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Paper **218**

**Meeting the Greenlandic people:  
Mediated intersections of colonial power, race  
and sexuality**

by

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# Meeting the Greenlandic people – mediated intersections of colonial power, race and sexuality

Marie Maegaard & Kristine Køhler Mortensen

## 1. Introduction

Whereas many former colonized regions and colonizing nations have engaged in public political debates on past assaults, the colonial relation between Denmark and Greenland presents an opposite case in point. Despite the fact that Denmark has been colonizing Greenland for centuries the Danish nation has maintained a self-understanding as exempt from traditional colonial power regimes, which by scholars of postcolonialism has been described as a sense of ‘Nordic exceptionalism’ (Loftsdóttir & Jensen 2012). In the case of the colonization of Greenland the colonial bind is to some extent still maintained through economic and political dependencies. Spread widely apart geographically the most dominant way for Danish citizens residing in Denmark to meet ‘the Greenlander’ is through mediated representations. Danish public service national broadcast is obligated to produce and offer content on Greenland, which means that a number of Danish produced media products circulate in the Danish public. Previous to contemporary mass media representations we find a long line of descriptions of the Greenlandic people written by colonizers and explorers. This chain of descriptions of Greenland and its people, we argue, contains recurring assumptions and accounts of particular practices as *different* from Danish customs. One such recurring theme is that of sexuality which throughout history has been a topic around which to differentiate the Greenlandic from the Danish people, and this is also found in contemporary representations. In this article we investigate how Danish contemporary media representations of Greenlanders and Greenlandic sexuality work to re-inscribe issues of colonial relations by modulating representations around specific intersections of social categories. We view sexuality as a pertinent focal point not simply because sexual practices are repeatedly taken up as relevant in representations of Greenlanders, but also because, as Foucault (1976) has argued, sexuality is closely linked to power. By studying how sexuality is produced and materialized in a given context it is possible to gain an insight in the workings of power. When studying colonial relations the link between sexuality and power becomes even more pronounced. As argued by Meiu (2015) colonizers’ descriptions of the intimate practices of the colonized Other was used as a powerful tool to construct and maintain cultural boundaries between them and us. By categorizing specific

behaviors as sexual and thus sinful colonizers used the concept of sexuality as a way of justifying bourgeoisie lifestyle, the Christian morals and the colonial project in general (Lugones 2010: 743). Such historical readings of the sexual Other is the ideological foundation on which contemporary representations of (post)colonial societies rests and continues to influence the categorization and valorization of particular practices as different. Importantly, the concept of sexuality in this context not simply covers specific sexual interactions, but concerns a broad area ranging from reproduction to marital politics.

In this article we investigate Danish representations of Greenlanders in relation to the topic of sexuality. Based on an overview of historic and more contemporary descriptions we zoom in on a Danish highly popular TV-documentary series from 2015. The documentary was framed by an explicitly formulated purpose to show the “strong” and “brave” Greenlandic people. Through detailed linguistic analysis we demonstrate how in this production bodies are inscribed in intricate intersections of nature, gender, sexuality, and race producing the Greenlandic people as exotic and uncivilized. Moreover, the article engages in interactional analysis of interview scenes that demonstrates how the portrayed Greenlanders despite being given ‘a voice’ end up being ‘silenced’ (Spivak 1988) through various epistemic authoritative acts carried out by the host. We conclude by discussing how despite the explicitly formulated “good intentions” of the TV show, it ends up reproducing and maintaining colonial power dynamics.

### **1.1 Denmark – Greenland: A colonial past and present**

The Danish colonization of Greenland began in 1500s and was formalized in 1720s when the Danish/Norwegian priest Hans Egede arrived in Greenland as appointed representative of the Danish state. Since then Greenland’s relation to Denmark has been formalized in different ways. Since 1979 Greenland has had home rule government, and since 2009 self-government. However, Greenland is still part of the Danish federation, occupies two seats in the Danish Parliament (out of 179 in total), and Danish administration and law are still central in Greenlandic society.

The population in Greenland is quite small, and amounts to approximately 56,000, which is around 1 % of the total population of the Danish federation. The languages in Greenland and in Denmark are very different, one being an Inuit-Aleut language, the other a Germanic language. Danish used to be the official language in Greenland, but since 2009 the official language has been Greenlandic. However, Danish is still taught in school, it is spoken in many urban areas in Greenland, in large parts of the educational system, and in parts of the public administration (even

though since 2012 a new language policy in Greenland has given Greenlandic language more prominence in public administration). In the TV-documentary, which we focus on in this article, no Greenlandic language is present, the program is produced for a Danish audience, and the program only features Danish speaking Greenlandic participants.

One might ask whether the current relations between Denmark and Greenland are best described as *postcolonial* – as a situation of independence from a *past* colonial rule. A concept like ‘coloniality’ may be a better term to describe the relation. As explained by Grosfoguel: ”Coloniality allows us to understand the continuity of colonial forms of domination after the end of colonial administrations, produced by colonial cultures and structures in the modern/colonial capitalist world-system” (Grosfoguel 2011). It is developed as ”Southern” theory, and it is not usually applied to the colonial or postcolonial contexts of the Arctic region, partly because the Arctic generally remains marginal in critical colonial studies (however see Andersen, Hvenegård-Lassen & Knoblock 2015). This lack of engagement with the Arctic as (post)colonial can be understood in the light of *Nordic exceptionalism*. Despite the fact that Denmark has been a colonizing nation for centuries, the colonial history is seldom in focus in Danish self-understandings, in fact it is often denied or belittled, and this is part of the discourse of Nordic exceptionalism. Nordic exceptionalism refers to the general self-perception of the Nordic countries as peripheral in relation to colonialism and contemporary processes of globalization – a declared innocence regarding colonialism (see e.g. Rud 2016: 3; Loftsdóttir & Jensen 2012: 2). This innocence regards Danish as well as other Nordic countries’ past colonial actions, both in the Arctic and elsewhere. In Denmark a prominent example would be the fact that Denmark was among the larger slave-trading nations in the world until around 1800, responsible for bringing more than 100,000 people from Africa to the Virgin Islands (at the time called “Danish West-India”) (Gøbel 2016). This has only in recent years become an issue of critical involvement in the general public in Denmark. Similarly, the history of Greenland as a colonized nation has in many Danish accounts been seen almost as an act of humanistic support, helping a people unfit for the modern world to develop in a civilized way. Despite the fact that there is this self-perception of Denmark as innocent and exempt from colonial history, we find – when we look at public discourse – articulations of the relation between Denmark and Greenland clearly reflecting problematic power relations that have been built through expansive colonialism.

