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The Last Frontiers:

Adventure and Belonging in the Anthropocene

Visual Ethnography

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Abstract
In this photographic essay, I explore the romantic pursuit of happiness in Svalbard and Patagonia—places imagined as among the world's last remaining wilderness areas. I use the camera as a tool to contrast and compare ways of life in these sites, drawing on the analytical category of dwelling-mobility in a visual approach to landscape, transience, settler ethos, history, exploration, community, home, globalization, spirituality, and future. The research draws on critical perspectives that examine the changing conditions of the good life under global capitalism and non-dualist, phenomenological, and ecological approaches that situate our relation to the world at the centre of contemporary notions of happiness.

Keywords: Wilderness, happiness, tourism, conservation, enclosure.

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Introduction

In this essay, I explore the romantic pursuit of happiness in places imagined as among the world's last remaining wilderness areas through photography. I see these sites as articulated through an ethos of exploration and adventure on the one hand, and through the romantic trope of return, of communing with and dwelling in the landscape, on the other. Thus, the entanglement of the existential categories of adventure or mobility and dwelling or belonging as centrally informing romantic notions of happiness structure my approach (see Dahlberg & Galvin 2010). Additionally, my research is informed by non-dualist (Spinoza 2007 [1670]; Vetlesen 2019), phenomenological (Heidegger 2001), and ecological approaches (Næss 1995, 2008), that situate our relation to the world at the centre of contemporary notions of happiness and on critical perspectives that examine the changing conditions of "the good life" under global capitalism (see Han 2015; Eriksen 2016; Rosa 2019). Through these perspectives, I challenge what I perceive to be a reductive standard analysis of the relation between man and nature (see, e.g. Cronon 1996), unpacking the complexity and depth of meanings that are attributed to the natural landscape in Western Modernity. The purpose of this exercise is to show the multiplicity of ways in which the western view of nature goes beyond the instrumentality that is often assumed and taken for granted in popular narratives of environmental destruction.

Despite their geographical distance, Svalbard and Patagonia are embedded in a common cultural history as the frontiers of civilization—sites where scientific and national agendas have merged. First, through the western practice of exploration: the discovery, mapping, naming, and cataloguing of geographies that have been imagined as remote, pristine, and inhospitable. Next, through imperialist processes grounded in the territorialising practices of settler colonialism, resource extraction, and conservation. Thus,´ layered historical processes have often involved the dispossession of groups that formerly inhabited these territories. Today, a new form of dispossession is taking place at these frontiers, mainly driven by infrastructural developments and a rapidly expanding tourist industry that challenges local forms of life, reshapes relations between humans and the environment, and transforms modern citizenship ideals according to market dynamics (see Fairhead *et al.* 2012; Salem 2023; Salem *et al.* forthcoming).

There is a long tradition in anthropology to look to societal margins to better attain a necessarily critical distance to and, thereby, an improved understanding of key processes of systemic change (see Das and Poole 2004; Tsing 2005). Approaching Svalbard and Patagonia as the frontiers of globalization and comparing the ongoing reconfiguration of socioenvironmental relations at these sites through the photographic lens, I have tried to grasp the relation between past, present, and future imaginaries of and conditions for "the good life" and how changes are expressed, challenged, and resisted by the romantics and adventurers of the 21st century.

The processes I observed raise many questions and concerns with regards to the future of democracy and of humanity's relationship to the landscape. In an urbanized and industrialized world, the compounded effect of hyper-rationalism, alienation, and environmental risks are increasingly imagined as an existential threat (Roitman 2013). Echoing romantic tropes, there are growing concerns that the modern world is "sick" and that in order to "get well" we must "heal" our relationship to nature (MacMahon 2006; Rosa 2019). Through my research, I have tried to reflect on how our relation to the natural landscape is changing and what this means—also for processes related to ideas of healing.

What is the role of the natural landscape in processes of social reproduction? How does nature act as a liminal space and source of creativity, spiritual connection, and meaning? How are contemporary market- and state-dynamics changing our relation to nature? Why is it important to guarantee equal

access to the natural landscape for all humans? Why do modernist cosmologies pitt humans against nature and how can we ensure that the needs of both human and non-human nature are met in the future? What socio-political forms do we need to develop to meet these needs?

