

Sámi Identity across Generations: From Passing for Nordics to Sámi Self-exposure*

Adriana Margareta Dancus

Abstract: Following histories of racism and abuse at the hands of Norwegian and Swedish authorities, many Indigenous Sámi have chosen to disconnect from everything Sámi and instead pass for ethnic Norwegians and Swedes. As a result, their children and grandchildren have grown up with no or little knowledge of their Sámi heritage. In the 2000s, several of these children and grandchildren, who were born after the Second World War, are eager to reconnect with their Sámi identity. This article fleshes out the entangled road back to Sáminess through a close analysis of two Norwegian documentaries—*Suddenly Sami* (*Min mors hemmelighet*) (2009) and *My Family Portrait* (*Familiebildet*) (2013)—in which the women directors discover their Sámi identity in front of the camera. A central point in the discussion is how the directors use discourses of biology and genetics to recuperate their Sámi identity in the 2000s. The article raises several explanations as to why they retreat to these discourses by putting the two Norwegian documentaries in conversation with the Swedish feature film *Sami Blood* (*Sameblod*) (2016).

Keywords: Sámi identity, Nordic film, Nordic scientific racism, passing, biology, genetics, DNA tests, self-exposure

Introduction

Starting with the late 1800s, Norwegian and Swedish authorities launched aggressive assimilation policies meant to “civilize” the Indigenous Sámi. For example, they forbade Sámi religious practices; sent Sámi children to mandatory boarding schools where Sámi language, history, and culture were not part of the curriculum; made it impossible for Sámi families to own or purchase land under their Sámi names; and undermined women’s position in Sámi communities through patriarchal laws.¹ One of the decimating results of such assimilation policies has been a deep sense of shame for being Sámi, which has made many Sámi keep their Sámi identity hidden from their own children and grandchildren, as also shown by the ongoing work conducted by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission established by the Norwegian Parliament in 2018.²

In the 2000s, several women directors with Sámi background have sought to transform and transgress that shame by making films in which they use themselves in front of the camera to engage with questions of Sámi identity. I am thinking of films like *Sami Daughter Joik* (*Sami nieida jojk*) (2007) by Liselotte Wajstedt, *Suddenly Sami* (*Min mors hemmelighet*) (2009) and the follow-up *Joiking Fever* (*Joikefeber*) (2014) by Ellen-Astri Lundby, *Half of This, Half of That* (*Halvt ditt, halvt datt*) (2011) by Marja Bål Nango, *My Family Portrait* (*Familiebildet*) (2013) by Yvonne Thomassen, the collaborative project *Dreamland* (2014) by Britt Kramvig and Rachel Andersen Gomez, and *Rebel* (*Bihttöš*) (2014) by Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers.³

* A version of this article features in my book *Exposing Vulnerability*, 2019.

In this article, I analyze two of the Norwegian projects listed above: *Suddenly Sami* and *My Family Portrait*. In both films, the directors discover their Sámi identity in front of the camera: as they shoot the film, it becomes evident to them that they have Sámi roots, although their mothers and grandmothers are unable and/or unwilling to confirm that identity. The films document the directors' entangled and difficult road back to reclaiming Sámi identity or what I also call Sáminess. Through a close analysis of various scenes from the two films, the article shows how both Lundby and Thomassen mobilize discourses of biology and genetics to recuperate that which their mothers and grandmothers have silenced.

The article also raises several explanations as to why they retreat to biology and genetics by putting these two Norwegian documentaries in dialogue with the 2016 Swedish film *Sami Blood (Sameblod)*, directed by Amanda Kernell. Like Lundby and Thomassen, Kernell has Sámi background, yet her film is not an autobiographic documentary project. *Sami Blood* is a feature that tells the story of fourteen-year-old Elle-Marja (Lena Cecilia Sparrok), who grows up in a Sámi community in northern Sweden in the 1930s. As a teenager, Elle-Marja decides to abandon the traditional livelihood of reindeer husbandry and distance herself from everything Sámi in a wish to pass for Swedish. It is striking to see *Suddenly Sami* and *My Family Portrait* through the lens of *Sami Blood*. *Sami Blood* powerfully fictionalizes how the shame of being Sámi caught root in the older generations of Sámi, an explanation the directors of *Suddenly Sami* and *My Family Portrait* cannot readily obtain from their own mothers and grandmothers.

A prime example of cinematic mastery, a coming-of-age drama with complex character psychology and exquisite cinematography, Kernell's film is also rooted in historical realities that continue to be undercommunicated in contemporary Scandinavia. In this article, I highlight this link to history by providing not only a close reading of a central film sequence in *Sami Blood* but also references to the work of Scandinavian historians like Jon Røyne Kyllingstad, who have discussed how notions of Sámi primitiveness protruded the scientific discourse at the turn of the century. This will allow me to point out the cruel paradox in *Suddenly Sami* and *My Family Portrait*, where we see both directors reclaim their Sámi identity in terms of blood, phenotypic traits, and genes.

***Sami Blood*: A Historical Perspective on Nordic Scientific Racism**

Passing is a well-established trope in critical mixed race studies. In a North American context, passing has been used to describe when "individuals with a more European American phenotype and cultural orientation have made a covert break with the African American community, either temporarily or permanently, in order to enjoy privileges of the white community."⁴ Elle-Marja's story in *Sami Blood* taps into one of the longest narratives of passing in the Nordic region, namely, Indigenous Sámi, who, deprived of political advocacy, choose to pass for Nordics.

