

A TALE OF  
TWO MERMAIDS:  
*Disrupting Narratives  
of Danish Colonization*



Olga Elliot  
KABK 2021

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*Abstract*

This thesis explores the production, erasure, and retrieval of cultural heritage, in the context of the Danish colonization of Greenland. Throughout history, mechanisms of worship and negation have been used to marginalize and demonize, and we discover that Christianity played a crucial role in the invasion of Greenland and the subsequent exploitation of the land and its people. I approach the tradition of Inuit storytelling, knowledge-production and spirituality to decenter euro- and anthropocentric perspectives which up until now have functioned to prevent Greenlandic sovereignty and survival. I propose *the mermaid* as a tool for critically engaging with the dominant narratives and giving voice to decolonial resistance.



*Methods*

Using diverse sources such as photographs, documentaries, archival documents, maps, film, literature, social media posts, etc., I create qualitative research. Departing from the neighbourhood where I grew up, I examine colonial history through a feminist lens to understand decolonizing currents which exceed national borders.

*Note on language*

The name Greenland was invented with the Norse settlers led by Erik the Red in 982 on the South-West coast. With this promising name, Erik was trying to promote his idea of creating new territory for Vikings, whom he attracted from Iceland. As Greenland is a name for a country coined by settlers I have been looking for what alternatives are in use, most popularly Kalaallit Nunaat (official Greenlandic for Greenland) which means *land of the Kalaallit*, referring to the biggest ethnographical group of Inuit (sing. Inuk), historically inhabiting Western Greenland. Thus Inuit Nunaat would be a more inclusive alternative as Inuit is composed of all the Indigenous peoples of Greenland, however the name

would not include Greenlanders of European descent and the Danish-Greenlanders who account for appr. 10 percent of the population.<sup>1</sup>

Worth noting is that some find that the noun-form *grønlænder* (Greenlander in Danish) has gained negative connotations, as it is used in a stigmatizing or derogatory way associating Greenlanders with alcoholism, thus some Greenlanders avoid it entirely when speaking Danish, using ‘folk i Grønland’ (people in Greenland) instead.<sup>2</sup> Like the capital letter in Black I also capitalize Inuit and Indigenous.

<sup>1</sup> Inuit across territories use the term ‘qal-lunnaat’ to describe white Europeans or non-Inuit as a group, but refers less to skin colour as it does to a way of being.

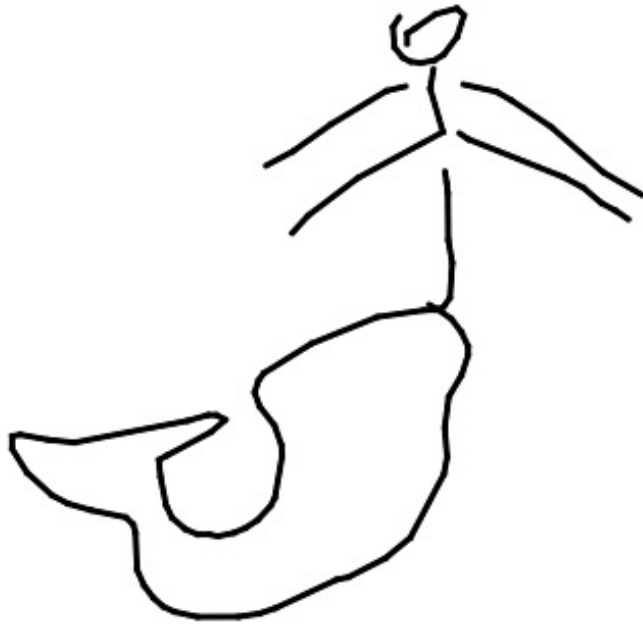
<sup>2</sup> I thank Aka Hansen, film-maker and co-founder of Greenlandic NALIK, for pointing this out to me, and for ceaselessly educating her Instagram followers on the decolonization of Greenland. See @akahansen.

*Note on the author*

As a white descendant of colonizers, I have not experienced racialization or negative discrimination based on my ethnicity or nationality, and will never fully grasp the experience of Indigenous peoples who have been forced to submit to nation states refusing their sovereignty and humanity. I hope to expand the vocabulary of Danish *harm reduction*<sup>3</sup> as I realize my own privilege within the research of an oppressed culture includes blind spots, and the importance of positioning myself as a designer and author.

<sup>3</sup> Anna Jacobs identifies white supremacy as a public health issue, causing most other public health issues. *White harm reduction* cultivates a self-critical consciousness and is different from *white saviorism*, in that it is not a mission to save the world, it only serves as a stopgap to the harm caused by white supremacy. See Tuck and Yang, *Decolonization is Not a Metaphor*, 21.





*POLICE* inspecting The Little Mermaid Copenhagen after her first beheading in 1964. The perpetrators have still not been identified and the action remains a mystery.



TOURISTS posing in front of the Little Mermaid statue, even as she protests against whaling in the Faroe Islands.

## THE LITTLE MERMAID AND THE DEVIL'S GREAT GRANDMOTHER

At the harbour of Copenhagen, on a large stone by the quay, is a statue of a small womanly figure. She does not look like much, but she is world-famous and if you saw her before the pandemic, chances are she was surrounded by people from across the world photographing her. For more than a century, she has been sitting still looking at the water, her fishtail folded behind her, and her human upper body resting on her arm. Conceived by the Danish author H.C. Andersen, the *Little Mermaid* of the fairytale becomes a human being by giving up her beautiful voice, so she can live with the prince whom she loves. Failing to seduce him without words, she is left with only two options; either kill him in his sleep, or sacrifice her life. The *Little Mermaid* chooses her own death over hurting her beloved, yet the story does not end in tragedy as her innocent selflessness is awarded with a chance to perform good deeds and finally rise up to the heavens.

The Little Mermaid in Denmark has had many visitors and travelled around the world,<sup>1</sup> twice she has been decapitated, and yet she always comes back to life. Is it magic? Is it capitalism? Is it because she gained an immortal soul when she struck a deal with the evil sea-witch? Whenever an unsolved issue needs new attention, she is first to revive

<sup>1</sup> In spring 2010 she was exhibited in the Danish pavilion during the World Expo in Shanghai. Chinese artist Ai Wei Wei kindly supplied Copenhageners with a live-stream of the *Little Mermaid* in her new surroundings, until she returned six months later.



the discussions. Known to resist mainstream opinion, she often appears in scandalous outfits, with bold words or accessories, to challenge the Danish self-perception, or show solidarity with victims of oppression in other parts of the world. Having been assaulted and dismembered on several occasions, it seems this mermaid with nothing left to lose, has become a popular tool for igniting risky conversations on Danish territories.

Leaving the Little Mermaid for a moment, let us look at her from the other side of the water, by crossing the harbour to Christianshavn, taking the first bridge we arrive at the Royal Greenland Dock. From 1750 until 1970 everything Denmark took from Greenland was shipped to this place and turned into profit.<sup>2</sup> Also the first Inuit to arrive in Denmark, abducted from South-western Greenland in 1605, were sailed here where the Danish king himself came aboard the “Red Lion” to see them with his own eyes. Enjoying what he saw, he sent many more expeditions to the island where over and over Indigenous men, women and children were kidnapped and brought to Copenhagen, to demonstrate conquest, stir exotic curiosity and create stories.<sup>3</sup>

But never their own stories—always the stories of colonization, which *we* continue to tell in Denmark even though centuries have passed. Three hundred years later in 1905, Inuit people from Greenland were exhibited in the Tivoli garden along with people from the Faroe Islands and

the (then) Danish West Indies in the *Colonial Exhibition*.<sup>4</sup> This show and subsequent displays of non-white peoples in the Zoo

<sup>2</sup> Josefsen, *Tur: Grønland Og Christianshavn*.

<sup>3</sup> Johannsen, *Jagtspyd Sladrer*.

<sup>4</sup> National Museum of Denmark's Online Collections, *Koloniudstillingen i Tivoli, 1905*.



SHIPS unloading goods at the Royal Greenland Dock in Christianshavn, Copenhagen.

garden, made colonization stories all the more entertaining, while reinforcing the popular idea that *we* were superior to *them*. The Canadian settler/Indigenous research duo Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang explains this dichotomy:

*"Indigenous peoples are those who have creation stories, not colonization stories, about how we/they came to be in a particular place—indeed how we/they came to be a place."*<sup>5</sup>

If it was not for these colonization stories, would Denmark still have fairy tales about curious mermaids and invincible princes? Had *we* not taken Indigenous people hostage to stimulate our fantasy, would *we* have bedtime stories to tell our children? What stories do women in Greenland tell *their* daughters? In the recent documentary *the Fight for Greenland* one of its young protagonists Greenlandic Paninnguaq Heilmann, tells her daughter bedtime stories about Sassuma Arnaa, *the soul of the sea*.<sup>6</sup> Worshipped for thousands of years by Inuit people across continents she is known both as a great big mermaid and as an old vengeful woman carrying many names, but for the sake of ease, let us stick with the translation *Mother of the Sea*.<sup>7</sup> Opposite the Little Mermaid she was born human, but transformed into a Goddess when drowning at sea. Refusing to marry any man from her village, her father cuts off her fingers as she hangs grasped on to the side of his boat. As she sinks to the dark depths of the sea, her fingers turn into sea animals, and as ruler of the underworld, *Mother of the Sea* holds power over both life and afterlife.

<sup>5</sup> Tuck and Yang, *Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor*, 6.

<sup>6</sup> Sorento, *the Fight for Greenland*, 00:16:45.

<sup>7</sup> Sassumap Arnaa, Imap Ukua, Nuliajuk, Sedna, Sanna Sassuma Arnaguasakk same Goddess has many names and variations to her mythology. A subversive woman, in some legends by the name Nivika, refusing to marry any of the village men she decides to marry her dog, who accompanies her in the underworld as a great guardian.



FOUR Greenlandic men onboard of Dano-Norwegian expedition ship *Gjøra* in 1903.







SCULPTURE of Sassuma Arnaa raised in Nuuk Colonial Harbour in 2007. The angaqok is combing her hair, so she will provide people on land with hunting animals.

musical at College of Nuuk she is disappointed to find out that her character will be performing exclusively in Danish and singing the song 'Look At What You Made Me Do' by Taylor Swift instead of a Greenlandic song paying tribute to her cultural heritage. She confronts her teacher and proposes to add Greenlandic expressions to the script, but her concerns are dismissed, making her give up the role.<sup>11</sup> Not only do *we* insist on repeating colonization stories, we also colonize, appropriate and abuse *their* creation stories.

<sup>11</sup> Sorento, *the Fight for Greenland*, 00:24:00.