Thus, my project seeks to reclaim the value of nature in a broad and relational sense. Through ethnographic encounters and theoretical discussions I challenge the understanding of nature as being first and foremost a resource for humanity (see Spinoza 2007 [1670]; Næss 2008). Instead, I emphasize how nature often figures as a healer and spiritual other; as a social and ritual space; as a home and provider; as part of our cultural history and identity; as the source of universal consciousness and thus, as a part of us. Importantly, I try to show how these different roles of nature are not limited to animist or indigeneous cultures, but inherent in western modernity—an insight that equips us with the tools to distinguish the value of different relations to nature in attempts to reflect on its importance and role in the futures we envision and seek to create.

Affective Landscapes

Figure 1 Snowmobile on the sea-ice on the East Coast of Spitsbergen (Svalbard). Photo by Tomas Salem, June 2021.

The "High Arctic" is a region that has been shrouded in mystery for its remoteness and inhospitable environment. Covered by a vast and moving sheet of sea-ice and lacking in the basic resources needed to sustain human populations, it remained one of the last areas of the world to be mapped and explored. Svalbard was visited by European explorers as early as the 16th century and became an important site from which expeditions to reach the North Pole were launched in the early 1900's. Polar explorers like Fridtjof Nansen,

Roald Amundsen, and Helge Ingstad became national heroes in Norway and have all been important figures in the production of the Svalbard a place for adventure, exploration, and Arctic imperialism. Alongside the vast and purportedly "empty" wilderness landscape of the archipelago, these historical figures continue to inspire islanders and visitors who see the icy Arctic desert as a place to find peace, calm, and solace: as a place to experience a sense of timelessness and to enact the ethos of exploration.

Figure 2 Climber in front of the Fitz Roy-massif at dawn (Patagonia).
Photo by Tomas Salem, January 2023.

Fernando Magellan, Charles Darwin, Perito Moreno, Bonnie and Clyde, Cesare Maestri, Cesarino Ferrari and Bruce Chatwin are some of the names that have been strongly associated the southernmost region of Latin America. Colonized by European settlers as late as the latter half of the 1800's, the indigeneous Tehuelche and Mapuche tribes have been known for their fierce resistance to the Argentine and Chilean military campaigns that annihilated much of their culture through genocidal violence. This part of Patagonia's cultural history has remained a footnote in western imaginaries of the region, which emphasize its "discovery" by European explorers. Today, Patagonia is seen as the epitome of wilderness in western culture: bountiful wildlife, jagged peaks, large glaciers, and a vast natural landscape that has been imagined as empty or scarcely populated by *estancias* (remote mega-farms) in decline. Shrouded in mystery and romanticized in lore and literature, the Patagonian landscape continues to effect a magnetic pull on new generations of settlers and modern explorers. The granite peaks of the Fitz-Roy and Torre massifs have long been considered among the world's most challenging ascents, attracting French, British, and Italian climbers in particular. They continue to fuel ego-battles, heroic narratives, and social dramas to this day.

Transient Villages

Figure 3 Longyearbyen (Svalbard). Photo by Tomas Salem, May 2021.

Longyearbyen was established in the early 20th century as a coal-mining settlement and company town and has always retained a sense of exceptionalism. It has a highly transient and cosmopolitan population. Most town dwellers stay for a period of time before returning to the mainland, and almost all the housing infrastructure is state-owned (it used to be owned by the mining company). Historically, it has been a highly stratified society, with mine operators living in the upper parts of the valley, removed from the administrative employees and bureaucrats who lived near the coast. Today, as mining is being discontinued as part of a national strategy of green transition, the economy is being geared towards tourism, research, and satelite communication. Class hierarchies are becoming racialized as professional nieches are occupied by different nationalities, with ethnic Norwegians at the top and southeast asians at the bottom of the professional hierarchy. To avoid further preassures on the ecosystem, local authorities have set a cap on hotel beds such that tourist growth must be achieved by attracting wealthier guests and by extending the tourist season.

