

# Everything Changes

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# Greenland

3	Foreword Everything Changes Beat Hächler
4	Ten Misconceptions About Greenland and What I Have to Say About Them Qupanuk Olsen
6	History of Greenland An Island on Its Way to the World Bruno Kaufmann
10	Greenland Today, Greenland in 2050 From Anguish to Aspiration AneMarie Ottosen
13	Settlement Policy and Architecture If You Want a New Greenland, You Need a New Way of Building Bert De Jonghe Peter Hemmersam
17	Greenland, Denmark, and the Colonial Legacy The Belief in Exceptionalism Has No Future Ebbe Volquardsen
22	Tourism “We Absolutely Need a Good Plan” Iddimangiiu Bianco Urs Bühler
26	Switzerland, Greenland, and Science Discovery of the Horizontal Alps Daniel Di Falco
32	Workshop Talk Is Everything Changing? Alberte Parnuuna Gian Suhner Inuuteq Storch Salome Erni
37	Imprint

Construction site for the airport in Ilulissat. We are standing like big kids with cameras at the ready, waiting for the bang. Any moment now, the dynamite charge is supposed to go off. The rock face is about three hundred meters wide and several meters high, standing like a barrier across the planned new runway. Therefore, the entire hilltop must be removed. "5,300,000 cubic meters of rock," says the chief engineer. A massive task spanning years, carried out in shifts by a Danish consortium. After each explosion, heavy machinery crushes the rock, loads it onto trucks, transports it to the right location, and levels the ground. By 2026, large planes with three hundred passengers will be able to land safely in Ilulissat. The guests disembarking here will say they come for the beauty of nature. They want to see the famous Icefjord of Ilulissat, a UNESCO World Heritage site since 2004. They will take photos and videos of the gigantic icebergs gliding into the ocean and will report on the consequences of climate change, which is causing the ice to melt here four times faster than in other places.

The airport example is just one of many. It's unsettling because we believe that such tourist development destroys more than it preserves. Yet in Ilulissat, there are also other viewpoints. There are those who wish to develop the place. Who is right? And who decides? It is these contradictions and dilemmas that we discuss in the exhibition and in this magazine. We present them as accurately as possible, but we don't point fingers. We let Greenlanders speak about how they perceive the fundamental changes in Greenland: climate change, the tourism boom, the extraction of natural resources, urban growth, and the secession from Denmark. They are the voices identifying and evaluating the construction sites of change. We simply ask questions and listen. We conducted around seventy interviews, explored controversial positions, and condensed them for the exhibition. This is the core idea of the project. We are interested in more than just the beautiful Arctic nature of Greenland. We are interested in change and how the people are coping with it. Greenland confronts us with developments, perspectives, and contradictions that exist not only in Greenland. And we don't have easy answers either.

In the fish factory of Nuuk, we encounter globalization which we all know about but do not expect to find here. We meet workers from Thailand and the Philippines processing shrimp for the Swiss market. Greenland contains the largest deposits of rare earth elements. We might imagine what one of these resource sites, the currently untouched Kangerluarsuk Fjord, will look like once the excavators arrive to extract minerals to enable Switzerland's transition to clean energy. Nature tourism is booming in Greenland, which is already leading to overtourism in hot spots. This is what it feels like when cruise ships deposit their passengers into places like Ilulissat, flooding them with tourists. However, we are cautious about drawing hasty conclusions. In Greenland, an Indigenous majority population is beginning to question its history of Danish colonization and is taking modernization into its own hands. This is a delicate balancing act. The magazine expresses this through text and image contributions from Greenlandic and local authors.

"Greenland. Everything Changes" was created through dialogue. The film team led by Gian Suhner was keen to make a Greenland project with Greenland, not about Greenland. We didn't arrive with a fixed script but developed the content from contacts made during the ten-week shooting period. This led to the film themes and conversations at various locations in Kullorsuaq, Sisimiut, Ilulissat, Nuuk, Qaqortoq, Qassiarsuk, and Narsaq. Fortunately, this approach was well received and generously supported by our public and private funding partners.

And yes: The explosion at the airport construction site in Ilulissat was precise and beautiful. The white dust cloud shot up into the sky like fountains and slowly settled like a veil over the rock debris.

### 1. No one lives in Greenland

In 2008, I wanted to go to Chicago without a visa. At immigration, I was taken aside and had to explain the purpose of my visit in the customs office. One of the officers looked at my passport and asked, "Where is that?" My passport said, "Politimesteren i Qaqortoq," (the chief of police in Qaqortoq) since that's where it was issued. I replied, "That's my hometown in South Greenland." The officer asked again, "Where is that?" Luckily, there was a world map in the office, and I pointed to South Greenland. The officers looked at each other, and one said, "But no one lives there." I pointed to myself: "I come from Greenland." Finally, they let me in, and I spent the weekend in Chicago.

### 2. We live in igloos

When I studied in Denmark, a fellow student asked me, "Do you live in igloos?" I was irritated and sarcastically replied, "Of course, and we ride polar bears." I made a serious face, and he believed me. I'm still amazed at how little many Danes know about Greenland, especially when I think about how much more we know about Denmark.

### 3. We are all alcoholics

Some people in Denmark still believe that we are all alcoholics. Unfortunately, you often see homeless people from Greenland on Danish streets who are struggling with alcoholism. Many have moved to Denmark for social assistance, leading to sweeping generalizations. However, statistics from the last ten years show that on average, people in Denmark drink more than those in Greenland.

### 4. Traveling in Greenland is simple

Last year, I had a conversation with an assistant of a famous YouTuber who reports on food from different cultures around the world. The assistant asked, "We'd like to film in West and East Greenland. Can we charter a small plane and fly to East Greenland for a day or two?" Theoretically, it might be possible to fly to East Greenland this way. But there are no small planes available for charter. There is only one scheduled flight to East Greenland per week, and it often gets canceled due to poor weather conditions. Many people also think they can just rent a car to travel from town to town. But there are no roads between the towns; the distances are too great, the climate is arctic, and the land is sparsely populated.

### 5. We have ice all year round

In 2017, I planted potatoes in my new garden in front of our house in Nuuk, the capital of Greenland. I had a video call with a good friend, an Indian who lives in Australia and studied with me for a year and a half. I was happy and proud when I showed him the garden: "Look, my first potatoes." He exclaimed, "Where is the ice? Where is the ice?" I asked, "What do you mean?" but I was mostly disappointed in myself. How poorly must I have described my country to one of my best friends for him to think we had ice all year round, and even snow in Nuuk during the summer?

### 6. Greenland is white and mostly unexplored

Two years ago, I contacted a woman in the UK who was newly employed by a Greenlandic company. I was supposed to give her a crash course on Greenland, and when I showed her on the map the villages and towns along the ice-free coast and other features as well, she asked, "Why is the rest of Greenland white? Is the interior unexplored?" I explained it was white because eighty percent of the area is covered by ice sheets. It's 2024, and I still get these questions, making me think, "Wow."

### 7. We have our own alphabet

Some people assume that we use the syllabary of Inuktitut because we are Inuit, like the people in Canada and Alaska, and speak a language that is very similar to their Inuktitut. However, we use the Latin alphabet, a result of Danish and Norwegian colonization that began in the early 18th century. Nevertheless, I plan to learn Inuktitut syllabics soon, as Greenlandic and Inuktitut are closely related.

#### 8. All Inuit practice throat singing

Some Canadians and Americans I've met over the years have asked me if we practice throat singing. It is common among the Inuit in Canada and Alaska, but not in Greenland, although some of us have recently learned it from them. I'm not sure when we lost this tradition, whether it ever existed, or if we perhaps left it behind when we migrated from Canada to Greenland in the 13th and 14th centuries. However, we have two types of Qilaatit, drums that resemble those used by the Inuit, even though ours are smaller. This year, I got my first drum from Qaanaaq in North Greenland, and I'm currently learning the drum dance. I'll show it to you once I've practiced a bit more!

#### 9. There are at least half a million of us

No matter where I go: when I tell people that only 57,000 people live in Greenland, they are always surprised. They often assume that we must be at least half a million, simply because of the size of our country.

#### 10. We can never become independent

Many believe that we can never become independent from Denmark because the population of this vast country is too small to sustain itself. But I beg to differ—within ten years, Greenland will be its own state. We need to go much further with decolonization than we have so far. And we also need to rouse the Greenlanders, as there are still too many among us who do not believe that Greenland can survive without Denmark.

Life is fantastic! Siunissami takuss'  
(See you again).

Qupanuk Olsen (born 1985) grew up in Qaqortoq in South Greenland. After studying civil engineering in Aarhus, Denmark, she graduated as a mining engineer from the Western Australian School of Mines at Curtin University. In 2020, she began creating videos for social media under the name "Q." With "Q's Greenland," Olsen has become the most significant social media figure in her country, currently boasting 1.4 million followers. On YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok, she aims to inform a global audience about Greenland and has also gained popularity among Greenlanders.

Suddenly, green appears on the horizon. And a deep blue. Then, far below us, a runway emerges, next to a small building. The twin-engine Dash 8, with sixteen passengers on board, which took off three hours ago from the international airport in Keflavík, Iceland, begins its descent toward Erik's Fjord. The last hour has felt like a weightless state above an endless white expanse, the edges of which seem to merge with the atmosphere in all directions.

Greenland is the largest island in the world, covering an area of over two million square kilometers, of which approximately 80% comprises the (up to) three kilometers thick ice sheet. It stretches nearly three thousand kilometers north to south and just over a thousand east to west. The vast whiteness between Europe and North America is unmistakable on any world map, yet as a self-governing territory without legal statehood, "Kalaallit Nunaat" – meaning "Land of the People" in Greenlandic – is mostly ignored by the rest of the world.

#### Vikings and Americans

The sheltered fjord extends from the often-stormy North Atlantic almost up to the edge of the ice sheet. After a long 180-degree turn, we land on the isolated runway in the even more isolated fjord—welcome to Narsarsuaq. Aside from a short gravel track for local sheep farmers, no road connects this airport in southern Greenland to the surrounding area. Those who wish to travel further, and everyone does, transfer to a helicopter or a small ferry. The modest infrastructure amid the colossal landscape is named "Narsarsuaq International Airport"; it is Greenland's second most important global connection after Kangerlussuaq, located two and a half flight hours to the north.

Here, at Erik's Fjord, Greenland's history has been impacted twice. In 940, the Norwegian Viking Erik the Red is said to have reached the fjord that now bears his name. He settled in a meadow he called "Brattahlið," meaning "steep slope." Not only that: the landscape so enchanted him that he named the entire island "Greenland," meaning "green land." Almost exactly a thousand years later, in 1941, U.S. fighter pilots discovered the fjord during their reconnaissance flights. There's a flat glacial moraine here, they reported to headquarters. This area was known to the local population as "Narsarsuaq," meaning "great plain." What followed would prove crucial for Greenland.

