



Dealing with racism: Colonial history and colonization of the mind in the autoethnographic and Indigenous film *Sami Blood*

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how *Sami Blood* (2016), as an Indigenous film, addresses colonialism and its consequences. *Sami Blood* documents historical injustice, shame and how colonialism is internalized by the colonized, and mechanisms of systemic and individual racism. Based on analyses of the film, reviews and perspectives on colonialism and cinema, it is argued that *Sami Blood* contributes to reconciliation processes in contemporary society because it addresses past events and colonial practices from a Sámi perspective. *Sami Blood* is the first feature film to use the Indigenous South Sámi language, and the first with a female director, Amanda Kernell.



ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 22 January 2021

Accepted 22 November 2021

KEYWORDS

Indigenous film, racism, othering, colonialism, *Sami Blood*

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Introduction

Indigenous films play a significant role in on-going processes of self-articulation, identity construction and memory-making (Christensen, 2012; Ginsburg, 2003). After a long history of cinematic representations where non-Indigenous film-makers have made stories about the Sámi, Sámi film production is now on the rise. On-going revitalization processes in Sápmi are fueled by increased recognition in media (Sand, 2021), and the film *Sami Blood* is part of a renewed interest in Sámi cultural expressions. However, Sámi film is still rather unexplored in academic research. This article addresses this gap by discussing how Amanda Kernell, the young, Swedish-South Sámi director and screenwriter behind the critically acclaimed film *Sameblod* (*Sami Blood*) (2016), deals with a troubled, colonized past. *Sami Blood* is a historical film in many ways: it is the first feature film to use South Sámi language, which is spoken by less than 500 persons; it is the first Sámi feature film directed by a woman, and it addresses colonization and nomad school practice in Sweden in the 1930s. When Kernell entered the stage at the film festival Kosmorama in 2017 in Trondheim, Norway, she told the crowd about the responsibility she had felt when she started the project. With the small number of Sámi films available, it was important that the historical details were correct, that the result could stand as a historical document (Danielsen, 2017).

The film has been screened at prestigious film festivals such as Berlin, Venice, and Toronto Film Festival. *Sami Blood* has received several awards and nominations worldwide, which is especially impressive because it was a debut work. Several critics in the Nordic countries specifically underlined the importance of exploring “our own colonial history” (Danielsen, 2017) and that the film gives the audience “a slap in the face” (Vik, 2017). *Variety*, an authoritative source on entertainment news worldwide, addressed how the director “robustly blends adolescent fears that resonate across borders and generations with a fascinatingly specific, rarely depicted cultural context: Sweden’s colonial oppression of the Indigenous Sami folk” (Lodge, 2016).

Dealing with a troubled past, *Sami Blood* centers on 14-year-old Elle Marja (played by Lene Cecilia Sparrok, a South Sámi girl from Norway). Elle Marja is a reindeer-herding Sámi girl from the South Sámi area in Sweden. In this coming-of-age film, Elle Marja is exposed to the structural racism of the 1930s at her nomad school and in society. After several incidents, she breaks all ties with her family and culture. Based on analyses of the film, reviews and perspectives on colonialism and cinema, the article asks how *Sami Blood*, as an Indigenous film, addresses colonial history and its consequences.

Method

In an interpretive process in search of meaning, theoretical perspectives on colonialism, racism and cinema guide the analysis, and the choice of examples that I focus on. These are the frame story, which represents the beginning and end of the film, and two scenes, which display racial abuse and specifically address colonization, othering, shame, humiliation, and animalization.

The context of the film informs a deeper understanding, and film reviews and interviews with the director in online newspapers- and magazines have contributed with insights. I have also placed *Sami Blood* in a historical and Sámi cinema context. The goal is not to unmask an “authentic” reality based on broad data, but an analysis of depth and details, or what Geertz (1973) describes as “thick description.” To include the Sámi director’s perspectives also contributes to a deeper, thicker description. Interpretations of film are subjective, and as a researcher, I do not explore the film as an “outsider” with little knowledge of Sámi culture. I live in a Sámi area, and, as many others who live here, experience the results of colonization, including struggles concerning identity and loss on the one hand and reconciliation- and empowerment processes on the other.

In the following, I will contextualize *Sami Blood* by addressing the historical context of Sámi film, and Sámi education policies in Sweden in the early twentieth century, before I introduce theoretical perspectives on colonialism and cinema. In the second part, the article outlines how Amanda Kernell made use of auto-ethnographic methods in the preparations and research of the film. Finally, I discuss representations of colonialism in *Sami Blood*.