Was the docile *Little Mermaid* invented by a Danish man, in an attempt to combat the ferocious sea-goddess of Inuit myth? Endorsed by Disney, the little mermaid taught me and millions of girls to give up their voices and identities for the love of a white cis-male. Rather than roaming the sea, proud of her fish tail, the *Little Mermaid* leaves her sisterhood behind to become 'fully' human hoping to live happily ever after with a prince. Back in the 18th century Christianshavn, similar hopes must have been held by the women who journeyed to Greenland from the 'discipline, health, and improvement house' a penal institution hosting prostitutes and children. As the new colony which Egede named 'Good Hope' needed females to successfully reproduce, young women and girls married the soldiers, prisoners and slaves that the king sent to occupy the 'Island of Hope' but eventually left to die from malnutrition, and infections.

2021 marks the 300th anniversary of the arrival of Hans Egede, though the capital is no longer known as 'Godthaab' (*good hope*) a statue of Egede still overlooks Nuuk today. Apart from a recent attack covering the statue,



with red paint, the pedestal with Inuit symbols and the word 'decolonize', there has been no political backlash on the celebration of the Danish colonization of Greenland. Instead the focus is to commemorate the *meeting of cultures* enforcing the colonial narrative of a happy union between the primitive and the civilized, which made Danish territory 98% larger than it was.<sup>12</sup> It is this claim to territory that renders Denmark an Arctic superpower and the stolen land

<sup>12</sup> A celebration budgeted to cost Greenland roughly € 400.000, if divided by citizens, every Greenlander could get 7 euros instead. Schultz-Nielsen, *Knap 3 Mio. Afset Til Hans Egede-Fejring*.

<sup>13</sup> Ritzau, *Christiania*.

"natural resources". Driven by the insatiable desire to explore, extract and exhaust these reserves, Greenlandic demands for influence are repeatedly undermined, and the current self-rule act of 2009 does not include foreign affairs, finances, defence and jurisdiction.

The influx of Greenlandic women in Christianshavn today reflects a past of hopelessness. Squatters in the 1970's created a tolerant atmosphere which laid the foundation for the biggest drug market in Denmark, in the freetown *Christiania*. Naturally, the commune has also attracted Greenlandic people with addictions and in 2018 during one of countless police raids in *Pusher Street*, a violent confrontation occurred between armed police and civilians. Video recordings of the incident fluctuated, depicting an intoxicated Greenlandic woman getting violently pushed back several meters by an officer, landing with the back of her skull against the brick road.<sup>13</sup>

It might come as a surprise, that the woman so brutally assaulted two years ago, is still in prison convicted for violence against police in function. The 51-year old woman who posed little threat to the officers in full armour, was not



HANS EGEDE statue vandalized on Greenland's national day, less than a month after the murder of George Floyd.



VIOLENT CLASHES in Freetown Christiania where a Greenlandic woman pushed to the ground by police, she was imprisoned in 2019.

only wounded, she also had to go two years to prison for it. Following her arrest the newspapers did not write about the overrepresentation of Greenlandic women in Danish prisons nor did they write about the systemic invisibility Inuit are subjected to due to their Danish passports, instead they found comic relief in her court defense:

*"I don't recall it. I had been drinking vodka, Bailey, Tuborg Gold, and I'd smoked some weed."*<sup>14</sup>

Struggling with past trauma and addiction, many a Greenlandic woman has been left racialized, discriminated against, and ostracized by society, only to find peace at the bottom of the bottle, which Danish media dramatize gleefully, thereby enforcing dehumanizing stereotypes.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> My translation.  
Ritzau, *Jeg Kan Ikke Huske Det*.

The harmful effects of this dehumanization became unbearably apparent when a homeless man was found dying in front of a mall. The first by-passer to make an emergency call was asked on the phone if the man was 'a Greenlandic' after answering yes, it took 40 minutes and numerous other callers, before an ambulance arrived to find the man dead. Even after leaked recordings proved how police had lied about the racist question, the neglect never had any legal ramifications for those responsible.<sup>16</sup> That the Danish justice system provides no justice but rather incriminates the Inuit minority is not surprising considering that it was never a system designed to protect *them*, but protect those who made them vulnerable in the first place.

<sup>15</sup> The idea that Greenlanders are child-molesting alcoholics, is prevalent in Danish society and leads to a broad range of discrimination and racist attacks. Ekstra Bladet provides many examples of harmful media coverage like the 2012 headline: "Lesbian Greenlanders in Fight over Beer".

<sup>16</sup> Trier, *Hør Lyden*.

The central Christianshavn Square is home to young

and old alcoholized Greenlanders but also to two-billion-year-old Greenlandic marble blocks.<sup>17</sup> The exploitation of land is inextricably linked to that of Indigenous peoples, and across generations, patterns emerge demonstrating the urgent need to address the pain which Denmark has

<sup>17</sup> The rediscovery of the 3,5 tons marble blocks from Maamorilik used as cargo on ships until 1940's coincided with the reconstruction of Christianshavns Square and the landscape architect thought using the blocks as bike stands and benches would be an appropriate way to reflect the history of the neighbourhood. See Josefsen, *Historien Om Granitblokkene*.

for centuries inflicted upon Greenland with great indifference. As the desire for independence grows stronger, the *Little Mermaid* could easily be swallowed up by the *Mother of the Sea* who—as a figure of replenishment and regeneration—uses her transformative powers to balance life in the sea, the source of Inuit economy. As she releases a new wave of national empowerment, it is yet to be seen whether Greenland will throw all

colonial remnants overboard and cut ties to the old kingdom—or if her knots can be gently brushed out through Indigenous healing.



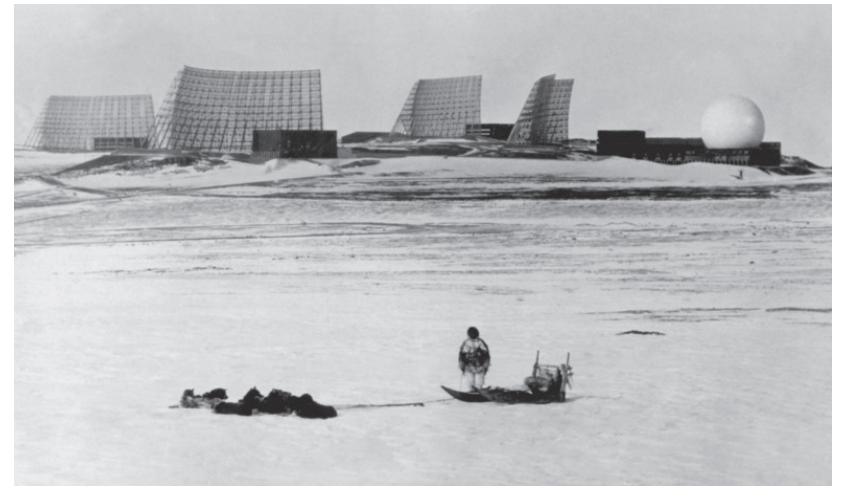
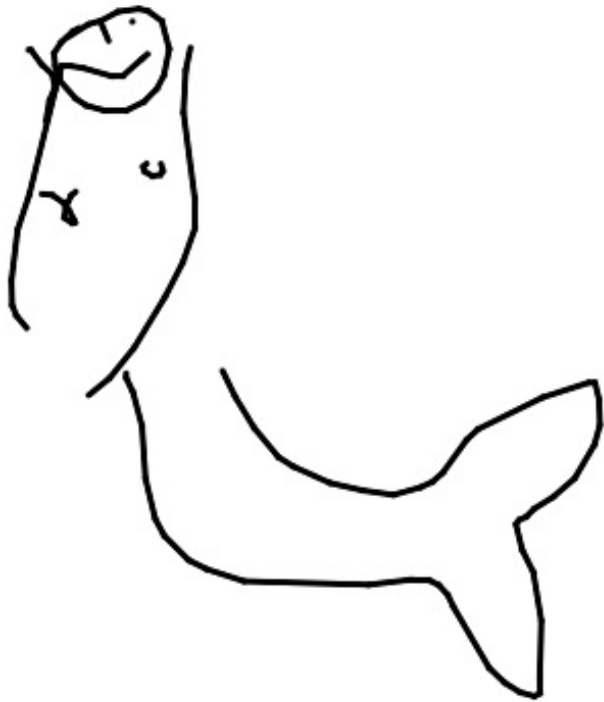
MARBLE BLOCKS from Maamorilik, serve as benches for day-drinking in Christianshavns Square. Sculptures of Inuit hunters mark the evolving presence of Greenlandic people in the neighbourhood.



THE QUARRY in North Western Greenland employed up to 300 people in the 1930's. Image: Arktisk Institut, 1937.





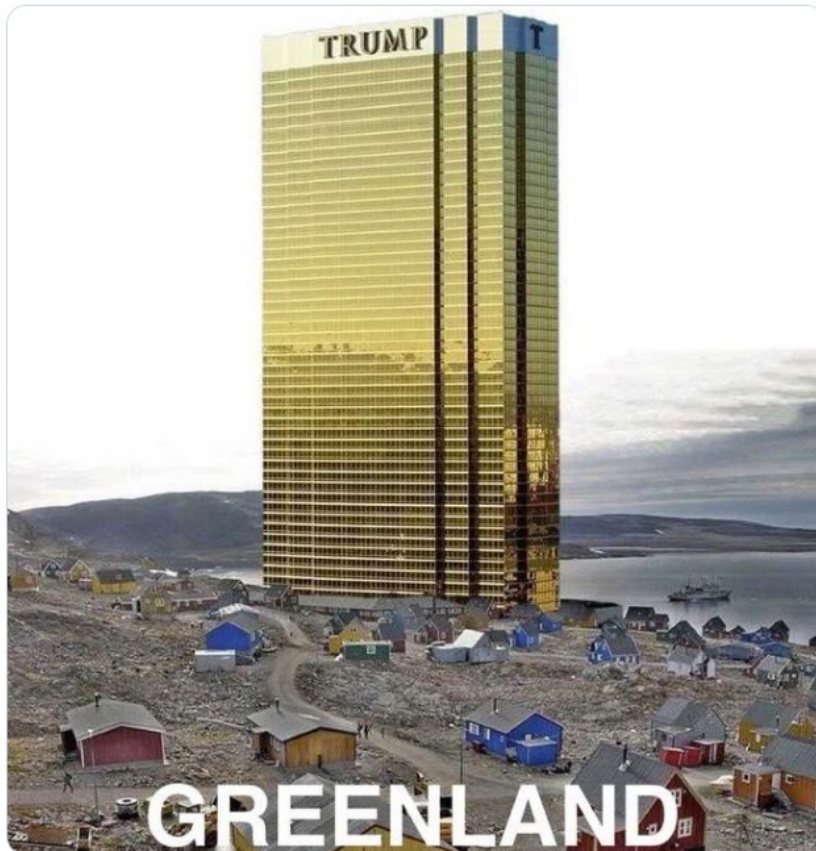


*INUIT* passing the US military base at Thule on snow sled in 1966.

