A borderland on the edge of materiality: ancient remains, storied landscapes, and community narratives from the arm of Finland

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ABSTRACT

In past decades landscapes have become recognized as essentially liminal systems: there has been an increased appreciation for the embeddedness of lived experiences of places in four-dimensional space-time and the landscape’s connections with perceptions, stories, the material and immaterial pasts, as well as the material and immaterial present and future. Kilpisjärvi is such a place where immaterial pasts, presents, and futures consolidate into lived experiences. Intimate narratives of the local inhabitants and enveloping environment are produced through the intermingling of traditional ways of living and being with the development of modern perspectives and infrastructures. This photo essay glimpses at the flow of interconnected stories of becoming of an Arctic village’s lifeworld. It glances at what has never been built nor written down, what has been built over, the local anecdotes that speak to these, and how this amalgamation of interweaving materiality and disembodiment shape an understanding of Kilpisjärvi and its inhabitants from an insiders and outsiders perspective. The essay takes the reader through the liminal landscapes of reindeer, reindeer herders, tourist organizations, and village life, and its analysis advances our understanding of how these all connect in a meshwork that teaches old and new ways of viewing the environment.

KEYWORDS

In-betweenness; ethnoarchaeology; reindeer herding; tourism; meshwork; memory

Introduction

Kilpisjärvi (Gilbbesjávri) is a remote village in the Fennoscandian far North. Located in the upper arm of Finland and close to the borders of Norway and Sweden, it comprises a borderland in many ways. The landscape is characterized more than not by what has never been built nor put in ink. Reindeer grazing pastures, ancient migration routes, old milking grounds, and camp sites both ancient and new: all these leave minimal traces in the landscape from a modern perspective. The recent repurposing of land in the region by the non-
indigenous locals and Finnish government and the building over of old cultural landscapes by modern structures, such as roads, shops, and hotels, has transformed the region of Kilpisjärvi into a murky liminal space where cultures mix, both in material and immaterial ways. By building over the land, the old cultural landscapes become partly ‘disenstori’d, by which (material) references to old local stories are removed, and thus prompt different experiences and narratives to the beholders. There will be new stories and perceptions, as there always are, and so the landscape gains novel narratives which might be viewed as part of the modern landscape. Kilpisjärvi, along with its stories, has become a hybrid amalgamation of old and new ways of viewing the cultural and natural environment, the indigenous and non-indigenous locals, and the omnipresent non-human animal in the area that cannot be overlooked: the reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus tarandus*).

This paper presents a collection of the stories and experiences I have had during a Kilpisjärvi fieldwork trip in the summer of 2020. While conducting this fieldwork and listening to stories from the inhabitants, it became clear that the surrounding landscape, memories, and the told narrative were very closely connected. What became apparent, too, is that with all these different narrational histories and present-day experiences of Kilpisjärvi, it became impossible to view different ancient or more recent remains/constructions/intangibles as stand-alone entities. Rather, they are all interconnected, always changing, every day, becoming their stories as time passes.

Reflecting on this reminded me of how Ingold (2011, 64–92) draws attention to a different way of viewing our world, which might be considered close to the animistic worldviews of old. Instead of the idea that things are self-contained entities that interact with, but are ultimately set apart from, the environment, Ingold stresses that we need to view the world as a tangle of threads and pathways. As a meshwork. This is to say that the connected elements in our environment should not be distinguished from the lines that connect them. Rather, they are their relationships and connections, and that beings are in this sense, not this or the other, but always in-between, forever becoming, in which movement is the primary and ongoing condition. This subjective ‘in-between’ also gives room for things and beings to take on non-tangible properties. As much as they are the sum of their tangible properties, they are also the sum of their intangible relationships (Ingold 2015, 147–153).

How Ingold views the world is an extension to actor network theory (ANT). Where ANT appreciates the relationships and connections that actors with agency have in the social and natural world on different scales and in different periods (e.g. Law 2008), Ingold’s meshwork takes it one step further and also recognises the embeddedness of different actors (whether it be living beings, inanimate materials, concepts, or ideas) in their environment; forever influenced
by their embeddedness and relations, and never fixed, never finished. Always being, acting, perceiving, as well as always becoming (e.g. Ingold 2008).

This view is very closely echoed in Massay’s work For Space (2005), which suggests a dynamic form of space (and thus place) as an open, lively whole, in which space is the product of interrelations, is heterogenous with coexisting distinct trajectories, and always under construction (Massey 2005, 9). Space is therefore not, as our Western mindsets might make us believe, the mere stable material form of temporal sequences, but is its past; its present; and, its future, with all its interrelated heterogeneity. In her judgement, space, as well as place, are processual and constantly made and re-made (e.g. Massey 2005, 30; Anderson 2008). Although Ingold and Massay use slightly different terms, i.e. what Massey calls the heterogenous interactions of space and time, Ingold refers to as a meshwork or lifeworld (see Ingold 2006), their views on space, place, living, and relations greatly harmonize.

Within this complex meshwork of space and place, lies a deeply embedded ‘landscape’. As well as a verb, a noun, as an adjective, both the natural and the cultural; ‘Landscapes are created by people through their experience and engagement with the world around them’ (Bender 1993, 1). A landscape is individually made and experienced (e.g. Taçon 2000, 34; Stilgoe 2018, 19) and is embedded in and re-made through our stories and perceptions (e.g. Tilley 1994, 11–14). The landscape and its connected stories are in fact so tightly intertwined that it is hard to say how one influences the other and in which order. As Casey (1996, 18) so delicately puts it: ‘Knowledge of place is not . . . subsequent to perception . . . but is ingredient in perception itself.’ Landscape is never a passive material scene that awaits inscription by the perceiver, rather it is already, as Basu (1997) tells us, ‘embedded within webs of personal and cultural narratives, memories, and associations’ (Basu 1997, 25). Once stories become associated with the landscape, they reproduce and construct each other. This, in turn, creates a sense of place, which is subsequently used and transformed in relation to the practices embedded in the landscape (Tilley 1994).

