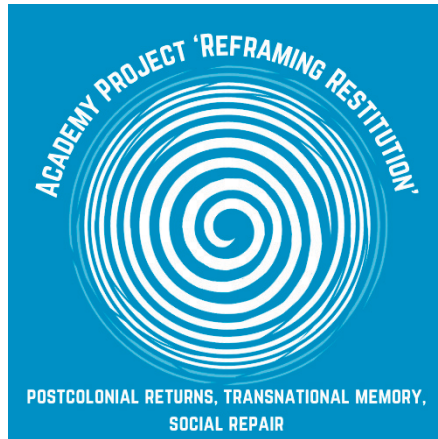


# Politics of Difficult Histories: (Post)Colonial Legacies in Northern Europe International workshop

November 6–7 2025,  
University of Jyväskylä



JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO  
UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ



Research Council  
of Finland

## **Workshop description:**

In the last two decades Northern European countries have witnessed a renewed political impetus to address historic injustices and legacies of colonization, including abusive and assimilationist policies towards vulnerable social groups, ethnic minorities, and the Indigenous people: the Sámi and the Inuit in Greenland/Kalaallit Nunaat. These redressive and reconciliatory measures have encompassed truth and reconciliation commissions (TRCs), state and institutional apologies and reparations programs. They have focused on, among others, the abusive history of the colonization of the Sámi, including investigations of assimilationist and re-educational policies implemented through the boarding school systems in Norway, Sweden and Finland; reconciliatory initiative of the White Paper Project on the Church of Sweden and the Sámi (2012-2017); monetary compensations program aimed at surviving victims of Swedish sterilization programs; the Greenlandic TRC (2014-2017) investigating Denmark's role as a former colonial power; and the apology delivered by the Danish Prime Minister in Nuuk in 2020 to the victims of 'little Danes' re-education program. A whole other set of redressive and reparative initiatives concerns the post-colonial object movement from metropolitan museums to the communities of their traditional custodians and caretakers (e.g. the Utimut process of repatriation of Greenlandic artefacts by the Danish National Museum in 1982-2001; or the deaccession and rehoming of Sámi cultural heritage by the National Museum of Finland in 2021); as well as the return and reinterment of ancestral remains.

While policy-experts, scholars and cultural custodians agree that this turn to politics of redress and repair in Northern Europe is gathering momentum, there is still a need for scholarly and public attempts to address these developments collectively and dialogically within the region. The international workshop on 'Politics of Difficult Histories: (Post)Colonial Legacies in Northern Europe' held at the University of Jyväskylä as part of the Academy Project 'Reframing Restitution: Postcolonial Object Movement, Transnational Memory and Social Repair' (Research Council of Finland) aims to promulgate scholarship and debates within that field by creating a platform for the presentation, exchange and discussion of ideas and for collective learning, regarding the following topics and themes:

- The politics of redress, social repair and historical justice and challenges posed by 'difficult histories' in Northern European societies today.
- Critical political issues uncovered and instigated by truth-seeking, reconciliatory and compensatory processes, including current and recent TRCs, state

apologies, restitution of cultural heritage, and return and reinterment of human remains.

- Questions of cultural and collective memory and historical trauma, as well as practices of witnessing and testimony to 'difficult histories' that elaborate perspectives on political responsibility and recognition today.
- Cultural and social reframing of restitution and redress through activism and through artistic practices and initiatives.

The workshop features individual paper presentations, as well as sessions dedicated to group discussions and collective learning. **The workshop will be followed up with an academic publication featuring submissions from the workshop participants.**

**Practical information:****Address details:**

University of Jyväskylä, Seminaarinkatu 15, 40100 Jyväskylä

**The workshop is organized in the following buildings (see campus map):**

Seminarium (S)

Lyhty (P)

**Workshop dinner, Thursday 6 November, 7 pm:**

Hotel Alba, Ahlmaninkatu 4, 40100 Jyväskylä

**Accommodation:**

Hotel Verso, Kauppakatu 35, 40100 Jyväskylä

**Contact details of the organizers:**

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**University wi-fi:**

If you have access to the Eduroam network (for example, provided by your home university), you can log onto it by using your own credentials, i.e., through your own account.

In case you do not have access to Eduroam, please ask Katarina for credentials to use the University of Jyväskylä Visitors' Network.

# JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTON KAMPUKSET



- S Seminarium
- P / Lyhty
- Hotelli Verso  
Kauppakatu 35

## Workshop Program

### 'Politics of Difficult Histories: (Post)Colonial Legacies in Northern Europe'

November 6-7, 2025, University of Jyväskylä

#### **November 06, Room: Seminarium S110**

9:15-9:30 Welcome and introductions

9:30-10:30 Keynote presentation

(chair: Magdalena Zolkos)

**Kirstine Møller Gray:** "Resisting and Adapting: Indigenous and African Women in Early Moravian Missions"

10:30-10:45 Break

10:45-12:15 Panel 1: Confronting Difficult Histories: Beyond Eurocentrism

(chair: Katarina Sjöblom)

**Saara Alakorva:** "Rethinking Museums Beyond the Nation-State. Sámi Heritage and the Politics of Difficult Histories" (co-authored w. Áile Aikio)

**Marjo Lindroth & Heidi Sinevaara-Niskanen:** "Hope, reconciliation and dispossession in Indigenous-state relations"

**Anna Rastas:** "Ambassadors of Decoloniality"

12:15-13:30 Lunch break

13:30-14:30 Panel 2: Museums, Colonialism and Material Culture

(chair: Kia Pyykkönen)

**Margaret Tali:** “Researching Layered Colonialisms through Material Culture”

**Kristín Loftsdóttir:** “Prince Napoleon’s plaster casts as Contact Point”

14:30-14:45 Break

14:45-15:45 Panel 3: Historical Justice in the North

(chair: Tarja Orre)

**Elin Skaar:** “What happens after a Truth Commission? Follow-ups to the TRCs in Norway and Canada” (co-authored w. Aaron Spitzer)

