Centring on the Peripheries

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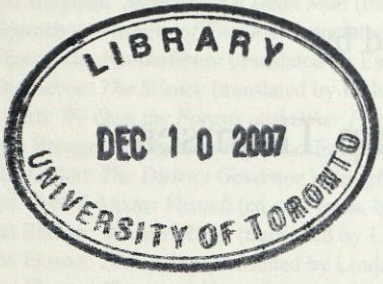

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Stepping off the Map? Greenlandic Literature between Nation and Globalisation

Kirsten Thisted

Seen from an external perspective, the Nordic countries may themselves be very exotic, 'the far North' – but then again, viewed from within the Nordic countries, the Arctic North certainly constitutes a periphery! As far as the relation between Greenland and Denmark is concerned, Greenland has made the otherwise small, thoroughly agricultural and well-organized Denmark seem so much greater. Greenland has – both symbolically and in reality – played the part of the Danes' private wilderness, serving as an arena for all kinds of fantasies which cannot be realised in Denmark. Part of this wilderness has been the Greenlanders, who have been seen as symbiotically connected to the surrounding nature. The relationship between Denmark and Greenland is thus mired in a Western concept of 'us' and 'them', where the idea of a common Western European culture has arisen from the alienation of 'the others'. It is for these reasons that Greenland – having long since become a political and administrative reality – can also be seen as a kind of geopolitical construction like that of the 'Orient'. I call this process 'Arctic Orientalism'. In the same way that Edward Said demonstrates how Renan, for instance, working in his 'philological laboratory', does not simply concoct the scholarly topos of the Semitic Orient but in the same process also produces a conception of what it means to be European and modern, Danish writers and scholars have been involved in a similar process when describing Eskimo language, culture, marriage rituals, the so-called 'adaption problems', etc.[1]

However, this very asymmetrical relationship is slowly changing. In 1979 Greenland gained home rule. This was a revision of the Constitutional Law of 1953 according to which Greenland had changed its status from being a colony to being a county in the kingdom of Denmark. The recent negotiations about the US army's continued possession of the Thule Airbase have brought the whole question of who has the power to represent Greenland into focus. By law, Denmark still holds this right, since the question of the airbase falls

under foreign affairs and national security; but nevertheless an agreement was negotiated between three parties: the USA, Denmark and Greenland. The agreement, which grants the USA the right to retain the airbase, was signed in Igaliku in South Greenland in the summer of 2004. Practically from the start of home rule, Greenland initiated a development towards self-representation, which, strictly speaking, goes beyond the letter of the law. In January 2000 a Home Rule Commission was set up to draw up the principles of a revised law more in step with reality. Its goal was to expand Greenland's self-government, but still within the framework of the present union. From the Greenlandic side the wish for a renewed *partnership* was expressed, with a special view to a more symmetrical distribution of power. The Home Rule Commission presented its report in 2003. In 2004 a new, joint commision was set up by the Greenlandic Home Rule and the Danish Parliament. Also this commission works within the frames of the present union; but in Greenland the question that is discussed is whether (or rather when) Greenland will be able to form a separate national state.

In the following, I will try to describe the centre-periphery relationship as seen from the perspective of Greenlandic literature – but since no such thing as one unified 'Greenlandic literature' exists, I shall introduce two different writers, each with their own very different perspective.

Ole Korneliussen and Hans Anthon Lynge

Ole Korneliussen was born in 1947 in Nanortalik in southern Greenland. He has been living in Denmark since 1967. Korneliussen is one of the very few Greenlandic writers – if not the only one – who has made his name in Denmark, and this has happened quite recently, with the novel *Saltstøtten* (The Pillar of Salt), published in 2000. The novel was first published in Greenlandic in 1999, under the title *Tarrarsuummi tarraq*, which means something like 'The Shadow in the Mirror'. Korneliussen writes both in Danish and in Greenlandic, and prefers translating his texts himself. According to his own description, none of his books are translations – all are independently written texts – although some of them may have the same theme in Danish and in Greenlandic. Actually, the texts *are* always quite different in Danish and Greenlandic, and bilingual readers would benefit from reading both versions – since it can sometimes be argued that the two versions together establish the *complete* text. Also, it is not always the Greenlandic version that is the first version – the first draft of *Tarrarsuummi tarraq/ Saltstøtten*, for instance, was written in Danish; the draft was finished in 1988 and sent to several Danish publishers, but was not accepted for publication at that time.