# THE LESSER EVIL<sup>1</sup>



I promise not to do this to Greenland!



MEME retweeted by president Donald Trump in response to the claim *Greenland is not for sale* in 2019.

It seems that the *hope* most central to Hans Egede's mission, which *we* celebrate in the coming year, was a hope for continuous acquisition of land, bodies and minds, the "development" which shaped Greenland into a constituent part of a nation state 3000 km away. This ongoing somewhat casual exploitation goes largely unnoticed and undisputed, yet when Donald Trump in 2019 proposed to *buy* Greenland, calling it a 'large real-estate deal', the status of Greenland within the Danish Realm, again became a question of public interest in Denmark. Historically the relationship between Greenland and USA, with Denmark paternalistically leading negotiations on Greenland's behalf has led to numerous military and environmental scandals. The receding Greenland ice sheet will sooner rather than later reveal secretly disposed nuclear waste, as the ice is melting at the highest pace in 12.000 years,<sup>2</sup> making Copenhagen-based scientists admit to the failure of their climate predictions which factor in hopeful reductions of CO2 emissions while underestimating the multitude of climatic processes simultaneously occurring.<sup>3</sup>

Whether it is left to climate scientists or shamans like the angakoq, to guide and foresee the future of our environments,

<sup>1</sup> The principle of the lesser evil was problematized by Hannah Arendt: 'Politically, the weakness of the argument has always been that those who choose the lesser evil forget very quickly that they chose evil.' See Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, 36.

<sup>2</sup> Henley, *Greenland's Receding Icecap to Expose Top-Secret US Nuclear Project*.

<sup>3</sup> Jex, *Klimamodeller Undervurderer Kraftig Afsmeltning På Grønlands Indlandsis*.



it is evident that nature changes behaviour influenced by human activities. Inuit knew this many generations ago, when taboo rules and myths functioned to prevent over-hunting, as *Mother of the Sea* could withhold the sea animals if humans violated her. As temperatures in the Arctic rise faster than anywhere else on the globe, it is easy to imagine the burning fury of *Mother of the Sea* heating up the ocean due to *our* ignorance and harmful habits.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Climate Signals, *Arctic Amplification*.

<sup>5</sup> Australian-Chinese co-operation Greenland Minerals Ltd. plan to open the second biggest uranium-mining site in the world. The area was explored by Danish commissioners already in the 1960's, but abandoned due to ban on nuclear power. Mineral extraction has changed from a case of Danish colonialism to a promising alternative to the Danish financing. See Hooge, *Kujataa*, 80.

Believing in man-made climate-change can be just as difficult as believing in mermaids, however *we* need to believe in something for a chance of survival.

Regardless if we decide to think of it as *arctic amplification* or the powers of a furious Goddess, the extreme decrease of sea ice opens up new shipping routes in the arctic, so Asian goods can be transported much faster to consumers in the West. Apart from the obvious strategic benefit, Greenland also attracts global interest due to its enormous untapped supply of minerals, and rare-earth elements (REE). Estimated to contain a third of all the world's untapped REE reserves alongside the largest undiscovered oil and gas reserves, Greenland has been dubbed the *Amazon of the North*.<sup>5</sup> This is a stark comparison given the South-American rainforest is currently transforming into a desolate Savannah, depleting its Indigenous inhabitants for their sustainable ways of living.

Changes imposed to Greenlandic ways of living and dying accelerated after World War II, when Greenland changed status, becoming an 'equal' part of the Danish



TOWN HOUSE floating by Nuugaatsiaq after the 2017 tsunami, which killed several.



*BLOK P* was the largest residential building to be erected on Danish territories in 1965-1966 and was demolished in 2012. With its 320 apartments the building housed more residents than entire villages, and became home to approximately 1% of Greenland's entire population.

kingdom in 1953, rather than a colony subjected to UN critique. Greenland's modernization turned self-sufficient hunters into wage-workers in Danish-owned factories and mines, and replaced semi-nomadic settlements along the coast, with poor quality concrete blocks in the capital, outsourcing care and education from the family to the emerging welfare state. No longer independent in small communities, the Greenlandic people became rent-paying and reliant on forces of the market economy. In Marxist terms this phase is understood as the *primitive accumulation* preceding any capitalist society, which feminist scholar and militant Silvia Federici argues is never a one-time isolated historical event, but an eternally recurring process, essential to global capitalism.<sup>6</sup>

With the industrialization of the 20th century, new ways of living meant an explosive growth in birth rates causing the population to almost triple in only forty years<sup>7</sup>. In the early 1960's Danish authorities began campaigning for birth control to bring down the number of pregnancies and implemented the right to abortion in 1975. Today more pregnancies end in abortion than in birth, and Greenland has one of the highest rates of abortion in the world. Paradoxically, the first Greenlandic person to be incarcerated, was a woman who committed infanticide after an unwanted pregnancy, she was sentenced in 1909. Just like the sisters of the *Little Mermaid* who had their long hair taken by the evil *Sea Witch*, when they tried to save her, the woman from Qaqortoq had her hair cut off as punishment.<sup>8</sup> What also contributed to an increased population was the influx of Danish migrants who

<sup>6</sup> Federici, *On Primitive Accumulation, Globalization and Reproduction*.

<sup>7</sup> Marquardt, *Greenland's Demography*.

performed skilled labour and administration in the growing public sector. Of these *postcolonial*\* generations many were born to Danish fathers, who bore no legal responsibility for children born out of wedlock in Greenland and had their right to anonymity protected by Danish law. This law ensured that mothers to children born out of wedlock before 1974, could be taken to trial for informing anyone of the Danish father's identity. Only in 2014, after years of documenting the traumatic consequences experienced by fatherless children, did the organization *Juridiske Faderløse* (eng. Juridically Fatherless) achieve a change in legislation so that Greenlandic children born out of wedlock to Danish fathers have the same rights as any other child born to unmarried parents.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The woman from Qaqortoq was the first Inuit to receive punishment equal to the Danish system, previously Greenlandic offenders would receive a public beating instead, as Inuit were not considered 'fit' to the Western penalty system. See Jeremiassen, *Straf Og Fængsel i Grønland*.

\* Postcolonial is in italics as it is argued that Greenland still functions as a colony, as it continues to be under the Danish constitution. Hansen, *Forsker: Grønland Er Fortsat En Dansk Koloni*.

<sup>9</sup> Ministeriet for Børn, Ligestilling, Integration og Social Forhold, *Juridisk Faderløse Får Nye Rettigheder*.

<sup>10</sup> *Fødestedskriteriet* legislation in place from 1964-1991 meant that people born in Greenland or living there before the age of five, would receive lower incomes and fewer benefits than people born abroad.

Until recently Danish legislation was not only efficient at protecting Danish men's sexual freedom, it also ensured via the *birth-place criteria*<sup>10</sup> that their salaries would be approximately twice as high as those of Greenlandic worker. This type of discrimination was not a modern invention, since the earliest attempts of colonization, the nation state has gendered and racialized in order to exploit Indigenous populations. Discrimination and obsessive categorization was deeply embedded in the social design of the colony, illustrated by the Royal Greenland Trade Department who prohibited employees from marrying Inuit or



*DANISH PRIMEMINISTER* Stauning portrayed as a visionary 'father of nations' in a 1939 painting by Wilfred Glud. Amongst the workers, the Faroe Islands, and Iceland are depicted as adults, while the child between the primeminister's legs is the representation of Greenland.



CENSUS of the Chief Colonial Officer from Qeqertarsuaq 1830. The word *blandinger* was used for children of mixed descent, in administration up until the 20th century.



MISSIONARY preaching in Inuit home painted by Aron of Kangeq

racially mixed women in 1782. The term ‘mixed’ was used to describe any Greenlander who, even generations back, had some European ancestry, evoking the *blood-quantum laws* of Northern America. Other than placing Greenlanders in one of two ethnic categories and assessing their *literacy* and *moral behaviour*, the administrators did everything to quantify the isolated Inuit population.<sup>11</sup>

Thus Inuit was ordered into the binary categories of women and men, promoting strictly monogamous hetero-sexual marriages, as anything other would be irreconcilable with God.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, Inuit people had traditions involving extramarital sex, and believed that every person had a female and a male spirit, that gender was not defined by the body but by which of the two spirits was the most dominant within it. The three centuries of Danish occupation in Greenland demonstrates how colonization subjugated populations to Christianity, turned women’s reproductive rights into a ‘bio-political’ instrument, and invented race and gender as tools for capitalist exploitation threatening the lives of any non-conforming peoples.<sup>13</sup>

In her online lecture at KABK, Federici brings up the notion of *body territory*, tying the resistance and defense of land to the female body, as the same authorities inflict violence on both. Federici emphasizes how the capitalist state invades not only geographical territories but renders the female body a territory, an ‘object of direct appropriation’ by the state:

<sup>11</sup> Seiding, Colonial Categories of Rule, 56-63.

<sup>12</sup> At the time the missionaries arrived it is estimated 10-30% of marriages were polygamic, but this practice was annihilated within one or two generations as the Christians considered it to be pagan. Marquardt, *Greenland’s Demography*.

<sup>13</sup> In Foucault’s terms, racism is above all a technology aimed at permitting the exercise of biopower. See Mbembé, *Necropolitics*, 17.

*"The woman's body is a colony that can be acquired, dominated, exploited without risk, with impunity."*<sup>14</sup>

Our understanding of colonization needs to be extended to the female body, sexuality, and reproductive rights, if we are to understand how the Danish colonization has extended far beyond the date Greenland officially stopped being a colony. Meanwhile the trauma of forceful modernization has been passed on to following generations and stories of neglect, abuse, discrimination and violence are ubiquitous across Inuit territories, leading to a stark rise in suicides.

Until the year 1950 only 14 suicides had been recorded in Greenland but by the late 1970s the ratio had changed from being amongst the lowest in the world to the highest. A world record which has remained for 35 years in a row, a reality so deeply painful, statistics can only give an indication of the suffering.<sup>15</sup> Violence, alcohol and sexual abuse is recognized as contributing factors to the *suicide epidemic*, a health survey from 2014 suggest that almost 50% of East Greenlanders have suffered from sexual abuse while growing up, but surveys rarely reflect the historic roots of problems.<sup>15</sup>

Though the number of suicides peaked in the wake of rapid changes to Greenlandic society, criticism is seldomly explicitly directed at the Danish politics which imposed these rapid changes. In the essay 'Necropolitics' political theorist Achille Mbembé defines sovereignty as the right to kill, to subjugate the 'other', or in

<sup>15</sup> In 2015 the ratio of suicides in Greenland was 83 per 100.000 which remains more than twice as high as the second and third ranking countries. Turnowsky, Antallet Af Selvmord Falder - Men Ikke i Grønland.

