

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Colourising the past: Digital visual repatriation of colourised Sámi photography

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### Abstract

Colourised photographs have become a popular form of social media content, and this article examines how the digital sharing of colourised colonial photographs from the Sápmi region may develop into a kind of informal visual repatriation. This article presents a case study on the decolonial photographic practices of the Sámi colouriser Per Ivar Somby, who mines digitised photo archives, colourises selected photos, and subsequently shares them on his social media profiles. The article draws on a qualitative, netnographic study of Somby's *Colour Your Past* profiles in Facebook and Instagram and demonstrates how Somby and his followers reclaim photos of Sámi people produced during historical encounters with non-Sámi photographers. Drawing on Hirsch's (2008, 2012) concept *affiliative postmemory*, the analysis examines how historical information and affective responses becomes interwoven in reparative readings of colonial photos.

**Keywords:** Sámi; photography; colourisation; affiliative postmemory; visual repatriation; decolonisation; social media

### Introduction

The practice of digitally colourising old photographs has been trending for several years, and colourised photos have become a popular genre of social media content. The colourisers range from skilled hobbyists to professional artists. They produce books and exhibitions and accept commissions from media and heritage institutions; nevertheless, their most immediate outlets are social media, where they can connect with large numbers of followers. This article focuses on photographs colourised and shared by Sámi colourist Per Ivar Somby, who posts his work on social media under his personal brand, *Colour Your Past*. The article examines how the online sharing of colourised photos, in which Somby and the Sámi people among his followers reclaim historical photos of Sámi people through collaborative memory work, constitutes a form of non-institutional visual repatriation. The article's analysis draws on the affective turn in photo theory and, more particularly, on the concepts of *postmemory* and *affiliative postmemory* developed by Hirsch (2008, 2012) to explore how historical information and affective responses are interwoven in reparative readings of colonial photos.

The Sámi are an Indigenous people whose ancestral land, Sápmi, today spans from central Norway and central Sweden across the northern part of Finland and to the Kola

peninsula in Russia, but whose original settlement extended more towards the south (Swedish Institute 2023; Valkonen *et al.* 2022, 3). The colonisation of the Sámi was a prolonged process in which trade relations were gradually transformed into settler colonialism as the nation states intensified their extraction of resources in the north through farming, fishing, forestry, and mining (Josefsen 2022; Valkonen *et al.* 2022). Sámi cultural traditions and religion were harshly repressed, and the Sámi became racialised as an exotic northern *Other* of Europe (Baglo 2001; Mattson 2014). Nineteenth-century developments in physical anthropology and biological race theories had severe repercussions for the Sámi, as the race researchers' construction of the Sámi as an inferior race coincided with and supported the agendas of settler nation states (Baglo 2011; Mattson 2014; Sannhets- og forsoningskommisjonen 2023). Since then, the Sámi have fought for cultural and political self-determination and have been active in the transcultural political mobilisation of Indigenous people (Lien and Nielssen 2021b).<sup>1</sup> Their continuous struggle for decolonisation takes place through numerous political and cultural practices, and this article argues that Somby's sharing of colourised photos can be read as a decolonial photographic practice. This article contributes to an emerging research field that examines how Indigenous people negotiate the past by repurposing colonial photography (Lien and Nielssen 2021a; Lydon 2021; Peers 2021).

The visual technology of photography became central to the colonisation of the Sámi as they were 'subjected to the multiple agendas of colonialism's photographic culture' (Lien and Nielssen 2021a, 7). Since race was considered to be evident from one's physical appearance, photography was used to racialise the Sámi. From the 1860s to World War II, anthropometric photos were used to support race theories that had harsh consequences in terms of informing discriminatory minority policies (Baglo 2001, 2008, 2011; Lundström 2008; Mattson 2014; Nielssen 2018). The Sámi were also depicted in other photographic genres, such as in scenes used for postcards, travel literature, and tourist brochures. Such photos often represented Sámi persons as picturesque types and some even recirculated racist stereotypes (Baglo 2019; Lien 2014). Most older photos of Sámi people, as products of asymmetrical encounters in colonial contact zones, represent an external and controlling gaze, but historical photos taken by non-Sámi outsiders often have complex social biographies. Such photos were used to racialise and exoticise Sámi people in postcards or research publications, but prints of the same photographs also became cherished heirlooms within Sámi families (Dobbin 2013; Lien and Nielssen 2021c; Öhman 2021).

Somby colourises many different genres of Sámi photographs, from snapshots taken by Sámi families to photos produced for race research. During a research interview, he told me about his lifelong fascination with the old photographic portraits he saw in the houses of relatives and neighbours as a child. His first experiments with colourisation were motivated by an urge to find out what his own ancestors might have looked like 'in colour'. Most of the photos he colourises are found in various digitised photo collections, which means that he can choose from an abundance of photographs from all parts of Sápmi.

