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**How Sámi Literature Matters:**

**The Significance of Literature for Cultural Identity**

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## 1. Introduction

In the Scandinavian Countries, Sámi literature has for a long time been notably absent from the literary scene. This is partly due to the precarious standing of Indigenous<sup>1</sup> literature in general, which in turn is caused by persisting (post-)colonial aftereffects, aggravated by the fact that the Sámi homelands, often called Sápmi, spreads over four national and numerous linguistic borders. In Norway, the Sámi literary scene is comparably vivid, largely owed to the fact that both the largest Sámi publishing company, Davvi Girji, and one of the most extensive collections of Sámi and Sámi related literature are situated in Karasjok. Last year, in 2019, Norway was the Guest of Honour at the Frankfurt book fair, the biggest and arguably most important of its kind, which in extension shone a special light on Sámi literature, prompting the publication of “new anthologies of Sámi prose and poetry [...] in both English and German” (“Sámi literature”).

The situation of the literary and cultural scene is further ameliorated by the deployment of book-busses that make Sámi literature and other Sámi media available to remotely situated small Sámi communities within the Norwegian parts of Sápmi.

But many Sámi do not live in their homelands anymore, which often puts their cultural identity into jeopardy, as Indigenous peoples are tied by definition to a specific geographical area that they are connected to in a much more substantial and holistic manner than the mere occupation of territory (see “Arctic Indigenous People”). Their ties to these homelands, that is their relationship to the land itself, their ancestors, and cosmology, are decisive and meaningful for their history and cultural identity. Literature is known to be able to connect people not only to each other over space and time but also *to* a specific place or time. The choice of literature is in all cases dependent on what the reader wants to connect to: If they want to connect to a certain place, for example, they will choose literature about or from that place. Similarly, if they want to connect to a certain culture they will choose literature written about or risen out of that culture. So it stands to reason to explore the significance Sámi literature holds for members of the Sámi community that do not live within the Sámi homelands in terms of cultural identity. In other words: How does Sámi literature affect the cultural identity of Sámi that grew up and live far away from their cultural epicentre?

Seeing that I myself am a white German scholar writing about Indigenous peoples, I have taken great care to include Indigenous scholars’ perspectives into my theoretic superstructure to ensure a meaningful and insightful analysis of the issue at hand.

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1 I made the conscious decision employing a capital ‘I’ and follow Daniel Heath Justice’s reasoning: “The capital ‘I’ is important here, as it affirms a distinctive political status of peoplehood, rather than describing an exploitable commodity, like an ‘indigenous plant’ or a ‘native mammal’. The proper noun affirms the status of a subject with agency, not an object with a particular quality” (6).

## 2. Methodology

This project seeks to understand in which ways Sámi literature serves as a building block for both cultural identity and social reality and wants to determine how it ties Sámi who live far away from their cultural epicentre to their Sámi community and therefore it employs qualitative research methods. Since I specifically want to apprehend the opinions and perspectives of a certain group of people about a rather specific if complex topic, I decided to mostly rely on semi-structured interviews that I conducted personally in the field.

### 2.1. Data Sampling

All the interviews were conducted in Bergen and its surrounding area because I have connections to some Sámi who live there and served as gatekeepers to the Sámi community and often as facilitators of interviews. Previous experience with fieldwork within the Sámi community has taught me that having an insider establish the contact with possible research participants is invaluable, as many Sámi are more willing to talk to an outsider if he or she is brought to them by another member of their community.<sup>2</sup> After the first two interview partners willing to ‘talk about Sámi literature and stories in the broader sense (more on this phrasing in the ensuing deliberations on theory)’ were found, I gained access to the others through snowball sampling, because they made it possible for me to also talk to their parents and grandparents, who in turn pointed me to several more possible interview partners. While there are warranted reservations against this kind of access strategy, as it might “have the effect of locking you into a particular social [...] network” and depending on the person who established the contact “change how you are perceived” and thereby affect the data’s validity in a limiting way (Lamont 147), in this case it proved to be enabling as it not only made more people willing to talk with me, but also diversified my pool of interview partners in terms of age and educational background: Initially consisting of people about my age with a university degree, I ended up talking to teenagers still attending high school and adults never having attended college, as well as people that are retired or close to retirement. This rather diverse assortment of interviewees ensures a certain degree of reliability of the data sample, which in turn adds to its validity.

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2 In the light of the anything but glorious history of researchers and Sámi well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century this is not very surprising.

## 2.2. Data Collection

As mentioned above, I decided on semi-structured interviews, as this form allows on the one hand for flexibility during the conversation, while on the other hand assures that a common theme can be maintained and one does not lose sight of the topic of interest or ends up in a conversational impasse. It also permits making comparisons between interviews since all the interview partners answer the same questions. In preparation, I composed an interview guide with some core questions that I deemed indispensable, paying special attention to phrasing them in an objective manner. Additionally, I prepared follow-up and specifying questions put in general terms (behaviour, values, emotions, relationships, experiences) in order to ceaselessly dig deeper should the conversation falter. Finally, I prepared the informed consent form that they signed for me before the interview started (see Appendix A).

