

FRANK MÖLLER

# “Wild Weirdness?” “Gross Humbugs!”

## Memory-Images of the North and Finnish Photography

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**ABSTRACT** In this essay it is argued that northern photography can serve as an epistemological triangle both combining different layers of experiences and memories with one another—experience in the north, experience as inhabitants of the north and experience as such—and connecting photographers, subjects of photography and viewers with one another. The essay discusses selected photographs of northern indigenous people and landscapes—and the approaches underlying them—in terms of what is here deemed key concepts in social research including northern studies: experience and memory. Owing to the surplus of meaning that images inevitably carry with them and their irreducibility to one meaning, photographic images, it is argued, contribute to what Sherrill Grace has called the north’s “resistance to measure and closure.” Images may help the beholder to acknowledge that different groups of people may have different memories of what only seems to be the same history. A brief discussion of the work of Jorma Puranen, Tiina Itkonen and Antero Takala substantiates these claims.

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**KEYWORDS** photography, experience, memory, Jorma Puranen, Tiina Itkonen, Antero Takala

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“Not bad, they all agreed, exploding water, rather interesting, rather strange. But they wanted wild weirdness, [...] in the manner of all the old dreams of the north, the “other world” of Thule.”

In the above quotation,<sup>1</sup> Joanna Kavenna (2006: 98) describes Victorian travellers' slightly disappointed reactions to their experience of Icelandic geysers. Her description serves well as a starting-point for the following reflections on memory-images of the north, because it refers to different layers of experience that can be observed in social research including northern studies: experience in a given place (for example, the north), experience as an inhabitant of this place and experience as such. In what follows, these layers will be related to contemporary photographic representations of northern people, peoples and places.

I would certainly not be the first to claim that people, rather than representing themselves, are often represented by others (Couldry 2000). Such forms of representation were an integral component of colonial photography, for example. There are, however, different forms of representation and some may be more in accordance with the interests and self-images of those depicted than others: not all forms of visual representation are colonizing, patronizing and exploitative. In a period of profound changes in visual representations owing to, among other things, the transformation of analogue forms of image production into digital forms and the dramatic increase in the number of images (see Ritchin 2009), it may be useful to reflect upon ways through which photography can help photographers, subjects of photography and viewers to connect with one another so as to produce inclusive memory-images of the north—that is to say, images of northern people which reflect the self-images of those depicted, communicate the images those depicted want to communicate to others and respect their individual and collective attitudes to memory, identity and place.

The following text targets primarily readers who are interested in the connection between visual representation, experience and memory without, however, being experts on visual representation. Indeed, the article is not primarily meant as a contribution to the rich specialist literature in connection with, for example, the history of photography, indigenous photography, museum studies or post-colonial studies. The text proceeds by discussing key concepts of current social research—experience and memory—in relation to visual representations. The photographic work of Jorma Puranen, Tiina Itkonen and Antero Takala will subsequently be discussed in light of these concepts. A brief return to “exploding water,” interesting and strange but ultimately disappointing, is a useful starting point.

## Pieces of Paper

In the case of the Victorian travellers referred to above, it seems that nature did not match the image of weird wildness or wild weirdness that the travel-

lers had carried with them and that had probably motivated their long journey to Iceland in the first place. For them, geysers in particular and the north in general were culture not nature, “constructs,” as Simon Schama (1995: 61) puts it with respect to landscape in general, “of the imagination projected onto wood and rock”—and water. The travellers seem to have been looking for confirmation of their pre-existing beliefs, imagined and discursively constructed prior to their journey on the basis of other travellers’ experiences or imaginations, dating back, perhaps, to Greek writings emphasizing the north’s otherworldliness. When nature deviated from imagination, they were disappointed, referring to the geysers as “gross humbugs” (Kavenna 2006: 97).

The images of geysers the Victorians had seen prior to their journey or constructed in their minds on the basis of written or other reports were, no doubt, images of overwhelming natural, superhuman power, dwarfing human beings. These mental images could not stand the test when confronted with the vicissitudes of volcanic and sulphuric activity and, especially, passivity. Experience gained by actually observing nature was not appreciated. As “the scale at which we look very often depends on the object that we hope will become visible” (Lorimer 2006: 505), the experienced north paled against the imagined one because the scales did not match; the imagined dwarfed the real. Visual evidence and lived experience contradicted imagination but rather than altering their imagination, the travellers ridiculed the north as humbug.