## 2. Intersectionality and mediatization

One recurring articulation in the representation of Greenlanders in Danish public discourse is built through linkages between different categorizations like ‘Greenlander’, ‘woman’, ‘uncivilized’ or ‘promiscuous’. Such semiotic entanglements can be seen in the light of intersectionality theory (Crenshaw 1989, McCall 2005, Yuval-Davis 2011). In this paper we are concerned with how ‘the Greenlander’ is produced as a figure in Danish media discourse, and in showing how previous understandings of ‘the Greenlander’ are reproduced in present accounts. The perspective of intersectionality allows us to see how social categories are mutually constitutive (McCall 2005), and how different attributes are ascribed to ‘the Greenlander’ figure. We are concerned mainly with sexuality but as we shall see, constructions of sexuality are tied to other aspects of ‘the Greenlander’. These attributes are not independent of the social and political context of the Danish/Greenlandic relationship, but are on the contrary deeply rooted in the colonial history of this relationship. The analyses in this paper are concerned with the production of ‘the Greenlander’ as a figure, and this way we are not focused on “the multidimensionality of marginalized subjects’ lived experiences” (Crenshaw 1989: 139), but on how subjects are *represented* in public discourse. Of course the representation of Greenlanders in public discourse ultimately has a bearing on “lived experiences”, but the focus of our analyses are not these experiences, but restricted to the discursive production of ‘the Greenlander’ as the Other.

Intersectionality theory is sometimes criticized for being based on an interpretation of the social world as static. The focus on categories and positions easily leads to a preoccupation with structure, which means that patterns revealed through intersectional analyses can give the impression of stability rather than process. Furthermore, the focus on categories seems to imply an understanding of the social world as divisible into distinct categories, each influencing the other, but nevertheless distinct from each other (e.g. Puar 2007). However, we find that in many conceptions of intersectionality, the term is not understood as presupposing a static or stable social world, quite on the contrary (e.g. Yuval-Davis 2011, Levon & Mendes 2016), and this is also how we perceive the concept here. Intersectionality offers a focus on the mutual constitution of social categories, and we use this focus as a way to examine closer the way ‘the Greenlander’ is constructed simultaneously as being i.e. in harmony with nature, authentic, uncivilized, abusive etc.

We are specifically interested in the representation of Greenland and Greenlanders in the *Danish* media as a way to understand how ideas and beliefs about Greenland are displayed to the general Danish public and shaped through such specific representations. This particular dynamic

can be described as a process of ‘mediatization’. Mediatization refers to the ways in which media influence the continuous shaping of cultural and political ideas and beliefs in modern society (Jaffe 2009). Furthermore the concept of mediatization captures aspects of institutionalization by pointing to how societal institutions become dependent on the ways in which the media work and potentially change in structure and dynamic by following the workings of media (and their ‘logic’) (Hjarvard 2013:17). Such processes are not new, but can be viewed as historically progressing (Krotz 2009). However, the majority of mediatization theory is concerned with the time after the rise of mass media (Hepp 2014: 51). In line with what Hepp terms the social-constructivist tradition of mediatization scholarship we are concerned with the role played by the media in discursively producing what is understood as social and cultural reality. Within sociolinguistics a line of researchers have investigated how media representations about language variation plays a crucial role in constituting ideologies about language users and which social values connect to which types of linguistic resources (e.g. Androutsopoulos 2017, Johnson and Ensslin 2007, Jaworski et al. 2003, Kristiansen 2001). In a similar vein we consider media products about Greenland and Greenlanders as powerful vehicles for producing, reproducing and potentially contesting stereotypes and ideologies about Greenland. Mediatization theory further draws attention to the importance of the specific type of media chosen for representation. Different types of media have different levels of impact and thus potentially different ideological power (Hepp 2014: 50). National broadcast in Denmark can be considered as possessing an authoritative position in the Danish media landscape in reaching a high number of viewers (DR medieforskning 2016). The media landscape of today is of course far more complex in regards to formats, institutions, their status and authority with continuously developing media platforms, large amounts of user-generated content and shifting power relations. This has led some researchers to talk about ‘deep mediatization’ (Couldry and Hepp 2018). By zooming in on a contemporary TV-documentary from traditional media such as Danish national broadcast, however, we wish to demonstrate in which ways state financed media products with a broad national outreach establish a mediated context for the generic Danish TV viewer to “meet” the Greenlandic people and how this works in ideological formations of the relation between Denmark and Greenland.

A combination of intersectionality and mediatization theory allows us to grasp the single elements incorporated in processes of ideology building in a media product. Informed by intersectionality theory we seek to single out the various categorizations which are drawn on in the mediated representation and exactly how these are braided together discursively linking certain

social values with certain people and attributing certain positions with certain amounts of authority.