To make a distinction here between landscapes that are either ‘natural’ or ‘cultural’ would be meaningless: the natural and cultural meshworks are in complete synergy and forever becoming, constantly influencing one another. Thus, in terms of the landscape, natural and cultural aspects cannot be dissected into their ‘original’ separate parts: our bodies, our minds, our perceptions and our very DNA are in constant co-evolution with the landscape (e.g. Henrich 2017).

It is easy to fall into the mind-trap of the dualist human-nature separation and the existence of a pristine wilderness. Many ideas about nature and the wilderness are strongly biased by Western urban perceptions of the environment in which the natural environment and human (urban) civilizations are in a dichotomy (e.g. Gómez-Pompa and Kaus 1992). Even though, by now, it is
widely recognized that practically every part of the earth has been inhabited, altered, or managed throughout human history (e.g. Erickson 2008) and that conceptions of nature and the wilderness are socially constructed concepts and vary vastly across time and space and between cultures (e.g. Nash 1967; Cronon 1996; Oelschlaeger 1991; Descola 1996; Kirchhoff and Vicenzotti 2014). What nature is to us, or to me, may indeed not be perceived as such by others. As Nash so famously pointed out:

‘One man's wilderness is another's roadside picnic ground’ (Nash 1967, 1).

It is those above-presented theoretical frameworks that are of relevance to the stories of Kilpisjärvi: the meshwork, the embeddedness of nature and the landscape, its perception, and its narratives, which are never finished. During the fieldwork trip, I came to appreciate that Kilpisjärvi is not merely constituted of connected actors with agency (as viewed by ANT) but is created and constantly being revised by being embedded and changed from within the meshwork. We come to see that what Kilpisjärvi is, is a borderland of which its murky waters weave a wonderful multi-narrative meshwork. Furthermore, this meshwork is an amalgamation of our Western concepts of nature and culture: it is either neither or both at the same time. By exploring this meshwork, it unfolds before our very eyes as a carpet that develops not only along its x-, y- and z-axis, but in the four-dimensional space-time that humans call ‘life’.

Through this photographic essay, we glimpse the in-betweenness of the places, reindeer, inhabitants, and landscape of Kilpisjärvi. Kilpisjärvi is home to a plurality of different sites of memory, and I want to consider how different elements relate to memory of the past and present, to each other, and how they are active in the present. This presents an approach to multi-sited research with a multi-disciplinary perspective that angles the subjects encountered in the field through multiple epistemological lenses: ethnographic, archaeological, and environmental. Taking the reader through different visited sites and explored concepts during the field trip on separate days, I weave a story of in-betweenness, and present the meshwork of life that comprises Kilpisjärvi.

Before we embark on this journey exploring a lifeworld, there is one thing that I would like to disclose. As an archaeologist, I have always felt fascinated by remains from the past. They represent something that can almost be touched, almost be felt, but cannot be quite fully grasped or reached. On a quest to release these archaeological remains from their veil of mystery, I have greatly come to appreciate the stories of times past. The chronicles of the olden days. The tales from a gone era, from time immemorial. And as these stories made deep imprints into my mind, I started to see how they connected to and influenced the present times. This traverse of temporalities and how they evolve in synergy is a truly wonderful thing to me, and I have steadily started to sympathize with old forms of knowledge, of past ways of living, with traditional worldviews, and indigenous perspectives.
Thus, I find myself once too often nailing my colours to the mast: notably appreciating the traditional over the modern; the untouched over the polluted. Hereby falling into the deceitful nature-culture and traditional-modern dichotomies as so many have done before me. I desperately want to contain the traditional, preserve it, and this, of course, is naïve as well as stubborn. What I have learned in Kilpisjärvi, most of all, is that the traditional and the modern are mingling, as cultures always have. Not only in terms of livelihoods but also in terms of perceptions and narratives, and that there is beauty in that, as well as hardship. My analysis in this essay, however, cannot be completely nonpartisan. Readers will come to find that my inclined preference towards the traditional versus the modern shines through in this essay. By making this explicit, my hope is that you, the reader, can view the meshwork of Kilpisjärvi through my eyes but also, that you remain aware of this bias.

**It is said that the last wild reindeer in this region was shot in 1901**

At some point in history wild reindeer might have dominated the landscape – imprinting the air with grunts from adult does to their calves, bleating responses, the hoarse snorting of bucks, the smell of their urine, droppings, fur, and leafage, their fluffy pairs of antlers so characteristic during summertime, and the dust from their trampling hooves. Clicking as they run, and grunting as they go, presently it is still reindeer that mark the landscape, but they are not wild.

Juha Tornensis is a reindeer herder in the Kilpisjärvi area and comes from a family of reindeer herders from his father’s side, while his mother’s family were reindeer hunters. Juha is a living archive full of stories and experiences. As he led us on a full-day trip around Čáhkáljávri lake, situated about 1 km south-east of Saana (Sáná) fell, we listened to his perspective on the nature and ancient remains surrounding the lake. For us, this was an ausländisch (alien) experience, not only because of the buzzing mosquitos that eat you alive every step you take but also because the landscape evokes so many stories of the past and the present in Juha that it became practically impossible to view Čáhkáljávri just as a piece of nature.