Hans Anthon Lynge was born in 1945 in Qullissat in northern Greenland. He now lives in Nuuk, and always writes in Greenlandic. Lynge, however, is one of the very few Greenlandic writers who does get translated into Danish. The Danish versions are also published by the Greenlandic publishing firm Atuakkiorfik, and this might be part of the reason why his name is not known in Denmark. Lynge made his debut in 1970 with a short story in a Greenlandic anthology. His first novel was published in 1976. He was co-writer and consultant on the film *Lysets Hjerte* (Heart of Light) from 1997, which got quite a lot of attention both in Greenland and in Denmark, being the first movie with Greenlandic actors and in Greenlandic.

Lynge's novel *Allaqqitat/Bekendelser* (Confessions) was nominated for the Nordic Literature Prize in 2001, and Korneliussen the following year for *Saltstøtten*. Neither of them actually won, but at least their names were mentioned and Scandinavia was reminded that modern Greenlandic literature does exist! Making Greenlandic literature known to the outside world is an important step in Greenland's drive towards self-representation.

Felling the family tree with a chain saw

With his access to two languages and two cultures, Korneliussen himself is a good example of the modern migrated, diasporic elite which forms the basis of postcolonial studies. From his borderline perspective he views *both* societies from the double perspective of the insider/outsider and so he takes up the position of the *in-between*. From this position he establishes an alternate reality, a third space, from which he tries to displace the usual binary logic of primordial polarities through which the cultural encounter between Denmark and Greenland is usually constructed: Denmark *v.* Greenland, modernity *v.* tradition, self *v.* other. Especially in Korneliussen's later texts, these binary opposites are denied, since the differences are not differences *between* but differences *within* – not leading to the traditional discourse of a tragic *split* between cultures in such a person, but to a third dimension.

One thing that many of these so-called post-colonial, bi-lingual and bi-cultural authors have in common is a lack of belief in the usual connection between 'roots', language, identity and 'culture' that support the idea of the nation. The main character in Salman Rushdie's novel *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999) dreams of letting go of this whole idea that has become a straitjacket to the modern, migrating individual:

> ... let's just suppose. What if the whole deal – orientation, knowing where you are, and so on, – what if it's all a scam? What if all of it – home, kinship, the whole enchilada – is just the biggest, most truly global, and centuries-oldest

> piece of brainwashing? Suppose that it's only when you dare to let go that your real life begins? When you are whirling free of the mother ship, when you cut the ropes, slip your chain, step off the map, go absent without leave, scram, vamoose, whatever: suppose that it is then, and only then, that you're actually free to act! To lead the life nobody tells you how to live, or when, or why. (Rushdie 1999:176-77)

Ole Korneliussen expresses the same thought in this way:

> Inuup kinarpiaanera aatsaat paasinarsisarpa siulini kinguaanilu ilanngullugit ilisaritikkuni? Inuk siuleqanngitsoq kinguaaqanngitsorlu kinaassuseqannginnami? Inuk siuliminik qimatsisoq kinaassuseerukkami? Naamik, naamivik, taamaaliguni aatsaat kinaassuserpiani takutissinnaanngortarpaa siulini ajappissatut napaniutitut atorunnaassagamigit. Inuk kisimiittoq kinaassuserpiaminik takutitsisinnaasutuaavoq. (Korneliussen 1999:14)

> Har mennesket kun en identitet, hvis det blander forfædre og efterkommere ind i billedet? Har et menneske uden fortid og fremtid ingen identitet. Har et menneske, der har forladt sine forfædre, ingen identitet? Jo og atter jo, det er først nu, den personlige identitet virkelig dukker frem, nu er han sig selv, klamrer sig ikke længere til sine forfædre. For lang tid siden væltede jeg mit stamtræ med en motorsav og sprængte dets rødder med dynamit. (Korneliussen 2000:14)

> (Does a human being only have an identity if he draws ancestors and descendants into the equation? Does a human being without a past and a future have no identity? Does a human being who has left his ancestors behind have no identity? Quite the contrary, it is not until this moment his personal identity really emerges, now he is himself, no longer clinging to his ancestors. I long ago felled my family tree with a chain saw and blew up its roots with dynamite.)[2]

In the opening of Korneliussen's novel the first person narrator is burning his old boat on a beach which we might believe is situated in Greenland. But the main action takes place in a big city which we might believe is Copenhagen. One day the narrator wakes up and immediately realises that this day is not just any day, but a very special day. No mark has been put on the calendar yet, but the pencil has been hanging there, beside the calendar, waiting to be used.