<sup>16</sup> Bjerregaard and Larsen, *Three Lifestyle-Related Issues of Major Significance (...)*, 5.



PROTEST MARCH against suicides passing the graveyard in Nuuk, October 30. 2018.





STILL from Aka Hansen's "Polar" short film that deals with youth suicides and the myth of *Sassuma Arnaa*, and is an example of a growing Greenlandic film scene.

the case of suicide the self, to different degrees of death:

*"Whether read from the perspective of slavery or of colonial occupation, death and freedom are irrevocably interwoven. As we have seen, terror is a defining feature of both slave and late-modern colonial regimes. Both regimes are also specific instances and experiences of unfreedom. To live under late modern occupation is to experience a permanent condition of 'being in pain'."*

In this experience of unfreedom, the ongoing pain is relieved only at the moment of death, and the sole possibility for attaining sovereignty over life is to become one's own killer.<sup>17</sup> Looking at death as an intrinsic part of politics, and learning that Indigenous and First Nation peoples across the globe battle equally brutal statistics, it seems evident that the colonization and still-Danish sovereignty is reflected in the *pain* Greenland faces today. But in Denmark the perception is very different. Mostly when Greenland gains media attention, it is for its nature portrayed as a great unexplored *resource*, or for its people portrayed as emotionally dysfunctional addicts, unable to meet *modern* ways of living. Danish film and tv producers will use music and effects to dramatize the vast and beautiful landscapes, in stark contrast to the ugliness of Inuit suffering. The awareness that *we* contribute to that same suffering, has yet to sink in, while Denmark continues to postpone or deny any attempts of reconciliation.

In recent debates over the word '*eskimo*' concerns for white fragility, overrule any considerations for Greenlandic experience. Thus the ice cream called '*Gigantic Eskimo*' can still be found in supermarkets, ignoring decades of

<sup>16</sup> Mbembé, *Necropolitics*, 38-39.

Inuit activism.<sup>18</sup> Ignorance has been the preferred attitude towards Greenlandic demands for as long as anyone remember; when an American military plane carrying bombs crashed outside the Thule base in 1968 Denmark ignored it until it was revealed years later, that the Danish prime minister had been informed about the presence of atomic weapons in Greenland, despite the Danish ban of nuclear power.<sup>19</sup> The scandalous incident illustrates how laws which applied to all of Danish territories, could in the case of Greenland, be altered, extended or completely ignored.

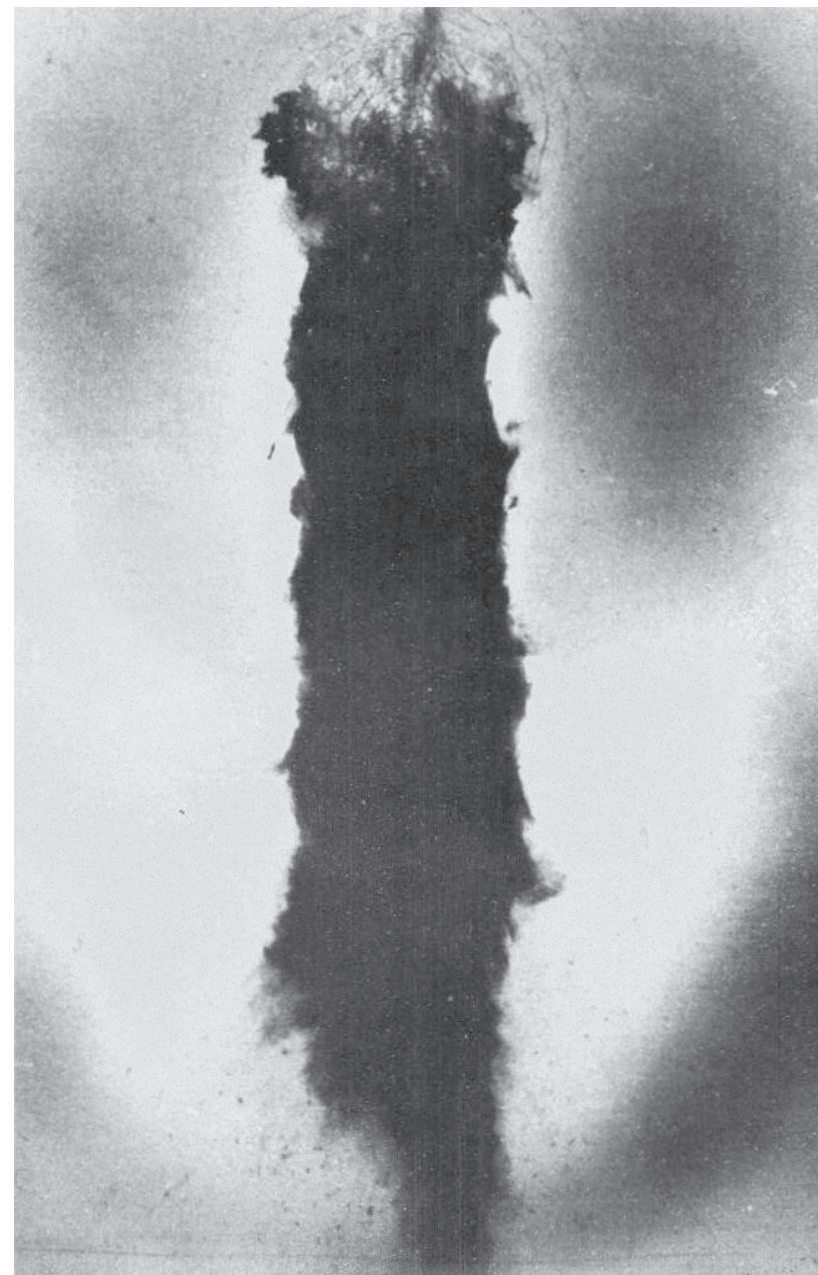
Mbembé elaborates on this state of exception, as a consequence of racism, the technology which enabled Europeans to commit murder, without it being a crime:

*“That colonies might be ruled over in absolute lawlessness stems from the racial denial of any common bond between the conqueror and the native. In the eyes of the conqueror, savage life is just another form of animal life, a horrifying experience, something alien beyond imagination or comprehension. In fact, according to Arendt, what makes the savages different from other human beings is less the color of their skin than the fear that they behave like a part of nature, that they treat nature as their undisputed master. Nature thus remains, in all its majesty, an overwhelming reality compared to which they appear to be phantoms, unreal and ghostlike.”*<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Hansen Is, other ice cream producers insist on keeping the term ‘eskimo’ which for decades has been considered derogatory and was officially replaced by the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) in 1980. However it can still be found in the *National Museum of Denmark* as they only recently decided to outphase it in their exhibitions. See Floris, *Eskimo Ice Cream*.

<sup>19</sup> Wikipedia contributors. 1968 Thule Air Base B-52 Crash.

<sup>20</sup> Mbembé, *Necropolitics*, 24.



AERIAL photograph of the blackened ice in, the b-52 American military plane crashed in 1968. The clean-up operation was called ‘Project Crested Ice’.



ARTIST Pia Arke reversing the Greenlandic national costume while sitting naked in front of a landscape photograph. Arke created performative works and writing, critically engaging with photography and colonial archives reimagining the female body.



STILL from the German silent comedy film from 1918 *Das Eskimobaby* in which a caricature of an uncivil Greenlandic woman, played by Danish actress Asta Nielsen.

Undoubtedly, the lifestyle of Inuit communities was used to fuel the fantasy of a vast wilderness, in which primitive savages subordinated to nature in order to survive. The colonial imagination of us and them as separate species, justified the difference in treatment, present even in 'post-colonial' Greenlandic society.

In Canada the Inuit population were forced to carry badges similar to dog tags, identifying them by number instead of name. The 'eskimo identification' was officially in use until the 1980's while until the 1990's children were forcefully removed from their families, cultures and languages to receive a 'civilized' Christian education. With prime minister Stephen Harper's apology in 2008 these politics of the Canadian settler state were officially declared a *cultural genocide* against Indigenous peoples. In comparison to US and Canadian settler-coloniality, Denmark's rule over Greenland is portrayed as *the lesser evil*. Yet Denmark too has experimented with the same variation of cultural genocide, while survivors who were removed from their families and sent to Denmark as children in the 1950's are still waiting for an apology.<sup>21</sup> The institutional assaults on Greenlandic identity bear witness to the importance of education.<sup>22</sup> It is alarming how racism found heavy anchors in innocent things like children's stories,

<sup>21</sup> After multiple delays and long silences, on the last day I write this, the Danish prime minister officially apologized to the 6 out of 22 Greenlandic people who survived the state's treatment coined *the experiment*, but hundreds more were "adopted" by Danish families throughout the 1950's. Unlike the Canadian, the Danish apology makes no mention of a *cultural genocide*, but repeats that the mistake was made with the 'best intentions'. See Regeringen, *Undskyldning til de 22 grønlandske børn*

<sup>22</sup> In Greenlandic schools children were not taught Greenlandic languages until 1967, and still today secondary schools and higher education is only available in Danish, making it inaccessible for Greenlanders who do not speak it fluently. (Growing up in the 2000s all I was taught about Greenland was that it is the part of Denmark where Santa Claus lived.)



amusement parks, zoos, and candies, how rather than admitting error, and critically educating about past mistakes, *we* choose to insist on the right to feed children racist ice cream.



*INSTEAD* of using Inuit names, the Canadian settler state assigned identification numbers and tags to natives, which were in use until the 1980's, and allegedly still exist in the government systems.



*THE 'EXPERIMENT'* children were placed in foster care in Denmark to be educated as 'Danish' children' in 1951. Today 6 out of the 22 survivors were alive to receive an apology from the state.





*THE SCULPTURE* of Hans Egede was first covered in paint in the 1970's.





AQQALU BERTHELSEN placing snow goggles on Hans Egede's statue in Harstad, Norway.

## THE MASTER'S TOOLS<sup>1</sup>

As much as it has been used for colonization, education can also be a tool for decolonization—to instill pride and confidence in Indigenous knowledge production and to carve out a space where alternatives to colonial systems can exist. However Tuck and Yang reminds us it cannot be achieved by metaphorizing, abstracting and conceptualizing decolonisation:

*“The easy adoption of decolonization as a metaphor (and nothing else) is a form of settler anxiety, because it is a premature attempt at reconciliation.”*

The duo defines six tendencies which have falsely been connected to, and taken away focus from the essence of decolonisation. Coined *moves to innocence*, these responses frequently appear in the context of ‘justice-work’ and provide colonizers and their descendants with relief from inherent guilt.<sup>2</sup>

In response to the vandalism of Hans Egede's statue, two white scholars wrote the article “*Activists demand the mental decolonisation of the mind*” for Justiceinfo.net. The article begins with a superficial introduction of the Danish colonisation of Greenland, after which they quote artist and activist Aqqalu Berthelsen's statement:

*“It's about time that we stop celebrating colonizers*

<sup>1</sup> The Master's Tools was coined by Audre Lorde in 1984: “*For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.*” See Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 110–114.

