

# The Anonymous but Acknowledged Sámi Woman at Ellis Island

by Elle Márjá (Ellen Marie) Jensen

*An introduction to a book to  
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The following is not an exaggeration: the first time I saw her face seven years ago she took my breath away — the Sámi woman (cover) in a collection of prominently placed photos at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, New York City. Ellis Island served as the point of entry for cross-Atlantic immigrants to the United States from roughly 1880 to 1938. The museum engages all of its visitors' senses; it succeeds at enlivening a realistic re-enactment of that segment of the immigrant experience. When walking through the entrance and towards the immigrant processing zone, one almost feels like a beleaguered late 19<sup>th</sup> century cross-Atlantic arrival. The facility and all of its functions are intact and as they might have experienced it. Large, still, black and white photos of some of the millions of newcomers hang from the ceilings and on the walls. I come to write this by way of one of those anonymous photos, a photo of a Sámi woman wearing *gákti* who arrived in North America sometime between 1905 and 1920.

Her face is one of the first I saw amongst a large collage of immigrant “portraits”<sup>1</sup> when we entered the museum. In the section of the museum where the entire Sherman Collection is housed in the corridors above the “Great Hall,” her ¾ image is also hanging amongst other “exotic” looking new arrivals in cultural dress. The caption reads “Lapp Woman Immigrant.” I obtained a copy of the photo and have enthusiastically shown it to friends and acquaintances in the hope that someone could identify her. A friend of mine who comes from the same general area of Sápmi as the woman in the photo commented perceptively on her expression: “She is both frightened and proud.”<sup>2</sup> I have since visited the museum again in December of 2006 to research how her photo came to be there and I have increasingly pondered what she might mean to us, living in North America, who have ancestors from Sápmi. Her image confirms our existence in North America in black and white. Each time I look at her eyes, she beckons me to do justice to her story.

*She haunts me.*

At the time when I was doing research in 2004 for my master's thesis on the Sámi in America — the subject of this book — it seemed like the accepted conclusion in the Sámi American community that the woman in the photo was one of the reindeer herders commissioned by the Alaskan government to immigrate to America in 1894 and 1898. At that time, her image functioned as a means to simultaneously

contextualize and challenge the practice of “naming” immigrants' ethnicity and culture according to totalizing concepts of “race” and the western concept of “nation” (which will be reviewed at length in the chapters to follow). I made a promise to myself at that time to find out who she is, who her relatives are, and how they feel about her image hanging there — the intention was to disarticulate her identity from “race” and “nation,” and provide a space for her own silenced narrative.

Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980) theorized two concepts at play when one “reads” a photograph: the *studium* and the *punctum*. The *studium* is that which is culturally, socially or politically recognizable, immediately accessible, or ultimately represents the intention of the photographer. The *punctum* is that which “wounds” or “pricks” the viewer, it is that which engages the viewer on an emotional level, going beyond the photographer's intentions. The *punctum* can be a small detail, which a certain viewer cannot seem to release from their gaze. In the photo of the Sámi woman at Ellis Island, it is her eyes that “prick me” that seem to beg for a deeper reading than the *studium* — the reading that says “Lapp Woman Immigrant.” In the sense that the woman in the photo represents a collective ancestor — to borrow from Toni Morrison's literary theme of writing “the presence of the ancestor” — to acknowledge the woman in the photo is to acknowledge the continued importance of our ancestors in our contemporary lived lives. It is to remain or re-establish our tribal “rootedness.”

Her face has been viewed by millions of tourists and visitors, both American and international — few of them are likely to understand what it must have meant to be a “Lapp Woman Immigrant” awaiting her fate in the detainment area of the island. Few of those visitors know that “Lapp” is Sámi and the Sámi come from Sápmi and that Sápmi is both a place and a people of a culture with an alternative temporal and spatial vision as compared to their Nordic neighbors.<sup>3</sup> I continue to wonder: can her silenced narrative find voice through her descendants and relatives on both sides of the Atlantic?

