

Roundtable

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JOHANNA DOMOKOS

Writing and Unwriting in Contemporary Sámi Artivism

The Sámi people live across four countries in northern Europe: Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Russia. The five living Sámi languages are highly endangered, spoken by only a few dozen to a few thousand people.

Although the term artivism gained prominence following a 1997 gathering of Chicano artists, the phenomenon itself is much older. One early example is the Sámi ČSV (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ČSV>) ethnocultural movement of the 1970s and 1980s. Groundbreaking literary works such as Nils-Aslak Valkeapää's *Terveisiä Lapista* (1971) and Kirsti Paltto's *Saamelaiset* (1973) paved the way for artistic and activist expressions of Sámi identity and sovereignty.

Building on this legacy while addressing contemporary urgent issues, the interdisciplinary project *Rájácutmmá - Kiss from the Border* (2017-2018) was created by the Sámi writer and multimedia artists Niillas Holmberg (<https://niillas.com/>), Jenni Laiti (<https://www.jennilaiti.com/bio>), and Outi Pieski (<https://www.outipieski.com/>).

The project integrates environmental community art, poetry, and visual media to engage themes of language contact, cultural identity, and sovereignty. Set within the Deatnu River valley, a borderland between Finland and Norway, *Rájácutmmá* comprises eight poetic lines installed in the natural landscape, alongside eight photographs and a lithograph.

These elements critically examine Sámi self-determination and sustainable practices concerning land and waterways. Central to the project is the positioning of language as a bridge between culture and the environment, emphasizing reciprocity and respect as core principles of life in the border region. The eight poetic lines, notably written in Sámi rather than the official languages of the bordering states, exemplify this approach.

Through its poetic and visual narratives, *Rájácutmmá* reimagines mobility and coexistence, rejecting rigid national boundaries in favour of approaches rooted in the natural and cultural dynamics of the area. By granting equal status to nature and humanity, the project advocates for a vision of sustainable living informed by Sámi traditions and perspectives.

This presentation explores how *Rájácutmmá* reflects acts of writing and unwriting in its multilingual Sámi and Nordic context while addressing broader cultural and ecological dimensions. It highlights the capacity of literature and art to transcend linguistic and geopolitical borders, fostering dialogue about environmental justice, cultural resilience, and pathways to de-colonial futures.