In the opening scenes of *Sami Blood*, we see an old Elle-Marja (Maj-Doris Rimpi) returning to her local community in northern Sweden for the funeral of her younger sister, Njenna (Mia Erika Sparrok). She is accompanied by her son and granddaughter and comes across as both distant and reluctant to be back. In contrast to her son and granddaughter, who choose to stay with her family, Elle-Marja books a room at a hotel nearby. She also refuses to partake in the gathering of the reindeer herds, which happens the day before her sister's funeral. Through a flashback, the rest of the film takes the contemporary

audiences back in time to explain why Elle-Marja is so skeptical to be back and why she, a long time ago, decided to pass for Swedish.

Shame is an important catalyzer for Elle-Marja's decision, as powerfully shown by a central sequence of two disturbing scenes twenty-eight minutes into the film. In the first scene in the sequence, three official visitors from Uppsala, two men and a woman, arrive by car at a small boarding school for Sámi children in rural northern Sweden. The children are lined up in front of the school as the visitors descend from the car. Identity is suggestively coded through costume: the visitors and the teacher wear business attire typical of the 1930s, while all the children are dressed in colorful *kofte*, the traditional Sámi garment. At the teacher's instruction, Elle-Marja, the most diligent pupil in the school, takes a few steps forward and presents the visitors a traditional Sámi gift made of reindeer antlers. After a quick inspection of the children's clothes and looks, the girls are separated from the boys and moved inside the school in line formation, with Elle-Marja leading the group. Once in the classroom, Elle-Marja is asked to take off her *kofte* and sit down on a chair placed by the teacher's desk. One of the two male visitors, a young scientist, inspects her teeth and skin color and measures her skull and nose, while the other man, the scientist's older assistant, writes down the numbers dictated by the first.

As the scientist undergoes these measurements, the camera focuses on close-ups and extreme close-ups of Elle-Marja, who is repeatedly asking the scientist what he is doing. The scientist chooses to neglect her question and instead directs all his questions and instructions to the teacher in third person, as if Elle-Marja is not a worthy partner of conversation: "Are both *her* parents of Sámi origin?" "Now, *she* can go there and take off *her* clothes," "Does *she* understand?" (emphasis added).⁵ From the side, the teacher confirms Elle-Marja's 100 percent Sámi background and overlooks the procedures, seconding the scientist's instructions and making sure Elle-Marja obeys his orders. "Elle-Marja, be a good example," she says in a strict tone, when the Sámi girl is unwilling to take off the rest of her clothes. Through a point-of-view shot, the viewers are made to inhabit the humiliation felt by Elle-Marja when she notices that several local boys oversee the procedures by peeping through the classroom window.

"Elle-Marja!" the teacher commands, as the scientist forces the girl to hold her arms behind her head and pose naked in front of a camera mounted on a tripod in front of her. Every time the scientist's camera secures yet another picture of the naked Sámi girl, the diegetic sound of the blitz is enhanced in order to underline this incredibly invasive moment. Kernell chooses to shoot the photography session mostly in medium close-up of Elle-Marja filmed from behind. The focus is on the back of her head and her naked shoulders, while in the background we distinguish the blurry silhouettes of the rest of the girls. In this way, Kernell's film suggestively covers the body that the scientist's camera shamefully uncovered, while the racism undergirding the scientific gaze is stripped bare. When the two men finish their session with Elle-Marja, they move on to measuring and photographing the other girls.

In the next scene, we meet Elle-Marja outside the school building. The camera follows her in handheld, and the diegetic sound of her steps is seconded by sad non-diegetic instrumental music. As she passes by the boys who watched the photography session in the classroom, Elle-Marja overhears one of them calling her a "circus animal." "They [the Sámi] are on a lower stage of development. That's why they look like this," he says demonstratively to his mates to make sure Elle-Marja hears him. Irritated and upset, she confronts him by asking him to take his words back. She also threatens him with her Sámi knife, yet

the boys quickly immobilize her. They push her down to the ground and hold her head tight as the offender chops off a piece of her ear in a similar fashion to how the Sámi reindeer herders earmark their calves. The camera crosscuts from medium close-ups of the attacker filmed from below to medium close-ups of Elle-Marja forced to the ground, suggesting a power imbalance in terms of both physical might and social hierarchy. The ravaging shame of having to stand naked in front of Swedish scientists and random voyeurs is now compounded by the shame of being earmarked as a “circus animal.”

This sequence of two scenes from *Sami Blood* shows how the shame to be Sámi caught root in Elle-Marja. Eventually, Elle-Marja discovers that the only feasible way to deal with her shame is to distance herself from everything Sámi and pass for Swedish. The same film sequence also makes evident how Nordic majorities mobilized discourses of biology at the turn of the century to justify their oppression of the Indigenous Sámi. Although Nordic historians have done a fair amount of work to document how biology was used by Nordic racist ideology, such historical realities continue to be under-communicated in present-day Scandinavia.⁶

As shown below, this is even the case in documentary films like *Suddenly Sami* and *My Family Portrait*, in which the directors seek to reconstruct the histories of discrimination and abuse to which their mothers and grandmothers have been exposed. This is why *Sami Blood* is such an important contribution to current debates on Sámi identity and a productive prism through which to analyze *Suddenly Sami* and *My Family Portrait*. Before I turn to a discussion of these two documentary films by and with Sámi women directors, let me briefly discuss some of the findings made by Nordic historians that are of particular relevance to my analysis.