Recalling experiences made last year when trying to set up interviews with Sámi in Northern Finland, I set the interviews up as group interviews, as interviewees were much less reserved and more relaxed when in the company of at least one other person who answered the questions. I did ask beforehand, however, if they would be more comfortable on their own, with a person they knew or somebody they did not know and if they wanted the facilitator of the interview around. As expected, none of them wanted to be interviewed alone, though preferences in regard to familiarity with the other interview group members was not as pronounced: The majority did not have a preference at all and only two people did not want another stranger being part of the interview. I also asked them beforehand to think about if they would be comfortable with me recording our conversation to make the transcription easier and to make sure they knew that they could back out at any time without giving any reasons.<sup>3</sup>

Having laid out my reasons to style the data collection process as group interviews, it is also vital to bring to mind that being and performing in a group changes the interviewees social role and speaking behaviour considerably. While being in a group of peers provides a sense of security and comfort, it might as well exert a significant amount of peer pressure and the need to ‘answer correctly’<sup>4</sup> might be increased due to the peers witnessing your testimony. To strike a balance between providing comfort and exerting peer pressure, I only interviewed two to three people at a time. This also changed the nature of the interview to a setting more reminiscent of a focus group, which in turn allowed me to

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3 After one of the prospective participants voiced some insecurities about being recorded or recognised I added that the recording would be deleted after the transcription was finished to the informed consent form and inserted an option to be anonymised (see Appendix A).

4 While the researcher is or should be fully aware that there are no ‘wrong’ answers in an interview, interviewees often struggle with this insight.

engage in a sort of small-scale participant observation, especially when interviewees ended up explaining experiences rather to each other than to me.

Where it was possible I recorded the interview, translated and transcribed it, and let the person who acted as facilitator for the respective interview check the translation. All the interviews were conducted in Norwegian, and while I speak it fluently, I deemed it necessary to have a native speaker revise the transcription, in order to secure the correctness of the translation. Since not all participants agreed to being recorded, I took notes during the interview in these cases and planned on transcribing them respectively. I ended up not including those into the project however, because the data provided by the recorded interviews proved to be exhaustive.

Since all the interviews were conducted in a rather informal setting – in the homes of the interviewees as libraries and many other public spaces were closed due to Covid-19 and because it was more convenient for them when I traveled to see them – I did not transcribe the entire interactions but rather the relevant sections (see also Bryman 483), due to interfering roommates or hospitality related intermissions, as well as time restraints.

### **2.3. Data Analysis**

In order to analyse my data I initially planned to code the interviews in order to organise the information and establish categories and themes that would develop into a thematic content analysis. Early into the coding process, however, it emerged that including some narrative analysis would be necessary to do the data justice: When asking about stories it stands to reason that one is in turn presented with stories. These stories are more often than not constructed to make sense of an event or action and keeping their temporal sequence intact is vital to their analysis (see Bryman 589f.). Aside from that, the process of coding itself proved to be tricky because a lot of the statements fit multiple categories and it is impossible to institute categories concerning cultural identity that do not overlap, as components that make up and influence identity are intrinsically intertwined and interdependent; stories and narratives serve several purposes simultaneously in a similar manner. While it is typical for qualitative content analysis to constantly revise categories and themes while examining and move “back and forth between conceptualization, data collection, analysis, and interpretation” (Bryman 559), it is equally important to find a way to organise those themes and categories. To lend some structure to the analysis, I put my findings in relation to theories on cultural identity and Indigenous literature that I will elaborate on in the next chapter.

At this point I would also like to point out that I am employing a combination of inductive and deductive theoretical approaches. Prior to my excursion to Bergen for the



sake of carrying out the interviews, I already had done a good deal of reading about Indigenous literature, the situation of the Sámi, and recent developments from different perspectives (Sámi and non-Sámi), which prompted me to form certain assumptions and hypotheses on Sámi literature and its significance in terms of cultural identity – this kind of approach is decidedly deductive. However, I also had the opportunity to reflect on those preconceptions and their extent, which made me very attentive to not let them overly influence my behaviour during the interviews or contaminate my findings, which is more in line with an inductive approach. I kept an open mind to the possibility of adapting my hypotheses and concepts according to my data, which resulted in an iterative process of moving back and forth between deductive and inductive positioning as my research moved along.

### **3. Theory**

Embarking to identify the ties between cultural identity and Indigenous literature entails touching upon several complex issues, particularly ‘cultural identity’ and ‘Indigenous literature’, that demand a thorough theoretical differentiation; their meanings and ramifications are by no means self-evident. In order to build a foundation I will first shine some light on literary theory in regard to Sámi<sup>5</sup> culture and cultural history. This is common practice in academic research written by Sámi scholars about their culture.<sup>6</sup> Thereafter, I will attend to the concept of ‘cultural identity’ and determine its meaning and implications for this project. Based on this theoretical groundwork I will develop the theoretical frame that will help me to structure my analysis and find meaningful answers to my research question. This frame will build primarily on Daniel Heath Justice’s recent work on Indigenous literatures and their significance for personal identity building, “healthy decolonization efforts and just expressions of community resurgence” (Justice xx).