An introduction to Sámi cinema

So far, there exists no overview of Sámi film production in the Sápmi area (Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia). The Sámi live in four different countries with differing film infrastructure and film archives, which makes it difficult to get a complete overview of the productions. However, according to Dancus (2014), the first Sámi films date back to the silent film era. One example is the feature film *Laila* from 1929, directed by the Dane Georg Schnéevoigt. This film is criticized for romanticizing and racializing the Sámi and for using non-Sámi actors dressed up in Sámi clothes (Dancus, 2014; Skarðhamar, 2008). According to Mecsei (2015), classic themes in previous representations of the Sámi involve romanticizing “the noble savage” by only showing him/her as belonging to the past, including to show the Sámi as “nature people” out of pace with the present development. Furthermore, Mecsei describes these films as outsider films, meaning films that were produced by non-Sámi directors, such as *Laila* and *Viddenes folk* (The People of the Mountain

Plateau, directed by the Swede Ragnar Westfeldt, 1928). Although several of the films show empathy towards the Sámi, researchers have still problematized how these films display stereotypical, essentialising images of the Sámi.

The year 1975 represents a turning point in Sámi film history. The television series *Ante*, produced for the Norwegian public service broadcaster NRK, and the feature film with the same name, were results of consultancies with Sámi advisors, and the language and actors were Sámi (Mecsei, 2018). It depicts the story of the young boy Ante, who comes from a reindeer herding family. The international breakthrough for Sámi film came in 1987 and it was the first time the audience could watch a Sámi film told by a Sámi director. The language and clothes were Sámi, and it was filmed in Sámi areas. It was the film *Ofelaš* (the Pathfinder), directed by Nils Gaup. The film was Oscar-nominated, but perhaps more importantly, it showed that it was possible to produce Sámi films, and that they could be successful. However, the development of Sámi film was, until rather recently, slow.

Sámi cinema has developed significantly after the establishing of the International Sámi Film Institute (ISFI) in Kautokeino, Northern Norway, in 2007. A year later, Nils Gaup produced his second film, *Kautokeino-opprøret* (The Kautokeino Rebellion). However, it took eight years before the next Sámi feature film came, namely *Sami Blood* and the ISFI played an important part in the development and funding of the film. According to their website, ISFI (2021) “is dedicated to providing the Sámi people with the skills and economic opportunities in developing, producing, and distributing Sámi films in the Sámi language.” Sámi film workers from all Sámi areas may apply for funding. Several film festivals promote Sámi films, including Skábmagovat in Inari, Northern Finland, Tromsø International Film Festival in Northern Norway, and Dellie maa – Sápmi Indigenous Film & Art Festival in Northern Sweden. Sámi films have also been screened at international film festivals with Indigenous programs, such as Sundance Film Festival in the US and imagine NATIVE Film and Media Arts Festival in Canada. A report from 2018, which focuses on Sámi films produced in Norway, shows that the total number of produced films in the period 1988–2017 is 76, and more than half of the films are produced after 2010 (Mecsei, 2018). The report includes feature films, documentaries, television series, short films, animation, and information films.

Although there are exceptions, many of the Sámi films address the past. Nils Gaup's *Ofelaš* is inspired by an old, Sámi myth, the film *Trust the Minister* from 1997, directed by Paul-Anders Simma, takes place in the tiny village Sagojokk after WW2, and Nils Gaup's *The Kautokeino Rebellion*, is based on a historical event, which took place in 1852. As such, Amanda Kernell follows in previous, Sámi directors' footsteps, but it is the first film that specifically explores colonization in depth. Next, I will shortly address the nomad school and its role in the colonialization process, including why it was implemented in Sweden.

Early twentieth-century Sámi education policies in Sweden

The Sámi nomad school plays a significant role in the film since it is the setting where most of the scenes take place. In an article which compares Sámi elementary education in the early twentieth century in Sweden, Norway and Finland, Kortekangas (2017) finds that Sweden was the only country with a nomad school, a special school form for elementary education of the Sámi. In Norway, a strong assimilation policy (Norwegianization) was implemented while in Finland, no official policy and no special consideration were taken regarding Sámi language and culture (Kortekangas, 2017, pp. 82–83). In Russia, the introduction of nomad schools for the Sámi happened in the 1920s and the children could speak Sámi, except for the Russification period from 1956 to the late 1970s when they were prohibited from speaking their mother tongue (Afanasyeva, 2019, pp. 307–309).