We set out from the Kilpisjärven Luontokeskus (nature centre) and Juha led the way, using two Nordic walking stocks to propel him along. We trail in his wake over the hubbly path and try to hold our focus on his stories and the landscape instead of the mosquito’s buzzing in thick black swarms around our heads. The tourist path is eroded, and ATV tracks criss-cross the landscape (Figure 1).

For millennia, these lands were subject to wild reindeer migrations until a few centuries ago. Thousands of them shook the ground, trampling and grunting as they made their way over these eroded grounds. Then came the domestic herds. When the local Sami started adopting large-scale reindeer herding
economies, the migrations changed in design but were still essentially the same: massive herds migrating between summer and winter pastures. This changed with the construction of the modern nation’s borders during the last century, which brought the annual cross-border migrations to a halt. Now reindeer are grazed here all-year-round and are supplementarily fed during the harsh winter months.

It was the impact of these impressive migrations of old that eroded this landscape until the last century. Exposed rocks, pebbles, and brown compacted soil lie bare under the green shrubby undergrowth of the mountain birch woodland vegetation. The mountain birches here, too, have endured the millions of hungry reindeer that have grazed here. Their lowest leaves are nibbled away; their lowest branches gnawed to stumps.

The branches of these same birches were used to build reindeer fences, which later in time were constructed from fabric and iron, and earliest in time also from stone. The natural trap-shaped geography of the landscape enabled the herders to herd the reindeer into the roundup places here and we can still see a long row of a remaining fence on the southern side of the lake. This very fence was used by the family of Per Antti Labba, the reindeer herder tells us in
an interview later that same week. His family’s reindeer used to graze around Čáhkáljávri, and they held the calf-earmarking events there for many years. Now, nothing remains in the landscape other than the fence.

We step into a slightly more open patch of land (Figure 2). The vegetation is markedly different here. Instead of the shrubby tundra undergrowth and tortuously shaped dwarf birches, we march into a grassy field spotted with yellow and purple flowers. The long-lasting activity of humans and reindeer on this site has left it with (semi-)permanent changes in the vegetation. The bleached poles of a goahti (kota) skeleton welcomes us at the clearing, with remnant pieces of plastic tarpaulin, bleached planks and stone circles of fireplaces scattered around and within it. A burned broken lower leg bone (metatarsal) of a reindeer adorns one of the hearths. From the looks of it, this place had been used by reindeer herdies not too long ago, while other stone hearth remains in the clearing appear of a much older age. Juha tells us that the goahti, a year-round structure, had been in use during the 70s while during the 90s they had made use of a lavvu, a less permanent structure which had no remains visible to

Figure 2. The bleached remains of the goahti from the 70s can be seen against the backdrop of Čáhkáljávri. In the front lie the stone remains of a rectangular stove hearth. The differences in vegetation between the clearing and the rest of the landscape are clearly visible (69°1′40.58″N, 20°55′30.77″E). (Photo: M. van den Berg).
us left present at the site. One of the older stone circles is of the rectangular stove hearth type and has probably been in use around 1000–1500 AD by reindeer herders of that time, as pointed out by Oula.

Imagine a place so ancient that it has taken up all the layers of history and coated them thinly and carefully, like fine strokes of paint, over the landscape. The sedimated layers are compacted and albeit thin, mainly opaque. Some points are not fully dry yet when painted over, and so when a new layer of paint is applied, the former layer is affected but not fully covered. The artist does not seem to bother and varnishes the scenery all the same. And so, this landscape is born. Fully varnished and glossily coated by lush green summer vegetation blowing in the mosquito laden breeze. Yet, ancient layers show through the younger laminations and look naked under the final layer of the glossy gild. Though only final for the moment, as new strokes of paint are making their way down the canvas even as we lay our eyes upon it.

These remains are 1,000 years old. So old that the mind boggles over the forgotten generations, lives, and stories. It also contains a feature that reveals that, on basis, these people had the same way of living as the people living here now. Especially in the last three generations the Sami’s ancient ways of living have become more entangled with the cultures of the Finns, Swedes, Norwegians, and tourists. Yet, cultures never develop in a vacuum, and many.

Figure 3. The old reindeer milking site from the last century, located on a small peninsula bulging into lake Čáhkáljávri (69°1'42.51"N, 20°55'8.12"E). (Photo: M. van den Berg).
countless cultural elements have been part of an exchange for not only these last couple of generations but many centuries before. The Sami have had intimate contacts in economic, social, and religious terms with other populations since prehistory, and these have intensified over the centuries. Especially, the last generations have seen tremendous change as the reindeer herding Sami communities tailored their herding strategies to the meat market (Hansen and Olsen 2014).

As we head out of the clearing and into the bushier vegetation to resume our walk along the edge of the lake north-westwards, we come across several other ancient hearth remains and a little peninsula bulging inwards into lake Čáhkáljavri (Figure 3). This had been an old reindeer milking site. Up until the last century, reindeer milk was an important part of the sustenance for some Sami reindeer herding groups. One can immediately see why this strategically chosen little peninsula was a good reindeer milking place: the reindeer could be easily gathered here due to the natural shape of the peninsula and be discouraged from escaping by the lake.

Reindeer does were milked during spring and summertime. To leave enough for the reindeer calves, a doe could be milked for only about 2 dl of milk per day, so a herding family needed quite a few does to get a sizable daily amount of milk. Juha tells us that not many people could stomach the milk if they drank it directly. Upon reflection this must have been because of the lactose content. The milk was mostly made into cheese which was ripened in a reindeer stomach with added bacteria from a calf’s stomach, not unlike modern cheese-making practices. They let the cheese dry and it could be stored till the winter. By this time, the cheese would have become so dry that you could scrape and cut it with a knife. The tradition was to put this into coffee as milk to both cream the coffee and to make the cheese less dry by drenching it in the coffee.