<sup>2</sup> Tuck and Yang, *Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor*, 9.



*and that we start taking back what is rightfully ours. It is time to decolonize our minds and our country. No colonizer deserves to be on top of a mountain like that. We need to learn the Truth of our History.”*

This straight forward demand is however moulded into the settler-friendly idea, that only the minds need decolonisation, without any mention of the land.

The authors conveniently overlook the most central claim of the statement, that Greenland is, and should be officially recognised as, its own country. Focusing solely on the diffuse idea of decolonising the mind the article describes the activist group as:

*“(...) part of a movement in Greenland calling for mental decolonization, who argue that despite large degrees of self-government compared to other indigenous peoples around the world, a wide variety of informal forms of colonialism are still governing Greenlandic people, making the transition away from the state of Denmark almost impossible.”<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>3</sup> Krebs and Andersen. *Activists Demand Mental Decolonization in Greenland.*

With imprecise reference, they argue Greenland has relatively large autonomy, thus instilling skepticism and ignoring the claim for sovereignty, ultimately appeasing the white reader, that for Greenland it is *almost impossible* to leave Denmark. Though perhaps well-intended, this argumentation reveals an underlying conviction that Indigenous people are in need of guidance from the white settler state. Tuck and Yang characterizes this form of response as the ‘*free your mind and the rest will follow*’. The central mechanism in this



'DECOLONIZE' banner hung by the road leading to Nuuk, an artistic intervention by Aka Hansen.



RED FLAG raised on the foggy National Day reading 'LAND BACK'.

specific *move to innocence*, is to focus on cultivation of critical awareness without regards to the necessary actions for actual decolonisation. The article's biggest red flag is that it makes no mention of what was also part of the activist intervention; a red flag with white letters reading 'LAND BACK'. In the activists' manifesto delivered by Aka Niviâna, the flag is contextualized:

*"Land back. A statement not only defending the land, but the people living on it. A solidarity movement beyond colonial borders, showing solidarity with other indigenous groups and marginalized people."*<sup>4</sup>

Tuck and Yang insist that decolonization must include the return of land. That it never goes unnoticed, because it is an unsettling process of distancing the settler from that which was unjustly occupied. Aligned with political philosopher Franz Fanon who in 1963 insisted on decolonization as a historical process of complete disorder, a break with colonial conditions, Tuck and Yang compare him with education philosopher Paulo Freire:

*"Freire positions liberation as redemption, a freeing of both oppressor and oppressed through their humanity. Humans become 'subjects' who then proceed to work on the 'objects' of the world (animals, earth, water), and indeed read the world (critical consciousness) in order to write the world (exploit nature). For Freire, there are no Natives, no Settlers, and indeed no history, and the future is simply a rupture from the timeless present"*<sup>5</sup>

Paradoxically celebrating the colonizer is

<sup>4</sup> Niviâna, *Manifesto: The System Exposing Itself*.

<sup>5</sup> Tuck and Yang, *Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor*, 20.

today normalized to the point that making any changes to his presence, even as a statue, is seen as a *threat to history*.<sup>6</sup>

So Hans Egede remains, after a local vote, at his prominent spot, while the word “DECOLONIZE” has been washed off his pedestal. Using the word in its verb-form it becomes an imperative for the continuous dismantling of colonial values. It is with this commitment that re-designed curriculums around the globe approach education in a myriad of contexts. Research collective Decolonizing Design outlines their vision of improved design education, in *Decolonising Design Education: Ontologies, Strategies, Urgencies*, the collective defines decolonisation of design as an ontological statement:

*“What we mean by ‘ontological’ is that what we design, designs back on us, designing the very being of our world. And it seems for the Global North at least, what is required to get viable futures, is to redesign the being-in-our-worlds.”*<sup>7</sup>

As much as we need to change, as merely a statement, containing no historical, ethnic or geographical specificity, ‘decolonising design education’ might become yet another *move to innocence*. Like *feminism* and *anti-racism* also *decolonization* risks becoming a ‘trend’, but Tuck and Yang remain critical towards its application within education:

*“(...) it is not uncommon to hear speakers refer, almost casually, to the need to “decolonize our schools,” or use “decolonizing methods”, or “decolonize student thinking.” Yet, we have observed*

<sup>6</sup> In September it was decided after a local vote, that Hans Egede will remain in the prestigious site looking over the capital. The popular argumentation is that removing statues is erasing history. Wille, *Status På Afstemning*.

<sup>7</sup> Decolonising Design, *Decolonising Design Education*, 82.



THE BUST plaster replica of a former king, Frederik V who founded the Danish Royal Academy of Art in 1754 with money made in the transatlantic slave trade.





ONCE retrieved from the harbour, the bust was dissolved beyond repair. A teacher at the academy claimed responsibility for the event, and lost her job as a consequence.

*a startling number of these discussions make no mention of Indigenous peoples, our/their struggles for the recognition of our/their sovereignty, or the contributions of Indigenous intellectuals and activists to theories and frameworks of decolonization.*"<sup>8</sup>

This is why at Ontario College of Art and Design University (OCAD) in Toronto, head of design, Elisabeth 'Dori' Tunstall

<sup>8</sup> Tuck and Yang, *Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor*, 2-3.

begins every presentation by acknowledging the Indigenous custodians of the land upon which the university was built.

Meanwhile the Danish Royal Academy of Art is proud of its royalty, even if it means the school is built with rubble used as ballast aboard slave-ships.<sup>9</sup> When the academy's founding father, king Frederik V embodied by a plaster replica of a statue, suffered the tragic fate of dissolving in the canal, it resulted in scandal and firings. The act of solidarity with activists in Nuuk and elsewhere impacted by Danish colonization, was labelled terrorism and equalled with the Taliban's annihilation of 6th century Buddha statues in Bamiyan, Afghanistan.<sup>10</sup> Regardless of what these

<sup>9</sup> Anonyme  
Billedkunstnere, DET  
KGL. DANSKE  
KUNSTAKADEMIS  
GRUNDLÆGGER

actions are called, there is an urgent need for addressing and reducing the harm done by Eurocentric art and design education.

<sup>10</sup> Willerslev,  
Rane Willerslev:  
Busteaktionen Rejser En  
Vigtig Debat...

Within graphic design, typography especially illustrates existing hierarchies as it expresses written language, where Latin is favoured over all other scripts, symptomatically called Non-Latin. Typographer Robert Bringhurst defines the responsibility of graphic designers:

*"Communication ceases when one being is no*



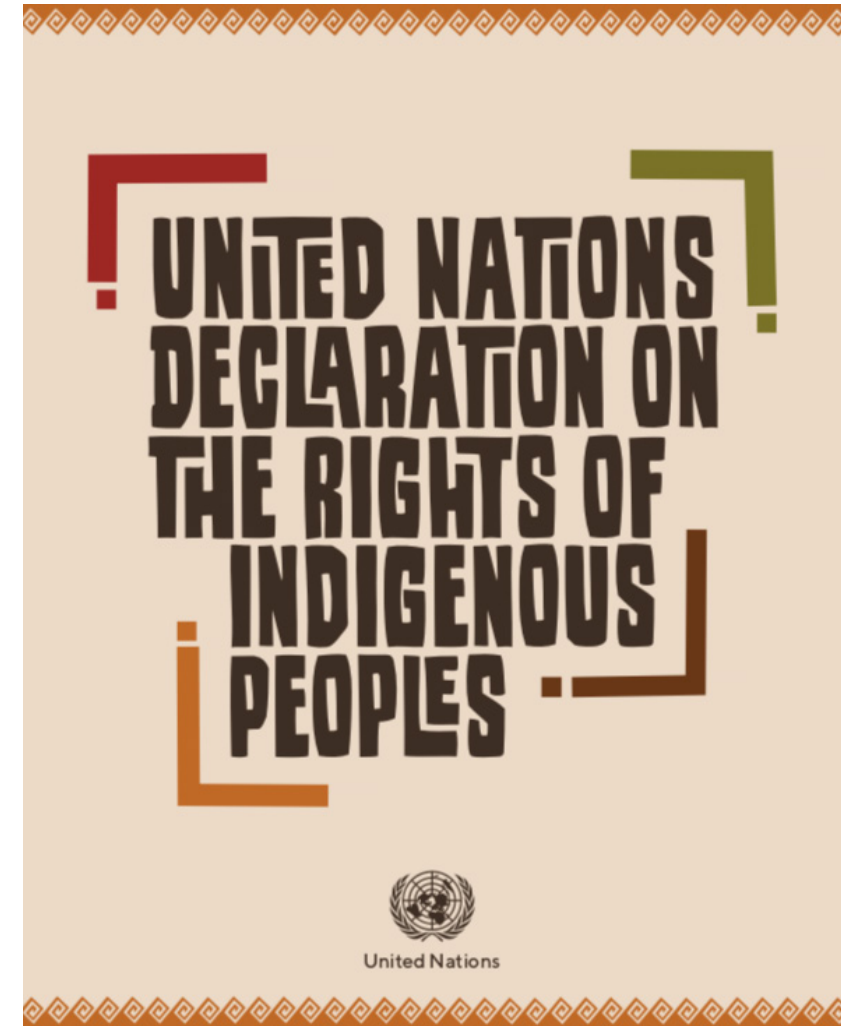
*different from another: when there is nothing strange to wonder at and no new information to exchange. For that reason among others, typography and typographers must honor the variety and complexity of human language, thoughts and identity, instead of homogenizing or hiding it.”<sup>11</sup>*

An honourable task, if completed with this dedication to diversity, yet often misunderstood resulting in offensive use of type. One surprising example of such offense is the United Nations’ Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Designed by UN in-house designers, the legal paper uses the same typeface as the cocktail menu of the Vavoom Tiki Room in the Hague, and probably countless other ‘exotic’ publications around the world. Unlike other official documents, the headlines are in ‘earthy’ warm colours accompanied by a border consisting of geometric spirals. A strong sense of cognitive dissonance occurs when reading the text: “*Resolution adopted by the General assembly...*” as the eyes expect to read “*Hakuna Matata!*” As in other fields, graphic designer Ruben Pater notes how often questionable design decisions are made by white designers, with no knowledge of the culture they seek to emulate, instead reflecting only the designers’ imagination, reducing Indigenous culture to a colonial stereotype. According to Pater:

