choruses, which are doubled at first and then separate into two melodic lines, do not resort to belting, but restfulness. Jada’s voice is interwoven with sleek pop synth sounds, an analogue bass line, and a drum machine beat featuring heartbeat-like kick sounds, rhythmically emphasizing

embodied presence. Shimmering synth sounds emulate the sounds of water hitting the heated stones above the sauna stove, while others create slowly rippling vibrato to convey watery or underwater spaces. Backing vocals are filtered as though underwater and reinforced by shots of waves and Jada singing from a bathtub, her body sinking into the water.⁵¹ A natural connection between Jada and the sauna is implied; she is making underwater spaces equally audible to those above the surface. Her audiovisual message seems to embrace the ideas of French feminist theorists like Cixous and Irigaray, who regard femininity as fluid, since Jada's music and voice production emphasize watery sounds.⁵² These function as symbols of a relaxed space where bodies and breasts of all sizes and shapes are allowed to exist and be visible. As the video progresses, the nude models are seated in bathtubs, two in each, coolly facing the cameras (2:37–2:52; see Figure 4.2). The bathtub embraces the bodies in a womb-like sanctuary of porcelain and warm water. Astrida Neimans regards water as a feminist symbol for connecting to one's own body and others: 'Water is between bodies, but of bodies, before us and beyond us, yet also very presently *this body*, too'.⁵³ Jada's models enact this in-betweenness concretely. With Jada's doubled vocals, her voice represents all bodies onscreen, suggesting that the water and the sauna's warmth (produced by evaporating water on hot stones) connect separate bodies; or indeed, that the bodies are in their natural, fluid worlds, bringing forward Neiman's 'hydrofeminist' camaraderie.⁵⁴

Still, a Sapphic interpretation is difficult to avoid. The 'white space' of the sauna forbids displays of same-sex desire, but Jada's music video continues to emphasize naturalness and softness even as these displays grow throughout the video. The first gaze exchanged between Jada and another woman happens at 3:28; then physical contact between everyone increases. Perhaps the audioviewer is encouraged to regard this as a 'natural' part of nudity, where touching other naked bodies is nonsexual. In other words, a 'Nordic gaze' informed by Nordic innocence sees Jada touching her fellow bathers as simply innocent and a sign of homosocial, not homosexual, behaviour. However, the presence of naked female bodies and the display of uncovered breasts seem naturalized only when there is no contact



Figure 4.2 Jada, second tub from the left, and her entourage enjoying their spa moment, facing the audioviewer.

between the women, and the embodied experience is conveyed only through music and Jada's singing. As soon as there is physical touching, tensions between natural and sexualized nudity become heightened. The atmosphere does not become 'smutty', but it is an unfamiliar context for a sauna as the function changes from single bodies receiving heat for health reasons to interrelated bodies embracing each other. The shift in context might still vouch for the naturalness of sexuality, but the function of nudity also changes. The insistence on the sauna as a nonsexual space becomes moot, revealing the fact that nudity in music videos can rarely be seen as nonsexual, as nakedness, even when the 'Nordic gaze' would insist upon it.

Nordic Exceptionality in Queer Sex(ualities): 'Bitches'