When I returned to Ellis Island in 2006, I spoke at length with a librarian in the collections department. I had presumed that there must have been more photos of the reindeer herders in the collection. He allowed me to view all of the originals housed there — specifically the Sherman Collection. There were no other reindeer herders, no other Sámi, but there were other photos of members of peoples who today would also consider themselves to be indigenous,

like the North African Berber, and East African Borana. But even before I viewed this rich collection, the librarian had been insistent that there were no photos of people with reindeer anywhere in the museum and that if there had ever been a group of people to come through Ellis Island with a herd of reindeer he would have known about it (Dosick, 2006).

I was still unconvinced; after all, she was wearing the Guovdageaidnu *gákti*, but I kept in mind that the particular *gákti* is worn by people from the surrounding area in both Finland and Sweden. I meticulously examined the faces of all the photos of the reindeer herders who came in both 1894 and 1898 in the book *Saami, Reindeer, and Gold in Alaska: The Emigration of Saami from Norway to Alaska* (Vorren 1994) to see if I could find her face amongst them. No matches. Later, I began to contact descendants of the Alaskan reindeer herders who came in 1898 to ask them if they knew anything about the woman in the photo. They had interesting and important stories to tell about other photos taken of their ancestors, both in New York City and elsewhere, but none of the stories matched the woman in the photo at Ellis Island. No one could identify her as being one of their relatives.

At a loss for an explanation, I recently decided to call the librarian again. He asked me when the reindeer herders came, and when I told him 1898 and 1894, he said something like:

“There’s no way she could have been with that group of reindeer herders in 1898 for two reasons. One is that the Ellis Island station had burned down in 1897. It was undergoing reconstruction at that time, which meant that they came through the processing zone at the lower tip of Manhattan. And the Sherman photos were all taken between 1905 and 1920 at the newly constructed building” (Dosick, 2008).

I must confess that I read her photo differently upon learning that she did not arrive alongside the reindeer herders in 1898. This knowledge engendered a deep compassion in me because she represented the numerous oral histories of Sámi Americans who seek to understand their ancestors’ sense of isolation when they arrived in North America; most Sámi immigrants came alone or with their immediate family or spouses. It is not difficult to imagine her trying to find her way alone in Manhattan, like the thousands of others who shared her fate.

David Levi Strauss discusses the role of believability, identity and consciousness in the use of photography in *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics* (2003):

*Belief involves the “assent of the mind to statement, or to the truth of a fact beyond observation, on the*

*testimony of another, or to a fact or truth on the evidence of consciousness”* (Oxford English Dictionary). *In relation to photography, this assent is influenced, but not exhausted, by the photograph’s relation to “objective reality.” It is also influenced and determined by its place in the complex web of subjectivities that determines how we negotiate the world /.../The relation between photography and belief is especially complicated in images having to do with identity, where the effect of a photograph can be decisive/.../Sometimes, the photograph doesn’t need to prove anything on its own; it corroborates and confirms what we already know. (2003: 73-74)*

The librarian pointed me towards a book that had recently been published by the Aperture Foundation called *Augustus F. Sherman: Ellis Island Portraits 1905-1920* (2005). It had a short history of the collection and a biography of the photographer himself, as well as 100 of the original photos. Some of them are accompanied by the original photographer’s notes and/or some have notes about the subjects’ presumed culture written by the editors of the book. The page with her photo has a caption beneath it written by the editors of the book that says: “Sami Woman from Finland.” In other words, Sherman did not identify her into one of his “immigrant (racial) types.” Sherman’s notes that were written on some of the photos themselves offer clues as to their origins or intended destination in North America; her photo was blank.

#### *The Sherman Collection*

The photographer, Alexis F. Sherman, was a clerk who worked for the commissioner of immigration at Ellis Island. He used his power and position as a US immigration officer to summon immigrants who were detained for processing to sit or pose for “portraits.” This was clearly part of his fascination with photography and a reflection of his own culture shock when encountering thousands of non-western European immigrants over the course of fifteen years (Dosick 2006). It is also evident that he was particularly interested in the discourse and practice of “racial typing” of the time. He chose subjects that either wore colorful cultural dress or otherwise stood out from the “usual” northwestern European immigrants (Irish, German, and Dutch). In general, he would photograph groups together. The Sámi woman in the photo was likely alone in the detainment zone, because if she had been with a group it seems to follow that he would have photographed them together like he had with other groups. The authorities detained certain people to ascertain whether the new arrival was “fit to farm” or otherwise work the land, or to determine if they were physically or psychologically ill.