In a study of physical anthropology in Norway in the period 1890–1945, Kyllingstad shows how the notion of Sámi primitiveness as racially determined colored the research of several Norwegian scientists at the time. Kyllingstad includes the extreme voices like the Norwegian geologist and ethnographer Andreas Martin Hansen (1857–1932). Basing his study on measurements of human relics, Hansen challenged the status of the Sámi as firstcomers in Scandinavia. He developed a racial hierarchy with the long-skulled Aryans at the top and the “dwarflike” Sámi at the bottom and advanced a theory that the Sea Sámi were racially different from the reindeer-herding Sámi, placing the Sea Sámi above the Mountain Sámi in his racial hierarchy yet below the Aryans. As Kyllingstad underlines, Hansen did not win general scientific acclaim, but his theories led to much public debate, influencing public opinion and later research, such as Halfdan Bryn’s politically charged work on the racial composition of Troms.⁷

Other Norwegian scientists at the time were more moderate in relation to the question of racial determinism. Kyllingstad points attention to Kristian Emil Schreiner and his wife, Alette, who played a major role in the establishment of physical anthropology as a field of research at the University of Oslo. Unlike their colleague Bryn, who actively promoted eugenic measures to prevent the “bastardization” of the Nordic race, the Schreiners had a less deterministic view of race and biology, dismissing the idea of a Nordic master race and speaking positively about genetic variation.⁸

Yet the idea of racial hierarchies influenced much of their studies of the anthropology of the Sámi. They both operated with the notion of Sámi primitiveness, which they traced in bodily appearance but also in psychology. Kristian Emil Schreiner identified a pool of “Mongol-like” bodily characteristics in the Sámi, such as low stature and poor beard growth, which, according to him, implied that the Sámi belonged

to a primitive race.⁹ His wife, Alette, further tied these bodily characteristics to psychology, describing the Sámi as infantile, carefree, cheerful, simpleminded, and shy, noting among others how she had to use “mild violence” and “small gifts” to persuade Sámi individuals to take off their clothes for the scientist’s inspection.¹⁰

In light of the photography scene from *Sami Blood*, the racial dimension of Alette Schreiner’s comment about the alleged Sámi shyness in front of the scientist’s camera becomes particularly clear. Also resonant with Kernell’s film is Alette Schreiner’s way to describe the “primitive” Sámi in contradictory terms: backward and stagnant yet perfectly adapted to the environment and living harmonious lives in contact with nature.¹¹ When Elle-Marja informs her teacher that she wants to study in Uppsala, the teacher, who, in a previous scene, is shown to own a racial biology book, tells her that this is not an option for her. After fumbling to provide a sensible reason, the teacher finally explains: “According to research, you [the Sámi] do not manage life in the city. Your brains are ... you do not have what is needed. You have to live up here for otherwise you will die out.”

Here again, the teacher’s comment reflects the racist mentality undergirding the scientific discourse of the time that described the Sámi as “children of nature” who were not biologically designed to make it in urban areas inhabited by the Nordic majorities. In the Norwegian folk censuses from the interwar period, these notions of harmony and perfect adaptation to the arctic climate were, however, long gone. According to Norwegian cultural historian Bente Persen, as late as 1950, Norway’s statistics classified the Sámi as “deviants” in the same category with the blind, the deaf, the mentally disabled, and the insane.¹² This shows how a few decades after being scientifically measured, psychologized, and racialized, the Sámi body was ripe to be medicalized and even psychiatricized.

Given the histories of scientific racism against the Sámi, in Norway and Sweden, it is not hard to understand why Elle-Marja decides to pass for Swedish in the 1930s. But how does race biology, which *Sami Blood* so masterfully reminds us of, affect Sámi identity claims in generations born after the Second World War? If *Sami Blood* gives the younger generations of Sámi only peripheral attention, *Suddenly Sami* and *My Family Portrait* sets them at the core.

In the films, Lundby (born 1959) and Thomassen (born 1977) document their own struggles to reconnect with their Sámi heritage when their mothers and grandmothers are unwilling and/or unable to talk. If the scientist’s camera in *Sami Blood* functioned as a prolonged arm of a racist mentality, subjecting Elle-Marja to excruciating humiliation, in *Suddenly Sami* and *My Family Portrait*, the director’s camera becomes a tool to recuperate Sáminess. Standing “naked” in front of the camera is, however, a painful process also for the Norwegian directors Lundby and Thomassen. As they shoot, major questions arise and unfold. Why have their families kept their Sámi origins hidden and how does one assume a newly discovered Sámi identity? It is particularly the second question that I want to address in the following discussion.

My Family Portrait: Recuperating a Lost Culture through Biological Discourses

Thomassen’s *My Family Portrait* was broadcast on national television in Norway and won the debut prize Skårungen at Tromsø International Film Festival in 2013 and the public’s award at the 2013

Eurodok. The film features the director's attempts to gather her mother and her mother's five siblings to take a last family photograph together with their ninety-year-old mother, Thomassen's grandmother. Starting from a color family portrait taken in a studio years before her grandfather passed away, Thomassen embarks on a digital cinematic project that proves to be much more challenging than initially anticipated. As it turns out, the six siblings no longer wish to keep in touch with each other after what they describe as a difficult and split childhood. They see their mother as having an important role in the family rupture and blame her for cultivating a culture of silence rather than open dialogue when they grew up. In the first part of the film, this silence is explained as an attempt to put behind traumatic experiences during World War II when the family was forced to evacuate their home in Lerresfjord as Nazi troops engaged in scorched-earth war tactics. In the second half, the film narrative takes a sudden shift, and a new layer of silence is shown to split Thomassen's family.

