Greenland: Literature and Cultural Production[1]

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In the debates about decolonization and the reconciliation of indigenous peoples with their own history and the majority population, the demand for "narrative sovereignty" (Wente 2021: 168) plays an increasingly important role. In 2017, the Greenland Reconciliation Commission also emphasized the need to narrate history from an indigenous perspective. The term refers to the fact that representations of former colonies are often based on Western perspectives, whereby the line between fictional genres and those that claim objectivity and authenticity is often blurred. Textual, pictorial, and audiovisual representations of the colonies and their inhabitants have thus served to legitimize the colonial project from the very beginning. In the case of Greenland, they evoked notions of the Inuit as alternately in need of Western civilization, worthy of protection as "noble savages", or deplorably bereft of identity, and solidified them in the discourse of the metropolis. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Greenlandic writers and artists began to adopt European forms of expression and use them in their work. Since then, Greenlandic cultural production has often stood in opposition to the prevailing foreign images. It has been a site of counter-publicity where questions of identity and nation-building have been negotiated and colonial historiography and modes of representation have been confronted and challenged by counter-narratives and alternative perspectives (McLisky/Møller 2022).

Western representations

Greenland first appeared in Danish literature in 1842. In *Kunnuk og Naja*, Bernhard Severin Ingemann depicts his protagonists as childlike figures in need of the care of Christian missionaries. Henrik Pontoppidan, in *Isbjørnen* (1887, "The Polar Bear"), creates the illusion of Greenland as a place of purification for European

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escapists hoping for catharsis (Volquardsen 2022). As a result, Denmark has a long tradition of literary engagement with Greenland, and many of the narratives introduced into literary discourse during the colonial period have an astonishing persistence due to their intertextual aftermath. Between 1774 and 1953, only employees of the colonial administration and excursionists were allowed to enter Greenland. This isolation contributed to the fact that, in addition to the extensive corpus of widely read travel and expedition literature, fictional and artistic representations of the colony and its inhabitants also gained influence on the dominant international imaginary. The popularity of historically and biographically inspired Greenland novels by Scandinavian authors such as Kim Leine and Iben Mondrup, which dissolve the boundary between fact and fiction as aestheticized narratives of reality, testifies to the fact that the demand for the most authentic possible depiction of Greenland continues to this day (ibid.). International television productions such as *Thin Ice* (2020) and *Borgen - Riget, Magten og Æren* (2022, *Borgen - Power and Glory*) fictionalize not only the geopolitical competition of the great powers for raw materials and military presence in the Arctic, but also the growing decolonization efforts of the Greenlanders, and allow the global media audience to participate in these developments.

Oral tradition and written language

Because the Inuit did not have a written language at the beginning of colonization in 1721, colonial discourse attributed to them a "deficient historical and chronological consciousness" (Eglinger 2021: 48) as well as a "deficient historiography" (ibid.), overlooking the fact that oral tradition, in addition to transmitting ancestral knowledge necessary for survival in the Arctic, also fulfilled a historiographical function. In addition to the myths and legends common throughout the circumpolar region, which the polar explorer Knud Rasmussen used in the 1920s to reconstruct Inuit kinship relationships and migration routes, remarkable events were also passed down through the generations, such as accounts of encounters between Inuit and medieval settlers and Christian missionaries. It is only in the wake of recent debates about the recognition of indigenous knowledge in research that oral traditions have received renewed scholarly attention, not only as literary artifacts but also as historical sources (Mønsted 2021).

The development of the Greenlandic written language is closely linked to the mission. It was standardized in the mid-19th century by Samuel Kleinschmidt,

a German missionary of the Moravian Church. At the same time, Greenlandic authors began to write down oral traditions, including myths and legends, rhymes, proverbs and drum songs (Thisted 2011). One of them was the teacher and author of psalms Rasmus Berthelsen, who in 1861 became the first editor of the monthly newspaper *Atuagagdliutit*. The early publishing projects were promoted by the colonial inspector Hinrich Rink, who, by providing a supraregional medium and rehabilitating the precolonial cultural heritage, forced the formation of a Greenlandic national identity as an imagined community based on the culture of seal hunting, which was crucial for profitable trade (Rud 2006). One consequence of these efforts was the establishment of an early art industry. Artists such as Jens Kreutzmann and Aalut Kangermiu responded to Rink's call for the preservation of oral traditions by producing numerous watercolors, woodcuts, and drawings, which remain valuable cultural-historical sources and provided the Inuit with another medium, in addition to the printed word, to counter the prevailing colonial modes of representation with their own perspectives (Hatt 2020).

