

# THE IMAGINARY NORTH IN FINNISH COMICS ON MIGRATION

Ralf Kauranen and Olli Löytty (University of Turku)

## Abstract

This article analyses three comics published in Finland that are focused on migration and offer differing insights into the representation of ‘the north’: Pentti Otsamo’s *Kahvitauko* (2012), Leen van Hulst’s *Maitoa ja lunta / Milk and Snow* (2011) and Lauri Ahtinen’s *Elias* (2018). These albums are both representative of the field in general and unique with respect to their treatment of the connections between place and migration. The analysis of the imaginary north is structured around the three tropes of the northern suburb, the northern climate, and the northern natural environment. What is common to them all is a construction of the north as a place without clear limitations and as an amalgamation of various relationships.

A central aspect of what a place is in the globalized world is that it constitutes a meeting place. In *Kahvitauko*, the drinking of coffee is used to show how ‘north’ and ‘south’ are connected on a global scale. In *Elias*, the symbols of the north, the snow, and the bear, are tied together with Afghanistan. *Maitoa ja lunta / Milk and Snow* provides another viewpoint, as it lacks the representation of xenophobia. Read in parallel with the other two comics it not only shows that migrants of different kinds are treated differently, but also highlights how a place such as the north is defined in different terms depending on reasons for migration, race and ethnicity, and privilege in general.

A place is precisely a place for articulation of networks of meanings, experiences, and people. In addition, the three albums are posited in the broader field of Finnish comics on migration. This is carried out with a focus on how the very concrete places in the comics in the field are named and visually anchored.

**Keywords:** *North; Migration; Comics; Place; Finland*

## Introduction

In this article we examine what ‘the north’ means in the context of Finnish comics about migration to the country. Most comics located in Finland would, of course, provide material for an analysis of the medium-specific imagination concerning ‘the Finnish north’, but we consider the comics on immigration to Finland an especially apt corpus as they highlight and focus on the place that is Finland precisely as a meeting place. According to geographer and social scientist Doreen Massey (1991; 1995), a central aspect that defines a place in the globalized world is that it constitutes a meeting place for various activities. A place is precisely a place for the articulation of networks of meanings, experiences, and people. In a globalized world places are marked by the various global flows forming the landscapes of our imaginations, namely, according to anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1996), the ethnoscape, mediascape, technoscape, finanscape, and ideoscape. In this setting, places are not static, nor do they have clear-cut boundaries or identities (Massey 1991). According to Massey, places

can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings, but where a larger proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself, whether that be a street, or a region or even a continent (Massey 1998, 21).

The lack of a definitive or essential identity of a place, however, does not imply the absence of the specificity of the place. Places, indeed, are specific, but this is due to an articulation that momentarily ties together various networks and flows.

Places constitute one aspect of the building blocks of migration stories, the other central ingredient being the people on the move. Both places left behind and places arrived at, as well as places in between (on an escape route, for instance), on the one hand, affect the meanings attached to migratory movement and the migrant, and, on the other hand, gain meaning as people leave and arrive, stay, and move onwards. Stories of migration work with the dynamics of difference and sameness, between people en route and rooted people (individuals can of course move from one category to the other), and between the meanings of places. The flow of humans – the ethnoscape – traversing places gives rise to new articulations, and changes the specificity of a place. This is true of geographically real locations, imagined regions, and spaces such as ‘the north’, as well as the places represented in stories such as comics on migration.

There is currently an international boom in migration-themed comics (see Rifkind 2018). While this is certainly also reflected in Finnish comics, the number of comics representing immigration to Finland is not yet very high, but there is already significant variation in the field, which is also reflected in the choice of material for the analysis presented here. The rise in the number of asylum seekers reaching the EU and Finland in 2015 sparked the publication of a number of comics and made migration topical in the comics field (see Kauranen et al. 2019).

Our analysis focuses on three comics published in Finland. They are all, in their own ways, focused on migration and offer differing insights into the representation of the north in this genre. They are both representative of the field in general and unique with respect to their treatment of the connections between place and migration.

Pentti Otsamo’s *Kahvitauko* (Coffee break, 2012) is a dreamy everyday story of a very mundane theme, having coffee (Figure 1). It is not a migration-themed comic in the sense that it describes a protagonist’s travels, escape, or movement from one place of residence to another. Rather, migration plays only a minor role as it is represented mainly in the form of an immigrant character that the comic’s protagonist encounters. The theme is also articulated in the comic in a scene in which the main protagonist is served free coffee by anti-immigration protesters. The setting in the album is a generic northern suburb, in which the idea of the north is put into question by both migration as a phenomenon and coffee as a sign of the connectivity of north and south.

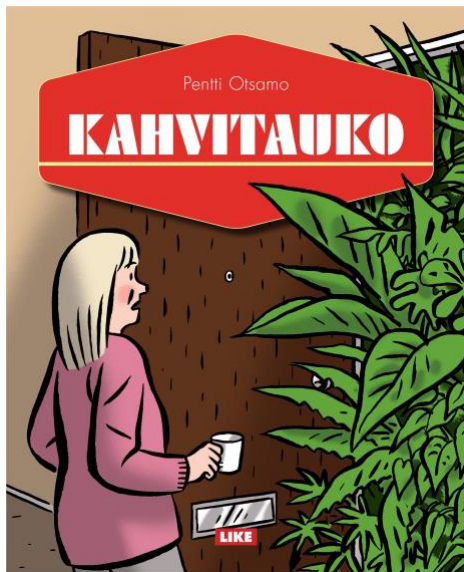


Figure 1. Pentti Otsamo, *Kahvitauko* (2012), front cover.