**Otso Kortekangas:** “Nordic-Sámi TRCs and the challenges of transnational historical responsibility”

15:45-16:00 Break

16:00-17:30 Panel 4: Colonialism, Extraction, Coercion

(chair: Magdalena Zolkos)

Film screening of *Orsugiak – Greenland’s White Gold*

**Naja Dyrenhold Graugaard:** “Cryolite colonialism: (De)colonial narration of Danish exploitation and coercion in Kalaallit Nunaat” (online)

19:00 Dinner at Hotel Alba

**November 07, Room: Lyhty P302**

9:15-10:45                      Panel 5: Political and Ethical Issues of Ancestral Returns

(chair: Kia Pyykkönen)

**Katarina Sjöblom** “The Violation of Ancestral Authorities in the Context of Colonial Collecting of Human Remains: Perspectives beyond Dehumanization”

**Natan Elgabsi**: “The Ethical Status of Human Remains: Reification, Decomposition, Sacralization”

**Carl-Gösta Ojala**: “Dealing with colonial collecting: Histories of collecting, repatriation and the roles of universities today”

10:45-11:00                      Break

11:00-12:30                      Panel 6: Cultural Heritage Restitution

(chair: Katarina Sjöblom)

**Eeva-Kristiina Nylander**: “Provenance research, repatriation and rematriation as examples of decolonial and indigenisation practices in the museum world”

**Mari Viita-aho**: “Reframing Museums’ Restitution with Neutrality. The Case of the National Museum of Finland”

**Kia Pyykkönen**: “Restitution of Sámi Cultural Heritage in Finland: Analysis of State Narratives”

12:30-13:30                      Lunch

13:30-14:30

Panel 7: (Post)memory and Social Repair

(chair: Tarja Orre)

**Minna-Kerttu Kekki:** “Where goes the line between me and my family? Analysing the concept of *postmemory* through the case of Ingrians”

**Ulla Savolainen:** “Livvi Karelian Language, Transgenerational Memory, and the Possibility of Repair in Henna Hyvärinen’s Film Art”

14:30-14:45

Break

14:45-16:00

Roundtable: Comparative Perspectives on  
Difficult Histories and (Post)Colonialism

(chair: Magdalena Zolkos)

**Erica Lehrer**

**Saara Alakorva**

**Elin Skaar**

## Biographies

**Saara Alakorva** is a Doctor of Social Sciences and a university teacher at the University of Lapland. In her PhD research, Alakorva focused on Sámi political history and contemporary Sámi political thinking, situating her work within political science and Sámi studies. As a Sámi scholar herself, Alakorva has deep knowledge of issues concerning modern Sámi society. She also has practical experience working with Indigenous issues both nationally and internationally.

**Naja Dyrendom Graugaard** is Associate Professor at Department of Nordic Studies and Linguistics, Copenhagen University. She is a Danish-Kalaaleq (Inuk) researcher with an expertise in past and present colonial relations between Denmark and Kalaallit Nunaat. Her research attends to alternative, decolonial, arts-based, and Indigenous narratives, Kalaallit lived experiences, and Inuit knowledge systems.

**Natan Elgabsi** is a Postdoctoral researcher in Philosophy at Åbo Akademi University, in the project *Doing Justice to Experience: Relations to the Difficult Past in History and Memory*. Elgabsi's research is focused on the philosophy of history, existential and moral philosophy, the philosophy of writing (hermeneutics, deconstruction, narrativism), memory studies, and the ethics of the human sciences. Elgabsi is the author of *Existential Ethics and the Philosophy of Historiography: Transgenerational Life and Memory in Literary Culture* (forthcoming with Amsterdam University Press in 2025).

**Minna-Kerttu M. Kekki** is a postdoctoral researcher at the Centre of Excellence in Law, Identities and European Narratives at the University of Helsinki. Her background is in philosophy, and her academic publications are mostly on political philosophy, phenomenology, and philosophy of education. She has also published a book and several popular texts on Ingrians' history.

**Otso Kortekangas** is a Docent in Nordic Studies at the University of Helsinki and a researcher in history at Åbo Akademi University. He has published widely on the history of education, science, and the environment. He is currently involved in the project *TRiNC: Truth & Reconciliation in the Nordic Countries* led by senior researcher Astrid Andersen at the Danish Institute for International Studies. He is also the PI for the project *MaMeFo: The Manifold Meanings of Forests in Comprehensive Education in the Nordics 1972–2023*, funded by the Kone Foundation (2024–2027).

**Erica Lehrer** is a sociocultural anthropologist, historian, and curator. She is Professor in the History Department and held the Canada Research Chair in Museum and Heritage Studies (2007-2017) at Concordia University, Montreal, where she is also Founding Director of the Curating and Public Scholarship Lab (CaPSL). She is the author of *Jewish Poland Revisited: Heritage Tourism in Unquiet Places* (Indiana University Press 2013); and co-editor of *Terribly Close: Polish Vernacular Artists Face the Holocaust* (Krytyka Polityczna, 2023); *My Museum, A Museum About Me* (Jagiellonian/Columbia University Press, 2023); *Curatorial Dreams: Critics Imagine Exhibitions* (McGill-Queens 2016); *Jewish Space in Contemporary Poland* (Indiana University Press 2015); and *Curating Difficult Knowledge: Violent Pasts in Public Places* (Palgrave 2011), among others, as well as numerous articles. She is Principal Investigator on the international team project *Thinking Through the Museum: A Partnership Approach to Curating Difficult Knowledge in Public* (2021-2028), see [thinkingthroughthemuseum.org](http://thinkingthroughthemuseum.org).