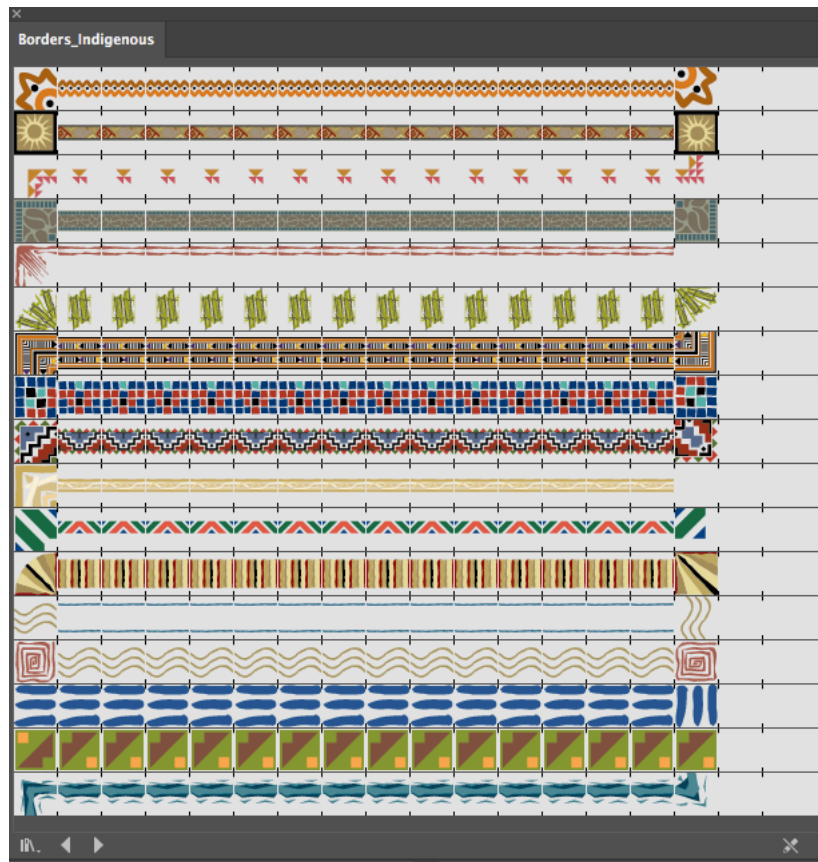
*“Ethnic typography can lead to racist designs, but more importantly the use of ethnic stereotypes prevents the public from seeing representations of minorities treated with the same respect as those of the dominant culture.”<sup>12</sup>*

When a document concerning the ‘survival, dignity and

<sup>11</sup> Bringhurst, *The Elements of Typographic Style*, 82.



THE COVER of the United Nations’ Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples signed by 182 nation states worldwide in 2007.



BORDERS in “Indigenous” styles, can be easily added to any vector-shape in *Adobe Illustrator*.

<sup>12</sup> Pater, *The Politics of Design* 52–55.

<sup>13</sup> A non-legally-binding resolution passed in 2007. United Nations, *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.

wellbeing’ of all Indigenous peoples on this planet, at the highest institutional level, on behalf of 182 constituent nation states, is designed with this level of cultural awareness, can we trust those rights will be taken seriously?<sup>13</sup>

However not only ignorant designers are to blame, also our tools carry responsibility as they support these decisions. In the 2020 version of Adobe Illustrator, a popular software amongst graphic designers, a property called ‘borders’ enables users to apply an ‘Indigenous’ style, reminiscent of the UNDRIP spirals. Across platforms and interfaces examples of racialization can be found encoded within the software, *we* see as a neutral and universal vessel for design. Indeed, what we design, designs back at us, and as technology grows ‘smarter’ the question of agency becomes very important. Mbembé articulates this development:

*“We are witnessing an opening up to the multiple affinities between humans and other creatures or species. We can no longer assume that there are incommensurable differences between us, tool makers, sign makers, language speakers and other animals or between social history and natural history.”*<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Mbembé, *Decolonizing Knowledge*, 26.

Without the binary division of objects and subjects, animals and humans, our machines and our brains, *the mermaid* becomes evermore relevant as an interspecies creature, able to float between cultures.

In pre-Christian Greenland such separation was not made between humans and other species. In the holistic Inuit belief system the concept of *Inua* meant that everything visible was animated with life, not visible to the eye.<sup>15</sup> This

spiritual approach to nature, created an entirely different understanding of tools, than that of a consumer-society, and resulted in an intricate and inherently sustainable design practice. Gore-tex-like technologies were used to insulate clothing, allowing hunters to move swiftly and suddenly without sweating, to again sit still for hours without freezing.

Just by feeling three-dimensional maps carved in driftwood, hunters could navigate the coastlines in kayak in the darkness of winter. Snow goggles helped in the long bright summer days, when hunters could go blind from the sun's reflection. The Inuit hunting techniques were so sophisticated, it took 150 years of colonization before Europeans could contribute anything significantly improving them.<sup>16</sup>

But Inuit innovations were not only practical, the interconnectedness with spirits meant design was a kind of magic that anyone could exercise for protection, revenge or healing.<sup>17</sup> When uncritically adopting pre-existing tools,

<sup>15</sup> The closest English word would be *soul* or *spirit* but *Inua* also applies to objects, animals, emotions and abstract things like sleep or laughter.

<sup>16</sup> Marquardt, *Greenland's Demography*, 49.

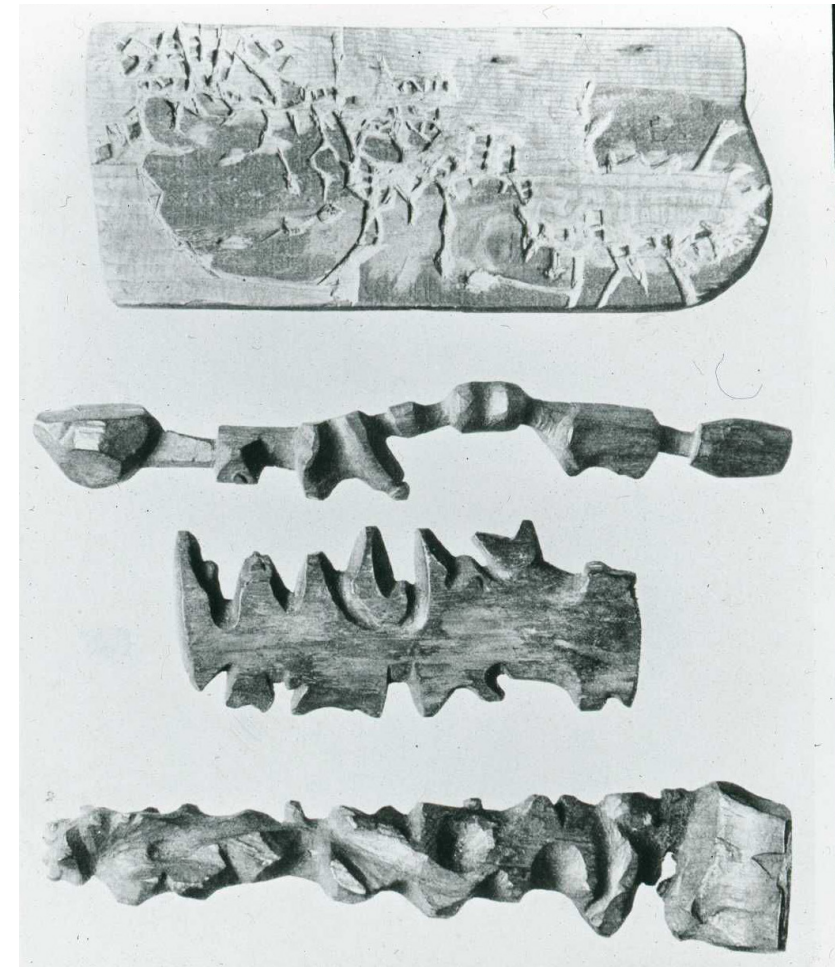
<sup>18</sup> Lorde, *The Master's Tools*, 12.

<sup>17</sup> See Jakobsen, *Shamanism*, 46.

aesthetics, and attitudes shaped by those in power, we are merely reproducing the same patterns in new guises. Audre Lorde brought up this urgency in her speech 'The

Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House':

*"Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference—those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older—know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths."*<sup>18</sup>



COASTLINE MAPS carved in drift-wood, from East Greenland 1885



*AMULETS* traditionally represented people, plants or animals made from materials like feathers, skin, claws, teeth. Not only the item itself, but the process of creating it, was important as the amulet absorbs and reflects the intentions of its maker.

Inuit knew how to create powerful tools for survival using only what was available. Indigenous knowledge-production guides a radical understanding of technology and other species, which could bring about the necessary onto-epistemological change.





*Chp. IV*



*THE MYTH* of the dead's passing to the underworld, Adlivun, illustrated by Karaale Andreassen.



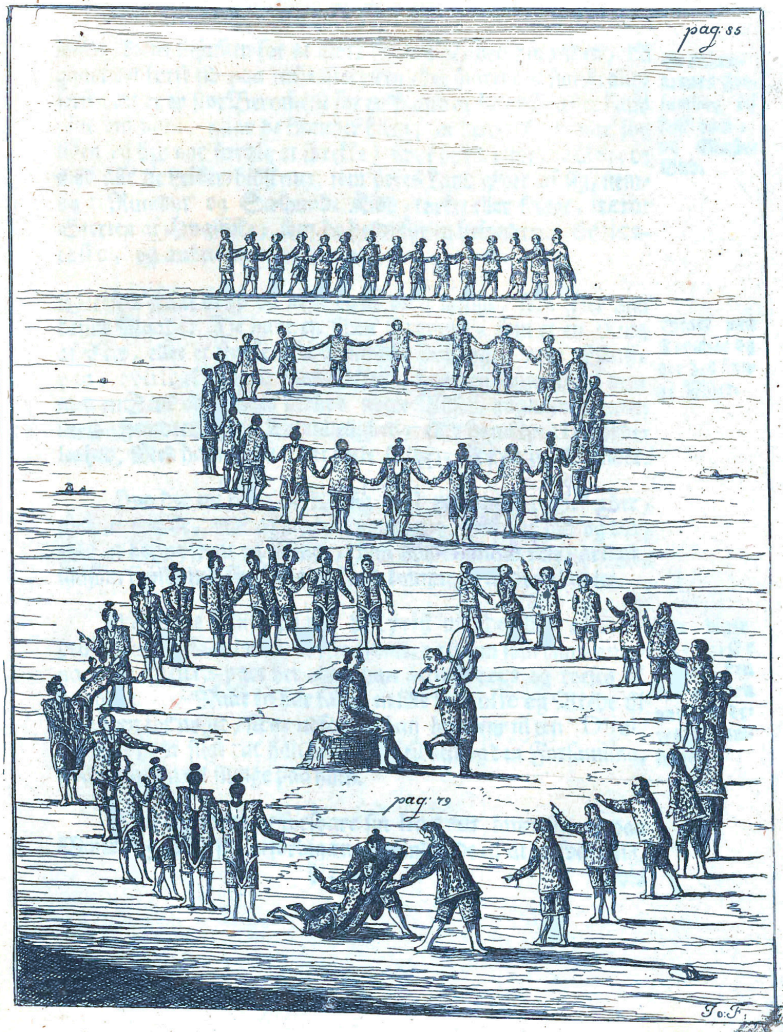
# STORYTELLING FOR SURVIVAL<sup>1</sup>

The genocidal history of Western civilisation teaches the dangers of celebrating the colonizers, of relying exclusively on scientific models and written languages, centering the white man who turns all other living and non-living beings into his property. Thus *land back* is not merely taking over a physical property, but caring for the land as a spiritual, historical responsibility as Inuit used to carry out with full autonomy. Once arrived at the realization that Denmark was never small and innocent as the *Little Mermaid*, but still benefits from the colonization of Greenland, and from privileges inherited from a time as the world's seventh biggest slave-trader, a mourning of the stories no longer being told begins, and new stories can emerge.<sup>2</sup>

