

DE-FRAMING THE INDIGENOUS BODY. ETHNOGRAPHY, LANDSCAPE AND CULTURAL BELONGING IN THE ART OF PIA ARKE¹

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The camera zooms in on a photostat of a Greenland landscape laid out on the floor on a black piece of cloth. Now a woman with black hair and the distinct features of a Greenlander (the artist) enters the video frame crawling on the photostat. She pats the landscape, strokes it with her hands, sniffs it, and tries to suck it in. She lies down on her back, as if she is trying to be in the landscape, pressing herself against it, attempting to get into contact with it, become one with it – but ends up by tearing the picture to pieces. Slowly and methodically, the photostat degrades into a collection of strips that the artist rakes together around herself. At last she seems to achieve some small degree of physical contact— not with the depicted landscape, however, but with the material the landscape was printed on. She crawls out of the video frame again, a heap of white strips of paper lies behind her on the black underlay. The video, shot in Copenhagen on March 25 1996, is called *Arctic Hysteria*. It is an important work, not only within Pia Arke's own body of work, but within the broader discussion about the representations and self-representations of Arctic/Indigenous peoples. Likewise, Arke's art is central for the understanding of key topics and conflicts within the Greenlandic/Danish narrative community concerning the history of "Danish Greenland." Narratives were at the core of Arke's art: the narratives others told about the Greenlanders, the narratives the Greenlanders told about themselves – not to mention the stories which were *not* told. She worked with books and images she located throughout Europe, and created books and images of her own. As such, she transgressed established genre lines just as she transgressed the boundary between "Dane" and "Greenlander."

¹ This essay is a draft version later to appear in Thomas A. DuBois & Dan Ringgaard (eds.): "Places," (*Comparative History of Nordic Literary Cultures. Vol. II*). The essay has been developed within the two Tromsø-based projects: *Arctic Discourses* and *SARP: The Sami Art Research Project*. I also thank Thomas A DuBois, University of Wisconsin, Madison, for helpful comments. As will appear from the text, I knew Pia Arke and followed her work over the years. The article draws on this insight, but the responsibility for the interpretations is of course mine, except in cases where reference is made to Arke's own writings. An in-depth treatment of Pia Arke's œuvre is under publication in: *Kuratorisk Aktion* (ed.), *TUPILAKOSAURUS: An Incomplete(able) Survey of Pia Arke's Artistic Work and Research*, Copenhagen: Kuratorisk Aktion, 2012.



Arctic Hysteria. 1996. Video 4:3 (S-VHS to DVD), 5:55 min.

Greenland and Denmark represent a typical (post) colonial landscape in the sense that the relationship, even after the official termination of colonialism was characterized by highly asymmetrical power relations. This applies not least in terms of the power of representation. Politically, the Greenlanders were represented by the Danes – to a certain extent they still are regarding international affairs and matters of security. To an outside world, Greenland is first and foremost known through literary and visual images created from an outside, primarily Danish, perspective. A well-known example is Peter Høeg's novel *Frøken Smilla's Fornemmelse for Sne* (Miss Smilla's Sense of Snow) from 1992. These days, global warming pulls the Arctic into the media spotlight. In Greenland especially the huge glacier at Ilulissat in Disko Bay and the hunters in the northernmost settlements of Avanersuaq (Thule) attract the international media.

Greenland is inscribed within a broader discourse about the Inuit, who not long ago were called "Eskimos" and considered "primitive". With his famous notion of "Orientalism" the Palestinian-American literary theorist Edward Said (1935-2003) described how the "Orient" has been constructed by external representations in which one text and one image leads to the next and the next and the next in an infinite intertextual chain of production (Said 1978). Something similar can be described for the Arctic (Thisted 1994:214ff.). Ann Fienup-Riordan talks about

“Eskimo-Orientalism” (Fienup-Riordan 1995), I have used the term “Arctic Orientalism” (Thisted 1996, 2002), Gísli Pálsson calls it “Arcticity” (Pálsson 2002), Hans Hauge “Nordorientalism” (Hauge 2004). In a Danish-Norwegian context, renowned figures like H.J. Rink (1819-1893), Fridtjof Nansen (1861-1930), and Knud Rasmussen (1879-1933) must be credited for showing the Inuit respect and for having changed the discourse from the derogative “primitive peoples” to the positive “naturfolk” (peoples of nature), a term borrowed from the German “Naturvolk” (Thisted 2001, 2003, 2010), a discourse within which culture was “good”, civilization “bad” (Robertson 1995:29). Neo-Romanticism escalated in the civilization critique of the 1970s and 80s, and in a Danish-Greenlandic context the word “Inuit” (people) was given connotations like “menneskelighed”/ “medmenneskelighed” (real or genuine humanity), something the “civilized” world had lost, a still living memory and corrective to the modern world (Thisted 1992, 2002). As Ann Fienup-Riordan so aptly summarizes it: “Euro-Americans gradually transformed the image of the Eskimo from subhuman to superhuman” (1995:14). The discourse about what was now called “indigenous peoples” was characterized by a conception of these peoples as the carriers of a vulnerable and unprotected “true humanity”, and it included people living under such different conditions as the Amazonas Indians, the North American Indians, the Sami of Scandinavia, the Inuit of Greenland, Canada, and Alaska. Thus, the term “Naturvolk”, and even the term “indigenous”, are ambiguous because, on the one hand, these terms recognize the Inuit’s close relationship with nature and support their land claims, but on the other hand they lock them securely in this relationship, making them one with the natural surroundings they live in, in the same way as the seals, polar bears, and walrus are considered to be part of the Arctic environment. This becomes deeply problematic when the Arctic is described with an “anthropological present” without a sense of the huge upheavals that have occurred as a result of contact with European culture (Gant 1998a, 1998b, 2005, 2009, Thisted 1992, 2007b). In most of these representations, the Greenlanders are depicted as caught within the so-called “fatal impact” or “pure or poor” syndrome, assumed to be “lost in translation” between tradition and modernity, always assumed to be the victims of modernity rather than producers of it. With the strong emphasis on the past as the cultural background that made the Greenlanders a people in their own right, distinct from the Danes, the Greenlanders have, to some extent, been co-producers of this discourse. The nation model that was imported to Greenland via Denmark was ethnically and culturally based (Thisted 1990, 2011a, Langgård 2011), and the postcolonial confrontation in Greenland, leading to Home Rule, implemented in 1979, and to self-government, implemented in 2009, was an unambiguously nationalist endeavor in the struggle to establish an ethnically based nation (Gad 2009). Pia Arke was, as it will be shown, highly critical of the assumptions about the correlation between place, identity, language, and culture that underpin this idea of nation.