On April 9, 1940, during World War II, Nazi Germany invaded neutral Denmark. Since the 18th century, the Danes had ruled Greenland, but now Copenhagen lost its control over the remote island. At the same time, Hitler never succeeded in extending Germany's influence over the North Atlantic. Instead, the Americans and the British began to take care of the formally neutral Danish North Atlantic colonies, which included Greenland, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands. An emergency clause from 1925 granted Greenland the right to self-govern in the event of war. In fact, Henrik Kauffmann, Denmark's ambassador in Washington, no longer felt bound to the government in Copenhagen, which was controlled by the Nazi regime: Kauffmann facilitated the first defense agreement between Greenland and the US.

As a result, in 1941, the U.S. began to establish a military infrastructure in Narsarsuaq, which would later expand to include numerous other airports. "This was Greenland's first step toward geopolitical independence," says Maria Ackrén. Growing up on the Swedish-speaking Åland Islands, which belong to Finland, Ackrén is a professor of political science at Ilisimatusarfik, Greenland's university in the capital, Nuuk.

#### Geopolitics and Geology

By the end of World War II, the U.S. had established thirteen army and four navy bases in Greenland. According to Ackrén, this was for several reasons: "First, Greenland served as a strategic buffer against North America. Second, the island could be used as a transit stop to Europe. Third, it offered opportunities to study important meteorological phenomena. And fourth, there were many minerals and metals that the North American aircraft industry found very useful during the war."

Greenland had much to offer to global politics even then. At the American base Bluie West One in Narsarsuaq, where up to four thousand



personnel were stationed, more than ten thousand landings and takeoffs were recorded during World War II. After the war, when liberated Denmark regained its colonial power over Greenland, uranium and rare earths were discovered just a few kilometers west of Erik Fjord—"the second largest deposit of such minerals in the world," according to Ackrén.

But that's not all. Since the 18th century, Greenland had been a mining region with enormous deposits of coal, gold, silver, zinc, and graphite. Additionally, oil and gas fields were located along the coastline, which measures a staggering 44,000 kilometers—longer than the entire equator. The harsh climate and lack of transportation infrastructure—many American bases were closed after the war—placed significant limits on resource extraction. However, for the approximately sixty thousand people living in a country that is fifty times the size of Switzerland, this was more of a blessing than a curse: it protected them for a long time from foreign interests and allowed the indigenous people at the Arctic Circle to gradually "emancipate themselves from the former colonial power of Denmark," says Ebbe Volquardsen.

The German-Danish Nordic scholar and historian works at Ilisimatu-sarfik alongside Ackrén, researching Greenland's development as a professor of cultural history. "In recent history, Greenland has succeeded in filling many important institutions with its own people despite its small population," says Volquardsen. This now lays the groundwork for addressing the traumatic chapters of colonial history. These include the forced adoption of Greenlandic children to Denmark and the forced sterilization of young Greenlandic women by Danish doctors, as well as the relocation from fishing villages to urban high-rises—measures through which Denmark attempted to brutally "modernize" the indigenous population up until the 1990s.

At the same time, Greenland's self-confidence in relation to Denmark grew after World War II. It was a shock for the colonial power when Iceland voted to separate from Denmark in 1944. Danish naval forces thwarted a similar attempt by the Faroe Islands two years later. In Greenland, Copenhagen responded with increased control and a diplomatic manoeuvre at the UN: instead of granting autonomy and self-governance to overseas territories like other colonial powers, the Danish parliament made the island a province of Denmark in 1953. After Greenlanders had been able to negotiate directly with the U.S. government during World War II, Denmark, as part of NATO, began to form its own agreements with Washington in the post-war period. While Copenhagen officially prohibited the U.S. from stationing nuclear weapons within the Kingdom of Denmark, a secret clause allowed exactly that in Thule, in northern Greenland. According to an investigative report published in 1997, a 250,000 square kilometer area beneath the ice sheet was to be transformed into an Arctic "super-fortification" with an extensive tunnel system—without informing the government in Nuuk or the local population.

#### Nuclear Bombs in the Land of the Inughuit

The events of January 21, 1968, were long kept secret. That afternoon, with a light wind, the outside temperature had just reached minus 37 degrees when a message was received over the radio in the control tower of the American base at Thule: "Fire on board, we're turning back!" Despite significant difficulties, the pilot managed to get his aircraft back on course in order to make an emergency landing in Thule. However, the fire on board filled the cockpit with toxic smoke, and the seven crew members ejected into the cold using their ejection seats. The B-52 crashed ten kilometers from the base onto the ice cover of the Arctic Ocean and exploded. With the help of the local population and their dog sleds, six of the seven crew members were rescued.

In the days following the crash, Danish and Greenlandic workers found not only wreckage from the plane but also components of nuclear weapons. However, many of the local search and rescue personnel were kept in the dark about this, as was the indigenous population. These were the Inughuit, who had been forcibly resettled to the Thule area fifteen years earlier and who differ from the west and south Greenlandic Indigenous peoples in terms of their origins and language. In the decades that followed, an above-average number of people in the region died from cancer.

It was not until 2003 that the Supreme Court of Denmark declared Copenhagen's actions in Thule to be a crime against humanity. The following year, the Danish-American agreement regarding the base was replaced by a trilateral agreement that also involved Greenland.

Not only the Danish cooperation with the USA but also collaboration in Europe contributed to Greenland becoming increasingly aware of its own role and potential. This was evident when Denmark joined the European Community (EC, now the EU). When a vote was held in 1972, about 63 percent of Danes supported accession. However, over 70 percent of Greenlanders said "naamik" – No. Nevertheless, Greenland was still integrated into the Brussels community.

These tensions strengthened the desire for self-determination in Greenland. In 1979 they resulted, after years of negotiations, in a new government system known as "Home Rule." This legally established that Greenlanders are a distinct people, can elect their own parliament, and officially use their language. One of the first steps in this direction was a new vote on the EC – 53 percent voted for withdrawal, which was completed on January 1, 1985.

With the autonomy of 1979, Nuuk also took over from Copenhagen extensive responsibilities for education, culture, and fisheries. However, matters concerning natural resources, as well as foreign and security policy, remained in the hands of the Danish government over three thousand kilometers away. This changed, after further lengthy negotiations, with "Self-Government," a law that was passed in a vote with 76 percent support and came into effect in 2009.

#### Cooperation Around the North Pole

This did not make Greenland an independent state "but it was a very important step toward it," says Sara Olsvig. Born in 1978, the Greenlandic politician presided over the Inuit Ataqatigiit (IA, "Community of the People") party in the 2010s and represented Greenland in the Danish Parliament. Since gaining autonomy, the former colony – like the Faroe Islands – has had two permanent seats. Together with her successor as party chair, the current Greenlandic Prime Minister Múte Bourup Egede, Olsvig is now one of the leading voices advocating for imminent state independence. Most parties represented in the Nuuk Parliament support this goal.

With the Self-Government Act of 2009, the Arctic country fought for control over its own resources as well as the right to declare independence from Denmark at any time – without the Danish Parliament being able to veto it. The fact that this has not yet happened is linked to economic conditions. In 2024, grants from the Danish government still amount to over four billion kroner (520 million Swiss francs) – nearly half of Greenland's total state revenue. Moreover, Greenland lacks personnel in key positions, such as in the judiciary and finance.

Since 2022, Sara Olsvig has led the Inuit Circumpolar Council. This council, based in Nuuk, is a cooperative organization that represents around 200,000 Indigenous people in Greenland, Canada, Russia, and the USA. In this role, Olsvig also sits on the "Panel on Critical Energy Transition Minerals," a UN body established in 2024 that deals with the minerals essential for clean energy transition. Given the tense global situation, Greenland has become even more important internationally, both as a supplier of raw materials and as a strategic location. "We must also develop and pursue our own path in foreign and security policy," says Olsvig.

#### "Nothing About Us Without Us"

Indeed, Greenland is taking a bolder stance in international contexts. In the spring of 2024, the government in Nuuk adopted a strategy with the English title "Greenland in the World – Nothing about us without us." This strategy focuses on cooperation in the Arctic; specifically, Greenland aims to become a leading Arctic nation and therefore intends to strengthen collaboration with partners north of the Arctic Circle. These include the governments and parliaments of Alaska (USA), as well as Yukon, Nunavut, Nunavik, and the Northwest Territories (Canada). Additionally, the Greenlandic government has recognized the Arctic Council as the most important international cooperation body. Established in 1996 in Ottawa, Canada, the Council now includes eight Arctic states and thirteen observer states



(including Switzerland since 2017).

Greenland sees itself as the “Arctic part” of the Danish Kingdom, putting it in a prominent position. However, since the Ukraine war, political dialogue with Russia, the largest and most important Arctic state, has been on hold. Moreover, the Danish Foreign Ministry has been somewhat resistant to properly accommodating Greenlandic representatives in international forums. In 2025, Denmark will assume the presidency of the Arctic Council, and Greenland has already claimed the position of Arctic Ambassador to replace the current Danish one.

Tensions with the former colonial power are likely to increase in the coming years. This is mainly because while Greenland now has independent control over its natural resources, the competencies regarding foreign and security policy remain undeveloped. Additionally, the fields of geopolitics and resources are increasingly intertwined. When Greenland will achieve independence remains uncertain. However, for most Greenlanders, the vision of a self-governing, internationally recognized state, despite all challenges, is a realistic one—especially if additional revenue from mining could flow into the national treasury.

### A Bridge to the Arctic

Meanwhile, the airport infrastructure reflects the highs and lows of the journey toward independence, as seen during World War II and the Cold War. So far, the former American airfields in Kangerlussuaq and Narsarsuaq have handled intercontinental connections (the airport in northern Thule is not accessible for civilian flights). However, both are far from the main population centers. Therefore, Greenland has decided to build three new airports that will partially accommodate large jets from Europe and America: in the capital Nuuk (opening at the end of 2024), in Qaqortoq in the south of the country (end of 2025), and in the tourist hub Ilulissat in the north (also at the end of 2025).

The new airports are intended to connect the remote island to the international transport network, following the example of neighboring Iceland, where Keflavík International Airport has served as a hub for North Atlantic traffic for decades. In 2018, the Greenlandic Parliament approved a budget of over three hundred million francs for construction—funded through foreign banks. Initially, a Chinese state-owned enterprise offered to handle the construction and financing. This proposal was met with skepticism in Nuuk, Washington, and Copenhagen. The Danish government warned Nuuk against engaging with China. The Greenlandic negotiators skillfully navigated around these interests and ultimately received a financially and politically more attractive offer from Denmark, while Washington reinforced its presence by opening a consulate.

Thus in 2024 a new era may have begun in Greenland. At Nuuk Airport, the well-appointed new reception building was put into operation even before the extended runway. Additionally, traffic between Nuuk and Iqaluit, the capital of the Indigenous Canadian region of Nunavut, has been resumed. This marks a strategically significant bridge between Europe and America in the Arctic—an increasingly important part of the world both geopolitically and for its resources. Greenland, which has long been sidelined on the world stage, aims to become a country at the center of global affairs.