We plod onwards through the bushy vegetation with mobs of mosquitos in our wake, determined not to be bothered by them (even though all the flailing about among my colleagues shows we clearly are), and as we pass the northern edge of the lake we have to hop over several smaller streams that snake their way from the more mountainous area north of the lake and empty out in Čáhkáljavri. Every turn we make seems to inspire Juha into more stories of old and new, and as we trail behind him, we learn to glimpse the landscape through his eyes here and there. Every now and then, he remembers a humorous anecdote, and he sniggers while he calls to mind that at some point during the last century black reindeer skins were considered very fashionable among the local population. These skins were sold for good money at the market in Kautokeino, and consequently during that time, many black reindeer vanished from people’s herds. To get back at the thieves somehow, they made a yoik (traditional form of Sami music) about the vanishing black reindeer, which was sung by many to publicly shame the thieves.
Borderlands

Reindeer like to hang out on the roads and other asphalted areas. As the wind sweeps through these places, biting insects are brushed from the air. Here at the clearing of the Tulli station, reindeer hang lazily about, enjoying the relatively parasite-free zone. The Tulli (the Finnish customs station) is located about 6 km south on the road from the Norwegian border to Kilpisjärvi. The herd residing there at the moment consists mainly of does and calves, with only two fully grown males present. The males are easily recognizable by their hefty but fluffy pairs of antlers, covered with soft fur at this time of the year. The does are easily recognizable by their absence of antlers and by the greedy reindeer calves knocking their udders aggressively in search of a nutritious gulp.

One overcast morning, we were tipped off by a small group of southern Finnish tourists who were camping on the side of the Käsivarrentie road close to the foot of mount Saana. They had made it a game on their trip to count all the reindeer they encountered, and a small herd of about 30 calves and does had passed through their camp the previous night. The two young women in the group found them ‘very cute’ and said they thought they were heading north. Excitedly we set off, and as we approach the Tulli station we could see from a distance that there was something going on. We drove into the station parking area and upon arrival were greeted by a large herd of reindeer hanging

Figure 4. The Tulli station is crowded with reindeer and scattered with reindeer droppings (69° 0’67.49”N, 20°76’6.10”E). (Photo: M. van den Berg).
around lazily on the asphalt (Figure 4). We immediately notice that the place is full of reindeer droppings, but apart from the dung (and the original donators of the droppings) the place seems deserted, so we edge slowly into a parking place, disembark the van and advance towards the herd on foot.

The station is manned but no vehicles are stopped and checked here for the time being as border-traffic has been limited due to the COVID-19 situation. In the absence of the cars and trucks coming and going, the reindeer aggregation takes advantage of the peace. The peace is not so tactfully disturbed once we, and more tourists followed by our example, advance towards the herd; making the reindeer skit around and move further away from us, seemingly annoyed. Many tourists pose in front of the reindeer making ‘V’ signs, while others snap pictures. As more cars and tourists pour in, the reindeer jointly move away and then back again, like a flock of synchronizing starlings.

During our interview with Per-Henrik Tornensis the next day, he mentions the reindeer situation at the Tulli station. Per-Henrik is the only son of Juha, and a reindeer herder himself. Although he studied in Oulu at the university, he returned to Kilpisjärvi after his studies and began reindeer herding, at first on the side and then professionally a few years ago. He now raises reindeer both for the meat industry and he breeds and trains reindeer for tourist rides. In our conversation about how he trains his reindeer and selects the reindeer for training he surprises me with a view on reindeer training that I have not heard before from other reindeer herders. Several times he mentions that the things his father and other reindeer herders tell him are based on old traditions, but that he sometimes questions these because he has not seen any proof or statistics on the matter. It is apparent that ‘old’ and ‘new’ ways of thinking are mixing inside him, and that this influences his view on reindeer herding and how he carries out the training of reindeer.

At the start of our meeting, Per-Henrik states that he only had time to meet us today because an iron fence had not arrived yet. The Tulli station and the reindeer owner, we learn, have come to an agreement about the reindeer hanging out at the station: one of the reindeer herders would construct a fence if the Tulli station pay for the materials and labour. He mentions that the reindeer would probably like to hang out there because when trucks with saltwater fish are inspected by Tulli, they leak salt water onto the asphalt and the reindeer like to lick it from the surface. The reason the Tulli station wants the reindeer removed from the station ground is because of the large amount of dung they leave behind, which manages to make its way, via the soles of the custom inspectors’ shoes, into food trucks when they are checked by the custom inspectors.

The story goes that a while back the Tulli station had rung the reindeer owner and asked him to remove his reindeer from the station. Unamused, the reindeer herder replied that if the Tulli station were not happy with where his reindeer enjoy hanging out, then perhaps they should build their station somewhere.
else. Such an attitude can be found among most reindeer herders, their rationale being that reindeer were here before the village, tourists, roads, or the Tulli station.

This was not the first time there was borderlandian trouble around Kilpisjärvi. A combination of repurposing the land in the area, and the closing of national borders forcing Sami reindeer herders and their herds to become more stationary has resulted in an ongoing conflict in the region as reindeer herders see their rights being taken away and their pasture lands declining. Over the course of the last century border crossings have become more officially restricted, forcing the mobile families and herds to choose a country to settle in. Finally, in the 1990s crossing the border by reindeer herds became so heavily fined (Jokinen and Heikkinen 2005) that this put an ultimate end to any traditional movement. As the herders had to increasingly rely on favourable conditions of local pastures this put them in difficulty, especially during hard winters, and many must now resort to supplementary reindeer feeding in winter.