From 1913 until the 1960s, children of the nomadic reindeer-herding Sámi in Sweden were segregated into nomad schools, while children of the non-reindeer-herding Sámi were placed in Swedish elementary schools. According to Lantto and Mörkenstam (2008, p. 30), reindeer-herding Sámi were, according to

official view, the “real Sámi” and the others should be assimilated. In Sweden, it was believed that the reindeer-herding children should be educated to a certain level of enlightenment, but higher education would be harmful for them. The Swedes were the ones to decide what was best for the Sámi, namely to continue their nomadic lifestyle, and to be citizens in a category that was secondary to the citizenship of the majority population (Kortekangas, 2017). Sweden created the world’s first State Institute of Race Biology (SIRB) in Uppsala in 1922, and the purpose was to survey and classify the Swedish people according to their race (Kjellman, 2013). At the beginning of the twentieth century, racial biology thinking influenced educational policy and it was believed that the Sámi, as an inferior race, would not be able to survive the new modern life that most of the Swedes were now living (Lundmark, 2012). As a result, they should receive a minimum of education, to read, write and count, but otherwise continue to work as reindeer-herders as it was believed that they were well adjusted to the life and work in these areas, but not in the city. The first nomad school inspector, vicar Vitalis Karnell, introduced the slogan “Lapp ska vara lapp” (Sámi shall remain Sámi) in 1906. The educational policy was met with resistance from Sámi parents who claimed the nomad schools to be of poor quality and that the parents should have more to say regarding education, and they protested against the definition of “Sámihood” (Lantto & Mörkenstam, 2008, pp. 30–32).

Colonialism and cinema

Researchers have problematized that Indigenous people are under-represented and misrepresented in cinema, which has resulted in othering and stereotypical, exotic and racist images (Mecsei, 2015; Rushton & Bettinson, 2010). Largely, it has been the majority’s privilege to define and determine Indigenous people. Film is a cultural expression, which takes part in shaping how we see ourselves, and questions concerning who gets to define, speak, and represent the stories, are important. According to Shohat and Stam (2014), much work on colonial representation in films is devoted to the question of truth and realism. Perhaps this is not surprising, since many oppressed groups have protested against cinematic representations throughout the years. Historical correctness in film has been heavily debated, and as mentioned in the introduction it was an important topic for the director of *Sami Blood* when she was preparing her film. Although they might not claim to represent the truth, films which represent marginalized people and historical incidents implicitly make factual claims (Shohat & Stam, 2014, p. 179).

Sweden, along with the other Nordic countries, has since the 1960s been promoting decolonization (Hübinette, 2012, p. 45). Many Sámi scholars have addressed decolonization, “the revision of colonial cultural practices and values, undertaken to become aware of how our attitudes towards ourselves and others have been shaped by ingrained colonial conceptions” (Henriksen et al., 2019, p. 16). In a process of reconciliation and reparation, it is crucial to recognize and listen to Indigenous peoples’ lived experiences, and film constitutes an important cultural practice for self-articulation and decolonization. As the Sámi researcher on Indigenous studies, Rauna Kuokkanen (2000, p. 412) points out, Indigenous peoples resist one, fixed definition and Indigenous film contributes to showing the diversity of their situations.

To establish the colonizers’ cultures and worldview as normal and natural is a process where “colonial discourse produces its subjects” (Ashcroft et al., 1998, p. 171). Frantz Fanon, an influential theorist who writes about colonialism, states in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*; “For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white” (Fanon, 2008, p. 4). Fanon describes a feeling of being inferior, alienation, and a struggle to be white. Although he underlines that his experiences are based on his background from Martinique, he implies that his book is relevant for colonized people in general, since “Every colonized people (...) finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation” (2008, p. 9). As the Sámi researcher Astri Dankertsen (2019) notes, the Sámi are often defined in terms of “racial” characteristics, but they do not fit into the taken-for-granted whiteness category of the Nordic people, which was important in the construction of these nations. Processes of colonization have in a Sámi context resulted in denial and

cultural fragmentation, including language shift from Sámi to majority languages. Dankertsen (2014) uses melancholia as a concept to describe how people struggle to save Sámi culture and to find one's place in an intercultural society due to the loss and repression of Sámi identity in the past.

In his foreword to the 1986 edition of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Homi K. Bhabha writes: "It is not the Colonialist Self or the Colonized Other, but the disturbing distance in-between that constitutes the figure of colonial otherness" (Bhabha, 2008, p. xxviii). The question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity,

it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image. The demand of identification – that is, to be *for* an Other- entails the representation of the subject in the differentiating order of Otherness. (2008, p. xxix)

To "colonize the mind" means getting colonized people to accept their inferiority, to persuade people into internalizing the values of the colonizers and the way they perceive the world (McLeod, 2000, p. 118). This process involves establishing positions of superiority (colonizers) and inferiority (colonized), which legitimize the colonizer's continued control over the mind (Smith, 2012). Shohat and Stam (2014, pp. 137–141) and use colonial tropes to describe how European superiority is constituted. The animalization trope means portraying colonized people as animals, associated with body, not mind, and nature, not culture. The infantilization trope projects the colonized as less culturally developed, as an immature, as a child. There is also the trope of racial blood, including fear of mixing blood, or races.