Leen van Hulst's bilingual *Maitoa ja lunta / Milk and Snow* (2012) is a story of student mobility (Figure 2). The creator, van Hulst, is Belgian, and her comic was first published in 2011 in Dutch in Belgium. The story depicts the author's experiences as an exchange student in the south western town of Turku, Finland, and the bilingual translation to Finnish and English was published by the Comics Association of Turku. European exchange students make up a group of migrants on their own as compared to, for example, refugees, and the north reveals itself as a very different construct to each of these groups.



Figure 2. Leen van Hulst, *Maitoa ja lunta / Milk and Snow* (2012), front cover.

The third comics album that we focus on is Lauri Ahtinen's *Elias* (2018), the story of a young Afghan Hazara refugee's immigration to Finland (Figure 3). Contrary to the story in *Maitoa ja lunta / Milk and Snow*, the protagonist Elias's situation is extremely precarious. Still, the natural environment of the north, including its mythical fauna,

brings some sense of wonder to Elias, just as it does to Leen in *Maitoa ja lunta / Milk and Snow*. The comic *Elias* highlights the shift that occurred in comics on migration in the late 2010s as it reflects the sudden arrival of increased numbers of asylum seekers in Finland as well as elsewhere in Europe from 2015.



Figure 3. Lauri Ahtinen, *Elias*, (2018), front cover.

Our analysis of the imaginary north in these three comics is structured around the three tropes of the northern suburb, the northern climate, and the northern natural environment. How these themes form the understanding of the north varies due to their different ways of approaching migration as a phenomenon. What is common to them all, however, is a construction of the north as a place without clear limitations and as an amalgamation of various relationships. The north itself is formed by the people traversing it, by their perspectives as they are conveyed in the comics, as well as by the depictions of the sceneries constituting the northern places in the comics.

In the following section we will posit the three albums in the broader field of Finnish comics on migration. We will do this with a focus on how the very concrete places in the comics in the field are named and visually anchored. A central dimension in this is the question of realism or referentiality. This is connected to both genre conventions and to forms of intertextuality as part of representation. Comics are fictional and documentary and everything in between. There is no absolute correspondence between a work's belonging to a genre and its treatment of place. Many a fictional work takes place in a real-world setting and even documentary comics often fictionalize various elements, for example, for the protection of vulnerable informants. Referentiality in comics is a form of intertextuality: places in comics are, for example, named with the same proper names as outside the storyworld, and places are visually depicted with reference to, for instance, real-life city views, public art works, and so on. In comics, where the story is constantly placed somewhere, not all places are referential in this sense. As a basically visual art form, events and characters' actions in comics are drawn

for the reader to see. There are, of course, exceptions to this, as a comics panel may show a close-up of something not situated in an environment, or an inner vision of a character, but as a general rule much of what happens in a comic is located somewhere, be that place sketchily drawn or presented in photographic detail. In this context, many places in comics are fictional, the result of an artist's imagination, even in a very realistic or documentary comic.

### Setting the scene

The north of this article should be considered as a north under erasure. Although all the storyworlds of the comics discussed can be located in the north of the Mercator projection – they ‘take place’ in the northern part of the globe – we make this connection for the purpose of our argumentation. In other words, the geographical closure is arbitrary. However, all comics present the reader with their own, individual milieux. These places do not necessarily as such represent the north, other than being locations in Finland, a country situated in the northern hemisphere and being north of many locations on the globe. In this relative sense Finland is, of course, situated in the north for the majority of humans on earth. Illustratively, almost all of the migrants in the comics arrive in Finland from the south, that is, from a place of emigration south of Finland.

While a place is a relational, ever-changing articulation of various elements, the migrant's movement from, through, and to a place changes the character of the place or, indeed, what the place is. In comics depicting migration, the places that the migrant moves in are in many ways very concrete things. A place may be an airport, a room in a detention centre, a park in a town, a spot on a map, or more broadly a town or country that is named in the story. One aspect of these concrete places is related to their character as fictional or having a referential relation to the world and its places outside the comic's pages. For instance, Pentti Otsamo's story *Kahvitauko* takes place in a suburb that is not named or located in a specific city. Its connection to Finnish society is only explained once, in the depiction of anti-immigration protesters' placards, on which the word ‘Suomi’ (Finland) is written. Otsamo's comic represents the type of comics where migration as a theme is present in the form of a so-called immigrant character. These comics do not necessarily focus on how a character has ended up in the place, but make use of the dramatic function of the difference between characters.

One of the first immigrant characters in Finnish comics, and certainly the most well-known, is the Somali refugee character Muhammed Al-Zomal introduced in Tarmo Koivisto's long-running comic *Mämmilä*. First published episodically in a magazine and then collected in albums, the *Mämmilä* series (1975–2008, with some interruption in publication) follows the life and social change of a fictional Finnish small town called Mämmilä. The town is fictional, yet Finnish, and with some referentiality to the real-world town of Orivesi. Like Orivesi, Mämmilä is located in the province of Häme in southern Finland. The town can be described as the real protagonist of the comic. Referentiality, of course, does not end with the occasional geographical detail. For instance, the arrival of Al-Zomal in Mämmilä coincides with the arrival of the first Somali refugees in Finland in the early 1990s (see Koivisto 1992).

The real-world cities of Turku and Tampere are depicted in almost photographic detail in Toni Karonen and Harri Honkala's *Karim* (2014) and J. P. Ahonen and K. P. Alare's *Perkeros* (2013), respectively. *Karim* is a dystopian vision of an alternate 1990s

in the city of Turku. In the story, an economic recession has led to great social inequalities and an extremely insecure society, where the services and security offered by the state have withered away. The speculative story is tied not only to Turku, but also more specifically to one of its suburbs, Varissuo, where criminal immigrant and racist skinhead gangs fight with each other for regional power. *Perkeros* tells of an avant-garde metal rock band who sign a new lead singer, a man with a Turkish background whom they found working in the local kebab shop cum pizzeria. Aydin proves to be not only a heavy rock enthusiast and a dashing vocalist but also capable of using his pizza knife against the devil himself. The album contains several meticulous drawings of locations in Tampere.