**Marjo Lindroth**, PhD, is a researcher in the Arctic Centre at the University of Lapland, Finland. Her research critically investigates the intersections between power, rights and indigeneity in international politics. Her particular research interests at present are hope, resilience and contemporary colonialism. Her books, co-authored with Heidi Sinevaara-Niskanen, include *The Colonial Politics of Hope: Critical Junctures of Indigenous-State Relations* (Routledge, 2022) and *Global Politics and its Violent Care for Indigeneity: Sequels to Colonialism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

**Kristín Loftsdóttir** is a professor of Anthropology at the University of Iceland. Her research focuses on mobility, exceptionalism, whiteness, gender, decoloniality, racism, crisis, future, as well as the idea of Europe. Loftsdóttir's different research projects have taken place in Iceland, Niger, Belgium, Italy and Spain. Loftsdóttir has published in Icelandic and English. Her publications include *Creating Europe from the Margins. Mobilities and Racism in Postcolonial Europe* (co-edited Routledge, 2023); *We are all African Here: Race, Mobilities and West Africans in Europe* (monograph, Berghahn, 2021); *Exceptionalism* (co-authored, Routledge, 2021). Loftsdóttir has authored and held few museum exhibitions in connection to her research, to reach broader audience.

**Kirstine Møller Gray** is a Kalaaleq Inuk cultural researcher specialising in identity narratives, entangled histories, cultural encounters, and colonialism in the Arctic. Her work critically examines the intersections of Indigenous agency, colonial amnesia, and decolonization practices, particularly through archival research, archaeology, and cultural memory. She has been actively involved in fieldwork and research projects in Kalaallit Nunaat, working within Indigenous knowledge systems and exploring missionary legacies, and cultural resilience. Through her scholarship, she seeks to challenge dominant colonial narratives and advocate for inclusive, ethical research methodologies that centers Indigenous perspectives.

**Eeva-Kristiina Nylander** defended her PhD thesis 2022 in the University of Oulu, Giellagas Institute (Institute for Saami Studies) in Finland. Her thesis deals with repatriation, rematriation and dismantling the attitudes and potentials behind Sámi repatriation in Finland. She has worked in Sámi museums in Norway and Finland, as well as in the Historical Museum in Sweden, for example. Nylander is specialized in Sámi collections in Nordic and European museums, ethical questions and repatriation. She has worked for a long time with these subjects together with the Sámi society. She has also been a part of curatorial teams in two Sámi exhibitions in Finland. Currently she works in a project The Sámi Collection at MEK. A Multiperspective Approach of Provenance Research in Museum of European Cultures in Berlin. In addition to her scientific articles, she has launched a book *Ládjogahpir - Máttaráhkuid gábagahpir* in 2020 together with Sámi contemporary artist Outi Pieski which presents in book form the past, future and present stories of the Sámi horn hat - the ládjogahpir - and the rematriation of its existence, use, making and wearing.

**Carl-Gösta Ojala** is Associate Professor and Senior Lecturer in archaeology at Uppsala University, Sweden, and Associate Professor at the Global Institution for Collaborative Research and Education, Hokkaido University, Japan. His research focuses on archaeology and heritage in Northern Fennoscandia and northern Russia, especially in Sámi contexts, and the politics and ethics of archaeology and heritage management. Ojala has been involved in several research projects dealing with early modern colonial history in Sápmi, including early industrialism, mining and the collecting of Sámi material culture. Furthermore, he has critically examined 19th-century and early 20th-century collecting of Sámi ancestral remains. He is interested in debates on indigeneity, land and cultural rights, decolonization, cultural revitalization, repatriation and reburial.

**Kia Pyykkönen** is a doctoral researcher in Social Sciences at the University of Jyväskylä and works on the Academy Project ‘Reframing Restitution: Postcolonial Object Movement, Transnational Memory and Social Repair’ (2024-2028), funded by the Research Council of Finland. Her research interests include the political uses of memory and the power dynamics involved in defining belonging, constructing narratives, and addressing marginalised perspectives in the shaping of collective memory.

**Anna Rastas**, Dr.Soc.Sc., adjunct professor (docent) of social anthropology (Tampere University) and European ethnology (University of Helsinki) works as a senior lecturer at Tampere University. Her research projects have focused on racism and anti-racism, ethnic and racialized relations, transnationalism, African/Black diaspora, decoloniality, intersectionality, knowledge production concerning minorities and marginalized communities, museums, and cultural production in multiethnic societies. In her ethnographic studies, Rastas has favored collaborative and action research methods. She has edited books and special issues on these topics and published articles in peer reviewed journals and chapters in edited volumes in Finland and internationally (see <http://www.annarastas.com/publications/>).

**Ulla Savolainen**, PhD, works as a University Lecturer of Folklore Studies at the University of Helsinki and she is a Docent of Memory Studies and Oral History Research at the University of Turku. Her research focuses on minority memories, the interplay and friction between institutional and grassroots actors, transnationality and migration, materiality, and the link between memory and social justice. In her work, she has analyzed a wide range of materials, from interviews and literature to (audio)visual representations, objects, and public debates, and to institutionalized cultural heritage and archival materials. Geographically, her work has focused on the margins of the Nordic context (especially the transnational borders of Finland and Russia) in relation to European and global memories.

**Heidi Sinevaara-Niskanen**, PhD, is a university lecturer and feminist scholar at the University of Lapland, Finland. She holds a Title of Docent in World Politics at the University of Helsinki. Her critical research addresses the problematics of development, power and social sustainability, with particular reference to Arctic politics. In her recent research, she has examined the links between hope and politics. Her books, co-authored with Marjo Lindroth, include *The Colonial Politics of Hope: Critical Junctures of Indigenous-State Relations* (Routledge, 2022) and *Global Politics*

*and its Violent Care for Indigeneity: Sequels to Colonialism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

**Katarina Sjöblom** is a postdoctoral researcher in the project 'Reframing Restitution: Postcolonial Object Movement, Transnational Memory and Social Repair' (2024-2028), funded by the Research Council of Finland. Her research interests include modern political theory, questions related to political freedom and equality, social movements, restitution processes, and cultural critique. She is the author of 'Politics as Activity: Praxis, Poïësis, and Gesture in the Work of Giorgio Agamben' (Routledge, 2025).