## **2.1 Analytical approach**

In the following we first set the scene by offering an exemplary overview of types of mediated representations of Greenlandic sexuality that can be found in Danish media. This overview is meant to offer a broader context for the understanding of Danish media representations of Greenlanders before we delve into detailed analysis of one influential contemporary media product. These overview examples we demonstrate draw on historical myths, which are re-entextualized in various media texts from the past up until today. The examples we present are meant to function as a glimpse into circulating statements and accounts connecting Greenland and sexuality but must not be viewed as representative of the entire media landscape. Secondly, we focus on the contemporary TV documentary series ‘The Outermost Town’ from which we have extracted all scenes in which sexuality is topicalized in any way. In the following we analyze three examples by help of interactional sociolinguistics (Rampton 2017), i.e. turn-by-turn analysis and demonstrate the various ways in which the host is positioned as an epistemic authority and thus deliver concluding assessments of the life of the other. Furthermore, our analysis explores how semiotic linkages are built between the Greenlandic interviewees, their practices and larger ideologies and myths about Greenlanders. Our aim here is not to offer a full media analysis with attention to all deployed modes, but rather to seek out and demonstrate how attention to linguistic detail and interactional dynamic in interview sequences can offer important insights. We show in detail how linguistic acts work to build certain representations of Greenlander as different from the host and the Danish mainstream viewer.

## **4. ‘Greenlandic sexuality’ in Danish national discourse**

In April 2018 Greenland had a general election, and the national Danish broadcasting company DR stated that they would “focus massively on the Greenlandic election” and devote their popular weekly news program 21Sunday to this theme by telling the story of “a Greenland which is split between tradition and modernity” (dr.dk). This narrative of a country in internal conflict, at the one hand a modern industrialized society, at the other a traditional hunter-gather society can be seen as a master narrative of Greenland, circulating in Danish discourse. In a newspaper editorial in one of the larger Danish newspapers we find the following:



For far too long the Greenlanders kept claiming that they did not have larger problems with child neglect than other countries, and that if there was something to be said about it, the Danes were definitely to blame for it. There is no doubt that the quick change from hunter society to modern welfare state has been dramatic and contributing to the social problems, which have among other things been manifested in abuse of alcohol and promiscuous behaviour. The problems have been directly visible in the statistics which are not seen anywhere else in the Western world. Every third mother has been sexually abused, every fourth child grows up in an alcoholic family, and the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases has been massive, and in some years the number of abortions exceeds the number of births (Kristeligt Dagblad 2010)<sup>1</sup>

Several things are drawn in to this argument: The Greenlandic traditional culture and the hunter society that was lost, abuse of alcohol, child neglect and child abuse, promiscuous behavior and sexually transmitted diseases. All of this is woven together in an argument about problems in Greenlandic society. Traditional culture, sexual behavior and modernity makes up the basis of this argument, and this is not an unusual argument. It shifts the focus from Danish colonialism ("the Danes were to blame") to the more abstract concept of "modernity" (as in the "modern welfare state"). The Greenlandic culture is constructed here as "pre-modern", and as something which cannot survive the societal and economic changes that modernity brings with it. What happens then is that part of the culture – the free and open sexuality for instance – is mutated into something else; here child abuse, abortion, and sexually transmitted diseases.

The described tension between tradition and modernity is rooted in colonialism and can be traced all the way back to the early days of the colony. In his analysis of Danish colonialism in Greenland, Søren Rud has shown how early ethnographic accounts portray Greenlanders as originally pure and natural, but corrupted by the destructive powers of Western civilization (Rud 2017: 12). Similarly, Fienup-Riordan (1990, 1995) has adapted Edward Said's notion of *orientalism* to the Arctic. It refers here to an ideology where the Greenlandic people are depicted and imagined as a romantic "Naturvolk" – a particular kind of superhuman who constitute a memory of a lost "pure" world. The idea of Inuit or Greenlanders as originally closer to nature, and to a more true and pure world, is not an idea only of the past, but can be found flourishing today too. In the following we will account for how different representations of Greenlanders have developed (or perhaps not developed) up through history, with a special focus on sexuality, beginning with the Danish/Norwegian priest Hans Egede who arrived in Greenland in 1721 and founded the colony Godthåb (present day capital Nuuk) in 1728.

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<sup>1</sup> Our translation here and in all following examples.

In one of his first reports on Greenlandic culture and tradition Hans Egede writes, in lofty moral contempt, about a certain ritual involving sexual activities: "One after the other walks with another one's wife behind a curtain or a partition wall made of skin which is hung in one end of the house. On the couch they are lying caressing each other [...] in this shameful whore game only the married take part." (1741: 63). This so-called "wife-swap" (*konebytning*) is a recurring phenomenon in Danish descriptions of Greenlandic culture. However, nowhere in Egede's accounts of Greenlandic sexuality is it possible to find primary sources of evidence for his descriptions, and this is the same pattern up through history when it comes to accounts of Greenlandic sexuality. The detailed descriptions of wife-swap and this type of celebrations are never traced back to people who have firsthand experience. This is also the case when looking at what we might call "popular knowledge". Under the reference word "inuitter" (Inuits) on the Danish Wikipedia website we find this description of wife-swap etc:

Wife swap and lamp-switch-off celebrations served as psychological lightning conductors through the long, dark and hard winter.[Source missing]  
It is believed that the survival of these extremely isolated tribes has furthermore been secured through the costume of offering visiting travellers to spend the night with the wife. By doing so you have also achieved resistance towards e.g. the flu. [Source missing] (<https://da.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inuitter>)

"Lamp-switch-off celebration" (*lampeslukningsfest*) is a practice which is commonly described in accounts of Greenlandic traditions. It is described as a ritual game where people gather together in a house, all lights are switched off, and participants have sex with each other without then "knowing" who they are with. Again, it is typically a practice we find in Danish anthropological descriptions and reports from officials but not with exact accounts of the sources of information and never told from people who have first-hand experience. In the extract above the phrase "source missing" indicates that the norms of reference on Wikipedia have not been met sufficiently, since there are in fact no references at all in this description. This example of common knowledge about Greenlandic sexual practices is also interesting for other reasons. As we see above, the sexual practices are seen as *functional*: They function as "psychological lightning conductors", building on the assumption that living in Greenland during the winter is hard, and presumably makes people aggressive. The other function is biological: It is argued that the practices of having sex with differing partners is a means of avoiding inbreed and of building up resistance against illness. This idea of Greenlandic traditions being grounded in biological functions and nature is often reported. For instance by the

late Danish adventurer Kirsten Bang in an newspaper interview, where she claims that "to avoid inbreed in the villages, they held lamp-switch-off-celebrations when there were visitors" (Information 1999).