Leen van Hulst's *Maitoa ja lunta / Milk and Snow* and Lauri Ahtinen's *Elias* are comics where the journeys and movement of people play a more significant role than in the previously mentioned comics with so-called immigrant characters. *Maitoa ja lunta / Milk and Snow* describes voluntary movement and a rather pleasant stay abroad. There are, perhaps, no other comics focusing on student mobility to Finland, but the comic may be connected to two Finnish comics that depict studies abroad from the perspective of a Finn moving to another country: Mari Ahokoivu's *Löydä minut tästä kaupungista* (2009; Find Me in this City, 2015) depicts loneliness in a strange city, whereas Wolf Kankare's eponymous protagonist *Miska Pähkinä* (2013) is an exchange student, who in Edinburgh processes issues of gender identity. *Maitoa ja lunta / Milk and Snow* plays out in two Finnish locations, the city of Turku, again, and Luosto in Lapland where a group of exchange students, including the comic's protagonist, Leen from Belgium, go for a field trip. Despite its short duration, the trip to Lapland takes up a large part of the album. Travel is also present in a spread depicting scenery from above the roofs of Tallinn during Leen's brief visit there. Turku is presented in details, for example, posited on a map of the Nordic countries and in a couple of spreads that depict the pedestrian ferry that crosses the river Aura that runs through the city (van Hulst 2012, n.p.).

The afterword to van Hulst's album states that '[t]he people and places in this book are just as fictitious as the [sic] real life is. Therefore possible resemblances are not a coincidence'. This ambiguous statement can be related to the strong sense that the story depicted is more or less autobiographical or auto-fictitious. This sense of referentiality is partially created by the realistic depictions of places. *Maitoa ja lunta / Milk and Snow*, however, shares this trait with *Karim* and *Perkeros*, which also offer the reader concrete viewpoints of Turku and Tampere and their landmark buildings. However, in these cases, the referential imagery only sets a realistic and, to some readers, recognizable scene for a fictional story.

With its strong autobiographical connotations, *Maitoa ja lunta / Milk and Snow* is related to the genre of documentary comics, as outlined by comics scholar Nina Mickwitz (2016). Yet, as van Hulst's postscript and the realistic city views in *Karim* and *Perkeros* remind us, the dividing line between documentary and fiction is by no means unambiguous. Still, it is clear that those comics on migration that bear an affinity with the documentary mode of presentation are more likely to name the concrete places that are traversed by the migrants' movements.

While the memories of the protagonist take the reader to Afghanistan and to the route from there to Finland, Lauri Ahtinen's *Elias* takes place in northern Finland, in the city of Oulu. The place can be identified, for example, by the silhouette of buildings such as

an old church and by the recognizable and famous statue of a policeman (*Toripoliisi*, Kaarlo Mikkonen, 1987) situated in the pedestrian zone of the city centre.

Finnish comics on migration, and with immigrant characters, bring forth one aspect of the imagined places that are traversed by migrants' routes. These places in the comics' storyworlds are, especially in documentary comics, referential to and familiar from the outside world in many ways. Familiarity, of course, is dependent on the reader's existing knowledge. In all cases, except van Hulst's *Maitoa ja lunta / Milk and Snow*, the implied reader is, based on publication context and language, to start with, the Finnish comics reader. This fact is also illustrated in the way one particular narrative trope is used in the comics. Maps are a frequent means of presenting a place or places to a reader, and in the Finnish comics maps are used to present and inform the reader about locations outside Finland. In van Hulst's comic, on the other hand, the Finnish city Turku is shown on a map of the Nordic countries.

The relevance of different places in a comic varies depending on whether a story's focus is on, for example, migrants' routes of travel or on their life after migration to a new environment. As is to be expected with a corpus consisting of Finnish comics on migration to Finland, Finnish places hold a prominent place in the comics analysed. These named places in Finland, be they the indirectly named suburb in 'Suomi' in *Kahvitauko*, the recognizable yet (auto-)fictional Turku in *Maitoa ja lunta / Milk and Snow*, or the city of Oulu in the fact-based and in many ways fictional comic *Elias*, these localizations only provide one way of describing the environment for migration. What these places (in the comics) in fact are is a much more complex issue. One thing that adds to the complexity of these places and to their character as articulations of networks is their relation to 'the north'.

Put another way, setting the scene in Finland, in a real location such as the city of Turku or in a fictional suburb, only provides a starting point for an analysis of 'the north', which becomes visible in the ways these settings are characterized in the comics. These characterizations and the imagined norths are presented in the comics in different ways. They are, for example, made visible in the imagery and they are related to the reader with insight into the minds and feelings of the migrant characters of the comics. There are, however, a number of core thematics in these comics, through which the north as an imagined place is represented.

In the following sections, we will approach the imaginary north through three particular tropes that frequent Finnish comics on migration. These analyses will be based on three case studies of three comics albums, but the analyses are strengthened by some references to other comics. Firstly, we will focus on the suburb as a place representative of an idea of the north. In this section, the main focus is on Pentti Otsamo's comics album *Kahvitauko*. Secondly, another perspective on the construction of the north is offered by the climate and especially the natural phenomenon of snow. In this case, the main focus of analysis is on Belgian Leen van Hulst's *Maitoa ja lunta / Milk and Snow*. Finally, the third case study approaches the north through the representation of the natural world, in both concrete and mythical terms. Our analytical focus here is on Lauri Ahtinen's comic *Elias* (2018), in which a centrepiece in the narration is a bear, a natural animal of mythological significance in the Finnish and northern context.