To make things right: Kernell's auto-ethnographic approach

For Kernell, authenticity has been an important topic when writing and filming *Sami Blood*, and she did extensive research. In an interview with Alex Heeny in the Canadian film-and theatre publication *Seventh Row*, Kernell talks about the use of auto-ethnographic methods in her preparations and research. She wanted to make a realistic film, and she did a lot of personal interviews, including interviews with her relatives. "I feel great responsibility to make things right, to not make my family ashamed that I got it wrong" (Heeny, 2017). Kernell emphasized that she did not want the film to be educational or didactic, but she thinks details are important and they make the film more authentic. Her use of actors and language are examples of these details. Instead of using professional actors, Kernell began casting two years in advance because she wanted two real sisters and they had to speak South Sámi.

In one interview, she describes her film as something hybrid, between reality and fiction (Buder, 2017). One example based on real experiences is the discriminating comments that Elle Marja gets from the local boys when she goes to school; those are comments that the children in the film have heard themselves. A second example is the scene where Elle Marja gets her ear marked, something which happened to one of her interviewees (Buder, 2017). Kernell emphasizes the importance of being an insider – people knew her father, relatives have roles in the film, and she says it would be difficult to make the film if she had come from the outside. "People would have been more scared of being exploited or misunderstood" (Buder, 2017).

According to Shohat and Stam (2014), many oppressed groups try to counter colonialism with a vision of themselves and their reality "from within." Shohat and Stam emphasize that something vital is at stake in these debates about representations but warn against focusing too blindly on "reality" and "authenticity" because these are not neutral categories. Many film-makers with a minority background have also complained about "the burden of representation"; because there are so few films, they feel obligated to "represent" the whole minority group and the films are also interpreted as to represent the whole group (Cottle, 1998, p. 306).

However, *Sami Blood* is not primarily about the authenticity of the historical details. For instance, there is no written information about the context, year, and location in the film. Although the film is set in the 1930s, it does not focus on the period pieces. The film is sometimes set in beautiful surroundings, but the camera does not dwell on these locations. This is a character-driven film where Elle Marja's subjective feelings are the most important, not the period or the locations. Not focusing on the period makes the film less distant, and to a certain extent timeless.

As Kernell puts it, the film is about colonization of the mind (Gignac, 2016) and to explain one's choices is a red thread throughout the film. Kernell wants us to understand *why* Elle Marja breaks loose from her background.

I made the film as a declaration of love to this older generation, to those who stayed and those who left. I think both choices are hard ones to make. You have to be strong to leave, but you have to be strong to stay. (Heeney, 2017)

The film is to some extent auto-ethnographic, loosely based on director Kernell's own background, growing up with a Swedish mother and a South Sámi father. Relatives from her Sámi family have also experienced loss of identity, shame, and othering:

But some of the elders in my family, they really want nothing to do with Sámi people. They speak quite harshly and badly about them, but they are Sámi themselves. I'd always known that they grew up with having Sámi as their mother tongue, not speaking Swedish at all as children, in the traditional way of living. But now, they have other names, first names and surnames, and have another life. (...) They want nothing to do with their siblings, their old life, and their old identity. So I was wondering what happened? If you change your name, your language, your way of behaving, can you really become another person or are you still the same old person inside? Where does this shame and anger come from? What does it do to you to cut all ties with your past, your family, and your culture — full assimilation? (Heeney, 2017)

I will now discuss colonial themes in *Sami Blood* and explore why Elle Marja breaks all ties with her family.

The past in the present: Colonial themes in *Sami Blood*

The frame story Stuurre Vaerie: How colonialism affects generations

Sami Blood is based on Amanda Kernell's short film *Stuurre Vaerie* (Northern Great Mountain) from 2015. In *Northern Great Mountain*, we meet Elle Marja, or Christina as she now calls herself, as an old woman (played by May-Doris Rimpí). She is reluctantly traveling north to attend her sister's funeral, together with her son and grand-daughter. Elle Marja has not visited her Sámi community since she moved away a long time ago. At the funeral, she keeps her distance from those who recognize her, and she does not want to speak Sámi, saying "I do not understand" when a man speaks to her in Sámi, telling Elle Marja that her sister has taken care of her reindeers throughout these years. She is also dressed in black and not in a Sámi dress as the others.