Experience is one of the key concepts with which social research tries to make sense of the world (LaCapra 2004: 35–71). The term refers to each person’s “individual history of reflection” (Couldry 2000: 51)—and memory of reflection—enabling partial identification with one another and recognition of both sameness and difference: no one can be reduced to that which he or she shares with others; no-one can be reduced to that which separates him or her from others. Based on the distinction between the “real” and the “imagined” north, experience has also become an important concept in northern studies (see Hulan 2002), influenced by the importance assigned to lived experience (rather than to Western, abstract, scientific representations such as maps) by indigenous people. For example, the Innu Elder Pien Penashue reportedly articulated scepticism of maps by saying that “[m]aps are only pieces of paper. I know ponds and lakes because I was there” (Samson 2003: 69). Different forms of experience can also be found underlying Finnish paintings of northern landscapes: there were those painters “who travelled to Lapland,” those who “lived there” and those who “felt the urge to depict the region’s great vistas without actually going there” but all of them are said to have expressed a “sense of infinity that one finds in Lapland” (Hautala-Hirvioja 2011: 109).

As Renée Hulan has shown, the focus on lived experience resulted in the assumption that accounts of the north that are based on personal experience are epistemologically superior to accounts that are lacking such experience. In a second step, it was assumed that accounts of the north that are based on the experience as an inhabitant of the north, that is to say, as someone permanently residing in the north, are epistemologically superior to accounts merely based on temporary experience in the north by, for example, visiting researchers, photographers or travellers. In a third step, however, preference given to experience as a northern inhabitant gave way to the idea of experience as such. Emphasis on experience as such resulted in a focus on reflexivity. Researchers and travellers started questioning their own subject positions when visiting the north and doing social research including northern studies. This approach suggested that "speakers gain epistemic privilege through experience *in* the north rather than experience *as* a northern inhabitant" (Hulan 2002: 15) and through reflection on their experience—hence the plethora of travel writings based on first-person accounts, replacing the silent voices of indigenous people, mostly absent from these writings, with accounts focusing on "the individual's role as a storyteller speaking for the silent north" (Hulan 2002: 152). However, the inclusion of indigenous voices in such writings does not necessarily result in what David MacDougall calls "indigenous statements" because "a method that purports to disperse some of its authority to its subjects is also capable of using this to reinforce its own" (MacDougall 1998: 154).

The problems involved in absorbing indigenous statements into non-indigenous narratives are of course immense and well known. Often the issue is not one of translation but one of "simulation" (Samson 2003: 59) effectively eliminating indigenous practices and thought patterns from representation. Rather than treating indigenous writings as an end in itself, they are frequently used as a means to an end. By adapting indigenous narratives to the worldview of non-indigenous readers, their credibility and comprehensibility for the readers are increased just as is their salability on non-indigenous markets; their authenticity and indigenesness, however, are undermined. In academic research, indigenous lives and stories are often reduced to "mere data" (Samson 2003: 23) serving the researcher's empirical and theoretical mission. In land claims negotiations, indigenous voices are frequently presented by their (often non-indigenous) advisors in such a manner that they do not openly challenge "the scientific materialism" on which Western knowledge production is based (Samson 2003: 58). Thus, they are presented in terms other than their own, translated into concepts derived from the Western world and thereby ultimately liquidated—a good example of what Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966: 133) call "ni-

hilation,” that is to say, a process of meaning-making by translating statements into “more ‘correct’ terms.” This would then seem to be a form of exploitation of indigenous voices and, in effect, a second—and ultimate—silencing.

## Experience and Memory

The story of the Victorian travellers that opened this essay is also important in the present context because it touches upon the idea that every person carries with them a huge reservoir of stories, images, dreams, imaginations and memories. This reservoir is the property of this person alone and it serves among other things as the standard against which new information is being evaluated. Thus, if we talk about stories and images, we also talk about memory, because it is by means of memory that stories and images are contextualized and meaning is assigned to them. Without memory, most stories and most images would not mean much to us. “Without memory, there can be no recognition of difference [...], no tolerance for the rich complexities and instabilities of personal and cultural, political and national identities” (Huyssen 1995: 252).

Although memory is intimately linked to experience, it is often very difficult to differentiate between “real” memories based on experience and “imagined” memories devoid of a person’s own experience. Surely, “[w]hat we refer to as experience is typically the memory of experience” (LaCapra 2004: 66), but from this it neither follows that experiences are literally translated into memories nor that “imagined” and “invented” memories would be less powerful than “real” ones. Indeed, “invented” memories would not seem to be less “true” than “real” ones as long as they are believed to be “true.” All memories are derived from experience, albeit to different degrees and not necessarily from one’s own experience. At the same time, memory is detached from experience; it never is a carbon copy of experience. Memories are adapted to the needs of the present. In contrast to traumatic re-enactment, memories tend to change especially when incorporated into, or told as, a story (Levi 1989: 24). They also change when reshaped and rethought in the light of visual accounts of the remembered event in film, photography and television (Welzer 2002: 175). Memories are often based on visual rather than verbal sources and this adds to memory’s notorious unreliability another source of unreliability, namely, the peculiarities of images, especially the surplus of meaning that images carry with them and their non-reducibility to one specific meaning (Möller 2009)—and one specific memory.