### **The northern suburb**

Pentti Otsamo's comics album *Kahvitauko* is a story over sixty pages long of a very ordinary situation, although it takes the reader over vast distances. The story depicts a mother, who, after having put her young son to sleep for his afternoon nap, desires a cup of coffee. The peaceful afternoon is disturbed by the realization that she has run out of coffee (Figure 4). Having pondered the solution to this problem she rushes out of the apartment, and as she is nervous about leaving the boy home alone she is visibly in a hurry when running to the nearest supermarket to purchase some more coffee. Queuing for the cashiers in the supermarket, the mother can no longer stay away from her son, whom she has imagined in different kinds of danger. Without a package of coffee she rushes back home, only to find her boy still peacefully asleep.



Figure 4. Pentti Otsamo, *Kahvitauko* (2012), p. 9.

The mother again rushes to the shop, only to realize, when it is time to pay for the coffee, that she has no money in her purse. Inspired by a bum outside the supermarket, she tries to beg for some money, but she is only driven away by a security guard. She now discovers the booth of a political group offering free coffee to promote their message. It turns out the message is one of anti-immigration and nationalism. Ready to enjoy the coffee (despite the messages on offer) the woman on her way meets a neighbour, a man of colour. Ashamed of the politics of her coffee, the woman throws it away, not to be discovered by the neighbour (Figure 5).





Figure 5. Pentti Otsamo, *Kahvitauko* (2012), p. 25.

Back home, she still has not had any coffee. She decides to approach her neighbours in her block of flats, and ends up at the home of the immigrant man she met previously. While there, the police rush in because of the suspected cultivation of cannabis. At this point the story takes a turn to the more fantastic: the woman is frightened by the police raid and rushes to hide among the neighbour's plants (that probably are not related to drugs). His rich collection of plants turns into a jungle where the woman stumbles upon a root, falls to the ground and loses consciousness.

On the following page a woman working on a coffee plantation gains consciousness after having fallen over a root. The comic now follows her work harvesting and roasting coffee beans. She and her friends put the coffee pot on the fire, but before she gets to enjoy the drink she falls asleep. A lion walks by her, indicating that we are in an African, coffee-cultivating country. Turning the page, the reader is taken back to the woman in the Finnish suburb. She wakes up on the bed where she put her son to sleep at the beginning of the story. The young son, however, is gone. He, now an adult man, comes to the bedroom bringing his mother a cup of coffee. It turns out the whole story to this point has been a dream, dreamt by the now elderly mother.

*Kahvitauko* cannot be described as a migration-themed comic in the sense that it depicts a migrant's travels, but it highlights the issue with the presence of both an immigrant character and the anti-immigration protesters in the story. Both are rather recent figures in Finnish comics. Their presence in *Kahvitauko* point to Finnish society in general and the Finnish suburb in particular as a multicultural setting where people of different backgrounds and experiences meet and interact.

The suburb in Otsamo's comic is both generic and particular. It is an area with apartment buildings, a playground, and some trees and bushes. The story starts in the

winter or late autumn when there are no leaves on the trees. The garments of the people outside also attest to the weather being a bit chilly. Based on all this, one could conclude that the comic's suburb is a generic northern European suburb. As was noted earlier, the nationalist protesters' signs tell the reader that the action takes place in Finland.

The suburb in *Kahvitauko* can, however, by no means be described as exclusively Finnish: it is precisely a meeting place for cultures and peoples from around the globe. It is also a place where north and south meet. In Finland immigrant populations generally settle in the larger towns, and often also live in the suburbs dotted around the city centres (Vaattovaara et al. 2010). The multiculturalism of Otsamo's suburb therefore is realistic, although it, of course, is also a narrative choice and the result of the storyteller's artistic vision. It is interesting to note that some short story comics by Otsamo also take place in suburbs and include significant protagonists representing people of colour and a so-called immigrant background (see the stories 'Elämää sota-aikaan' (Life in wartime) and 'Joonas täyttää 25 vuotta vuonna 2000' (Joonas turns 25 in the year 2000) in the collection *Eedenistä pohjoiseen ja muita kertomuksia* (North of Eden and other stories); Otsamo 2012a). Otsamo's work thus clearly attests to a wish to broaden and diversify the gallery of characters in Finnish comics.

The Finnish and Nordic suburb is historically a meeting place. The housing projects and garden suburbs in the urbanizing Nordic countries and the emergent welfare states were a solution to the influx of agrarian populations to the Nordic cities (Porfyriou 1992, 269). Often more affordable than living in the city centres, the suburbs in Finland, for example in Helsinki and in Turku, have attracted significant shares of inhabitants of migrant background (Rasinkangas 2013). Also, the immigrant-populated suburb has become a cultural trope repeated in the media and by xenophobes wanting to point out how problematic immigration is. *Kahvitauko* points at the tensions in the multicultural suburb, with its representation of racism, both in the anti-immigration protesters' pamphlets and, perhaps, in the actions of the police.

The more sensationalist imagery concerning the suburb is, however, lacking in *Kahvitauko*. In this context, the suburb of *Kahvitauko* can be compared to the one depicted in Karonen and Honkala's *Karim*. This story of speculative fiction is located in the Turku suburb of Varissuo, where immigrant and racist skinhead criminal gangs fight each other. The back cover of the *Karim* album plays with the fears and fear-mongering concerning the immigrant-populated suburbs: a colourful burning car is accompanied by a text addressing and challenging the reader: 'Welcome to Turku. Hopefully you'll survive the experience.' (Karonen and Honkala 2014, back cover.)