The first novels

At the beginning of the 20th century, a literature of novels was established which, despite the appropriation of Western genres by the authors, most of whom were educated in Denmark, also showed aesthetic reminiscences of the oral tradition. The first novels, Mathias Storch's *Sinnattugaq* (1914, *A Greenlander's Dream*) and Augo Lynge's *Ukiut 300-nngornerat* (1931, "300 Years After"), are partly set in the future and were read as a form of political discussion literature at a time when censorship by the colonial authorities was common. By having their protagonists undergo processes of religious-national awakening or by depicting them as self-determined individuals in a society liberated from colonial hierarchies, the authors outline models of nation building whose declared goal is to overcome dependencies and the asymmetrical distribution of agency (Volquardsen 2011). By granting even precolonial customs and traditions a share in a new order of values, texts such as Frederik Nielsen's *Tuumarsi* (1934) and Hans Lynge's *Ersinngitsup piumasaa* (1938, *The Will of the Unseen*) can be read as correctives to the evolutionist understanding of culture that characterizes the first novels, according to which traditional Inuit culture in order to achieve equal rights must give way to a modern social order based on the Danish model (ibid.). Hans Lynge, who later became known as a playwright and painter, sets his novel in precolonial times. After

a guilt-ridden patricide, Ulloriaq, has decided to turn away from the community as a mountain wanderer (*qivittoq*), a figure known from mythology, he experiences a form of absolution in an encounter with spirits and returns as a wise shaman (*angakkok*) who also knows about values such as mercy and grace. The radical message of the novel, and perhaps the reason why it was not published before the official end of the colonial period, is that even without the intervention of the mission, the Inuit value system would have evolved towards virtues that are not to be understood as solely Christian, but as universally human. A similar motif can be found in Ole Brandt's novel *Qooqa*, which was published in 1971, when the limits of what could be said in the public discourse of the country, which was on its way to political home rule, had already been considerably expanded. Even without the imposition of foreign values, the protagonists of the story, which is set long before colonization, find ways to overcome the once widespread practice of blood revenge (Grove 2007). In addition to Hans Lynge's belatedly published novel, the correspondence of the author Peter Gundel with a confidant in Denmark testifies to the high hurdles that authors of the colonial period had to overcome in order to be published: Gundel hardly ever succeeded in publishing any of his manuscripts because of his outspoken criticism of the colonial system (Thisted 2021).

Postcolonial literature

While the beginnings of Greenlandic fiction were marked by political visions of the future, the literature of the post-war period was dominated by a look at the past. Texts such as Otto Rosing's novel *Taseralik* (1955), Villads Villadsen's cycle of poems *Nalusuunerup taarnerani* (1965, "In the Night of Paganism") and Otto Sandgreen's adaptation of East Greenlandic sagas *Isi isimik kigullu kigummik* (1967, "An Eye for an Eye, a Tooth for a Tooth") have in common that they are engaged in a project of reappropriating a national historiography that, until recently, was reserved for Western historians and subjected to their often narrow gaze. Inspired by the student movements of the time, an openly anticolonial protest poetics emerged in the 1970s, including the poetry of Kristian Olsen aaju and the later politicians Aqqaluk Lynge and Moses Olsen, as well as the lyrics of the music group Sumé, which, according to the title of a 2014 documentary, composed the "sound of a revolution" that led to the implementation of home rule in 1979. Hans Anthon Lynge's novel *Umiarsuup tiikinngilaattaani* (1982, "Just Before the Ship Comes"), in which a village awaits the arrival of a supply ship while a

