

Landscapes of care
the emergence of landscapes of care in unstable territories



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Reframing the Far North Landscapes of Care in *Borealis* and *Hyperborea*

Esther Scholtes

Abstract

Exploring the Far North historically meant an immense effort, meticulous planning and the endurance of many hardships. These are characteristics that partly still hold true today. The northern parts of our planet are therefore surrounded by a narrative of distance. In this simplified notion the Far North is pictured as an isolated and unspoiled wilderness, one of the last places on Earth free of human disruption. Meanwhile, the (sub-)Arctic areas are among the first to be profoundly affected by climate change. Melting snow and ice incites a chain reaction that is known as the albedo effect, causing an accelerated rise in temperature. The Far North comprises territories whose physical state is profoundly altered at the moment; the melting of ice and permafrost has lasting effects on the physical make-up of the area, and thus these places can be marked as vulnerable and unstable landscapes.

This article explores how a theoretical focus on relationality can unearth relations between photography and the geographical concepts 'isolation' and 'connection' in order to put forward a type of caring that is more geographically dispersed. In the photographic series *Borealis* (2015–2020) by Dutch photographer Jeroen Toirkens and *Hyperborea* (2013–2019) by Russian photographer Evgenia Arbugaeva, the oppositions between 'isolation' and 'connection' are inverted. This article analyses their photographs not as flat representations of a secluded place, but as nodes in a spatial constellation in a wider sense. Eventually, the images construct a 'landscape of care' that moves beyond physical boundaries and underlines an ethical duty for anyone living on this planet to care for and about places that we otherwise deem disparate.

Keywords: photography, spatiality, remote care, the (sub)Arctic, boreal zone

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Introduction

The exploration and mapping of unknown territories has been vital to humankind since the very beginning. Driven by national quests for commercial expansion, the polar regions became interesting for the search for exploitable resources, shipping routes and overall national prestige.¹ In the nineteenth century, polar exploration rose to a scale of professionalised enterprise, funded by national governments and private companies alike.² Historically, travelling to the Far North meant an immense effort, meticulous planning and the endurance of many hardships.³ These are conditions that partly still hold true today. As a result the northern parts of our planet are presented in popular discourse as an isolated place of primal, pristine wilderness.⁴

This article explores alternative means to frame the 'Far North' by probing the dynamics between the photographs of Dutch photographer Jeroen Toirkens that emerged from a long-term research expedition to the northern taiga forests, and the photographs of Russian photographer Evgenia Arbugaeva, who revisits her birthplace at the Arctic ocean to deepen her emotional relationship to a place that she misses dearly. Both photographic projects transform the established narrative of secludedness, isolation and remoteness into one of sincere connection, albeit in different ways. Eventually, they construct a 'landscape of care' that moves beyond physical boundaries and underlines an ethical duty for anyone living on this planet to care for and about places that we otherwise deem disparate.

Myths of the North

The north is a deictic concept – it refers to any place north relative to the position of the viewer – and thus it is necessarily a flexible concept. Deictic terms are empty terms that have no fixed meaning of their own. They only make sense through the presence of the concerning subject and its spatiotemporal context, of being there at that specific moment.⁵ Compared to the 'north,' the Arctic seems to be a more coherent geographical domain. However, it is not an entirely fixed territory: the region can be defined in a number of ways, depending on context and interest. According to most definitions it refers to the area north of the Arctic circle, a latitude circle that currently runs approximately 66°33'49.0" north of the Equator, yet its precise position depends on the Earth's tilt. Others take the more sinuous northern treeline as the line marking

1 Spring and Schimanski, 2015.

2 Karpoff, 2001.

3 The Far North is defined as the Arctic and sub-Arctic regions of the world. The initials are written in upper case because it denotes a territorial region. In this article I will employ the term Far North primarily to denote an imagined territory that coincides with the Arctic and sub-Arctic regions. See, Collins Dictionary, "The Far North."

4 Fjellestad, 2016.

5 Doane, 2007.

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the southern boundary of the Arctic zone.⁶ Yet, the conditions that we commonly perceive as 'Arctic' – a cold yet pristine wilderness – extend well beyond this cartographic line into an imagined territory signified through the term the 'Far North.'⁷

The term 'Arcticness,' as a consequence, is an ambiguous concept. Even more, it is a relatively underexposed and particularly undertheorised concept.⁸ However, many would intuitively feel what such a concept conveys. It often denotes the characteristics of an empty frozen wasteland, the last remaining frontiers of the planet. Television series and films such as *The Terror* (2018), *Hold the Dark* (2018) or *Fortitude* (2013–2015), focus on the sinister conditions that are lurking over virgin white vistas as powerful cinematographic tropes. The vast expanse of frozen plains is put forward as an empty, malicious space, that is literally frozen in time and space.