Black-and-white photographs in her grandmother's family album turn out to play a central role in the disclosure incited by Thomassen's film project. In voice-over, against a montage of photographs of Thomassen's grandfather helping reindeer-herding Sámi to move their herds across the fjord, Thomassen shares how she accidentally found out about her Sea Sámi origins. The camera cuts smoothly from one picture to another, slightly zooming in and out of each picture and slowly panning from left to right and right to left in an attempt to animate the old stills. Thomassen's commentary in voice-over is accompanied by non-diegetic string music softly marking the slow editing pace. The director explains how her mother revealed in a brief commentary to these pictures that Thomassen's grandfather spoke Sámi and that both he and Thomassen's grandmother were Sea Sámi. After showing the black-and-white photographs from her grandmother's album, the camera cuts to an archival picture in the Sophus Tromholt Collection taken in the beginning of the 1880s.

This photograph, the last in the montage, depicts a group of Sea Sámi in traditional clothing looking straight into the camera. Inscribed in the World Heritage List of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Sophus Tromholt Collection is considered to be a unique record of the Indigenous Sámi that eschews racially charged depictions characteristic of the time, as can be seen in *Sami Blood*.¹³ When Thomassen's camera focuses on this picture, the director describes how her mother's revelation took her completely by surprise, not least because she grew up with negative stereotypes about the Sámi and learned to use the word "Sámi" as an ethnic slur. This comment, corroborated with the visual shift from silenced family photographs to celebrated archival material, subtly suggests the national dimension of this demeaning narrative that the Sea Sámi eventually came to internalize. Then, Thomassen explains that it took her an entire year to dare to ask her grandmother about their Sámi roots, a conversation that she reveals in the scene immediately following the montage of old photographs.

We are in her grandmother's kitchen and her grandmother's brother Hagbart is visiting. In an establishing long shot, we see Thomassen sitting by the table in the left corner of the screen and her grandmother and her granduncle sitting across the table from her. They have three coffee cups in front of them. In voice-over, Thomassen explains that she had never met her granduncle before, which convinces her even more that time was ripe to finally ask her grandmother about their Sámi origins. As the camera

cuts back and forth from long shots of the two siblings sitting by the table to close-ups of particularly her grandmother's face, but also Hagbart's, we hear Thomassen speaking off-screen.

YVONNE: Do you have Sámi blood?

HAGBART: Sámi blood, well, if one comes originally from ... in other words, this has something to do with genes.

YVONNE: I didn't know that we had Sámi ancestry.

HAGBART: No, well ... yeah...

YVONNE: You have not told me about this [*takes a short break as the camera focuses a close-up of her grandmother*]. Do you have enough Sámi in you that you could have worn a *kofte*?

GRANDMOTHER: I don't know [*laughs nervously*]. Who can know that? We cannot measure the blood whether it is Sámi or Norwegian or [*grandmother takes a short break, Hagbart mumbles undistinguishable words in the background*] for the blood is the same, I think.

In this scene, we see Thomassen's first attempts to assume her Sámi identity by asking her grandmother and granduncle to confirm their Sámi ancestry. She defines Sáminess by blood and describes it as an interiority that in turn can legitimize the wearing of the traditional Sámi garment *kofte*. In reaction, her granduncle fumbles and avoids, unable to finish his sentences, while Thomassen's grandmother says she does not know whether or not she is Sámi. She also dismisses a definition of Sáminess by blood. The close shots of the two elderly faces reveal distress, a controlled panic of sorts suggestively communicated through the exchange of glances.

This short scene foreshadows other conversations Thomassen will have with her mother, her aunt Hallfrid, and her grandmother later in the film. During these conversations, histories of discrimination and abuse become evident. For example, Norwegian authorities banned the Sámi language in schools, and after World War II, speaking Sámi was seen as unpatriotic, which made many parents stop speaking Sámi to their children also at home. Or it was more shameful to be a Sea Sámi than a Mountain Sámi, a shame also sustained by internal hierarchies within the Sámi community. In light of the histories of racialization documented by Kyllingstad, it is striking to note how the internal hierarchies Thomassen's family talks about resonate in unpleasant ways with Hansen's racial hierarchy from the 1800s.¹⁴ If Hansen saw the Sea Sámi as "more developed" than the Mountain Sámi, then Thomassen's family speaks of a reversed situation within the Sámi community, with the Sea Sámi feeling a deep shame for being less Sámi than the Mountain Sámi who engaged in reindeer husbandry.

In conversations with the director, Thomassen's aunt and mother talk about a culture that has been taken away from them once the Sámi language disappeared. In the present, Sáminess is systematically framed as interiority, something that resides inside you, placed in the blood and revealed by phenotypic traits like high cheekbones or short bodies. For example, when Thomassen asks her aunt why she was never told about her Sámi background, the aunt replies: "Look at your high cheekbones. Look at yourself in the mirror and you'll see there is a Sámi in you also in some other places." In another conversation with her mother, Thomassen reflects on the identity dilemmas she is facing: "I don't really manage to define myself

as Sámi, but neither as only Norwegian.” How can she reconcile with her newly discovered mixed heritage and, more important, how is she to live out her Sámi identity?