Other descriptions and theories of sexual practice among the Greenlanders can be seen in medical accounts. In 1907 the Danish doctor Alfred Bertelsen writes about births in Greenland, explaining how birth rates vary through the year. He argues that more births take place in the first quarter of every year due to a higher amount of catch in the second quarter of every year. As he states, he has "no reservations" drawing this conclusion, especially since he finds similar accounts from anthropological descriptions of "the exotic peoples' sexual lives". Here descriptions from Australia are reproduced, and according to Bertelsen Western scientists have found that among the indigenous people in Australian there is "a sort of rutting period generated by better nutrition" due to larger catches of prey (Bertelsen 1907: 9). Bertelsen draws direct parallels between the description of this "rutting period" and Greenlanders' sexual practices, which are in his account influenced by hunters' larger catches of prey in specific times of the year. Again, we see that the sexual practices among the Inuit are constructed as closely tied to natural phenomena such as an increase or decrease in the number of seals.

A final example of the biology and evolution argument is seen in the extract below. Under the heading "50 years behind Denmark", a journalist of the union magazine for nurses writes about the challenges facing Danish nurses working in Greenland, based in experiences from Danish nurse Bente Juel:

When working as a nurse in Greenland, it is necessary to know about the historical understanding of the body, since many inhabitants have experienced large problems with abuse and violence. Bente Juel says that as a rule of thumb you can assume that every second child in Greenland has been a victim of abuse of some kind or the other. Ever since the Inuit times there have been so-called "darkness games", where the lights were turned off and sexual interaction was encouraged with the young girls and each other's wives to secure variation in the genetic material." (Sygeplejersken 2014(5): 27)

This article is written more than a hundred years after the report from Bertelsen, yet it draws on some of the same understandings of Greenlanders' sexual practices as closely linked to biological necessity and function. Again, the Greenlandic body, traditional culture, nature, and abusive behavior are tied together in an argument that seems to say that the abusive behavior of today is based in the Greenlandic traditional culture of the past. The sentence "Ever since the Inuit times..." is not explicitly linked to the previous text, but can only be understood as relevant, if it is taken as

an explanation or elaboration of the previous theme of abusive behavior. Furthermore, the headline "50 years behind Denmark" presents Greenland as underdeveloped, and still not a modern country.

As has been seen in the above accounts, Greenlandic culture, and especially Greenlandic sexuality, is in Danish discourse described as connected to nature and biology, at the same time as it is described as corrupted and disturbed by modernity. This duality can be traced all the way back to the early days of colonization and constructs Greenlandic sexuality as either pure and uncivilized and belonging to some earlier developmental stage, or as problematically disturbed by civilization. In both cases Greenlandic sexuality is delimited from Danish culture and civilization through a process of othering, constructing the Greenlanders as not just different, but backwards and culturally and morally inferior to Danes.

#### **4.1 Meeting the Greenlanders in Danish national broadcast**

The representation of Greenlanders to the Danish public is to a large degree driven by mass media. Danish national broadcast (Danmarks Radio, DR) carries a contractual commitment to produce and air content concerning Greenland. However, there are no concrete requirements to the amount or format of such content. In DR's public service contract 2015-2018 it is simply stated that "DR should strengthen the coverage of Greenlandic and Faroese relations" (p. 12).

Greenland has similarly a national broadcast corporation (Kalaallit Nunaata Radioa, KNR), founded in 1958 and producing TV since 1982. However, these TV programs are generally not broadcasted in Danish media and thus not made accessible to Danish viewers.

The four-part TV-documentary 'The Outermost Town', which we focus on in this article, was produced and broadcasted by the Danish national broadcast in 2015 on the main channel DR1 in prime time 8:30-9:00PM once a week for four weeks. The documentary reached relatively high viewer numbers with an average of 469,000 viewers out of a total Danish population of 5,7 million. Furthermore, the documentary has been re-run and is available for streaming online. Based on its relatively high popularity we view this media product as potentially central in circulation, production and reproduction of ideologies of the Greenlandic people – especially in relation to Denmark and the Danish viewer. The host of the documentary, Anders Lund Madsen, is a media celebrity with a career falling mainly within the genre of comedy and entertainment with later endeavors into hybrid genres such as 'docutainment' informing about 'factual' topics such as

science, history and social relations in an entertaining manner<sup>2</sup>. ‘The outermost town’ may be described as one such hybrid media product and falls within a line of documentaries both hosted and produced by Anders Lund Madsen himself that take issue with ‘difficult’ topics such as mental illness, crime, and death. In these documentaries Anders Lund Madsen goes to visit among others inmate forensic psychiatric patients and hospice residents and conduct a relaxed-style but rather direct types of interview, which seem to draw on his publicly known role of comedian and provocateur. Producing a TV-documentary about Greenlanders hosted by Anders Lund Madsen thus creates a particular context and presumably viewer expectation for the stories to be told. With his oeuvre in comedy, entertainment, and straightforward interviewing Anders Lund Madsen’s participation lends a particular entertaining and provocative lens to the media product.