The outer northern (Arctic) and southern (Antarctic) parts of the world have attracted Western minds for a long time. In ancient times the Greek astronomer and geographer Pytheas travelled northwards and reached a land he called Thule. In this land, he argued, the sun would always shine. Soon stories of an Arctic paradise inhabited by the Hyperborean (which in Greek means something like 'beyond the North wind') people emerged, referenced in many examples of Greek literature. Yet it took until the nineteenth century before the age of exploration truly commenced. These explorations were fueled by scientific objectives, but since the sixteenth century a major commercial imperative was to find a Northwest Passage through the Canadian Arctic connecting the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Both undertaken by private enterprises and national administrations, polar exploration emerged as endeavor for commercial and colonial exploitation – in the sense of making a claim to the region – but also as a form of nationalistic pride.

Particularly since the mystery of the lost Franklin expedition in 1845, the Arctic started to enter into the (Anglo–American) public imagination as well.⁹ The mysterious fate of the twin-ship's crew became a symbol of the dual attitude towards the Far North. Influenced by the ill-fated expedition, the history of Arctic exploration is nowadays still written as a dramatic history of triumph, courage, endurance and perseverance, yet also a history of peril and tragedy. The appetite for Arctic adventure found its way into literature as well. Victorian writers such as Arthur Conan Doyle, Mary Shelly, Charles Dickens, Edgar Allen Poe and Jules Verne contributed to this sub-genre of polar fiction. In these stories Arctic nature would often be portrayed as a horrid

6 Arctic Centre, "Arctic Region."

7 Chartier, 2018.

8 Kelman, 2017.

9 In 1845 Sir John Franklin was captain of a British expedition of two ships (HMS Erebus and HMS Terror) that set out to traverse the final uncharted parts of the Northwest passage in the Canadian Arctic. The two ships became icebound and its crew eventually disappeared and presumably perished. In the subsequent decades more than thirty search missions were launched. Franklin's wife Lady Jane Franklin was one of the driving factors and sponsors behind these missions.

force without mercy. The malice of the northern landscapes would cause all traces of humanity and decency to disappear, leaving the characters to turn to violence and eventually madness.

As the above already indicates, the narratives about the poles were equally polar by nature. The Arctic was conceived to be either pristine and precious, a blank canvas that was there for the explorer to take; or the most desolate, hazardous and violent fringe of the Earth's surface. The poles were two of the remaining least-known parts of the world and thereby they represented the terrifying and dreadful nature of the sublime.¹⁰ In an era of increasing industrialisation, Romantic tendencies of escapism were common. Besides the many state-led and commercial expeditions, the American painter William Bradford set out on a journey towards the west coast of Greenland for the sole purpose of capturing its aesthetic qualities. Aboard the steamship Panther were also two photographers, George Critcherson and John Dunmore, who took photographs during the trip that were meant to form a basis for paintings. These photographs were considered to have value in their own right, and were subsequently published in 1873 in *The Arctic Regions*.¹¹

In artistic outings such as these, the Arctic is portrayed as a harsh and barren wasteland at the isolated periphery of civilization. Even more, it is perceived as an empty canvas upon which (predominantly) European men could project their masculinity in service of nationalist aspirations or personal glory. Indeed, enduring the hardships of polar travel and the frozen frontier has presumably been reserved for the strongest, bravest and toughest men, prioritising ultra-masculine values.¹² In other words, explorers were perceived as Gods among men.¹³ There were different objectives for polar travel, including the economic aspirations of finding a shorter maritime route and the race for the North Pole, which was primarily a matter of honour and glory. As science historian Michael Robinson asserts, explorations that aimed to reach the North Pole provided rather unfitting circumstances to conduct scientific research. The polar sea's pack ice did not accommodate shelter or food, therefore "the consumption of provisions became the clock by which explorers measured their progress."¹⁴ With no time at hand to do measurements or observations and no room for carrying instruments or specimens, scientific research was less relevant. Instead, by the turn of the twentieth century, the prestige of polar explorations was not at all reliant on science any more as most expeditions were funded by private and commercial funders "that could capitali[s]e on stories of manly explorations."¹⁵

10 Loomis, 1977.

11 LeBourdais, 2019.

12 Ridanpää, 2010.

13 For an elaborate analysis of the changing nature of masculinity in relation to the Arctic over the course of the nineteenth century, see: Robinson, 2006.