Bruno Kaufmann, born in 1965 in Aarau, lives in Arboga, Sweden, and has been reporting from Northern Europe for Swiss Radio and Television (SRF) since 1990. He studied Nordic languages, Eastern European history, and peace research at the universities of Zurich, Uppsala, Gothenburg, and Hawaii. Over the past thirty years, he has repeatedly visited Greenland for research and reporting.

#### Further reading

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What needs to change in Greenland, and what should the country look like in 2050? AneMarie Ottosen visited Greenlanders between the ages of twenty and forty and spoke with them about what Inuit across different Arctic countries have in common, the value of traditions, the needs of children, and life in remote villages.

#### “We Need to Change the Way We Help Families”

Angutinnguaq Schmidt works with young people from difficult family backgrounds. He is trained as an educator and has been employed in children's homes and care institutions in the towns of Qaqortoq and Nuuk, while also engaging in politics. He himself grew up under challenging circumstances, having cared for his grandfather when his grandmother passed away and confronted with suicide amongst those close to him.

Today, Schmidt works in a privately run home that can accommodate up to ten children. Currently, eight children aged eight to fifteen are cared for, attending school from there, visiting their families, and spending much of their time outdoors in green spaces. The institution has a small house outside the capital, Nuuk. “I feel,” says Schmidt, “that I can do something right for myself and the children here, which will also benefit their families.” Nonetheless, he believes he can achieve more and hopes to eventually work for the social services.

Over the past fifty years, Greenland has faced various social issues: alcohol dependence, drug addiction, sexual abuse, and neglect of care-giving responsibilities. The need for help throughout the country is significant. “We need to address the traumas inflicted upon us over many years,” says Angutinnguaq Schmidt. He refers not only to the traumas experienced by Greenlanders due to modernization in the 1960s and 1970s but also to those that date back to when Greenland was still officially a Danish colony.

“To solve our current problems, we need to change the way we help families,” Schmidt emphasizes. There is a need for institutions that support the entire family rather than removing children from their homes. Parents also face challenges, and when they receive help, the children benefit as well. It's easier in families' homes to discuss raising children, achieving a stable income, and finding strategies for handling emotions.

What kind of Greenland does Schmidt envision for 2050? He hopes there will be more families living harmoniously and thriving, where all children have equal opportunities in life, and society is less divided. “A lot can happen in 26 years, as we've seen in the past 26 years.” It is essential to remember and relearn what a functioning family looks like. He holds the entire society accountable: the more families that have stable lives, the better they can support one another. Schmidt wants young people to grow up in happy environments— for every child and every family.

#### “These Ways of Life Will Be Preserved for a Long Time”

Emma Lennert has just returned from Upernavik and Tasiilaq, two medium-sized towns in northwestern and eastern Greenland. During information evenings, accompanied by music and comedy, she spoke about prevention, healthy eating, and a healthy lifestyle—about living with fewer addiction problems and greater mental resilience. Lennert is employed by Sorlak, an organization that works with Greenlandic children and youth and which takes her around the whole country. She is also a special education teacher at the school in Sisimiut in southern Greenland, where she has taught young people in small classes for four years. “I love my job,” she says, “because I enjoy seeing the students make progress and witnessing what happens in their lives.”

Emma Lennert grew up in a family that was deeply involved in community life and politically active. Her father worked in finance and planning for their city, so it was natural for her to join political groups. Today, she is a member of the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC), a body advocating for the rights of Inuit people in the polar regions and for the self-determination of Indigenous peoples, both nationally and internationally. Lennert travels to meetings throughout the Arctic; last year, one was held in Ilulissat, Greenland.

She believes that movements like the ICC have a significant impact on politics. By 2050, she hopes that the rights of Inuit people will be respected across Greenland and that lifestyles will change accordingly. Traditions that have been lost should be revived and integrated into everyday life, including schools and workplaces.

She aims to promote this change through her political engagement and as a teacher. Part of the transformation, she believes, involves people in the Arctic coming together to support one another. Additionally, she hopes that hunting rights will be further extended. Emma Lennert enjoys going hunting with her friends and relatives, maintaining a family tradition. In Sisimiut, where she lives, sled dogs are as much a cultural asset as snowmobiles. She is confident that “these ways of life will be preserved for a long time.”

#### “I Hope Our Traditional Ways of Life Will No Longer Be Stigmatized”

Hans-Henrik Suersaq Poulsen is many things: an artist, actor, and storyteller. He sews and drums, sings traditional songs, and is skilled in throat singing, a practice from Canada. While we talk, he is sewing an Annoraaq, which is worn on special occasions. Poulsen learned how to make these traditional garments from his grandmother, which inspired him to sew other items, such as gloves originally from Qaanaaq in northern Greenland. He has also crafted an Annoraaq from seal skin.

When Poulsen plays drum songs, they are tunes that have been passed down from family to family. The fact that he can do this today is not a given, as this cultural heritage was deemed primitive and stigmatized during Danish colonization. Drums were destroyed, and the songs were forgotten. “It’s a blessing,” says Poulsen, “that some written documents have survived and that a few families kept the tradition alive in secret.”

“I hope that by 2050, our traditional ways of life will no longer be stigmatized.” Every family should have traditions to pass on. The remnants of colonialism must disappear, Poulsen believes. He refers to “the borders created by the white man”—the national boundaries that today separate the Inuit in Canada, Alaska, and Greenland. Poulsen is convinced that the Inuit community would benefit if it were easier to visit one another in the Arctic, as they share roots, history, and traditions.

#### “There Has Always Been a Difference Between the Cities and the Remote Villages”

Ittoqqortoormiit, the village where Charlotte Pike lives with her children and husband, is isolated from the rest of the island on the east coast. She works for the municipality in the cultural sector as well as running afternoon childcare. Together with her husband, she has founded a tourism company offering snowmobile and dog sledding tours, as well as Greenlandic food featuring self-hunted and prepared specialties. They have an agreement with an international tour operator and also sell their products through Facebook.

Charlotte Pike reports that some people are afraid to live in Ittoqqortoormiit because there are no midwives or doctors. Two nurses are on-site, and a doctor visits occasionally. Once or twice a year, if the residents are lucky, a dentist comes. For childbirth, one must travel to the capital on the other side of the island. At least in Ittoqqortoormiit, toilet waste is burned, and garbage is sorted, but that is not enough for Charlotte Pike. The village lacks infrastructure—and she wants to change that. Therefore, she decided to enter politics. “There has always been a difference between the cities and the remote villages. Legislators know nothing about us, yet they decide what is best for us. That must change.”

Charlotte Pike became politically active in her community and had a seat in the Greenlandic Parliament representing the Inuit Ataqatigiit party (“Community of People”). For example, she wants to change the contracts for flight services that have been in place for ten years. In Iceland, better services for the population have been negotiated, and that is something to learn from. Pike knows the topic well—when she had to attend monthly sessions in the capital Nuuk as a politician, it always meant traveling for two or three days: the journey went via Iceland, through Akureyri and Keflavik, to the other side of the island.

The tickets were astronomically expensive, and family life suffered, especially since her husband works as a hunter and is sometimes away for days. Despite the possibility of some online meetings, Charlotte Pike ended her political career. Both felt it was better to spend more time together. They are convinced that they can find other ways to contribute to their community.

“I hope that by 2050, human rights will be a priority in Greenland.” By this, Pike means that people in remote areas will not be overlooked and that their communities will flourish. Currently, more and more Greenlanders are moving to larger cities like Nuuk; this urbanization slows down the development of small settlements or brings them to a complete standstill.

“There are many good opportunities in our region to make money from mineral resources,” says Pike. Yet, the locals are denied this chance. Currently, an outside company is once again looking for oil in the area. “We were not informed, we were not heard. We can’t change anything about it.” She hopes that by 2050, the locals—the “legitimate owners”—can earn a living from natural resources. But this will only happen if Greenlanders are well educated and can make their voices heard.

AneMarie Ottosen, born in 1982, holds a Bachelor's degree in Education and studied at the Greenlandic National Theatre School. She currently works at the Greenlandic National Theatre in Nuuk, writing plays and acting in various film productions. Ottosen supported the ALPS during the filming in Nuuk and provided on-site translations.

Greenland is home to 56,400 people, spread across an area of two million square kilometers. Since inland ice covers most of the island, settlements are concentrated along the rugged coastlines, particularly in the west - a thin strip of habitable land stretching from Qaanaaq in the north to Nanortalik in the south. However, the most significant influence on building and living in Greenland in recent times has not been the ice but external forces: the Danish colonial authorities pursued a policy of settlement and relocation with the aim of urbanizing the population and imposing Danish culture on a seemingly unruly land.

In fact, the planned urbanization was difficult to reconcile with the Inuit's originally semi-nomadic lifestyle. This was especially true of the apartment blocks built in the 1950s and 1960s, which were completely unsuitable for this way of life and caused severe problems in Greenlandic society. Today, in the era of Greenlandic self-determination, urban planning offers a different opportunity: it can promote a more inclusive form of "nation-building", one that works from the bottom up rather than the other way around.

#### Six Thousand New Houses

In the post-World War II period, Denmark set new priorities for its policies in Greenland: social welfare and infrastructure changes. Both were part of efforts to "modernize", that is to say westernize, the Inuit's land and society. This goal was embedded in a program called G50, which the Danish colonial government initiated in 1950, implemented by the Greenland Commission, and later taken over by the Grønlands Tekniske Organisation (GTO).

Although Greenland was no longer formally a colony after 1953 but part of Denmark, the colonization process intensified. The GTO put pressure on the Inuit to permanently settle in so-called modern accommodation. Six thousand new houses were intended to replace the entire stock of existing housing in Greenland, as Denmark sought to urbanize the Inuit society and "improve" conditions. G50 was followed by G60, a program aimed at concentrating economic development in the capital Nuuk (then called Godthåb) and the cities of Paamiut, Sisimiut, and Maniitsoq.

All of these plans depended on Danish government subsidies, which grew exponentially from 28 million Danish kroner per year in 1950 to 109 million by 1962. Although a lot of money flowed into Greenland, the views of its people were ignored. Until the 1970s, GTO staff were entirely Danish, and little was done to train local skilled labor. Most Danish experts and workers settled temporarily in Greenland during construction phases. Meanwhile, the forced modernization and the exclusion of the Inuit from political decision-making led to numerous social problems, including psychological stress, increased rates of alcoholism, domestic abuse, and generally poor health. Thus, while colonization brought certain advantages to Greenland, such as modern infrastructure and amenities, it also traumatized the population.

#### The Color Regime

The problem with settlement and housing policy was not only the imported principles of urban planning but also the aesthetics and organizational patterns that were alien to Greenland. In the early 1950s, the authorities specified about forty different types of houses that were eligible for financial support. The differences between the buildings were based on their purpose and sometimes their location; in most cases, there was neither running water nor sanitation, and the houses were spaced far enough apart to prevent the spread of fires.