The article draws on a qualitative netnographic study of Somby's facilitation of memory work through the colourised photos he posts on social media (Kozinets 2015; Kozinets and Gambetti 2020). Additionally, Somby explained his practices to me in a two-hour long research interview (Per Ivar Somby 2022, interview with author) and provided additional information by email. Netnography is particularly suitable for examining the practices of digital memory communities through prolonged fieldwork (Ekelund 2020, 2022). The method entails the researcher's immersion in a specific technocultural field to 'form

<sup>1</sup> This general and very brief introduction does not address the variations in historical relations between the Sámi and the nation states (Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia).

cultural understandings about language, power, identity, and desire in worlds where technology and the social intersect' (Kozinets 2020, 7). In addition to following Somby's Facebook and Instagram posts on a nearly daily basis since January 2021, I have systematically read through all his Facebook posts from August 2018 to December 2021 and produced field notes on recurrent themes, photo genres and interaction types.<sup>2</sup> Based on these field notes and my increasing understanding of the memory work performed by Somby and his followers, I was then able to select specific posts for close, multimodal analysis. To contextualise the analysis, I draw on previous writings on colonial photography in Sápmi and more broadly on historical and cultural research on the consequences of Nordic settler colonialism for the Sámi people.

The following section will present the practice of digital photograph colourisation and how sharing these images has become a contested social media trend. This overview is followed by an introduction to visual repatriation and a theoretical framework that establishes Hirsch's theory of *postmemory* and *affiliative postmemory* within the affective turn in photography studies. The analysis opens with a description of Somby's role as a facilitator of visual repatriation before moving on to discuss two of his social media posts. The photos analysed represent Sámi people to whom Somby is not directly related but is reclaiming as fellow Sámi community members or possibly as collective Sámi ancestors. The first photo was chosen as an example of how Somby facilitates collaborative memory work by inviting his Sámi followers to share information about the depicted family. In contrast, the other close analysis examines Somby's more creative use of digital technologies, specifically his use of colourisation and animation, to deconstruct the racialising gaze of a portrait produced for race research.

### Colourising photographs

Somby began colourising photographs as a hobby around 2012. He is self-taught, helped by online tutorials and occasionally by advice from other colourisers. Although his colourising practices have become quite time-consuming, he continues to work as an information technology specialist, and his development may be described as that of a talented hobbyist gradually becoming a highly skilled, semi-professional colouriser. Somby sells prints of his work, presents exhibitions, takes on commissioned work for museums and media, and has published one book (Somby 2020). Nevertheless, his continuous sharing of colourised photos on social media continues to be central to his colourising practices.

Photographs can be colourised quickly and automatically by artificial intelligence (AI) programmes, but this often produces crude results. More subtle colourisations are typically made by artists using Adobe Photoshop, which is also Somby's preferred digital tool. He uses the programme to meticulously colourise images 'by hand', and he is eager to get the colours right. His choices of colours and nuances are based on his knowledge of how historical monochrome photo techniques often create a distorted impression of tonal values. Furthermore, he has gradually gained extensive knowledge on Sámi material culture and has, for instance, collaborated with Sámi experts on traditional clothing to gain a better understanding of historical uses of colours. Nevertheless, he does not position himself as an expert on Sámi history and stresses that the colourised images are not to be seen as scientific documentation but as the result of a creative and interpretative process.

<sup>2</sup> In this article, I focus on his Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/colouryourpast>), which has 4.9 thousand followers, and his Instagram account (<https://www.instagram.com/colourmypast/>), which has 24.7 thousand followers (numbers registered on 5 May 2023). I have also examined his website and his additional social media profiles on TikTok, YouTube, and Reddit, but material from these other platforms is not included in the article.

The colourisation of black-and-white photography is not uncontroversial. Although the hand colourisation of photos became a common practice soon after the invention of photography, colourised photographs, and colour photography have often been less valued than black-and-white or monochrome photography. Black-and-white has been considered the classic photographic look and matches the aesthetic values of Western modernism (Mensel 2023). Roland Barthes' book *Camera Lucida* (1980) is considered one of the first academic texts to adopt an affective approach to photography (Brown and Phu 2014b), and Barthes' emotional reaction to colours in photography was certainly evident in his writing:

An anonymous daguerreotype of 1843 shows a man and a woman in a medallion subsequently tinted by the miniaturists on the staff at the photographic studio: I always feel (unimportant what actually occurs) that in the same way, color is a coating applied *later on* to the original truth of the black-and-white photograph. For me, color is an artifice, a cosmetic (like the kind used to paint corpses) (Barthes 2020 [1980], 98).

One can easily imagine Barthes' disgust if confronted with the digitised colourised photographs now circulating on social media, and it may be a similar preference for a classic, monochrome photographic look that at times elicit dismissive remarks calling digital colourisation tasteless (Sheehan 2018). Furthermore, some historians have argued that colourisation distorts our sense of historical photographs (Nicholson 2020). The few comments by photo archivists that I have been able to find express ambivalence towards the trend (Lonie 2017; Rosenqvist 2022). These photo archivists acknowledge the skills and meticulous research by some colourisers but are also concerned that the public may not realise that a photo has been colourised, that the colourised versions could become prioritised by search engines and that black-and-white photographic heritage may gradually become less valued or even obsolete.<sup>3</sup> Since some colourisers, including Somby, have similar concerns, they are increasingly adding watermarks to indicate that the photo has been colourised or are sharing the monochrome photo alongside the colourised version. Somby generally welcomes new technical developments but is also concerned about how rapidly evolving AI technologies could make the carefully researched work of colourisers obsolete or drown out their work in a flood of badly colourised images.

