

Nothing About Us Without Us: Impressions of the Skábmagovat Film Festival*

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Recently, the Sámi Parliament in Inari (Finland) passed a decision implementing a procedure to require the free, prior and informed consent of the Sámi in research projects on Sámi cultural heritage and traditional knowledge, as well as other measures that have or may have an impact on the Sámi cultural heritage and traditional knowledge¹. This decision by the Parliament represents the increasing activism around the Indigenous right to self-determination and Indigenous representation in decision-making processes, which include the ability to

define the narratives surrounding their culture and cultural heritage. This activism has also been present in the art scene, with Canadian filmmakers starting a movement using the slogan 'nothing about us without us'². In January 2019 I had the chance to experience one of the most northern film festivals in Europe: Skábmagovat in Inari. Along the lines of the law recently passed by the Sámi Parliament A.L. Utsi, the Director of the International Sámi Film Institute, wrote the following:

*"Indeed, it is essential that Indigenous peoples themselves can tell stories through their films, because it enables us to define, through our films, our past, present and future as well as who we want to be."*³

In this essay, I will discuss how Indigenous peoples⁴ of the Arctic are using art for cultural self-determination

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¹ Available at: https://www.samediggi.fi/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/menettely_saamelaisten_suostumuksen_tiedustelemiseksi.pdf (Accessed 17 February 2019).

² The 'nothing about us without us' movement, or in Latin *nihil de nobis, sine nobis*, can be traced back to the 16th century. In 1505, Poland adopted the Nihil Novi law, making sure that the noble men were involved in the decision making of the country after discontent because of their exclusion. (<http://polishfreedom.pl/en/document/on-not-laying-down-the-constitutions-without-consensus-of-the-counsels-and-envoys-nihil-novi>, accessed 17 February 2019). The disability movement started using the slogan from the 1990s, claiming that people with a disability themselves should be central in decision making, aiming at a society where full equality and inclusion is possible. (https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/nothing-about-us-without-us-mantra-for-a-movement_us_59aea450e4b0c50640cd61cf?guccounter=1, accessed 17 February 2019). The slogan is widely used by other activists too.

³ Skábmagovat 2019 Festival Booklet p. 52.

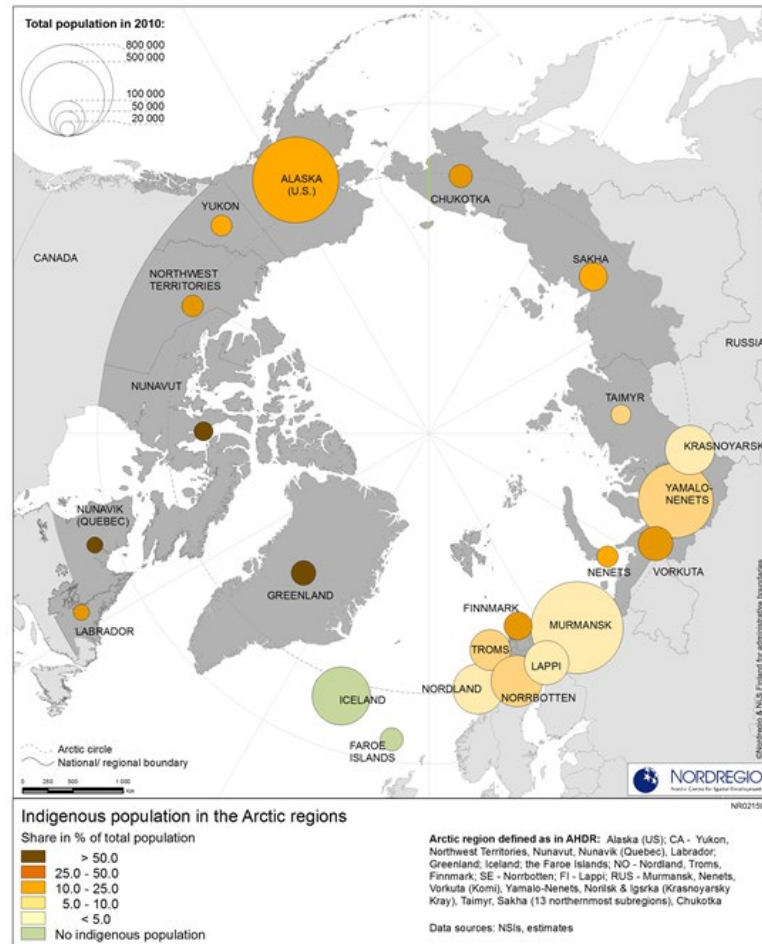
⁴ The University of British Columbia, *Indigenous peoples: Language Guidelines*, 2018 (version 2.0), available at http://assets.brand.ubc.ca/downloads/ubc_indigenous_peoples_language_guide.pdf (accessed 16 February 2019).

by reflecting upon my experience on the Skábmagovat film festival.