Elle Marja's son and grand-daughter want to stay with their relatives after the funeral and attend earmarking of the reindeer calves. Elle Marja just wants to go home but decides to stay overnight at a hotel. She goes to the hotel bar where she meets some visiting Swedish tourists. Elle Marja presents herself as Christina, a Swedish teacher from Småland, an area in Southern Sweden. She listens to the hotel guests who criticize the reindeer herders for making such noise when they use vehicles in their work; "I thought they were nature people." This sentence has a double meaning as it addresses the ambivalence in the majorities' description of the Sámi, from the old stereotype of the "ecological" Sámi and connection to nature, to contesting this view by claiming that modernized reindeer herding and motorized transportation destroy the ecology of the tundra (Mathisen, 2004, pp. 24–25). Elle Marja takes part in the critique although we

understand that the conversation is unpleasant for her. She repeats the stereotypes she has internalized about her own people (Cocq & Dubois, 2020, p. 179).

Later in the evening, she sits alone in her dark hotel room. She opens a chocolate praline, which she probably has brought with her from the city. The scene conveys her solitude and loneliness. Even her own son and grandchild become estranged from her. We can hear her son, talking through the door, trying to persuade her to come with them. He even says a few Sámi words to her, “Mum,” “I love you.” She slowly gets up from her bed, listening to her son who eventually resigns and goes away. However, her son and granddaughter’s visit has affected her, and she has a tear in her eye. In the next scene, we see Elle Marja at the dance floor wandering through the crowd. She is drawn to the window where she watches the helicopter take off with her son and grand-daughter, going up to the mountain. Elle Marja leaves the hotel, and she walks with determined, high-heeled steps to the church. There, alone in the darkness, she opens the coffin, lays her head next to her sister and whispers, in Sámi, “forgive me.” Next she is on her way up to Northern Great Mountain, and, like Cinderella, she loses one of her shoes when she crumbles her way up. After all, the woman in the black dress and high heels was not Elle Marja, it was Christina. She has reconciled with the past, the dark night is gone, as she walks in sunshine towards the lavvos (Sámi tents) and her family.

Northern Great Mountain is the frame story of *Sami Blood*, and it constitutes the beginning and the end of the film. The short film communicates how colonialism affects generations and how Elle Marja’s experiences have implications not only for herself, but also for her descendants. To be ashamed of being Sámi is a topic that several Sámi filmmakers have delved into more recently. For instance, Ellen-Astri Lundby (*Suddenly Sámi*, 2009) and Liselotte Wajstedt (*Sámi Daughter Joik*, 2007) have addressed their own family background in documentaries, exploring how their parents and family members have hidden their Sámi heritage. Researchers have also addressed shame throughout the years, from social-anthropologist Harald Eidheim’s (1969) research in a Sea Sámi, Norwegianised area in Finnmark, Northern Norway, to sociologist Astri Dankertsen’s more recent fieldwork in a “Sámi-Norwegian intercultural space” (2016). As film scholar Monica Mecsei has noted, the feeling of loss, for instance of language, culture, and dignity, is also an important topic within newer, Sámi film productions, including *Sami Blood* (Haugan, 2017). Elle Marja has lost the connection to her family, and because of that, her descendants do not know their background. However, her son’s attempt to speak South Sámi through his mothers’ locked hotel door, and his and her grand-daughter’s attendance at the ear marking of the reindeer calves represent a hope that things might change for the better. This hope is strengthened in the last scene of the film, where Elle Marja, still in her funeral dress and with high heels (after all, she was not planning on staying), crawls up the mountain to get to her family.

In many ways, the short film is a distilled version of the full-length film; it addresses colonization, alienation, racism, shame, self-denial, and reconciliation. However, where the short film addresses these topics as expressions of undercommunication (Cocq & Dubois, 2020), *Sami Blood* elaborates more explicitly.

The racial examination scene

Sami Blood is the story about Elle Marja, a south Sámi reindeer herder, and the film elaborates on why she ended up as Christina, a “Swedish” teacher from Småland. When we meet the young Elle Marja, she is marking the ear of a reindeer calf. Njenna (played by Mia Erika Sparrok, who is Lene Cecilia Sparrok’s sister in real life) helps her. The two sisters are going to the nomad school (nomadskolan), and Elle Marja takes care of her sister, who is leaving for the first time. The sisters are expected to return to their widowed mother and help her with maintaining the reindeer herd. However, the two girls’ path parts because of their experiences at the nomad school. Through a series of incidents, we witness Elle Marjas’ transformation, which eventually makes her reject her own identity and background.