The program begins with an introduction, a film sequence showing a satellite picture of Denmark, starting with Copenhagen, the camera moving up through the North sea to Greenland, and zooming in again. Houses and people are pictured in black and white, shown in slow-motion, and finally the title of the program is written together with the name of the host. The introductory sequence has background music consisting of simple piano accords, occasionally accompanied by electronic spheric sounds. The introduction is furthermore accompanied by the words of host Anders Lund Madsen:

Living in Denmark is easy (.) the sun rises every day the train leaves on time and the animals have been tamed a long time ago (.) but there is another Denmark without *fletteregler* ((a specific type of traffic regulation)) where man-eating beasts sneak around in the streets and where the sun stays in the sky all summer (.) you have to be strong and brave and sometimes a little bit crazy to make it here (.) in the outermost Greenland is Ittoqqortoormiit (.) 171 wooden houses on the edge of the world (.) and inside these houses people are sitting looking out (.) who are they (.) what on earth are they doing here (.) and why aren’t they afraid of anything at all (.) welcome to the outermost town

There are several points to notice here: First of all the title of the program series – “The Outermost Town” – draws on the ancient Greek and Latin notion of “Ultima Thule”, which in medieval geographies denotes a distant place located beyond the “borders of the known world”. At the same time Thule is today more specifically associated with Greenland, as Thule is a town in Greenland (now called Qaanaaq). Thus, “The Outermost Town” draws on ancient mythologies of a place “on the edge of the world”, using this exact wording (*på randen af verden*) in the intro.

The voice-over furthermore establishes several dichotomies: The easy, regulated, safe

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<sup>2</sup> Brødrene Madsens tidsrejse (DR 2016), Helt alene (DR, 2009), Du skal dø (DR, 2012), Sindssygehospitalet (DR, 2014).

life in (well-known) Denmark is set up against the dangerous life in (unknown) Denmark. Interestingly, both places are presented here as "Denmark", which means that according to this presentation, Greenland and Denmark are not two different countries, but two parts of the same country – Denmark.

There is also a tone of irony present in the extract. The voice-over creates a dichotomy between the safe (and perhaps a little bit boring) Denmark that we know – and the unsafe and wild Denmark that we are about to get to know. This dichotomy is among other things created listing things like "flettere-gler" on the one hand, and "man-eating beasts" on the other. Mentioning "flettere-gler" makes the safe and well-known Denmark seem a little bit ridiculous, and similarly mentioning "man-eating beasts" as representative of the unknown and unsafe Denmark is also non-serious. Most likely, every viewer knows that Greenland is home to polar bears, and that sometimes they come into the villages, but describing Greenland as a place where "man-eating beasts sneak around in the streets", clearly signals non-seriousness and irony to the viewers.

The introduction of the place ends with the host stating that you have to be "strong, brave, and sometimes a little bit crazy" to survive in this place, and it is claimed that the inhabitants "aren't afraid of anything at all". The positioning of the inhabitants as strong and brave is a recurring phenomenon in this program, and we will get back to how this is used in the interactions with the host.

#### **4.2 Assessing bodies and practices in interviews**

As stated in the intro the host sets out to meet the Greenlanders and these meetings are represented to the viewer through a number of mainly one-to-one interviews with various villagers. In such interview interaction assessment talk plays a noticeable role. Goodwin and Goodwin define assessment talk as "evaluating in some fashion persons and events being described within talk" (1992:154). By observing the objects being assessed, the assessables, and how these are evaluated either positively or negatively, it is possible to understand how specific practices are inscribed with particular values and ranked into larger ideological structures. In the following we will demonstrate how the power of coloniality is reproduced in assessment sequences in very subtle ways via deployment of various linguistic strategies. As will become evident in the interactional analysis of the interview scenes assessments are complex phenomena. As Goodwin and Goodwin argue an assessment involves the assessable, the assessor, and also the co-participant who is simultaneously assessing the same event, but may not have the same perspective (1992: 165). Moreover, Heritage

and Raymond (2005: 16) point to the fact that by zooming in on how the roles of describer and describee, assessor and assessable are distributed in the TV-documentary we gain insights into who exercise epistemic rights to evaluate events and practices.

In the first interview example the host has gone on a hunting trip outside of the village with one of the villagers, Aviaja. In this example it becomes evident how the interviewer and the interviewee collaborate in creating oppositional positions in relation to nature and pain.

*Example 1: Reading the river*

- 01 HOST: now you're reading the river and I'm  
walking neatly behind you
- 02 AVIAJA: I'm walking where it's gravelly
- 03 HOST: that's a good idea
- 04 AVIAJA: because it's ((the water)) not that  
deep you could say
- 05 HOST: ouch ouch ouch ouch ouch ouch  
CUT
- 06 AVIAJA: uh one has another pain tolerance
- 07 HOST: oh so there exists a Greenlandic pain  
tolerance
- 08 AVIAJA: yes it's quite different
- 09 HOST: are you a mother
- 10 AVIAJA: yes
- 11 HOST: then you have tried to give birth to a  
child
- 12 AVIAJA: yes
- 13 HOST: would you say that that really hurts
- 14 AVAJA: ye:s I would say so
- 15 HOST: but not not in a way that one
- 16 AVIAJA: not any more than I were able to pull  
him out myself
- 17 HOST: ((pulls head slightly backwards)) oh oh
- 18 AVIAJA: so ((shrugs shoulders))
- 19 HOST: no you didn't did you?
- 20 AVIAJA: @yes@

As Aviaja and the host are crossing a stream the host starts narrating their movements: "now you're reading the river and I'm walking neatly behind you" (01). Here the host assesses Aviaja and his

own movements as oppositional: Aviaja is the expert with a special understanding of nature whereas the host is her apprentice unaware of how to move skillfully through the local landscape. In response Aviaja accounts for her movement by normalizing her behavior. This she does by pointing to basic rationality: *“I’m walking where it’s gravelly”* (02), explaining further that she simply chooses to walk where the water is shallow (04). However, she does not succeed in this as her account is, firstly, treated as new knowledge when the host says – *“that’s a good idea”* (03) – and, secondly, overheard as the host redirects the narration of the activity from rationality to affective sensations by his repeated verbal exclamation *“ouch ouch ouch ouch ouch ouch”* (05). In response to the host’s articulation of pain Aviaja provides information about “another pain tolerance” (06). The host follows up and specifies by – in a question – labeling the pain tolerance *“Greenlandic”* (07), which Aviaja additionally assesses as something quite different. However she does not explicate what it exactly differs from (08). As a way of ‘testing’ the truth of the claim of a particular “Greenlandic pain tolerance” the host now questions Aviaja about the pain level of giving birth. In this sequence Aviaja simply confirms the hosts’ claims about giving birth as something particularly painful in short affirmatives. Maneuvering the narrative back to the concept of the “Greenlandic pain tolerance” the host initiates a counter-assessment of the birth pain level for Aviaja to pick up on: *“but not not in a way that one”* (15). Aviaja joins in and finishes off what the host has started by providing information that she pulled out the baby with her own hands. Even though the host explicitly prepared for an oppositional response he now rather dramatically performs surprise and aw – and Aviaja in turn performs a cool attitude shrugging her shoulders and laughing.