**Elin Skaar** is a political scientist and Research Professor at the Chr. Michelsen Institute in Bergen, Norway. Exploring the intersections between law and politics in Latin America and Lusophone Africa, Elin's research interests include human rights, transitional justice, courts, and judicial reform. Much of her work in over the last decade has focussed on truth commissions worldwide. She was part of a research project following closely the work of the Norwegian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2020-24) and is currently heading a project on truth commissions and conflict related sexual violence in Africa and Latin America. Elin has for three decades published widely on democratization processes and human rights. Recent publications include two volumes on the implementation of truth commission recommendations in Latin America: *Exploring Truth Commission Recommendations in a Comparative Perspective (Beyond Words. Vol. 1, co-authored)* and *Latin American Experiences with Truth Commission Recommendations (Beyond Words, Vol. 2, co-edited)* (Intersentia, 2022).

**Margaret Tali** is a visual culture and museum studies scholar, who works as Assistant Professor at the Institute of Humanities in Tallinn University. She completed her doctoral studies at the Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis in University of Amsterdam. Her research interests involve transnational histories of museums in the Baltic region, visual art and materiality, and curating difficult histories. She is the author of the monograph *Absence and Difficult Knowledge in Contemporary Art Museums* (Routledge, 2018) and co-editor of the Special Issue 'The Return of Suppressed Memories in Eastern Europe' in *Memory Studies* (June 2022). She has co-curated with Ieva Astahovska the project *Communicating Difficult Pasts* (2019-2024) that focused on researching Baltic history through transnational and transcultural perspectives and involved the exhibition *Difficult Pasts. Connected Worlds*.

**Mari Viita-aho** is a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Helsinki, working at the Finnish Literature Society. She is the Co-Editor-in-Chief of *Kulttuurintutkimus* journal. Viita-aho's research focuses on the societal roles of museums. She is currently working on the Uncomfortable Museum - research project (funded by Kone Foundation, 2023–2027) that explores museums' strategies for representing, producing, and handling difficult topics with and for communities. In October, she starts her post-doctoral project on the politics of the National Museum of Finland. Her dissertation investigated museums' societal agencies forming from policies and exhibition practices in Finland during the 2000s and their engagements with Wicked Heritage Problems (2025).

**Magdalena Zolkos** is Associate Professor in the Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy at the University of Jyväskylä. She is the primary investigator in the Research Council of Finland Academy Project 'Reframing Restitution: Postcolonial Object Movement, Transnational Memory and Social Repair' (2024-2028) and the author of *Restitution and the Politics of Repair: Tropes, Imaginaries, Theory* (Edinburgh UP, 2020).

## Abstracts

### **Rethinking Museums Beyond the Nation-State. Sámi Heritage and the Politics of Difficult Histories**

**Áile Aikio (University of Lapland) & Saara Alakorva (University of Lapland)**

The idea that the world can and should be divided into distinct nations and clearly demarcated states is less than two centuries old. The global spread of the museum as an institution during the nineteenth century, almost simultaneously with the consolidation of nation-states, was no coincidence. In a world newly partitioned into states, museums were needed to collect, represent, and define cultural heritage in ways that sustained national narratives. Museums thus helped construct and maintain understandings of homogeneous nations with long, continuous histories—narratives that legitimized both the establishment of states and the drawing of their borders. Although historical research and museums have in recent decades sought distance from grand national narratives and paid increasing attention to microhistories and the plurality of interpretations, museums have never fully relinquished their nationalist legacy.

This relationship between museums and nationalism is especially salient in the Sámi context, where the borders of nation-states and their administrative divisions shape the possibilities and responsibilities of Sámi museums. The first Sámi museums were founded in the aftermath of the Second World War, in response both to the destruction of Sámi material heritage during the war and to intensified state policies of linguistic and cultural assimilation. Three decades later, in 1984, the Sámi Council proposed a transnational Sámi museum network that would transcend state borders and reflect Sámi understandings of how the people and territories of Sápmi are internally differentiated. This visionary plan was never realized—perhaps for lack of resources, perhaps because it was seen as too radical and divergent from established museum practices. Instead, Sámi museums developed along national lines, becoming increasingly embedded in majority-led museum frameworks and fragmented into divergent practices, governance models, responsibilities, and funding structures. For example, in Finland, Sámi museological work and heritage management were centralized in a single institution, the Sámi Museum Siida, while in Norway a large number of small regional museums were founded, each responsible for the representation, safeguarding, and preservation of local Sámi heritage (Aikio 2023). Such nationally confined approaches risk marginalizing cross-border histories and silencing Sámi presence, especially in regions outside the present-day Sámi Homeland (Alakorva 2025). For example, state-administered nature exhibitions in Finland often erase human presence altogether, reproducing a long-standing narrative in which the state writes Sámi histories out of the land to consolidate its own national story (Aikio forthcoming).

Sámi cultural heritage located beyond the present-day Sámi area—including archaeological materials and historical Sámi objects—further raises difficult questions of recognition and ownership. In Finland, the Sámi right to manage Sámi cultural heritage has been challenged in politicized debates where local non-Sámi actors invoke historical Sámi ancestors to justify claims of ownership. These disputes not only undermine the authority of Sámi museums but also reflect broader struggles over recognition, belonging, and political responsibility in the context of the ongoing conflict over the definition of Sámi identity.

This article examines the role of Sámi museums in composing Sámi histories and identities, and how Sámi cultural heritage has become entangled in contested claims of ownership and belonging. We also analyze the broader relationship between museums and nationalism in the Sámi context, and reflect on the idea of a Sámi national museum. What would such an institution mean for a people whose homeland and communities are inherently transnational? By addressing these questions, the article seeks to open a new perspective on the structural entanglements between Indigenous institutions and the nation-state, and to contribute to wider discussions on restitution, recognition, and historical justice in Northern Europe.

## **Cryolite colonialism: (De)colonial narration of Danish exploitation and coercion in Kalaallit Nunaat**

**Naja Dyrendom Graugaard**

This paper reflects on the concept and meaning of *Indigenous narrative sovereignty* in the movement to address historic injustices and legacies of Denmark's colonization of Kalaallit Nunaat. As is reflected in recent measures to redress Danish colonial policies and atrocities – such as the most recent state-led investigations of the IUD enforcement program (2022-2025) and 'the historical inquiry' (2022-) – the political and public attention towards Danish historical repression of Kalaallit Inuit is increasing. Arguably, the long-standing narrative of Denmark as the benevolent colonial power, or "the best option" for Kalaallit Nunaat, is under pressure and is being re-negotiated in Danish-Kalaallit relations. Meanwhile, with neo-colonial claims to Kalaallit territories and the ensuing geo-political tension in the Arctic, this past year has also witnessed a kind of "narrative regression" by which Danish politicians and media have been re-casting the story of Danish benignity.