Tove Lo's music video *bitches* (2018) presents a cavalcade of artists who bring their solo verses to a song addressing sexual pleasure as a feminist right. With one exception (the British Charli XCX), all artists hail from Nordic countries: Lo and Elliphant are Swedish, Alma is Finnish, and Icona Pop features Finnish-Swedish Caroline Hjelt and Swedish-Gambian Aino Jawo. The music video is the quasi-cinematic story of a (supposedly) American heterosexual couple who take a course, gleefully instructed by the artists, in the fine arts of sex, but also feminism, respect, and caring for each other. The lyrics of the music video reassign a gender-neutral tone to the word 'bitches', implying people who don't know how to please a woman sexually. With this example, I return to the concept of Nordic exceptionalism, where traits of Nordic cultures are harnessed as proof of a welfare state model that produces equality.⁵⁵ In Nordic countries, women gained voting rights relatively early, which encouraged a tradition of feminist empowerment. Nowadays, this empowerment allows women to perform sexual themes in mainstream entertainment. Wencke Mühleisen regards this as epitomising 'Nordic New Feminism', a form of criticism born in the 1990s which aimed at seemingly equal Nordic gender politics but did not achieve sexual agency for women.⁵⁶ This resonates closely with the global strand of postfeminism. Moreover, as Nordic artists are becoming better known in the global pop sphere, Nordic New Feminism and its emphasis on affirmative attitudes towards sexual desire becomes a viable marketing strategy. Tove Lo's approach is indeed to demand attention and emphasize agency. Musically, the singing voices are paired with dirty-sounding, downward-swooping synth bass sounds, a sharp drum in a 4/4 drum comp, and a simple harmonic structure. Almost all the artists' voices are produced as sizzling with high frequencies, heavily compressed and situated dead centre in the mix, pushing them to the fore, demanding attention, and emphasizing agency. By wearing a baby blue jacket against her bare skin and tape-covered breasts, Tove Lo both invites and evades the sexualizing gaze. While the music might be 'smutty', the artists, their voices, and the lyrics are to be taken seriously.

The wide collection of artists admits a spectrum of sexualities, with the bisexual Tove Lo in the lead and Alma representing female homosexuals. All featured artists have claimed to support queer rights during their careers. In the video, they assume the position of instructors, knowing more about sex and sexuality than the

average North American couple. The narrative of instructing non-Nordic people in the ways of ‘proper’ feminist sex resonates strongly with the notion of Nordic exceptionalism: if sexuality is taken as a normalized thing, there are no taboos in expressing your sexual needs, nor in pursuing them (see Figure 4.3). Having qualms about your sexuality, in this regard, seems like a prudish American attitude, and something Lo and her featured artists place themselves above. The main theme of the song is cunnilingus or pleasuring female genitalia with your tongue instead of unprotected hetero sex. This is even represented musically: the lyrics ‘All the girls stare at me, drop lip, dripping in harmony, like a fifth’ describe cunnilingus as fifth-based harmonies (also audible in the song at this section), familiar from Gregorian chant and folk music; the Icelandic tradition of *tvísöngur* (twin singing in parallel fifths) is also relevant here. The use of Gregorian chant becomes humorous with its connotations of single-sex choirs and seemingly devout singing in a context where sexual interaction was denied or sublimated. In contrast, later in the song, the lyrics describe an insatiable female Goddess with eight breasts, demanding devout attention in the guise of sexual contact. Conservative-Christian values (Catholic and Protestant alike) are the targets of criticism: sexuality is not a sin or against sacrality, but (should be) very much a part of it.⁵⁷

Intersectionally, this music video is replete with content. Alma’s presence brings to the mix a lesbian perspective and represents perhaps the most pronounced hip-hop aesthetics of the bunch.⁵⁸ Educating the music video’s boyfriend about sex turns the idea of the Netflix show *Queer Eye* on its head: gay men can teach cis-men and women how to be sensitive and fabulous but leave the hardcore sex education to outspoken lesbians and queer women. Icona Pop’s Aino Jawo represents the contribution of an Afro-Nordic artist, which offers the possibility of contradicting my earlier claim about black female artists not being allowed or not wanting to represent themselves as sexually titillating entities. However, Jawo’s performance does not extend to innuendo like Tove Lo’s instructive performances of cunnilingus but remains bracketed off from explicit displays of sexuality.



Figure 4.3 Tove Lo, second from the right behind the table, using props in her educational moment for the couple in front.