Those in favour of colourisation typically claim that black-and-white photos create distance between the viewer and the subject and that colourisation makes historical events more relatable, thereby enhancing viewers' engagement with history. One of the most famous professional colourisers is Marina Amaral, who described her work as a way to 'build a bridge between the present and the past' (Freeman 2018). In the introduction to the book *The World Aflame*, a collaboration between Amaral and historian Dan Jones, the authors describe the affective dimension of colourisation:

It is self-evident that as members of the species *Homo sapiens* we respond to colour instinctively, and in deep, primal ways. It stirs our hearts as well as our heads. Colourization at its best is an emotional enhancing agent: it magnifies empathy and horror, pity and disgust. It challenges us to respond to history not simply as accountants and analysts, but as human beings, capable of the same fear, confusion, passion, ambition, anger and love as those whose images we see. It asks us to ask

<sup>3</sup> My description of these matters is informed partly by a particularly thoughtful discussion of colourisation in an as yet unpublished paper by Kaja Rosenqvist, a photo archivist at The Norwegian Maritime Museum. She presented her paper to the Norwegian Photo Historical Association in 2022 (Rosenqvist 2022).

more. It nudges us to go off and hunt for the truth behind these extraordinary scenes. That is its purpose. That is its power (Jones and Amaral 2020, 9).

Given that monochrome photography can certainly elicit curiosity and affective responses in the viewer, these claims may be a bit over the top. Nevertheless, when observing reactions to coloured photos on Somby's social media profiles, I frequently came across comments such as 'It seems so real' and 'Wow, you make them come alive' (paraphrased). The photos often elicited a shared collaborative search for information about the portrayed people.

### *Visual repatriation*

The term *visual repatriation* refers to the practice of bringing archival photos produced by outsiders (i.e. anthropologists) back to the so-called source communities represented in the photos (Dudding 2005; Edwards 2003; Lien and Nielsens 2021c). Visual repatriation projects have typically implied offline collaboration but may also be set up through digital platforms (Marselis 2017; Marselis and Schütze 2013). Elizabeth Edwards described visual repatriation as a process of recontextualising photographs. Drawing on the indexicality of the photos, the participating community members are often eager to identify individuals and the context in which the photos were taken. Edwards describes these efforts as *forensic readings* (Edwards 2003, 91) and stresses that such readings are not only a form of fact-finding but can be empowering and make room for counterhistories (Edwards 2003, 84). Renaming individuals in photos may involve reconstructing ancestors' biographies, telling stories of resilience and challenging the stereotypes conveyed by the gaze of the outsider photographer. Since visual repatriation projects 'reclaim and activate kinship' (Peers 2021, 107), they have the potential to stimulate reparative testimonial practices and intergenerational continuity (Payne 2012, 2021; Voelker 2017). Furthermore, repatriated photos are often reused in artistic memory practices (Marselis 2017; Peers 2021).

Regarding Sámi photography, Veli-Pekka Lehtola, a professor of Sámi culture, described his experiences with visual repatriation projects at the Sámi Museum Siida in the Finnish part of Sápmi (Lehtola 2021). He found that naming individuals and places became pertinent and that the participants had extensive knowledge of local networks of belonging. Although the consequences of settler colonialism were occasionally mentioned by the participants, they generally downplayed interethnic encounters in favour of reconstructing life stories and focusing on Sámi agency. Lehtola concludes by describing the photos as 'an "emotional archive", enabling the transmission of experience and memories' (Lehtola 2021, 163), and thereby stresses their potential for transgenerational transmission. He also describes how photos are used to revitalise material culture, such as clothing and handicrafts. In other contexts, Sámi artists have reclaimed photos by including them in artworks that typically express an explicit decolonial agenda that emphasises the historical oppression of the Sámi (Dobbin 2013; Lehtola 2021).<sup>4</sup>

### *Postmemory as affective engagement*

Participants in visual repatriation projects often engage with very old photographs that reconstruct stories about great-grandparents or community members to whom they are not directly related. The stories told are based on historical and cultural knowledge as well as more imaginative readings of the photos. Accordingly, research on visual repatriation frequently makes use of the concept of *postmemory* developed by Hirsch (1997, 2008,

<sup>4</sup> Among the Sámi artists who have repatriated photographs from archives and used them in artworks are Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, Marja Helander, and Anders Sunna (Dobbin 2013; Heith 2014, 2015; Lehtola 2021).

2012).<sup>5</sup> Hirsch's approach adds nuances to the idea of photo collections as 'emotional archives' that transmit experiences and memories (Lehtola 2021). She stresses that while photos are read for their indexical traces (who was in front of the camera and where and when), the photos are not literal transmitters of memories (Hirsch 2012, 31). In contrast, postmemory is a process of affective identification and interpretation mediated by memory objects, such as photographs. Many of Hirsch's analyses focus on artworks that repurpose photos from traumatic pasts, and while postmemory practices build on historical knowledge and family stories, she stresses their creative dimension: 'Postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection and creation' (Hirsch 2012, 5). Hirsch argues that 'the index of postmemory (as opposed to memory) is *the performative index*, shaped more and more by affect, need and desire as time and distance attenuate the links to authenticity and truth' (Hirsch 2012, 48). Hirsch's writings on postmemory have been ascribed to the affective turn in photography studies, which examines 'the affinity between feeling and photography' and pays attention to 'the viewer's engagement with the image' (Brown and Phu 2014b, 2, 7). In their collaborative contribution to the influential anthology *Feeling Photography* (Brown and Phu 2014a), Hirsch and Leo Spitzer explore the repurposing of school photos in art installations that address traumatic pasts.<sup>6</sup> They argue that photographic portraits may be able to carry and transmit affects over time as the images become affective triggers for the viewer, who reads into gestures and expressions and thereby recognises the human particularity of the portrayed individuals (Hirsch and Spitzer 2014, 258, 262–263). In a similar way, affective readings of faces have become central in visual repatriation projects.