At the same time that the border crossings were restricted, Kilpisjärvi village had extended its tourism, including hotels, shops and roads, especially in the last 50 years, which has led to even more loss of pasture. A good example of this

Figure 5. Shot through one of the now degraded WW2 bunkers remaining on top of the Saana fell (not accompanied by any information board) which looks out towards Salmivaara. It was a strategically chosen vantage point and in the distance one can clearly see Kilpisjärvi village, built just on the inlet of the piece of land that connects Salmivaara to the mainland (69° 2′37.51″N, 20°50′54.35″E). (Photo: M. van den Berg).
development is Salmivaara (Çoalmmevárit) (Figure 5). The story goes that Kilpisjärvi village is built on one of the lushest patches of vegetation in the region, and thus is a big competitor for good summer reindeer grazing pasture. Before the encroaching tourism, Salmivaara was used as a reindeer roundup place because of its advantageous topography. It was relatively easy to drive the reindeer there and collect them on the peninsula. Hannu tells me that this came to a halt when the village and its bungalow parks spread at the end of the last century at the foot of the peninsula, blocking the way to the reindeer roundup area that had been used for centuries before.

A borderland in many fashions. The Sami herders and their reindeer are both transnational, and transborder, species. Not belonging to one place, nor to the other, but originally seasonally dependent on both. The newer constructions like the roads and Tulli station may envelop and mask the ancient landscape but cannot fully hide it. The pioneering species and ways of living still peak through the modern varnish and in turn adapt to it in their own way.

**Considered one of the most beautiful places in Finland**

Many Finns, Swedes, and Norwegians come to the Malla Strict Nature Reserve for summer refreshment. It is beautiful, but also an area of conflict. It is the oldest nature reserve in Finland and was established in 1916 to protect its unique nature from human impacts (Heikkinen et al. 2010). Although this area had been grazed by both wild and domestic reindeer alike for centuries before the reserve was established, reindeer herding has been prohibited since 1981 and listed under reserve regulations in 1993, while full-scale reindeer grazing was already halted in the reserve around 1955 (Heikkinen et al. 2005, 22; Jokinen 2005, 10).

On one hot sunny and particularly mosquito-y day, we set along a track starting from the Käsivarrentie road leading through Siilasvuoma (Šilisvuopmi) to the northern side of the lake Siilasjärvi (Šilisjávri) for a day hike into Malla. We have acquired special permission from Metsähallitus (the Finnish Forest Administration) to wander off the official tourist paths. Taking off our shoes and trousers, we wade through the broad river debouching into Siilasjärvi from the north and slog through the marshy surrounding area. We take a small break on a dryer patch of land on a sandy beach to put our clothes and footwear back on, and while one of our group members launches his drone to record some of the area, I spot reindeer tracks along the shoreline (Figure 6).

This is the area leading up to Malla, which starts about 700 meters to the east, and from what we have heard reindeer are often to be found here. In an interview later with Per Antti, he confides to us that reindeer usually stay on this lakeside and in Siilasvuoma. Per Antti comes from a family of reindeer herders who are originally from Sweden but moved here once the borders closed and became settled. He tells us that when the weather becomes too hot for the
reindeer, they go up to Malla to the mountains, where it is windy and cooler. His family at one point had their reindeer at Malla too, and he has many photos of his family with their reindeer up in the mountain area. I ask Per Antti what his family had said about Malla, and he tells us that his father had said that Malla was a hyvä poropaikka (good reindeer spot), which it is still considered today.

We continue and browse our eyes over thick forests of twisted mountain birches alternating with mossy and grassy open patches, littered with prisoner-of-war camp remains from WW2. We see old glass bottles, rusty barrels, corroded barbed wire, and foot deep pits flaunting both sides of the paths we stride on. The sun is streaming down on our mosquito repellent covered faces. Our bodies, clammy and warm from the climb, welcome the cool wind blowing from Malla. Both the wartime remains and the mountain birches grow scarce, and ultimately fade into a dwarf-shrubbed heathland.

What is scarce too, but still easily spotted, is a thick lock of white reindeer hair among the heathland shrubs (Figure 7). As I sweep the heathland with my eyes, I notice plenty of dark-brown, almost black, droppings exactly like the droppings we saw earlier at the Tulli station.

We climb Iso-Malla (Gihcibákti) and Pikku-Malla (Šilismalla dahjege Gilbbesmalla) and ultimately venture back down as the sky turns a stormy and ominous mixture of light grey and dark grey clouds. As we head for the bridge at

![Figure 6. Reindeer tracks on the sandy beach of Siilasjärvi. Korkea-Jehkas (Jiehkkáš) and Saana can be seen in the background (69°45’57.07”N, 20°43’55.73”E). (Photo: M. van den Berg).](image-url)
Siilaskoski, we come across a small lake, Mallalammit (Mallaláddot). Here, I catch a glimpse of a small figure dressed in a mosquito net hat and blue plastic gloves sitting along the shore and staring at a bag full of water (Figure 8). I presume this is a researcher from the Biological Research Station taking water samples. I have heard that the Biological Research Station arouses mixed feelings in many people here in Kilpisjärvi, because of their attitude towards reindeer herding and general development of the area.