Implicit in the title, *Sami Blood*, is the trope of racial blood, which serves to signify race. Showing head scull measuring of Sámi children, the racial biological scene is uncomfortable to watch, as it displays the history of institutional racism against the Sámi people. The scene has caught the attention of reviewers of the film, and it is a topic in several interviews with the director. In an interview with the Indigenous public service broadcaster NRK Sápmi, Kernell said, “around the world, people are shocked that this has happened in Sweden. We are seen as a pioneering country when it comes to human rights” (NRK, 2017). The racial biological examinations are carried out by researchers from Uppsala, from The Swedish State Institute for Race Biology (SIRB). From 1922 until the mid-1930s, SIRB classified Swedish citizens into different racial categories according to physical appearance and ranked the races hierarchically: the blond, blue eyed, fair skinned, tall and long-skulled gained a superior position when compared to races with darker complexion and shorter skulls and stature (Kjellman, 2013, p. 187).

The children are lined up outside the school when the visitors arrive. The children are aware that they will meet some visitors from Uppsala, but they are not told what these visitors will do to them. The visitors inspect the children and look at their Sámi clothes. The scene expresses exoticification, and how the Sámi children are on display. According to Shohat and Stam (2014, p. 21), racism is closely related to exoticism. The Sámi children are not recognized as individuals, but as objects for the exoticist’s pleasure. This objectification is further strengthened in the next scene, inside the building, when Elle Marja is told to take off her clothes. She obeys and sits down on a chair, only wearing her underwear. She asks, “what are you going to do,” but the scientist ignores her and does not answer any of her questions. He measures her skull, teeth, nose, and cheeks. Elle Marja does not oppose, but when she is told to take all her clothes off to be photographed, she hesitates. Eventually, she takes the underwear off, but holds it tight to her chest. The scientist approaches her, grabs her clothes, forces her to pull her arms up, and places her hands behind her head.

The intense light and the piercing, loud sound of the flash makes it discomfoting to watch. Kernell wants us to see this in all its horror, to feel the ultimate shame, humiliation, and despair when Elle Marja has no other choice than to let herself be measured, naked, in front of the visitors, the teacher and the other pupils. There is nowhere to hide for Elle Marja. Her feelings as a human being are not relevant here, she is an object of scientific research, like an animal. To underline the embarrassment, we see some local boys giggling outside, behind the windows; they have watched the whole thing as if it was a human zoo. The scene is very important because it lets the spectator see, in a very concrete way, how racism was carried out and because it visualizes how this must have felt. The camera’s point of view underlines Elle Marja as an object and we see her desperate eyes when she is forced. We see pitying looks, frightened staring but also eyes who do not seem to care. It is unpleasant also because we as viewers take part in watching the measuring. Somehow, the scene still allows for dignity. In contrast to the scientist, Kernell does not display her character naked in front of the audience, as we only see Elle Marjas’ naked back from behind – shivering as the flash goes off.

The ear marking scene

In the next scene, Elle Marja walks alone, back to the dormitory. She passes some local boys, who just watched her being photographed. One boy says, “look, here comes the circus animal. They are at a lower evolutionary level, that’s the reason why they look the way they do.” Elle Marja immediately walks towards the boy, and says, “Take back what you said!” She threatens him with her knife, but after a short struggle, the boy takes her knife and with the help of the other boys, Elle Marja is forced to the ground. The boys hold her down, and one of them marks her ear. The knife, which Elle Marja uses so skilfully when we meet her for the first time, marking the ear of a reindeer calf, is now used against her as if she was herself a reindeer.

As mentioned, this scene is inspired by a real incident and based on a story that one male interviewee told Kernell.

The scene reveals what Shohat and Stam describes as the animalization trope, a key colonialist trope which draws sharp boundaries between the animal and the human. “Animalization forms part of the larger, more diffuse mechanism of naturalization: the reduction of the cultural to the biological, the tendency to associate the colonized with the vegetative and the instinctual rather than with the learned and the cultural” (Shohat & Stam, 2014, p. 138). Animalization involves reducing the colonized to the biological, for instance as something filthy. After the boy has cut Elle Marja’s ear, he comments that his hands are now dirty. The animalization trope involves projecting the colonized as body instead of mind (Shohat & Stam, 2014, p. 138) and the situation resembles an animal enclosure, where Elle Marja is treated like an animal that needs to be “tackled” by a human. It is a violent expression of power and how the colonizer may treat the colonized as they have no feelings. As Kjellman notes,

One reason for organizing humans into different races has been the urge to prove that there is a hierarchical order among them, that some races are regarded as superior and other races inferior, and, because of that, some are entitled to rule over others. (2013, p. 187)

This power relationship between “superior” and “inferior” is explicitly addressed in this scene.