#### **3.1. Literary Theory**

Situating Indigenous literature in general and Sámi literature in particular within the literary field is a comparably recent enterprise. The relative novelty of this undertaking is largely owed to the sparseness of published works and the fact that the meaning of the term ‘Indigenous literature’ is not self-evident: “For some readers, these two words together are

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5 I use ‘Sámi’ as collective identifier without paying attention to the manifold cultural differences within the group, be it in relation to occupation (reindeer, coast, and forest Sámi) or language (Southern Sámi, Ume Sámi, Pite Sámi, Lule Sámi, Northern Sámi, Skolt Sámi, Inari Sámi, Kildin Sámi, Ter Sámi.

6 See Gaski 33–54, Kuokkanen 91–103, and Paltto 42–58.

an oxymoron, an absurd assumption, political correctness run amok. For others, they are a revelation, a confirmation, an affirmation” (Justice 17).

This has mostly to do with Western stress on literate, that is written, culture as the benchmark of civilisation and high culture. Up until the last century it was common practice to distinguish between ‘civilised’ and ‘primitive’ people:

Eit av kjenneteikna ved kulturfolk var at dei hadde ein eigen nasjonal skriftkultur, slik til dømes nordmenn, svenskar og danskar hadde. Naturfolk, som samane, hadde ikkje det og var avhengig av kulturlån for å kunne utvikle seg kulturelt, økonomisk og sosialt. (Zachariassen 2)

One of the characteristics of cultural people was that they had their own national written culture, including Norwegians, Swedes and Danes. Primitive people, like the Sámi, did not have a written culture and were dependent on cultural loans to be able to advance culturally, economically and socially. (Trans. A. S.)

Employing those existing assumptions about the link between what we traditionally refer to as ‘literature’ and the value of a culture reinforces prevailing aesthetic standards and norms and stands in the way of advancing the field of literary and cultural studies. If one, on the other hand, engages with Sámi literature on its own terms, one is rewarded with a much broader and inclusive concept of literature:

If one leaves the Latin (and the English) for a moment and instead observes the question from a Sami language point of view, there is not necessarily a divide between the established binary opposition litera-*ture* and ora-*ture*. In Sami these terms are unified in what is usually the translation for literature, namely *girjjálasvuohta*. The term derives from the substantive *girji*, meaning "pattern" and "book." To the noun is added the ending *-las*, creating the adjective "patternly" (that is, something which follows a pattern or has something to do with patterns) in one meaning, and "bookly" (something which reminds of a book or has to do with books) in the other. From the adjective *girjjálas* one can again create a substantive by adding the ending *-vuohta*, so that the direct translation of *girjjálavuohta* would be "patternliness" and "bookliness," that is, something which follows a pattern or is pertaining to books. (Gaski 381; see also Kuokkanen 94f.)

The initial orality of Sámi culture is one obstacle standing in the way of the advancement of Sámi literature and it is closely connected to another, structurally even further reaching impediment, and that is the issue of language and orthography. As broached in the introduction, the Sámi homelands, also called *Sápmi*, spread over four national borders and the Sámi nation consists of at least nine distinguishable linguistic communities, whose native languages are not necessarily mutually comprehensive. This not ideal publishing situation is aggravated by the long-lasting lack of a standardised orthography – it was only “[a]fter years of negotiations, [that] a common orthography was accepted in 1979” (Paltto

49). This is due to the fact that Sámi culture was by and large an oral culture, and when the Scandinavian settlers arrived, their governments put discriminating language policies and assimilations measurements in place that led for many to the loss of their native languages.<sup>7</sup> It was mostly the vernacular that survived, the bits and pieces that were spoken at home or when working with the reindeer. This in turn entails that many who are able to speak Sámi are still not able to write it. In a world of text messages, email, and google, we quite literally navigate our social reality with words and letters, which makes literacy indispensable; not being able to write in your native language might spark a sense of deficiency, either of yourself or your language.

This leads us, last but not least, to the question of what constitutes a Sámi author and by extension Sámi literature: Is it enough to be Sámi or does one's literary work have to be composed in Sámi as well? The answer to this question remains highly contested within the Sámi community to this very day: Just in 2018, the Sámi Writer's Association, Sámi Girječálliid Searvi, decided to make it mandatory for the admission as member to not only be Sámi but publish in Sámi as well, which led to ongoing outrage of many associated authors (see Gaup and Nystad, and Skåden).

Language is beyond any doubt an important part of both culture and identity, and a decision like this has a pronounced political dimension, which makes this a good opportunity to take a step back and consider, however shortly, the concepts of culture and cultural identity in general before expanding on Sámi literature and Sámi identity.

### **3.2. Cultural Identity**

Before we focus on cultural identity it stands to reason to revisit what constitutes a culture: "Culture is a learned set of shared interpretations about beliefs, values, norms, and social practices", which means it is "taught by the explanations people receive for the natural and human events around them" (Lustig and Koester 25). The idea that culture is both 'learned' and 'taught' implies that there is somebody who can transmit those explanations to the new generation and make sure that they, too, "have a common frame of reference that provides a widely shared understanding of the world and of their identities within it" (Lustig and Koester 33). This is to be kept in mind when it later comes to analysing interviews given by individuals who identify with a culture even though there was not necessarily anybody to teach them about it and who still developed a concept of self that draws from that culture. It furthermore entails that culture is by design dynamic, relational and, to a certain degree, negotiable: "Culture must not be taken for granted as though it were a natural phenomenon, but rather grasped as a dynamic process, a learned collective assertion of an

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<sup>7</sup> For example the infamous boarding schools, see Corson and Lukkari.

imagined identity through which a people strategically positions itself” (Lustig and Koester 145).