To many, 2025 has been a pivotal year that has shed light on a range of "difficult histories" in the relation between Denmark and Kalaallit Nunaat: the Danish IUD program, the forced removal and adoption of Inuit children, Inuit sovereignty and the military presence of the United States in Kalaallit Nunaat, and Denmark's exploitation of cryolite and (de)generation of wealth.

With the example of ‘cryolite colonialism’ and the Danish reaction to and de-publication of the Kalaallit-Danish film documentary *Orsugjak – Greenland’s White Gold*, this paper questions the practice of *Indigenous narrative sovereignty* when redressing colonial legacies. It raises the questions of: who gets to tell the story, who should, and which narratives are allowed for in the present? Why are some “difficult histories” welcomed, legitimized, and others not?

As the lead character in the documentary film *Orsugjak* and the main target of the ensuing Danish media storm in the Spring of 2025, I will provide auto-ethnographic reflections on the colonial, racializing, and gendered mechanisms in the existing narrations of Danish colonialism in Kalaallit Nunaat.

## **The Ethical Status of Human Remains: Reification, Decomposition, Sacralization**

**Natan Elgabsi (Åbo Akademi University)**

Demands and initiatives for the return of cultural objects and human remains have been raised among the world’s indigenous peoples since the 1970s, in the wake of the horrifying past of our modern culture of science and *curiosa* (Clegg 2020; Sámediggi [Sámi Parliament] 2024). In the past few years, there have also been increasing important initiatives in contemporary Sweden and Finland to return and rebury human remains that were taken from graves in the Sámi communities (Sámediggi [Sámi Parliament] 2024). These are painful issues of both Sámi history and the contemporary transnational, Nordic social reality that partly intersect with ongoing truth and reconciliation initiatives in the Nordic countries.

Nevertheless, one of the ethical concerns in discussions surrounding initiatives to return body remains is how to understand the humanness of the human remains to be returned. On the one hand, although a human has a materiality, a person is not the same thing as an object (see for instance Levinas 1991; Wyschogrod 1998). On the other hand, even today, this claim seems to be a controversial issue for prominent researchers who continue to regard body remains in museums and institutions as something “between subject and object” (Nilsson Stutz 2023, 1065). Consequently, and because of claims to not fully conceive human remains as persons, ethical concerns raised by critics who insist on the “posthumous dignity of dead persons,” to use a phrase by human rights historian Antoon De Baets (2023, 15), often become sidestepped in the bioethical discourses of archaeology, biological anthropology, and heritage studies as yet another variety of *object return* (see ICOM 2021, and more critical perspectives such as Dunnivant, Delande, and Colwell 2021; Dziuban 2017; Ireland and Schoield 2015; Scholts 2024). In an attempt to avoid reification, Ewa Domańska has argued that the “forensic turn,” promoting a “dehumanization” of the dead body, is not a question of degradation or reduction of dead people, but “is

intended to contribute to discussions on the sacralization of remains, ensuring their protection against desacralization and utilization” (Domańska 2017, 98). Nevertheless, it remains unclear how “dehumanization through decomposition,” through which one conceives the dead body precisely as a non-human part of the natural environment, is an attempt to counteract *reification* of dead people.

In this presentation, the intention is to scrutinize the ethics of customary theoretical ideas about the return of human remains. To my mind, the forensic perspective seems to be a symptom of a greater ethical inability in our culture. As Anton Froeyman has argued: “For us modern people, it is impossible,” or often incomprehensible, to conceive the dead beyond their *materiality*; an impossibility “to see the dead as being part of a reciprocal, moral community” (Froeyman 2016, 8, compare with Domańska 2017). Focusing on the permissions and rights of object return and museum exhibition (or possibly on more radical forensic perspectives) risk to not fully take into consideration why the identification, return, and reburial of human remains bears important ethical and existential dimensions for many people who have lost their ancestors and who live in the aftermath of colonial violence.

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### **Where goes the line between me and my family? Analysing the concept of postmemory through the case of Ingrians**

**Minna-Kerttu Kekki (University of Helsinki)**

In this paper, I will analyse the sub-category of collective memory called 'postmemory' through the examples of systematic violence experienced by Ingrians in the WWII and Soviet Union and remembered by their descendants today. 'Postmemory' refers to the experience of the generation after a personal, collective, and/or cultural trauma. As Marianne Hirsch has characterized it, the generation that comes after the traumatic events so-to-say *as if* remembers the events by means of the stories, images, and behaviours of their parents and grandparents among which they grew up. These experiences are transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Such transmittance can be seen in how Ingrians talk about their family histories. The stories have often been told intimately within a family, as the surrounding society has either ignored (current Finland and Estonia) or negated (former Finland and the Soviet Union, current Russia) the experiences of older generations.

My analysis of the concept of 'postmemory' is philosophical, more precisely phenomenological. I will argue that collective memory as such differs essentially from individual memory, even though postmemory as if brings the individual and collective memories back together. From the first-person perspective of the person who as if remembers their family members' experiences, the line between "my" and "my family's" memories is blurred, unlike in normal daily cases of individual memories, and

distinguishing between what has happened to “me” and one’s family members may require self-reflection. However, postmemories are different from clearly “my” memories in that they appear to the remembering subject as true, and doubting them is different than doubting one’s own individual memories.