Embracing “the Mongrel”

Pia Arke (1958-2007) died of cancer when only 48 years old. At her death, she was a well-known and respected artist both in Greenland and Denmark. However, it was not until after her death that her name really became “hot”, mainly due to the Danish

curatorial collective Kuratorisk Aktion and their large-scale retrospective exhibition TUPILAKOSAURUS: Pia Arke's Issue with Art, Ethnicity, and Colonialism, 1981-2006, mounted in Copenhagen in the spring of 2010 and later in the same year in Nuuk and in Umeå. The title "Tupilakosaurus" was the name of one of Arke's own exhibitions, embodying her sense of science, history, and irony. A tupilak was part of Inuit oral tradition, a kind of voodoo or black magic being created against an enemy. Today, these spirits are carved in ivory and wood and sold to tourists, who believe them to be guardian spirits! Dinosaurs are something we all know. But what happens if we combine the two and go in search of a Tupilakosaurus to classify and register and bring into order in the regime of scholarly knowledge? Likewise: what happens to the people living in a given landscape when this landscape is mapped and explored by a foreign power? What is history – whose story, whose history? What happens when one part in the cultural encounter has the power to define and represent the other? And what happens when we change these conditions? These were (some of) the key questions for Arke in her work.

Arke was born in Scoresbysund/Ittoqqortoormiit in East Greenland. Her mother was from East Greenland, her father from Denmark. Due to his work as a telegraphist, her father was constantly moved to different localities in Greenland, and Arke spent most of her childhood in different places in West Greenland (including Thule), and in Denmark. She was christened Pia Gant, but in 1983 she took her mother's maiden name. Actually, this is spelled Arqe, but Arke realized that the Danes were not able to pronounce it correctly, and she therefore changed it to Arke. Names are important in Greenland; Arke knew all about that, and the incident bears witness to the way in which she negotiated her identity, trying to formulate a position that would be neither Greenlandic nor Danish, not even the sum of the two but something that would add the two together without adding them up. This was well before Homi Bhabha's famous texts about living in a "third space" in the "in-between" or "interstices" between established cultures and identities reached Scandinavia (Bhabha 1994). However, it was exactly such a "third space" Pia Arke tried to create for herself with her new name. She cherished the concept of the "mongrel" which she made a sort of leading note for her investigations of notions of "culture", "identity", and "belonging".

As was expected of an artist with her background, Arke started her artistic career producing paintings of seals and ulu's (the half-moon shaped Inuit women's knife) and women flensing seals. Soon, however, she started to ask why, due to her background, people expected her to paint pictures of this sort and why she herself even expected it. And why were these pictures so marketable? Why did art produced by Greenlanders so often end up in being considered in terms of ethnography rather than art appreciation? Arke investigated these questions in her essay *Ethnoaestetik* (Ethno-Aesthetics, Arke 2010), handed in as her graduate thesis at the Department of Theory and Communication at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in 1995. The essay was first published in 1995 and drew a good deal of attention in Greenlandic art circles, not the least because it explicitly questioned the way the Danish artist and art historian Bodil Kaalund had presented Greenlandic art as a curator and in her very influential book on the subject (Kaalund 1979, revised versions in 1990, 2011, English translation 1983, republished 1984, revised version 2011). Kaalund was (and

still is) considered an “ambassador” for Greenland and for Greenlandic art, and many readers, both Danes and Greenlanders, felt Arke’s criticism very unfair. It took a while before people started to see and openly discuss the more far-reaching perspectives of Arke’s considerations, which were not aimed at Kaalund as a person, but at the discourses framing Greenlandic art evidenced in her work.