According to Myron Lustig and Jolene Koester, an individual’s self-concept is made of their cultural, social, and personal identities. In this context, “[c]ultural identity refers to one’s sense of belonging to a particular culture or ethnic group. It is formed in a process that results from membership in a particular culture, and it involves learning about and accepting the traditions, heritage, language, religion, ancestry, aesthetics, thinking patterns, and social structures of a culture” (Lustig and Koester 142f.). This means that cultural identity, too, is both dynamic and relational. When it comes to validating and reaffirming this cultural identity one has formed, representations of the associated culture is vital:

Aspects of one’s cultural identity can be activated not only by direct experiences with others but also by the media reports, by artistic portrayals that have particular cultural themes, by musical performances (such as rap music) that are identified with specific cultural groups, and by a range of other personal and mass-mediated experiences. Thus, if individuals from one’s culture are frequently portrayed [...] this can provide a sense of legitimacy for the culture and can help to establish that the culture’s members are attractive, desirable, and good. (Lustig and Koester 146)

This is particularly true for a culture’s language, as Kaisa Rautio Helander points out in relation to linguistic representation of Sámi placenames in Northern Scandinavia: “[R]epresentations not only reflect reality, but they help to constitute reality. If one accepts that representation is an active, constitutive practice, then it follows that knowledge cannot be neutral or innocent of power relations” (327). She argues that choosing not to represent a culture linguistically (or other) is to actively – and literally – silence it and to make it decidedly invisible by favouring another, dominant culture.<sup>8</sup> To counteract this non-representation, Lia Markelin, Charles Husband, and Tom Moring hold that “in order to maintain and develop Sámi languages and culture in a context that tends to marginalize them, it is legitimate to defend and actively develop the position of the Sámi through striving to strengthen the position of their languages” (105). They equate the promotion and strengthening of the Sámi languages with the promotion and strengthening of the Sámi themselves. It is no secret nor a groundbreaking insight that language is very closely connected to national and cultural identity and that it is powerful: “In political science, the role of language generally appears in conjunction with investigations into national identity. In the literature on nationalism, language figures prominently among those who seek to explain the rise of states and nations” (Bucken-Knapp 11).

While I am not contesting the importance of this relation or its validity, I want to circle back on the issue at hand that is primarily concerned with the impact of literature on

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8 Which in this case is the settlers’ culture, which also is repugnant to decolonising efforts.

cultural identity: “A common view of indigenous peoples is that stories tell who ‘we’ are” (Kuokkanen 94). This is where we tie literature and cultural identity together, because “[t]his includes stories of origin and of ancestors, worldview, values and knowledge for everyday survival. Storytelling and literature reflect the values and worldview of that culture” (Kuokkanen 94). As we have established earlier, culture is dynamic, relational, and negotiable, and therefore inventive. This means that even though literature in the conventional way is relatively new to Sámi culture<sup>9</sup>, it is possible to include it and make it a part of it: “A book is a modern product of duodji (duodji is traditional Sámi handicraft), and as such, it should be beautiful to look at, pleasant to touch, and well-written” (Gaski 33).

### **3.3. Literature and Cultural Identity**

This finally leads us to the question of why and how Indigenous literature matters. Daniel Heath Justice, an Indigenous literary scholar (Cherokee Nation) by trade, approaches this topic by taking a specific look at the role of Indigenous literature (he uses the plural ‘literatures’ to emphasise their manifold appearances; since I use the extended concept of literature as propositioned above, I continue to use the term ‘literature’) in answering four guiding questions that he deems central for establishing “some of the more widely held ideas about relationship, kinship, respect, and responsibility that Indigenous peoples articulate, separately and together” (Justice 28). Those questions, which also serve as chapter headings in his book, are:

- How do we learn to be human?
- How do we behave as good relatives?
- How do we become good ancestors?
- How do we learn to live together?

In answering them he especially focuses on what Indigenous literature *does*, both for and to those who composed it and those who consume it, illustrating and deriving his points by and from many literary examples. He concludes that “[b]y virtue of their very existence, Indigenous literatures affirm Indigenous experiences, presence, and possibility” and that they are needed “to speak our truths into the world on our terms, for our purposes, for the continuity of our peoples and relationships in all their diversity and complexity” (Justice 208f.). These assertions are echoed by Sámi scholars. Kuokkanen, for example, emphasizes the importance of literature in order to affirm the presence and continuity for the Sámi: “Sámi writers have also a central role as they are the ones who constantly weave the past, present and future into a fabric that gives us the meanings we need to stay

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9 Or if ‘culture’ is put in a more literal translation of the Sámi word for ‘culture’ ‘the Sámi way’.

grounded in who we are” (Kuokkanen 92). Paltto on the other hand underlines the importance of continuity and relationship between generations: “The older generation has started to learn to write their mother tongue so that they can record their lives for future generations—they see it as a crucial tool for transmitting Sámi knowledge and values to younger people“ (Paltto 56).