It is not only migration that defines the northern suburb in *Kahvitauko*. What is most significant for our understanding of this comic as a representation of the north is coffee, and the turns that the story takes around this beverage. The fictional story centres around the enjoyment of coffee, a most ordinary habit in Finland and the other Nordic countries, and the crisis of not being able to maintain this mundane custom. In this regard the north as place is a result of various articulations, and a place without clear boundaries. The northern suburb is here a place where various trans-social networks are tied together (Gielis 2009), or, to use another term, it is translocal (Dirlík 2002, 232; Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013). Both 'trans-social' and 'translocal' have been suggested as alternative concepts to the 'transnational', which is, perhaps, too tied up with the level of national belonging or the nation as a place and construct (Pollari et al. 2015). As the networks in *Kahvitauko* suggest, the northern suburb connects, through

migration and coffee, the global and the local, while the national level is also present in the form of the nationalist demonstrators.

The main protagonist's dream sequence within a dream sequence, depicting her vision of African women harvesting coffee and working on the raw material for the Finnish suburban inhabitant's relaxation and pleasure, brings Africa and the global south to the concept of north depicted in this comic, and thus, gives meaning to this northern suburb. The mundanity of coffee in the northern context is questioned by the portrayal of coffee as a global product. The traditions of how coffee has become a part of the north are also pointed out in the comic, which in one panel shows the imagery on the side of the coffee-yearning woman's empty coffee jar (Otsamo 2012b, 9; figure 4). The image of a monochromatically black (dark brown in the colours of the comic), exotic 'African' woman holding a steaming hot equally exotic coffee pot on offer is a reference to the colonial past, still present, in many ways, in 'northern' culture (Rastas 2012). This image from the woman's jar also comes to her mind when she approaches her immigrant neighbour. His appearance, perhaps, his skin colour and headgear remind her of the image from the mundane object in her home. This is a strong reminder of how conceptions of racial difference and racialization have developed in the Finnish context, where, for example, popular culture and consumer goods have edified the citizens as to how the peoples of the world look and are. The exotic woman of the coffee jar also resembles, to some degree, the 'African' women in the protagonist's dream. The main character in this dream has a similar headgear and as remarkable an earring as the woman depicted on the coffee jar. Still, the dream sequence lacks the exoticizing character that is associated with the object in the Finnish woman's home (Figure 6). The women in the dream sequence live as mundane a life as the dreamer herself in the Finnish suburb. They go on with their lives, they have their fair share of worries, and they all look forward to having a cup of coffee. Also, the graphic depiction of the women in the dream is not as simplified as the depiction on the coffee jar. The skin tones of the women in the dream are more varied, with areas of white and lighter and darker brown that outline facial forms and bring out the contrasts of light and shade. In its depiction of coffee harvesting women in the dream sequence, Otsamo's *Kahvitauko* avoids the pitfalls of stereotypical racialized representations (Gardner 2010). The normalcy of the women's actions, their personal characteristics, the colouring of the comic, and the suggested similarity between lives in a dreamed African surrounding and a Finnish suburb all contribute to this.



Figure 6. Pentti Otsamo, *Kahvitauko* (2012), p. 54.

The opposition and relation between north and south, through which both components gain meaning, is further accentuated in a scene where the woman, approaching her neighbours for some coffee, is denied help. The negative response is in no way unfriendly. Instead, the neighbour, dressed hippie-style in a Paisley shirt and remarkable necklace, offers the woman a bag of dried and grounded root of the *Taraxacum officinale* plant, more commonly known as the common dandelion. This flower, which grows in North America and Europe, has occasionally been used as replacement for coffee in Finland since the 19th century, but was especially significant during World War II and the post-war years, when the consumption of coffee was regulated in the country. The local plant is contrasted to coffee in the narration, the result of which is yet another reminder to the reader of the opposition between north and south as well as the connectivity between the two, embodied in coffee drinking in the north.

### Snowy climate

The cover of Leen van Hulst's *Maitoa ja lunta / Milk and Snow* (2012) shows the auto-fictional protagonist of the album, Leen, lying on the frozen surface of sea (Figure 2). The same picture can be found inside the album in a spread (n.p.). The figure of Leen has its arms and legs spread out on the snow as if she is hugging the sky above – or making a snow angel (i.e. moving the arms up and down in order to leave the mark of an angel's wings on the snow). The following spread shows the view of the protagonist, the blue sky with white clouds and an airplane, a trope of mobility, with a white tail appearing in the corner. Two panels portray her directly from above: one of them is a 'full shot' showing the whole body, while the other one is a close-up portrait of her face.

The accompanying words tell that she is thinking of a girl she has fallen in love with. Thus, the natural phenomenon of snow and the icy surface covering the water provide a background for the protagonist's reflections. On the one hand, she is trying to figure out how to talk about her feelings to a person she is fond of, while on the other hand, the posture implies a deeper existential dimension: the empty space between the frozen sea and the open sky can be interpreted as a liminal passage from one phase of life to another. The whole experience of being an exchange student in a foreign land can be seen as a turning point in her life. The north will definitely present her with a new point of view.

In the course of history, the north has certainly been represented by European travellers as a *tabula rasa* on which a wide range of pursuits and aspirations have been projected. In their article on the Austro-Hungarian Arctic expedition in 1872–1874, Ulrike Spring and Johan Schimanski (2015, 14) suggest that the Arctic represents a 'symbolic resource for national or state identity formation and the different images of nature in the Arctic indicate different ways of legitimizing such symbolic exploitation'. One of the topoi that Spring and Schimanski find is the 'empty Arctic', that was used as a justification of a peaceful Austrian conquest of a seemingly vacant area (Spring and Schimanski 2015, 18). Correspondingly, the 'empty spaces' of northern nature and climate in van Hulst's comic function as a setting for Leen's emotional life and her identity formation as an exchange student and a young woman in love.