Wearing the *kofte* is one way to express Sáminess. That is why getting a *kofte* is so important for Thomassen. The *kofte* was the first thing Elle-Marja in *Sami Blood* dropped on her first escape from the boarding school to join a local party. Dressed in a light summer dress she found hanging to dry in the yard of a Swedish household, Elle-Marja tests for the first time what it feels like to pass for Swedish. A young upper-class man from Uppsala, who is enrolled in the military in northern Sweden, becomes interested in her. They dance, laugh, and make an immediate connection, which stands in stark contrast to how the local boys treated her following the photography sessions in the classroom. In the 2000s in Norway, the *kofte* is the first thing younger generations of Sámi like Thomassen pick up again in a wish to assert their Sámi identity. Thomassen’s mother decides to make one for her, and the first time she puts it on, we see the director overwhelmed by emotions. Yet, before she can wear the *kofte* with pride, she seeks a final confirmation from her grandmother.

Four years have passed since Thomassen first found out about her Sámi origins and we are back in her grandmother’s kitchen. Like three years ago, the two women representing two generations of Sámi sit across each other at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee in front of them. Speaking on-screen, Thomassen opens by explaining her decision to get a *kofte* and asks her grandmother once again about their Sámi origins. As the conversation develops, close-ups of Thomassen and her grandmother are symbolically edited together to suggest tight family bonds but also generational differences. When the grandmother asserts with certainty that she is not of Sámi ancestry, Thomassen pulls out her grandmother’s genealogical tree made by one of her cousins. The tree attests that her grandmother’s great-grandfather on her mother’s side was Sea Finn, which is the old denomination for Sea Sámi.

YVONNE: So, we have a little bit of Sea Finn inside.

GRANDMOTHER: Yes, yes, then it must be like this. That’s why we are short. [*Thomassen starts to laugh and so does her grandmother*]

YVONNE: Yes, that’s why we have high cheekbones.

GRANDMOTHER: Yeah.

YVONNE: So, this makes me fully entitled to wear a *kofte*.

GRANDMOTHER: Of course, and so is everyone else in the Norwegian country, the majority, in any case up here [in northern Norway].

The grandmother’s reassurance reflects the broader conversation in present-day Norway about who can assert the Sámi identity when language and traditions have been erased. Unlike in Sweden and Finland, where the status of being a Sámi is strictly connected to membership in the Sámi electoral register, one is fully entitled to claim Sámi identity in Norway as long as one considers oneself a Sámi.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Thomassen needs the grandmother to confirm her background, which she does with a tongue-in-cheek commentary about short bodies and high cheekbones. The conversation ends with Thomassen trying to figure out why their Sámi ancestry has been kept hidden from her, an explanation she only partly procures from her grandmother.

After reiterating the difference between Sea and Mountain Sámi and expressing her bewilderment at the Sea Sámi's unwillingness to talk about their origins, the grandmother concludes: "People are people. What matters is how they behave, I have said this before, whatever community they come from." Indirectly, the grandmother suggests that the internal hierarchies among the Sea and Mountain Sámi have contributed to why many Sea Sámi have kept hidden their Sámi origins. It is strong, moving but also disquieting to see how Thomassen assumes Sáminess in front of her grandmother in the 2010s. She mobilizes biological discourses of blood and phenotypic traits to recuperate a culture that has been taken away from her. For when all cultural traces are lost, the body becomes the place in which to look for Sáminess.

Seen from a historical perspective, this presents us with a cruel paradox. Thomassen looks for Sáminess where Norwegian and Swedish scientists strove so hard to place it, namely, in the body. A nonagenarian, Thomassen's grandmother is old enough to remember the discourses that constructed the Sámi body as "primitive" and "deviant." Her defensive answer when first confronted about her Sámi origins ("You cannot measure the blood if it is Sámi or Norwegian," she says) must therefore be understood in light of the scientific discourse that tied Sáminess first to biology and then, via biology, to notions of racial determinism and social Darwinism. Four years later, when Thomassen pulls out her family's genealogical tree, the grandmother finally accepts her Sámi origins. She does that not only in front of her granddaughter but also in front of the camera and by extension in front of the nation. Although she now manages to chuckle at the racialization of phenotypic traits, like short bodies and high cheekbones, together with her granddaughter, she is also quick to underline that it is how people behave what matters and not how they look.

Suddenly Sami: Embracing a New Identity through DNA Tests

If in *My Family Portrait* Thomassen uses an old-school genealogical tree to obtain her grandmother's confirmation, Lundby mobilizes other resources in the process of developing her Sámi identity in *Suddenly Sami*. *Suddenly Sami* has had a prolific festival life several years after its official release in Norway in 2009, listing showings at more than twenty film festivals around the world and a few distinctions, like an honorable mention at the 2009 Tromsø International Film Festival and the Bronze Drum at the 2009 Nepal International Indigenous Film Festival.¹⁶ In the film, we see Lundby's mother sick with Alzheimer's disease, a condition that has significantly affected her language capabilities. The film implies that a long-suppressed language came to the surface when the director's mother withdrew from family and society into herself. This language attests to the mother's Sea Sámi origins, an identity that she had kept hidden from her daughter. Perhaps one of the most suggestive scenes in this sense is when Lundby plays a Sea Sámi traditional song *joik* for her mother and her mother responds by humming along and shaking her head, a reaction that contradicts the apathetic mood in which the ailing woman otherwise dwells.

Because of her mother's declining health, Lundby is however unable to engage her in a discussion about her Sámi origins like Thomassen does with her grandmother. Instead, she seeks answers from her mother's relatives in Lerresfjord, which is also the place of Thomassen's family roots, and from bureaucrats at the Sámi Parliament in Karasjok. She also reenacts scenes from her childhood in an attempt to resurrect

the past and recover the truth that has been hidden from her. Just like Thomassen in *My Family Portrait*, she mixes her own recordings with official archival material (film clips and photographs) and personal archives (mainly family photographs but also a clip of her mother) to underline the interplay between her personal story and the fate of the Sámi community in a national perspective.