Along with the memories of the vanishing hunting culture and its tools and techniques, the Inuit language and the Arctic landscape are considered central aspects of Greenlandic identity. Arke suffered from a lack of competence in the Greenlandic language. East Greenlandic had been her mother’s first language, but since the family moved from East to West and from North to South Greenland, where the dialects are all very different from one another, and since they also spent time in Denmark, Danish became the easiest language of communication for her. This of course also had to do with the fact that Arke’s father was Danish – and with the fact that Danish was the language of power and status at the time. Very few Danes learned Greenlandic, and among Greenlanders as well fluency in Danish was considered a necessity for succeeding in the modern world, which had finally been opened to the Greenlanders by the end of the colonial regime and the inclusion of Greenland in the Danish state in 1953. Many Greenlanders from Arke’s generation were enrolled in “Danish classes” where Danish was not only a foreign language, but the language of all teaching and communication. However, when Arke’s generation reached puberty and youth, the pendulum had just begun to swing in the opposite direction: the quest for home rule started as a language politics campaign. So, suddenly, proficiency in Danish no longer represented the same cultural capital as before, especially if one’s competence in the language had been achieved through the loss of Greenlandic. In many ways, these were difficult times for persons like Arke who found themselves in the category of “Danish-speaking Greenlanders.” In a time when the focus was on the exploration of the Greenlandic background and heritage, Arke had to accept the fact that the Greenlandic literature and other Greenlandic sources of Greenlandic history were a closed book to her. Instead, she turned to Danish and English books, re-investigating the explorers’ and administrators’ descriptions from a Greenlandic perspective. The colonial contact zone became the focus of her interest.

Landscape, Memory, and Culture

The relation between man and (the Arctic) landscape was at the center of Arke’s interests from the very beginning of her artistic career. One has to remember that this was a long time before global warming became a public issue. Back in the 1980s, the Arctic landscape was still represented as untouched and irresponsive to human impact. That the Inuit had been able to survive in the hostile and desolate nature, where so many famous European men had lost their lives, was something that made the Inuit very special in European eyes. Survival at the limits of human existence was a familiar topic in narratives about the Inuit. We see in our minds the picture of a lonely sledge making its way through the frozen white landscape where it seems nearly impossible that anything living could exist or that food could be procured. Or we see some fragile little kayaks in the middle of a great fjord, icebergs and mountains towering over them, unaware of their presence. One of the icebergs may

collapse at any moment, smashing the kayaks to pieces. Arke wanted to contest this severe image of the Arctic landscape by exploring new ways of communicating with it. In one of her first projects she painted big squares and rectangles in strong, bright colors on cliffs and took photos with and without people posing in this new, “remade” landscape.

In 1988 she began to experiment with the pinhole camera. She built a huge plywood box—165x140x170 cm—large enough that she could stand and move around inside it. There was no lens in this very basic camera, but in one of the walls there was a thin metal plate with a very small hole. This hole was covered until the picture was taken. On the opposite wall, the black-and-white-film was mounted. When the picture was to be taken and the light poured in through the hole, it hit the film on the opposite wall of the camera box. The exposure time was more than 15 min., and by sitting inside the camera while the picture was being taken, Arke could watch it forming. It was also possible for her to shade the light with her body, thereby producing a very direct, bodily influence on the result (Gant 1996, Kleivan 2010). The outcomes are beautiful, rather blurry representations, far from any exact reproduction of the landscape, but a representation of the meeting between the landscape and the human imagination and emotion. It was Arke’s plan to have the camera transported to all the places where her family had lived in her childhood, but only the first step of the project was realized: Nuugaarsuk, South Greenland, in 1990. However, with an ordinary camera she managed to go back to the other places, and with her lens she explored what it means to have a “homeland”, and if it is ever possible to return to such locations of memory. The series of photos are sometimes called *Imaginary Homelands*, i.e. the same title as Salman Rushdie’s famous essay (Rushdie 1991, Jørgensen 1997).

However, it was the photographs she had taken with the pinhole camera in Nuugaarsuk that kept inspiring Arke. She continued working with the concept, and in a series of new photographic works from 1992 the image forms a gentle, dreamlike background for portraits of modern, urban Greenlanders. It is hard to tell if the persons are coming out of the landscape or disappearing into it – or if the relation is in fact purely imaginary, a postulated link between persons and landscapes created by images and artwork. The last interpretation seems supported by the disengaged expression on the persons’ faces, almost as if they were unwilling to cooperate in the project. In some of the images, the artist poses alone, in some with a cousin, and Arke also explored different effects and connotations by posing in front of the pictures in the nude or wearing her usual urban clothes. The iconic Arctic landscape is here taken at face value as exactly what it is—an icon, represented by the picture. This was definitely a departure from what other Greenlandic artists were doing at the time, such as Aka Høeg (born 1947), a very well-known and established artist who represented Greenland and Greenlandic art on many occasions. In Høeg’s work, the Arctic landscape is the very link that connects the modern Greenlanders and the previous generations in an unbroken chain, no matter what cultural changes. It was this melting of place, landscape, and people that Arke contested – thereby contesting as well the ways in which Greenlanders themselves cooperated in maintaining colonial representations, benefitting from the “cultural capital” of the exotic Other (i.e. Arke 2010 [1995] 23f.).



The Three Graces 1994. B/w photograph of cut-up and reassembled photograph.