This example demonstrates how Aviaja firstly does not seem to go along with the exoticizing assessment that the host puts forward but then eventually affiliates and collaborates. Together the host and Aviaja co-construct a portrait of the natural woman who lives in harmony with nature and who has no need for modern medical assistance. This type of portrait to some extent resonates with “Arctic orientalism” by drawing on a concept of ‘the superhuman’ from a lost “pure” world. The topic of reproduction is not just an issue in the specific interview with Aviaja, but reoccurs throughout the entire documentary as the host continuously addresses family structures through what often seem unmotivated questions about how many children the interviewees have, how old they were when they had their first child, and whether they were in a romantic relationship with the father or mother of the child. This he does with the villager, Josef, too in example 2 below.



Whereas the issue of reproduction in the example above with Aviaja was addressed in terms of unique strength the same issue is approached and valued very differently in the case of Josef.

*Example 2: "Enough is enough"*

01 HOST: how come that there are so many who  
have extremely many children in this  
village

02 JOSEF: ((shakes head, shrugs shoulders))

03 HOST: I mean you're some of those who have  
few children I've heard about someone  
who has seven kids and eight kids and  
six kids that's hell of a lot

04 JOSEF: at first when you begin you think right  
(.)  
it was my wife

05 HOST: yes

06 JOSEF: she wishes

07 HOST: she would like to have some kids

08 JOSEF: yes and u:h

09 HOST: but then you should say stop then you  
should say stop it's enough

10 JOSEF: I've done so

11 HOST: @@

12 JOSEF: but she keeps saying

13 HOST: should- just one more

14 JOSEF: shouldn't we try one more

15 HOST: @@

16 JOSEF: then there comes one more

17 HOST: aha

18 JOSEF: yes yes

19 HOST: then you say enough is enough

20 JOSEF: the last one was with planning

21 HOST: oh ((raises eyebrows)) okay (.)is it  
then done with having kids

22 JOSEF: she said so yes

23 HOST: what do you say ((grabs Josef's  
shoulder and looks at him))  
(music starts))

24 JOSEF: fine ((HOST pats Josef's shoulder  
twice, smiles)) @but it@

25 HOST: but one never really knows

26 JOSEF: one never knows XXX they're always  
lovely

27 HOST: yes

The host starts by addressing reproduction in general terms by posing a question about the reproduction pattern in the village (01). Josef is thus positioned as somebody possessing epistemic authority as he is offered a position as specialist in family patterns in the village. However the phenomenon he is offered to share his knowledge is labeled by what Pomerantz (1986) has termed “an extreme case formulation”. An extreme case formulation works by presenting a case in point as the opposite of moderate. In this example the number of kids in the village is presented as something deviant and extraordinary when seen through the eyes of the host.

Josef gives a minimal response by shaking his head and shrugging his shoulder and thereby rejects the offered position as somebody who can give an account on this matter (02). Minimal responses or silence entirely may very well function as a way of resisting the coloniality of power. Rather, than viewing ‘lack of response’ as tacit agreement scholars have pointed to the ways in which silence carries within it a form of opposition (MacLure, Holms, Jones & MacRae 2010; Wagner 2012). In this case ‘Josef’s lack of ‘voiced’ engagement with the host’s question and the assumptions it carries with it can be viewed as not just rejecting to be able to answer the question, but being unwilling to enter into a particular understanding of the world.

When the host prompts Josef further, however, he offers an account (04-08). Firstly by using a generic pronoun of the agent behind the deeds (04) and then by personalizing the account by appointing responsibility to his wife (04, 06). The host fills in the holes of Josef’s explanation (07). Despite the fact that Josef has never oriented to the number of his children as problematic the host provides Josef with instructions on how to resist his wife’s wishes to continuously reproduce. These instructions are very literate and articulated as ready-made utterances: *“but then you should say stop then you should say stop it’s enough”* (09) and again *“Then you say enough is enough”* (19). The instructions are followed up by the host grasping Josef’s shoulder, looking directly into his eyes and requesting him to articulate clearly whether he is going to follow the instructions and stop to reproduce (23). Josef responds with a “fine” which is acknowledged by the host as he pats Josef’s shoulder twice (24). Yet, as a subtle resistance to this apparent deal between the two, Josef

adds a laughing "but" allowing for his previous agreement to be broken. Additionally, he provides a concluding counter-assessment in the following turn as he – in a mumbling voice – proclaims "they're always lovely" (they referring to "children") and thus adds a different perspective on the story of family life in the village.

These two examples demonstrate how the portrait of the Greenlanders in both cases is articulated as extreme cases and as different from what the host embodies and represents. However this happens in different ways. Whereas Aviaja embodies a unique connection to nature both in terms of the surrounding landscape and in terms of the human body, Josef comes to represent an uncontrolled and problematic relation to his own (and his wife's) bodily desires. Whereas Aviaja's story of reproduction generates admiration and curiosity, Josef's story generates worried gazes and concrete attempts of regulation. And in both cases we see how the host is the main actor in framing the narration yet with collaborative support from the interviewees. In our third example we demonstrate more narrowly some of the linguistic and interactional details characteristic to the hosts' interviewing style.

In this example Aviaja is talking to the host about her father who abused her when she was a child, and she has just told him about the trial and how she had to witness against her father in court.