Suggestively, in the first archival clip used in the film, Lundby is even able to spot herself as a nine-year-old young girl marching in front of the royal palace in Oslo on the Norwegian Constitution Day. A family picture of her and her mother taken on the same occasion follows this official clip borrowed from the Norwegian public broadcaster NRK. The visual rhetoric in this personal photograph is very much in tandem with the film clip borrowed from NRK: mother and daughter are festively dressed, both smiling and posing in front of the Oslo City Council as a Norwegian flag waves from a boat in the left corner of the picture. In retrospect, this montage of official and personal records underlines that the official national pride of being Norwegian inhibited the expression of a Sámi identity in the late 1960s.

Also like in *My Family Portrait*, the mother's unwillingness to talk about her Sámi origins is tied to histories of discrimination and abuse at the hands of Norwegian authorities as well as to the collective shame the Indigenous Sámi came to internalize as a consequence of such discriminatory practices. World War II is seen to have exacerbated the shame to be a Sámi, a shame Lundby's mother successfully camouflaged by "becom[ing] Norwegian the moment she left northern Norway," to quote her brother in Lerresfjord. At the end of the war, Lundby's mother moved to Oslo, leaving behind not only a community devastated by the war but also her family, her mother tongue, and her Sámi identity. In Oslo, she made a new family, married a Norwegian, had a girl, moved to a new apartment in the suburbs, and enjoyed modern life in the city. Like Elle-Marja in *Sami Blood*, Lundby's mother chose to disconnect, maintaining only minimal contact with her family in northern Norway.

To illustrate visually how common the Sámi disconnect was, Lundy includes a model of the folk census from Kvænangen Municipality in northern Norway, the neighboring municipality of where Lundby's mother comes from. The model consists of small wooden figurines that hold up posters indicating their ethnic affiliation: the Norwegians hold a Norwegian flag, the Sámi and the Kvens (a Finnish ethnic minority in Norway) hold white posters on which their ethnicity is displayed in black capital letters. If in 1930 close to half of the figures carried Sámi and Kven posters, twenty years later, in 1950, the number of Norwegian flags increased drastically, with only one Sámi and one Kven figurine left. This suggests how not only those who left but also those who stayed in the area chose to officially shed their Sáminess by declaring themselves Norwegian in the folk census.

Through her film project, Lundby regains contact with her relatives in northern Norway, whom she visits on several occasions. But, more important, she assumes a racialized identity that her mother tried to "protect" her from when she turned her back on Sáminess and started a new life in Oslo. If Lundby's relatives in Lerresfjord have different strategies to assume their Sámi identity (for example, her uncle is an official member of the Sámi electoral register), Lundby feels she needs more time before she can take the official step of registering in the Sámi electoral roll. Instead, she turns to genetics to confirm her Sámi roots. Five minutes into the film, and before she heads to northern Norway, we see her sending a saliva sample to the Genographic Project initiated by the National Geographic Society.

As she opens the package from the Genographic Project, she finds a CD-ROM that she then plays on her computer. The camera films the computer screen as Lundy clicks on the introductory video. The video opens with the following white-on-black text being typed on the screen against a soundtrack of computer-simulated metallic sounds punctuated by the sound of typing: “Your DNA contains the greatest history book ever written.” Genetics thus proudly promise what historical annals could not register. As the video starts to roll, the camera cuts back and forth between the computer screen showing fast-edited close-ups of mostly men belonging to different ethnicities to close-ups of Lundy watching the video in deep fascination. Off-screen, we hear the manly voice of authority announcing in English:

You may have your mother’s smile or your father’s hair. But why do you look the way you do? How do you explain the incredible diversity of people around the globe and how did your ancestors find their way to the place where you live today?

Lundy then transfers to the bathroom where we see her taking her saliva sample. Halfway through the film, she finally gets her results. She is once again in front of her computer, with the camera cutting back and forth between shots of the computer screen and close-ups of Lundy. As Lundy clicks on the tab “SEE YOUR RESULTS,” we see her face in bewilderment: “I don’t understand a thing. I have ended up in Spain. This doesn’t make sense. What?” she says. A new shot of the computer screen shows what Lundy reacts to: Lundy’s genetic material is visualized as a cartographic image in which we see twenty dots spread across three continents and a red line that starts in Africa and ends in southern Europe.

As she moves with her mouse along the red line, she remarks that one dot is placed in northern Norway. When she clicks on it, a new text box opens with “Saami culture” written on it. Lundy then proceeds to read aloud an excerpt from the report sent by the Genographic Project, which states that her haplogroup is Vee as in Victor, and not five as she mistakenly reads out. Because haplogroup V attains its highest concentration among the Skolt Sámi of northern Scandinavia, Lundy can happily conclude that she has genetic proof of her Sámi ancestry.

Lundy is by far an exception when she turns to DNA tests to confirm her ancestry. North American sociologists Wendy Roth and Biorn Ivemark show how the industry of genetic genealogy has grown significantly in the last few years, bringing testing companies revenues of billions of dollars. They also analyze how commercial DNA tests affect the racial and ethnic identities of those who take them: while some embrace the tests’ results, others choose to ignore them following such social mechanisms as identity aspirations and social appraisals.¹⁷

In *Suddenly Sami*, we see Lundy use her test results to embrace her Sámi identity at the same time that she is unsure whether her mother would have accepted her decision. She also shows how Torfinn Thomassen, who is the same age as Lundy and speaks Sámi, is much more skeptical of reclaiming Sáminess. Nevertheless, the director finds out that her own identity aspirations in the 2000s weigh more than her mother’s passing for Nordic at the end of World War II or Torfinn’s current skepticism. She finally manages to procure social appraisal from relatives in northern Norway, who, unlike her mother, have chosen to continue to speak their native language and practice their ancestral traditions.