None of the performers are naked, but Tove Lo marks her breasts with black tape covering the nipple. Because it is her song, it makes sense that Lo shows the most skin: she is building her brand instead of being an invited guest. Indeed, she has been known to reveal her breasts during live gigs.⁵⁹ Susanna Paasonen has claimed that the Swedish emancipated woman ‘takes the shape of activity, initiative, and availability alike’.⁶⁰ All three traits are present in Lo’s performance as she educates the couple without qualms, physically showing the sexual gestures and administering corporal punishment when the couple fails to repeat them. At times, Lo performs in the dead centre of the screen, facing the audioviewer, who is placed in the position of the clueless couple. This demand for attention when portraying overtly sexual gestures can also be a strategy for inducing fear: Brett Lunceford writes of rhetorical nudity and its potential to provoke unease as a ‘combination of unpredictability and disregard for commonly held norms’.⁶¹ As such, strategic implied nudity could be a new aspect of the ‘manic pixie dream girl’ trope that resexualizes the otherwise child-like, zany image of the pixie woman.⁶² Alternatively, the child-like trope rebrands the breast as white innocence, especially as the artist in question is Nordic. This ultimately deconstructs Lo’s nude threat and reveals it as play with conservative values: the joke, again, is on the audioviewer. Lo cannot be overlooked, however: the demand to consider the music and the message has been direct. Sexual services and, by extension, consuming Lo’s music, are not polite requests, but it is only a matter of time before they happen.

Conclusion: Naturally Naked?

‘Not all nude bodies are the same’, writes Brett Lunceford; it is context which gives power to the messages that implied or actual nakedness conveys to the public.⁶³ This also applies to my examples, where the revealing of skin functions as aestheticizing a bigger body (Paha Matami); as a sign of naturalness and feminine contact (Jada); or as a demand for attention (Tove Lo). Nakedness (implied or actual) functions in all my examples as a symbolic resource for Nordic cultures.⁶⁴ In other words, nakedness is a branding strategy which emphasizes connotations of (Nordic) naturalness and health in and beyond sexuality. However, most of these connotations are based on—and sanctioned by—idealized connotations of Nordic whiteness, which are not necessarily available to non-white artists. Furthermore, all the discussed artists emphasize body and sex positivity as a Nordic trait, which might help their branding in the global pop market but does not directly engage with or contest issues of equality in the Nordic countries, especially where racial or sexual minorities are concerned.

Where nakedness is depicted as natural by Nordic artists, it is possible to see it as a self-conscious deployment of Borealist-inflected open-minded attitudes towards sex and sexuality. It is not, however, a given that the artists escape hypersexualization in the non-Nordic context; their nakedness could still be regarded as a target of the male gaze, as nudity. This might also extend to Nordic women in general, reinforcing the idea of Nordic women as ferociously sexual. Naturalness is also comparable to cleanliness, which draws another line between ‘smutty non-Nordic’

and ‘clean Nordic’ sexualities, which are difficult to overlook as possessing racialized subtexts. The music of two of my examples is saturated with ‘dirty’ sounds through appropriations of the urban sounds of hip-hop, whereas Jada’s watery pop sounds connote cleanliness and hygiene, which in turn imply naturalness. As Matami and Lo make demands for sex in their lyrics, Jada’s main message is beyond sexual pleasure; therefore, the juxtaposition of Matami’s and Lo’s urban hip-hop and Jada’s close-to-nature pop sounds can be likened to ‘smutty’ sex and ‘clean’ embodied pleasure. However, Matami’s and Lo’s ‘dirty’ sounds are performed also in the context of sporty connotations, excusing them from the category of ‘mere’ smut. The presence of clean and natural sexuality is present in all three articulations of nudity, bracketing off ‘smutty’ sounds as belonging to non-white music.⁶⁵ This is not an intentionally racist strategy, but it reveals how whiteness functions as a measuring stick for acceptable (female) sexualities in the Nordic countries and, possibly, also in the Nordic music industry.