14 Robinson 2015, p. 97.

15 Ibid., p. 98.

Visualising the North in Photographic Surveys

Before the rise of photography, visual depictions of the Arctic and sub-Arctic landscapes were limited to artistic representations based on sketches or written descriptions. These were subject to the interpretations and signature of the artist and general societal views, therefore these visualisations were at risk of providing a distorted impression of Arctic landscapes and depictions of indigenous peoples as immoral savages.¹⁶ The Arctic fever that accompanied the myths of Franklin's expedition and the search thereof, coincided with the early years of photographic experimentation and the rivalry between the persona and processes of the British Talbot and the French Daguerre. Although their processes were not yet very portable and the exposure times were long, attempts to use the new technology in the Arctic emerged soon. It was the expedition led by Sir John Franklin that was the first to presumably include daguerreotype equipment into its inventory.¹⁷ It is not known whether the camera was actually taken aboard into the Canadian ice and if any successful plates were produced. In the subsequent search missions attempts at photography were increasing. The necessary chemicals behaved differently in colder temperatures and the use of wet negative plates that could not dry before development restricted the photographer's action range significantly. The naturalist, doctor or surgeon on board expedition ships was often assigned the task of photography, sometimes trained before departure by a local photographer.¹⁸ Throughout the nineteenth century explorers made use of both photography and sketches as on-the-spot witnesses. These were used as visual sources for engravings, lithographs or the construction of entire panoramas. After the commercial introduction of dry negative plates (1881) that made photography outside a studio a much easier task, production of photographs in the Arctic increased. However, innovations in photographic technologies did not directly improve the situation in the high Arctic. The low temperatures combined with intense light reflected in snow and ice complicated the production of negatives. As a challenging terrain, the Arctic became an ideal arena for experimentation in photography, primarily for testing more portable and user-friendly devices.¹⁹

Technical difficulties that photographers encountered could lead to flawed negatives – for instance under- or overexposed plates – and these could be 'corrected' in the process of reproduction in print. Translations from photographs to woodcuts or engravings to publish in popular press gave maritime authorities the opportunity to steer the conveyed motifs to create a rather specific vision of the Arctic.²⁰ For instance, by erasing human presence to

16 Condon 1989, p. 47.

17 Wamsley and Barr, 1996.

18 Douglas Wamsley and William Barr describe the use of photography in several expeditions in the 1850s and 60s. See: Wamsley and Barr, 1996.

19 Kaalund, p. 3.

20 Kaalund, p. 20.

create an image of a solitary ship in a deserted bay. Arctic historian Nanna Kaalund furthermore points at the practice of photographing (or staging) common rituals that “constructed a sense of familiarity, of the translocation of British religious and cultural practices to the Arctic landscape, which, in the rhetoric of imperial expansionism, was visual[s]ed as an unknown and uncivil[s]ed landscape.”²¹ The use of photography in the Arctic therefore complied with image control and curation of Arctic visualisation in service of the sublime.²² Polar archeologist Eavan O’Dochartaigh argues that “while the onboard history has been largely obscured, the metropolitan mode of Arctic representation remains dominant into the twenty-first century.”²³ Thus, disparities between photographic and image-making practices in the Arctic and the subsequent narratives that were produced abound, a field that has not yet received substantial scholarly attention.

The importance of research into visual depictions of the north is manifold. The Arctic is gaining visibility into a broader planetary consciousness, which coincides with a more widespread academic turn towards interdisciplinary research. Traditionally, the Arctic was the domain of the natural sciences, yet with an increasing interest among a diversity of publics, the role of the humanities has recently become more urgent. To challenge the image of a static Arctic, the so-called environmental humanities critique the conservative binary between nature and culture. Thus, it ties in with a broader paradigmatic shift that occurred during the last decades from semiotics – that privileged the role of language in the construction of reality and deemed matter as passive and inert – to posthumanism, new materialism, and related approaches that turn attention to the active role of matter in cultural processes.²⁴ Therefore, research into the complex entanglements of matter and culture in the Arctic necessitates an interdisciplinary approach.