The use of DNA testing within an Indigenous context poses some additional questions. For example, North American anthropologists Kim Tallbear and Deborah Bolnick warn Indigenous tribes in the US against the use of DNA testing as a way to validate claims of Native American ancestry. They point out how commercial DNA tests can be imprecise, inaccurate, and unreliable and underline that culture and politics, and not genetics, can provide satisfactory answers as to who is entitled to be eligible for Native American rights.¹⁸ In *Suddenly Sami*, on the one hand, Lundby does not advance any critical reflections on the reliability of DNA testing or its particular impact on Indigenous communities.

On the other hand, as the director strives to make sense of her genetic results, one cannot help but remark on the difficult language of genetics that attests to the complexity of the human genome, pinpointing, among others, the migration histories of a person's ancestors. Encoded in the annals of her DNA, "the greatest book of history ever written" turns out to be too convoluted in the scientific jargon. So why resort to this incomprehensible language that tells her little about how to go about becoming a Sámi in the late 2000s? Perhaps for the same reasons Thomassen mobilizes biological discourses in *My Family Portrait*. Because Lundby's mother has bracketed her own Sámi identity, the director intuitively turns to her own body as a way to trace what has been lost in culture.

In the final scenes of *Suddenly Sami*, the director reflects in voice-over on how the political emancipation of the Sámi of Norway incited at the end of the 1970s came too late for her mother: "For my mom, it was too late to get recognition for a background which she had put a great deal of effort to suppress." Although Lundby has lost the Sámi language, she nevertheless concludes that there are other things she can turn to when learning how to be a Sámi in the 2000s. She then cuts to a close-up of her feet wearing traditional Sámi boots followed by a series of shots in which we see her helping her family in northern Norway to gather reindeer. She is clearly a novice in reindeer husbandry and can barely hold the reindeer that she has taken by the horns, but luckily there is good help from the more experienced reindeer herders around her. With guidance from her community, she should manage to find her way to back to Sáminess.

Conclusion

In the closing scenes of *Sami Blood*, the old Elle-Marja stands by her sister's coffin while her family, including her son and her granddaughter, are gathering the reindeer herds. She apologizes in front of her sister's dead body and reconciles with her decision to turn her back on the Sámi community. The film alludes that her son's and granddaughter's enthusiasm for all things Sámi, including reindeer husbandry, become instrumental in this process of reconciliation, although the younger generations are afforded very little narrative space in Kernell's film. *Sami Blood* is after all the story of the old generation who experienced blatant discrimination and racism and who either left, like Elle-Marja, or stayed, like Elle-Marja's younger sister.

In contrast, *My Family Portrait* and *Suddenly Sami* set the limelight on the children and grandchildren of the real Elle-Marjas, who try to make sense of the silences and disconnects in their families and who are eager to embrace their Sámi identity. To be precise, these two films document the directors' own struggles to understand why their mothers and grandmothers have chosen to pass for Norwegians. As they seek to reclaim their newly discovered Sámi identity, Thomassen and Lundby turn to biology and

genetics respectively as important discursive resources. The article has explained this retreat to biology as a way to compensate for the loss of Sámi language and traditions. Moreover, it has discussed how this contemporary retreat to biology is in fact a paradoxical return. This becomes evident when the two Norwegian documentaries are put into conversation with the Swedish feature *Sami Blood* and the historical annals. Finally, the article has also shown how Thomassen and Lundby do more than just cling to the biological body as a site to reclaim Sáminess. They also seek to un-shame the Sámi body by dressing it proudly with traditional Sámi attire (*kofte* and boots), using celebrated archival material and personal photographs, and setting their own subjectivities at the heart of their films.

Notes

¹ Kuokkanen, “Indigenous Women in Traditional Economies,” 499–504; Kvist, “Racist Legacy,” 203–20; Marttinen, “Eugenics, Admixture, and Multiculturalism” (in this issue of the journal); Minde, “Assimilation of the Sami,” 1–33; Persen, “At bringe dem fram til mands modenhat.”

² Larsen, “Oppgjørets time.”

³ All translations by author.

⁴ Kyllingstad, *Measuring the Master Race*, 79–81, 121–22; Marttinen, “Scandinavian Anthropology,” 68–85; Persen, “At bringe dem fram til mands modenhat”; Silversparf, “Sáami Genealogy Research,” 131–42.

⁵ Kyllingstad, *Measuring the Master Race*, 79–81, 121–22.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁹ Kyllingstad, “Norwegian Physical Anthropology,” 55; Kyllingstad, *Measuring the Master Race*, 147.

¹⁰ Kyllingstad, *Measuring the Master Race*, 156.

¹¹ Persen, “At bringe dem fram til mands modenhat,” 74.

¹² UNESCO, “Sophus Treholt Collection.”

¹³ Kyllingstad, *Measuring the Master Race*, 79–81.

¹⁴ Lindi, “Når er jeg samisk nok?”; Berg-Nordlie and Skogvang, “Sametingets valgmanntall.”

¹⁵ Lundby, email correspondence with author, September 18, 2017.