The theme took on an even more direct turn in a series of new variations from 1993. In a famous image the artist is sitting with her back to the camera, facing a Photostat of the Nuugaarsuk photo and with a kamik (thigh boots made of seal fur and embroidery) from the West Greenlandic national costume placed on her head. The photo is also entitled *Put your kamik on your head so everyone can see where you come from*, a reference to a commentary by Arke in the Greenlandic newspaper *Sermitsiaq* (Kleivan 1999). Thus, the image was a comment on the constant talk about ethnicity, which it seemed impossible to escape at the time. Everyone asked the artist where she came from, and constantly she was met with preconceived notions associated with the category “Greenlander”. In another work, *The Three Graces* (1993), Arke poses together with her cousin and a childhood friend from

Ittoqqortoormiit/Scoresbysund in front of the same photostat image of the Nuugaarsuk landscape. Each of the women holds an object that is supposed to symbolize their ethnicity: an East Greenlandic drum, an East Greenlandic mask, a doll wearing the West Greenlandic national costume; the paraphernalia of culture. There is something provoking about the women's very direct stare, reproducing the direct gaze of the Greenlanders in photographs taken by European ethnographers. Due to the late colonization of East Greenland and Thule, ethnographers, explorers, and administrators in the early 20th century were met by a culture that in fact was far from "untouched," but which nevertheless in some ways resembled the precolonial lifestyle, and where people still remembered their old traditions. Photographs of the time were expected to depict the culture of the West Greenlanders when they first met Europeans in the 17th and the 18th centuries. Since they embodied the idea of "people of nature" (*Naturvolk*) in fashion at the time, Greenlanders were intensely studied and photographed. In contrast to the European versions of the three graces motif, there is no play, no sweetness, in the postures in Arke's work. While the three graces are usually depicted as absorbed in each other's company and touching each other affectionately, these three women stand at a cool distance from one another (Olsvig 2010). They wear European clothes, and it is obvious that the picture was taken in a studio, since we see the floor on which they are standing. However, when the picture was exhibited and reproduced in the newspapers, it happened on several occasions that the bottom of the image was cut off so that the impression of being in a studio was reduced (Kleivan 1999). The newspapers were, so to speak, trying to re-situate the women in a "real" Arctic landscape, where they were thought to rightfully belong. Thus, the reviews unintentionally demonstrated the existence of the very same problem that Arke was trying to highlight.

Re-Framing/De-Framing the Colonial Representation

For a long period of time, Arke had a life-sized poster of a particular photograph on the wall of her apartment in the Frederiksberg district of Copenhagen. The photo shows an East Greenlandic woman photographed up against a cliff with her arms raised, hands behind her head. The photo is cut so that we do not see the woman in full but only her upper body, which is naked. It shows that she has been breastfeeding. She is not old, but neither is she a classically voluptuous nude. From the expression on her face it is clear that she is not enjoying the situation. The viewer gets the impression that she may not have chosen this pose herself— there is an element of violence in the photo. Also, the fact that we can just glimpse that the woman is wearing a European skirt adds to the photo's feeling of nakedness and vulnerability. The photographer wanted to focus on the "traditional" part of her appearance: the tuft of hair decorated with beads and the beadwork around her neck, her naked breasts. However, somehow the nakedness does not seem "natural" to the woman – it seems likely that she has been asked to remove her shirt for the sake of the photo. The photograph kept fascinating Arke. She was angry with the photographer for having taken the photo in the way he did. But she was also glad that the photo had in fact been taken, because even though we may not know the woman's name and story, at least we know her features and the fact that she existed -

and she does communicate very powerfully with the viewer, in spite of the awkward position/situation.

The photo was taken by the medical doctor Thomas Neergaard Krabbe (1861-1936), who in the beginning of the 20th century travelled to many parts of Greenland and took a lot of photos, later published in his 1929 book *Grønland. Dets Natur, Beboere og Historie* (English translation in 1930: *Greenland. Its Nature, Inhabitants and History*). The photos are “ethnographic” images in the sense that they represent the alien, non-European natives, photographed by a European with the intention of documenting the existence and characteristics of the people in question. The text accompanying the photo in Arke’s apartment reads:

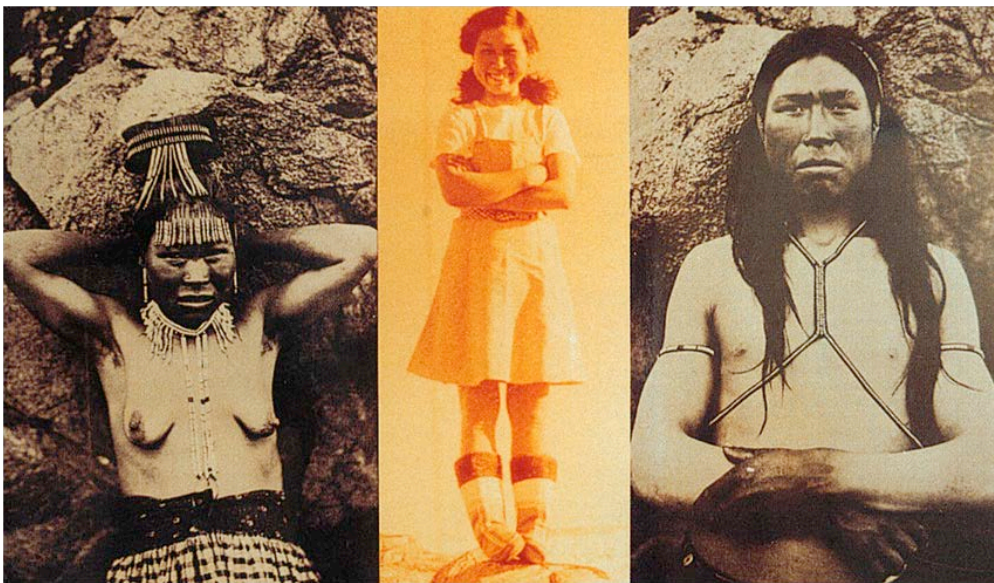
Yngre Kvinde med blottet Overkrop ved Kolonien Angmagssalik. Man bemærke hendes mægtige med Broderier og Perler (Fiskehvirvler) rigt besatte Haartop og Halsbaand. – Fot. 5. Sept. 1906. (Young Woman at the colony of Angmagssalik. The upper part of her body is nude. Note the necklet and huge top-knot, abundantly decorated with embroideries and beads (fish vertebrae). Phot. 5. Sept. 1906).

Usually, the photographer is invisible as opposed to the Greenlanders, who are most literally exposed to view. However, there is a photo taken in East Greenland, in which Krabbe actually photographed himself. We see him posing with binoculars, scanning the fjord where the kayaks pass by. He is fully dressed in a black suit with a bowler hat, necktie and all, and the photo stands out as a completely different representation from the photos he took of the Greenlanders. The two photographs represent the classical opposition between the white man who sees and documents and the natives who are seen and documented (Thisted 2005).

Arke came to terms with the photo of the naked East Greenlandic woman by reframing it into her own composition. In her work *Krabbe/Jensen* (1997), she combined the photo of the woman with another of Krabbe’s photographs, this time a photo of a man, shot at the same spot. The photo is cut in the same way, showing the man with his torso naked except for a thin leather harness for carrying amulets. Both of the subjects stand frozen in their poses, but especially after being combined with the photo of the man, it becomes clear that not even the woman is yielding unconditionally; there is a directness in these persons’ eyes that makes an enduring impression on and challenges the viewer. The photos are disturbing because of the tension between the individuality and will power of the subjects and the way they are photographed, aimed at an impersonal registration of “types” and physiognomies – a little like butterflies pierced on a pin. The photos seek to document the people and call attention to their existence, but because of the way the photos have been taken, they tend to reduce the individual human beings into bodies and the bodies into ethnographic objects.

The artist reinforces this effect by adding a third picture in the middle, a photo taken by Danish telegraphist Sven Lund Jensen in Scoresbysund/Ittoqqortoormiit in 1947. This is a more amateurish shot, with the character of a snapshot, even though it is evident that the young woman in the picture is posing for the photographer. This picture has a far more “private” character; the photographer has wanted to

photograph this particular young woman (the artist's mother), and the emotional distance that characterizes the two other photographs is therefore here replaced by attention and communication. The woman is smiling accommodatingly and is coquettishly – perhaps a little shyly – tilting her toes in her kamiks. We do not doubt that this picture was taken by a man – probably a man in love. With the contrast between this photo and the two others, the artist raises questions about the kind of cultural encounter represented. Because the photographer is so clearly present in the middle picture, even though we cannot see him, we also glimpse a sense of the photographer in the two other pictures. In this way he loses authority as an objective recorder. We automatically start asking questions: Who was he? With what right did he arrange his “objects” in



Krabbe/Jensen 1997. Photographic collage.

this way? What were these persons thinking while they were being photographed? Why did they participate? What form of communication was there before and after the pictures were taken?

By bringing two types of photography into confrontation and dialogue with one another in this manner, Arke opens the way for a postcolonial interpretation of the well-known old photographs, which have been reproduced time and again without anyone questioning the form of representation and dominance they express. The images are no longer neutral representations of a certain “culture,” but rather, the outcome of a strongly asymmetrical meeting of cultures, in which one side took control of the other and assumed the right to define its members. By reframing the old photographs in this way, the artist thereby in fact manages to de-frame the bodies captured within them.

Arctic Hysteria

It was the discussions of identity and representation that brought Arke to the concept of “Arctic Hysteria,” which she explored in a series of works around 1995-1999.

Perlerorpoq was a term by which the Inuit named a certain kind of insanity – however, in the European books it became an Arctic disease – not *any* mental illness but the special illness of hysteria which in Europe was associated with women. It is obvious how this way of describing illness worked as a way of marking a boundary between the civilized, controlled European man and the effeminate, irrational, uncontrolled natives. Arke is especially taken by the constant emphasis on nakedness – that the victim of this disease becomes insensitive to the cold and runs around naked and barefoot in the snow.