While Hirsch originally developed the concept of postmemory to describe the artistic practices of the children of Holocaust survivors, she later introduced the concept of *affiliative postmemory* to reach beyond the second-generation perspective and include 'identification and projection across distance and difference' (Hirsch 2008, 115). In *The Generation of Postmemory* (2012), Hirsch further broadens *affiliative postmemory* to include extrafamilial and transcultural identification across differences as a means of grasping the multiple interconnected pathways of connective memory in digital memory culture (cf. Hoskins 2011). Somby's online sharing of colourised Sámi photos can be seen as an invitation to collective, affiliative postmemory, where factual information about places and people is combined with imaginative engagement with the lives of the colonised Sámi.

### *The colouriser as a facilitator of visual repatriation*

Somby is based in Tromsø in the Norwegian part of Sámi, but his colourising practices connect people who identify as Sámi or as being of Sámi descent across national boundaries. In his social media posts, he writes about the photographs in either Norwegian or English, but users sometimes comment in Sámi, and he is able to engage with these comments.<sup>7</sup> A significant amount of code-switching occurs in the comment threads, and this is helped along by the AI translation affordances of the platforms, although this affordance does not yet support translation into the Sámi languages. In addition to his Sámi followers in Sápmi and throughout the Nordic countries, descendants of Sámi migrated to the United States regularly like or comment on his photos. Furthermore, Somby has

<sup>5</sup> For research on visual repatriation that makes use of the concept of *postmemory*, see Dobbin (2013), Lien and Nielssen (2021c), Marselis (2017), and Öhman (2021).

<sup>6</sup> The chapter examines art installations on the Holocaust by Christian Botanski and on the 'Dirty War' in Argentina by Marcelo Brodsky (Hirsch and Spitzer 2014).

<sup>7</sup> As a consequence of the harsh Norwegian assimilation policies towards the Sámi, which used the school system to stigmatise the Sámi language (Minde 2003), Somby grew up with Norwegian as his primary language, although his parents were Sámi-speaking.

many non-Sámi followers, who are less likely to participate in discussions around the photos but often ask more general historical questions.

A typical post includes a colourised photo with an introductory text, or caption, written by Somby, and the original monochrome photo is often included for comparison. The photos are discussed in a manner that resembles forensic readings of offline visual repatriation (Edwards 2003; Lehtola 2021). The participants draw on a broad variety of online and offline sources to contextualise the photos; for example, they may search digitised church registers and commercial genealogical databases, such as MyHeritage, or use Google Street View to name a location. They also consult historical publications, draw on their own cultural knowledge, or ask their Sámi relatives to identify people and places. Similar to the offline Sámi visual repatriation described by Lehtola (2021), the participants focus on the life stories of the represented Sámi and downplay information about the non-Sámi photographers. However, where Lehtola noted attention to local networks of belonging, the online discussions on Somby's profiles reconstruct transregional and transnational kinship networks with comments such as 'Oh, if she is your great-grandmother, then we must be family, because I am the daughter of. . .' (paraphrased). Somby takes on the role of facilitator in these conversations; he may add additional information or pose questions, but he does not position himself as an authoritarian expert and he acknowledges the input of others with positive emoji or friendly remarks. Furthermore, he patiently answers questions from non-Sámi followers who are unaware of the settler-colonial context of the photos.

Most posts do not elicit long comment threads, and individual comments at first appear to provide limited information; however, taking the continuous posts of new photos and information into account, the *Colour Your Past* profiles on Facebook and Instagram accumulate and recirculate substantial knowledge on Sámi history. In her work on Finnish American digital memory culture, Anne Heimo characterised Facebook groups in which ethnic and family memories are shared as 'spontaneous archives' that are continuously evolving while remaining dynamic and ephemeral. Heimo also mentions the briefness of comments and story snippets shared on social media, and she points out the similarities between online and offline memory work:

At first glance these family memories may seem very brief and fragmented, but actually the difference between how we share our memories online and offline does not differ much. Outside the interview situation, we rarely tell whole, coherent stories (Heimo 2017, 262).

She describes spontaneous archives as 'the result of an emotional need to share private and public memories within a group to which one feels connected, even if the members of the group do not know each other' (Heimo 2017, 255). In a similar way, the storytelling around colourised photographs on Somby's Facebook and Instagram profiles could be said to resemble a prolonged joint reading of a communal photo album that takes place not in a closed family circle but in an open digital fora and in the form of affiliated postmemory.

### Retelling resilience

In January 2021, Somby shared his colourised version of a photo of the Partapuoli family (Figure 1), which he had downloaded from the National Library of Norway's image database.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The photo is available in the public domain from the National Library of Norway's image database ([https://www.nb.no/items/URN:NBN:no-nb\\_digifoto\\_20171220\\_00088\\_NB\\_NS\\_NM\\_06364](https://www.nb.no/items/URN:NBN:no-nb_digifoto_20171220_00088_NB_NS_NM_06364)). Somby posted the Partapuoli photo on Facebook and Instagram on 22 January 2021. Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/colouyourpast/posts/pfbid02bxX5EQAFHTxXMVdphxzbxXDRay9amHzLuGTJXNuXu5DLuso6AyxXfSy4DWYdmHMK3l> (accessed 19 November 2023). Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CKW3LhCB9-n/> (accessed 19 November 2023).