When by 1911 the prestigious goals of reaching the geographical North and South Poles were accomplished, public attention for polar exploration started to wane. New frontiers were found in outer space and the age of space exploration commenced. Only recently the poles have attracted attention again, particularly framed as an unstable region in discourse about climate change. In contrast to, or perhaps parallel to debates on global warming, the Arctic as a region is also increasingly commodified. It sells as an exotic faraway and virgin landscape. ‘Arctic’ as such has become a brand that is labelled on a wide range of products, such as bottled Arctic water or Arctic tours to experience the midnight sun. The branding of the Arctic has been a gesture for the outside spectator, the investor or the adventure-seeking tourist who desires to escape

21 Ibid., p. 12.

22 The active framing of Arctic visual culture to adhere to standards of the sublime has been pointed out by Hill, 2009; Morgan (2016); O’Dochartaigh (2022).

23 O’Dochartaigh 2022, p. 3.

24 Hacking, 1975.

the hustle of city-life to experience all that has been lost in so-called 'advanced' regions. The process of commodification traces back to the nineteenth-century period of Arctic craze when the region was monetised in published travel accounts, engravings, lithographs and panoramas. Arcticness, both current and past, as a brand and commodity has to be based on a unified idea of the Arctic for marketing purposes, i.e. a simple, coherent and recognisable identity. Even more, putting forward such a brand identity necessarily requires "existing stereotypes."²⁵ As such, the complexities of the northern regions and their histories are simplified in an idealised narrative of exploration. Far from an unspoilt no-man's land, the Far North is home to communities of peoples, animals and vegetation. A complex ecosystem that is changing profoundly due to climate change, globalisation and many other influences, the impact of each of these can vary locally. Therefore prevailing narratives of the Far North do no justice to a territory in flux. New imaginations are necessary that support the North as a region that matters locally and globally, and is highly related to other parts of the world on multiple levels.

Borealis: Tracing the Trees

The region that is situated directly south of the Arctic circle, the sub-Arctic zone, comprises a belt of conifer trees that extends along the circumference of the Earth. This region is known as the boreal zone - from the Latin *borealis* that means from the north - or taiga forest. In the United States and Canada these forests are referred to as the Great Northern Forest. As the world's largest land biome - a biome being a larger area of similar vegetation - the boreal forests house thirty per cent of all the trees in the world. These forests are, amongst other things, significant carbon reservoirs. Therefore any change to its configuration will alter the world's ecological balance.

Despite their importance in combating carbon emissions, in the Northern discourse this specific area is particularly underrepresented. Whereas the Arctic is at the forefront of global warming concerns, the boreal zone does not receive equal coverage. This lack of emphasis inspired Dutch journalist Jelle Brandt Corstius (b. 1978) and photographer Jeroen Toirkens (b. 1971), who work together regularly, to take the boreal forest as the protagonist of a photographic and journalistic project. Between 2015 and 2020 they visited the region extensively, travelling to eight different locations within this vast and diverse landscape. They spent longer periods of time with wood loggers in Norway, ecological researchers in Japan and Cree people in Canada. They witnessed the aftermath of wildfires in Russia and rewilding initiatives in Scotland. Eventually they were thrown back to themselves when they withdrew to a cabin in Alaska in the final part of their journey.

25 Loftsdóttir, 2015.

The material that was produced on these travels is aptly titled *Borealis. Trees and People of the Northern Forest*. Often described as a form of slow journalism, Toirkens and Brandt Corstius aim to focus on the stories that escape rapid news reporting. Toirkens photographic approach mirrors the slowness of the project. He used the bulky and heavy, medium format analogue camera Mamiya RB67 that shoots 6 x 7 negatives. Loading the cassettes slows down the work process forcing him to observe his environment closely. Once he almost lost an entire roll of exposed film, when the cold temperatures had made his hands numb and the sticky tape used to seal off the film froze. Whereas photography was a cumbersome and sometimes disastrous practice in the nineteenth century, weather conditions can still be a limiting factor to the northern photographer. Apart from the difficulties of moving one's fingers and operating a camera in colder temperatures, sudden changes in temperature and humidity causes condensation on lenses. Exposing white landscapes poses challenges to the camera's sensor, that tends to misread the landscape as too bright and therefore it will underexpose. Equipment may give unreliable measurements and terrains may prevent access. In the Arctic and sub-Arctic the impact of the weather is both more unforgiving and dictating compared to milder regions. The wider material, spatial and climate conditions delimit the options a photographer has and thereby define the photographic work, this is something that comes back in the subsequent sections that discuss the work of Evgenia Arbugaeva.