In a rather ironic and humorous photo montage titled *Arctic hysteria* (sometimes also referred to as *Arctic Hysteria IV*) from 1997, Arke opposes the very dressed up Polar explorers with their private snap shots of more or less naked Inuit women. These were the kind of photos they took for their private collections, giving them titles like: “The Mistress of the Tupik” (tupeq = tent), “An Arctic Bronze,” and “Flash-Light Study,” associating the women with classical sculptures and paintings of “exotic” women. These men obviously had painters like Gauguin and his images of the tropics in mind. So what kind of “Arctic hysteria” are we talking about here? The women who undress – or the European male fantasies they represent? Who are actually stripped in this collage? As Iben Mondrup has pointed out, the naked women make visible the lustful erections hidden under all those furs (Mondrup 2010). And yet again – it is done with humor and with a twist. Far from simply condemning this type of sexual relation, Arke is curious about it, and avoids the moral outrage that we so often find in postcolonial studies.

Curiosity also characterizes the video *Arctic Hysteria* with which I opened this essay. How does it feel to take upon oneself this subject position of the cultural and sexual “Other”? This is what Arke sets out to do in her courageous video, in which she is literally putting herself and her own body on stage and at stake. Western representations of the “Oriental” or “exotic” Other have been criticized by both Western and non-Western critics. What Arke does, however, reaches far beyond these intellectual considerations, which often reproduce the dichotomy rather than deconstruct it, i.e. James Clifford’s critique of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*: “Indeed his [Said’s] critical manner sometimes appears to mimic the essentializing discourse it attacks.” (Clifford 1988:262). Rey Chow makes a similar point, while also drawing attention to the gender aspect. In an essay titled “Where Have All the Natives Gone” from 1994, Chow talks about how the natives are constantly exploited – even by those non-Western intellectuals who set out to do the opposite. First, there were the imperialist forces of domination. Second, there was the cultural domination in the form of subjection in which “we” give “them” a voice, whereby the “natives” end up as fix points of authenticity for the scholars’ critical discourse. In other words: first, the Western representation constructed the savage, then the *noble savage*. But then, ironically, the “native” is exploited a third time by the anti-imperialist “native” critic himself. Chow’s example is Malek Alloula’s book *The Colonial Harem* from 1986, originally published in French in 1980. Alloula’s material is the postcards with a

pornographic overtone, which French soldiers sent home from Algeria between 1900 and 1930. In the sales material the publishers quote a review from *Village Voice*:

Imprisoned by the photographer's eye these women reclaim their historicity through the pages of this powerful book. *The Colonial Harem* deserves a central place in the growing literature of decolonization. (<http://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/the-colonial-harem>)

Chow is not so impressed. If Alloula is really so offended by these images, then why re-circulate them? Alloula's entire message could have been delivered verbally. The critic takes upon himself the fate of the exposed women, claiming that at some point *he*, as a colonized male, must have been equally exploited. However, what emerges is not an identification between the critic and the images of these women, but an identification between the critic and the gaze of the colonialist photographer *over the images of the women*, who remain frozen in their poses. Alloula wants to answer the white man back – but in this process the women are made a transparent medium, a homoerotic link between the white man and the brown man in a classical Fanonian constellation of repulsion and attraction between the colonizer and the colonized.

In her article, Chow asks how we represent the native without exploiting the native:

How would we write this space [of the native] in such a way as to refuse the facile turn of sanctifying the defiled image with pieties and thus enriching ourselves precisely with what can be called the surplus value of the oppressed, a surplus value that results from exchanging the defiled image for something more noble? (Chow 1994:124)

By refusing to stay in her frame and incarnate the passive victim on display, Arke gives at least one possible, powerful answer to that question. In the above-mentioned essay *Ethno-Aesthetics*, Arke, identifying with “the mongrel,” situated herself as “neither the ethnographic object, nor the ethnographic subject” (Arke 2010 [1995]:28). From this position, the artist is able to break free from the frozen posture and enter the scene on her own terms. In the video, the artist tries to *be* in the landscape, to touch it, to feel it, and to smell it, but there is absolutely no response. The only way of interacting with the icon is by tearing it apart. This became the most radical use Arke made of the Nuugaarsuk pinhole camera photo.

Frederic Jameson stated that “the visual is essentially pornographic.” The act of staring therefore is basically an act of violence. Films “ask us to stare at the world as though it were a naked body” (Jameson 1990, quoted in Chow 1994:123). In Arke's video, we *are* staring at the naked body – and yet there is absolutely nothing pornographic about it. By being totally naked, and yet totally unflirtatious, uninviting, unimpressed, the artist turns the violent gaze back on the viewer. All the time she is obviously very well aware that we are there, watching, but unlike the porn movie *she* is manipulating *us*, the spectators, not the other way around. When the native refuses to cooperate, the image dissolves before the viewers' very eyes, and

the stage is left empty—and open. Open for new images and interpretations, the old dichotomies finally – and effectively – deconstructed.