**Colour your past**  
22. januar 2021 · 🌐

Johannes Partapuoli med familie, Grotli i Skjåk (1905).  
Johannes, kona Ellen Marie (født Matti, 1877) og barna Johan (1900), Karen (1903), og Marit (1905).  
Foto: Narve Skarpmoen.

Denne familien kom fra Målselv i Troms i 1895, til Tafjord for å gjete rein i fjellene i Skjåk.De bodde blant annet på Grotli. Johannes ble etterhvert overgjeter for tamreinlaget i Skjåk. Kona Ellen startet med souvenirsalg for turister, og var kjent for å være språkmektig.

Familien ble i Skjåk resten av sine liv, og både Johannes og Ellen er begravlagt i Skjåk.

#colourmypast #colouyourpast #colorizedphoto #colourisedphoto #skjåk #grotli #reinheimen #tamreindrift #reindrift #målselv #johannespartapuoli #partapuoli #narveskarpmoen #1905 #tafjord

Se oversættelse




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Alle kommentarer ▼

**Figure 1.** The Partapuoli family in Grotli, 1905. Original photo by Narve Skarpmoen (public domain, National Library of Norway), colourised by Per Ivar Sombly.

The photo was taken by the Norwegian photographer Narve Skarpmoen in 1905 at the Grotli Høyfjellshotel (a mountain hotel) in Skjåk in Central Norway. Encountering the Sámi had at the time become a popular tourist attraction, and encampments were set up near mountain lodges and hotels (Baglo 2015). Additionally, Sámi people were a popular motif for picture postcards and photos sold as souvenirs (Baglo 2019). Despite this apparent appreciation of Sámi culture, the Sámi experienced intensified pressure for cultural assimilation due to *Norwegianisation* policies, and reindeer husbandry became increasingly difficult due to laws that prioritised agricultural settlements (Baglo 2011; Ravna 2017; Sannhets- og forsoningskommisjonen 2023). Under these difficult circumstances, the tourist industry provided supplementary income for some Sámi, such as the Partapuolis, who set up a tent (*lávvu*) next to the hotel in Grotli during the tourist season.



Norwegian image databases contain numerous photos and postcards showing the Partapuolis.<sup>9</sup> Many of the photos depict the scenery at Grotli with the family and their lávvu in the foreground and the hotel in the background, but Somby chose to colourise a photo that focused more closely on the family. By cropping the photo to zoom in on their appearance, he encourages viewers to notice the details of their colourful clothing, which seems less spectacular in the monochrome photo. Close cropping also allows the viewer to interpret gestures and expressions that might trigger affective identification (Hirsch and Spitzer 2014). In this photo, the whole family looks directly at the camera, meeting the outsider's gaze. The neutral, direct expressions of the parents contrast with those of the older children, who seem uneasy with the situation. The boy furrows his forehead, and the girl is tugging at her mother's apron. The children's expressions add tension to the image, which may be interpreted as a reluctance to be treated as a tourist attraction. However, in their discussion of the photo, Somby and his followers stressed the resilience of the family, which made their engagement in the growing tourism industry a rational choice in a difficult time.

In the national library database, the photo is captioned 'Johannes Partapuoli with family' [author's translation], but as the couple is well known, in his introductory caption, Somby was able to identify the rest of the family and include their names and years of birth: Ellen Marie (born Matti, 1877) and children, Johan (1900), Karen (1905), and Marit (1905). As is typical of Somby's posts, the photographer was acknowledged but not given any further attention. Somby explained that in 1895, this North Sámi family relocated approximately 1,300 km south of the Northern Region – Troms – to the mountains of Skjåk, where Grotli is also located. The reason for this move was not explained, but Somby said that Johannes and Ellen stayed in the Skjåk area for the rest of their lives, and he stressed their resourcefulness in coping with the move. Johannes became first herder for the local reindeer husbandry association. Ellen sold souvenirs to tourists and was known as being 'språkmektig', meaning that she spoke several languages.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Somby emphasised the agency of the couple and how tourism created economic opportunities for them (Baglo 2015).

On Facebook, the post elicited a thread with thirty comments and ten participants, including Somby himself.<sup>11</sup> Some participants solely expressed their appreciation of Somby's colourising skills, but the thread also expanded into informal storytelling, similar to how brief anecdotes would have been shared in an offline reading of a photo album (Langford 2001). Somby began the thread by assuming that the Partapuoli couple would have many descendants, and indeed, some of these descendants participated in the discussion. In particular, Kari Helene Partapuoli shared this post:

These are my great-grandparents. I am presently in the house they built in Skjåk. He came from Sweden, and she was from Norway. They never lived at Grotli but set up tent to sell knives and other things they made for the tourists. The pictures also originate from tourist sales. Proud descendant! [author's translation from Norwegian]<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Baglo has located several postcards with the Partapuolis in the collection of Tromsø Museum (Baglo 2019), and additional photos are available in the common database for Norwegian and Swedish museums and collections, Digitalt Museum.

<sup>10</sup> A literal translation of *språkmektig* would be *language empowered*, and indeed her great-granddaughter Kari Helene Partapuoli told me that Ellen spoke Sámi, Norwegian, Finnish, German, and possibly some English (Kari Helene Partapuoli, 30 January 2023, personal communication).