Without looking back the narrator leaves his apartment and starts walking towards an unknown goal or destination. Underneath or beside the city landscape we sense another landscape: a landscape with high mountains, deep fjords, wide open spaces and glaciers. The narrator is walking in *both* these dimensions or geographies at the same time – since both are part of his consciousness – although the one dimension may be more a landscape of remembrance.

On his way the narrator encounters literally half of Copenhagen's population, from the most marginalised, ostracised characters to more well-

to-do citizens. Through these encounters a picture is drawn of Denmark which has no resemblance to the picture drawn by the colonial and post-colonial Danish administration in Greenland. In this 'colonial' picture the Danes are rich, efficient, hard-working, goal-oriented, rational, open-minded, and modern – as opposed to the poor, inefficient, intuitive, emotional, narrow-minded, 'traditional' Greenlanders. Seen through Korneliussen's looking glass, the picture appears somewhat different. However, this does not mean that his own background is held up as an alternative – basically the first-person narrator is content with his life in Denmark: 'Nunami inuuffiginngisanni najugaqarpunga, nunalu najoruminarmat akunniffigisutut najorpara, naluara najortuassanerlugu' (Korneliussen 1999:14) / 'Nu lever jeg i et land, hvor jeg ikke er født. Landet er gavmildt og behageligt at bo i, og jeg betragter det som en mellemstation på min rejse' (Korneliussen 2000:14) (At present I live in a country I was not born in. The country is bountiful and pleasant to live in, and I consider it a temporary stop on my journey).

Greenlandic myths and traditions play an important role in the story – but in contrast to the usual description, the Greenlandic past is not used as any kind of corrective to the culture of present-day Denmark. In the Danish/Greenlandic context there exists a more or less hegemonic discourse shared between Danes and Greenlanders according to which Greenland – or rather the Greenland of the 'good old days' – is depicted as the perfect natural idyll in which the Danes have intruded to distort and destroy the so-called 'aboriginal' culture. This culture is seen as the essence of the Greenlandic character, something indestructible in the Greenlander's mind which is both the Greenlander's strength and his limitation. Korneliussen rejects any such primordialism or essentialism. In his universe these depictions are mere *constructions*, just like any depictions or so-called 'recollections' of the pre-colonial past are constructions. Korneliussen's first person narrator dare not even talk about his ancestors, but emphasises his constructivist – or what Homi Bhabha would call 'enunciative' – starting point with the cautious expression: 'siuaasaartukkakka' (Korneliussen 1999:12) / 'dem jeg er oplært at kalde mine forfædre' (Korneliussen 2000:12) (those I have been brought up to call my ancestors).

Actually, Korneliussen's first-person narrator introduces himself in the very same way Korneliussen has often introduced himself in interviews, when giving a lecture etc. He tells this story: A long, long time ago the ancestors lived on the other side of the globe. At some point the place where they were living was no longer a good place to live. So the ancestors started walking. Those who stayed were those who did not have the ability to travel. Sluggards and stay-at-homes. Those who continued, even when others settled down

along the way, were the ones who had the courage and the energy, and the most courageous and enduring did not settle down until they reached the big ocean at the end of the world.

You have to envision the long journey from Alaska through Canada to Thule in the extreme North, and from there down to Cape Farewell at the southernmost tip of Greenland, close to Nanortalik where Korneliussen was born. This journey has a mythical quality in a Danish/Greenlandic context, where the Arctic explorer Knud Rasmussen is famous for having repeated the journey in the opposite direction, from Greenland to the Bering Straits, to document and to revive interest in the Greenlanders' common origin with the other Inuit of Canada and Alaska. The myth is fundamental in Greenlandic nation building, as it simultaneously testifies to the Greenlanders close relationship with the other Inuit, *and* sets the Greenlanders apart as being something special and unique.

