



**Nuuk York, Nuuk York –  
Dreams of the Future, Amnesia of the Past**  
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Act 2: Greenland, April 21 – May 14, 2006

In the Greenlandic capital Nuuk, the second act of the postcolonial project Rethinking Nordic Colonialism led to discussions of the colonial past of Greenland and Denmark. A past that seems to be forgotten by most people.

In March 2006, the postcolonial project *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism* (RNC) started its journey in Reykjavik, Iceland. It then went further north, to Nuuk, Greenland where the theme of Nordic colonialism was introduced to the inhabitants through the art exhibition *Contested Territories: Representing Postcolonial Interests*, which had its opening on April 21, 2006. The exhibition was followed by a public hearing entitled *Debating Independence: Autonomy or Voluntary Colonialism?* from April 22 – 23, 2006.

For those to whom the colonial history of Greenland is somewhat unclear, here is the short version: Greenland was colonized by Denmark-Norway in 1721 and when the union dissolved in 1814, Greenland formally became a Danish colony. During the Second World War, Greenland had no contact with Denmark but received food and other supplies from the USA. In 1953, Greenland was made an equal part of the Danish Kingdom. Greenland was granted Home Rule in 1979, and began gaining control over most areas such as health and education. Today, Denmark still has the ruling power in areas like foreign affairs and justice. And to some people, Danish colonization still continues in spite of the Home Rule arrangement – although perhaps in a more subtle way as the exhibition and public hearing discussed in the following will show.

### **The Exhibition**

The Greenland National Museum and Archives is placed near a harbor, known in Danish as the “Colonial Harbor.” In more than one sense, it therefore seemed an appropriate place to show an art exhibition entitled *Contested Territories: Representing Postcolonial Interests*.

Like the RNC project itself, the art exhibition was a journey through time and cultures. One of the Greenlandic pieces was the result of a workshop, “Youth Writes Back,” in Nuuk carried out by Katrine Dirckinck-Holmfeld, Humphrey Polepole and Ivaaq Poulsen in collaboration with Inuit Youth International. The young activists and artists participating in the workshop succeeded in producing an amazing video, which showed an international, outward-looking youth. Proud of their Greenlandic culture but at the same time not clinging on to the colonial past, nor wishing to overemphasize their Inuit roots. Just a huge desire to be part of and contribute to cultural globalization – hence the title “Nuuk York, Nuuk York.”

The art exhibition also gave the spectator the possibility of visiting Sámi country in the Northern parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia (Sápmi). Through the photos and paintings of the Sámi artist Marja Helander, the issue was raised of the contrast between modern people and life in a traditional Lappish cultural environment, where reindeer breeding, fishing and hunting has characterized the long standing way of life. The visitors of the exhibition were greeted by the artist herself, dressed in the beautiful, traditional Sámi costume. She also appears in a similar costume in some of her photos. In this way, Marja Helander expresses very clearly someone totally lost in her culture and environment.

From Sápmi, the journey went further south all the way to South Africa. The visual artist Moshekwa Langa from South Africa participated in the exhibition with two pieces. One was the video installation “Where do I begin” which consists of two screens showing the lower parts of people getting on a bus on one hand and a river flowing on the other. The other piece was a set of two drawings with texts and names of people and places. The artist himself describes the piece as “an associative map of memories as well as private and public terms.”

Another piece in the exhibition reminded the spectator that Danish colonialism was and is not only connected to Greenland and the Faroe Islands. Denmark also has a colonial past in the West Indies. This was exemplified by the work entitled “Jan Leton and the Archive” by Brazilian artist Tamar Guimarães. She had made a short slide-essay about Jan Leton, a man born in the West Indies, who was given as a slave to the Bailiff of Skagen in 1806. He lived in Skagen as a slave until his death in 1827. A remarkable piece about a part of the Danish history that is very seldom described at length in the history books.

During the three weeks of the exhibition, the movie lovers in Nuuk were also offered a chance to learn more on the different perspectives of colonialism. Along with the exhibition in Nuuk, a film program entitled *Silver Screen Resistance* featured eight movies, each with a critical notion of the postcolonial opposition, the oldest dating back to 1966. The newest movie was the Greenlandic “With the Best of Intentions.” This film is a screen version of the book which the author, Tine Bryld, wrote in 1998. The book tells the story about twenty-two Greenlandic children who in 1951 were chosen to be sent to Denmark and live with foster families. A year later, they were brought back to Greenland and lived in the Red Cross children’s home in Nuuk. They spoke Danish and were taught in Danish. The book by Tine Bryld examines and traces these people to see what became of them.