<sup>11</sup> These numbers refer to the Facebook thread as of 2 May 2023.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted with permission (Kari Helene Partapuoli, 30 January 2023, personal communication).

By mentioning that she was ‘in the house they built’, she stressed transgenerational belonging, and the concluding ‘Proud descendant!’ articulated a positive affect and challenged any sense of shame associated with being a *postcard Sámi* (Baglo 2019). The collaborative memory work in the thread took place in a friendly tone, with participants gradually adding information that sometimes differed from that of previous posts but without explicitly correcting each other. Below the post by Kari Helene Partapuoli, another participant added nuance about the geographical belongings of the family and explained that both Johannes’s and Ellen’s families had followed the migration patterns of their reindeer herds and spent the winters in Sweden and the summers in Norway. Johannes was born on the Norwegian side of the border and Ellen on the Swedish side. Somby summed up this part of the thread with a comment that articulates the asymmetrical power relations between the Sámi and the nation states, whose borders cut through traditional herding territories:

By the way, it can be a little problematic to define them as being from either Norway or Sweden. After all, these Sámi families lived seasonally on both sides of the borders and probably felt a sense of belonging in both their winter and summer homes. Nonetheless, these borderless people were forced into one national citizenship [Somby in Facebook thread, author’s translation from Norwegian].

While transnational legislation allowed the Sámi to cross the Swedish–Norwegian border with their herds, the laws *de facto* restricted their opportunities and prioritised agricultural settlements over reindeer husbandry (Ravna 2017). By imagining a transnational sense of belonging and using the verb ‘forced’, Somby introduced a sombre affective register to describe how settler colonialism disrupted the traditional way of life of Sámi families. This theme was developed further when one of the participants praised Johannes Partapuoli for his willingness to take a chance by moving south. Somby replied by bringing up another story from the area:

He [Partapuoli] was courageous, yes. Read about the reindeer herding Sámi Torkel Jonasson down in the Skjåk region, who was harassed and suffered many types of assaults. You had to endure much and stand up against angry farmers. Almost a small war about resources. Nearly a small war between Sámi and Norwegians? [Somby in Facebook thread, author’s translation from Norwegian]

Somby’s reference to the tragic story of Torkel Jonasson and his family, who for twenty years beginning in 1869 were pushed around with their reindeer herd due to recurrent conflicts with farmers and authorities, served as a reminder of how expanding agricultural settlements pressured the Sámi (Hjelme 2014; Jåma 2015).<sup>13</sup> The terms *harassed*, *suffered*, *endure*, and *stand up against* signal empathy with Torkel Jonasson’s fate, and Somby stressed the seriousness of these conflicts by suggesting that it was ‘almost/nearly a small war’. He ends the comment with a question mark, and his cautious wording can be interpreted as acknowledging that such historical conflicts are still sore points in the relations between the Sámi and the Norwegian majority population (Ravna 2017; Sannhets- og forsoningskommisjonen 2023).

The stories elicited by the photo draw on books, websites, and family memories. The main point of sharing the stories was not to dig up totally unknown information but to celebrate the resourcefulness of the Partapuolis and recontextualise the photo in the asymmetrical

<sup>13</sup> The name of this reindeer Sámi is spelled differently on various websites, and stories about him in Digitalt Museum refer to him as Torkel (or Thorke) Jonassen (Hjelme 2014; Jåma 2015).

power relations of settler colonialism. The sharing of the coloured photograph created an opportunity for affiliative postmemory as descendants of the couple and other Sámi connected around imagining the lives of the Partapuolis and retelling stories of resilience.

### *Elen's gaze*

Many of the early portraits of Sámi people originate from race research, either by Nordic researchers or by visiting anthropologists who used photography as a visual supplement to anthropometric data (Baglo 2001, 2011; Nielssen 2018). When working with such photos, Somby made sure to mention that they were produced for race research, arguing that his non-Sámi followers, especially, might not be aware of this part of colonial history. The overall agenda of visual repatriation remained the same: to identify the individuals, share something about their lives, and confirm kinship patterns by pointing out physical resemblance across generations. However, photos from race research tended to prompt comments that interpreted facial expressions as a trace of the photographic encounter between the sitter and photographer. In Hirsch and Spitzer's (2014) terms, the photographs were read as if able to 'transmit affect over space and time' and thereby elicit affiliative postmemorial empathy in the viewer (258). In particular, reluctance and resentment towards the objectifying colonial gaze were commented upon, as when Somby read defiance in the face of Anne Skum, who was photographed in 1879 by Italian researchers: 'Her eyes look into the camera in a challenging way, like she is trying to say that "You don't mess with me!" A self-confident attitude, lifting her chin, looking into the camera with an oblique gaze, kind of evaluating the photographer'.<sup>14</sup>

Two Italian scientists, anthropologist Paolo Mantegazza and botanist Stephen Sommier, visited Sápmi in 1879. They produced a series of anthropometric photos, which were published together with tables of physical measurements and an anthropological description of the Sámi (Mantegazza and Sommier 1880). Mantegazza also wrote a literary account of their voyage to Sápmi, in which he attempted to describe Sámi customs, their mental and moral qualities and their physical appearances. The text was filled with sweeping generalisations and the Sámi were described without hesitation in inferior terms as a 'small and wretched race' having 'all the most marked characteristics of lower peoples [. . .] in all respect much like our children' (Mantegazza 2007 [1881], 417). The book, with photos, is available for digital download, and Somby has worked with these photos several times.<sup>15</sup> At some point, he shared his reflections about the stereotyping discourse of the book: 'It is almost entertaining – in a sad, ironic way – to read much of their work, while thinking 'My God, people in the old days . . .'.<sup>16</sup>

As an example of how Somby experimented with creative strategies to deconstruct the colonial gaze in the Mantegazza and Sommier photos, I considered a reel (short video clip) shared in October 2022.<sup>17</sup> The reel was based on a photo of a young woman who posed

<sup>14</sup> Introductory text to Facebook post with photo of Anne Skum (Mantegazza and Sommier 1879). Source: <https://www.facebook.com/colouyourpast/photos/pb.100066511306798.-2207520000./752810965332006/?type=3> (accessed 29 April 2023).