Family Albums

Even though the relation between Greenland and Denmark and between Greenlanders and Danes has undoubtedly been asymmetrical as far as power is concerned, Arke insisted on perceiving the history of Greenland and Denmark as a *shared* history – as opposed to some sort of “interconnected” histories. To Arke, it was important to stress the fact that the colonial process had resulted in family relations and family ties—not the family ties that officials talk about at celebrations, but the very concrete results of the Danes’ presence in Greenland which in many cases are acknowledged, in many cases not. Like the siblings that started to emerge when Arke began digging in her own family history. The Danish presence in Greenland is usually discussed in very abstract terms: power and economy, ideas and ideology, maps and resources. Arke wanted to call attention to the concrete: the flesh and blood of human beings that exist as a result of the encounter. Hence her use of her own naked body in some of her works in which the spectator is confronted with a nakedness that suddenly becomes uncanny, as opposed to the nakedness of the “primitives” in the ethnographic photos, because this body is far too familiar and yet put in the primitive’s place. As she stated in her book about the settlement Scoresbysund/Ittoqqortoormiit, where she was born: “Jeg gør kolonihistorien til en del af *min* historie på den eneste måde, jeg kender til, nemlig ved at tage den personlig.” (Arke 2003:11) “I make the history of colonialism part of *my* history in the only way I know, namely by taking it personally” (Arke 2010:13).

Rightly the book *Scoresbysundhistorier* from 2003 (Stories from Scoresbysund, 2010) has been called “Pia Arke’s major work” or even “crowning work” (Kuratorisk Aktion and Mirjam Joensen 2010:39). It is also the one among Arke’s works that has already undergone the most thorough analysis (eg. Jonsson 2001, Sandbye 2010). Scoresbysund/Ittoqqortoormiit is a settlement constructed by the Danish colonial administration. The name means “Those who live at the place with big houses”. Officially, it was established due to overpopulation of the existing colony Ammassalik/Tasiilaq further south. In reality, the settlement had everything to do with the dispute with Norway over the right to North East Greenland. The conflict was ended by the decision of the International Court of Justice in The Hague in 1933, which gave Denmark sovereignty over all of Greenland. While the official history of Ittoqqortoormiit was a success story of wealth and prosperity, the statistics and many documents told quite another story of famine, disease, and poverty. Also, Arke secured a rich trove of old photos, letters, and diaries from the basements and attics of relatives of the Danes, who had been in Ittoqqortoormiit at the time, which supported this unacknowledged history. With this material in her suitcase, she set out to tell the untold history – or rather histories – of the place.

One should have expected that people would remember and tell. But they did not. Probably not because they did not actually remember – even though some suddenly claimed to have lost their memory or suddenly and momentarily forgot their knowledge of Danish when Arke wanted to communicate with them. A conspiracy of silence seems to envelop the place - as if Danes and Greenlanders have agreed upon

letting these histories rest. When confronted with a photo like the one of “the forgotten” (Arke 2003:94), a miserably crying, ragged and filthy boy, all parties want to explain the picture away, Greenlanders just as eagerly as Danes. Could the boy have trained to be a shaman? Could he just have had a bad day? Or maybe his parents were lazy and incompetent? Finally, Arke’s mother breaks the silence:

Det er da klart, hans forældre var meget fattige, det var meget normalt. Hans far var syg af tuberkulose, han døde også tidligt. (Arke 2003:96). Obviously his parents were very poor – that was very normal. His father had tuberculosis and he also died early (Arke 2010:98).

Her mother is, however, irritated and annoyed when she gives this answer, probably because her daughter in this way forces her to speak the obvious and yet unspeakable. The colonial history is embedded in shame. It may be that the Danes involved with it respond with other versions of denial than the Greenlanders, but denial is the common ground. It is therefore not only the Greenlanders’ names that have been forgotten, also the names of the ordinary Danes, those who were not the main protagonists of history, and who ended up in the basements of oblivion. As Arke experienced when she took all the old photos to the old peoples’ home in Ittoqqortoormiit and tried to have the persons identified, some could not be identified. These were typically Danes and children who were not standing next to their mother. About them it was said: “Der var så mange, og de lignede alle sammen hinanden.” (Arke 2003:21). “There were so many of them, and they all looked alike” (Arke 2010:21).

Even though it is very convincingly demonstrated how Danes and Greenlanders were by no means living under equal or even comparable conditions no matter how much they were befriended and became family, Arke’s project tries to recall their histories on equal terms. There is something revealing and relaxing about this method of approaching Danes and Greenlanders side by side. They may not have been one another’s equals in their own time, but they are made equals from the perspective of the artist who places their photos in the exactly same position with the recalled names of the persons written in her handwriting across the photos. This is another, very effective, way of rewriting history and reframing the Greenlanders. In Arke’s description, the Greenlanders enter history as individuals whose destinies at some point of history have been closely tied to the place where they were living, but without the aura of a supposed mystical relationship between them and the landscape. The artist is therefore also very skeptical towards the genealogical table of Bella, sent to her by Bella’s adoptive parents in Provence. Bella is the grandchild of one of Arke’s maternal aunts, and the genealogical table is one of many Arke received after the rumor spread that she was investigating the family relationships of Scoresbysund. This particular table draws her attention, because it is so beautiful. It is as Arke writes, a piece of art, a linograph executed by a Scottish artist in 1978, on the initiative of Bella’s adoptive parents. The genealogy is printed on a background of an Arctic landscape with fjords and mountains, and the whole is framed by a frieze with bears, seals, and birds, resembling the East Greenlandic style known from utensils on which similar figures are used as ornaments carved in ivory. However,

there is something wrong with the whole thing, Arke claims, because the icons for men and women are the same whether they denote persons living around 1800 or around 1970. All the women wear kamiks and have big topknots; all the men wear polar bear trousers and seal skin anoraks. But the woman in whose honor the whole genealogy has been made lives in Copenhagen and works at the hot dog stand right across from the train station in Hellerup, one of the very well-to-do areas north of Copenhagen!