### **The Public Hearing / Day 1**

The Teachers’ Training School of Greenland was the physical location for the public hearing, which took place during the weekend of April 22 – 23, 2006. Despite a lack of information about the hearing and some confusion about where it took place in snowy Nuuk, the public hearing managed to draw at least around 100 people in total during the two days – which the curators, Frederikke Hansen and Tone Olaf Nielsen, proclaimed was far more than they had expected. To others among the audience, it seemed a disappointment that so few would participate.

A greater disappointment, however, was the fact that the first speaker of the hearing, Paul Gilroy, was not able to participate, or at least not in person. Instead, the audience was offered a video presentation that he had sent. In the presentation entitled “Colonial Crimes and Convivial Cultures,” Paul Gilroy started out by stressing the fact that it is vital for a population, a culture to gain access to its past. Without knowledge of the past, we have no chance of understanding the present, Paul Gilroy stated. And he pointed out that it is specifically important for the people in the Nordic countries to know about their past. According to Gilroy, the Nordic countries have been used by outsiders as an example of how the democratic principle is working at its best. However, in the eyes of Gilroy, we now see in the Nordic countries a new form of racism similar to nationalism which leads to xenophobia.

Paul Gilroy talked about five characteristic elements of the Nordic way of dealing with the past: Amnesia, ignorance, denial, guilt and shame. In order to find a proper word to describe the mentality of the Nordic people, Gilroy used the word

“melancholy.” He says that the mentality of melancholy is partly why the Nordics are not dealing with the problems of today, such as immigration. In Denmark, for instance, an immigrant stays an immigrant. He is an immigrant forever, since the language treats him as an immigrant of “first generation,” “second generation” and even “third generation.”

Paul Gilroy warned the audience of believing that the USA is the role model for the future with regards to integration. The US is not the future, Gilroy stressed in his video tape. Instead, he pointed out, Europe has a unique chance to create its own future. A future, where multiculturalism leaves way for an understanding of *conviviality*, in Gilroy’s terms, that could lead to people living together peacefully.

After the video presentation, some explanation was needed to clarify the terms “melancholy” and “conviviality.” Unfortunately, since Gilroy was not present, the audience had to rely on the various interpretations of his presentations. But after a while, the debate about the relationship between Greenland and Denmark started. There seemed to be general agreement that the Danes know virtually nothing about their past history as far as Greenland is concerned. And some of the speakers pointed out that a lot of Greenlanders feel hateful and angry towards the Danes, feelings that may have been passed on from generation to generation.

But what is needed for reconciliation? Would a public apology from Denmark be enough? Maybe, but as some speakers pointed out, an apology would be a strange thing... Apologizing for what? Since Greenland has copied Danish society in so many ways, some would feel it very odd to hear the Danes apologizing for something the Greenlanders voluntarily introduced into their society themselves.

Paul Gilroy was followed by Aviâja Egede Lyngde, who holds an MA in Social Science and Social Anthropology from the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. She gave a presentation entitled “The Best Colony in the World.” No slavery and no killings took place throughout the Danish colonization of Greenland – hence the title. Or so the Greenlanders have been taught by their Danish history books and from Danish teachers. “We learned to be Danish and we learned to be thankful,” Lyngde said.

She pointed out that the de-colonization has never really taken place in Greenland. Because why de-colonize when you are grateful? So today, whenever the problems concerning the Greenland-Denmark relationship is raised, the discussions often end with arguments about being racists or romantic nationalists and that Greenland cannot become independent because it has a bad economy.

Whilst there has been more than 250 years of colonization occurring in Greenland, it has been a special kind of colonization. It is a sort of a mental colonization, which according to Lynge meant that the Greenlandic people saw and maybe still see themselves as inferior to the Danes. She quoted the Greenlandic professor Robert Petersen saying: "If an idea is adopted by the colonized people themselves, it would create a people who had lost belief in their own capacity, a people that were thankful to be colonized."

The mental de-colonization has yet to take place in Greenland. Throughout the 1970s there was a rise in nationalistic feelings, a search for pride and ethnic feelings in order to find identity. In 1979, Home Rule was introduced. Now twenty-seven years later, Lynge pointed out, a disappointment with the Home Rule has led to a new nationalism because Danes still occupy leading posts in the Greenlandic society.

It is time for the Greenlanders to define our own history, our own feelings and our own view of how we have been affected by 250 years of colonization – if we are to become mentally independent, Lynge stated at the end of her presentation.