Who are the Indigenous peoples of the Arctic?

The Arctic region consists of both the Arctic Ocean and the parts of the eight countries, which are located above the Arctic circle: Canada, Denmark (Greenland), Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Russia and United States of America (Alaska). Although the first things coming into the mind of some people who do not live in the Arctic region when thinking about the Arctic region are snow, coldness, darkness and other features that would make the place unliveable according to them, the Arctic region has been a home to people for over 10 000 years⁵. Yet, because of harsh weather conditions and other environmental challenges, it is one of the most sparsely inhabited areas of the world. It is estimated that approximately four million people live in the Arctic region and the proportion of Indigenous peoples is estimated to be ten percent⁶. However, Inuit, Métis and First Nations peoples comprise half of the total population of the Canadian Arctic, and in Greenland, Inuit are the majority⁷.

There are roughly 40 ethnic groups living in the Arctic region, including Indigenous peoples such as the Inuit in Labrador, the Nenets in Russia and the Sámi in Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia⁸.



Source: <http://archive.nordregio.se/en/Maps/01-Population-and-demography/Indigenous-population-in-the-Arctic/index.html>

Although there is a diversity both across Indigenous peoples themselves and in

⁵ <https://arctic.ru/population/> (Accessed 17 February 2019).

⁶ <https://www.arcticcentre.org/EN/communications/arcticregion/Arctic-Indigenous-Peoples> (Accessed 17 February 2019).

⁷ <https://arctic-council.org/index.php/en/our-work/arctic-peoples> (Accessed 17 February 2019).

⁸ <https://www.arcticcentre.org/EN/communications/arcticregion/Arctic-Indigenous-Peoples> (Accessed 17 February 2019).

the Arctic states in which they are living, the Indigenous peoples of the Arctic region also share many commonalities. The Indigenous peoples of the Arctic region have a shared history of oppression under colonisation, cultural destruction and discrimination, including by enforcing boarding schools to 'civilise' the Indigenous peoples⁹. The legacy of colonisation is still present today, and the Indigenous peoples are confronted with narratives defining them as 'uncivilised people', who need to lose their Indigenous culture to become fully human¹⁰. On the other hand, besides the negative vision on the Indigenous culture in the Arctic, an exoticisation and a romanticisation of Indigenous peoples take place. Throughout time, non-indigenous authors have used caricatures and tropes of Indigenous culture in books and movies. The stories, for example, portray Indigenous peoples as the 'noble savages' by using elements of Indigenous culture without knowing or respecting these elements¹¹. The non-indigenous stories create a false narrative or caricature of the real

identity of the Indigenous peoples in the dominant narrative without consultation or recognition of the Indigenous peoples' struggles and history of oppression under colonisation. This can partly be described as cultural appropriation, which is defined as "the adoption of elements of a minority culture by members of the dominant culture. It is distinguished from equal cultural exchange due to the presence of a colonial element and imbalance of power"¹². One well-known example is the books of the German author Karl May about Winnetou, a Native American warrior fighting evil together with his non-native comrade Old Shatterhand¹³. Although this story is not about the Indigenous peoples of the Arctic, it is a good example to demonstrate the cultural appropriation of Indigenous culture and the disrespectful romanticisation of Indigenous peoples. This is also considered to be neo-colonial, with filmmakers taking the collective intellectual property of the Indigenous peoples for own usage without

⁹ For example: the Nenets in Russia, 2016, available at <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/photography/proof/2016/04/28/nenets-russia-boarding-school/> (Accessed 17 February 2019).

¹⁰ Secretariat of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, *Indigenous Peoples and Boarding Schools: A Comparative Study*, 2009, E/C.19/2009/CRP. 1, p. 3.

¹¹ <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/cultural-appropriation-of-indigenous-peoples-in-canada> (Accessed 17 February 2019).

¹² <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/don-t-dip-your-pen-in-someone-else-s-blood-writers-and-the-other-1.3533819> (Accessed 17 February 2019).