The racial examination scene and the ear marking scene reveal the racial thinking at the time and how the Sámi were regarded as primitive and less developed, in other words evolutionary closer to the animals compared to the majority population. According to Shohat and Stam (2014, pp. 18–19) racism usually comes “in the wake” of concrete oppressions, and racism invokes a double movement of aggression and narcissism. Because Elle Marja is subjected to oppression, being measured like a beast, the boys are “allowed” to attack and harm her. The two scenes express the hierarchy between the colonizer and the colonized, but also how racism can be both systemic and individual. The systemic racism that we see in the racial examination scene justifies the individual, brutal abuse of power which is expressed in the ear marking scene. As we will see, this racism has consequences: even though Elle Marja protests and tries to wrestle the attackers, the film displays how she processes this racism and how she, eventually, internalizes what they say.

Shame, othering, and internalized racism

An important part of the narrative is how the system “forces” Elle Marja to make her choices. Elle Marja is a clever pupil, and she wants to continue her education. She looks up to her teacher, Christina Lajler from Småland. However, the teacher tells Elle Marja that she cannot continue her education. As a Sámi, she is expected to stay with her own people and be a reindeer herder. This lack of opportunity, based on ethnicity, and experiences of racism and humiliation, triggers something in Elle Marja. When Elle Marja asks why she cannot continue studying, the teacher says “according to science, you will not make it in the city. You don’t have what it takes. You people have to stay up here or else you will vanish.” The nomad school in Sweden and the slogan “Lapp ska vara lapp,” is an example of how the majority determines images of the “other” and what a “real” Sámi is, and what is best for the Sámi. The scene shows what Kuokkanen describes as racist notions of a frozen culture (2000, p. 418). This talking about “traditional” ways of life denies the opportunity of development and change in Indigenous cultures, which is, as Kuokkanen mentions, a prerequisite of a living culture. Furthermore, the trope of infantilization projects the colonized as being at an earlier stage of individual human development, depending on leadership of the colonizer (Shohat & Stam, 2014, p. 139). Elle Marja will never, based on her Sámi background, reach what is described as a higher level of development, no matter how well she performs at school. The scene is therefore also an expression of division between high and low, what Shohat and Stam (2014, p. 140) call a spatial trope. This division

reflects symbolic hierarchies between “high” culture and “lower” species, including how measurements of the body have implications for the mind (“higher” and “lower” faculties). Elle Marja learns that to become a teacher, you have to be Swedish.

As a young girl, she is curious and wants to do what other young people do. She wants to go to a dance which is held outside, not far from the dormitory. But again, she cannot attend the dance as a Sámi, so she steals a dress which she finds hanging outside on a clothesline. She smells her hair and her arms, and she washes herself in a lake. It shows how Elle Marja is aware of the negative perceptions about the Sámi. It exemplifies the animalization trope and images of the dirty and smelly Sámi that we see in the ear marking scene. She repeats this internalized racism later, when she tells her sister that she also needs to wash herself because she smells – “you cannot smell it yourself,” Elle Marja says. At the dance she meets and makes out with Niklas from Uppsala, who is in the area doing military service. Throughout the film, she makes several choices which eventually take her to Uppsala to study. In Uppsala, she represents herself as Christina, the same name as her teacher. These two incidents, her going to Uppsala and changing her name to Christina, are allegories of internalized racism and the process she experiences, the colonizing of her mind. Uppsala is the centre of racial investigation, but she still wants to move there, since this is where Niklas lives. The teacher Christina represents the person Elle Marja wants to become. In the words of Fanon, for the colonized to elevate above her or his status, it is necessary to adopt to the majority’s cultural standards (2008).

To increase the gap between Elle Marja as a Sámi and the main Swedish characters, Kernell has chosen actors who are tall, blonde, and blue-eyed, like the Nazi, Aryan archetype. However, Christina and Niklas are not presented as bad persons. Christina appears as charming and attentive, while simultaneously following what is expected of her as a Swedish teacher, and she does not oppose to the system. Niklas is young, and not aware of or with any knowledge of the Sámi, and he is interested in Elle Marja/Christina until he learns from his parents that she is Sámi. When Elle Marja comes to Uppsala for the first time, she has nowhere to go, and shows up at Niklas’ house. After a few days, his parents tell Niklas that Elle Marja has to go and repeat, like the teacher, that she is better off with her own kind. To underline the contrast and differences between the Sámi and Swedish culture and Elle Marjas upbringing in a *gamme/lavvo* even further, Niklas’s parents live in a big villa.