<sup>15</sup> The digitised version of the book with photos and anthropometric measurement (Mantegazza and Sommier 1880) was made available by Creative Commons Licence (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) through the University of Padova: [https://archive.org/details/Studii-antropologici-sui-Lapponi-PHAIDRA\\_o\\_44099/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/Studii-antropologici-sui-Lapponi-PHAIDRA_o_44099/mode/2up) (accessed 29 April 2023).

<sup>16</sup> Somby's comment on a coloured photo of Lars Mattias Persson Nutti: <https://www.facebook.com/colouyourpast/photos/pb.100066511306798.-2207520000./868103700469398/?type=3> (accessed 30 April 2023).

<sup>17</sup> The reel was shared on Somby's social media profiles, including TikTok and YouTube, in October 2022. Facebook: [https://www.facebook.com/reel/8205618666180098/?s=fb\\_shorts\\_tab&stack\\_idx=0](https://www.facebook.com/reel/8205618666180098/?s=fb_shorts_tab&stack_idx=0) (accessed 29 April 2023). Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cjf9sNejpvG/> (accessed 29 April 2023).

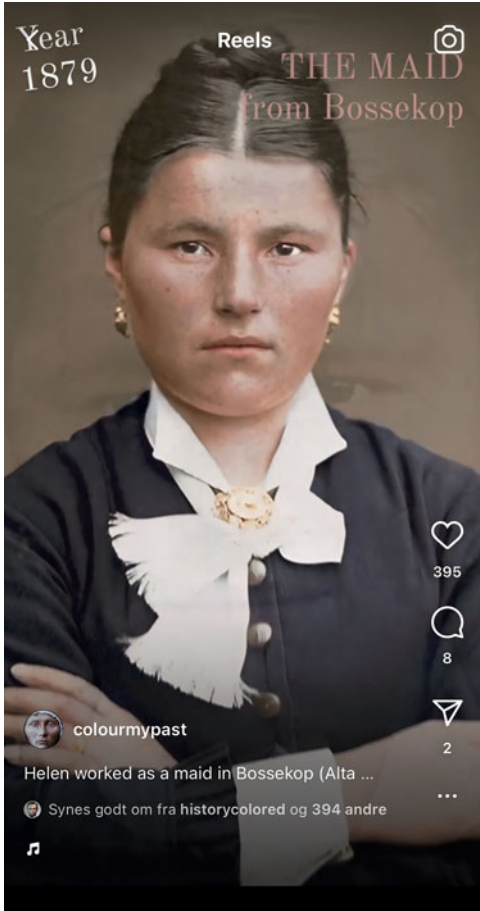


**Figure 2.** Portrait of a young woman. Original photo by Mantegazza and Sommer made in Bossekop in 1879, and published in their book from (1880). PHAIDRA, University of Padova. Creative Commons Licence (CC BY 4.0).

with her arms crossed and a serious expression that could be read as dismissive or possibly sad (Figure 2). The scientists described her as Helen, a coastal Sámi from Kaafjord who worked as a waitress in Bossekop, Alta. Neither her last name nor any anthropometric data were included, and in his caption to the reel, Somby speculated that she might not have allowed the anthropologists to measure her. Furthermore, he remarked that her name was probably Elen, a common Sámi name, and continued, ‘The Italians registered what they heard and wrote from their point of view. I believe they used Helen instead of Elen consistently on all the Sámi women with this name’. Somby used Photoshop to enhance the sharpness and colourise the still photo, giving her a fresh complexion and basing the colours of her eyes and hair on the notes of the anthropologists. Furthermore, her jewellery, which in the monochrome reproduction blended into the background, stands out with a golden tint and adds elegance to her appearance (Figure 3). Somby’s editing practices made the details in her appearance more salient and thereby his colourisation reinscribed a ‘sensuous particularity’ to the colonial photo (Pinney 2014, 88).

He took this strategy even further by creating a reel using the app *Deep Nostalgia*, which can animate faces in still photos. The app was launched in 2021 by the commercial genealogy platform MyHeritage and was promoted as ‘intended for nostalgic use, that is, to bring beloved ancestors back to life’ (MyHeritage 2024).<sup>18</sup> Somby’s reel of Elen combined a slow zooming in on the still photo with a couple of short close-up sequences in which

<sup>18</sup> The app uses AI technology licensed by MyHeritage from D-ID, which specialises in video reenactment based on deep learning technology. To avoid abuse and the creation of deep fake videos, the available driver videos used to simulate movements do not include speech. Nevertheless, the company acknowledges that results of the app may feel uncanny and that the technology is controversial. Users are urged to use the app ‘on your