Figure 4 El Chalten (Patagonia). Photo by Tomas Salem, October 2020

El Chalten is Argentina's youngest town. Established in 1985 following a territorial dispute with Chile, the small tourist hamlet has seen an exponential growth in residents and visitors, especially after the opening of the international airport of El Calafate in 2001 and the paving of the mythical *Ruta 40*—the highway that runs across Argentina from north to south along the Andes-range—in the mid 2000's. At about the same time, reliable forecasting radically changed alpine climbing in the surrounding mountains, making it possible for climbers to wait out the bad weather characteristic of the region in the village. Lacking cell-phone signal and efficient internet connection well into the late 2010's, the village retained its atmosphere of remoteness and adventure. However, booming tourism and development has radically transformed the area, with mounting preassures to expand the village beyond its current limits and a growing housing emergency similar to those produced in the world's major "global" cities, fuelling processes of expulsion and a sense of living in a state of permanent impermanence. Meanwhile, foreign and out-of-town investors try to establish El Chalten as an elite destination, developing luxury hotels and infrastructure.

Settlers and Pioneers

Figure 5 Marina's home (Svabard). Photo by Tomas Salem, May 2021.

Dutch settler and modern adventurer Marina in her tiny home and workshop. Marina spends half her time on Svalbard, where she runs a small jewlery-shop, and half her time in the Mediterranean, living on her sailboat. Through the years, she has been on many expeditions in the Arctic wilderness, cultivating a close and intimate relation to Svalbard's nature, like many long-term residents. While the Svalbard Treaty grants Norway territorial sovereignty over Svalbard under the condition that citizens of all the signing countries are given equal access to the archipelago, Marina and other non-norwegian settlers are facing increasing bureaucratic challenges. They attribute this to the Norwegian authorities' decision to privilege Norwegian citizens as part of a geopolitical attempt to ensure a Norwegian majority in the cosmopolitan island community. This is a different kind of Arctic imperialism on an archipelago that never had an indigeneous community, compounding the effects of the racialization of the job-market and attributing further privileges to Norwegian residents in relation to other groups.

Figure 6 La Chocolateria (Patagonia). Photo by Tomas Salem, March 2021.

In the early 90's, after hearing that the state was giving out plots of land in El Chaltén, Anabel packed her belongings on the back of her pick-up truck and drove 3000km from her home in Rosario to the provincial capital of Santa Cruz. There, a dismissive military officer informed her that there was no land left in the hamlet. Ana had brought the officer to her truck and uncovered the tarp protecting her belongings. Among them were two ferns and a broomstick: the officer had to accept that she was there to stay. Eventually conceding to her demand, Anabel and her partner were told to count 30 meters to the left at the end of the main boulevard, mark the spot with a wooden pole, count 30 meters further, and place a second wooden pole. This delimited their plot. At the time, El Chaltén was not much more than a few administrative buildings and gravel streets. Very few private homes had yet been built. On the night of their arrival, the fierce northwestern winds that normally sweep down the valley had shredded their tent, forcing them to seek cover in the low woods surrounding the village. A few weeks later, they made the 6-hour drive along the gravel road to the neighbour town of El Calafate. They spent the little money they had on materials that allowed them to erect a small cabin and over the course of the next years, they built *La Chocolateria*, Anabel's chocolate factory, with timber that had been cleared when the 40km road to Lago del Desierto was opened. 30 years later, Anabel's small café has gained mythical status among climbers from all over the world as a social meeting point.

Cultural History

Figure 7 Reindeer hunter (Svalbard). Photo by Tomas Salem, September 2020.

The first groups that engaged in economic productive activities on Svalbard were hunters and trappers from today's Russia that traded in fur: polar bear, polar foxes, and seal. In the 19th century, whale-hunting incited the establishment of the first settlements on the island. However, it was the coal-mining of the 20th century that spurred the creation of the first year-round towns of significance. The hunting and trapper-culture has been upheld at a few trapper-stations and by hunting practices among locals, who hunt reindeer, ptarmigan, and seal at annual, ritualized events that can act as important social events in their own right. Both the hunting and trapping tradition as well as mining, which is gradually beeing abandoned, retain an important symbolic and material presence on Svalbard, with old infrastructure, including old cabins that are used by locals, dotting the Arctic landscape.