In 1955, to facilitate production and assembly, the forty house types were reduced to about eight, with further standardization. These newer models included reasonably modern kitchens and toilets. In the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, the typology was updated again under the name "Illorput." To this day, a significant portion of the Greenlandic population live in such houses.

Primarily made of wood, these prefabricated buildings had to be imported from Denmark, due to the lack of timber in Greenland. Additionally, a color scheme was imported from Denmark to categorize and mark the built environment. Commercial and institutional buildings were painted



red, hospitals yellow, police stations black, telecommunication facilities green, fish-processing factories and water supply structures blue.

As in other colonial contexts, color was also a medium of control in Greenland. In some places, the functions of buildings according to their colors have been preserved to this day. However, the significance of the colorful facades is shifting. They are increasingly seen as having tourist value and are even used for new buildings—not as symbols of the colonial regime but as expressions of tradition.

### A Unique Capital

Those who want to understand the development of settlement and housing in Greenland can see this history encapsulated in Nuuk, the capital. It begins with the prefabricated houses of the 1950s, continues with the large-scale construction of new housing under the GTO, and culminates in the mix of state and private real estate projects that now form the increasingly vertical skyline of the city.

Nuuk is a unique capital. Small by international standards, it fulfills the functions of a larger metropolis, complete with a parliament and university. In 2020, 18,000 people lived in Nuuk—nearly a third of Greenland's entire population. By comparison, the UK, often considered dominated by its capital, had about 14% of its population living in London in 2019. These figures illustrate the disproportionate influence of Nuuk in Greenland's geography and demography.

Having originated as a trading and mission station, Nuuk quickly developed into an urban entity with agglomeration tendencies similar to those found in European contexts. Yet, there are few gardens, hardly any trees, and no fences around houses. The public sector owns the land, ensuring that pedestrian paths connect the city in all directions, linking residential areas with both the city center and the surrounding countryside.

Although car ownership is growing, most people in Nuuk still get around on foot. Access to nature is crucial for urban culture. While some residents still engage in traditional activities like hunting or fishing, most visit the surrounding fjords and mountains for leisure. In the city, space around houses is used to store boats, snowmobiles, or fishing gear, which contrasts, especially in the eyes of visitors, with the modern, industrially constructed buildings that make up much of Nuuk.

Housing in Nuuk, as in other larger settlements, makes it difficult for young Greenlanders to find homes of their own. The housing shortage limits their mobility—both geographically and socially. Young people often struggle to accommodate growing families, leading to emigration. One Greenlandic artist who lived in Copenhagen for a time summed up the issue: “Apartments are frequently offered to outsiders who want to work in Nuuk. This rarely happens to locals, who are often forced to move away.” Thus, certain professions and professionals are favored in the housing market, perpetuating a historical trend: once again, it is primarily Greenland's elites (politicians and managers) and international contractors (mainly from the raw materials sector) who can shape the country's future and make it a reality.

In Nuuk, it is clear what went wrong with previous housing projects. At the same time, four case studies illustrate how architecture can interact with the environment, promote communal life, and empower people—or fail to do so.

#### Example 1:

##### The Largest Building in All of Greenland

A building in Nuuk stands as a symbol of the effort to relocate the Inuit into modern housing and new industrial cities: “Blok P.” Initially, parts of this residential block were intended for migrant workers from Denmark. When it was completed in 1966, with additional sections for the locals, it became the largest building in the entire country—200 meters long, five storeys tall, and with 320 apartments, housing a full one percent of Greenland's population.

At first, living here was popular due to the modern amenities, and Blok P became the site of many happy childhoods. “Block P contains all that is good and bad. Many have lived harmonious lives in that building, really



good lives, but others have had a tough time. It is very mixed” a city official said in 2012. In reality, the corridors were too narrow for people wearing heavy winter clothing, and there was no space for sleds or sled dogs. Many residents struggled to adapt to the way of life that the building imposed on them. Moreover, maintenance was lacking. “Blok P offered toilets and running water for everyone,” summarized journalist Philip Lauritzen, “but it soon became a hub for social problems.” While the architecture imported from Denmark was modern at the time, it wasn’t suited to local conditions.

By 2010, the maintenance costs and the building’s poor reputation led the city and national authorities to decide to demolish it—two years later, Blok P was history. The modernist architecture had symbolized Danish colonialism; now, the demolition of Blok P became a symbol of Greenland’s self-determination.

#### Example 2: Arctic Villages

In the 1970s and 1980s, Nuuk expanded beyond its mid-century borders into the rest of the peninsula. Inspired by contemporary trends in Danish architecture, suburban living in these new districts took the form of various postmodern projects. This included the individual color schemes of different housing groups—a deliberate contrast to the uniform modernist architecture of the 1960s, the era of Blok P. For example, the new Paarnat district consisted of four groups of three- to four-story buildings arranged around playgrounds. The wood-clad buildings varied in height, and their arrangement adapted to the rocky terrain.

This dense, village-like urban design aimed to promote communal life and create spaces for informal encounters. At the same time, it reflected a nostalgia by the Danish architects: they designed the community aspect as a response to the perceived soullessness of modernism. However, they lacked a connection to Greenlandic realities and merely reproduced village life according to traditional European models. Still, the adaptation to the landscape and local living habits, the attention to architectural detail, and good maintenance have ensured that Paarnat remains a popular residential area to this day.

#### Example 3: Skyscrapers in a Quarry

When Blok P was demolished in 2012, residents were offered new housing in Qinngorput, a district on the mainland. However, they had no influence over the design of their future homes, and many didn’t want to move, citing higher rents and the loss of their community.

Suloraq is the most well-known settlement in this new district. Built between 2010 and 2013, it consists of ten eight-storey tower blocks—a building type favored by the Greenlandic government when creating efficient and affordable housing. The area was formerly a quarry, and the buildings stand on a flattened, weather-beaten hilltop. The view of the city center is spectacular, but the strong winds in this exposed location make it pointless to lay down topsoil—everything, from soil to benches, trampolines, and any other loose items, would be blown away.

Instead, a car-free rock garden was designed with playgrounds and sculptures. The ten tower blocks are a symbol of the autonomous policy of a strengthened national government. They are also popular among residents who are seeking something different from the worn-out social housing of previous decades.

#### Example 4: Does Tradition Lead into the Future?

The Qasigiannguut/Nødhavn district was built in 2022/23. It represents a first: never before have a private developer and architect planned an entirely new neighborhood. The settlement is arranged around a central parking lot and includes owner-occupied, rental, and cooperative housing in single- and multi-family homes. The entire development, as well as the individual buildings, were carefully adapted to the existing terrain.

The buildings have an overall modern feel, such as their single-pitch roofs. At the same time, their colors recall the brightly colored small-town

houses scattered across Greenland's rugged landscape. While this color scheme dates back to colonialism, Qasigiannuit shows that many Greenlanders now see it as an image of cozy, authentic, and "traditional" urban planning. This connection to the past goes even further: private gardens, like those found in older neighborhoods, were included in zoning laws.

However, this attitude also caused some frustration among politically engaged and critical Nuuk residents. In the case of Qasigiannuit, the new district, with its chic homes and magnificent views for the well-off upper class, displaced a harbor and boat storage area—facilities that had previously enabled traditional fishing and hunting close to the city center.

#### Infrastructures for the Postcolonial Era

Roughly seven decades separate the planning of Blok P from the completion of the new Qasigiannuit district. During this time, the political and economic environment for urban planning and architecture has changed significantly. Part of this transformation is the emergence of an urban society, which contrasts with the largely rural way of life of earlier times. As an Arctic city, Nuuk has undergone immense architectural changes in a short period, and this transformation continues, while it grapples with its colonial past as well as demanding climatic conditions.

The further expansion of Nuuk toward the southeast is currently on hold. Attention is now focused on the city center, on densification, and on the renovation and renewal of architecture from the 1960s and 1970s. Additionally, the city faces the task of transforming a former industrial area near the center into a mixed-use neighborhood with compact housing.

Urbanization in Greenland is linked to historical processes often beyond the control of the affected population. When colonization by Denmark began in 1721, it reshaped Greenland's indigenous culture so drastically that the Inuit risked losing the connection to their environment. The still close, yet tense, relationship between the two countries will probably be reflected in the built environment for a long time, especially if Danish materials, engineers, and architects continue to shape Greenland's buildings, roads, and neighborhoods.

This is particularly evident in Nuuk, which, alongside growing international investments, also attracts foreign architecture and design firms. This is partly due to the lack of local offices. These firms could take the lead in promoting locally led projects that address the societal and ecological needs of the region.

Across the Arctic and beyond, Indigenous peoples who have gained sovereignty over their lands are building infrastructures that serve them better than those created by colonial powers. In Greenland, too, it is time to understand the processes that have shaped the built environment and to find new ways to perceive and design it—ways that lead to more integration, participation, and better adaptation to climatic conditions.

Bert De Jonghe, born in 1992 in Bruges, Belgium, is a landscape architect and the founder of the design firm Transpolar Studio. His work focuses on landscape architecture, urban planning, and design in Arctic regions, with a particular emphasis on the challenges and opportunities posed by the extreme climate and remote geographical conditions. Currently, De Jonghe teaches at Harvard University and the University of Toronto.

Peter Hemmersam, born in 1969 and raised in Copenhagen, is an architect and professor at the Institute of Urbanism and Landscape at the Oslo School of Architecture and Design, where he leads the Center for Urban and Landscape Research. His work includes a focus on urban planning in the Arctic.

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Greenland, Denmark, and  
the Colonial Legacy  
The Belief in Exceptionalism  
Has No Future

Ebbe Volquardsen

At the 60th Venice Biennale in 2024, the Danish Pavilion hosted a significant premiere: for the first time, works by a Greenlandic artist were exhibited, featuring photographs by Inuuteq Storch. At the same time, the Danish National Bank asked the public to participate in a vote on the designs for a new series of banknotes.

Among the options was a portrait of Arnarulunnguaq, a member of the indigenous Inughuit from North Greenland. She participated in the fifth Thule Expedition from 1921 to 1924, which for the first time documented the kinship ties and historical migration routes of all Inuit in the Arctic region. However, Arnarulunnguaq was relegated from a historically significant role to being the shy assistant of polar explorer Knud Rasmussen in a narrative centered on male heroes.

Both current events reflect the same trend: Greenlanders are increasingly representing Danish institutions, both symbolically and concretely. Gradually and without much fanfare, Denmark is positioning itself as the post-colonial state it has effectively been since 1979, the year Greenland gained self-government. This is further underscored by the recent designation of Greenlandic as a working language in the Copenhagen Parliament.