Spending considerable time off the grid has a profound impact on one's mental state, especially to human beings used to the patterns of city life. In order to make sense of his personal experience in the boreal forests, Toirkens structured his stay in the forests by photographing a tree every day. Through this repeated gesture he structured his days while simultaneously structuring the landscape around him. The resulting sequence presents a typology of a tree in all its manifestations. The images function as a visual classification in ways not unlike the photographs of August Sander or Bernd and Hilla Becher. Yet Toirkens tree portraits are not formal characterisations that sever the subject from its socio-historical and environmental context. He rather portrays them as characters in so-called "tree portraits."²⁶ The portraits depict a variety of trees. Some of them are solitary trees standing proudly at the centre of the composition. Other trees have branches that reach off the frame. One of the portraits shows a fallen tree, left to merge into its surroundings. Sometimes the tree is seen from afar, yet its presence is felt immediately.

26 Brandt Corstius and Toirkens, 2020.



Each day, Toirkens selects the particular tree that appeals most to him. He observes that it is the tree that stands out among its peers because it has a certain auratic presence. Additionally, his method was further confined by the fixed focal length of his objective that made it often difficult to compress the entire tree into the frame. The camera itself prescribes the possibilities, as the Mayima was designed for studio use and therefore suitable to shoot human portraits. By capturing the tree as a character and an identity, Toirkens highlights the individuality of trees. Staying in the woods for extended periods of time, Toirkens and Brandt Corstius have come to regard the trees as friends, as a calming and stable presence. Indeed, Toirkens maintains a different relationship with each tree he photographed. A relationship that further thickened back in the Netherlands when he developed his film, and during the editing process where they both decided to employ the portraits as binder to connect the different chapters and stories of the book.

[Fig. 1]
Jeroen Toirkens, Boreal tree #42
View from the command post
Harstadt, Norway, 2019
Courtesy of Jeroen Toirkens



Toirkens' initial approach is formulaic, however by nominating a tree that connects to the local issues he and Brandt Corstius encounter he emphasises the singularity of each tree. Photographically framing the tree therefore implies rooting the tree in its local context. Whereas the very act of photographing is an act of isolation, trees do not exist in a vacuum. The inclusive collection of tree portraits creates a visual dialogue between diverse trees that live miles apart from each other. Eventually the photographs became a red thread throughout the project, the foundation that supports the narrative of life in the northern forests. By reconnecting the photographs into the sequence of the narrative, Toirkens reinserts the trees in the flows of mediation and the subsequent flow of life.

[Fig. 2]

Jeroens Toirkens, Boreal tree #25
Scotland, 2017
Courtesy of Jeroen Toirkens



[Fig. 3]
Jeroen Toirkens, Boreal tree #51
Beside Lake Baikal
Russia, 2019
Courtesy of Jeroen Toirkens

In *Borealis* the popular vision of the Far North as frozen space that contains either no life at all, or a form of life that is dark and ominous, is subverted. The significance of Jeroen Toirkens' tree portraits is two-fold. First there is the anthropomorphic gesture of comparing the tree to the human being. Yet, the second layer that unfolds is one of temporal dissonance. By photographing his encounter with each particular tree, Toirkens addresses a hiatus between the 'time' of the tree and our human temporal experience.²⁷ It is precisely this temporal chasm that underscores the difficulty of representing climate change, a scientifically complex process that unfolds over long periods of time. Climate change covers enormous spatiotemporal scales that connect the past and present to consequences that reach far into the future.²⁸ These consequences are both intangible and uncertain and thereby notably difficult to convey. The visualisation of climate change and the pictorial communication of global warming thus relies on the effectiveness of tangible tropes that a diverse audience can easily identify with. Such a trope is the polar bear, who has since long been assigned a role as poster child of climate change. The polar bear as a "physical and visual embodiment of the Arctic" makes for a comprehensible and relatable idea that furthermore instils an emotional response within the viewer.²⁹ Polar bears are charismatic characters that are assigned certain human traits. However, as Dorothea Born argues, the icon of the polar bear in visual climate change discourse is problematic for a number of reasons.³⁰ First, by presenting polar bears as iconic markers – and victims – of climate change the circumstances of other (non-)human species are diminished, or even made invisible. Furthermore, the explicit framing of the Arctic landscapes with the effects of global warming draws away attention from other places that are equally impacted by climate change.