In Greenland Inuit storytelling has always played an active role in education and parenting. Many of the central myths were told to discipline children, and instill a moral codex to improve the wellbeing of the community. Drama, dance and drum-music accompanied rituals and celebrations and the ancestral stories that survived colonization, are today listed as UNESCO intangible cultural heritage. In the *'The Fight for Greenland'* Panninguaq explains to her daughter that the lines under her skin, which cross her

<sup>1</sup> I adopt this title from the experimental documentary film *Storytelling for Earthly Survival* from 2016 where Fabrizio Terranova portrays Donna Haraway and her application of Haudenosaunee *seven generations principle* to storytelling.

<sup>2</sup> Dale, *Danmark Var Verdens Syvendestørste Slavehandler*.



*SINGING BATTLES* traditionally solved conflicts in a creative and communal manner. Hans Egede made this illustration and tried to anihilate the practice and the drum.

fingers, used to be tattooed in honour of the *Mother of the Sea* to secure a peaceful afterlife for the soul.<sup>3</sup> These lines indicate where the fingers of *Mother of the Sea* were cut, before her transformation, as traditionally, tattoos marked the passing from childhood to femalehood and protected women against anything from evil spirits to painful childbirth.

The inherently female practice of tattooing was one of the first traditions to vanish when the colonial introduction of Christianity made all creation stories about Adam and Eve. It is only in recent years that the sacred markings have resurfaced, as Western beauty ideals prevail beyond the impact of the church. Greenlandic tattoo-artist and researcher Maya Sialuk Jacobsen, acknowledges the decolonial significance of the traditional practice, but she insists that the tattoos are not revived to be Westernized, commercialized or used as a political weapon for Greenlandic independence:

*“The most pressing point of my practice right now, is how we as a people handle the finding and revival of old practices and avoid making it a weapon of the few, but instead make it the healing of everybody. It is so very easy for our practice to be taken over and politicized like it is happening now, and I am eager to change that, because it takes the opportunity away from the whole group to benefit from getting to know our culture again, and to reconnect with the deeper layers of female culture of the Inuit people.”*<sup>4</sup>

The Inuit tattoos make up an entire language they tell stories of the person who

<sup>3</sup> Sorento, *The Fight for Greenland*. 0:20:19

<sup>4</sup> Jacobsen, *Decolonizing Technology: Crafting Indigenous Resistance*. 0:12:08



PANNINGUAG explains to her daughter the Inuit belief behind her finger tattoos, as she reads a Greenlandic bedtime story about the *Mother of the Sea*.





YOUNG GREENLANDIC people of all genders are reclaiming the sacred markings of their ancestors, as Indigenous rights and LGBTQ activist Seqinnguaq Lyng Poulsen.

carries them, not just to be read by humans but also by spirits. Women would be tattooed with the patterns from their family, and when marrying adopt designs from their husband's ancestors, passing the combination on to their daughters.<sup>5</sup> The symbols are also specific to geography, e.g. West-Greenlanders and East-Greenlanders would be tattooed differently according to their difference in hunting techniques.

For more than four-thousand years, the tattoos were practised by Inuit in all Arctic regions, Jacobsen explains how they are gaining popularity with the young:

*"Today they just get the patterns that they like, they recognize the whole package as an Inuit identity marker, but really if you know how to read and utilize the tattoos there is great healing to get from them. I have tattooed hundreds of Inuit women across our territories and I've seen that it works, there is a magic!"*

Jacobsen describes the craft as something spiritual outside of a commercial practice, where a client requests from a catalogue, instead she practices tattooing as a way of healing communities. But this Jacobsen is not able to legally perform where she lives in Denmark.

Given the Arctic climate, traditional clothing covered most of the body, so the majority of patterns were designed for face and hands, but Danish law forbids tattooing from the neck and up, and from the wrists and down.<sup>6</sup> Even though Denmark is home to the second biggest Inuit minority in the world we make no exception from the law when it

<sup>5</sup> *Kakjernerit* or *Tunniit* are Inuit terms for the practice. Rosing, *Fortællinger Om INUA*, 155-174. For further reference see *Tunniit: Retracing the Lines of Inuit Tattoos* by Alethea Arnaquq-Baril.

<sup>6</sup> Jacobsen, *Decolonizing Technology: Crafting Indigenous Resistance*. 0:34:53

is actually requested, contradicting the UNDRIP which *we* signed in 2007:

*“§11.1 Indigenous peoples have the right to practise and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs. This includes the right to maintain, protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures, such as (...) designs, ceremonies, technologies and visual and performing arts and literature.”<sup>7</sup>*

<sup>7</sup> United Nations, *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, 11

<sup>8</sup> By Greenlanders in this case, naturally I mean those of Inuit heritage. I do not encourage the deeply offensive cultural appropriation taking place in Denmark and other Western contexts, where ‘tribal’ tattoos are copied because they are perceived as exotic.

Legalized or not Jacobsen’s practice and her extensive research into Inuit heritage provides an empowerment that will continue to serve Greenlandic self-perception for generations. That the tattoos have not recovered all of their original signification, makes space for artistic and deeply personal interpretations for Greenlanders today.<sup>8</sup> Inuit patterns appearing on skin already decorated by contemporary tattoos, or on pedestals

of colonizers, illustrate how Inuit tattooing is not simply a rediscovery of lost knowledge, it is a reimagining of the past stimulating the imagination of Indigenous futures.

This is vital work in a context where Indigenous culture is widely understood as belonging to the past. Colonization stories position indigeneity as incommensurable with modern life, as something that inevitably had to die out as it could not co-exist with civilization. This is why Anishinaabe theorist Gerald Vizenor speaks of ‘survivance’ combining the words *survival* and *resistance*:

*“Most importantly, survivance establishes Native identity in the present, as opposed to viewing Native*



*EIGHT MUMMIES* were excavated in Qilakitsoq, in 1972. The adult Inuit women bore facial markings, and are estimated to have died in 1475.



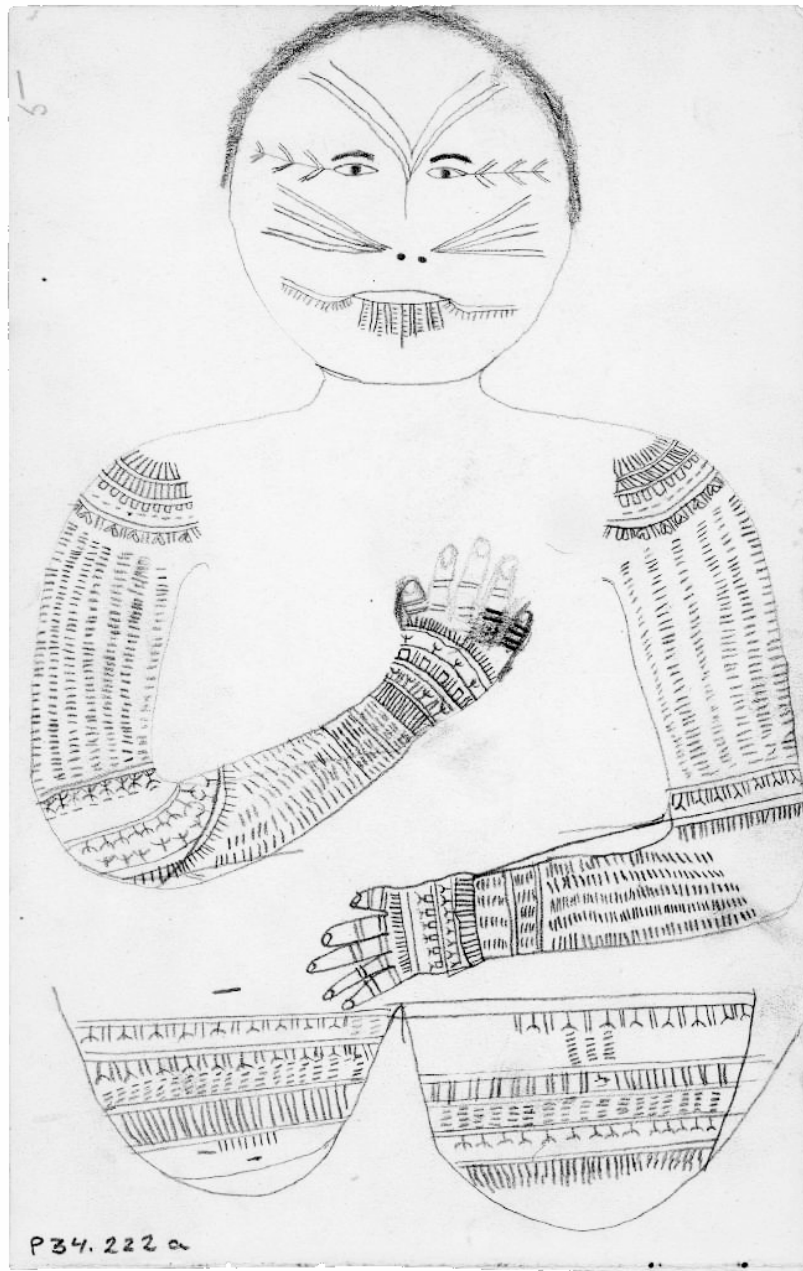


ILLUSTRATION of tattoo patterns by unknown Copper Inuit collected by Knud Rasmussen, ca. 1923 National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen.