To make her Danish colleagues aware of the linguistic challenges many Greenlanders face daily, Aki-Matilda Høegh-Dam, one of the two Greenlandic parliamentarians, delivered a speech in her native language. Initially criticized as a provocation, she convinced the parliamentary leadership to allow contributions in Greenlandic and to provide funding for translations. In due course, Høegh-Dam also won an award for the “best Danish speech” of the year. Greenlandic speeches are now equally accepted as Danish speeches.

#### Everyone Should Become Danish

The last time Denmark understood itself as a multiethnic and multilingual state was at least 150 years ago: Until the mid-19th century, the Scandinavian monarchy was a medium-sized empire with colonies on almost every continent. The so-called realm also included Norway, Schleswig-Holstein, and Iceland. With the successive loss of these territories, Denmark changed its self-image and increasingly saw itself as an ethnically homogeneous nation-state; a development that now fills many shelves of cultural historical research. Greenland, the last remaining colony, was formally integrated as an equal province in 1953. However, paradoxically, many Greenlanders experienced this subsequent development as the true beginning of colonial domination: The Danish Greenland policy of the post-war decades aimed to assimilate the locals to a European lifestyle and, as it was sometimes said, to make them “Nordic Danes.” This was not only to suggest to the decolonization-demanding United Nations that Danes and Greenlanders were essentially the same people due to centuries of cultural contact, but it also aligned with a dominant perception of Denmark as an ethnically homogeneous and socially progressive nation. Ethnic conflicts and violent struggles for independence might be fought elsewhere, but, it was believed, Greenlanders would soon understand what a privilege it was to be Danish, namely, citizens of one of the richest countries in the world with a welfare system envied by many.

This assumption turned out to be a mistake. In recent years, the systematic state intervention to which Greenlanders were subjected during decades of assimilation policy has become increasingly evident. Similarities to the treatment of Aboriginal peoples in Australia, Maori in New Zealand, or First Nations in Canada are unmistakable. When Greenlandic art is shown in Danish exhibitions, Greenlanders are depicted on Danish banknotes, and Greenlandic speeches are made in the Danish parliament, the Danish state is acknowledging, in an unprecedented way, the multiethnic character of the post-colonial union that it forms with Greenland (and the Faroe Islands). At the same time, it distances itself from the misguided assimilation policy of the post-war decades, which aimed to obscure or eliminate cultural and linguistic diversity. Yet, the conspicuous revival of a national identity also evokes memories of imperial times when the monarchy understood itself as a multi-ethnic state with subjects living on four continents and speaking a variety of languages.

## The Union is up for Debate

The reactions from Greenland to the efforts of Danish protagonists to strengthen the union with a more respectful appearance are correspondingly ambivalent. While the public generally views symbolic events positively—such as awards for Greenlandic artists, athletes, and politicians, as well as the recent visit from the new Danish royal couple—a majority in Greenland desires much more than just a contemporary reshaping of appearances. They seek a new form of cooperation to replace the union with Denmark, one that allows Greenland self-governance without completely severing ties with Copenhagen.

In 2023, a government commission in Nuuk presented a draft constitution for a sovereign Greenland. In the spring of 2024, the parliament also decided by a large majority to examine the conditions for activating Article 21 of the Autonomy Act—a step that would lead to concrete negotiations regarding Greenland’s formal separation from the Danish state. Discussions are underway about a free association agreement similar to that negotiated by post-colonial island nations in the Pacific. Just a few years ago, such possibilities were dismissed as pipe dreams.

Thus, discussions about the future of the union are taking place on both sides of the North Atlantic, with significant differences in objectives. In Copenhagen, it seems there is an understanding that a flourishing relationship with the former colony requires a more respectful coexistence and a more inclusive national identity. In this context, efforts are being made to improve relations with Greenland. However, this commitment comes rather late, as many in Nuuk believe the time has come to take another step toward state autonomy and dissolve the union with Denmark in its current form. To understand the complex dynamics on both sides, it is helpful to examine some political developments from recent years. What they all share is a gradual departure from colonial exceptionalism.

This term refers to a political ideology that portrayed Danish colonialism—as compared to other European empires and their colonies—as a benevolent, humane, if not harmless endeavor. Like the other Scandinavian countries, Denmark saw itself as an exceptional phenomenon in the modern world: as an extraordinarily peaceful, charitable society, as an unparalleled embodiment of inclusive, egalitarian, and progressive politics. The North was regarded as the “good West,” and for countries like Denmark, this ideal became part of the national self-image—even though Scandinavians were involved in colonial exploitation, including the transatlantic slave trade and the oppression of ethnic minorities.

## Should Greenland Be Grateful?

In fact, it often seems to be a self-image shaped by exceptionalist thinking that hinders a realignment of Danish-Greenland relations. This mindset is difficult to overcome because all colonial projects, not just the Danish, were legitimized by a belief in moral and cultural superiority: the colonizers viewed themselves as on a civilizing mission. In the Danish case, exceptionalist thinking also served to uphold the notion of a welfare state based on equality and human rights, even when its own colonial history contradicted these values.

Those who expose the ideological character of exceptionalism touch upon the core of national identity. Therefore, sometimes merely pointing out colonialism and racism is enough to provoke defensive reactions from the majority. Even if certain political measures later turned out to be wrong, they are often justified as having been undertaken in good faith—a recurring rationalization for what took place. This elevates the intent of the perpetrators above the experiences of the affected, making it difficult for Greenlanders to participate equally in the critical examination of their own history.

Moreover, the annual subsidy of half a billion euros from Denmark to the Greenlandic budget, which keeps the country in a state of dependency, has often been perceived as an altruistic act. In this way, Denmark interprets Greenland’s increasingly vocal demands for autonomy and the addressing of injustices during and after the colonial period as a lack of gratitude. Thus, many uncomfortable discussions have been stifled



in their infancy.

Such arguments were effectively countered by none other than former U.S. President Donald Trump. In 2019, he offered to buy Greenland from Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen. Although the offer bypassed the self-determination rights of the Greenlandic people and was promptly dismissed, it underlined the U.S. interest in Greenland. This interest centers around the Northwest Passage through the Arctic, which is opening up due to global warming and reduces the shipping route between Europe and Asia by five thousand kilometers. Additionally, Greenland possesses rare earth elements that are crucial for the electronics industry and transition to clean energy, which are expected to become increasingly scarce in the US due to the trade war with China. Finally, the strategic location of the US Air Force Base Pituffik (formerly Thule Air Base) in northern Greenland is becoming more significant, especially as Russia and China intensify their activities in the Arctic.

#### Decolonizing a Legend

Trump's move forced Denmark to realize that the annual payments to Nuuk should not be seen as a well-intentioned donation, but rather as the market value of what nations are willing to pay for a military and commercial presence in Greenland. It became clear that Denmark pays comparatively little to maintain its geopolitical position—a realization that challenges the centuries-old narrative of benevolent Danes and ungrateful Greenlanders, empowering Greenlanders to approach future negotiations for autonomy with greater confidence.

The events of June 21, 2020, remain unforgettable. On the eve of Greenland's National Day, unknown activists covered the statue of missionary Hans Egede, which overlooks the historic harbor of Nuuk, with red paint and inscribed the base of the monument with the call "Decolonize!" along with patterns of traditional Inuit tattoos, which had once been condemned by the church and are now regaining popularity. It was Egede who initiated the colonization of Greenland in 1721: the narrative suggests that he only focused on the conversion of the Inuit after failing to find descendants of medieval Scandinavian settlers whom he had intended to convert from Catholicism to Protestantism. This amusing yet easily debunked tale continues to be reproduced in popular historical accounts, giving colonization an accidental, innocent character—yet another variation of colonial exceptionalism.

#### The Victims are Resisting

The action at the Egede statue could have been easily overlooked if it hadn't coincided with global movements like "Rhodes Must Fall" and "Black Lives Matter," triggering an ongoing debate. It concerns not only political but also mental decolonization. In Greenland, where the indigenous population has achieved a relatively high degree of political self-determination, decolonization has long been equated with the formal process of self-government and further political autonomy. However, discussions about more subtle mechanisms that perpetuate colonial structures have remained taboo, as have demands to overcome colonial mindsets and traumas passed down from generation to generation. These debates now seem to have reached a critical mass, not least due to the urging of a globally connected youth.

It may be more than coincidence that psychologist Naja Lyberth publicly expressed the suspicion in 2021 that what happened to her as a young girl in Greenland might be systematic. Lyberth had been fitted with a contraceptive device without her parents' consent. Investigations by Danish Broadcasting revealed that between 1960 and 1991, when Denmark was responsible for healthcare, at least 4,500 women—many of them very young—were subjected to such violations, representing half of all women of childbearing age in Greenland. What thousands of women had carried for decades as personal trauma, without knowing the true extent of the scandal, turned out to be a state-sanctioned program aimed at reducing population growth in Greenland. This program, introduced in 1960, constituted a violation of the human rights of the affected women. Since 2023, an expert commission appointed by the governments of Greenland and Denmark has been investigating the scandal. However, many of the older

women do not want to wait for the report's results: they have sued the Danish state for damages. This is unprecedented, as systematic human rights violations have never been brought before a court in Denmark.

Recently, some victims of the assimilation policy have taken similar legal steps: “legally fatherless” individuals and Greenlanders affected by questionable adoption practices. Children born out of wedlock, whose fathers often came from Denmark, were barred from identifying with and inheriting from their biological fathers until the 1970s. During this time, as further revelations have shown, hundreds of children were adopted by Danes without their biological Greenlandic parents being informed about the implications of this step. In Greenlandic society, the term “adoption” had a different meaning; large families often temporarily entrusted their children to the care of relatives or childless acquaintances, without excluding the possibility of later family reunification.

#### The Paradox of Integration

Although in 2013 the Danish government saw no reason to participate in a “Reconciliation Commission” initiated by Greenland, Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen nonetheless traveled to Nuuk in 2022 to formally apologize to the survivors of the 1951 “experiments.” This is the most internationally recognized case of colonial political interference: a group of children was forcibly sent to Denmark and permanently separated from their families in order to raise them through Danish education to become future contributors to society.

This was still largely presented in 2022 as a regrettable exception to an otherwise successful modernization policy, fully in line with the narrative of colonial exceptionalism. However, just two years later, particularly in light of the revelations surrounding the enforced contraception and adoption scandals, it appears as one of many examples of a social policy system that subjected the majority of Greenlanders who grew up in the post-war era to disenfranchisement, involuntary resettlement, and abuses by the authorities. That this has now become clear to decision-makers in Copenhagen is evidenced by their participation in a large-scale research commission aimed at re-examining all aspects of Danish policy in Greenland. The goal of this historical review is said to be “reconciliation,” although what this specifically entails remains unclear.