While an image of a polar bear might evoke associations with victims of melting sea ice, an image of a tree does not elicit a similar response. The tree as a visual emblem has not yet gained stature in climate change discourse – Toirkens and Brandt Corstius aim to solve the lack of attention towards trees after all – therefore its signification is open to potential. The iconisation of polar bears tends to detach the animal from the wider spatiotemporal and material processes it is part of. The process of singularising the tree in *Borealis* has yet the opposite effect. The anthropomorphised trees reveal rather than conceal the network of dependencies that human beings and nature are entangled in. So, instead of depicting nature as separate from social life, the tree portrait rather reinstates the wider conditions by visually connecting the tree with other tropes. Thereby the tree connects to narratives of industrialisation, forest fires and climate change.

27 Van Kalsbeek and Keijzer, 2021.

28 Doyle 2009.

29 Huggan 2016, p. 14.

30 Born 2019.

Whereas parts of the narrative that Brandt Corstius and Toirkens have built follow the 'gendered' narratives of heroism, courage and hardship that have shaped the collective perception of the Arctic, they also foreground another notion of Northerness. Extending beyond the idea of the untouched wilderness and privileged travel on touristic Arctic cruises – a narrative that focuses on the persona of the explorer – Toirkens portrays the trees as beings that inhabit the boreal zone. The ego of the traveller is secondary to the beings, human and non-human, that call this region home. Instead of a story of 'man versus nature,' Toirkens conducts a narrative that of man aligning with nature.

Hyperborea: Arctic Homesickness

Departing from a different position, photographer Evgenia Arbugaeva (b. 1985) works from a yearning to the place she grew up in. She was born in Tiksi, a former Soviet port city at the coast of the Arctic sea. After the demise of the Soviet Union, the town lost its economic value and her family was forced to move to Yakutsk, a city in the far east of Russia built on permafrost. Eventually she moved to London to study and the geographic disconnection from her hometown left her memories starting to fade. Her early childhood recollections from the place she loves dearly even started to seem unreal. To come to terms with her own past and the preservation of her memories, Arbugaeva started to photographically document her renewed encounter with Russia's coastline of the Arctic sea. In 2013 Arbugaeva travelled aboard an icebreaker to the Russian Arctic to portray its inhabitants, both human and non-human, in a quickly changing landscape.

Arbugaeva's photographic journeys to the Russian Arctic sea were bundled in an exhibition titled *Hyperborea* at London's The Photographer's Gallery in 2021.³¹ Presented in an intimate setting and hung on dark walls the photographs seem to glow. The stories unfold in four chapters. The first series is titled *Weather Man* (2013) and follows Slava, a Russian meteorologist who lives in solitude at a weather station on the Barents Sea. The other three chapters were created over 2018 and 2019. *Kanin Nos* portrays the couple Ivan and Evgenia, lighthouse keepers at a station on the Kanin Peninsula. The series *Dikson* is taken at the abandoned town Dikson, which strongly reminded Arbugaeva of Tiksi. Dikson was once the capital of the Soviet Arctic, but is now a seemingly derelict ghost town. This chapter in the exhibition provides the most powerful expression of the tense conditions of photography in the Arctic and it signifies the thin line between luck and failure. She visited Dikson in the middle of a polar winter, when lack of natural daylight was at its most extreme. Conveying the meaning of the everlasting polar nights proved to be an almost impossible operation. She was close to giving up to plan another research trip, when suddenly the sky was lit with green flickers. From her lived experience, Arbugaeva knew the unpredictability of these phenomena, that could last for hours but also for much shorter periods. The entire series was shot in a very intense three-hour time span, when the aurora borealis lit the sky.

³¹ The Photographer's Gallery, "Evgenia Arbugaeva: Hyperborea – Stories from the Russian Arctic."