¹⁶ Roth and Ivermark, “Genetic Options,” 151, 152–53.

¹⁷ Tallbear and Bolnick, “Native American DNA’ Tests,” 1, 4.

Bibliography

- Berg-Nordlie, Mikkel and Susann Funderud Skogvang. “Sametingets valgmanntall.” *Store Norske Leksikon*. Updated March 19, 2018. https://snl.no/Sametingets_valgmanntall.
- Dancus, Adriana Margareta. *Exposing Vulnerability: Self-Mediation in Scandinavian Films by Women*. Bristol: Intellect Books; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2019.
- Daniel, G. Reginald, Laura Kina, Wei Ming Dariotis, and Camilla Fojas. “Emerging Paradigms in Critical Mixed Race Studies.” *Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014): 7–62. <https://doi.org/10.5070/C811013868>.
- Kernell, Amanda, dir. *Sameblod (Sami Blood)*. Copenhagen: Nordisk film, 2016.
- Kramvig, Britt and Rachel Andersen Gomez. *Dreamland*. Tromsø: Sonarfilm, 2014.

- Kuokkanen, Rauna. "Indigenous Women in Traditional Economies: The Case of Sámi Reindeer Herding." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 34, no. 3 (2009): 499–504. http://rauna.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/03_aiq35_2kuokkanen.pdf.
- Kvist, Roger. "The Racist Legacy in Modern Swedish Saami Policy." *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 14, no. 2 (1994): 203–20. <https://arctichealth.org/media/pubs/297024/4071a86173b5b171b0f08d9bb721ecd1cc48.pdf>.
- Kyllingstad, Jon Røyne. *Measuring the Master Race: Physical Anthropology in Norway, 1890–1945*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2014.
- _____. "Norwegian Physical Anthropology and the Idea of a Nordic Master Race." *Current Anthropology* 53, no. S5 (2012): S46–S56. <https://doi.org/10.1086/662332>.
- Larsen, Hanne. "Oppgjørets time: – Det var en skam å være samisktalende." *NRK*, October 19, 2020. <https://www.nrk.no/tromsogfinnmark/sannhets-og-forsoningskommisjonen-henter-historier-fra-dem-som-ble-berort-av-fornorskningpolitikken-1.15170198>.
- Lindi, Marte. "Når er jeg samisk nok?" *NRK*, February 12, 2017. https://www.nrk.no/finnmark/xl/nar-er-man-samisk-nok_-1.13364696.
- Lundby, Ellen-Astri, dir. *Joikefeber (Joiking Fever)*. Oslo: Ellen Lundby film & media, 2014.
- _____. *Min mors bemmelighet (Suddenly Sami)*. Oslo: Ellen Lundby film & media, Sonarfilm, 2009.
- Marttinen, Terry-Lee M. "Eugenics, Admixture, and Multiculturalism in Twentieth-Century Northern Sweden: Contesting Disability and Sámi Genocide." In *Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies* 1, no. 2 (2021): 233–61. <https://doi.org/10.5070/C81258341>.
- _____. "Scandinavian Anthropology, Eugenics, and the Post-Colonial Geneticization of Sami Culture." *Acta historiae, medicinae, stomatologiae, pharmaciae, medicinae, veterinariae* 34, no. 1 (2015): 68–85. DOI:10.25106/ahm.2015.1111.
- Minde, Henry. "Assimilation of the Sami—Implementation and Consequences." *Gáldu Čála—Journal of Indigenous Peoples Rights* 3 (2005): 1–33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08003830310002877>.
- Nango, Marja Bål, dir. *Halvt ditt, halvt datt (Half of This, Half of That)*. Kabelvåg, Norway: Nordland kunst- og fagfilmhøgskole, 2011.
- Pedersen, Helga. "Er jeg same?" *Nordlys*, November 14, 2016. <http://nordnorskdebatt.no/article/same>.
- Persen, Bente. "'At bringe dem fram til mands modenhet' En studie av fornorskningen av samene i Porsanger." Master's thesis, University of Oslo, 2008.
- Roth, Wendy D. and Biorn Ivemark. "Genetic Options: The Impact of Genetic Ancestry Testing on Consumers' Racial and Ethnic Identities." *American Journal of Sociology* 124, no. 1 (July 2018): 150–84. DOI:10.1086/697487.
- Silversparf, Agneta. "Sáami Genealogy Research and Resistance Practice." In *Re: Mindings Co-Constituting Indigenous, Academic, Artistic Knowledges*, edited by May-Britt Öhman and Hiroshi Maruyama, 131–42. Stockholm: The Hugo Valentin Centre, 2014.
- Tailfeathers, Elle-Máijá, dir. *Bihttöš (Rebel)*. Vancouver: Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers and Laura Good, 2014.
- Tallbear, Kim and Deborah Bolnick. "'Native American DNA' Tests: What Are the Risks to Tribes?" *The Native Voice*, December 3–17, 2004. https://web.williams.edu/AnthSoc/native/tallbear_bolnick%20_dna.pdf.
- Thomassen, Yvonne, dir. *Familiebildet (My Family Portrait)*. Bergen: Alligator Film A/S, 2013.

UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). "Sophus Treholt Collection." Accessed May 27, 2018. <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/memory-of-the-world/register/full-list-of-registered-heritage/registered-heritage-page-8/sophus-tromholt-collection/>.

Wajstedt, Liselotte, dir. *Sami nieida jojk (Sami Daughter Joik)*. Stockholm: Filmpool Nord, Little Big Productions, 2007.