Figure 8 The *gaucho* Don Guerra in his *quincho* (Patagonia).
Photo by Tomas Salem, January 2020.

The *asados* at Don Guerra's *quincho* started as an end-of-season ritual among alpine climbers that would spend the summer months up at the Fitz-Roy and Torre base-camps decades ago, before predictable forecasts radically transformed climbing in the area. Today, Don Guerra's *asados* are an institution in El Chaltén, signalling community belonging. Originally from northern Patagonia, Don Guerra worked as a *gaucho* (cowboy) at the *estancia* that occupied the valley of Rio de las Vueltas prior to the establishment of the village. While Patagonia is often imagined as an empty wilderness, it has sustained human populations for thousands of years. Early populations were nomadic hunters but the few Tehuelches that survived the Argentine genocide carried out in the late 19th century under the name of the "desert campaign" farmed the upper areas of the valley through the 20th century. Their descendants still live in the village and have resisted the dispossession of their land in the courts to no avail. The *estancias* that were established on native lands relied on grazing practices that have lead to the desertification of the Patagonian steppe. The creation of national parks and protected areas in the 20th century often implied a challenge to agricultural production and today, while the gaucho culture remains alive at some *estancias*, many farms have turned to tourism for income.

Modern Explorers

Figure 9 Skiing down from Nordenskioldtoppen (Svalbard). Photo by Tomas Salem, May 2021..

A group of friends ski-touring to Nordenskioldtoppen, near Longyearbyen. During the spring and summer months there is 24 hours of sunlight in Svalbard. On this particular day, the group summited around midnight. Sheltered by the cold winds that had picked up during the short ascent, they celebrated the birthday of David, an Italian glaciologist and modern explorer who has skied across Svalbard from south to north and spends large parts of the year out in the Arctic landscape. Longyearbyen is home to a many young outdoor enthusiasts who get enthralled by the atmosphere of adventure that permeates the town. Many locals plan and carry out “expeditions” to faraway corners of the island, spending days, weeks, or even months in the icy desert landscape. Some roam the landscape by ski, others by snowmobile, yet others with an entire entourage of dogs and sleds. Some live isolated lives as hunters and trappers, others spend the dark winter months in remote huts in quiet contemplation, in tests of character. As one young women put it: “In Svalbard, everyone can be an explorer.”

Figure 10 Climbing on Aguja Guillaumet (Patagonia). Photo by Tomas Salem, November 2020.

Southern Patagonia is a climbing mecca. With a rich climbing history filled with dramatic tales of death and survival, of false ascents and heroic achievements, and of the changing conditions and technologies for big-wall climbing, the Torre and Fitz-Roy massifs have continued to impress awe and respect in the climbing community. On any given summer day, the climbing areas near the village are brimming with climbers from Europe and the Americas. In recent decades, El Chaltén has become the epicenter of a growing Argentine climbing-community, with the biggest walls proving to be veritable rituals of passage on the ladder to success. Among the young generations of Chaltenenses, climbing any of the granite peaks is a ticket into the world of the "climbers". They are looked upon with a mix of awe, respect, and resentment among the "commoners" in El Chaltén. In latter years, this community has seen a feminist revolution, as more and more women have entered the traditionally male arena. Simultaneously, climbing practices have been transformed by technological advances that allow European climbers to hop on a plane to Buenos Aires and Calafate when the forecast predicts a weather-window, changing the rules of the game.

Social Reproduction

Figure 11 Nordenskiold Cabin (Svalbard). Photo by Tomas Salem, May 2021.

Besides the pub in the town center, the outdoors is one of the most important social arenas for the people of Longyearbyen. Groups of friends often organize trips to the nearby mountains and huts—many of which are accessible to members of the local hunting and fishing association for a modest price. Others have either been abandoned or are available to those who want to use them according to a "first come first served"-principle. The hut on the picture is an old Finnish research station. Abandoned for many years, two guides living in Longyearbyen decided to tidy it up, and keep it open to visitors on weekends. The outdoors also serve as an arena for community building through ritual practices such as the yearly garbage clean-up, when Longyearbyen's residents clean the arctic beaches for plastic that has drifted to these latitudes on ocean currents. Most children are introduced to the Svalbardian outdoor culture from an early age, either by their families or through school, and there are two higher education institutions in Longyearbyen that teach outdoor culture and nature guiding to Norwegian and international students.