### *Example 3: "A place of refuge"*

- 01      HOST:            it can't have been a nice it must have been a very  
                                  rough case to go through
- 02      AVIAJA:          I haven't understood how I managed
- 03      HOST:            because a place like this without sounding too Danish  
                                  and racist
- 04      AVIAJA:          yes
- 05      HOST:            it could also be a place of refuge for people who  
                                  can't make it in Denmark

The host is using a specific form here, similar to what is usually described as "I'm not racist, but..." when he says: "without sounding too Danish and racist [...] it could also be a place of refuge for people who can't make it in Denmark". This construction has been described by several scholars as commonly used by Whites as a means to avoid being labelled racist when expressing racist ideas (e.g. Bonilla-Silva & Forman 2000, Van Dijk 1984, 1992). The construction has been examined

further by Vanderstouw who expands the form to include all expressions of the type “I’m not X, but...” (Vanderstouw 2016: 117ff.). In his account he gives the following characterization of the construction:

In the I’m (not) X, but... construction, what is stated after the conjunction ‘but’ is expected to appear contradictory to the statement prior to it, although the speaker’s use of the construction is meant to encourage an interpretation that although the addressee might expect those statements to seem paradoxical, they in fact are not in contradiction (Vanderstouw 2016: 118)

Building on this the host’s use of the construction can be seen as a way of defending his utterance against any critique Aviaja might have of it being colonial and racist. By using the construction he apparently acknowledges that his utterance *could* be interpreted as racist, and he argues that it is in fact not. Interestingly, when using this type of construction there is no argumentation, rhetorically it is merely a statement, or an argument by assertion. Thus, one interpretation of the utterance is that Madsen is shielding himself from accusations of being racist, while expressing racial ideas. Another reading of the sequence could be that by explicitly addressing the issue of Danish racism, the program in fact offers an interpretation of Madsen’s utterances as expressing precisely that. The construction is used frequently by the host in the interactions, and we will get back to them below.

The other part of the host’s utterance, namely the statement that Ittoqqortoormiit could also “be a place of refuge for people who can’t make it Denmark” is quite remarkable in the context of these programs. This statement is completely the opposite of the declared premise of the program as showing how “brave and strong” you have to be to be able to make it in Ittoqqortoormiit. Here instead, Ittoqqortoormiit is presented as a place where it is easier to make it than in Denmark. Again, we see how the overall presentations in the programs of the Greenlanders as strong and brave, run contrary to what is actually happening in the interactions that make up most of these programs.

As we have shown above, the host is continuously assessing the place and the life of people there, and Example 4 is a further example of how that takes place.

*Example 4: “Quite a fucked up childhood”*

01      HOST:            ((raises his hand)) with all due respect ahm a ahm  
                                         quite a fucked up childhood ((points at Aviaja))  
02      AVIAJA:            yes  
03      HOST:            and ahm also it doesnt’ get any less tumultuous by  
                                         the fact that you are commuting between two  
                                         different worlds you know Denmark and and and  
                                         Eastern Greenland

04 AVIAJA: mm

05 HOST: you know you can hardly find anything more  
different

06 AVIAJA: no

07 HOST: but you manage anyway right you know you haven't  
you haven't gone insane

08 AVAJA: no I've been close to several times

09 HOST: so have all of us Aviaja

10 AVIAJA: mm yes yes

12 HOST: but you are not insane now

13 AVIAJA: no I feel that I have found reality

14 HOST: absolutely I mean I'm not a psychologist but it's  
just I'm thinking I'm not sitting here thinking ooh  
Aviaja she's a very fragile person I wonder if  
she'll be able to make it ((laughs)) I'm thinking  
things will be all right because there's something  
robust about you right

15 AVIAJA: I have (.) reached a point where no there will  
never be peace it will never heal but it I know it  
I know what it is and I'm in control now

16 HOST: ((gets up on his feet)) when have you been closest  
to saying now I can't cope any longer

17 AVIAJA: first time when I was eight  
(music starts)

18 HOST: that's very early

19 AVIAJA: mm

20 HOST: did you consider bringing an end to it all at that  
time

21 AVIAJA: °yes°

22 HOST: but thank god you didn't

23 AVIAJA: mm

In turn (01) and (14) the host uses constructions quite similar to the “I’m not X, but…” construction we showed above. He uses this when assessing Aviaja’s childhood with the expression “with all due respect [...] quite a fucked up childhood”, and when he assesses Aviaja’s psyche as robust: “I’m not a psychologist but [...] there’s something robust about you”. In both cases Madsen uses a disclaimer before announcing the supposedly problematic content: claiming that Aviaja has had a

“fucked up” childhood or that she is “robust”. Again, the constructions work to acknowledge the supposedly paradoxical nature of the utterance, but by producing the disclaimer, the speaker has already shielded themselves from critique. This way, what may at first seem to function as a downplay of a potentially problematic claim, may in fact function to silence the interlocutor, since the claim has already been contested by the speaker themselves (Van Dijk 1992).

In all these cases the host is using the construction in an assessment of Aviaja’s life (see discussion of assessment above). Another way of assessing is by using declarative sentences. The host is performing an interview, but the interaction is in fact not made up of interrogatives from his side, but mainly of declaratives. He is not asking many questions in the extract in Example 4 but is instead stating how things are (“it can hardly get any more different”, “you haven’t gone insane”, “there’s something robust about you” etc.). This type of discourse again makes it difficult for the interlocutor to challenge the claims made by the speaker, because the preferred response will be an expression of agreement with the speaker (Pomerantz 1984).