However, Korneliussen does not end the journey here. As soon as the big ocean was no longer the utmost border, the most enterprising individuals carried on where the ancestors had to stop and continued to Denmark – whence they journey on to populate the world! (Korneliussen 1999/2000:12-14, my resumé).

By this somewhat humorous and self-ironic introduction Korneliussen turns the underlying premise of the usual story of the ancestors' journey on its head: far from using the Greenlanders' close connection with Greenland to claim it as 'their' natural country, Korneliussen uses the story to dismantle this type of mythology. Not only does he refuse to choose between the two countries which through colonialism have come to share one another's history, but he also denies the very idea of nationalism. No people are predestined by their so-called 'culture', no people are 'meant' to live in the very place they were born, and the narrator hopes for his own offspring that they will never feel tied to one particular country, but be able to consider the whole globe as their country. In a Greenlandic context – in the middle of home rule and nation building – this is a very avante-garde and rather provocative statement.

The positive aspects of being a Greenlander

Hans Anthon Lynge's texts are usually set in Greenland – often in the smaller towns or settlements. In *Allaqqitat/Bekendelser* the main character is living a pleasant, quiet life in just such a small city. He has a job, a nice home, a wife. Suddenly, however, his idyllic lifestyle is disturbed. One day he gets a visitor: an old friend from his childhood. The two went to school together, although they were not very close, and lost contact afterwards. The friend is

not happy, he is not healthy and he is not at peace with himself. Before he leaves, he extorts from his host the promise that he will go through a huge pile of letters that he leaves behind. The main character, called the 'host' or the 'reader', is left in his nice and comfortable home with all these papers, and not having the guts to break his promise feels more and more frustrated and shaken in his beliefs, as he reads through what turns out to be not only the writings of his friend, but also all sorts of old press cuttings etc. – texts which force him to remember and to rethink history. The visit takes place in the beginning of 1976, and the last page of the main character's reflections on the writings of his friend is written 'Apriilip ulluisa naggataat 1979' (Lynge 1997:147) (the last day of April 1979). This is not just any day – it is the last day before home rule.

The novel insists on the kind of dialogue that the host/reader hates. According to his own words, the reluctance to get involved, instead of just keeping one's peace of mind and letting others sort out the problems, is 'inuiattut ilisarnaatitta ilagaat (Lynge 1997:107) (one of the characteristics of my people). First, the writing friend is in a constant dialogue with himself in all his papers and notes – and he forces his reading friend to take part in this dialogue. Second, the novel attempts to play the same trick on its own reader: never coming to any conclusions, but raising an immense number of questions. Questions such as: What exactly is Greenlandic 'culture'? How tightly or openly must it be defined? What happens when the respect for the elders, which was previously so important in Greenlandic society, disappears? Can the traditional upbringing of children be adapted to the new society or is it damaging to a child who is to live in a totally different society to be brought up in that way? Does religion have any role to play in this new society, or is it also just a relic of tradition? The point is that we, the actual readers, are reading this twenty or thirty years later. So while the fictional reader is reflecting upon thirty years as 'equal Danish citizens' from 1953-1979, the actual reader is reflecting upon these reflections, seen from the perspective of twenty years with home rule. A rather complicated, but interesting plot.

Even though Lynge raises all these questions, he never gives up operating with a common 'we', 'we the Greenlanders'. The great synthesis of nation and people that Korneliussen rejects still seems to give meaning in Lynge's context, where it is still possible to speak about 'Greenlandic culture' and 'Greenlandic identity'. In spite of the self-criticism levelled towards Greenlandic society in his text, and the above-mentioned Greenlandic 'illness', Lynge holds on to the idea of the nation. Being Greenlandic is also seen as a source of great pride, and the book concludes in a list of 'kalaaliussutsip nuannersui' (Lynge 1997:146) (all the positive aspects of

being Greenlandic).