Groups of people define themselves and others—and are defined by others—through a variety of means including visual representations. A sense

of place and belonging, derived from inter-subjectively shared memories of experiences, is often articulated by means of images or some form of word-image hybrid (see Kuhn & MacAllister (eds.) 2006). Book illustrations and photographs became important carriers and constructors of social memories and identities as early as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, respectively. In the twentieth century, illustrated journals contributed critically to our image and our memory of the century (Sontag 2003) while also occasionally undermining hegemonic forms of storytelling (Kelsey & Stimson 2008: xviii–xix). At the same time, the photographic family album—initially ridiculed in some writings<sup>2</sup>—became an important vehicle for the construction, justification and maintenance of often idealized family relationships and rules of appropriate behaviour. It is one of the everyday places where identities are constructed, notions of self and others developed, feelings of belonging articulated and collective memories formed (Hirsch 1997). It is a place of intimacy, meaningful only for those who are either aware of the tacit assumptions and implicit relationships that can be felt rather than seen in the photographs or capable of deciphering the hidden codes and symbols camouflaging issues pertaining to gender, race and class.<sup>3</sup> Internet-based social networks are certainly no places of intimacy but they, too, are places where identities are constructed and collective memories are formed, often based on questionable friendship designations. Family albums, social networks and other collections of photographs provide individuals and groups of people with reservoirs of images with which to define themselves and others and from which to select those images which allegedly show who “we” are. (The family album will be revisited below in connection with Tiina Itkonen’s work.)

Memories, while ultimately being individual properties, can be said to be collective in the sense that they are socially constructed and negotiated in communication with others in the process of, for example, story-telling. Acts of communication are not medium-specific; therefore, they cannot be reduced to verbal utterances (Mitchell 1994). Thus, without ignoring the role of language in the construction of collective memories and the intricacies of the image-word relationship, it is useful to treat visual representations, too, as acts of communication by means of which groups of people define, perceive and represent themselves and others. Appeals to and constructions of collective memories as parts of representational strategies with which to further group interests can be observed in abundance. However, memories—individual and collective, communicative and cultural, emotional and cognitive, pictorial and non-pictorial—are more than that, and group memories cannot be reduced to the politics of memory (just as identity cannot be reduced to identity politics): memories affect, shape, form, condi-

tion, determine, facilitate, restrict, render difficult, make impossible and expand the possibilities to act, politically or otherwise. The construction of social memories is an integral part of the construction of group identities. Without collective memories, collective identities can hardly be thought of: memory serves as glue connecting otherwise disconnected points in time to a seemingly coherent narrative without which identity can hardly be thought of (Zerubavel 2003: 40). By so doing, it supports the identity of the group and provides the group with notions of continuity and we-feeling, thus helping to construct the group in the first place.

However, collective memory often takes the form of stipulation—“that *this* is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds” (Sontag 2003: 86). A specific way to remember an event is said to be more important and more appropriate than others; the legitimacy of other ways to remember this very event is called into question. Colin Samson’s (2003) account of the extinguishment of the Innu in Labrador, for example, is a poignant account of the extinguishment of cultural difference including the extinguishment of collective memories. However, the story of the north has always been more complicated, ambiguous and hybrid than those interested in *the* story and *the* memory of the north would want to acknowledge. As Sherrill Grace has noted, in the Canadian discursive construction of the north in geography, historiography and political rhetoric there can be observed “a quixotic desire for closure or stability” (Grace 2001: 48) but this desire has recently been undermined by strategies of “writing back” (Grace 2001: 227–260).

Indeed, closure is unattainable and attempts at nihilation are necessarily undermined by the surplus of meaning (King 2003: 180) that images inevitably carry with them. The irreducibility of images is often disregarded in social research by subordinating the analysis of images to the analysis of the texts surrounding them; by editorial practices prioritizing text over image; and by reducing images to illustrations of text so as to “prove” what has already been established by means of language (see Ritchin 1999). The reduction of a given image to one specific meaning—for example, by what Walter Benjamin (2008b: 27) has called “signposts”—obviously has an important drama-setting, memory-constructing and identity-building and, as such, eminently political function. Images, however, always tell different stories at the same time; they co-represent similarities and differences, the general and the particular, the central and the peripheral, nearness and remoteness, absences and presences, voices and silences, past and present, life and death (MacDougall 1998).