Our interview later that week with Nils-Matti Vasara and Mia Vasara provides further insight into the matter of the Malla reindeer hair. It was, in fact, Nils-Matti’s reindeer that have been grazing on Malla. Nils-Matti is, Mia tells us, a reindeer herder whose family has been herding reindeer in the region for centuries, and Mia Vasara, originally from Southern Finland, moved to Kilpisjärvi years ago, marrying Nils-Matti soon after. Now, together, they both successfully run a tourist establishment with lakeside lodgings located just south from Kilpisjärvi village, although in practice Nils-Matti still spends most of his time herding reindeer. He tells us that he is one of the few herders who still spends most of his time with his reindeer, travelling some 120 kilometres a day on his ATV, looking after them.
Nils-Matti explains why he keeps his reindeer grazing on Malla, despite the problems this brings. The borders have made it quite hard for reindeer herders and the pastures have been decreasing and decreasing in quality. Malla is one of the few places left with good quality reindeer pasture, and the meat weight of his reindeer has been consistently larger, and his reindeer have been bigger than other herders’ reindeer. The reindeer are there every year. In midsummer, the reindeer will just head there to spend the hottest time of the year in Malla, and then leave at the end of the summer. The situation in Malla is a bit strange because there have always been reindeer and moose, but now reindeer are no longer allowed. On the other hand, there are many trails for tourists now. So, why would they allow tourists and not reindeer? Nitti tells us that Norway has the same flowers that are in Malla. Until now, there has never been any legal action against him, but the ongoing discussions are certainly heated. The government had made efforts to get his reindeer off, but he has stood fast. If the government will legally force him, he tells us, then he will remove his reindeer but otherwise will keep them there, just as his ancestors did.

Mia describes that the Biological Research Station has been campaigning against Nils-Matti and his reindeer for years to keep his reindeer off Malla and how the Finnish government had let reindeer herders down. She explains that the reindeer are there in the summertime and it is an important pasture for

Figure 8. A gloved person taking water samples from Mallalammit (69°3′54.31″N, 20°43′19.73″E). (Photo: M. van den Berg).
the does and calves particularly. Herself a southerner, she is dismayed by the fact that people come from other places in Finland and try to tell the Sami how to live their lives and herd their reindeer. There has been much local conversation and conflict about the matter. At the moment, only Nils-Matti’s reindeer are grazing in Malla, but in the past other families had their reindeer graze there as well. She tells us that the parents of Nils-Matti had owned 800 hectares of land in the Kilpisjärvi region, just up against the Norwegian border, before the war, and that after the war Metsähallitus had confiscated this land and had chased them away. Even though the former ownership of this land could be clearly pointed out in the records, the Finnish government had refused to hand it back.

There have been attempts to focus the reindeer on specific places in Malla, and other smaller areas have been fenced in an attempt to protect certain vulnerable areas. Per Antti tells us that Metsähallitus constructed mosquito shelters at specific points across Malla so that the reindeer would congregate in areas with less vulnerable nature. The shelters were not successful, however, as interested tourists tended to approach the reindeer gathering around the shelters and scared them away. Reindeer do not do well with disturbances and would not even approach the shelters with tourists about.

Figure 9. A helicopter is leaving from the helicopter platform. The helicopters mostly transport fishermen, hikers, and sightseers (69°0’21.17”N, 20°89’2.39”E). (Photo: M. van den Berg).
What Nils-Matti recounts about tourists being allowed into Malla while reindeer are not reminds me of my discussion with the head of the helicopter company in Kilpisjärvi village. The company mostly flies tourists around who want to see the landscape, but also takes fishermen to remote lakes, and hikers, whom he drops off at places that are hard to reach by foot (Figure 9). He has good relationships with the reindeer herders, sometimes having a beer together with them, and flies with the herders during the reindeer roundup seasons to gather the reindeer and round them up. When I ask him about Malla, he says that he never speaks with the herders about this but that he does not agree with reindeer grazing there. He sees a lot of reindeer in Malla during his flights and finds that herders are rather daft (he spits out this word passionately) for letting their reindeer in. Malla is a protected nature reserve with many protected species, he says, and because the herders are indigenous, they think they can do whatever they want and are above the law. When I ask him what he thinks about whether the sound of the helicopter disturbs the people or nature in Kilpisjärvi he denies that it does.

Earlier that week we heard from Hannu that reindeer were nearly chased off the top of Saana that week by a tourist’s dog. Dogs are meant to be leashed at all times on Saana, but occasionally tourists let their dogs free in the belief that the dog will behave itself. It was, in fact, the head of the helicopter company who had seen this scene unfolding and had contacted the reindeer herder to warn him about the issue.

Kilpisjärvi is a place where

Old traditions, Western culture, perceptions of nature, tourism, indigenousness, and new forms of being local curiously mingle here, and in turn, cause both prosperity and strife. It creates an interesting sphere of in-betweenness. Modern yet ancient. Domestic yet wild.

A general worry of reindeer herders in the region is the ever-encroaching tourism and what consequences this will have for the future of reindeer herders and their rights. At the same time, the reindeer herders are joining the rapid development of the region and often combine their reindeer herding practices with tourism to supplement their income. This does not always sit well with the non-indigenous locals, who sometimes hold the opinion that reindeer herders should stick with reindeer herding.

At Mia and Nils-Matti’s lodge, tourists can spend the night next to their reindeer farm while enjoying the aurora through a glass roof. They can feed reindeer and taste reindeer meat from Nils-Matti’s, called lovingly Nitti by Mia, own slaughterhouse. During wintertime, Mia and Nils-Matti wear traditional Sami dresses daily, partly because of the marketing value. They know that it is a big tourist attraction, and people ask in the
village where they can see the traditional Sami dress. This has been a point of strife between them and the non-indigenous locals, however, who are jealous of the tourist attraction this creates and make fun of Sami wearing their traditional dresses in the village. Non-indigenous locals told Mia that she should not wear the dress because she is originally not Sami, although she married one. The non-indigenous entrepreneurs had taken it even further and had started a campaign pressing the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry to expel Nils-Matti and his reindeer from the area. They had told Mia that ‘snow scooters belong here, but reindeer don’t’ and telling Nils-Matti that he ‘should have stayed a reindeer herder’.