On the other hand, the overall feeling in Lynge's text is this feeling of 'unhomeliness' that creeps in on him as his friend and all his papers with their alarming thoughts enter his home. The feeling of unhomeliness in his own home becomes a downright nuisance – not very unlike the one that also haunts the first person narrator in Korneliussen's novel because, to return to *Tarrarsuummi tarraq/Saltstøtten*, the narrator may not be so happily integrated as he claims to be in the opening of the novel. In fact, if we read beneath his own statements, a different picture emerges. Right from the very beginning, a similar feeling of 'unhomeliness' creeps up on the narrator. It is as if he has never really taken his own apartment into possession, as if he is not really 'at home' in his own house, and sometimes a strange shadow on the wall indicates a door, as if to a different apartment with other, unknown inhabitants. And as we follow the narrator on his wandering through the big city, we cannot help but notice that he is not once recognised for what he is by the people who are supposed to be his fellow citizens. Whenever he enters a bar or a restaurant, people take him for an immigrant from Turkey or some other Muslim country. He is constantly advised not to eat this and that because it is pork meat etc. – and he is definitely not made to feel welcome.

Stepping off the map?

Postcolonial literature has been enormously successful in the western world. Not only in those areas which were colonised, but seemingly to an even higher degree in those countries which were formerly imperial powers. According to postcolonial theory, this is due to the ability of postcolonial literature to capture the general postmodern feeling of living in a borderland after the breakdown of stable identities and traditions (Rushdie 1991, Bhabha 1994). At the same time, this kind of literature seems to be a literature of the 'jet set' – written by and for an international, globalised elite, travelling as privileged 'tourists' as opposed to the underprivileged 'vagabonds', to use Zygmunt Bauman's metaphors. Aijaz Ahmad has expressed the critique in this way:

> Among the migrants themselves, only the privileged can live a life of constant mobility and surplus pleasure, between Whitman and Warhol as it were. Most migrants tend to be poor and experience displacement not as cultural plenitude but as torment; what they seek is not displacement but, precisely, a place from where they might begin anew, with some sense of a stable future. Postcoloniality is also, like most things, a matter of class. (Ahmad 1995:16)

Even though migration is a defining characteristic of our times (as it has been in previous times as well), a fact that tends to get overlooked in the

discussion is that most people still tend to spend their lives in the area they are born. Therefore, there is a gap between the denial of the nation state often advocated by the globalised elite, and the conviction of the ordinary people who still, to an often dangerous degree, believe in the nation state. Therefore:

> To reject nationalism absolutely or to refuse to discriminate between nationalisms is to accede to a way of thought by which intellectuals – especially postcolonial intellectuals – cut themselves off from effective action. (During 1990:139, quoted in Gandhi 1998:166)

Or, as an Indian journalist expressed it during the controversy surrounding Salman Rushdie:

> No dear Rushdie, we do not wish to build a repressive India. On the contrary, we are doing our best to build a liberal India, where we can all breathe freely. But in order to build this India, we have to preserve the India that exists. That may not be a pretty India, but it's the only India we have. (Appignasesi & Maitland 1990, quoted in Gandhi 1998:166)

It is interesting that the very same author, Ole Korneliussen, who so explicitly rejects his own cultural roots, is at the same time one of the Greenlandic authors who draws most frequently both explicitly and implicitly on these very same roots in his art. You may appreciate the novel *Tarrarsuummi tarraq/Saltstøtten* without ever having heard of a *qivittoq*, a mountain wanderer, but some knowledge about the cultural background does help the reader understand what is going on in the novel. Only in this case it will enable the reader to detect how the negative role of the *qivittoq* symbolically changes into the positive role of the *angakkok*, the shaman, at the end of the novel.

Having read Korneliussen one may want to ask if it is *actually* possible to 'step off the map'. Is this not just a vision, a fantasy? On the other hand, reading Hans Anthon Lynge one may want to ask if it is possible NOT to step off the map at least to some degree, since modernisation and globalisation are realities we cannot escape, not even in the most remote places on earth.

So in spite of their widely differing starting points, the two Greenlandic novels should not be seen as poles apart, but rather as different voices in the same dialogue. These are questions raised not only by and of relevance for an 'exotic' periphery or minority, but the very same questions that have to be dealt with by the majorities and centres of Scandinavia.

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Notes

1. For a further introduction to the postcolonial relationship between Denmark and Greenland, see Thisted 2002a, 2002b, 2002c. The rest of this paper is a shortened version of Thisted 2001.
2. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the author. The last sentence of this translation is only found in the Danish version, not in the Greenlandic.