¹³ These books were made into a very popular film, the first one in 1965: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OKoOY-QEEuI> (Accessed 17 February 2019).

permission or without respecting the property and using these false or harmful narratives in the dominant narratives¹⁴.

Cultural self-determination, what's in a name

The act of non-indigenous authors using Indigenous culture and knowledge in their stories is a complex topic that can only partly be explained with the concepts of cultural appropriation and neo-colonialism. Other concepts, such as misappropriation of Indigenous knowledge and culture, and racism, are also relevant in this context. I decided to focus on cultural appropriation in this article, because that was the most apparent to me during my reflections upon the film festival. However, when talking about harmful narratives of non-indigenous authors about Indigenous peoples, it is important to acknowledge that it is a complex phenomenon with various factors at stake.

In the following part, I will take a closer look at romantic and stereotypical stories like the one about Winnetou with a human rights lens. Essentially, one of the underlying human rights issues with stories like the ones discussed before,

concerns self-determination, more specifically cultural self-determination. Self-determination is an important and vital human right for Indigenous peoples. Therefore, it is relevant to know what 'cultural self-determination' means, and what makes it so important. Where can we find this concept in the human rights framework, and how should we understand it? It must be remembered that all human rights are interrelated and indivisible, and the right to self-determination is no exception to that. In practice, this means that we can combine several human rights instruments to come to the interpretation and the meaning of the concept. Common Article 1.1 of the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) recognise the right of self-determination of all peoples:

*"All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development."*¹⁵

In the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), the right of Indigenous peoples to freely determine their cultural development

¹⁴ An interesting documentary about the thin line between cultural admiration and cultural appropriation was also shown at the film festival: Searching for Winnetou (2018) by Drew Hayden Taylor.

¹⁵ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (adopted 16 December 1966, entered into force 23 March 1976) 999 UNTS 171, Article 1.1.

and to revitalise cultural traditions and customs is recognised¹⁶. The UNDRIP also acknowledges the right to “maintain, control, protect and develop” their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, including concerning visual and performing arts¹⁷. “They also have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their intellectual property over such cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions.”¹⁸ Understanding the meaning of cultural self-determination shows why this concept is so important to Indigenous peoples in the context of filmmaking and cultural appropriation. Cultural self-determination means that Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their culture, something which was historically oppressed during colonisation. Cultural self-determination is the recognition, by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, that Indigenous peoples are the agents of their own culture. The right to cultural self-determination prescribes that Indigenous peoples should be able to be at the centre of filmmaking generally,

but even more (and maybe exclusively) at the centre of movies about Indigenous culture. Cultural self-determination is about cultural diversity and about creating a truly equal and inclusive society.

Cultural self-determination is exactly at the core of the recent movement by Indigenous Canadian filmmakers. They started adapting the phrase ‘nothing about us without us’ to highlight the need to put Indigenous peoples’ voices and artists at the centre of Indigenous storytelling, be it by the use of movies, theatre or books¹⁹. It has been called the ‘new wave’ of Indigenous cinema²⁰. In 2017 Jesse Wente, a broadcaster and Director of Film Programmes for Toronto International Film Festival, gave a speech at the annual conference of the Canadian Media Producers Association. During his speech, he focussed on the need of Indigenous stories to be told by Indigenous peoples. He said: “Our stories are our survival. That is why it is so important to us that we get a chance to tell them ourselves. That is why some of us are lobbying – hard – for dedicated funds to tell our stories. Because for us, this isn't about making a movie deal or

¹⁶ United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (adopted 13 September 2007) A/61/L.67 and Add.1, Article 3, 5 and 11.1. Hereafter: UNDRIP.

¹⁷ Article 31 UNDRIP

¹⁸ Article 31.1 UNDRIP

¹⁹ <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/film/canada-needs-to-give-indigenous-stories-the-platform-they-deserve/article34046186/> (Accessed 17 February 2019). See footnote 3 for the origins of the slogan.

²⁰ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/indigenous-film-panel-jackson-arnaquq-baril-wente-mccue-1.4704637> (Accessed 17 February 2019).

getting a network series, this is about our survival, and Canada's – because if you think this nation can exist without Indigenous people, then you just haven't been paying attention"²¹. According to him, reconciliation is about understanding that “consultation is not consent, and this notion applies not just to pipelines and mining operations, but to our stories as well”²².