Notes

- 1 Diane Railton, “Sex and Music Video,” in *The Routledge Companion to Media, Sex and Sexuality*, eds. Clarissa Smith, Feona Atwood, and Brian McNair (New York: Routledge, 2017), 259; Feona Attwood, “Introduction: The Sexualization of Culture,” in *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualization of Western Culture*, ed. Feona Attwood (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), xiv.
- 2 Not all Nordic cultures share the stereotypical open-mindedness about revealing skin. For example, many conservative-Christian subcultures frown on exhibitions of sex or sexuality, including nudity. Furthermore, attitudes towards public nudity are context-bound. In Iceland, where the domestic sauna culture is not as strong and the hot spring culture depends on gender segregation in the public dressing rooms, nudity is not considered as naturally present as with Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland.
- 3 This article is a part of an ongoing research project, NorPopVid: Performances of Body and Voice Politics in the Music Videos of Women Indie Pop Musicians in the Nordic Region (Finnish Academy, 2020–2024.)
- 4 Catrin Lundström and Benjamin R. Teitelbaum, “Nordic Whiteness: An Introduction,” *Scandinavian Studies* 89, no. 2 (Summer 2017); Héléne Ohlsson, “Performing Nordic White Femininity: Two Swedish Divas in the U.S. in the Nineteenth Century,” *Nordic Theatre Studies* 32, no. 2 (2020).
- 5 Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 2017 [1997]).
- 6 Ben Pitcher, *Consuming Race* (London: Routledge 2014), 2–3.
- 7 Ohlsson, “Performing,” 62.
- 8 Jana Sverdljuk, Terje Mikael Hasle Joranger, Erika K. Jackson, and Peter Kivistö, “Introduction: Whiteness in Nordic Immigrants’ Identity Formation,” in *Nordic Whiteness and Migration to the USA: A Historical Exploration of Identity*, eds. Jana Sverdljuk, Terje Mikael Hasle Joranger, Erika K. Jackson, and Peter Kivistö (London: Routledge, 2021).
- 9 Susanna Paasonen, “Healthy Sex and Pop Porn: Pornography, Feminism and the Finnish Context,” *Sexualities* 12, no. 5 (2009).
- 10 Paasonen, “Healthy Sex,” 589, 599.
- 11 Dyer, *White*, 10.
- 12 Kristinn Schram, “Banking on Borealism: Eating, Smelling, and Performing the North,” in *Iceland and Images of the North*, ed. Sumarlídi R. Ísleifsson with the collaboration of

- Daniel Chartier (Quebec: Presses de l'Université du Québec, and Reykjavik: Reykjaíkur Akademan, 2011).
- 13 Sarah Philipson, Malin Holm, and Suruchi Thapar-Björkert, "Challenging Swedish Exceptionalism and White Privilege: Media Discourses on Rummet," in *Shades of Whiteness*, ed. Ewan Kirkland (Freeland, Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2016).
 - 14 These are, of course, fictitious to some extent. Arguably all Nordic countries have long histories of colonialism and existing problematic legislations concerning sexual minorities, hate crimes, or immigrants.
 - 15 Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* (London: Penguin Press, 2018), 62–63. Considering the shocking findings of eugenics that informed Swedish and Norwegian medicine in the past century and targeted the lower social classes and racial minorities, such as Romani people, this assumption is revealed as a complete falsehood.
 - 16 Philipson et. al., "Challenging," 93.
 - 17 Philip Carr-Gomm, *A Brief History of Nakedness* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), 7.
 - 18 Jack S. Tillotson, Vito Tassiello, Alexandra S. Rome, and Katariina Helaniemi, "The Spirit of Sauna: Legitimizing the Finnish Place Brand," *Journal of Place Management and Development* 14, no. 1 (2021).
 - 19 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 2008 [1972]), 48.
 - 20 Paasonen, "Healthy Sex," 589.
 - 21 Philipson et. al., "Challenging." See also bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre* (London: Pluto Press, 2000); Sara Ahmed, "Embodying Diversity: Problems and Paradoxes for Black Feminists," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 12, no. 1 (2009).
 - 22 For this, I mainly searched music videos by Nordic artists who have published music videos during the 2015–2020 period. These included Yeboyah (Finland), Mira Craig, Stella Mwangi, Lil Halima, and Noora Noor (Norway), The Mamas (Sweden), and Cherrie (Sweden/Norway). I found no black pop artists from Iceland. Danish artists include Sosa, FVN, and Nabiha Bensouda.
 - 23 Anna-Elena Pääkkölä, "Nicki Minaj's 'Anaconda': Intersectional Feminist Fat Studies, Sexuality, and Embodiment," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Popular Music Video Analysis*, eds. Lori Burns and Stan Hawkins (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019).
 - 24 Some exceptions to this can be found. Norwegian Mira Craig's music video 'Leo' (2012) toys with tropes of black female sexuality through depictions of jungles and animalistic clothes. Jada's lyric video 'Nudes' (2019) features Jada's fans (also including black and queer people) who sent in nude videos or photos of themselves.
 - 25 Pop feminism is still defining itself in scholarly debates, but it is understood here as feminism that is promoted through popular music. I consider it slightly different than what Banet-Weiser calls 'popular feminism', as she sees this brand of feminism as ultimately self-centred, white, and capitalist at heart. My understanding is more akin to Sheila Whiteley's, where feminism in popular music is an ever-growing phenomenon that, especially in the 2020s, embraces many identity categories and girly aesthetics while it encourages feminine misbehaviour and artistic creativity, and emphasizes physical and mental well-being. It can also bring to light serious themes such as women's rights, queer and trans rights, gun control, domestic violence, and #MeToo in the music industry. See Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (Durham: Duke UP, 2018); Sheila Whiteley, *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity and Subjectivity* (London: Routledge, 2000); Ann Werner, *Feminism and Gender Politics in Mediated Popular Music* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022).
 - 26 Aliisa Ristmeri, "Twerking supertähti Tinzen videoilla tanssivat valkoiset ihmiset, ja siitä häntä on kritisoitu jo vuosia – miksi hän puhuu tästä julkisesti vasta nyt?" *Yle.fi*, October 20, 2020, <https://yle.fi/aihe/artikkeli/2020/10/20/twerkin-supertahti-tinzen-videoilla-tanssivat-valkoiset-ihmiset-ja-siita-hanta> (last accessed April 16, 2024).