As we have seen the host positions himself as someone who can legitimately assess and evaluate. This is done by the use of the constructions analyzed above, but it is also done even more subtle, for instance by the use of particular epistemic adverbials. The host repeatedly uses the Danish adverbial “jo”, which has no clear parallel in English. It is an adverbial with epistemic function:

”*Jo* indicates that the sender has strong knowledge-based support for the proposed statement, and at the same time implies that the sender assumes that the receiver is sharing this position. *Jo* is thus often used in situations where there is a consensus about a given topic. But it can of course also be used in situations where there is no agreement, for instance as part of an attempt to manipulate the receiver into accepting an unwanted view.” (Mortensen 2012: 76)

Hence, the use of the adverbial ”jo” implies both that the speaker has knowledge, and that the co-participant shares the expressed view. This way, the use of “jo” constructs epistemic authority and positions the host as having the rights to evaluate, at the same time as it once again makes it difficult for the interlocutor to disagree, since it would mean producing dispreferred responses.

Finally, we will mention the way the host asks questions. He generally does not produce many questions, and in Example 4 he only has two questions. The first one, in turn (16) is a ”when”-question. This type of question presupposes knowledge on behalf of the one asking the question. By asking *when* an event took place, the speaker has already implied that it *did* take place; the only question is when. By formulating this question the way he does, the host positions himself as someone who has knowledge about the event. Furthermore, when he asks Aviaja in turn (20)

”did you consider bringing an end to it all at that time?” he uses a yes/no-question, which is also a type of question that presupposes knowledge of the events. This type of question places all information in the formulation of the question, which means that again the host is positioned as someone who has knowledge of the events. At the same time, building on the assumption that agreement is the preferred response, the preferred response her will be a ‘yes’ (Schegloff 2007: 79). What is particularly disturbing in Example 4 is the fact that there seem to be a discrepancy between Aviaja’s descriptions of her childhood, and how she is still having difficulties living with it – and the host’s recurring claims that she is strong and robust. By assessing and concluding in this particular way the host is positioning himself as an authority, as someone who can legitimately assess the events described by his interlocutor. We argue that in these cases the strong assessments make it difficult if not impossible for the interlocutor to contradict what has been claimed by the host. By assessing this strongly the host claims ”the epistemic right to evaluate the state of affairs”, as Heritage and Raymond put it (2005: 16). He does this even when his assessment seems completely at odds with the content of the utterances spoken by his interlocutor, as we have shown in the examples above. This means that what is witnessed by viewers to this program is on the one hand the vulnerability and suffering of the people in the town of Ittoqqortoormiit, on the other hand the host’s recurring claim that these people are ”strong”, ”brave” and ”not afraid of anything”. Despite apparently being given ‘a voice’ the interviewees end up being ‘silenced’ (Spivak 1988) through various epistemic authoritative acts carried out by the host. What is explicitly formulated as ‘good intentions’ of representing the strong ‘Greenlander’ paradoxically ends up reproducing and maintaining colonial power dynamics. Similar to what we noted in example 2 with Josef, the minimal responses (“mm”, “yes”) that Aviaja delivers in this excerpt can also be viewed in line with an understanding of ‘silence’ as resistance. MacLure et al. (2010) suggest that an assumption, which takes the spoken word as the primary sign of presence, and thus the ultimate way of coming into existence, rests upon a false idea of silence as equal to lack of power. Similarly, Wagner argues that silence can work as a way of ‘being there’ “without having to acknowledge the mirror image projected upon them by those who observe them and inscribe them in discourse” (2012: 112). As much as our analysis demonstrates the many linguistic ways of blocking the Greenlanders’ own view on their lived experiences, it is important to bear in mind that ‘silence’ is not a single-sided phenomenon, a position forced on to the Other, but may also be a chosen position from which to object.

## 5. Conclusion

In this article we have analyzed Danish representations and understandings of ‘the Greenlander’ with a specific focus on sexuality. Through a review of a number of different mediated texts we have demonstrated that the representation of Greenlanders in Danish history and contemporary media productions rests upon two overall narrative strands: 1) the pure, pre-modern human in harmony with nature (“Arctic orientalism”) and 2) the mutated and contaminated human being ruined in its inability to comply with modernity. These representational matrices run as a line throughout various media types from historical accounts, printed press, union magazines and last but not least public service TV-productions. As we have demonstrated in our review of various media representations of Greenlandic sexuality the same reasoning is repeated without first-hand evidence. Mythical semiotic connections between Greenlanders, particular practices and the functions thereof are kept vital and thus relevant by continuously being drawn in as background knowledge when engaging with the subject of Greenlandic relations.

Our analyses of interactions between the host and interviewees in ‘The Outermost Town’ demonstrate how the portraits of the Greenlanders are articulated as extreme cases. However, this happens in different ways. Whereas Aviaja as an adult embodies a unique connection to nature both in terms of the surrounding landscape and in terms of the human body, Josef and Aviaja’s childhood experience of sexual abuse come to represent an uncontrolled and problematic relation to bodily desires.

By fluctuating between the counter-imaginaries of a nostalgic lost and simple world on the one hand and a ruined, ugly and perverted world on the other hand the representation entangles purity and perversion. By drawing on these presumably opposite understandings in representing the villagers and their stories these grand narratives are interwoven into causal binds that seem to suggest that built in to the pre-modern pure ‘Greenlander’ is germ to perversion.

By analyzing the objects being assessed, and how these are evaluated as extreme, surprising, ‘out of order’ and “a little bit crazy”, we have shown how specific practices are inscribed with particular values and ranked into larger ideological structures. Our analyses show that assessment talk is particularly rich for discovering the very subtle ways in which coloniality of power can work (Quijano 2000, Grosfoguel 2011). By exercising epistemic authority, the host manages to draw the conclusions and lays out the state of affairs. Drawing on the concept of coloniality of power we can view this as the reinforcement of a Eurocentric system of knowledge in which colonizers are the producers of knowledge.



We argue that the discourse of Nordic exceptionalism makes possible this type of media representation in which Greenlanders are portrayed as part of the Danish nation while at the same time everything but Danish. Media productions that on the surface appear to be a celebration of the Greenlanders as a unique, impressive and strong people cannot escape the history of colonialism and the colonality of power.

### **Transcription conventions**

@           laughter  
XXX       unclear speech

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