*Maitoa ja lunta / Milk and Snow* opens with a sequence of an airplane arriving in Finland. A view from inside the plane is seen through a window displaying the wing and an engine. The land she arrives at is covered by patches of snow. The colour white, often in greyish and bluish shades, is predominant in the album. In addition, the colour white is in focus when Leen encounters one of the Finnish peculiarities displayed, together with snow, in the title of the album: the fact that people drink lots of milk.

Because the album is made by, and describes the point of view of, an outsider in Finland, it is evident that anything abnormal to her experience catches her eye as a newcomer. There is, for example, an image of a car attached to an electric socket for heating, that, although a mundane practice in Finland in winter, is presumably a new sight for the Belgian narrator-protagonist. In addition, there is a picture of a person fishing through a hole in the ice covering the sea, which may be an unusual sight for a newcomer to the north. In this sense, the milk and snow mentioned in the comic's title are signifiers of strange new phenomena that Leen encounters in Finland. Leen, who is a student of art, takes photographs of her friends and objects that arouse her curiosity. However, her main target of interest does not lie in Finland as a tourist site or geographical entity, but rather in the people who are her fellow exchange students. This becomes obvious when a group of exchange students from various European countries take a field trip to Lapland.

The trip includes typical tourist activities such as skiing and a visit to a reindeer farm. On their social evening, Father Christmas pays them a surprise visit. Although Father Christmas appears in several panels, Leen states that she is not really paying any attention to him since she is thinking about a conversation with an Irish girl she has just met. Leen is also challenged to take part in a 'snow swimming' competition in which she is the last one to finish. Leen does not comment on the experience but she seems to be quite content with it. All in all, the trip to Lapland is more about the relationships between the students and not about getting to know Lapland. Indeed, most of the panels



display interiors, the place where they sleep and party, and there are fewer pictures of their activities outside. She is evidently more interested in the people than in the surrounding countryside.

The central thematic of *Maitoa ja lunta / Milk and Snow* is Leen's crush on a fellow exchange student, the Irish girl Gill. Leen is not able to express her emotions to the other girl, and the love goes unanswered. As the back cover of the comic states, it is a 'story about impossible love' (van Hulst 2012, back cover). The empty landscape offers Leen a space in which to ponder her feelings of loneliness and the melancholy of unanswered affection. The spread in Figure 6 shows Leen lost in her thoughts, in solitude in the grey and rather gloomy city of Turku, when she has heard that Gill's boyfriend has come to Finland for a visit.

Leen is in Finland as an exchange student for a relatively short period of time. When compared to the other comics discussed in this article, *Maitoa ja lunta / Milk and Snow* stands out precisely because of the status of its protagonist. For Leen, Finland is a place for adventure, a place to take a break from her normal life in Belgium and to be overcome and have time to explore her emotions in a new setting that seems to provide her with plenty of space to explore her feelings of love and solitude. Overall, she seems to settle down quite easily. In the beginning, she wonders about the Finnish habit of drinking milk with meals, and later on she is shown buying a milk carton from a shop for herself (n.p.). The north seems a thoroughly positive experience for her: the snow and ice, the cold weather, the whiteness of the landscape all appear as exotic and pleasant – and definitely not frightening or unwelcoming. Then again, the landscape covered by snow, and especially the frozen sea, functions as a metaphor of her condition of being an outsider or stranger as well as of her emotional state. Perhaps the emptiness and monotony of certain landscapes in Finland represent to her, a Belgian who is presumably more accustomed to crowds of people and the visibility of the built environment, something uncanny.

Many of the larger panels in van Hulst's comic represent exteriors. It is as if the snowy and icy wintery landscape demands a larger picture frame than, for example, the different interiors in which the story often takes place (Figure 7). The panel size thus has a rhetorical function and the changes in size accentuate the large, open, deserted and wintery spaces that the exchange student from a fellow EU country experiences in the north. In this context, the north, with its seasonal changes during the academic year depicted, is a place that infuses a sense of wonder and puts the imagination to work.



Figure 7. A spread from Leen van Hulst, *Maitoa ja lunta / Milk and Snow* (2012), no pagination.

Leen's experiences in *Maitoa ja lunta / Milk and Snow* are reminiscent of the experiences of the German Sabine, whom the reader encounters in Filippa Hella's short, eponymous comic, published in the *Mitä sä täällä teet? Tarinoita maahanmuutosta* anthology on stories of immigration to Finland (2016). Sabine's story, based on an interview with her, describes her reasons for her migration to Finland as based on love (with a German man living in Finland). Also in this story the wonder of nature and open spaces is impressively present. For Sabine, at first, the seaside is a place of pleasure and comfort but when the autumn arrives her relation to the blackening expanse of the sea changes dramatically: 'I stand on the waterfront and find out how the great darkness is coming. Darkness that consumes all colors around me.' (Hella 2016, 69) Again, natural scenery is presented in larger panels than other occurrences in the story.

### Nature and myth

Despite the xenophobia that Elias, the main protagonist of Lauri Ahtinen's graphic novel of the same name, encounters, the somewhat mystic nature of the north is not only overwhelming, it also provides him with a sense of relief and familiarity in an extremely precarious situation. Elias, a Hazara youth from Afghanistan, has arrived in the city of Oulu in northern Finland. He, like so many others, has applied for asylum in the country: 'Waiting for the asylum decision is like living in two places at the same time.' (Ahtinen 2018, n.p.) Ahtinen's comic is an impressive take on the feelings that a person in this situation might go through, or, perhaps more to the point, goes through, as the work is based on research and interviews with asylum seekers and experts in the field (Ahtinen 2018, back cover).

The documentary character of the comic, however, is overshadowed by Ahtinen's open-ended style in which, for example, the tensions between word and image are often played out as to problematize any clear-cut interpretations. The visual world of the book is also very rich on metaphoric images and intertextual references. In addition, the sequentiality in the conventional, linear flow of narration from one panel to another is every now and then broken by whole-page images of a collage-like character. These narrative devices are effective as a strategy for conveying to the reader the feelings of insecurity, fear, and confusion felt by the story's main character.