- 27 Noora Vilen, “Juuli nauttii seksistä, eikä häpeä sanoa sitä – ‘En ymmärrä, miten se voi vieläkin olla leimaavaa,’” *Iltalehti.fi*, March 13, 2021, <https://www.iltalehti.fi/mieli/a/816d5ee0-b5b8-47a5-a332-1f84b988d6ff> (last accessed April 16, 2024).
- 28 Wendy A. Burns-Ardolino, “Jiggle in my Walk: The Iconic Power of the ‘Big Butt’ in American Pop Culture,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: New York UP, 2009); Pääkkölä, “Nicki Minaj’s,” 366.
- 29 Tricia Jenkins, “‘Potential Lesbians at Two O’Clock’: The Heterosexualization of Lesbianism in the Recent Teen Film,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 38, no. 3 (2005).
- 30 Ohlsson, “Performing,” 62.
- 31 D. Lacy Asbill, “‘I’m Allowed to Be a Sexual Being’: The Distinctive Social Conditions of the Fat Burlesque Stage,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York: New York UP, 2009).
- 32 Pääkkölä, “Nicki Minaj’s,” 371–372.
- 33 Vilen, “Juuli nauttii.”
- 34 Karen Jaime, “‘I’m a Stripper, Ho’: The Sonics of Cardi B’s Ratchet, Diasporic Feminism,” *Performance Matters* 8, no. 1 (2022); Adeerya Johnson, “Dirty South Feminism: The Girlies Got Somethin’ to Say Too! Southern Hip-Hop Women, Fighting Respectability, Talking Mess, and Twerking Up the Dirty South,” *Religions* 12, no. 11 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12111030>.
- 35 Merl Storr, *Latex and Lingerie: Shopping for Pleasure at Ann Summers Parties* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 201–213.
- 36 Outi Aarresola, Hannu Itkonen, and Jari Lämsä, “Poikkeavat polut muuttuvassa urheilussa: rationalisoituvan urheilun nykysosialisaation nuorten tulkitsemana,” *Kasvatus ja aika* 9, no. 4 (2015). <https://journal.fi/kasvatusjajaika/article/view/68554>.
- 37 Johnson, “Dirty South Feminism,” 7.
- 38 Johnson, “Dirty South Feminism,” 8.
- 39 Pitcher, *Consuming Race*, 4.
- 40 Dyer, *White*, 74–75.
- 41 Tillotson et. al., “The Spirit of Sauna.”
- 42 Paasonen, “Healthy Sex,” 593.
- 43 Tillotson et. al., “The Spirit of Sauna,” 265, 267.
- 44 Dyer, *White*, 74–75.
- 45 See Mikko Lehtonen, Olli Löytty, and Petri Ruuska, *Suomi toisin sanoen* (Tampere: Vastapaino, 2004).
- 46 Hannah Jenkins, “‘Keep Cool’ Music Video: Grooves, Boobs and Hella Nineties Vibes,” *Girlsareawesome.com*, February 14, 2018, <https://girlsareawesome.com/keep-cool-music-video-grooves-boobs-hella-nineties-vibes/> (last accessed October 13, 2023).
- 47 Kjartan F. Stolberg, “Tag Med Jada I Kurbad i Ny Video til ‘Keep Cool’,” *Soundvenue.com*, February 14, 2018, <https://soundvenue.com/musik/2018/02/tag-med-jada-i-kurbad-i-ny-video-til-keep-cool-297174> (last accessed April 16, 2024).
- 48 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 84; Brett Lunceford, *Naked Politics: Nudity, Political Action, and the Rhetoric of the Body* (New York: Lexington Books, 2012), 118.
- 49 Kari Toepfer, “One Hundred Years of Nakedness in German Performance,” *The Drama Review* 47, no. 4 (2003); Barbara Brownie, *Acts of Undressing: Politics, Eroticism, and Disregarded Clothing* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).
- 50 B. J. Epstein, “Breast Versus Bottle: The Feeding of Babies in English and Swedish Picturebooks,” *Journal of Children’s Literature Research* 40 (2017). <http://dx.doi.org/10.14811/clr.v40i0.269>; Lunceford, *Naked Politics*, 39.
- 51 Yrjö Heinonen, “Vesi ja vesimaiset musiikissa,” in *Musiikki ja Luonto: Soiva kulttuuri ympäristökriisin aikakaudella*, eds. Juha Torvinen and Susanna Välimäki (Turku: Utukirjat, 2019).