Just as Justice, many of the Sámi scholars who have written about literature and cultural identity and who are quoted in this project happen to be people who are not only scholars but also published authors. Consequently, their focus is always tilted towards the position of the writer: Kuokkanen and Paltto are first and foremost concerned with the responsibilities, experiences, and positioning of the person that authors Sámi literature.<sup>10</sup>

This paper focuses neither on individual pieces of Sámi literature nor on why Sámi literature matters in general but on how it affects those that are not in an immediate or even close vicinity to their cultural epicentre. This means that the focal point is on the recipient and not the storyteller proper (although it is, in a transferred sense, insofar as recipients of literature in turn *told* me about their experiences and opinions), which should be reflected in the theory I employ. Therefore, I rephrased some of Justice’s assertions about what Indigenous literature does in due consideration of the theoretical considerations above:

- It provides **continuity** by preserving knowledge and past (84f.).
- It instills a sense of **connectedness** to a cultural community, especially in terms of geography, empathy, relationship and possibly language (41f., 77).
- It **situates/locates** members of a cultural community in space and time, serving both as a historic timestamp and affirmation of a presence and possible future (57).
- It offers **validation** for experiences and feelings (85, 141).

These four key functions will serve as the organising principles of the following analysis of my findings.

### 3.4. Epistemological and Ontological Implications

This theoretical positioning finally informs and determines my epistemological and ontological departure. It is deeply rooted in the idea of social constructivism, which is to say that reality is continuously constructed and reconstructed depending on social interactions, which in turn influence the way in which we partake in the construction or experience our reality. This corresponds to the idea that “identities are central, dynamic, and multifaceted components of one’s self-concept” (Lustig and Koester 145). As a necessary consequence of this conception it is self-evident that there is no pre-existing, ultimate truth but that knowledge has to be constantly acquired and revised by interpreting the information we are presented with. It is therefore deeply subjective and meanings are

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<sup>10</sup> This is also true for Gaski, who discusses the repercussions of writing in the settler’s and not you native language (377).

constructed accordingly: In order to understand other people we need to engage with them and pay close attention to every potentially meaningful behavioural nuance.

## **4. Analysis:**

This analysis aims to identify the impact Sámi literature has on the cultural identity of Sámi people that live outside of Sápmi and have no or little access to a bigger Sámi community. The data I will analyse in the following consists largely of transcripts of interviews that I conducted in the last couple of weeks with Sámi that live in and around Bergen. It is complemented by newspaper articles and various media output by and about Sámi that relates to what is being said in those interviews. The four key functions of Indigenous literature that were established in the previous chapter will serve as overall structure and yardsticks for my findings.

### **4.1. Continuity**

The aspect of continuity relates to the idea of preserving aspects of a culture in order to secure its continued existence. This is often achieved by passing on and/or filing in knowledge about the past. All of the interviewees agreed on the importance of preserving and passing on cultural knowledge, some more explicitly than others. They differ, however, in their opinions about how Sámi literature provides continuity. A1 for example acknowledges that “[o]ld stories are important, because they make the core”. At the same time they admit to not relating to them as well as to contemporary literature: “But we. We live in a different world. Our experiences are so different. Younger authors write interesting stories about mixed identities. I understand those better” (Appendix B). The fact that they *can* refer to those old stories and realise that they do not understand them as well as contemporary ones stands witness for an ever changing social reality that requires the cultural frame of references through which it is interpreted to change as well.

Most significant is what person C2 has to say. They talk about their mother’s diary, initially written by the latter to “remember her true home better” (Appendix D). It thereby serves a double purpose: Firstly, it preserves knowledge about a past that the mother wanted to keep fresh in her memory. Furthermore, putting the adjective “true” before “home” implies that she felt a disconnectedness with her ‘new’ home in the South while maintaining a longing connectedness to the North. This interpretation is later confirmed: “[T]he home she had to leave” and that she preserved on the pages with many descriptions of the “nature, the land, and the people” (Appendix D). The sense of connectedness that the diary apparently provided to the mother is mirrored by the reaction of her adult child:

Reading their mother's account of her life and the past not only helped them to connect to their heritage – “I learned a lot from it. About her. (pause) And about being Sámi” (Appendix D) – but also to the Sámi homelands: “The nature, the land, and the people. I cried a lot. So beautiful. So painful. (pause) It really connected me to Sápmi and the people there. I felt more Sámi. Even though I then had never been there” (Appendix D). Both the short, incomplete sentences and the pauses indicate how emotional her reception and recollection continues to be.

Until this point, this part of the analysis fits equally well if not better within the category of ‘Connectedness’. It is, however, the action that the diary elicited from its reader that I want to focus on now: Calling to mind their own experiences, C2 decided to also write a diary to bestow on their children: “So I think maybe my children can learn from me. So I also write a diary. Because sometimes they are interested in my stories and sometimes they are not. So I write it down. Maybe they are interested later” (Appendix D). First, it seems like they simply repeat what their mother did before. The deciding discrimination is the motivation to keep a diary: While the mother's diary was kept to maintain connectedness to her “true home”, C2 wants to preserve their knowledge, or as they later put it “my reality” (Appendix D), for their children. The mother apparently did not compose the diary to pass it on, or she at least did not attach much meaning to this function, as the diary remained not only undiscovered until long after her death, but was also initially unrecognised and remains incompletely understood: “I remember not knowing what it was. I was very confused. [...] It was hard to read and some things I still don't understand” (Appendix D). C2 on the other hand writes with their recipients and cause in mind, which results in reflexions on substance, form, and venture: “I am giving my children and their children a connection to their roots. Even if I do it in Norwegian. So they all can read and understand it” (Appendix D). They also recount what made them choose the form of a diary: Oral storytelling is not enough because they want their accounts available for their descendants, if “they are interested later” (Appendix D). In addition to being available on demand, having a written account at hand allows to “read it again if I forget something” (Appendix D).