The stipulation of an image’s meaning by means of captions or other such devices also reflects the over-estimation of the truth-value of pho-

tographic representation. This overestimation—reflecting photography's ostensible documentary potentialities, its mechanical way of reproduction and the long history of the use of photographs as evidence in all sorts of circumstances—tells us less about photography than about our longing for some degree of certainty and assurance. It is often ignored that there is no necessary and direct connection between a photograph and what John Tagg (1988: 2) calls "prior reality." Thus, we believe in photography's truth-value mainly because we *want* to believe in it. This longing for certainty can surely be understood in the northern context because owing to, among other things, global warming, environmental degradation and exploitation of natural resources, nothing will be as it used to be in the future. Uncertainty as to the question of "what our descendants will need to know about ourselves in order to understand their own lives"—the "acceleration of history"—is among the reasons for the current interest in questions pertaining to memory just as is the "democratization of history" resulting in the re-framing and re-claiming of stories and memories (Nora 2002).

## Images of the North

In the northern context, there obviously is a huge reservoir of images including photographs (King & Lidchi (eds.) 1996). In Europe, for example, visualizing and photographing the north can be observed in connection with the visual mapping of indigenous peoples and cultures, their "anthropologization," in the process of the nation-state's northern expansion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Edwards 1999b: 42) justified with reference to Western, allegedly scientific ways of knowledge production. Photographs have also been taken during expeditions to the north as early as, for example, Prince Roland Bonaparte's expedition to Swedish and Norwegian Lapland in 1884. It is not surprising that most of these photographs reflect the colonial spirit of the time but, as has been argued in connection with questions pertaining to territorial and cultural sovereignty in the Canadian Arctic, "the existence today of historic photographs permits Arctic peoples to repossess their histories and to reassert sovereignty over their cultures" (Stern 1996: 51). While colonial photography documented the names and ages of the subjects so as to categorize them according to anthropological types, nowadays "the very act of naming allows a space for re-engagement and re-activating" (Edwards 1999b: 46). Thus, in the north there can be observed not only strategies of "writing back" but also visual strategies of re-claiming access and right to land as well as strategies of re-framing and re-claiming memories. Colonial photography simultaneously produces and undermines colonial practices and thought patterns.



In the North European context, art history and political history have analyzed late nineteenth and early twentieth century landscape painting with respect to the construction of collective identities and senses of place. In Finland, landscape painting helped appropriate eastern landscapes in terms of “national landscapes.” Serving as the visual foundation of Finnishness, these paintings became reference points for the construction of national identity (see Valkanen 2001). Words and pictures seemed to work hand in hand: words seemed to explain what the paintings showed; the paintings seemed to support the words; together words and images created an “intellectual stereoscopic effect” (Gilgen 2003: 55) strengthening the overall message. The politics of memory, as long as it utilizes both texts and images, also often relies on the stereoscopic effect to strengthen the overall effect.

Early depictions of Finland’s northern territories (largely unvisited at the time) replaced “the fearsome unknown” with “the romantic exoticism of the fells” (Hautala-Hirvioja 2011: 78)—often in light of the midnight sun and the northern lights, the nightless summer and (what seems to be) the lightless winter. Owing to the strength of Karelianism prevailing at the time, however, they failed to establish Lapland as a national landscape. After independence, “landscape painting made the abstraction of ‘nationhood’ something visible and tangible” (Hautala-Hirvioja 2011: 78) and depictions of northern landscapes, especially fell sceneries, contributed to the construction of national identity. As a major recent exhibition shows,<sup>4</sup> Finland’s north has indeed been exceedingly visualized, first by means of paintings, then photographs. Alternatively, landscape painting may also be critically investigated in terms of expropriation, displacement and cultural governance (Shapiro 2004: 117–119). By investigating the concept of landscape (see Manning 2003: 1–30) the relationship between landscape painting and the construction of the Nordic nation-states can be revealed: historical landscape paintings often, but not always, seemed to communicate the north as devoid of human beings thus waiting to be captured, populated, “developed” and “civilized.” Indeed, “[w]ith a few exceptions, the Sámi are not to be found in Lapland landscapes” (Hautala-Hirvioja 2011: 99) arguably because their depiction would seem to confuse the idea of homogeneous Finnishness. Those Sami that were to be found in landscape paintings were normally accessories to the landscape, thus strengthening the sense of emptiness and vastness.

Recently, however, the visual arts seem to have established some degree of distance to the nation-states. The arts appear to have been interested in breaking with traditional, homogenizing approaches to memories of/in landscapes and in acknowledging both what Ari Lehtinen (2003) calls the “multilayered geographies” of the north and the changeability of (the

memories of) the north—their stubborn refusal to yield to unifying stories. Artists appear to have effectively called into question the premise of the need for both unitary stories and unitary memories underlying most political integration projects (Möller 2005). In a different context, Dominick LaCapra (2004: 43) has noted the

possibility that art, in its specific (often highly mediated, indirect, darkly playful, powerful but other than narrowly documentary or informational) forms of bearing witness or testifying to that [traumatic] past, might assist in partially working that past over and through, thereby making more available other possibilities in the present and future.