Figure 12 Bouldering near the village (Patagonia). Photo by Tomas Salem, February 2021.

El Chaltén has historically been a climbing mecca. The granite peaks are the obvious draw but the valley is full of sport-climbing areas and bouldering rocks. On windy days, local and out-of-town climbers congregate at the big rocks near the village—most of them sheltered by the surrounding notofagus-forest. Across the Fitz-Roy river, the 100 meter high wall *el paredón* (the big wall) has near 200 climbing routes, many of them multi-pitch trad-climbing. Most summer days these sites will be brimming with people: friends, friends of friends, future friends and rivals. On rainy days climbers and local youth meet at the boulder hall of the Andean Club. Every late summer, near the end of the season, Chaltén celebrates the "Boulder Festival" by the big rocks near the club and later the "Trekking Festivities" organized around a mountain marathon. The climbers of El Chaltén have been defining of the village identity—to the pride of some and dismay of others who do not identify with the community. Many climbers and villagers are volunteers of the local rescue team, which assists the park-rangers of the National Park in mountain rescue. While El Chaltén does not have any higher educational institutions, national and international guiding schools carry out educational activities in the area from time to time.

Home in Nature

Figure 13 Camping in the icy desert (Svalbard). Photo by Tomas Salem, May 2021.

While Svalbard has many private and public cabins, expeditions of the kind Longyearbyen's modern explorers sometimes carry out, often imply going to remote areas where tenting is the only option. This requires safety precautions that tenting elsewhere rarely demands, such as polar-bear scouts, trip-wires with pyrotechnics, as well as signal flares and guns for self-protection. By law, groups are required to carry guns when leaving the confines of Svalbard's urbanizations as polar-bear attacks occsionally occur. General rules of thumb, like avoiding to set up camp close to shore (polar-bear hunting-territory), must be followed dilligently. In the spring, temperatures can still reach below -20 C, and camping in these conditions is not for the faint-hearted and often requires a lot of protective gear and equipment. Regardless, many Svalbardians feel at home in these icy landscapes, incorporating them as part of their character and identity.

Figure 14 Base camp Piedras Negras (Patagonia). Photo by Tomas Salem, February 2021.

Argentina lacks a cabin-culture like the Norwegian one. In northern Patagonia, mountain clubs like the Andean Club of Bariloche have established a network of staffed huts and trails inspired by the Alpine clubs of Europe. In southern Patagonia, huts are few and far between. In El Chaltén, however, the different basecamps used by climbers to access the granite peaks have been meeting sites for alpinists and often have a rich cultural history and symbolic meaning. Places like Piedras Negras (picture), Paso Superior, Nipo Nino, Bridwell, or Rio Blanco have been used by climbers for decades. They are usually established in sheltered places, where one can wait out bad weather, access water, and be safe from physical dangers such as avalanches or rockfall. At some of the basecamps, specially the low-lying campsites in the forests, past climbers erected primitive structures as they would often spend the summer months without setting foot in the village—some of these sites were even established prior to the village. Later, tour operators have maintained basic infrastructure and structural domes (big tents) at some of these camspites, using them for commercial tours.

Impact of Tourism

Figure 15 University students on the sea-ice (Svalbard). Photo by Tomas Salem, May 2021.

Infrastructural and technological developments have brought Svalbard closer to civilization, to the point that to many residents, Longyearbyen is now seen as a "central" location—"only" a three-hour flight from Oslo. Similarly, remote regions of Spitsbergen can be accessed by snowmobile in just a few hours, with GPS and satellite communication significantly reducing risks and lowering the threshold for these endeavors. Frequent flights to the mainland, modern and luxurious tourist infrastructure, and the multiplication of tour-operators and Arctic cruises are gradually transforming the Svalbardian wilderness alongside rapid climate change. To protect the wildlife from the mounting pressures of tourism and thawing sea-ice, authorities are implementing new environmental regulations that limit tourism but also impacts on customary engagements with the landscape, producing a sense of loss among some of Longyearbyen's residents.