Finally the fourth chapter follows the indigenous Chukchi community from the easternmost peninsula of Siberia, who rely on the lands they live on for a living and they do so in an ethically responsible way. It was here that she encountered a haul-out of a hundred thousand walrus on a small patch of land. Walrus tend to use floating sea ice as places to rest in between hunts and during migration. With sea ice thawing, the animals had no place to go other than this beach, but their number was too high for the surface of the land. The overcrowded beach was soon filled with walrus in several layers on top of each other, causing suffocation among weaker and younger animals. Again this resulted in an intense, almost threatening, shooting session for Arbugaeva. It left her and a scientific assistant stuck inside a hut with no chance to get out. Surrounded by piles of walrus the noise was unbearable and prevented them from any sleep at night. To Arbugaeva this very moment was one of "visceral panic," a situation that was hopeless and left all the occupants of the beach completely helpless.³² Furthermore, the event presented evidently a direct consequence of global warming. The photograph, taken from within the hut and frames a couple of walrus through the doorway, captures this liminal space between danger and rest and intersects the fragile balance between human beings, animals and the available land.

³² The Photographers' Gallery. "Artist Talk: Evgenia Arbugaeva."

[Fig. 4]
Evgenia Arbugaeva, *Untitled 38* (From the series I. Weather Man), 2014
Courtesy of Evgenia Arbugaeva



The delicate balance within the photograph of the resting walrus with their long tusk yet framed in a soft lighting is characteristic of Arbugaeva's approach. The photographs seem carefully composed, each element deliberately placed. The lack of natural daylight greatly limits a photographer whose very medium exists by virtue of light. The compromised light conditions materialise on the sensitive plate or sensor and produce dramatic and slightly eerie effects. The resulting strong chiaroscuro creates a surreal brilliance reminiscent of theatre settings. In many images the atmosphere is dreamlike, whereas the depicted attributes seem obsolete, almost anachronistic. Referring to the fabulous lands of the Hyperboreoi – the inhabitants of the North in Greek myths – Arbugaeva employs the interplay between magic, myth and realism to express her personal connections to the Arctic region. The icy landscapes she encounters trigger recollections and opens up an emotional inner space. As such it blurs the lines between fantasy and reality, an aesthetic style often denoted as magical realism. Her photographs contain

[Fig. 5]
Evgenia Arbugaeva, Untitled 90 (From the series IV. Chukotka), 2019–2020
Courtesy of Evgenia Arbugaeva

elements of fiction and staged settings, that are slightly reminiscent of theatre decors, which are her way of connecting to the place, yet also remind us that conventional polar narratives are constructions that rely heavily upon an imagined Arctic land, as the first paragraphs have laid out. Hyperborea, a mythical place behind the north wind, where the sun never sets, was by the Greek perceived to be a paradise on Earth. This is precisely how Arbugaeva would like to remember her Arctic childhood

Her meticulously crafted compositions often include an open door or a window. This centuries-old art-historical trope is a visual element that creates connections. For instance, it binds the foreground and background into one compositional unity. The window also acts as an intermediary between different worlds, notably the outside world and the domestic world inside or the interior world of one's mind. Windows also filter and direct incoming light. Light penetrating through windows and doorways creates the dramatic effects that prompts her nostalgia. Magic realism often refers to death, threat and decay, yet in Arbugaeva's photographs these aspects might be read as an attempt to relive her memories. The window provides some vistas of the landscape beyond, yet the limits of its frame prevent the viewer from entering this space. One can almost touch it, yet one cannot fully grasp it.

Northern Imagination as a Landscape of Care

Being at the frontier of climate change, the Arctic has recently reappeared as a space of geopolitical concern. However, global warming is not the only factor that affects Arctic ecosystems. Apart from attention from scientists and activists the prospect of melting sea ice has also attracted attention of a different kind. Combined with rising global demand for resources, the Arctic is perceived in terms of its economic potential as a resource frontier. In such an 'underused' area extraction companies hope to find new opportunities to mine resources; drilling for oil and gas, mining metals and minerals, fishing, hunting and forestry. The international transport sector awaits the occasion to cut shipping routes across the Arctic sea. Referred to as the 'Arctic resource race,' rivalry between nation states for the newly accessible natural resources is focalising old territorial conflicts, putting indigenous communities at risk. Perhaps now more than ever, the northern territories are intricately connected to other places. Climate and weather patterns do not respect national borders nor are they confined to geographical regions. Ocean currents take plastic waste from industrialised and populated areas towards the Arctic sea, whereas the wildfires in the boreal zone emit gases and particulates that will be inhaled by people thousands of miles south. Microplastics are found in the most 'isolated' parts of the world, where mankind leaves its traces without being physically present. These traces eschew the very notion of isolation. Environmental care and responsibility are claiming space on political agendas. In the era of globalisation the spatial distribution of care has also become more urgent, giving rise to elaborate 'landscapes of care.'