### **Nordic-Sámi TRCs and the Challenges of Transnational Historical Responsibility**

**Otso Kortekangas (Åbo Akademi University / University of Helsinki)**

The three Nordic Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (in Norway, Finland, Sweden) working with Sámi issues each emphasize the importance of assuming historical responsibility. These TRC processes are in many way progressive in their decolonizing aims, and based on the wishes of the Sámi parliaments of each country. However, the mandates are closely connected to the (nation) states and current national borders. This risks leading to a presentist perspective on Sámi history, where certain historical Sámi groups that do not fit in nicely in the current patterns of “national histories” are forgotten, as are the questions related to historical responsibility for and regarding these groups. A related challenge is in what way the recommendations (e.g., concerning public and formal education) following the final reports of the TRCs could be understood in a more transnational sense.

### **Hope, Reconciliation and Dispossession in Indigenous-State Relations**

**Marjo Lindroth (University of Lapland) & Heidi Sinevaara-Niskanen (University of Lapland)**

This paper investigates the dynamics between hope, reconciliation and dispossession in state responses to Indigenous peoples’ claims. Indigenous-state relations, historically marked by colonial interventions, boast hopeful developments ranging from the recognition of rights to truth and reconciliation processes. Drawing on the critical notion of the politics of hope and scholarship on colonial dispossession, the paper delves into the role of hope in how states (allegedly) reorganise their relations with Indigenous peoples. In particular, we study the workings of hope in the ongoing Nordic truth and reconciliation processes between states and the Sámi. By offering an illustrative analysis of the process in Finland, the paper examines the state’s utilisation of hope in (re)defining its relations with the Sámi. We ask, to what extent does the built-in future orientation of hope enable states to postpone change? How might such control over time be connected to logics of dispossession?

## **Prince Napoleon's Plaster Casts as Contact Point**

### **Kristín Loftsdóttir**

In 1856, twelve plaster busts were created by a French expedition in Iceland and Greenland, revealing one of the many ways these countries were intertwined with the colonial and imperial projects of the 19th-century Europe. The expedition was headed by Prince Jérôme Napoléon Bonaparte—the son of emperor Napoleon's younger brother—to the northern seas. His journey reflected France's combined military and scientific interests in the far North, particularly regarding resource extraction in Greenland and Iceland. Three additional busts were also created through an official visit to Scandinavia during the same trip. The busts were displayed in Paris and became a part of wider collection with other busts made during similar expeditions, intended to show different racial groups across the world, and later replicas were sold to different museums in France and Spain.

The presentation focuses on these casts as “contact points” (Loftsdóttir 2023), in multiple sense, exposing Europe's imperial history and the Nordic countries involvement in different racial regimes. What do the busts as contact points say about Nordic colonialism more generally, as well as the differentiated Nordic subjects within the category of the “Nordic”? What does the “unfolding” of the busts (M'charek 2014) - bring into a present that is characterized by persistent positioning of racism as an exception (Loftsdóttir and Jensen 2012) and where colonialism toward Nordic indigenous populations is seen irrelevant (Naum and Nordin 2013; Graugaard et al. 2025)?

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## **Resisting and Adapting: Indigenous and African Women in Early Moravian Missions**

### **Kirstine Møller Gray (University of Groningen)**

In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Moravian missions in the Danish Caribbean, Nunatsiavut, and Kalaallit Nunaat became entangled in colonial structures of control, religious

conversion, and economic dependence. While these missions sought to reshape Indigenous and African lifeways, the individuals they targeted were not passive recipients of colonial influence. This paper examines the lives of three women – Rebecca of St. Thomas, Mikak of Nunatsiavut, and Juditha Isseq of Kalaallit Nunaat – who actively negotiated, adapted, and resisted missionary power in distinct colonial contexts.

Through Rebecca’s spiritual leadership within an enslaved society, Mikak’s diplomatic engagement with British authorities, and Juditha Isseq’s adaptation of Moravian communal structures to provide refuge for Kalaallit women who sought to avoid marriage or servitude, this paper highlights how Indigenous and African women shaped their encounters with Moravian missionaries, challenging narratives of passive assimilation.

This paper contributes to ongoing discussions on colonial legacies, historical injustice and contemporary reparative measures in Northern Europe by centring on these historical voices. It situates missionary histories within broader debates on reconciliation, including Denmark’s limited efforts to confront its colonial past in Kalaallit Nunaat and the U.S. Virgin Islands. While Denmark has issued selective apologies, it has not fully accounted for the broader impacts of its colonial policies, particularly regarding Kalaallit Inuit and the descendants of enslaved people in the former Danish West Indies.

The centennial of Denmark’s sale of the Danish West Indies to the United States of America in 1917, marked in 2017, reignited discussions about Denmark’s failure to address its colonial past. Initiatives such as the “I Am Queen Mary” statue – honouring Mary Thomas, an important leader of the 1878 Fireburn labour revolt on St. Croix – have served as powerful reminders of the continued absence of Danish accountability for its colonial legacies. In contrast, Canada has issued multiple formal apologies addressing forced assimilation policies against Inuit communities, including the residential school system and forced relocations. The lack of Danish accountability in these regions highlights a broader hesitancy to engage with the politics of redress and restitution.

This paper argues that understanding historical agency in colonial encounters, through historical figures like Rebecca, Mikak, and Juditha Isseq is crucial for framing meaningful redress and decolonial futures, particularly in nations where colonial amnesia still informs state response to historical injustices.

## **Provenance research, repatriation and rematriation as examples of decolonial and indigenisation practices in museum world**

**Eeva-Kristiina Nylander (Museum of European Cultures, Berlin)**

In the European museum world, there has been a change of Paradigm and we can today speak of the age of repatriation. Also, in the Nordic museum field, there is an increasing discussion about the return or repatriation of Sámi objects, the duodji to Sámi museums. I contribute to the debate by highlighting the importance of provenance research on repatriation in collaboration with Sámi communities. I propose a methodology for researching Sámi museum collections, which I describe as decolonisation and indigenisation. Finally, I introduce the concept of rematriation to describe the process of building new Sámi ontologies through these methods. Through these processes, difficult and challenging experiences of colonialism can be useful and helpful, for example, in the work of the Saami Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The methods I present may be of interest to other Indigenous people and museums that house indigenous objects from other parts of the world. My presentation is based on my doctoral thesis (2023) "From repatriation to rematriation. Dismantling the attitudes and potentials behind repatriation" and my practical work with the Sámi contemporary artist Outi Pieski regarding the Ládjogahpir-hat and the provenance research project together with eight Sámi duojár, the crafters in the Sámi collections of the Museum of European Cultures in Berlin.