**Figure 3.** Colourised portrait of a young woman. Original photo by Mantegazza and Sommier, colourised by Somby.

she blinked and moved her head. At one point, she gave a cautious little smile, which contrasts clearly with her attitude in the original photo (Figure 4). This technical simulation, which invited an imaginative identification with her shifting moods, could be experienced as if she had given the viewer a little glimpse of the personality she did not want to reveal to the scientists. One could, of course, question the ethics of making her smile, seemingly against her will, but based on the interplay with Somby's text, I suggest that the reel has more critical potential. Furthermore, Somby added a sound effect with restaurant ambience – people chatting and eating – as if representing Elen's working environment. She may have been busy and annoyed at being disturbed by the scientists.<sup>19</sup> The colourised still photo showing Elen's resistance to the colonial gaze is still included and lingered upon, but the viewer is encouraged to *look past* the racialising visual discourse of the anthropologists:

*Looking past* does not mean ignoring. It requires acknowledging the original purpose of the photograph, especially when that purpose involved constructing 'racial difference' as a basis of control over Indigenous peoples (Peers 2021, 109).

own historical photos and not on photos featuring living people without their permission': <https://www.myheritage.com/deep-nostalgia> (accessed 29 April 2023).

<sup>19</sup> Restaurant Ambience (Version 1, People Dining Eating Talking) from Finnolia Sound Effects.



**Figure 4.** Stills from an animation of ‘Portrait of a young woman’, an original photo by Mantegazza and Sommier colourised and AI-animated by Somby.

Somby’s creative experiment with various digital tools could be seen as an attempt at a reparative reading of the portrayal of the young woman (Hirsch 2012, 24). Although her exact identity remains unknown, Somby’s multimodal aesthetic strategies in this short video reindividualised the portrait. He renamed her with a Sámi name and reclaimed the data extracted by the scientists (the photo and description of her eyes and hair) to make her ‘come alive’.

## Conclusion

The colourised photographs circulating through social media are sometimes dismissed as kitsch or as undermining the historical value of photos, but this article insists on taking a closer look at the trend to examine the role of colourised photos in digital memory culture. Having noticed the popularity of colourised portraits of Indigenous people, I decided to examine the practices of the Sámi colouriser Somby through the lens of independent visual repatriation. Somby mines digitised photo archives, colourises selected photos, and then shares them with introductory captions on his social media profiles. His colourising, storytelling, and sharing practices mainly reclaim old photos taken by non-Sámi photographers, and he invites his followers to participate by identifying the Sámi people in the images and retelling their lives.

Based on a broader netnographic study of Somby’s Facebook and Instagram profiles, this article highlighted two historical photos and read them as examples of *affiliative post-memory* (Hirsch 2012), which here meant engaging affectively with photos that were several generations old (from 1905 and 1879) and reclaiming the portrayed people based on both historical knowledge and imaginative identification. The photo of the Partapuolis elicited stories about the family and recontextualised the photo within settler colonialism. The resilience of the Partapuolis was celebrated with a sense of pride, but this positive feeling was accompanied by more sombre registers of affect related to conflicts between reindeer herding Sámi and Norwegian farmers. In their discussion of the affective

registers elicited by photos, Phu and Brown (2014) argued that ‘any attempt to construct a negative/positive binary can only be reductive’, as the same photo may elicit ‘exquisite sadness and pangs of love’ (351). The memory work around photos on Somby’s Facebook and Instagram profiles resembles joyful communal readings of an online photo album but rests similarly on a decolonial agenda that also involves engaging with painful collective memories. Likewise, asymmetrical colonial encounters emerged as a theme in the second analysis, which examined Somby’s creative response to a portrait of an unknown woman who was photographed by Italian race researchers. Playfully combining meticulous colourisation, new AI animation techniques, a soundtrack and informative text, Somby ‘revived’ the woman, ‘Elen’, and invited the viewer to imagine how annoying these travelling researchers might have seemed to her. He thereby effectively deconstructed the racialising gaze and reclaimed this (so far) unidentified portrait of and for the Sámi people.

The digital colourisation of colonial photographs may be a new take on visual repatriation, but Somby’s strategies bear similarities to the work of other Indigenous artists. As Peers (2021) points out, ‘the intersection of photography and Indigenous people has a global history and common themes linking diverse Indigenous cultures and their historical experiences’ (103). She uses terms such as *reclaiming*, *reworking*, *recycling*, *renaming*, and *reconnecting* to describe the ‘broadly similar sets of creative responses by Indigenous people to historical photography’ (Peers 2021, 103). While the present article has focused on memory work as performed by Somby and his Sámi followers, his work is also followed by non-Sámi people from around the world and thus has the potential to communicate knowledge of colonial history. In an Instagram comment elicited by the post about ‘Elen’ (Somby’s reel and accompanying text), a person from Turkey warmly thanked Somby for sharing his knowledge of Sámi culture and the historical, racialising practices of anthropology, of which this follower had been previously unaware. Examining transcultural connectivity is beyond the scope of this article but is a highly relevant area of focus for future research. The connectivity of digital memory culture makes visual repatriation visible beyond the source communities, and the counternarratives articulated invite non-Indigenous people to engage with colonial history and decolonial discourses. Zooming in on the practices of a colouriser of Indigenous background has revealed an unanticipated depth of engaged memory work, as the trend of sharing colourised photos emerged as an outlet for inclusive visual repatriation.

**Data availability statement.** The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in the open Facebook and Instagram accounts of Per Ivar Somby.

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