LaCapra's argumentation would seem to be particularly suitable for art addressing indigenous people who are often said to be traumatized (to different degrees) by the experience of colonization, expropriation and forced adaptation to Western ways of living and thought patterns (see Samson 2003). Works of art including photography may help "envisage a form of memory for more than one subject, inhabited in different modalities by different people" (Bennett 2005: 11). At the very least, works of art may make the viewers think about both the conditions depicted in the artwork and their own involvement in, and responsibility for, these very conditions (Alphen 2005). Rather than simply confirming existing knowledge, art also produces new knowledge and new visions: "art articulates a vision of the world that is insightful and consequential; and the vision and the insight can be analysed" (Danchev 2009: 4). Thus, visual representations seem to be capable of contributing to the north's "resistance to measure and closure" (Grace 2001: 49). As suggested by Jill Bennett (2005: 2) in her discussion of art relating to the topic of traumatic memory, the issue is also one of

mov[ing] away from evaluating art in terms of its capacity to reflect pre-defined conditions and symptomologies, and open[ing] up the question of what art itself might tell us about the lived experience and memory of trauma.

The question is what art can tell us about "the experiences of conflict and loss" (Bennett 2005: 2). Art reveals "new configurations of what can be seen, what can be said and what can be thought" (Rancière 2009: 103) without which new political configurations can hardly emerge. With Bennett it can then be asked "what it is that art itself *does* that gives rise to a way of thinking and feeling about [trauma]" (Bennett 2005: 2). Although I will be dealing here with work by non-indigenous photographers who do not themselves seem to be traumatised, I want to suggest that this work can contribute to

the “reclaiming of the image of the Arctic” (McGhee 2005: 266).<sup>5</sup> It focuses on a form of knowledge production in which the subjects are represented in communication with the photographer as part of a dialogical relationship between photographer and subject but also involving the viewers who are given the possibility to call into question the ways they usually, and often without much reflection, make sense of images of the north.

There is another reason for focusing on photography and this refers back to the concepts of experience discussed above. Photographs of the north cannot be taken without a photographer, at some point, being in the north. It is therefore suggested here to see photographs as epistemological triangles linking with one another the photographer (a person in the north without necessarily being an inhabitant of the north), the subject (often an inhabitant of the north) and the viewer (often a southerner). The relationship between photographer, subject and viewer is an important one because it is here that the meanings of an image are constantly negotiated and re-negotiated in a process of discursive meaning making. In the following discussion, attention is directed to the contribution photography can make to attempts by northern people to position themselves in their own history without appearing as frozen in time, to prevent their memories from being absorbed in Western narratives and to strengthen their inter-generational connectedness. The contribution that photography can make to all of the above may be small but it may be important all the same.

## Jorma Puranen, *Imaginary Homecoming*

Connecting extensive fieldwork with an anthropological approach to photography, Jorma Puranen<sup>6</sup> connects in most of his work his experience in the north with the experiences of northern inhabitants so as to enable “a dialogue between the past and the present; between two landscapes and historical moments, but also between two cultures.” By so doing, he aims “to suggest a sort of historical ‘counter-memory’” and “to offer an alternative way of looking at a landscape and the concomitant facts, which we may know already” (Puranen 1999: 11–12). Those who are interested in categorizations may refer to Puranen’s work also in terms suggested by Charlotte Cotton, that is to say, in terms of “Revived and Remade.” Such photographs, according to Cotton, invite the viewers “to explicitly acknowledge the cultural coding that photography mediates” (Cotton 2009: 192). As Elizabeth Edwards has noted in her excellent essay in Puranen’s *Imaginary Homecoming*, these images are also “an invitation to the viewer to engage with the issues of memory and history, of dispossession and marginalization” (Edwards 1999a: 17).<sup>7</sup> Such invitation was especially pertinent at the time, the

1990s, as it resonated with the democratization of history referred to above and "postcolonial debates about imagery and representation" (Wells 2009: 21) both of which made use of photography: photographs, as "supposedly enduring materials," are archival, not performative (Taylor 2003: 19) and, therefore, good vehicles for what Cotton (2009: 210) calls "projects of archive-retrieval."