Mia explains: ‘The term local is a kind of difficult term because many people think they are local even though they arrived much, much later, and the ones who are truly local, are Nitti and Juha and their family.’

Nils-Matti tells us tourism is a big threat here. The more that is being built in Kilpisjärvi, the more difficult things are getting. Especially since COVID-19, tourism in the region has skyrocketed (probably because this remote place offers forms of entertainment, while the more southern regions were in lockdown). If this continues at the same rate, reindeer herding Sami will have to deal with the consequences, losing more and more land. The world is changing very fast, as is the way people think. The prediction does not seem good:

‘Sami are losing land, again and again, and it is like you would use part of your house, there is no living room anymore. But government policies, policy makers and researchers might be the ones who can affect the situation. In 20 years, it might be different, maybe there will be no Sami culture anymore on the Finnish side. It needs only one error, if there is one more silent generation . . . If the Sami people, there is one generation like 30 years, and the Sami people stay silent, don’t protect their rights, they will lose everything’ (Nils-Matti).

On the other hand, Nils-Matti also tells us that the tourists coming from Southern Finland are often very interested in Sami culture and want to know how long they have been here. He thinks that minorities have more presence nowadays than in the past.

There are also non-indigenous local villagers who understand both the reindeer herders’ point of view and the point of view of the non-indigenous locals. I spoke to the founder of Kilpisjärvi village, on the sun-bathed porch in front of his house. His father had been a forest ranger in Malla and he had seen reindeer in Malla himself for the first time in 1967. This was a big concern at the time, and a lengthy article about the issue appeared in the Helsingin Sanomat (the largest subscription paper in Finland) back then. I ask him what he thinks most people in the village think about reindeer here, and he tells me that most people in Kilpisjärvi think that there are too many reindeer in town during summertime nowadays:

‘They are always around the Tulli station, they shit there. They shit around the hiking trails, the school, and the day care centre.’
The founder proclaims that they talk about it quite a lot in Kilpisjärvi. It is not that they actually disturb people, but it is just a bit of annoying to have them there all the time (the reindeer). His neighbour built a fence around his garden, so the reindeer won't come and eat everything. But, he says, he thinks that Sami issues are a bit above the Finnish Law, and that that is the place where they belong. The Sami should be able to let their reindeer graze in Malla, despite the fact that it is protected. He understands that Sami traditions and reindeer practices are very strong:

‘There are reindeer and they can go around, and that is the way it is. They didn’t use to talk about this issue in the past as much as they do now.’

The truth is that you cannot fully control reindeer, which is an essential remnant wild feature of the animal. Of course, fences have been constructed to guide the reindeer in certain areas, but it is also in the nature of large-scale reindeer pastoralism to give reindeer free-range. Reindeer are vulnerable animals and do not do well when cooped up or sedentary. This freedom of the reindeer is an important part of the traditional reindeer herding culture and it is a major element in the herders’ way of thinking about the animals. In our conversations with reindeer herders, I noticed that all of them mentioned, at least once, in one form or the other, that you cannot control the reindeers’ movements:

‘Officials sometimes have tried to force reindeer off by force, but you can’t control reindeer by force. It just works like nature works, the reindeer keep eating in the one place and then move on to another place, and the same here, once the reindeer were on the Eastern side and once they are on the Western side. This is how it works with reindeer. Wind also affects them, and nature in general’ (Per Antti Labba)

‘The reindeer go where they want to go’ (Per-Henrik Tornensis).

‘The reindeer are there [in Malla] every year, in midsummer the reindeer will just go there, to spend the hottest time of the year there, and then leave’ (Nils Matti Vasara).

‘But reindeer don’t know, they go anyway, they don’t understand’ (Mia Vasara).

Along the long meandering roads through Lapland, small flocks or lone reindeer cross the road at any time. Sometimes skittish or darting out, sometimes slow and proud. Reindeer run along the road in front of cars, bewildered looks on their soft hairy faces and thick pink tongues flopping out of their gaping muzzles while running. Necks outstretched. You can hear the clicking when they walk. It speeds up as the reindeer increase their gait, as the tendons snap over the sesamoid bones in their feet creating a sound at an accelerating pace. Grunting and clicking, they create a sense of herd-cohesion.

Reindeer naturally resort to higher ground when they sense danger, and sometimes have trouble making the link that they should get off the road to avert it. The roads in Lapland are often constructed on artificially raised ground.
Not everybody can muster sympathy for reindeer. One elderly couple hiking up Saana we spoke to declared that they are always annoyed by them, and honk at the reindeer whenever they see them on the roads. They had seen too many of them and were uninterested in learning more about reindeer or about herders' culture here in Kilpisjärvi. They were here to experience nature, plain and simple.

They seemed rather unaware that being in Kilpisjärvi, if anything, is essentially a cultural experience. Kilpisjärvi may be carved and sculpted by the many asphalt roads and buildings, but outside that lies an almost untouched wilderness, or so it seems. The landscape is natural and untouched to the outsider, yet familiar and central to the ones who dwell in it. Indigenous and pastoral communities may leave minimal traces in the landscape (e.g. Tervaniemi and Magga 2019; Seitsonen 2020), but these landscapes thinly and finely painted with the cultural brush are no wildernesses.