This notion of literature as a provider of continuity is pointed out by C1 as well: “Paper doesn't forget, even when nobody is there to tell you the story. You just read it yourself. When we decide to share our experiences it might change the world for the next Sámi” (Appendix D). There are two main things to take away from this statement that distinguish the way in which knowledge is passed on literary from the way it is passed on orally. First, even though literature is usually written with a recipient in mind, creation and reception are asynchronous, knowledge can be accessed even if “nobody is there”. It therefore is, secondly, not as communal since you can “just read it yourself.” They finally



hint at the idea of paralleling the continuity of knowledge with the possibility for future development that might arise from that knowledge that has been shared. This link shall be explored further in the next chapter.

## 4.2. Location

To situate oneself in space and time affirms one's presence, which makes the future possible. This affirmed presence was once the future of those who were there before and situated themselves in time and space. By means of exploring those positions it is possible to trace cultural shifts over time. By exploring one's own location it is possible to examine the state of affairs and to pinpoint grievances.

C1 for instance tentatively touches upon the possibility that "If we share our experiences it might change the world for the next Sámi" (Appendix D). While it is not phrased as a fact, at least it is phrased as a possible outcome that the sharing of personal knowledge, or to employ the toolkit of this chapter, the subjective affirmation of the presence of a member of the Sámi community, can facilitate change in the future that will become the presence of the next generation.

During the interviews it became evident that this situating process can happen in a more general way that impacts the lived realities negatively as one is forced to closely examine the state of affairs. Recounting an incisive fairly reading experience, A2 reached several poignant insights about their location in space and time:

A2: But it is really disgusting when it is like with that Swedish woman. She wrote a book about a Sámi girl who grows up outside of the culture and it starts out fine enough. But then she learns all this stuff just like this (snaps fingers) and like magic she knows everything and is accepted into the community. (pause) It's absolutely not like that. Like at all. It's difficult, so difficult. And the Sámi in the North are not so welcoming to us who don't grow up like them. [...]

A2: I mean, she did not have to take somebody's culture and experience and make up a fantasy about it. She's Sámi, she knows what she writes about. Not that Swedish woman. I mean, just think! It's 2020 and people still think it's okay to take our culture and invent things about it. And then call it promotion of Sámi. That's colonialist! (Appendix B)

The presence they are affirming exhibits several grievances for them that this literary encounter shone a light on by misrepresenting it thoroughly: First, being socialised in the periphery of a cultural community carries hardship with it when one tries to obtain the cultural knowledge one missed out on. Secondly, the Sámi community is apparently internally not as inclusive as they would wish since there appears to be a clear 'inside'-'them' (Sámi in the North) and 'outside'-'us' distinction. Thirdly, cultural

appropriation, or as they put it “colonialist” behaviour, is still very much part of this presence. This does not mean that they do not condemn this behaviour and show their disdain against “that” Swedish woman.

Lastly, it appears that the positioning of one’s self can, at least to a certain degree, also be realised *ex negativo*, by virtue of realising where one does not locate oneself: “It was normal that we only read books at school that I found boring or stupid. Those stories are always about other people, not me. About Norwegian people, not us. Even if there are themes that I understand and identify with. I mean, I understand being a [young person] growing up, but the background is still different and that’s important. Because it makes me different to them” (Appendix B). They very clearly distinguish between the universal human experience of growing up, the experience of growing up as Sámi, and the experience of growing up as Norwegian as presented in Norwegian literature. The next chapter concerned with the very opposite of this disconnectedness and attends to the way literature can evoke connectedness.

### **4.3. Connectedness**

All of the interviewees attached great importance to the cultural identity of authors, especially in regard to books about Sámi. Person C1 explained that by drawing on their shared cultural identity: “If the author is Sámi, I feel better. Not because he is a better author. But because he is also Sámi and I feel that I don’t have to be on the lookout” (Appendix D). This means that this sense of relatedness instills trust and turns Sámi literature into some sort of safe space where they need to be less guarded. This, however, is not where the sense of security and connection between them and the author ends, as they continue: “Sometimes I do not feel Sámi or Norwegian. But I feel really understood when I read Sámi stories” (Appendix D). Even if they are feeling insecure about their cultural identity, engaging with Sámi literature facilitates the feeling of being understood, accentuated by the addition of “really”. It does not seem to matter that this connection is mediated and not immediate. In order to put an even greater stress on this empathetic connectedness, C1 juxtaposes this experience with the contrary experience they often have when engaging with Norwegian literature, which they failed to identify with to the same extent and which in turn “was sometimes really horrible” (Appendix D). They repeatedly use the amplifier “really”, which serves to highlight the difference between reading Sámi and Norwegian literature.