In *Imaginary Homecoming*, compiled between 1991 and 1997, Puranen—similar to, but not identical with, such archive-retrieval projects—used images of Sami people of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century,<sup>8</sup> re-photographed them, developed them on graphic film, enlarged them on acrylic panels or polyester sheets, positioned them in northern landscapes and re-photographed them (Edwards 1999b: 43). What then was an ingredient of the Nordic nation-state building project at the expense of the indigenous population can now be seen to represent the claim of the Sami people to their own lands. Puranen's photographs visualize different layers of memories. By so doing, they show that current identities cannot be thought of without the memories, individual and collective, of colonization, expropriation, dispossession and traumatization. But how can these memories be represented without patronizing their owners? After all, the photographer represents the memories of other people, not his own. According to Edwards, this can be done by "speaking about" rather than "speaking for" them (Edwards 1999a: 17), but it can also be done by speaking *with* them in a conversation that amounts to a dialogical construction of photographic trauma work. This conversation involves the viewers: Puranen's photographs are invitations to discussion widening the discursive frame within which conversations about the north normally take place. They are also invitations to transform visibility into a deeper form of visibility linked to representation and participation. Indeed, rather than pointing only at "what we may have lost," these images also point at "what we might, perhaps, still find" (Puranen 1999: 12).

Many visual representations of indigenous people detach their subjects from time. As a result, the subjects' "*afflictions are communicated, but recognition is lacking*" (Samson 2003: 227). However, rather than offering static representations of Sami life, Puranen shows how it became what it is today: in some images, historical pictures reproduced on acrylic are held by people who are situated behind another photograph as yet another layer of historical memories and experiences, showing the trajectory from then to now. As Edwards (1999b: 43) explains, in Puranen's work "the dead and the living are brought together."

In another image, a fence cutting the landscape and the photograph in two parts symbolizes the tension between the indigenous way of life and



Fig. 1. Jorma Puranen, *Anár*, Finland, 1994 (reproduced with permission by the artist).

the nation-state building process characterized by the erection of borders along a north-south line which challenged and to some extent rendered impossible the east-west migratory movements of the indigenous peoples. The indigenous way of life and the erection of national boundaries were mutually exclusive. To some extent they still are, therefore the title: “the homecoming” can only be imaginary, that is to say, it “exist[s] only in imagination or fancy.”<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, Puranen avoids nostalgic romanticization and idealization of the northern peoples’ way of life just as he avoids (seemingly) empty landscapes. More importantly, by “putting something in between the viewer and the subject: transparent portraits, phrases in Latin, flags”<sup>10</sup> he interrupts the viewer’s gaze, challenges habitual viewing patterns and invites engagement. Indeed, as Ernst van Alphen has noted, vision can be engaged by “raising obstacles.” Obstacles encourage, among other things, “to try something when it is impossible, to intrude on a space that is not yours and has to be respected as secret or somebody else’s” (Alphen 2005: 92). As such, they are an important ingredient of what Edwards calls “the critical edge of the work,” which might seem threatened by its “sheer beauty” (Edwards 1999c: 61). In particular, the use in Puranen’s work of flags in-

dicates a move from "the act of re-framing to re-claiming the identity of a landscape" (Papastergiadis 2000: 23). The use of white sheets on which historical photographs of Sami people are reproduced and positioned in the landscape also challenges the viewer. This procedure is reminiscent of the practice of colonial photography of taking pictures of indigenous people in front of white sheets and, by doing so, visually isolating them from their own culture and context. However, it also deconstructs this very practice by re-contextualizing the subjects and re-positioning them in the/their landscapes.

Other images show such modern elements as railway tracks, electric power stations and telecommunications installations, symbolizing the enduring conflict over land use. Placing historic images of Sami people in an economically exploited and partly devastated environment such as open-pit mines or above railway tracks indicates the dispossession of the Sami people of their own lands. However, it may also be seen as a claim to Sami participation in current and future forms of land use and global economic networks rather than freezing them as eternal reindeer herders. Yet, the indigenous peoples' connection with nature is acknowledged as an important one: in one image, a single light bulb reflects the faces of Sami people, photographed a hundred years ago and now reproduced on acrylic, on snow thus symbolically reuniting people and nature. In another image, the reflections of people's faces can be seen on the surface of a lake. At least visually, the indigenous people merge with, and regain possession of, their lands; at least visually, a homecoming is possible.