Her presentation was followed by a plenary discussion. Some pointed out that the tool to gain better self-esteem was to become completely independent from the former colony. But self-esteem has also to do with the way a country chooses to present itself, as a journalist from the Netherlands pointed out. He exemplified this by saying that he was surprised to see that the first sign greeting the visitor in the international airport in Kangerlussuaq, depicts four blond, blue-eyed people. The journalist called for Greenlanders to have an actual plan for independence, to set a date and form a schedule.

The debate also touched upon the issue of the linguistic problems in the Greenlandic society. It would seem that the wish for "Greenlandization" has meant a cutback in the teaching of other languages than Greenlandic, primarily

Danish. This causes problems when young people want to participate in higher education, since all courses are taught in either Danish or English abroad.

A feminist approach to the discussion of colonialism was given by Professor M. Jacqui Alexander from the Institute for Women's Studies and Gender Studies at the University of Toronto, Canada. She held the opinion that we now live in a dangerous moment, because of the war against terror. It is a time of empire building, Alexander stated, and this requires silence in order to show the patriotism required by the empire building nations. However, silence is not the requirement of democracy, Alexander warned. She also warned against the growing polarization within countries where massive wealth and consumerism are creating poverty as well. She finished her presentation by claiming that the road from colonization to conviviality requires hard work and practice.

### **The Public Hearing / Day 2**

The second day of the public hearing debating independence began with a presentation by the Faroese politician Høgni Hoydal. He is the Chairman of the Tjóðveldisflokkurin, a left-wing independence party, and is both a member of the Faroese Parliament as well as a member of the Danish Parliament.

With the presentation "Neo-Colonialism with a Human Face – the Cosy Self-Colonization in Danish Home Rule," Hoydal tried to show that the Danes use the "tools of soft power" to ensure sovereignty. By letting the Faroese society copy a true model of the Danish welfare society, the Danes continue to rule the islands in the North Atlantic. To Hoydal, this equals what he called "the unbearable cosiness of Home Rule" because it implies a total lack of responsibility.

It is no secret that Hoydal fights for independence. In his eyes, the Faroese population has been ready for independence for the last 100 years. However, the Danish nationalism is blocking the road, Hoydal said.

"Denmark would be a bigger nation by supporting our independence. Then, they would set a good example for how to treat a former colony," Hoydal pointed out and continued: "Today, we are not in a period of post-colonization but in a period of neo-colonialism."

Not many were opposed to the arguments of the Faroese politician in the following debate, perhaps because his arguments were all very new to a lot of the audience. As Alexander pointed out, the important thing is perhaps that we learn more

from each other about each other. Because the way she saw it, Greenland and the Faroe Islands seem to have a lot in common.

The lack of controversy was characteristic for the public hearing during the two days. Maybe because everybody participating in the hearing agreed and therefore no heated discussions were raised. Maybe it was due to the fact that people opposing the idea of Greenlandic and Faroese independence had not found their way into the hearing. Or maybe it was simply because a lot do not seem to find Hoydal's neo-colonialism concept a problem.

So what does the future hold for Greenland? A lot, it seems, in the eyes of the youth. They were given the floor for the last presentation of the public hearing. Three of the participants from the workshop "Youth Writes Back" performed a live interview with Humphrey Polepole from Tanzania as the host of a make-believe TV show. As his two guests from Greenland, he had Janus Kleist Chemnitz and AneMarie Ottosen who, in both Danish and Greenlandic, gave their opinion as to how Greenland should navigate through the future waters of globalization.

There was no doubt in the minds of the two young representatives of the "Nuuk York generation" that Greenland would, could and should become independent some day. But to them, the main question was not when but how. To the young, the question is whether Greenland succeeds in educating the population. And part of the education should be lessons of the past, including the colonial past, for both the Greenlandic and Danish youth to learn and hence understand the present.

The problem is not whether the official language is Greenlandic, Danish or English. The challenge is to get the people to be bilingual or preferably multilingual. Communication is vital and speaking several languages is a powerful tool to connecting to people outside of Greenland. And Greenland will need to employ other people from the outside for a good many years ahead. But perhaps it does not have to be Danes occupying the leading positions in the society.

With the uplifting performance of the youth, Act 2 of the postcolonial project *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism* reached its end in Nuuk. For a little while, the colonial past had become very present in the Greenlandic capital. Time will tell if the dreams of the future of the "Nuuk York generation" will be realized – despite the seemingly collective amnesia of the colonial past.