Susan Sontag discussed what it means to be educated by photos, truth and ethics in *On Photography*, (1977): *Photographs really are experience captured, and the camera is the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mode.../To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and, therefore, like power. (1977: 4)*

While Sherman did use, or even abuse, his power to acquire the photographic material in the collection, one could argue that this material is of great value; it constitutes a photographic record that can either dispute or confirm the written historic record. It could also be argued that such images could in some sense corroborate oral histories and family narratives that set Sámi immigrants apart from their Nordic cohorts. Photos are often as important in historical research as written text — they constitute a record of a past event. “Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it” (Sontag, p. 23). We know this event happened, we know that the Sámi woman passed through the corridors of the Ellis Island immigrant processing zone because “seeing is believing.”

Photos can be of particular value in the case of hidden histories, where immigration records likely stated the nation of her origin (Norway, Sweden, and Finland) as opposed to her own cultural and ethnic self-understanding. Researchers seeking evidence of Sámi immigrants in the records at Ellis Island would find scant evidence (other than perhaps in the subjects’ regions of origin) to support the entrance of thousands of Sámi immigrants to North America. Oftentimes, the immigration officials would hastily write down a name or even change immigrants’ names to befit an anglicized pronunciation, or they would write an immigrants place of origin in place of the surname. Less than five percent of the immigrants who came through Ellis Island were not admitted and sent back to their countries of origin (Mesenhöller, 2005). In other words, the Sámi woman in the photo likely settled in North America and like thousands of Sámi (and other) immigrants, she had to continue her life in America with some semblance of dignity.

#### *Contesting Essential Histories and the Photographic Record*

The Alaskan Sámi immigrant story is perhaps the most famous and documented of all Sámi immigration to North America. Their descendants can locate their Sámi relatives within their respective cultural communities, where the Sámi language is spoken and visible manifestations of the culture are present in the dress, art, and lifestyle. Those who would become known as the Alaskan Sámi came as

a group. Researchers from Sápmi, the Nordic countries and North America have written or met with some of the Alaskan Sámi descendants and the story has oftentimes been represented in such a way that it has become the essential Sámi immigration story; their story became the essentialized Sámi immigration story of North America. While the Alaskan Sámi immigration story is of great importance, it is but one of thousands of equally important Sámi immigration stories to North America. An educated guess from the Sámi Siida of North America is that those who would become known as the Alaskan Sami represent perhaps 1% of the total number of Sámi who immigrated to North America between 1880 and 1940 (Johnson, 2008)<sup>4</sup>.

Susan Sontag in *On Photography* wrote on the issue of photography and evidence:

*Photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we’re shown a photograph of it. In one version of its utility, the camera record incriminates. Starting with their use in the murderous roundup of Communards in June 1871, photographs became a useful tool of modern states in the surveillance and control of their increasingly mobile populations. In another version of its utility, the camera record justifies. A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort, but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what’s in the picture. (5: 1977)*

With the knowledge that the woman in the photo could have potentially come from Sweden or Finland, she affirms, or rather, the photo “furnishes evidence” of what many of us in the Sámi American community know well: there is still a lot of work to be done to find a space for the voices of those forgotten or lesser known Sámi immigrants and their descendants. Further, there is still historical research needed to fully comprehend what compelled Sámi people to emigrate from various regions of Sápmi. It seems of limited value to presume that a people experiencing the oftentimes profound cultural duress of forced assimilation and other colonizing practices would forever leave for precisely the same reasons that their Nordic cohorts did. Each of the narratives in this book speaks volumes to breaking the silence of this hidden immigrant narrative of the woman in the photo. Likewise, her presence on the walls of Ellis Island supports and validates the narrators’ stories since all of them had ancestors (Sámi or otherwise) who entered America through Ellis Island.

The woman’s captivating image is the subject of many immigrant photo displays on view in several key places in the near infamous Museum of

Immigration at Ellis Island. Something must have compelled the museum to place her image in multiple locations, such that anyone who visits the museum would see her image. Do her ancestors and relatives know that her image hangs there? Do they know that she is a Sámi? Do they know that her image is part of a historic record that begins the process of telling a broader collective story of an indigenous people?