## Tiina Itkonen, *Inughuit*

How to combine experience in the north with experience as a northern inhabitant without exploiting the subject by, for example, simply catering to the viewers' aesthetic pleasure? A possible answer can arguably be found in Tiina Itkonen's photographs of North-western Greenland's people and landscapes (Itkonen 2004), especially in those photographs that depict the family life—women and children as well as ordinary and daily activities.<sup>11</sup> These photographs are extraordinary although, from the point of view of the subjects, they show nothing special. Itkonen's portraits offer an alternative to the usual representational mode of approaching the north mainly as vast and empty landscapes and/or in terms of hunting, focusing on the unusual, the spectacular and the extraordinary (unusual, spectacular and extraordinary at least in the eyes of southern observers while being integral elements of the lives of the indigenous people). Itkonen's work may be seen as a family album. The family album is one of the everyday places where



Fig. 2. Tiina Itkonen, *Jonas, Savissivik* (reproduced with permission by the artist).

memories other than those stipulated for political or economic purposes are formed and cultivated, identities constructed and re-constructed and narratives tailored to the needs of the group (Hirsch 1997). The family album is a place where by means of story-telling and story-showing personal experiences are transformed into shared memories; a place where memories are transmitted from one generation to the next, thus preparing the future by narrating the past (a process that inevitably changes memories); and a place where current generations are linked to their ancestors, providing the family with a sense of continuous identity by verbally and visually linking the present with the past. Furthermore, photographs may not only appeal to or even touch the viewer but they can also be touched by the viewer, thus physically linking the viewer to the subject depicted. Indeed, touch “pro-

duces a much less dramatic transubstantiation of the object's material substance and form into a spiritual expression of boundless significance than do seeing or hearing" (Gilgen 2003: 54).

Itkonen's work can also be seen in light of the democratization of history noted above, that is to say, as an attempt to give voices and images to people and peoples marginalized, silenced and either made invisible or visualised for colonial purpose and for the purpose of satisfying the curiosity of southerners as to what they regard as "exotic" peoples. Indeed, as alluded to above, the current interest in collective memories has been explained with reference to processes of decolonization and democratization of history, in the course of which ethnic groups and minorities are said to "rehabilitat[e] their past [as] part and parcel of reaffirming their identity" (Nora 2002).

Itkonen's work, like Puranen's, is neither nostalgic nor static. It reflects the degree to which modernity has entered the lives of the Inughuit—remote control, coffee machine, a boy (Jonas) posing hilariously in a superman outfit, plastic toys, modern clothing and non-traditional housing. In combination with the accompanying captions revealing the names of those depicted, these photographs deviate from the visual colonial mode of depicting anonymous people, equating namelessness with a lack of identity. Itkonen therefore breaks with the practice of taking photographic possession of other people's lives, lands and identities. Based on respect for their lives, senses of place and identities, she constructs images in communication with the subjects. Ultimately, of course, it is for the people depicted to say whether they feel represented adequately or not.

## Antero Takala, *Kaamos*

Traditional Finnish landscape painting has often been criticized for its depiction of what appears to be mere landscape (mainly hills, forests and lakes) devoid of people thus seeming to justify, and indeed invite, the colonial taking possession of the northern lands (Shapiro 2004: 117). At first sight, this criticism seems to be applicable also to the work of Antero Takala (2006, 2010), depicting the polar night and *kaamos*, the winter darkness, in Finnish Lapland but showing no human beings.<sup>12</sup> The exclusion from representation of human beings, especially indigenous people, has often been seen as an element of cultural governance, justifying the expansion of the nation-state. However, this assessment is dubious on three accounts. First, it shows only limited regard for the capability of the viewers to identify the nation-state's representational strategies and their underlying motives and interests. Secondly, it confuses reduction in meaning as a part of cultural governance with the multiple meanings of the images. These meanings do



not simply evaporate just because official preference is given to one specific meaning; alternative meanings may be temporarily suppressed or marginalized but they cannot be extinguished altogether; thus, they may re-appear in different circumstances. Thirdly, it ignores the capability of images to work at the same time on different levels, to show by implication that which seems to be excluded from representation, and to co-represent presences and absences. Thus, the above criticism confuses the meanings of an image with the social processes through which a particular interpretation of a given image becomes the dominant one under particular spatial-temporal circumstances. While it is an important ingredient of political analysis to identify these processes, images cannot be reduced to them; art itself might give rise to a way of thinking and feeling about the north beyond, and deviating from, official stipulations of meaning.

In Takala's photographs, co-representing absences and presences, human beings are present (just as they are present in older landscape paintings) although they seem to be absent from both (which qualifies the conventional criticism of landscape paintings outlined above). Their seeming absence might even invite the viewers to ponder why they are not depicted and this may lead to a critical investigation of viewing practices, modes of representation and forms of cultural governance. Takala furthermore undermines standard patterns of depicting Finnish Lapland by focusing on a situation where shadows are cast only by the moon thus interrupting the viewers' habits of viewing: there "is hardly any light while an extreme richness characterizes the little that is there" (Takala 2006: 10). For the viewer, it takes time to identify this richness and the different layers of meaning that can be found in the photographs because "[s]ometimes, the shadowless world that presents itself in unreal guise sends obscure perceptions to the brain" (Takala 2006: 75). Takala's work invites what Mieke Bal (2007: 113), in a different context, has called "slow looking." Indeed, shadowlessness and slowness condition one another because it takes time to see both that which can be seen because it is depicted and that which can be seen—or felt—although it is not depicted: *kaamos* "is a thing to be experienced rather than seen. The camera functions as the mediator of experience" (Takala 2006: 10). Due to the intimate relationship between both experience and memory, and memory and landscape it also functions as a mediator of memories of landscapes and, with it, senses of place and belonging.