Skábmagovat film festival

In the same spirit as the recent Canadian movement, the Skábmagovat film festival 2019 focuses on the cinema of Arctic Indigenous peoples and the need for Indigenous peoples themselves telling their stories through film. This year's slogan was “From the Arctic with Decolonial Love”. The festival focuses on the significance of dialogue, solidarity and cultural significance between the Indigenous peoples of the Arctic and universal love²³. In what follows, I would like to give an overview of the things I saw happening during the film festival. The following is a personal account of my experiences, and should not be taken as speaking broadly about

the experiences others at the festival may have had.

First, I will give a short background of this unique film festival. Skábmagovat is one of the oldest Sámi film festivals and one of the oldest Indigenous film festivals, celebrating its 21st edition this year²⁴. The film festival takes place in Inari, Finland. Almost one third of the citizens of Inari are Sámi and the municipality uses four official languages: Northern Sámi, Inari Sámi, Skolt Sámi and Finnish²⁵. The film festival takes place at two locations: Sajos and SIIDA. Sajos is a cultural administrative center that houses the Sámi Parliament. The Parliament is a self-governed body that aims to plan and implement cultural self-governance of the Sámi as Indigenous peoples²⁶. SIIDA is a museum exhibiting Sámi culture and the nature of Northern Lapland. The museum also has an open-air theatre, the “Northern Lights Theatre”, which is made of ice and snow for the Skábmagovat film festival.

²¹ <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/film/canada-needs-to-give-indigenous-stories-the-platform-they-deserve/article34046186/> (Accessed 17 February 2019).

²² <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/film/canada-needs-to-give-indigenous-stories-the-platform-they-deserve/article34046186/> (Accessed 17 February 2019).

²³ http://skabmagovat.fi/skabmagovat_2014/?page_id=189 (Accessed 17 February 2019).

²⁴ http://skabmagovat.fi/skabmagovat_2014/?page_id=11368 (Accessed 17 February 2019).

²⁵ <https://www.inari.fi/en/information.html> (Accessed 17 February 2019).

²⁶ <https://www.samediggi.fi/task/?lang=en> (Accessed 17 February 2019).



Inari municipality and Inari city.

Source:

<https://www.inari.fi/en/information.html>

Skábmagovat provides an accessible platform to screen Indigenous films and to actualize the concept of cultural self-determination, a concept that is more than just existing on paper. It creates many opportunities for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to experience Indigenous culture and to understand cultural self-determination. Skábmagovat is also a platform to create a variety of dialogues, and I will demonstrate this by sharing and discussing my experiences during the film festival.

One of the most prominent activities at Skábmagovat were the numerous dialogues created about the past, present and future of Indigenous peoples of the

Arctic through films and conversations about these films. 'Daughter of the sun', a short movie by S. M. Oskal, painfully displays how openly discriminatory and racist the society was against Sámi in the past and is even still today. Through the eyes of a Sámi woman, the audience sees how this affects a person in the past and the present. The documentary 'WE UP!: Indigenous Hip-Hop of the Circumpolar North' by P. N. Hensley and D. Holthouse is a surprising documentary about

Indigenous hip-hop. Through hip-hop, Indigenous peoples of the Arctic have found a new platform to discuss Indigenous issues like the fight for languages and rights. The documentary both introduces the young artists and their motivation to engage in utilizing hip-hop as a medium. It also shows the creation of an Arctic hip-hop ensemble, WE UP!, with Indigenous artists from all over the Arctic region working together. Throughout the movie, it becomes clear that they sing about similar issues in different languages and that hip-hop is a way to address this and to connect. 'Through reindeerherder's eyes' by A. Paltto is a documentary about the recent increase in the number of reindeer being killed by northern predators like wolverines in Finland. One of the ways Sámi sustain themselves is through reindeer herding, which is dependent

upon the well-being of their herd. Although the Finnish state provides compensation for the reindeer killed by predators, the procedure for documenting in order to receive compensation is not adapted to the reindeer herding life itself. Compensation is, for example, only given when the herder finds the dead reindeer, but when it is not freezing this is almost impossible to do before the reindeer is unrecognisable due to decomposing, considering the vast lands the reindeer roam on²⁷. On top of this, acts to protect wildlife have resulted in an increase in predators and thus the killing of the reindeer. Although this has been brought to the attention of the Finnish authorities before, no meaningful intervention has been undertaken so far.