The caption in the book published by the Aperture Foundation says “Sami Woman from Finland” – the assignment of her national origins were determined by the book’s editors; the caption beneath the photo in Ellis Island says “Lapp Woman Immigrant” – the assignment given to her by the museum. Which one is authoritative? Neither of these assignments captures her cultural and ethnic complexity, or that of her descendants; such is the limited text available to a caption or tagline accompanying a photo. I have tried to contact the book’s publishers to find out how they came to the conclusion that she was from Finland; I have yet to reach them. I also inquired with the librarian about whether it was possible to change the wording in the text beside her photo in the museum to “Sámi” rather than “Lapp.” Use of the term “Lapp” in official publications has been vociferously challenged by many Sámi Americans as having derogatory and also inaccurate content and connotations<sup>6</sup>.

When it concerns *gákti* and *knowledge*, I choose to defer to the *indigenous knowledge* of our dress culture from the Sámi themselves, the indisputable experts of Sámi culture. Indeed, she could have come from anywhere in the general region that uses that *gákti* – Norway, Sweden or Finland. An educated guess is that she was not from Guovdageaidnu. The persistence of the knowledge of kinship clans in Guovdageaidnu, as well as the connectedness between the descendants of the Alaskan reindeer herders and their relatives in Sápmi, is enough to speculate that she did not come from Guovdageaidnu because it is likely that her relatives would have known about her photo in a famous museum and would have identified her by now. The only likelihood that she was from Guovdageaidnu is that she was en route to Alaska to join some of the other reindeer herders, but this explanation is still doubtful, given that by 1905 – the earliest year she could have arrived at Ellis Island – many of the original Sámi reindeer herders who immigrated to Alaska had already left the area, either to return to Sápmi or they had moved south to other parts of the United States (Vorren 1994)<sup>7</sup>.

Regardless of the nation-state she came from, she deserves to take up her rightful place in immigrant history, like the thousands of other Sámi immigrants who crossed the Atlantic and passed through that

island, for whatever reason. She deserves to have a name and narrative, so that we might better know ourselves and the Sámi part of our cultural birthright in America. With the narratives in this book, I hope to begin the process of doing justice to her story as an integral thread in the fabric of our collective story.

<sup>1</sup> Portraits, in the contemporary sense, involve explicit or implicit permission or a desire on the part of the subject to have one's portrait taken. It is not clear whether the subjects of the photos indeed gave explicit (perhaps implicit?) permission to be photographed; it seems much more likely that many of them were commanded to sit or pose for the photograph.

<sup>2</sup> Personal communication with Lena Susanne Kvernmo Gaup, 2007

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of indigenous temporality and spatiality see *Red Pedagogy: Native American Social and Political Thought*, by Grande, Sandy. New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers inc., 2004

<sup>4</sup> An example of the confusing and still problematic issue surrounding the manner in which origins and names were confused at Ellis Island is in the following anecdote: in 2006, I worked briefly for a travel bureau where my duty was to call people in the database to see if they had any banquets or events in the near future where they needed to book facilities. In the database I encountered the surname Romsa. When I asked the person where they believed they got their name they said "it's Norwegian." It seems likely that this was a case where the immigrant may have said "Romsa" believing that the officer was asking where he/she came from, and the officer then presumed that "Romsa" was his/her surname.

<sup>5</sup> I want to make clear that I am referring to a local discourse in Sápmi. Many Sámi Americans have been compared to the Alaskan Sámi, but this comparison or measuring authenticity has not come from the Alaskan Sámi themselves. The narrative of Mimi (as well as many writings by Alaskan Sámi descendants) supports the shared experiences of the third generation Sámi Americans, where the previous generations, even the reindeer herders, oftentimes remained silent about their ethnicity to their offspring. For the record: I have never had my authenticity questioned by an Alaskan Sámi descendant.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the use of the term "Lapp" versus Sámi, see article on Rudy Johnson by Mel Olson (2000) at [http://home.earthlink.net/%7Earran2/archive/rudolph\\_johnson.htm](http://home.earthlink.net/%7Earran2/archive/rudolph_johnson.htm)

<sup>7</sup> Alaska did not officially gain statehood until 1959.

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Contact the author at [freelance.global@gmail.com](mailto:freelance.global@gmail.com).