Conclusion

Obviously Arke's art speaks from the perspective of the culturally mixed, displaced/migrated Greenlanders. In Greenlandic literature she has a parallel in Ole Korneliussen (born 1947), who from his home in Copenhagen likewise has tried to negotiate the essentialist view of Greenlandic identity as expressed both in European representations and in Greenlanders' own discourse aimed at nation-building. Actually, Korneliussen (ironically) reminds his fellow Greenlanders, that what characterized the Inuit was their willingness to take a risk and to set out to see and experience something new. Therefore, it is also today the migrants—the Inuit spread around the globe—who are the true heirs of their forefathers who set out from Alaska and travelled all the way across the Arctic until they reached a – temporary – limit at the Cape Farewell (Korneliussen 1999, 2000, Thisted 2007a, 2010a). When the people of Scoresbysund first signed up for the expedition and resettlement, it was in the same spirit. As the old father in one of Arke's stories tells his sons when they blame him for the decision:

sket er sket og vi maa tage hvad der kommer" (Arke 2003: 42 quoted from the Minister's report to the Church Ministry, August 1926). What has happened, has happened, and we must take what comes (Arke 2010:44).

The people of Scoresbysund/Ittoqqortoormiit are far from seeing themselves as victims, and rejecting that role seems to be part of their reluctance to speak about the past.

It took a while before the Greenlandic audience took Korneliussen to their hearts. However, just as Korneliussen is one of the most renowned writers in Greenland today, the young generations have no difficulties identifying with the art of Arke. Many feel themselves to be in a similar in-between position, even though both their parents are Greenlanders and their language may be Greenlandic. However, their culture is urban, and they have little or no contact with the old hunting culture. Such young Greenlanders are cosmopolitans. They are globally oriented, many of them travel, if not in real space then at least in cyberspace, and they are not reluctant to settle elsewhere, at least for a while.

To return to the video *Arctic Hysteria* once more, the artist's tearing apart of the iconic landscape leaves no mystery. The message seems to be that there is nothing there, neither "behind the veil" nor in the culture's "inner core". No secrets, no special, privileged relationship between the artist and the Arctic landscape. This kind of statement is very much in line with Frantz Fanon, who tried to make his contemporaries understand that if the black man would not subscribe to the idea of a

privileged whiteness, then neither could he claim any privileged blackness (Fanon 1971 [1952], Larsen and Thisted 2011). However, this is clearly a provocative thought within the discourse of indigenous peoples, where the relationship between nature, people, and culture is still considered essential, even when life has become modern and urban, and nature is no longer a necessity for daily survival any more than it is for anyone else on the planet.

In a famous essay, “A Global Sense of Place”, geographer Doreen Massey called for academics to begin to look at space in a new way (Massey 1997). She further developed her ideas in the book *For Space* from 2005. Instead of trying to cram the diversity of life into narratives of homogeneity: one place, one history, one identity, space should be seen, according to Massey, as something always under construction, constituted through interactions and characterized by “the contemporaneous existence of a plurality of trajectories; a simultaneity of stories-so-far” (Massey 2005:12). With her provocative photos, books, and performances Pia Arke was using aesthetics for the exact same purpose: to call attention to the multiplicity of diverging and even conflicting identities and histories that has formed the Greenland (and the Denmark) we know today, and to open up our ideas of these places in order to include the multiplicity both in the present and in the future. Similarly, she was asking what it actually means to be “indigenous,” and if this is a discursive framework the modern Greenlander should want (or can claim) to remain enclosed within. In a time when Greenland has gained self-government and the initiative to industrialize and exploit the country’s subterranean resources is taken not by foreign powers but by the Greenlanders themselves, her discussion of these central questions is as relevant as ever.

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Abstract

The article presents the Greenlandic-Danish artist Pia Arke (1958-2007) and gives readings of various of her artworks, arguing that they attempt to negotiate a postcolonial condition. Arke was fascinated by the male European explorers and *their* fascination with the Arctic landscape, the Inuit and, not the least, the Inuit women. "Arctic Hysteria" is one of the main metaphors she used to describe this

fascination – giving a whole new meaning to this concept invented by explorers and scientists to describe a special kind of pathology by which the inhabitants of the Arctic were classified and distinguished from other people. Where so many male intellectuals have responded to the European representations with resentment and anger, Arke chooses *curiosity* as her main approach. What did these men see? What made them see in this way? What did the women feel? How does it feel to take upon oneself this subject position of the cultural and sexual “Other”? Thus, instead of repeating the dichotomizing constructions, as is often the outcome of “Anti-Orientalist” or “Anti-Othering” studies, Arke re-lives and thereby out-lives and deconstructs the colonial representations, leaving the stage open for new images and encounters. Arke thus addresses some of the key problems in the discussion of representation, and her work becomes an important critique not only of the colonial representations itself, but of the way in which the postcolonial response has dealt with these issues, trying to bring us further and beyond.

Key words:

Bodies and boundaries, people and landscapes, postcolonialism and gender, Greenlandic Inuit.