There are also instances when Sámi literature fails to connect its recipients to their cultural community and leaves them with a sense of shame and insufficiency, remarkably when it involves the Sámi languages. A3 for instance expresses some longing for a better

command of and literacy in Sámi, but does not want to read the books they are capable of reading: “I only know a little. Like it’s not enough to read in Sámi. Maybe children’s books. But I don’t want to only read those children’s school books. Like the ones for first graders. That are really simple. And I don’t want to check them out at the library, haha. I mean, I’m a grown-up, haha” (Appendix B). It is ambiguous whether they do not want to read the “really simple books” or if they do not want to be seen with them, especially in a public space. The joking and laughing suggest in any case that they are uncomfortable and feel the need to lighten up the mood.

A1 remained quiet during this exchange and while this might be due to the fact that it was in the beginning of the interview and they might not yet have been acclimatised to the interview setting. This silence is notable when put into relation to how they later positioned themselves when the topic of language was picked up again:

Question: Do You think it makes a difference if the author writes Sámi or Norwegian?

A1 Well, the difference is that I can’t read it if it’s in Sámi, hahaha.

A3 Haha, that’s right!

A2: Haha. But it’s not just that. Sometimes I feel that those that write in Norwegian are closer to me. Like, they are closer to how I feel. I mean, I am Sámi. But I think and dream in Norwegian. If I wrote books, I wrote them in Norwegian.

A1: Yes. And. If there’s only books in Sámi by Sámi authors I feel like they are, again, telling me that I’m not Sámi enough, that I’m second class Sámi.

A3: Hmh, indeed. (Appendix B)

There is again a notable amount of joking and laughing, though the conversation turns quickly serious again. Even though they are exploring a what-if scenario, there is again a clear distinction between a ‘they’-group, that holds the authoritative cultural advantage, and the ‘second class Sámi me’. This distinction is made on the base of cultural knowledge – language abilities – and the lack thereof and leaves the person in question with a sense of deficiency that was inflicted upon them by their own cultural community, which they wanted to connect to in the first place.

#### **4.4. Validation**

Earlier in this analysis it was highlighted that the continuously unfolding social reality and people's ever changing positioning requires the cultural frame of references to constantly change and update itself as well, in order to allow for continued connectedness to the cultural community. This connectedness in turn serves as premise validation.

How clearly recipients distinguish between what they receive to be an outdated cultural frame of references and can be illustrated by the following statement, which

ensued A1's claim to relate better to contemporary Sámi literature than to older stories: "I agree with [A1]. Some of those old stories are pretty sexist. That's not Sámi anymore. At least not for me. We need new ones, like Sigbjørn Skåden. She writes about sexual orientation, which really speaks to me. I'm Sámi and gay, and it tells me I'm legit" (Appendix B). The argument that A3 builds is pretty straightforward in determining which aspects of the frame of cultural references require updating to fit their subjective lived reality: sexism and sexual orientation. In their opinion, and they stress that this sentiment first and foremost concerns their lived reality and do not claim the authority for an universally applicable opinion, sexism is "not Sámi anymore. At least not for me." They follow this rejection of an old frame of cultural references with what they perceive as a very positive example of new literary work coinciding with their requirements of cultural values: "She writes about sexual orientation, which really speaks to me." Their argument end in their affirmation of feeling validated in their position as "Sámi and gay" by "it", which apparently refers to Sigbjørn Skåden's writing. What is really striking though is the use of the word "legit", which is not a translation of the employed Norwegian term but the term spoken in the interview. Using English terms is fairly usual for Norwegians, especially the younger generations, and employing this term at this point of the conversation is at least in retrospect layered. On the hand, "legit" is simply the abbreviation for "legitimate", which is very fitting in this context as A3 expresses how they feel validated as homosexual and Sámi. On the other hand is "legit" often used colloquially to express that something is "not fake" or "cool"<sup>11</sup>, which is also very fitting as validation of identity is accompanied by a positive self-image.

What emerges is that validation of feelings and experiences happens in steps. Representation of relatable situations and events in literature leads to validation of one's own experiences and feelings, which in turn results in affirmation of one's cultural identity. If this representation is lacking or fails completely, little or no validation comes about and the search for causes of this failure is initialised. In the context of Indigenous peoples, including Sámi, these causes are more often than not connected to cultural appropriation or (post-)colonial aftereffects. Discussions of appropriation and notions of lingering colonial residues inevitably ask about 'ownership' of culture. This could be observed on multiple occasions during the interviews, most notably expressed by B2. For a start, they not only accuse the Norwegian state of tokenism but attest it a persistent colonial mindset that finds expression in the attributed possessive pronoun with which the Norwegian state supposedly claims ownership of the Sámi people: "It's like they think because they publish a few books and say 'look at our Sámi writers!' that makes it all ok or that means that they behave good to all the Sámi. But they do not teach about Sámi at school, not really"

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<sup>11</sup> see the entry in the Urban Dictionary ("legit").