*Elias* takes place in several locations. The story begins with a description of refugees' travel across the Mediterranean. This location is revealed with an intertextual image of the three-year-old Syrian boy Alan Kurdi who drowned in the Mediterranean and whose body washed ashore on the Turkish coast. Some pages in the story take the reader to Afghanistan and the world left behind by Elias. Both the turbulent history of Afghanistan and Elias's travel from there are depicted in maps. The narration, however, takes place in a now, situated in Oulu. The I-narrator Elias introduces himself to the reader a few pages into the story, and says: 'I made it all the way here, to the northernmost corner of Europe, half a year ago.' (Ahtinen 2018, n.p.)

Oulu is present as city views, named cafés, landmark architecture, and public art, familiar (to the knowing reader) from outside of the storyworld. Such visual ingredients add to the comic's realistic feel, as do images of recognizable Finnish right-wing populist politicians (from the True Finns party) voicing their anti-immigration sentiments. These characters and their words are part of the milieu that make Elias's life insecure and filled with fear. Elias feels lost and strange in his new surroundings,



while the terrors he has escaped from also haunt him. The new place should feel safe, but it does not, both because of his past experiences and the current situation in Finland.

In this situation, the natural world, both in real and in mythological terms, provides Elias with some relief. The two central aspects of the northern natural environment that somehow have a soothing effect on Elias are snow and a bear. Although these are elements that clearly tie Elias's storyworld and experiences to a mythical north, they are, in Ahtinen's comic, not only related to the north. Instead, they are used to highlight the networked and translocal character of place in the north.

In a key moment in the narrative, the focus turns from the threatening aspects felt by Elias in his new hometown – the memories of war and escape, the negligent attitude of his co-residents, and the threatening discourse of populist politicians – to a more peaceful depiction of falling snow. In a three-page sequence – a two-page-spread and the following page – a male figure representing the sources of hostile racist slurs turns into a rolling snowball that at the turn of the page turns into part of a snowfall. The narration explains some of the visual sequence: 'When a person is empty, it is easy to fill his mind with hate. It is like a rolling snowball that absorbs more and more as it rotates downhill, in solitude...' (Ahtinen 2018, n.p.)

The subsequent scene with the falling snow breathes calmness (Figure 8). While the images, including Elias's face, perhaps, are not unambiguously serene, the linguistic narration suggests serenity: 'How odd... There's something familiar, yet strange, about this snow... something... comforting ...infinite... It feels eternal, everything is covered and features vanish, all that remains is shapes.' (Ahtinen 2018, n.p.) The familiar yet strange snow triggers Elias's memory. It reminds him of his first encounter with snow connected to the, perhaps, vanishing and featureless memory of the death of his father in the civil war in Afghanistan. The element of snow, a symbol of the north, is, after all, common for both Elias's current, northern place of living and his childhood home in the global south. The snow connects the two places. This may, of course, come as a surprise to the Finnish reader, but snow is not uncommon in mountainous Afghanistan.

In connection to the snow, Ahtinen depicts a number of images from Finnish national Romanticist paintings and their imagery based on the Finnish national epic *Kalevala*. The two figures in the bottom of the right-hand page are the dead Lemminkäinen and his mourning mother. *Kalevala's* Lemminkäinen is a fair young man as well as a womanizer. His mother fished out his body parts from the river Tuonela that separates the dead from the living. The river depicted in Ahtinen's comic connotes the river Tuonela, as the depiction of the dead man and the mother is based on Finnish national Romanticist painter Akseli Gallén-Kallela's famous painting *Lemminkäinen's Mother* (1897), in which the mythical river runs behind the lying man and the seated mother. On the following page Elias's reminiscences of his father's death and the snow continue: 'How everything at first was black and noisy until the snow covered the sounds, colours and the chaos. All that was left were the light and the shapes of memories, silence.' (Ahtinen 2018, n.p.) Elias's linguistic narration is accompanied by further references to Finnish national Romanticist paintings: again to Gallén-Kallela's *Lemminkäinen's Mother*, but also Magnus Enckell's *Boy with Skull* (1893) and Eero Järnefelt's *Under the Yoke (Burning the Brushwood)* (1893). While the reference to the latter may be read as an allusion to economic hardships or a difficult life more generally, the boy and the skull are more directly related to the boy Elias and his dead father. All in all, the intertextual references depict death and mourning, and in relation to Elias's disclosure

of his father's death, tie together, just like the snow, human experience in different places, in the Afghanistan of civil war and a Finland described in mythologically nationalist terms.



Figure 8. Lauri Ahtinen, *Elias* (2018), two-page spread, no pagination.

A few pages further on in the narrative, another transition from a frightening situation to a more soothing nature-based experience occurs. This time the panic-stricken Elias runs into a forest. Whether this is something that only happens in his mind or in the storyworld's reality is open for interpretation. In the forest, he meets a talking bear, the first of a few national Finnish animals he is to encounter or imagine.

The presence of the bear, as a fantastic speaking figure, can be interpreted as a reference to northern bear cults and mythology. In Finland, bear mythology can still be found in both regional and national imagery (Pentikäinen 2005). The bear is a figure that ties the young refugee man to a place in the north, but this connection is not developed further to, for example, references to the different powers that have been ascribed to the bear in the regional mythology. The national connotation, however, is clear: the bear is the national animal of Finland. The bear in *Elias* is nonetheless a powerful creature that offers Elias some consolation in his desperate situation. The bear speaks to Elias and with the bear Elias is able to speak 'quite proper Finnish', as he himself notices (Ahtinen 2018, n.p.). The bear is familiar with Elias's troubled situation and offers him words of wisdom. The bear notes that the strange land that he has arrived in will become familiar to him and advises him that he must 'remember to live' (Ahtinen 2018, n.p.; Figure 9). In a surprising phrasing the bear notes that his words

may appear a bit ‘coelhoesque’. The bear’s reference to the Brazilian, globally bestselling author Paulo Coelho, whose novels are rife with grandiloquent symbolism and whose *The Alchemist* is described as ‘more self-help than literature’ by one *New York Times* critic (Cowles 2009), reminds the reader in a self-ironic fashion of the transnational or prenatal character of myths in general and national animals in particular.