## **Dealing with Colonial Collecting: Histories of Collecting, Repatriation and the Roles of Universities Today**

**Carl-Gösta Ojala (Uppsala University)**

In recent years, histories and legacies of Nordic colonialism in Sápmi have been increasingly discussed by scholars. As part of this much needed broader examination of Nordic colonialism in Sápmi, there is also a need to recognize and critically examine legacies of colonial collecting.

Histories of colonial collecting include, for example, the early modern collecting of Sámi material culture, such as the sacred Sámi drums that were confiscated and collected in the 17th and 18th centuries, and the collecting of Sámi ancestral remains in the 19th and early 20th centuries, as part of racial science and the assembling of craniological collections in the Nordic countries and elsewhere.

The 19th and early 20th-century collecting of Sámi ancestral remains was conducted in a deeply unethical and offensive manner – through excavations or plundering of graves, or the removal of human remains without any consent. During this period, there was a

large national and international interest in Sámi ancestral remains, which led to international exchange and trade.

The anatomical collections have been at the center of repatriation and reburial demands from Sámi groups for a long time. In recent years, several reburial processes have taken place in Sweden, Norway and Finland. Still, important issues of Indigenous rights, responsibilities of academic institutions and Sámi self-determination in heritage management remain to be critically discussed.

This paper discusses some of the challenges for scholars and research and heritage institutions in this field of tension between past and present. The paper addresses the current situation concerning repatriation and reburial processes, and their wider implications and significance, in the Nordic countries – stressing the importance of examining the politics, ethics and power dynamics of academic research, museums and heritage management, when discussing histories and legacies of colonial collecting. In particular, the roles and responsibilities of universities – in dealing with colonial collecting and colonial collections today – will be critically discussed.

### **Restitution of Sámi Cultural Heritage in Finland: Analysis of State Narratives**

**Kia Pyykkönen (University of Jyväskylä)**

This paper examines the restitution of Sámi cultural heritage in Finland by using a postcolonial framework which enables a closer examination of Finnish state narratives and the power dynamics embedded within them. By analysing documents from the Ministry of Education and Culture in Finland, roughly from 2015 to 2022, this study seeks to explore the state narratives that frame the Sámi cultural restitution process, the right of Sámi people to govern their own cultural heritage, and the power asymmetries surrounding these issues. Through this analysis of Finnish state narratives, this paper seeks to examine the ways the Finnish state positions itself in relation to its colonial legacy and contemporary relations with the Indigenous Sámi people.

This study contributes to the broader discourse on cultural heritage restitution by expanding what is meant by “restitution” – it is not only a legal, physical, and administrative act but a more complex effort that connects the discourse of Indigenous rights, Indigenous self-governance, and the right and authority to manage one’s own history. The process of restitution of cultural heritage can serve both as a tool and a case study for researching power dynamics between the state and Indigenous peoples. Restitution processes, in this sense, also reveal who is included – and who is excluded – in such practices.

## **Ambassadors of Decoloniality**

### **Anna Rastas (Tampere University)**

In my earlier studies focusing on racism and representations of Africa and Africans in Finland, I have identified various articulations of a discourse that has been termed Nordic, and in case of Finland, Finnish exceptionalism. Differentiating Finland and Finnish people from colonial powers, and the moral superiority included in this discourse, was common in perceptions of earlier encounters between Finns and particular others, as well as in public discussions on racism in Finland. During the past decade, historians and other scholars have shown an increasing interest in analyzing the colonial complicity of the Nordic countries and challenging the innocent self-image of the Nordic nations by exploring their participation in various colonial projects. These studies have also made visible how the colonial worldview has defined Finnish culture.

However, research that focuses on dominant representations and ways of thinking can also obscure the agency of minorities and oppressed groups and how these groups have sought to challenge dominant ways of thinking at different times. Research on the Sámi, for example, has increasingly begun to highlight their different strategies of resistance. In an ongoing research project on the history of the African diaspora in Finland (see <https://www.annarastas.com/the-history-of-africans-in-finland/>), we have wanted to emphasize the experiences and perspectives of Africans and other people of the African diaspora who settled in Finland, rather than those of the majority population. Our research, based on extensive interview and other ethnographic data, reveals how people of African (diaspora) background in Finland have already for decades been trying to raise discussion about colonialism and what is today termed as decoloniality. My presentation will focus on how also such minority knowledge and agency could be incorporated into the writing of national history.

### **Livvi Karelian Language, Transgenerational Memory, and the Possibility of Repair in Henna Hyvärinen's Film Art**

#### **Ulla Savolainen (University of Helsinki)**

Karelia is a region that spans the current Finnish-Russian border, stretching from the Gulf of Finland to the White Sea. Historically, Karelians were the predominant ethnic group in the area until the 1930s. Over time, many Karelians have integrated into Russian or Finnish societies, and the Karelian language has become critically endangered. Karelia holds significant symbolic importance within the national memory complex in Finland. During WWII, Finland fought two wars against the Soviet Union, resulting in the annexation of a large part of Finnish Karelia to the USSR and the evacuation of over 400,000 people from Karelia to Finland. The annexation of lands and

the evacuation of the Karelian population to Finland have become cornerstones of national memory and historical narratives in Finland. At the core of the hegemonic memory complex is a strong emphasis on Karelians' essential Finnishness, both in the past and present, as well as the selective remembrance of wartime events and linguistic and religious discrimination against them.