*experience as a relic of the past, consigned to museum exhibits and to the nostalgic longing for a return to the noble, savage fictional contact narratives in the guise of an alien race (...)*<sup>9</sup>

Distanced from victimhood, *survivance* indicates the ongoing, and collective experience of existing in spite of an ongoing genocide, most often portrayed as an one-time-event of the past. Despite *our* ceaseless efforts to erase, Christen, assimilate, disappear and forget entire populations, cultural workers and researchers inscribe Indigenous lives into cyberspace, public space, and any other space *we* think of as blank.

The figure of the mermaid has been present since the dawn of humanity, and can be traced across the globe with representatives like the Japanese *Ningyo*, the South-east Asian *Suvannamaccha*, the Assyrian *Atagartis* and the West-European *Melusine*. This cyborg identity is so contended, today merpeople have their own unicode emoji and with the use of artificial intelligence unique mermaids can be generated (see cover) from now until infinity.<sup>10</sup> Whether physically dismembered, digitally disembodied, or rendered into vast datasets, the mermaid's capacity for *survivance* makes her an inspiring idol for marginalized identities everywhere. In USA afro-goddesses give rise to pop culture, as more and more female artists create hype around Black heritage. Famously Beyoncé paid homage to Yoruba water-goddess *Oshun* on her visual album in 2016, while her sister Solange often refers to the mermaid and sea-deity *Yemaya*, central to Afro-Cuban and Black diaspora in Latin America.

<sup>9</sup> Or *endurance* in some readings. Dillon, Ray Bradbury's *Survivance Stories*, 57-69

<sup>10</sup> Trained on a dataset from the Google game Quick, Draw! the deep learning model sketch-rnn, can be used to draw mermaids.

As an instant response to the Black Lives Matter uprisings of 2020 rapper Princess Nokia, called upon her:

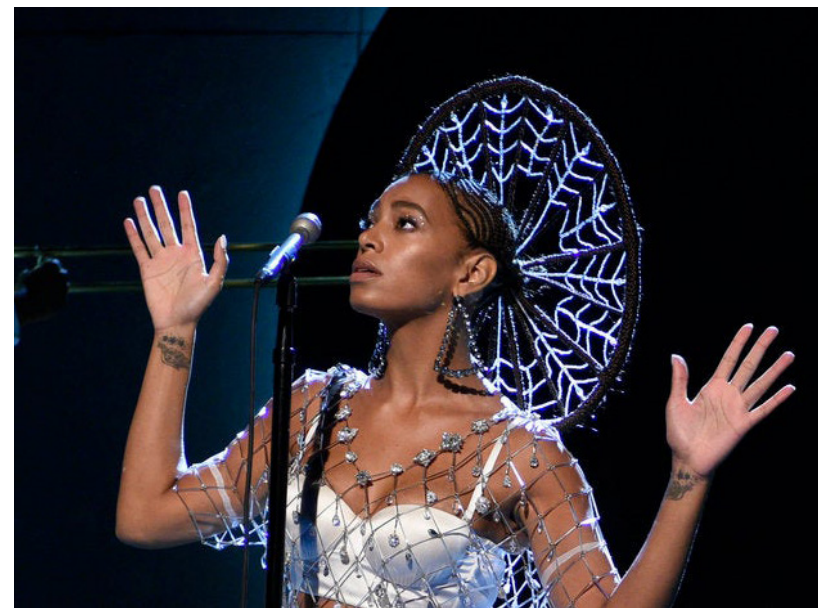
*“Mafererefun Yemaya. I pray to you virtuous mother, on behalf of your beautiful children who so dearly need your help right now. I call on you Yemaya, to shield us with your Ashe<sup>11</sup> and light, and protect your children from the harm of white supremacy. Mafererefun Yemaya todo el dia, I call on you selfless mother to bring your children into formation and give them the tools they need to succeed in dismantling the new world order and centuries long systematic racism that has ripped our families and cultures apart. Mother of all black children, mother of all life, water and sea, I call on you ! (...)”<sup>12</sup>*

In times of increasing instability and fear, younger generations of Black Americans look East at their African roots, while Inuit Greenlanders look West towards the territories in North America, to find spiritual empowerment and artistic inspiration.

In a globalized world, where every physical and digital corner has been invaded by colonial capitalism, a shared resistance against white supremacy provides a different kind of hope than Hans Egede. Yet there are very specific vocabularies and aesthetics, local to every struggle, that call not just for statements but for particular *actions*. Just as nuclear waste is a multinational, multi-generational threat to all life, there is a need for multi-species thinking in what might be a final chapter of human life on Earth. Will Inuit identity evolve below the surface, like the sculpture of Sasuma Arnaa defies the

<sup>11</sup> Similar to *Inua*, Ashe is the philosophical concept in West-African Yoruba beliefs, signifying a power inherent in everything from plants, to rocks, to humans, to ancestors, to Gods.

<sup>12</sup> Princess Nokia, “Mafererefun Yemaya. I pray to you virtuous mother...”, 02.04.2020.



SOLANGE performing at Saturday Night Live in 2016.



YORUBA DEITY Yemaya as depicted in Princess Nokia's Instagram post in June 2020.





IN JULY 2020 the little mermaid was again making a statement. This time she had stickers on her knees and nipples, and the words *racist fish* spray painted on her stone.

rising sea-level in Nuuk? Will the Little Mermaid help Danes through planetary crisis, or is she nothing more than a *racist fish*? Returning to the harbour of Copenhagen, it is easy to ignore traces of past encounters, yet more and more stolen goods reach the light of day, as reconstructions bring up evidence of the exploitation of Greenland.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> The findings of 17th century Greenlandic spearheads in the soil surrounding the metro construction in Kongens Nytorv, Copenhagen, shed light on the abductions of Inuit. See Johannsen, *Jagtspyd Sladrer*.

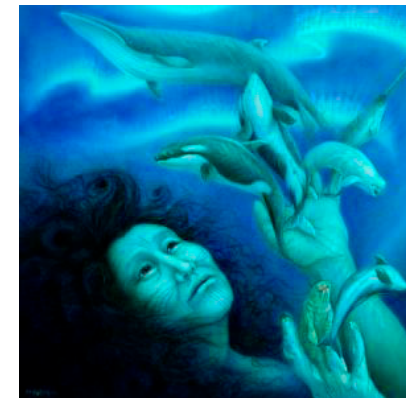
The marble blocks from Maamorilik were buried under the Royal Greenland Dock until it turned tourist-attracting food-market. These stories of stones, places and people are deeply intertwined with colonization, but not in the dominant narratives which cast Denmark as a benevolent and civilized nation. Most stories, of women like the one arrested in Christiania, go untold, because rarely do *we* listen to how these stories end. The Danish state keeps quiet no matter the severity of the suicide crisis in Greenland, and it is hard to imagine just how deep the silence is. How long before *we* see *our* reflection in *their* suffering? What treasures will reveal themselves in old soil? How many more statues will be dumped in the harbour?

Perhaps only when Greenland gains full independence, will the Danish prince wake up to find there is no kingdom left. Until then, the most urgent task is to minimize any contributions to the *ongoing pain*. Apologies are far from enough, but they are the very first step on the path away from ‘celebrating the colonizers’. No more concern should be paid to *white fragility* as white supremacy is indeed a threat to public health, harming those who are left invisible to systems which deem them ‘unfit’. For inclusive systems to come into existence, designers need to dig deep

into the terrain they engage with, and realize that creation and destruction goes hand in hand. In this context, respectful design is actively questioning existing paradigms, and one's own position and privileges within them. It is avoiding stereotypical and racialized aesthetics, and reversing the gaze to critically examine our own colonial habits, so that colonized bodies are no longer scrutinized in the eye of technology but actively reshaping it. As creative work becomes more precarious and art-history and design canons open up to non-conforming knowledges, perhaps survival can be introduced as an academic skill. New curricula have the potential to shatter the myth of *white innocence*, and educate about the toxic forces of “good intentions”.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> The term *white innocence* coined by Gloria Wekker with her 2016 book by the same name. Wekker's analysis of Dutch racism and the claim to innocence is in many ways applicable to the Danish, and as colonial neighbours Denmark and the Netherlands were initially competing over dominance of Greenlandic territory.

Greenland should by no means be compared to Denmark, and in positioning the Mother of the Sea in contrast to the *Little Mermaid*, I risk trivializing and confusing struggles which are incommensurable. Women's emancipation does not equal decolonization, anti-racism does not equal decolonization, throwing old statues in the harbour does not equal it either—though it could be a step in that direction, it might also be a slick way to get rid of the evidence—an attempt to escape the discomforting guilt, a *move to innocence*. Nevertheless, what sea goddesses across the globe have in common is their capacity for transformation and fertility. The mermaid as a storytelling device, has the ability to remould and dismantle narratives from below. Despite efforts to make the mermaid an innocent and powerless figure for white consumption, she resurrects at the intersection of human and animal, of life and death. Out of



*MOTHER OF THE SEA* transforms into a goddess as her fingers become animals of the sea.

darkness and silence real change can erupt like bubbles in the deep rising to the surface to burst.<sup>15</sup> *We* might not live

<sup>15</sup> Qarrtsiluni means “while something is waiting to burst” and describes the tradition before celebrating the soul of the whale, when traditionally Inuit would remain silent to prepare new songs and fresh words for calling upon the spirits. Jørgensen, *Sjæl Gør Dig Smuk*, 190-191.

long enough to see it, but the *Mother of the Sea* surely will.

*“These places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through darkness. Within these deep places, each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling. The woman’s place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep.”*

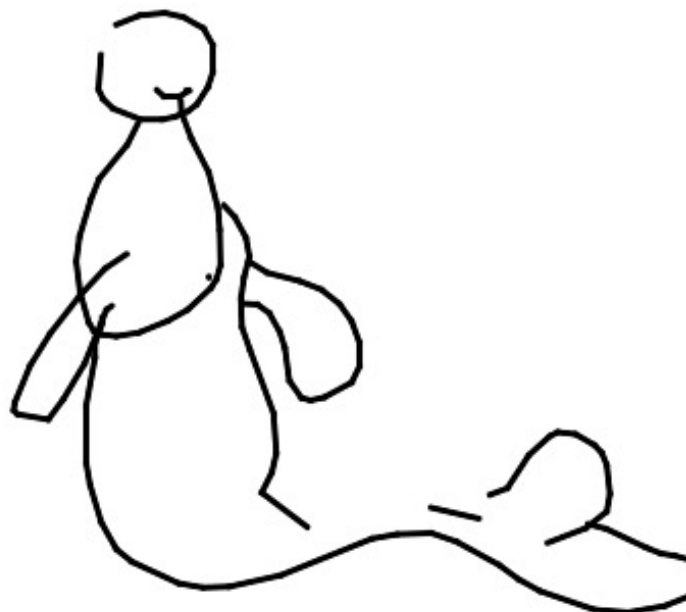
Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 36-37.





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A TALE OF TWO MERMAIDS:  
*Disrupting Narratives of Danish Colonization*

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