## Conclusion

In this essay it has been suggested that photography can serve as an epistemological triangle combining with one another different layers of expe-

riences and memories: the experiences (and memories of experiences) in the north with the experiences (and memories of experiences) as northern inhabitants. Both forms of experience can be communicated visually to the viewers of photographs without representing the experiences of northern inhabitants in terms other than their own. Obviously, photography is a medium through which all sorts of stories can be told and all forms of experiences can be communicated—stories and experiences supporting as well as criticizing existing and non-existing ways of life (Samson 2003) in the north. Indeed, from the surplus of meaning that images inevitably carry with them it follows that they cannot be reduced to one specific meaning. Images, therefore, may help their readers to live with difference, to respect other people's experiences and memories of experiences and to acknowledge that different groups of people may have different memories of what only seems to be the same history.

## NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this article was presented at the conference North and Nordicity: Representations of the North, Munk Centre for International Studies at Trinity College in the University of Toronto, Canada, 17–19 May 2007. I am grateful to Heidi Hansson, Maggie McCarthy and two anonymous referees for *Journal of Northern Studies* for wonderfully constructive comments on different versions of this paper.
- <sup>2</sup> See, for example, Walter Benjamin's scathing remarks on photography albums displaying "Uncle Alex," "Aunt Riekchen" and "little Trudi"—"... and finally, to make our shame complete, we ourselves—as a parlor Tyrolean, yodeling, waving our hat before a painted snowscape, or as a smartly turned-out sailor, standing rakishly with our weight on one leg, as is proper, leaning against a polished door jamb" (Benjamin 2008a: 282). In the meantime, the family album has been explored by a number of scholars including Richard Chalfen, Annette Kuhn and Julia Hirsch. I am grateful to one of the reviewers for pointing these authors out to me.
- <sup>3</sup> See Sherrill Grace's discussion of portraits of Kate Carmack/Shaww Tláa (Grace 2001: 98–104).
- <sup>4</sup> The Magic of Lapland: Lapland in Art from the 1800s to Today, Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki, 16 June 2011–8 January 2012.
- <sup>5</sup> While the incorporation in the analysis of indigenous photography would certainly be important, this cannot be done without systematically discussing the above concepts in terms of indigenous knowledge production which, in turn, cannot be done within the scope of a short article.
- <sup>6</sup> Born in 1951, Puranen, a graduate of the University of Art and Design in Helsinki, is widely considered to be one of the most important contemporary Finnish photographers. His work is regularly shown nationally and internationally in both solo and group exhibitions. A professor of photography at the University of Art and Design from 1996 to 1998, Puranen is regarded as one of the most important figures behind the current international rise of Finnish photography. A good introduction into

his recent work can be found at [www.helsinki.fi/helsinki/artist.php?id=9032&type=slideshow](http://www.helsinki.fi/helsinki/artist.php?id=9032&type=slideshow); access date 29 September 2011.

- <sup>7</sup> What follows is inspired by Edwards's thoughtful reflections on *Imaginary Homecoming*.
- <sup>8</sup> Most of these photographs had been taken by a professional French photographer, G. Roche, during Prince Roland Bonaparte's expedition to Lapland in 1884. The photographs, some 400 negatives, are collected in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris (Puranen 1999: 11).
- <sup>9</sup> *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, Volume 1, p. 1023.
- <sup>10</sup> Dialogue: Marjatta Levanto and Jorma Puranen, at [www.anhava.com](http://www.anhava.com); access date 29 September 2011.
- <sup>11</sup> Born in 1968, Tiina Itkonen lives and works in Helsinki. Her work has been featured widely in both solo and group exhibitions as well as in numerous publications. A good introduction into her work on Greenlandic people and landscapes can be found at [www.tiinaikonen.com/landscape\\_gallery.html](http://www.tiinaikonen.com/landscape_gallery.html); access date 29 September 2011.
- <sup>12</sup> Born in 1939, Antero Takala lives and works in Helsinki. A former television cameraman, Takala is well known for his photographs of northern landscapes (*Landscape*, 1977; *Kaamos*, 1987; *Mindscape*, 2003) taken under very difficult light conditions. He also realized television video art works. Some of his landscape photographs can be found at [www.katse.org/galleria/anterotakala](http://www.katse.org/galleria/anterotakala); access date 29 September 2011.

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