

of the 20th century. He was especially admired by the Greenlanders for his capacity to adjust to the climate and thereby to the conditions of the Inuit. He was seen as part of the Arctic world and collected important ethnographic material, which he narrated with the gift of the storyteller. The Kununguak nickname referred to his childhood in Jakobshavn, now Ilulissat.

Perhaps the greatest explorers have to be storytellers at heart, people who journey into the landscape and its people with an open mind and a dream. *The Polar North: Ways of Speaking, Ways of Belonging*, by Stephen Pax Leonard, follows that track. A linguist and an anthropologist at heart, Leonard gives a very personal account of the meeting with a small group of Polar Inughuit in the town of Qaanaaq and two other settlements on the northernmost western coast of Greenland.

This traveler faced a landscape quite different from that of Kununguak. Climate change and Western values have altered the life of the people. Set on getting to know the Polar Inughuit, Leonard was first and foremost determined to learn their language, seen as an almost impossible quest as this polysynthetic language uses constructions of several hundred affixes. The challenge of this task becomes clear to the reader through selected words presented in brackets.

The chronological narrative takes us through a year of the inner and outer journeys undertaken by Leonard. He describes his travels in the magnificent and unforgiving landscape of the Arctic, alone and in the company of the Greenlanders, and shares his reflections on meetings with different people who came to play an important part in that journey. He observes the sledge dogs and the evocative grandeur of the sea ice, the mountains and icebergs, the glaciers, and the fjords. All form almost equally important parts of the story.

Like all travelers, Leonard is also moving away from something. He expects to leave behind Western culture with all its unnecessary gadgets, the mind-numbing humdrum, pollution, and alienation from nature, but there it is waiting for him with its twisted features among polar bears and seals, hunters, and howling dogs. A *tupilak*, a magic seal, slipped into the water thousands of miles below him ready to kill its target. The choice of making this a very personal narrative seen from this one man's perception becomes justified. The otherness has partly gone and is replaced by cell phones and soap operas.

But the old traditions live on alongside this new affix to culture. Like the core of a word, they are at the heart of the mind-set of these men and women as soon as Leonard manages the language and thereby their way of speaking. The kinship system is still the strong and sometimes merciless centre of the structure of society. Suicides are the flip side of these ways of belonging. The endless stream of visits between the inhabitants is both caring and controlling, the friendly approach to the newcomer is both heartfelt and of a pecuniary interest.

This is a landscape the navigation of which takes a capacity for humility, as these people have seen various

a

THE POLAR NORTH: WAYS OF SPEAKING, WAYS OF BELONGING. By STEPHEN PAX LEONARD. London: Francis Boutle Publishers, 2014. ISBN 978-1-903427-94-1. 311 p., maps, glossary, bib. Hardbound. £20.00.

Kununguak ('little Knud') was the loving nickname that the Greenlandic people gave to Knud Rasmussen, perhaps the most popular explorer of Greenland. There had been several others before him since the Egede family settled as missionaries on the west coast of Greenland in 1721 and wrote their valuable reports to the Danish king. They met a people almost untouched by other cultures, and they commenced the change.

However, Knud was the one who really established himself in the hearts of the Inuit people and his readers in Denmark and later elsewhere. He was half Greenlandic and half Danish, spoke the Greenlandic language, and wrote his observations and popular books in the first half

waves of *kavdluna* or white people penetrating into their world over a very long time, each with a craving they were expected to satisfy. The way that Leonard moves into this sensitive society is by being prepared to take on the role of partly the apprentice, partly the fool, the one prepared to be ridiculed and laughed at. He slowly gains their respect, thin at the edge like the melting ice.

The linguistic and anthropological theories that guide Leonard's approach are closely linked to phenomenology and the work of Merleau-Ponty. Landscape and language are enmeshed with silence or gesture in this analysis of ethnolinguistic identity (p. 128). The choice of style of narrative is also connected to this method. It might be seen as a deviation from the chosen genre of travel writing when the text turns from a description of the smallest details, such as dog droppings and belching, straight to academic speculation on language and meaning. It might also be seen as a deviation from the phenomenological approach when the emotional responses of Leonard colour the narrative. Or it might be seen as the consequence of interacting with a culture and landscape that have to be understood through the senses, because so much is unspoken.

Stamina and determination, poetic experiences, and ecological issues are woven together in a tapestry of observations. When the epilogue turns to the ecological problems, which seem to be magnified in this vulnerable landscape, the very personal journey with Leonard makes sense. As a reader one has come a long and detailed way. When these pressing challenges of survival are presented, they become the more relevant as Leonard has kept such a tight focus on the minutest experiences—not an easy task in a world where doomsday is looming in the media. The repetitive warnings of the world's imminent collapse numb us, but suddenly, through this detailed and emotional approach to this small group of inhabitants on this most northern

outpost of human existence, comes a feeling of immense sadness and the need to act responsibly. The book never claims to be academic; it uses academic theory as an addition to the narrative. Leonard is a storyteller and environmentalist first and an academic thereafter. This is one man's quest. What makes it important to the rest of us are its urgency and respect for the culture. Kununguak's collection of material reflected a people who were glued together by myths, taboo rules, and belief in spirits; Leonard's is a culture trying to find new ways of navigation in the midst of a slowly vanishing landscape, while at the same time keeping a sense of belonging in their culture and their landscape.

This is a brave book in the long history of explorers in the Arctic. It is evocative, poetic, and critical, "like a tapestry of vignettes," as the author himself points out in the prologue (p. 17). The focus on the personal experiences renders a minute, profound, and vulnerable picture of the "otherness" of the traveler. This focus can at times be extremely revealing in a way that any poet bares his feelings for the unknown receiver, only to be reined in by the fact that Leonard is also an observer of his own embodiment of landscape, language, and culture. *The Polar North* is a detailed, environmentally deeply relevant presentation of a group of people on the edge of existence, and at the same time, a story about a year in the life of Leonard.

Merete Demant Jakobsen
School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography
Oxford University
5 Stanley Road
Oxford, OX4 1QY, England
and
University of Southern Denmark
Tybrindvej 10
Husby, 5592 Ejby, Denmark
mdemant@health.sdu.dk