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In social theory the notion of a 'landscape or landscapes of care' is increasingly part of theoretical lexicons. In the last decade, thorough theoretical grounding of this concept has primarily been done related to the spatial organisation of care for elderly, ill and disabled and their related power relationships. As such, care is understood as "the provision of practical or emotional support," and has a complicated relationship with power dynamics and dependency.³³ Care can be perceived either as work or as something that one just does, as an integral part of any relationship. Furthermore, care can be unidirectional – i.e. concerning an active care-giver and a passive receiver – or mutual. As a concept and practice, care is thus multifaceted. It is a relevant concept to probe in relation to northern territories. Care has traditionally been associated primarily with female qualities, whereas the Arctic is imbued with male values. Yet relating the construction of care as a gendered concept to the production of the Arctic as a male space provides an opportunity to critically re-asses both notions through which both can become more inclusive conceptually.

In the previous paragraphs both Arbugaeva's and Toirkens' photographs have been analysed in terms of the connections and interrelations they afford and convey. With his tree portraits Jeroen Toirkens not only underscored the particularity of trees, he also visualises trees as networked existence. In his notes he emphasises how a forest is larger than the sum of its parts. It is not merely a collection of trees, but it comprises a network of fungi and lichens through which trees exchange nutrients. This network of care has been formed over long periods of time, so it will take hundreds of years before such a web is recovered. He follows the reasoning of ecologists Peter Wohlleben and Stefano Mancuso who have put forward the root systems of plants as a form of perception and intelligence.³⁴ Trees care for one another and in the process care for the entire ecosystem. By planting young trees one does not create a new forest, therefore taking care of existing biotopes is crucial.

As mentioned before, care also pertains to relations of dependency. Exploration, even when done solo, is not a solitary activity that can be confined to the time spent en route. The eight individual trips Toirkens and Brandt Corstius made were made possible by prior crowdfunding and sustained by subscription-based cassettes. The explorer duo instructed Sweden-based Dutch carpenter Thomas Peters to build cassettes from birch-wood from the Taiga-region. These cassettes were slowly filled over the course of the project with items that Toirkens and Brandt Corstius found or products they created like a photographic print.³⁵

Moreover, photographing the Far North is not an act of isolation, but rather characterised by dependency. This includes both the dependency one has on local peoples when travelling beyond the set infrastructure, and dependency on the home front. Toirkens benefitted from the connections that were built in the early crowdfunding stages of the project, by turning them into long-term relationships that could fuel his practice financially.

33 Milligan and Wiles, 2010.

34 Wohlleben 2015; Mancuso and Viola, 2013.

35 Borealis, "Borealis Cassette."

Despite geographical distance, caring about someone or something is an embodied rather than disembodied activity. Creating “care–ful” and compassionate subjects is a dynamic process that operates through the reciprocity between personal relationships and spatially distanced relationships.³⁶ This particular interaction materialises in the photographic practice of Toirkens and Arbugueva. Their images do not emerge from a vacuum. They rely on relationships that have been built carefully and as such they are not a flat representation of something they found there.

Conclusion

Impacts of climate change are felt earlier in the Far North. Also the consequences are more immediate and severe compared to other regions. The region's environment is fragile and has always been prone to extreme weather events, avalanches, earthquakes, and so forth. Yet as the ice of the Arctic sea melts, commercial shipping, resource development and tourism are increasing. With tourism and resource exploration on the rise, the vulnerability of the region increases. Art and photography might challenge the ongoing portrayal of Arctic and Subarctic terrains as isolated, wild, natural places outside society and civilization. As this article attempted to argue, the humanities are essential in forwarding ideas about the Arctic and the Subarctic. Natural science is crucial in research to climate change, risks and adaptations. But if the knowledge that is produced about the polar regions is limited to the natural and physical disciplines, the policies and strategies that follow will be equally limited. Ethical responsibility is related to public perceptions of a place. Visualisation, through art or photography, can foster new connections and advance an imagination of change. Both photographic projects transform the narrative of secludedness, isolation and remoteness into one of sincere connection. Eventually, they construct a 'landscape of care' that moves beyond physical boundaries and underlines an ethical duty for anyone living on this planet to care for and about places that we otherwise deem disparate. This is a vision of the Far North that is vital and very welcome.

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³⁶ Milligan and Wiles, 2010.

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