In Greenland, there has long been an awareness of how past abuses continue to impact the present, even though the topic has often been off limits. Meanwhile, the gradual disillusionment with the exceptionalist narrative has led some Danes into a state of “postcolonial melancholy.” This term, coined by sociologist Paul Gilroy, describes the nostalgic longing for more peaceful times and the feeling of loss over diminished status and power in post-imperial societies. It is sometimes stated in the Danish press that Danish-Greenlandic relations have never been worse than they are today. However, insights from integration research can provide a more positive perspective on this view. Aladin El-Mafaalani, in a widely respected sociological study, describes the paradoxical situation where progress towards the integration of minorities in a society initially leads to more conflict and tension. This can be explained: improved participation and social mobility raise the expectations of the affected groups and make them more visible in society.

#### Turning Away from Exceptionalism

Recently, Greenlanders have indeed become more visible and vocal within the Danish state, whether culturally, in their successful demand to rename a classic ice cream product that included the racially charged term “Eskimo,” or in legal battles regarding abuses and injustices that many have personally experienced. If Denmark takes seriously the re-invention of the union as a post-colonial federation of equal members, conflicts and tensions are likely to increase in the foreseeable future. For only a decisive departure from colonial exceptionalism—the cherished narrative of Denmark as a selfless, albeit not always infallible, partner of Greenland on its path to modernization—offers the chance for a sustainable relationship with the former colony.

It's likely that this aligns with the economic and geopolitical interests of the country, as suspected by those in the government offices in



Copenhagen. Attention given toward more uncomfortable and contradictory historical narratives will continue to face resistance. For Greenlanders, however, such a paradigm shift would provide belated justice as contemporary witnesses of history. Their long-standing perception of many political decisions as wrong, unjust, and violent would finally be acknowledged. This would allow them the opportunity to find peace with their history and take control of shaping their future.

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Tourism  
“We Absolutely Need  
a Good Plan”

Iddimangiiu Bianco  
Urs Bühler

Tourism in Greenland is young, but it is growing. At the same time, it thrives largely on the longing for untouched landscapes and pristine nature. How can tourism be promoted under these conditions? How can Greenlanders ensure that they are in control of its development? And how do you protect polar bears from inexperienced visitors?

An interview with Iddimangiiu Bianco, who trains local tourism professionals in Qaqortoq, southern Greenland.

Many travelers want to see Greenland before it's too late: climate change is causing the icebergs to melt. This also threatens Greenland's attractiveness as a travel destination. How does that make you feel?

It makes me realize that we all have a lot of work to do in the face of climate change: myself, my family, our country, and the entire global population.

Greenland's main attractions, also known as the “big arctic five,” are closely tied to untouched wilderness: in addition to the icebergs, they include sled dogs, the northern lights, whales, and the inland ice sheet.

In fact, the “big arctic five” could serve as a powerful advertisement to remind everyone that we must take care of our land.

At the same time, Greenland offers something that many people in densely populated Europe long for: peace and solitude in nature. But doesn't the growth of tourism threaten exactly that quality?

This risk does exist. But, you know, we have a vast country, and it's an isolated place, not easy to reach, which offers some protection from too much hustle and bustle. Our central question is: how can we use the land sustainably and develop it in a way that benefits the population?

You don't have any concerns that there could eventually be too many tourists?

I don't have a simple answer to that. On the one hand, I see the potential for our tourism to keep growing, because there are still so many opportunities for locals to get involved as tour operators and providers. On the other hand, because we still have so much work to do in tourism development, growth is limited anyway—especially due to logistical constraints, like the relatively small number of beds available in hotels or private accommodation. So, we absolutely need a good plan for promoting Greenland. With an emphasis on growth, caution is necessary: we don't want mass tourism.

Does modern tourism even suit Greenland?

Absolutely. We are quite internationally oriented, even though that might surprise some people. We are cautious, but we're also quite good at adapting, even to modern forms of tourism. And we've observed closely how other countries, like Iceland, have developed as tourist destinations.

Is Iceland a role model?

It's both an inspiration and a warning. We've observed how much tourism has increased there, but also how local operators have been pushed aside. The key is to train both young and older generations, so they are well-prepared for the challenges ahead.

How has Greenland's tourism developed since the pandemic?

Like the rest of the world, we were heavily affected by COVID-19, but the enforced break has helped us make significant progress. It opened the eyes of local players to how they can engage in tourism and how it can evolve in the future. And sustainability is a part of that development. Today, we have more well-trained staff across the country, especially guides.

Are locals taking more control of the business now, whereas it was previously dominated by foreign providers?

Yes, exactly. Foreign operators still dominate, but in the next few years, a law will be introduced to increase the share of local providers. This continues the process that has been unfolding over recent years.

So, does this mean that the involvement of foreign operators will be restricted by law?

Partly, but it's more about promoting locals rather than imposing restrictions, because international partnerships are very helpful, and we still need them. At the same time, it's crucial to listen to the locals, especially regarding sustainability: they are familiar with their land, respect it, and know how to protect it. I also see how happy our people are to be involved in the tourism development process—from planning and training to legislation. This has also impacted the educational level in Greenland. Education levels are relatively low, but more and more young people want to get into the tourism business, which motivates many to continue their studies.

You work at Campus Kujalleq, where local tour guides are trained in six-month courses. They can either specialize in urban environments or work in the wilderness. What is the focus in the training of these “Adventure Guides”?

The main focus is safety. Especially in the “Wilderness” course module, the emphasis is on how to handle dangerous situations and emergencies. We collaborate with Danish and American providers; our training is very internationally oriented, and we seek inspiration worldwide. I just returned from the US, where we have a partnership with the University of Southern Maine.

What are the greatest dangers for travelers, and how often are they involved in accidents?

In southern and northeastern Greenland, the greatest danger comes from polar bears. We don't yet have comprehensive statistics on all accidents, but I'm working with the national tourism organization, Visit Greenland, to improve data collection.

And how do you ensure tourists behave properly?

Those who visit us must respect nature and the environment. That's what we expect. Therefore, we give guests instructions and are increasingly documenting these rules in writing to hand them out. This includes not only how to act if a polar bear appears, but also, for example, asking locals for permission before photographing them. But there is still much more to do to protect Greenland. UNESCO, with whom we collaborate in several areas, is contributing to these efforts.

The Ilulissat Icefjord has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2004 and is Greenland's most visited tourist destination. How well behaved are tourists in general?

They behave quite responsibly. This is also due to the effort it takes just to get to Greenland. That increases their appreciation of their final destination.

At the end of November 2024, Nuuk's new international airport will open. With this new hub, the island will be easier and cheaper to reach. Won't that negatively impact this appreciation?

We certainly need to stay vigilant to avoid facing mass tourism one day. But I believe that, especially in Nuuk, we've had enough time to prepare for this new situation.

How does the local population feel about the airport project?

The reactions are mixed. Some are enthusiastic, while others worry that cheaper flight options could have negative consequences.

There are only two ways to get to Greenland, and neither is particularly eco-friendly: a little more than half of the visitors arrive by plane, the rest

by ship. In 2023, a record 76,000 cruise ship passengers were registered. Is that a good thing?

This mostly affects southern Greenland, where around seventy cruise ships dock each year, and this market is continuing to grow, which benefits local operators.

Is there a risk of a situation like in Venice?

It's true that we should avoid situations where two large cruise ships with 4,000 passengers dock at the same time in a town with only 1,000 inhabitants. But with better planning, we can prevent that, and we already have a good working relationship with the cruise organizers. That's why I'm confident we can manage this.

A population survey by Visit Greenland this year shows a generally positive attitude toward tourism, but not toward the increasing number of cruise passengers.

I don't fully share those concerns. I also see many local providers who are happy that the guests are coming.

How much do local communities really benefit from efforts to establish tourism as a source of income?

We have larger providers, like in the hotel industry, whose offerings are developing in ways that benefit both guests and locals. But, of course, tourism mostly offers very seasonal income. Most people involved in it have other jobs during the off-season, often as teachers. And I don't want to sugarcoat it, it is difficult to be successful in the tourism business. I know some smaller providers who stopped after a few years. I would say about half of the people who enter the tourism industry make a go of it—it works out for them.

Is there a danger that the country could one day become too dependent on tourism?

I can't imagine that. But we'll see how things develop. And we're prepared.

Most guests come in the summer. Couldn't visitor numbers be better distributed throughout the year?

We have a second peak season, in winter, with activities like skiing and dog sledding. The opportunities in other seasons are more limited. There's a chance to see whales in the spring, for example, but the chances are much better in summer, when you can also see the largest icebergs and catch your own fish.

After the hub in Nuuk, two more airports will be built over the next two years, in Ilulissat and Qaqortoq, opening up other regions of Greenland. More flights not only mean more people, but also more noise and emissions.

These regions will adapt. As I said, we know how to adjust without losing awareness of our own culture.

There's already talk of a gap between modern and traditional ways of life.

That's true. The larger towns in southern and western Greenland are shaped by modern life, while smaller towns in the east and north are more rooted in old traditions, passed down from generation to generation. But there are also traditional elements in other areas, like the national costume in western Greenland. We haven't lost our culture.

Alcoholism is widespread in the country. Isn't the clash of cultures one of the causes?

Yes, that's true. Alcohol is one of our big problems, as is the high suicide rate. You see a similar development in other countries that were colonized and whose populations are at risk of losing their culture.

Can modern tourism help overcome these problems, or does it make them worse?

It's helpful because we blend our culture into tourism. This strengthens awareness of it and how we represent it while finding ourselves in the

process. But we need a law to ensure the preservation of our cultural heritage. That's also in the works.

Can you give an example?

Narwhal hunting in northeastern Greenland is disrupted by cruise and sailing ships during the peak season. That's why we need a law to restrict shipping in these areas.

This hunt isn't just for sustenance, but also part of the cultural heritage?

Absolutely.

How traditional is the culture that guests can see in Greenland?

If you want to experience it in its most traditional form, like drum dancing or ancient winter survival techniques, you need to visit the remote small towns in the east and north. But you'll encounter traditions wherever you go. There are many unique characteristics in each region.

Cuisine has become central to tourism. What can Greenland offer in that area?

We have a lot to offer in terms of meat and fish dishes, from whale and seal to reindeer. And the tour operators keep finding new ways to bring these to the attention of tourists. Even in the smallest towns, there are people who know how to make fish soup or a traditional seal dish. In southern Greenland, we also have about three dozen sheep farmers, and a few cows are raised there as well. And in Nuuk, a farmer is growing potatoes and other vegetables, but that's still very new. Many young people are interested in living in our natural environment and using it sustainably, which encourages them to be innovative.

The fishing industry, by far Greenland's largest economic sector, has come under pressure. This also applies to the fur trade, the main source of income in East Greenland, where you served as tourism director for several years. Can tourism compensate for these developments?

It certainly helps, even in East Greenland, although this part of our country is not the primary tourist destination. This remote and isolated region, characterized by small villages and a deeply rooted cultural heritage, has taken an interesting path since the pandemic: there are more and more small-scale providers, tourism is still growing, and for some, it provides a very good income.

What is your personal main goal for Greenland's future?

That many young people feel proud to have a good place to live. And right now, I can hardly think of anything more inspiring than educating such young people.