Each film was followed by a discussion with the audience, where questions were asked and the directors spoke about their motivations and experiences behind the story. Often the conversation would continue outside of the theatre. Many of these films moved the audience, who was able to either sympathise or empathise with the struggles or issues presented. Meaningful and necessary conversation was given a much-needed space and time during Skábmagovat. Since the film festival took place in Inari, which is in the Sami cultural homeland, many audience members were either

Sámi themselves, or interested in the issues and topics discussed. Therefore, the documentary about the reindeer herding was very relevant to many of the visitors of Skábmagovat. The discussion after the documentary 'Through reindeerherder's eyes' was therefore also one of the most extensive, focusing on the inclusion of Sámi perspectives in the law, the influence of technology, and the meaningful preservation of nature. This discussion was emblematic of how the film festival was creating a space for conversation about the past, present and future of reindeer herding, an important aspect of Sámi culture.



Northern Lights Theatre at Skábmagovat

Besides the many dialogues, Skábmagovat also creates a platform for experiencing and displaying the Sámi

²⁷ Reindeer have a unique cut in the ear to identify the owner of the reindeer.

and other Arctic Indigenous cultures to people from diverse backgrounds and of various ages. It initiates an opportunity to tell stories to young Indigenous peoples about their background and culture. “As from of narration, cinema is the closest thing to the Sámi way of teaching.”²⁸ There were also performances organised, including from Inari hip-hop artists and joiks, a traditional Sámi way of singing. Skábmagovat creates a meeting place and a hub for new ideas and cultural coalitions. There is the creation of a community where the boundaries between director – spectator, young – old, fade away. It creates an atmosphere of inclusion. Skábmagovat shows that cultural self-determination is not only about setting right how Indigenous peoples were unjustly portrayed in the past. It is also about changing other people’s views about Indigenous peoples in the Arctic by taking narratives into their own hands. This idea of cultural self-determination was mirrored in the slogan of this year’s film festival: “From the Arctic with Decolonial Love”.

Decolonial love is a new concept to many people and with the aim of both introducing and explaining it, a panel discussion was organised. The origins of the concept of decolonial love come from Junot Diaz, a Dominican Republican

author who describes it as “the only kind of love that could liberate [...] from that horrible legacy of colonial violence”²⁹. Decolonial love is about social and political transformations and about accepting and acknowledging existing



Poster of Skábmagovat 2019

Source:

http://skabmagovat.fi/skabmagovat-2014/?page_id=189#

histories. It is “a practice that bears witness to the past while looking towards a transformative and reparative future by unravelling coloniality, the matrix of power that is manifested in our

²⁸ Skábmagovat 2019 Festival Booklet p. 53.

²⁹ <http://bostonreview.net/books-ideas/paula-ml-moya-decolonial-love-interview-junot-d%C3%ADaz> (Accessed 17 February 2019).

contemporary conceptions of power, gender, and bodies”³⁰. Decolonial love is the recognition of the violence of dehumanization and by doing so creating relationships based on love. “Bearing witness to violence, to the past, and even to the present, is central to achieving decolonial reparations.”³¹ Although decolonial love is not the same as cultural self-determination, both concepts go hand in hand and strengthen each other: cultural self-determination becomes more meaningful when it emerges out of the mind-set of decolonial love and decolonial love could be achieved, among others, through storytelling. Because the concept was new to many people in the audience, the discussion was mainly about explaining decolonial love. Yet, it became clear how relevant this concept could be in the future and how decolonial love could foster the healing process of the legacy of colonial violence.

The power of film

“One of the great acts of decolonization is to create. Make art. Tell stories.”³² That is exactly what one could witness during Skábmagovat: opportunities, stories, debates and memories were created

during the festival. Film is a powerful tool: it can both harm and heal; it can both destroy and create. Skábmagovat showed how film can be a medium to heal and create. While colonisation has played a negative role in the experiences of Indigenous peoples in the past, and continues to have a present legacy, Skábmagovat 2019 demonstrated that the future of Indigenous peoples in the Arctic is also one of empowerment and self-determination. By creating conversations about the past, present and future the film festival showed the true meaning of cultural self-determination and decolonial love. Skábmagovat is a film festival that leaves the audience with much to think about, many new impressions but mostly with a feeling of empowerment and the impression that you, as an individual, can make a difference, every day and every moment.

³⁰ Y. C. Figueroa, ‘Reparation as transformation: Radical literary (re)imaginings of futurities through decolonial love’, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2015, p. 44.

³¹ Ibid.

³² <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/film/canada-needs-to-give-indigenous-stories-the-platform-they-deserve/article34046186/> (Accessed 17 February 2019).