(Appendix C). Even more pronounced is the perception of ‘them’ and ‘us’ and who can rightfully claim ownership over Sámi culture at an earlier point in the interview: “I don’t think non-Sámi should write books about Sámi. It’s not their stories to tell. It’s ours. It doesn’t belong to them” (Appendix C). The clear and unambiguous juxtaposition of “not their” and “ours” as well as the repeated negation of possessive relations sets Sámi and Non-Sámi in clear positions to each other and denies the latter any claim on Sámi culture.

This is not to say that all of the interviewees persist that literature which validates Sámi culture has to come from Sámi. There is a single voice that advocates for some non-Sámi writers, be it in a very limiting way: “[T]here are great books by non-Sámi that sort of make a platform for Sámi” (Appendix C). So if non-Sámi writers use their platform to provide Sámi with agency, their work can be considered “great”. Ultimately this means that validation must come from within the cultural community because only members of this community have the authority to impart validation of culture.

#### **4.5. Discussion: Insider vs. Outsider**

One could assume that those who do not speak Sámi themselves and do not see it in their near future to learn it would like to have more books by Sámi available in Norwegian or English. Many, however, have the feeling that not all knowledge should be accessible to just anybody, although it is hard to determine who ‘just anybody’ might be. The terms employed remain vague – “not [...] everyone” (Appendix B); “non-Sámi” “outsider” (Appendix C) – and while they all speak from an insider position as marked by the use of the personal pronouns ‘we’ and ‘us’, as well as the possessive pronoun ‘our’, the notion of being a marginalised group within a minority was given expression as well: “I feel like they are, again, telling me that I’m not Sámi enough, that I’m second class Sámi” (Appendix B). In contrast to the previous case, there is the formation of a ‘they’ to refer to a group who apparently has the authority to decide on cultural belonging, that consists unmistakably of ‘the insiders’. B2 takes this one step further by claiming “Making Sámi literature more accessible to outsiders does not mean that they will understand it” (Appendix C), which calls into question how they position themselves in this situation. While they refer to Sámi cultural knowledge as ‘ours’, they equate ‘translating books from Sámi’ with ‘making Sámi literature more accessible to outsiders’ – even though they themselves acknowledged earlier to possess only minor language abilities, which would make them an outsider by extension as well. It depends on this positioning whether they themselves are capable of understanding, which is taken up by Gaski: “[T]hose inside the culture comprehend all from the beginning, while those who do not understand may

actually come to understand to the extent that they are no longer uninformed, but hardly ever become ‘completely’ informed” (380).

This back and forth between insider- and outsider positioning is obviously frustrating for those that are often considered – be it by themselves or by their cultural peers – not Sámi enough and highlights the dynamic and relational character of cultural identity and the inconstancy of social reality. Exactly these conflicts are often represented in contemporary Sámi literature, which is respectively often more concerned with finding one’s place within the Sámi community and not so much with finding a place in the world as a Sámi community. In doing so, “Sámi literature not only reflects lived Sámi realities but also gives glimpses of Sámi ways of knowing and constructing reality” (Kuokkanen 101).

## **5. Conclusion**

Unsurprisingly, there is no single answer to how Sámi literature matters in terms of cultural identity, as both identity formation and the concept of culture involve continuous processes of positioning oneself in accordance to an ever changing reality. That being said, the preceding analysis still yielded some results that help to understand the significance Sámi literature holds for Sámi that live far away from their cultural epicentre.

Sámi literature reflects their unique struggles and offers them solace. It not only helps them to connect to their cultural community over space and time; it also addresses contemporary issues like mixed ethnical descent or sexual orientation, offering different footholds and thereby helps the Sámi to navigate the world while keeping in touch with their culture and heritage. Literature helps to navigate identities that are fluid and negotiable, offers support for difficult identity negotiations and contributes to the formation of a positive self-image. This process is amplified by the fact that Sámi literature and language is interesting for others as well and not just the Sámi themselves. It should be noted, however, that the language abilities of Sámi that were socialised on the fringes of their cultural communities are often insufficient and do not allow for literacy in their Indigenous language. Language policies that aim to strengthen the Sámi languages and culture, like the decision of the Sámi Writer Association to make publishing in Sámi mandatory, can, counter-intuitively, produce the stigmatisation of illiterate groups and make them in turn feel insufficient. However, the mere existence of Indigenous literature can also serve as incentive to read or learn the language.

Narratives, which are an integral part of literature, impact the formation of identity, they reflect and amplify power relations as well as cultural values and function as means of

intercultural and interpersonal communication and thereby contribute significantly to the construction of social realities. Furthermore, literature can be empowering for both creators and recipients, as many stories that shape us are not the ones we made (see Justice 34) – participating in the composition of these narratives imparts agency. This is closely connected to decolonising processes and the resurgence of Indigenous communities. While these issues were not the focal point of this project, there is undoubtedly much to discover and account for, particularly in regard literature, historical as well as fictional.

Ultimately, the findings of this project echo those of Aubrey Jean Hanson, a Métis Nation researcher from Canada, and suggest that individual negotiation of cultural identity is quite similar to the resurgence of a long oppressed cultural community and that Indigenous literature relates to both in a similar way: “Indigenous literatures can enable healing, carry forward histories, embody ways of knowing and ways of being, envision better worlds, facilitate memory, inspire social change, foster empathy, and encourage relational understandings” (Hanson 75).

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