Recently, artists and activists have started to highlight the blind spots of this memory complex, discussing the status of the Karelian language in Finnish society. Their activities have often focused on bringing light to the experiences and legacies related to the violence faced by Karelians in Finland at different times. This recent activism can be conceptualized as memory activism (Savolainen 2025), aiming for “mnemonic regime change” (Rigney 2022) in Finland, which essentially represents a struggle against hermeneutical injustice. According to Fricker (2007), hermeneutical injustice refers to harms arising from semantic, discursive, or performative conditions that hinder a person's or group's capacity to communicate their experiences and be understood by others. In my paper, I will explore the nexus of language, memory, and hermeneutical (in)justice by analyzing a three-part autobiographical video work by artist Henna Hyvärinen. The triptych (part of the collections of the Finnish National Gallery) consists of the films *Pussycat Soup / Misukeitto / Kidžurokku* (2022), *Sugar Water / Sokervettä / Zuharivetty* (2023), and *Minuška (Selfie)* (2024). By means of audiovisual media, the work discusses Hyvärinen's orthodox Karelian family's memories and experiences of displacement and othering, the loss of family's Livvi Karelian language, and the role of language in the transgenerational mediation of family memory and Karelian culture. The aim of my paper is to focus on the intersection of memory, language, and audiovisual media in promoting or hampering social justice and repair.

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## **What happens after a Truth Commission? Follow-ups to the TRCs in Norway and Canada**

**Elin Skaar (Chr. Michelsen Institute) & Aaron Spitzer (University of Bergen)**

One of the most important legacies of truth commission are their recommendations. Recommendations made by these temporary non-judicial fact-seeking bodies are designed to redress the harm documented in the truth commissions' final reports and to prevent similar harms from occurring in the future. This paper examines the recommendations made by the Canadian and Norwegian truth commissions and their implementation record. Both commissions were set down recently by their respective governments to examine historical wrongs committed against indigenous minorities and were tasked with making recommendation to amend these wrongs. Applying a theoretical framework developed to assess implementation and based on desk study and survey material, we find that the implementation process in Canada has so far been more systematic and has brought more visible results than the twin process in Norway. We argue that this is, in part, due to the absence of a follow-up mechanisms in Norway, but also due to the design and formulation of the recommendations themselves. Where the Canadian government has assigned responsibility for the implementation and follow-up of the recommendations, the process in Norway has been much less government driven. Implementation in the Norwegian context has therefore – so far – been left in the hands of civil society and interest organisations.

## **The Violation of Ancestral Authorities in the Context of Colonial Collecting of Human Remains: Perspectives beyond Dehumanization**

**Katarina Sjöblom (University of Jyväskylä)**

Returns and reburials of human remains have been at the center of debates concerning repatriation and reparative justice starting from the 1970s, when several Indigenous communities started claiming back the remains of their ancestors. It has become a somewhat established approach in the international literature on repatriation and restitution to view struggles for return and reinterment of ancestral remains as attempts to restore humanity to the individuals to whom the remains belonged, to *reverse* the process of dehumanization and objectification that was central to the racial sciences of earlier centuries. In my paper and the presentation based on it, however, I attempt to show that to understand the full scope of the transgression that happened when remains were unethically obtained and studied, it is also vital to consider these practices not only as violating the *individuals* in question but the *systems of authority* that the position of 'ancestors' entail in many Indigenous contexts.

## **Researching Layered Colonialisms through Material Culture**

**Margaret Tali**

Recent calls to decolonize museums have triggered renewed global debates over provenance and restitution. Yet the Baltic region with its complex colonial dynamics has largely remained missing from these debates. In Estonia the critical application of postcolonial theories has brought along the need to revisit colonial frameworks based on the country's layered colonial experience that includes Russian imperialism, the Baltic German colonial rule the Soviet and Nazi Occupations as well Swedish and Danish colonial politics. Furthermore, since the Soviet era has created a break between memories from the beginning of 20th century and the post-1990s period its many influences continue to serve as a layer through which to look at the local and regional cultural history.

My starting point in this paper is exploring the potentials that the materiality of artworks could offer for furthering the decolonial debate in the framework of memory and heritage studies. How could objects "speak" about their provenance and their use based on their materiality? And what could the methods of heritage studies and material art history in particular contribute to understanding cultural memories in novel ways? I will use as my examples artworks from the collections of Art Museum of Estonia and Estonian National Museum that originate from private collections to consider how they could add to global debates about decolonization based on Estonian experiences of layered colonialism.

## **Reframing Museums' Restitution with Neutrality. The Case of the National Museum of Finland**

**Mari Viita-aho (University of Helsinki / the Finnish Literature Society)**

Museums are among the most trusted societal institutions (e.g. Cameron & Deslandes 2011; Torsti 2012). Whether as a result or a justification of the public's trust, they are often seen as neutral venues of objective knowledge production. However, several instances have recently confuted claims of museums' neutrality and objectivity (e.g. Autry & Murawski 2019; Janes & Grattan 2020). This paper grows from the discussions of neutrality and their ways of positioning museums in society with a specific interest in the role of "neutrality" in future museum work. The focus here is on the National Museum of Finland, where special attention is paid to its restitution projects. The government often regulates national museums, and donating government property is usually restricted by law. Therefore, critical discussions in restitution have evolved around legal and moral rights to hold objects. Instead of dealing with legal issues, I focus here on whether "neutrality" as a conceptual tool might support restitution by repositioning the museum as one of and among the many equal voices. The

presentation briefly introduces the National Museum of Finland's recent restitution projects and considers how they support developing the future museum as "neutral."

I acknowledge museums, as performers and narrators, as infeasible to ever be objective in knowledge production. However, if we consider "neutrality" as refuting selecting sides or as an aspiration to widen the institutional boundaries in a museum space (Barthes 2005), it must be separated from the idea of objective information mediation. Further developing Laura Raicovich's (2021) ideas, the approach to "neutrality" is here two-folded. First, it reflects the status quo: the acts and values following the dominant narrative remain unnoticeable and appear neutral. In other words, neutrality can be a camouflage for the dominant values. Second, "neutrality" can be used as a conceptual tool to build a museum space towards versatile, polyphonic approaches and encompass as many viewpoints as possible. The restitution projects may benefit from this approach. If participants consider the space neutral and trust their backgrounds and identities are noted, it becomes possible to develop cultural exchange and expand museums' vocal spectrum through restitution towards multifariousness. The paper discusses "neutrality" as this type of multifaceted approach and asks how it may be used to open new perspectives to the museum's restitution projects.

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