Figure 16 Forest fire (Patagonia). Photo by Tomas Salem, January 2023.

In El Chaltén, growth has exceeded the infrastructural capacities of the village. While tourism has increased exponentially in the last decades, this has not been accompanied by adequate investments. As a result, both the village and park infrastructures have collapsed: untreated sewage flows into the rivers, the local population is sometimes left without water and electricity during peak season, trails deteriorate, and national park authorities are unable to meet the demands caused by overcrowding—such as search and rescue or rule enforcement. Strong winds and a drying climate means that the risk of forest fires is increasing, and the high number of tourists compounds these risks. Many fear that a fire in the national park's forests will be impossible to extinguish, threatening the entire village, which is located downwind from the main trails.

Searching for the Divine

Figure 17 Randonné on the West Coast of Spitsbergen (Svalbard). Photo by Tomas Salem, May 2022.

Among Norwegians, as well as many European settlers, nature is perceived to have healing properties. Life in the outdoors is seen as healthy and good for body but, especially, mind. To some, seeking out to the vast Arctic landscape is described as a way to encounter "the creation" (*skaperverket*) and experience the "forces of nature" (*naturkreftene*). Traditionally associated with notions of the sublime, the wilderness is a place where the modern subject encounters the divine, experiencing a sense of being a small part of a larger whole—a universal consciousness—and where one can retreat to quiet contemplation around the fragility and brevity of human existence.

Figure 18 Summit of Cerro Electrico (Patagonia). Photo by Tomas Salem, December 2019.

"What about the spiritual aspect?" This question was the first thing Diego, one of my friends from El Chaltén, asked me when I explained what I wanted to focus on in my research project on mountains and happiness. Trained in critical perspectives, "the spiritual aspect" had eluded me completely. As my project progressed, I realized that to the people that participated in my research, life in the outdoors was first and foremost a practice that imbued their lives with profound meaning: they simply could not imagine a good life where nature did not play a major part of the equation. This feeling was perhaps best expressed when discussing the risks of alpine climbing. Few people are as aware of the thin line that divides life and death as alpine climbers. They would often stress that they would rather die doing what they loved than abstain from the risks of climbing.