- 52 Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, 1 no. 4 (Summer, 1976); Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia UP, 1991), 37.
- 53 Astrida Neimans, "Hydrofeminism; Or, On Becoming a Body of Water," in *Undutiful Daughters: New Directions in Feminist Thought and Practice*, eds. Henriette Gunkel, Chrysanthi Nigianni, and Fanny Söderbäck (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
- 54 Neimans, "Hydrofeminism," 85–100.
- 55 Philipson et. al., "Challenging."
- 56 Wencke Mühlesen, "Mainstream Sexualization and the Potential for Nordic New Feminism," *Nordic Journal of Women's Studies* 15, no. 2–3 (2007).
- 57 Lunceford, *Naked Politics*, 114–115.
- 58 Hanna-Mari Riihimäki and Anna-Elena Pääkkölä, "Alternative Femininities, Voices and Queer Body Politics in Alma's 'Dye My Hair'," in *Made in Finland: Studies in Popular Music*, eds. Toni-Matti Karjalainen and Kimi Kärki (New York: Routledge, 2020).
- 59 See Amelia Wynne, "Tove Lo Flashes Her Bare Breasts on Stage and Wears a Gold Corset with Fake Nipples Attached While Putting on a VERY Raunchy Display Performing in Birmingham," *MailOnline*, November 4, 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-11389637/Tove-Lo-flashes-bare-breasts-puts-raunchy-display.html> (last accessed April 16, 2024).
- 60 Susanna Paasonen, "Smutty Swedes: Sex Films, Pornography, and the Figure of Good Sex," in *Tainted Love: Screening Sexual Perversities*, eds. Darren Kerr and Donna Peberdy (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017).
- 61 Lunceford, *Naked Politics*, 120.
- 62 John Richardson and Anna-Elena Pääkkölä, "Regina Spektor's Small Bill\$: The Cute and the Manic-Zany as Body-Political Strategies," in *Popular Musicology and Identity*, eds. Kai Arne Hansen, Eirik Askerøi, and Freya Jarman (London: Routledge, 2021).
- 63 Lunceford, *Naked Politics*, 13.
- 64 Tillotson et. al., "The Spirit of Sauna."
- 65 See Paasonen, "Smutty Swedes," 120, 123.

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