Iddimangliu Bianco, born in 1986 in Tasillaq, studied law at the University of Greenland. In 2014, she was elected to the national parliament for the Inuit Ataqatigiit party but gave up her seat three years later to take on a new position: she became director of the tourism organization for East Greenland. Today, she works in the southern Greenlandic city of Qaqortoq, as the head of training at Campus Kujalleq, where local tourism professionals are taught.

Urs Bühler, born in 1967 in Zurich, completed a degree with a major in art history. He is an editor at the "NZZ am Sonntag Magazin" as well as a freelance author and columnist for the "Neue Zürcher Zeitung", where he previously worked for twenty years in the local and cultural news sections.

Where is “Schweizerland”, and how does one get there?

It is mid-July 1912, and the expedition has been on the ice for almost a month. Everything is white. Everything is flat. There are neither mountains nor valleys, and when wind and snow blur the view, the horizon disappears as well. The four men must navigate as if on an ocean, using a compass, sextant, chronometer, and a wheel on the sled that mechanically records the distances traveled.

Initially, they cover no more than fifteen kilometers a day, mostly between late evening and early morning, when the snow is cold and firm enough. However, during some of these bright polar nights, they manage to cover up to forty kilometers. This is partly because their supplies—350 kilograms for the dogs and 200 for the men—are continuously diminishing, making the sleds lighter. Unfortunately, the number of dogs is also decreasing. They are part of the provisions.

The goal of the expedition is to cross and map the ice sheet that covers almost all of Greenland, in places up to three kilometers thick—a glacier of continental dimensions. At that time, little is known about this inland ice. For the Danish colonists, it is a no-man’s land, but even the native Inuit, whose direct ancestors migrated from North America starting in 1100, stick to the coastal regions that borders the ice. This is even truer for the settlers from Norway and Iceland, who arrived in Greenland shortly before the year 1000 and disappeared again between 1400 and 1500.

The route of the 1912 expedition goes from the west coast to the east coast, a total of 650 kilometers. It is significantly further north and thus also much longer than the path taken by Norwegian Fridtjof Nansen, who was the first to cross Greenland in 1888. In the summer of 1912, the focus is on venturing into the “yet unexplored interior” of the ice sheet, as Alfred de Quervain puts it. The 33-year-old Zurich meteorologist and geophysicist leads the expedition, which includes three other Swiss: a doctor, an engineer, and an architect.

On July 13, when the path on the ice plateau begins to incline slightly to 2505 meters above sea level, the four men know they have reached the highest point on their route—they raise a Swiss flag and pose for a group photo. But that’s not all. The Swiss expedition leaves traces in Greenland that are still visible today. These traces are the beginning of a remarkable closeness between the two countries. This closeness is connected as much to science as to the political culture of Switzerland and its national identity. Beyond the Arctic Circle, in the vast expanse of Greenland’s ice, one sees a kind of Alps. And in the Inuit, a kind of alpine people.

#### Land in Sight

On July 17, 1912, at eight in the evening, the group sets off from their 25th day camp. However, after just three-quarters of an hour, Alfred de Quervain stops his dogs when he notices shouting and waving from the sled behind him. Land in sight! Far to the east, a mountain rises from the glacier ice—the first visible land in more than five hundred kilometers. “It was a high mountain, far away on the horizon, along with somewhat lower mountains. Much further left than I had expected,” notes de Quervain. “We realized that it must be an unknown mountainous region not marked on the map.”

The “endless desolation” of the ice and the “terrible monotony of this most complete and relentless desert” have not yet affected their spirits, declares de Quervain in his diary, which he later publishes as a travel report. Yet, the sighting of the mountains apparently lifts their mood, for by morning they make a record-breaking advance of 42 kilometers eastward. “It was a magnificent journey. The dogs ran as fast as they could; behind us, the red sun in the night sky.” Before it finally disappears back into the whiteness, and the group moves on, de Quervain makes a “precise drawing of the mountain horizon” and names the large peak “Mont Forel” in honor of a renowned glacier researcher from Lausanne: François-Alphonse Forel helped secure funding for the expedition. The smaller mountains are named after other research colleagues, and the four expedition members will also immortalize themselves.

Four days later, on July 21, they reach the eastern end of the ice sheet. It drops from a height of a thousand meters into a rugged landscape of fjords from which icebergs break off the glaciers. From here, the four Swiss



seek a prepared supply cache and a way to the coast. Locals take them further through the pack ice in kayaks to a Danish trading and mission station: on August 1, de Quervain reaches Ammassalik, which has a dozen houses and fewer than a hundred people.

Today, Ammassalik is called Tasiilaq and, with two thousand inhabitants, is the largest settlement in East Greenland. However, four peaks in the hinterland around the Sermilik fjord still bear the names of the four Swiss who mapped the area in the summer of 1912: Quervains Bjerg, Hoesslys Bjerg, Ficks Bjerg, Gaules Bjerg. Moreover, maps still record “Schweizerland”—a mountain massif at the eastern edge of the ice sheet that extends to the Sermilik and covers an area of nearly three hundred square kilometers. Also named by de Quervain and his team, this mountain range emerged from the ice on the evening of July 17, 1912, revealing how far they had come.

#### Called from Nature to Natural Research

One wonders what the Swiss were even doing in this area. Scientific research was one thing. The focus was primarily on glaciology, on the shape and dynamics of glaciation. Such topics were already relevant before global warming; in Switzerland, Alfred de Quervain participated in surveying the Grindelwald Glacier, which had advanced dangerously far down the valley around the mid-19th century and has since been retreating.

In Arctic Greenland, the Swiss measured and recorded the shapes and heights of the ice sheet. Was it perhaps merely a melting remnant of the last great ice age? And did ice-free oases exist deep in the interior that could be used agriculturally, as some researchers believed at the time? The 1912 expedition provided, alongside geomagnetic and atmospheric data, the most extensive and accurate topography of the ice sheet up to that point. From their exploration, it could be concluded that the glaciers were generating new ice, that the ice sheet remained stable as a result, and that it completely covered the interior of the island. At the same time, de Quervain, as a meteorologist, disproved two further presumptions circulating in research. One was that a constant high-pressure area existed over Greenland. The other was that a high air vortex ensured a permanent westerly flow in the Arctic. In reality, the pressure was as variable as the wind.

But behind the Swiss interest in Greenland lay something else, which had little to do with science and much with national thinking. The Swiss saw themselves as called to polar research, particularly as a mountain people, with their self-image as a special case among nations, born and rooted in the mountains that form Europe’s center. When de Quervain referred to his undertaking as the “Swiss Greenland Expedition” and emphasized the Swiss aspect, it was not by chance—he explained in his report what had driven him. It was “the thought that perhaps what our homeland gives us; the love for the high mountains, the familiarity with snow and glaciers, and a certain adaptability and modesty; uniquely qualify us to operate in the polar region.”

This was less a question than a claim, as it meant: what connects Switzerland to Greenland are the living conditions in the Arctic environment—conditions similar to those in Swiss high alpine regions. And if the mountainous land shapes the character of its inhabitants such that they are “uniquely” prepared for an expedition to Greenland, then polar research appears to Switzerland as something self-evident, if not inevitable: it is only natural for them to achieve pioneering feats in the Arctic regions.

#### The Alps as a Training Ground

Alpine training was certainly an advantage in Greenland. Before their expedition in the summer of 1912, the Swiss trained in their home mountains, “transferring the skills learned and tested there—such as mountaineering, glacier walking, skiing, and navigation—onto the Greenland ice sheet”, explains historian Lea Pfäffli, who has studied the beginnings of Swiss research in Greenland. The same applied to scientific methods, such as glacier surveying: the Swiss benefited from techniques that had already proven effective on the Rhône Glacier.

However, the connection to the Alps had not only a practical but also a political dimension: it endowed the expedition in distant Greenland with

the sanctity of a patriotic act while, conversely, granting Switzerland a particular reputation and status among the Western nations competing for the exploration of polar regions. “Crevasses and countless other obstacles confronted the four brave men every day,” stated the “Pestalozzi Calendar” to its youthful audience when reporting on de Quervain’s arduous mission in 1915. Yet if anyone was capable of mastering Greenland, it was the sons of the Alps. “It took genuine Swiss endurance, determined forward momentum, and manly perseverance to bear the chain of hardships with a fresh, cheerful spirit.” Thus, the venture into the interior of Greenland became an example of national virtues. This interpretation was popular in Switzerland, making Alfred de Quervain a Swiss polar hero.

This is also evident in the summer of 1938. At that time, another expedition from Switzerland set off for Greenland, this time directly to Ammassalik on the east coast. Organized by the Academic Alpine Club of Zurich and led by the Genevan mountaineer and engineer André Roch, their goal was the “Schweizerland” that de Quervain had marked in 1912. In the meantime, it had not been further explored. Although English and French teams attempted to cross the region and be the first to climb Mont Forel, the main peak of the massif, which at nearly 3,400 meters held the title of the highest mountain in Greenland for a long time, they failed due to the weather, according to Roch. They were hindered by “a lack of provisions, time, and strength needed in this mountainous land.” Or by the ice mantle that partly overhangs the summit plateau of Mont Forel, blocking the way up.

On August 2, 1938, the Swiss flag flies atop the mountain. André Roch does not explicitly explain why he and his two companions had more success. Instead, he describes the mountains of East Greenland as “an area as large as the Bernese Oberland and Valais combined” and Schweizerland as that part of the country “which most resembles the Alps.” The implication is clear, especially in those years of defending the spirit of a nation, and echo de Quervain’s sentiments: Schweizerland is reserved for the Swiss, for their Alps predestine them, more than representatives of other nations, to undertake the most demanding adventures in the Arctic.

This notion significantly contributed to justifying the scientific endeavors of Swiss researchers in this region of the world, and it continues to do so. In the 21st century, research at both the North and South Poles notably focuses on climate issues, such as the importance of the Antarctic and Greenland ice sheets for the planet and how both respond to global warming. Swiss researchers study how the ice moves within the sheet and how it melts at the surface, what interactions exist with the ocean and the atmosphere, how strongly snowflakes reflect solar radiation, and how deep sunlight penetrates the snow cover. They also investigate how climate-relevant gases from industrial countries are transported and distributed in polar regions.

Moreover, Switzerland has been involved in ice core drilling in Greenland and Antarctica since its inception in the 1960s. Samples from the depths of the ice sheet allow for the reconstruction of climate history, as information about atmospheric composition and temperatures from past eras can be gleaned from the ice and its air bubbles. Parts of the first ice cores are still preserved at the University of Bern, where physicist Hans Oeschger helped to establish modern climate research.

#### A Narrative Has Become a Tradition

Expeditions like that of 1912 laid the “foundation for Switzerland’s excellence in polar research.” So states the foreword from the federal council in a current brochure where representatives of scientific projects in the polar regions present themselves. It speaks of “pioneering spirit, passion, and expertise” and Switzerland’s “significant participation” in international scientific work, yet all this is not attributed to chance or to scientific or geopolitical successes but rather to a “special interest.” It relates to the peculiarities of that topography which de Quervain still called “home-land.” Just like the polar regions, Switzerland is largely “shaped by glaciers and ice.”