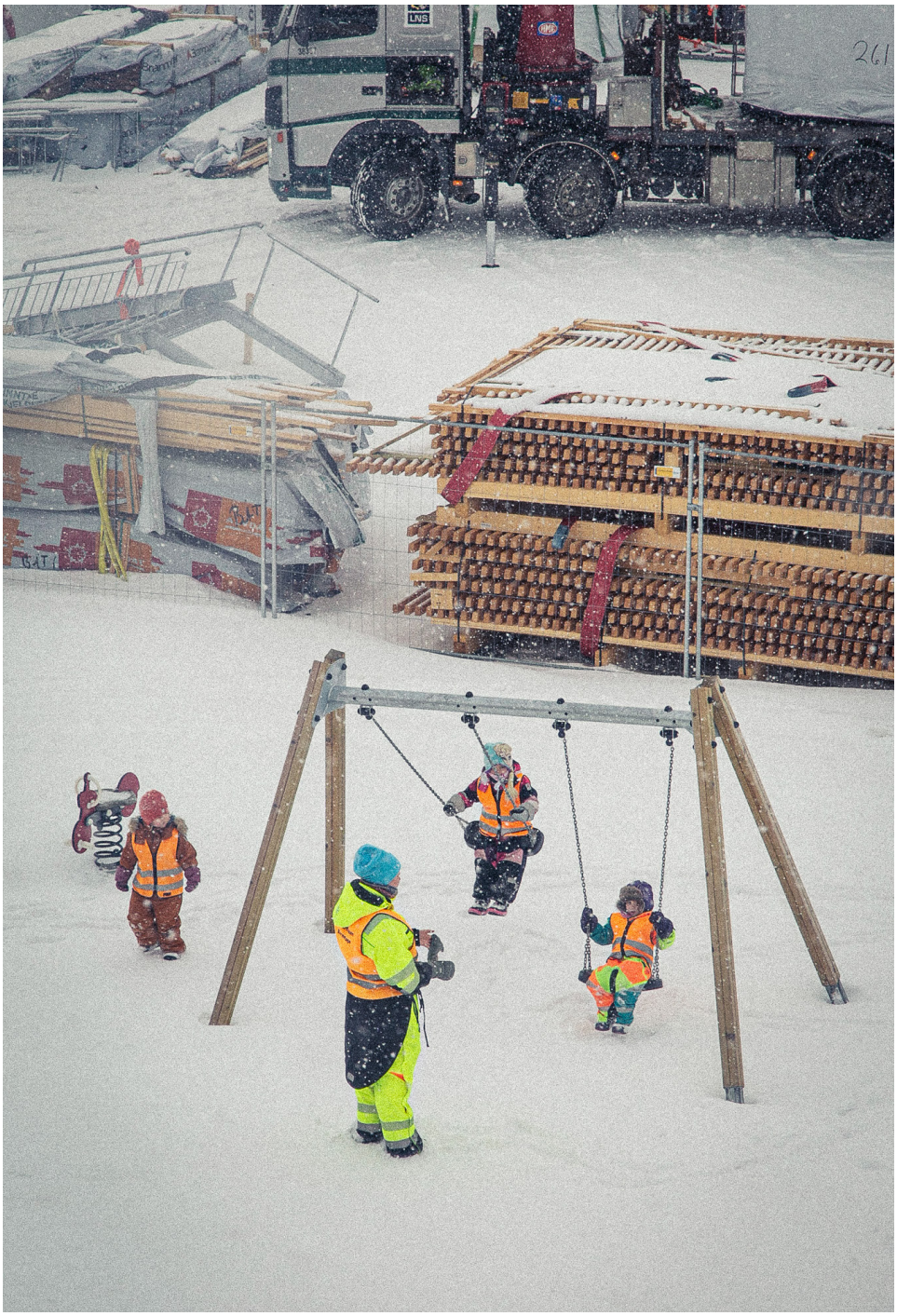

Figure 19 Children playing next to a construction site (Svalbard). Photo by Tomas Salem, May 2021

The relentless encroachment of development, growth, and progress on the natural landscape is radically transforming the modern subject's relation to the natural world. As the landscape is commodified, regulated, and repurposed, the spontaneous engagement and unstructured play in nature that some psychologists describe as essential to the healthy brain development of children is dissappearing. In Svalbard, environmental regulations that restrict access to the natural landscape challenges the right to roam and mirrors global trends towards the enclosure of the natural world.

Figure 20 Boy in caravan (Patagonia). Photo by Tomas Salem, March 2021.

While the children of El Chaltén still have a vast natural landscape in which they can play, the dynamics of global capitalism and tourism are fuelling a logic of expulsion, forcing many families to move from the village as the costs of housing skyrocket. Meanwhile, institutions that would secure former generations access to the area have been closed, such as the *Planta Estable* camping, created for schoolchildren from the provincie of Santa Cruz, and the Madsen-campsite, where visitors could pitch their tent for free. Today, there are no free campsites left in El Chaltén, narrowing public access to the National Park, while tourism is booming.

Where do the Children Play?

Well, I think it's fine
Buildin' jumbo planes
Or takin' a ride
On a cosmic train
Switch on summer
From a slot machine
Yes, get what you want to, if you want
'Cause you can get anything

I know we've come a long way
We're changin' day to day
But tell me, where do the children play?

Well, you roll on roads
Over fresh green grass
For your lorry loads
Pumpin' petrol gas
And you make them long
And you make them tough
But they just go on and on, and it seems
That you can't get off

Oh, I know we've come a long way
We're changin' day to day
But tell me, where do the children play?

Well, you've cracked the sky
'Scrapers fill the air
But will you keep on buildin' higher
till there's no more room up there?
Will you make us laugh?
Will you make us cry?
Will you tell us when to live?
Will you tell us when to die?

I know we've come a long way
We're changin' day to day
But tell me, where do the children play?

- Cat Stevens -

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