tragedy unfolds, has been read as an allegory of this long-awaited event. Lynge's later novel *Allaqqitat* (1997, "Confessions") and texts by Ole Korneliussen address typical postcolonial themes such as hybrid and ambiguous identity positions (Schramm 2005). Mâliâraq Vebæk's novel *Bussimi naapinneq* (1981, "Encounter on a Bus") deals with the arrival of immigrants from the former colony in the prosperous metropolis of Copenhagen, the racist mechanisms of exclusion experienced there, and strategies for resisting them. Young authors such as Niviaq Korneliussen and Sørine Steenholdt, in their literary debuts *Homo sapienne* (2014, *Crimson*) and *Zombiet Nunaat* (2015, "Zombieland"), depict youth in urban and globally oriented Greenland, where not all postcolonial wounds have healed, and the dark side of Greenlandic society, marked by abuse and violence. While Korneliussen juxtaposes in a discourse montage the different attitudes of young Greenlanders to the postcolonial situation and the resulting problems, Steenholdt provides a depressing portrait of the tensions, taboos and inhibitions of articulation that this situation evokes. For her second novel, *Naasuliardarpi* (2020, "Flower Valley"), Korneliussen became the first Greenlandic author to receive the Nordic Council's Literary Award.

Visual arts and film

With a new generation of authors, Greenlandic literature has experienced an unexpected renaissance. For a long time it seemed that the visual arts would take over as the leading medium of identity debate and social criticism. In a postcolonial context, the works of Julie Edel Hardenberg are particularly noteworthy, as they address questions of mental colonization, cultural assimilation, and hybrid identity positions (Körber 2011). In her essay *Etnoæstetik* (1995, *Ethno-Aesthetics*), the artist Pia Ârĸê draws attention to the problematic demand for a supposedly authentic Greenlandic art production, which she understands as the disenfranchisement of Greenlandic artists through an "imperative of exotism" (Volquardsen 2011: 144) enacted by Western art criticism. In particular, Ârĸê argues against tendencies to understand Greenlandic culture in its entirety as art, and to subsume handicrafts and utilitarian art, if not an entire lifestyle, under the concept of art, which confronts artists with the double challenge of having to meet expectations of ethnic authenticity on the one hand, and the demands of the international art scene on the other (Trondhjem 2022). This criticism may have led to a temporary avoidance of forms of expression suspected of essentialism on the part of

Greenlandic artists and thus to the dominance of a Western concept of art. Younger artists seem to be emancipating themselves from such external constraints, also in the wake of international debates on intellectual decolonization: In line with the demand for narrative sovereignty, they use the various forms of artistic expression to reappropriate their own narrative of Greenland.

The first film made in Greenland in which East Greenlandic amateur actors portray the everyday life of their parents' generation is Knud Rasmussen's semi-documentary *Palos Brudefærd* (1933, "Palo's Wedding"). Other Danish productions include Erik Balling's *Qivitoq* (1956) and Aqqaluk Lynge's socio-critical documentary *Da myndighederne sagde stop* (1972, "When the Authorities Said Stop"), about the closure of the mining town of Qullissat. Hans Anthon Lynge wrote the screenplay for *Lysets Hjerte* (1998, "Heart of Light"), a story of cultural deracination as a result of the assimilation policy imposed by Denmark. An independent Greenlandic film industry can be said to have emerged around 2009 with the release of the drama *Nuummioq*, which, by locating itself in Nuuk's linguistic and habitual hybrid culture, also responds to the prevailing discourses of authenticity and purity. Shortly thereafter, Aká Hansen and Malik Kleist produced two feature films, the comedy *Hinnarik sinnattunili* (2009, "Hinnarik and His Dream") and the horror film *Qaqqat alanngui* (2011, "In the Shadow of the Mountains"), which received a sequel in Kleist's *Alanngut killinganni* (2022, "At the Edge of the Shadow"). Like Marc Fussing Rosbach's fantasy films, Kleist's works refer to the unbroken popularity of scary topoi from mythology and oral tradition, revived in the guise of international cinematic aesthetics. In this way, they are given the opportunity to form the basis of a genuine Greenlandic cultural production that is not susceptible to cultural essentialism.

Literature

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