Figure 9. Lauri Ahtinen, *Elias* (2018), no pagination.

The bear reappears to Elias at the end of the story. Before this sequence, Elias has described his dreams of becoming a Finn: ‘free as a wolf’, ‘Finnish as a (northern) pike’ and as ‘noble, beautiful’ as a swan (Ahtinen 2018, n.p.). Again, the presented nationalist Finnish connotations of these animals are questioned. Elias explains that he has been taught in his Finnish language and culture classes that the swan is the ‘national bird of Finland’ and wonders why he needs to know this. In addition, the wolf depicted on the page wears a collar with the text ‘Liberté égalité [sic] frat[...]’, thus placing the animal in both a revolutionary internationalist tradition and in connection to the republic of France.



Figure 10. Lauri Ahtinen, *Elias* (2018), no pagination.

In the final meeting with the bear, it again reminds Elias of the importance of living his own life: ‘It is precisely what it is. Just do what you can.’ (Ahtinen 2018, n.p.) In the following sequence Elias receives a letter with the decision on his application for asylum from the Finnish Immigration Service. Through violent imagery (a hard-hitting fist, a crying face, a roaring bear) the message is shown to be a negative one, which drives Elias to dive into the sea, from which he is pulled up by a bear’s paw. As Elias surfaces the bear wanders off and its face transforms into Elias’s face (Figure 10). The boy and the bear and their metamorphic and intermingled character opens up for different readings. Firstly, the conclusion offers to the reader a vision of the national animal of the northern country of Finland having resided in the Afghan Hazara boy. This is a strong proposal, again, that the identities and boundaries of places and people are to be questioned and cannot be interpreted in a clear-cut fashion. Secondly, the bear as a national symbol turns its back on Elias, which may be seen as a metaphor for the policy of the Finnish Immigration Service, representative of the government of that time. One could say that the policy and the negative decision on Elias’s application denies his value and being as a human, a human worthy of government protection. Thirdly, the final panel on the page depicting the bear’s metamorphosis into Elias again contains an intertextual reference, this time to Michelangelo’s *The Creation of Adam* in the Sistine Chapel. The comic thus suggests that Elias’s life does not end with the decision of the Finnish Immigration Service, and instead he as a result becomes (a) man. He is even reborn, which the symbolism of Elias diving into water and resurfacing

might suggest. On the following page the new man's feet are shown walking out of the top border of the page. Water is dripping from his upper body situated outside the page, and after him are left, instead of human footprints, the traces of a bear's paws. The motto following the image induces hope: 'I know I can survive anything. I am a wanderer.' The motto is ascribed to the name 'Jobe', perhaps one of the asylum seekers interviewed by the comic's creator. Elias wanders on, and leaves behind the Finnish bear, which during the asylum seeking process has become a part of him, yet has abandoned him.

## **Conclusions**

In the previous sections we have analysed three tropes of the north as it is imagined in Finnish comics on migration. Pentti Otsamo's comic *Kahvitauko*, a tale of migration only in the sense that it makes use of a so-called immigrant character, builds on an idea of the northern suburb. Leen van Hulst's *Maitoa ja lunta / Milk and Snow* rests on a perception of a north marked by a geographically defined climate and the related snow and ice. In Lauri Ahtinen's *Elias* the north again is marked by the natural world, both in more concrete and in mythical terms. Despite the differences in the storyworlds, and the characters, events, and actions that take place in them, the cultural frames of the north in terms of particular ways of life in a particular natural environment are quite clear.

What, however, is of paramount significance in our reading of the north in these comics is the fact that the north as a place (while tied to some cultural frames) is a meeting place for different networks of relations. An obvious dimension, given our choice of material, that is, comics on migration to Finland, is the presence of characters of various cultural, ethnic, or national backgrounds. But the relational character of the north is not limited to this kind of multiculturalism or to the meeting of different people in this setting. It is also, particularly in the cases of *Kahvitauko* and *Elias*, more convoluted: in *Kahvitauko* the drinking of coffee, often considered a mundane Nordic practice, is used to show how 'north' and 'south' are translocal or connected on global scale. In *Elias* the symbols of the north, the snow and the bear, are tied together with Afghanistan and the protagonist representing the Afghan Hazara minority. Snow ties together the different locations and their cultures, whereas the bear, the Finnish national animal, resides in the 'foreign' refugee man.

The mixed quality of places and characters is a strong humanistic or cosmopolitan reminder to the reader emphasizing common humanity despite superficial differences. This reminder is even stronger when situated in the context of racism, xenophobia, and extreme nationalism, as happens in both *Kahvitauko* and *Elias*. As stories of migration, they clearly state that the northern milieux, however mixed or relationally constructed in character, are also unwelcoming to the migrant or to one perceived as a newcomer or stranger.

*Maitoa ja lunta / Milk and Snow* provides another viewpoint, as its protagonist is a white EU citizen and the story lacks the representation of xenophobia. Read in parallel with the other two comics it not only shows that migrants of different kinds are treated differently, but also highlights how a place such as the north is defined in different terms depending on, among other things, reasons for migration, race and ethnicity, and privilege in general. Even a natural phenomenon such as snow, epitomizing a cliché of the north, changes in meaning depending on dynamics of privilege and inequality.

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