However, Elle Marja is determined to stay in Uppsala, and she manages to get into a local school. Although she struggles and we see she has to learn new things and adjust, Elle Marja is on her way to become a regular Swedish student. After a while, Elle Marja approaches Niklas’ house for the second time, which must have taken a lot of courage since he kicked her out of the house the last time. But Elle Marja is someone else now, she is Christina the student, not a Sámi reindeer herder. Or is she? Niklas is having a birthday party together with his upper middle-class friends, and a guest invites Elle Marja inside although we understand that Niklas himself has not invited her to the party. Whatever dreams Elle Marja might have had of just being a person among the others, is quickly shattered as one of the female guests finds out that Christina is Niklas’ friend from Lapland. She pushes Elle Marja to joik (a Sámi way of singing) and explains that she studies social anthropology, and will be doing fieldwork, as she explains, “up there.” We understand that Elle Marja does not want to perform a joik, but she resigns as the girl involves all the guests including Niklas. After all her struggles to become someone else, she learns that she is still the exotic “other.” The scene also reveals the feeling of being ashamed because of your identity, who you are and where you come from.

Frantz Fanon argues in favor of humanism, a reciprocity of recognition (2008). Fanon’s idea of universalism is based on the notions of dignity, equality, and equity, against a background of eurocentrism and western domination (Sardar, 2008, p. xvii). Elle Marja experiences the opposite of this idea, she is expected to behave a certain way, as a Sámi. She is responsible for her body, her race, and her ancestors,

made aware of her Sáminess, her ethnic characteristics (Fanon, 2008, p. 84). She tries to hide her identity but does not succeed. The scene reveals that Elle Marja is not the master of her own identity, it is the majority who has the definitional power and decides who she is, based on their own presumptions.

Elle Marja needs money to go to school, and she goes back to her mother to claim her father's silver belt. This sequence is perhaps the most expressive in terms of showing shame, self-loathing, and internalized racism. In front of her family, she rejects her name, describes them as circus animals, and makes it clear that she is not planning on staying. Her mother tells her to get out of the lavvo. Elle Marja walks among the reindeers, frustrated. The fog is a metaphor that describes her state of mind; she is lost. She kills one of the reindeers in anger. Later, her mother finds her and gives her the silver belt.

Throughout the film, Elle Marja changes her identity, her name, she stops wearing the traditional dress, and she stops speaking Sámi. In one scene, she even burns her own clothes, which symbolizes how she burns the bridge between her old and new life. However, paralleled with the transformation Elle Marja experiences throughout the film, she becomes the other, the outsider, both among the Sámi and among the Swedes.

Conclusion

This article has discussed how Amanda Kernell, as a young and new voice on the Sámi film scene, expresses a troubled past. Due to the recognition of film as a cultural flagship of national identity (Collins & Davis, 2004), it is vital to address how Indigenous filmmakers take part in mediating our historical memory. By examining colonial history, *Sami Blood* plays an important part in reconceptualizing national imaginaries and destabilizing unified national narratives. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon examines how colonialism is internalized by the colonized, how an inferiority complex is inculcated, and how, through the mechanism of racism, black people end up emulating their oppressors (Sardar, 2008, p. x). Kernell examines the same process in her film *Sami Blood*. Colonialism has led to fragmentation for many Sámi, which, according to Dankertsen (2016), has resulted in decolonization processes where people try to deal with these bits and pieces from the past.

Sami Blood is an important film because it displays colonialism, including systemic and individual racism, othering, and shame from a Sámi perspective. The director and the main characters are Sámi, the language is Sámi, it depicts Sámi history, and the story is based on interviews with Sámi people, including her own family. Secondly, although it is a Sámi film, I argue that *Sami Blood* is important because it addresses both the Indigenous and majority population. It deals with a common, colonial history and it contributes to enlighten the audience about a troubled past. It represents, in the words of one reviewer, "universal reflections concerning fighting against oppression and your own feeling of shame" (Vik, 2017). Reviews of the film reveal that Amanda Kernell has reached an audience worldwide and contributed to enlighten and display debates concerning colonialism and injustice. Lastly, *Sami Blood* also represents decolonization and hope for the future; the last scene in the film reveals that reconciliation between conflicting identities is possible and that cultural ties can overwin years of oppression.

Acknowledgements

The author wants to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful feedback.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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