These wildernesses are human. They hold stories, memories, experiences, and expectations. Juha’s stories are such a clear reminder of that. And so, a landscape is encultured as the dweller lays eyes upon it, and so the dweller is enlandscaped by his or her perception of the physical place in conjunction with all its associations. As these cultured landscapes lose part of their meaning to the new non-indigenous local inhabitants, can it be done so that these new dwellers become more enlandscaped by the perceptions of old?

**Built over, repurposed, and in-between**

Places are built over and repurposed at a rapid pace in Kilpisjärvi. To the non-indigenous dweller, Malla may seem a piece of nature that should be left undisturbed. Undisturbed by the human and non-human animals that created the place of Malla, in all its colourful forms, in the first place. What if the tourists who are now enjoying a false sense of nature in Malla and the surrounding region could become enlandscaped by the taught perceptions and history of the original inhabitants?

Reindeer might be increasingly shunned from the town and parks, but they are of vital importance to the general ambiance of the place. Admittingly not of direct economic value to the village’s tourism industry, the reindeer provide a series of socio-cultural experiences, as well as an environmental characteristic (Gisolf 2014) of the ‘nature’ in Kilpisjärvi. The reindeer at the Tulli station and the countless tourists stopping there to photograph them, the reindeer on the road, the Sami dresses worn by Mia and Nils-Matti during wintertime, the reindeer meat offered in the restaurants, and even the reindeer droppings over the village: these all contribute to the sense of place in Kilpisjärvi, which is saleable because it is distinct from the tourists’ sense of home. It is therefore unsurprising that it is Finnish tourists from the south who are enamoured with the reindeer
and who want to learn more about Sami culture, while the elderly couple from Lapland were rather less sanguine. Tourists do not pay for the reindeer in the village, but all the same appreciate them as a component of the destination’s culture (Gisolf 2014).

Reindeer are considered a domestic species. They are distinct from their, now locally extinct, wild counterparts, differing in both behavioural and physical properties. In many ways, however, they linger in the liminal space between wild and domestic. This in the sense that their lifecycle and lifestyle permit them not to be fully controllable. As we have seen from stories told about herded reindeer, they are perceived by non-indigenous locals to be worthy of control by the herders. The herders, however, ascribe the reindeer more agency and mind that they should not, or cannot, fully be controlled. A reindeer goes where it wants to.

Like their reindeer, the herders themselves too tread in two different worlds. Like their reindeer, originally a migratory species, they are now confined within the nation’s borders. Like their reindeer, formerly the herder went where he or she wanted to go, carried by the season’s breezes. Both species are adapting to this new world with competence. But just as the reindeer runs bewildered and seemingly out of place along Lapland’s roads chased by cars, not able to fight its evolutionary urge to seek higher ground, so the herder tries to stay in contact with traditional ways of living and being which might not always be fully understood or respected by infringing modernization.

The landscape is embedded with practices: migration routes, milking sites, round-up places. Part of these are bodyless bygones that are embedded with meaning and practice but that do not show direct material remains in the landscape. Examples are the ancient pastures or the old milking site around Čáhkáljávri which both bear no material remains but are culturally no less important and persist in memory and practice (in the case of the pastures).

The landscape is embedded with stories: the building over of Salmivaara, the area around the Tulli station, the old migration routes that are now tourist paths, the construction of the shops, even the Biological Research Station: as we have seen from our tour around Čáhkáljávri with Juha Tornensis, stories seep out of the keeper who observes the meshwork as a place he calls home with every step that he takes, prompted by his own senses of place. It is through his observations and disclosure that stories seep out of the landscapes too, for us mere visitors to behold. The invisible curtain separating ‘culture’ and ‘nature’ is instantly lifted, as I, an outsider, come to realize that nature and culture are in many ways the same thing. If only a days’ worth of stories can do that, then maybe stories can change the world.

Once landscapes are built over, they become disenstrored. Though the sense of place might persist or become newly constructed, it is a different sense of place, one that cannot be called home by the original inhabitants for it is not the
centre of their world anymore (Berger 1984, 55–56). Something along those lines was said by Nils-Matti too:

‘Reindeer Sami are losing land, again and again and again, and it is like if you would use part of your house, there is no living room anymore’.

But new stories arise from the newly constructed places, mixing the old ways of living with modern infrastructure. Literally too, as the reindeer droppings adorn the roads and the Tulli station. As uncontrollable reindeer test tourist’s and local’s patience on the Lapland roads. New stories are spun into the progressing and ever-weaving meshwork of relations of place, people, and reindeer.

In the end, it is this web of old and new stories being told, retold, reformed, forgotten, and (re-)constructed and how these stories relate to the tangible and intangible remains of Kilpisjärvi that make up the village’s atmospheric environment, shaping an emic and etic understanding of its inhabitants. This place, of which its stories shape our perception, is always in motion. Kilpisjärvi’s inhabitants and landscapes are neither one nor the other, but always in-between. Neither culture nor nature, nor traditional nor modern, not material or immaterial – always both, and always an obscure mixture. Material remains and places have immaterial stories lingering inside them; places without remains (such as the milking site) can still not escape from narrative. Modern structures are excreted upon by animals who embody an ancient way of living and thinking and embedded in nature are the cultural remains and narratives of old and unleashed dogs of tourists.

This stormy, murky borderland where ‘things’ mingle.

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M. van den Berg is a third-year PhD candidate at the University of Oulu. Her doctoral research, supported by the Domestication in Action project, draws from archaeological,
anthropological, as well as biological approaches to further understanding of human-reindeer relationships of the past and present. Her areas of research and interest include reindeer domestication, ethnoarchaeology, and Arctic anthropology.

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