Does this mean that glacier researchers from glacial countries are automatically the best glacier researchers? That the quality of scientific

work arises from the personal impact of the subject? Something else is more pertinent: there exists a narrative with which Switzerland claims a special place in the polar regions, and it has become tradition—a fixed idea. While today there is no longer talk of a national character, the existence and excellence of Swiss polar research is still primarily justified by drawing an analogy between alpine and arctic environmental conditions.

The foundation of this notion may have been provided by botany. As early as 1908, Basel botanist Martin Rikli, a specialist in plant geography, spent five months on Greenland's west coast at the Danish research station Godhavn, now Qeqertarsuaq, to study the distribution of arctic dwarf shrub heath. He measured the height of the shrubs, the length of their shoots, the circumference of the branches, the width of the growth rings, as well as humidity, soil temperature, and their frequency. He was primarily a specialist in the vegetation of the Swiss mountain world. Yet in Greenland, the plant researcher found many of the same species that he had come to know and love from his alpine homeland since childhood, Rikli explained. And dwarf shrub heath was not the only species that could be categorized under both alpine and arctic flora.

Rikli evaluated his findings in a table, recording the occurrence of various plants based on two criteria: northern latitude and alpine elevation. He found silky willow in the Valais up to 2,560 meters above sea level and in the north up to the 76th parallel. Rikli aimed to define and understand global vegetation zones more precisely. Yet, at the same time, his calculations of latitudes and altitudes contributed to an image that is still recalled today when asserting a special closeness between Switzerland and Greenland: the Arctic is understood as a horizontal version of the Alps, and the Alps as a vertical polar region.

For the history of Swiss polar research, however, there is another significant aspect. Historian Lea Pfäffli has pointed out in her study that the explorers and scientists from Switzerland did not only interact with Greenland's natural environment. The production of "Arctic knowledge" (Pfäffli) also involved two other parties, who are at the beginning of Swiss polar research but do not appear in the prevailing narrative of Greenlandic-Swiss kinship. On one side was the colonial power Denmark, and on the other were the Inuit.

#### The Uncredited Participants

Alfred de Quervain and his companions embarked on their expedition in 1912 during a tumultuous time: industrial nations were racing to the poles, and polar explorers became public heroes. In 1906, Norwegian Roald Amundsen was the first to navigate the Northwest Passage; in 1909, both Robert Peary and Frederick Cook claimed the North Pole for the USA, and in 1911, Amundsen reached the South Pole before the Briton Robert Falcon Scott. These expeditions sought scientific knowledge but were also about territorial claims and imperial power.

Greenland was no different. Here, Denmark had annexed large parts of the west coast and a section of the east coast to its colonial empire, placing them under a state-run company, "Den Kongelige Grønlandske Handel." This company managed part of the colonial administration and all the trade, especially the export of whale oil, seal oil, and other hunting products from the local population. To protect this monopoly, Danish Greenland was strictly sealed off. Meanwhile, Norway, Canada, and the USA increasingly asserted claims to other coastal areas. The Danes saw their plan to control the rest of the island threatened.

According to Lea Pfäffli, this explains why the trading company did not allow researchers from these countries to enter Danish Greenland, even for scientific purposes—while it welcomed representatives from Switzerland and treated them as allies. Even though they operated under their own flag and tirelessly named Greenlandic mountains after Swiss names, Alfred de Quervain, Martin Rikli, and several other Swiss naturalists could travel on Danish ships and use the Danish research station. They were allowed to stock up on equipment from the trading company and even hire Inuit for their own purposes.

This means that early 20th-century Swiss natural research relied on the exclusive services of the Danish colonial power. "Measurements and

samples from the Arctic were sought for modeling global natural phenomena,” writes Lea Pfäffli, but establishing their own infrastructures for exploring and researching Greenland would have “far exceeded the financial capabilities of the Swiss.” Conversely, the colonial power benefited from the Swiss, and this was, according to Pfäffli, the decisive reason for the support: they brought techniques and knowledge that could help Denmark solidify and expand its rule over Greenland.

For example, knowledge about glacier movement was crucial for determining how far the island’s coastal areas were ice-free and habitable. While Paul-Louis Mercanton, a glaciologist and member of a second team of the 1912 expedition, measured the ice from the west coast, Alfred de Quervain sent sounding balloons into the atmosphere to gather data for modeling wind currents—a prerequisite for Arctic air navigation and the exploration of further areas. Swiss research was equally relevant in the case of Zurich geologist Arnold Heim, who traveled to Greenland in 1909 at the direct request of a Danish mining company to prospect possible deposits of coal, copper, and graphite.

#### Four Weeks in the “Dog School”

But what does “Swiss research” mean? The contribution of the Danish colonial power was complemented by that of the Greenlandic population. This was equally crucial, yet it is seldom mentioned today when Swiss polar research showcases its “excellence,” celebrates the “pioneering spirit” of its early days, and recalls the already headline-worthy discovery of “Schweizerland.” Without the Inuit, Alfred de Quervain and his companions would hardly have made it through the ice. “Becoming a polar hero meant adopting indigenous techniques,” states Lea Pfäffli. For the researchers the Arctic was a zone of physical and psychological dangers, from which many did not return alive.

De Quervain was fully aware that they depended on the Inuit for their research and survival—local knowledge in matters of mobility, logistics, orientation, and clothing. He had already attempted to cross the Greenland ice from the west in 1909 but quickly turned back because he and his two colleagues were overwhelmed by pulling the heavy sleds. The 1912 expedition began differently: with the purchase of sled dogs on the west coast. This was followed by a four-week stay in Sarfannguit. Here, a Greenlandic couple ran a small trading post and a “dog school,” as de Quervain called it.

David and Ania Olsen specialized in teaching sledding and how to handle the animals to a well-paying international clientele. The expedition leader dedicated an entire chapter of his travel report to the “secrets of northern Greenlandic dog science.” It involved using the whip without injuring oneself, preventing the 29 dogs from constantly chewing through their harnesses, and having a certain linguistic competence, as the animals expected their commands in Greenlandic.

Other Inuit found different opportunities within the Danish colonial regime, where they were mainly used for the procurement of hunting goods: they sold souvenirs, ethnographic objects, photographs of land and people, or their labor to foreign researchers. A seal hunter working for the Swiss expedition of 1912 earned more in a few weeks than in a year selling seal oil to the trading company. “The Inuit made every effort to seize the earning opportunities presented by the few travelers allowed into the territory,” writes Lea Pfäffli. At the same time, no cases of violence or forced labor were reported in Greenland, unlike scientific expeditions in Southeast Asia and other colonial contexts.

#### Felt Boots for the Swiss High Alps

Thanks to Pfäffli’s work, we now know what contributed to the early Swiss research successes in Greenland —contributions from participants, whether colonists or locals, who are often absent in mainstream scientific narratives. Furthermore, the historian has traced the pathways through which cultural techniques from Greenland made their way to Switzerland alongside scientific data. For instance, Hans Hössli, the doctor on de Quervain’s team, reported in the magazine of the Swiss Ski Association after his return about the “clothing of the Eskimos.” He recommended it for improving the equipment of mountaineers. Especially the Greenlandic



jacket called anorak and the kamik, a boot made from seal fur, could serve the Swiss military well on glacier tours in the local high mountains. What Hössli knew came from the Olsens, the Greenlandic couple in Sarfannguit. A similar story applies to Martin Rikli, the botanist. He shared knowledge with the Swiss Pharmaceutical Society that he had acquired from a seal hunter: Philemon Petersen had accompanied him on an expedition to Greenland's west coast and informed him about the pharmaceutical uses of a plant called angelica. This exchange was a constant in the researchers' relationship with the Greenlandic locals. While the Swiss often romanticized them as "children of nature," justifying colonial rule by claiming it led the Inuit towards Christianity and a moral life, they also defended Danish "exceptionalism," the notion that in Greenland, a humane and benevolent colonialism had become reality. In typical colonial manner they did not hesitate to ask the Inuit in remote settlements to show them gravesites in order to obtain human skulls for anthropological studies back to Switzerland.

At the same time, however, they regarded the Indigenous people as "bearers of knowledge" (Pfäffli) from whom they could learn. "While colonial discourses often celebrated the superiority of European technology, Indigenous techniques appeared admirable in the Arctic." This did not create a relationship of equals between the Swiss and the Inuit, but it was ambivalent. It led the Swiss to see the locals not merely as subordinates or objects of their scientific mission but as participants as well.

Switzerland may have viewed itself as a polar nation, yet it found that the "familiarity" (de Quervain) with snow and ice—the "adaptability and modesty" that it attributed to itself as national virtues—were echoed in distant Greenland. This transformed the Arctic people into an Alpine people. The same applies to the alpine and scientific knowledge that resulted from polar research: it traveled in more than one direction, it "circulated" (Pfäffli)—alpine knowledge reached the Arctic, while Arctic knowledge found its way into the Alps.

All of this suggests that we might view the relationship between Switzerland and Greenland differently today than is typically stated in discussions about the history of the sciences or that of colonialism: "The West" and "the periphery" are not territories with clear boundaries.

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André Roch and Guido Piderman: *Quer durchs "Schweizerland" mit der schweizerischen Grönland-Expedition des AACZ*. Zürich 1941.



## Workshop Talk Is Everything Changing?

Alberte Parnuuna  
Gian Suhner  
Inuuteq Storch  
Salome Erni

A Greenlandic photographer, a Greenlandic filmmaker, and a Swiss director and filmmaker: Inuuteq Storch, Alberte Parnuuna, and Gian Suhner discuss their collaboration on the Greenland project. They explore the unique challenges of working there, how to portray the country and its transformations, and what distinguishes an indigenous perspective from an outsider's view. The conversation is led by Salome Erni.

Salome Erni, born in 2001, grew up in Hildisrieden, Lucerne. She works as a journalist and is currently studying photography at the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague. In her exhibition and book projects, she focuses on collective narratives, often exploring them through participatory methods. Her aim is to create space for multiple perspectives. Erni served as project coordinator and research assistant for the exhibition "Greenland: Everything Will Change" at ALPS.

Gian Suhner, born in 1987 in Savognin, Graubünden, now lives in Berlin. The filmmaker studied history and sociology at the University of Basel and directing at the German Film and Television Academy in Berlin. He has worked on various documentary productions and exhibitions in Switzerland and Germany. Suhner is the director and co-curator of the exhibition "Greenland: Everything Will Change" at ALPS, the Alpine Museum of Switzerland, after having contributed in the same capacity to the 2021 exhibition "Let's Talk About Mountains: A Cinematic Approach to North Korea."

Inuuteq Storch, born in 1989, returned to his birthplace Sisimiut in Greenland after completing his studies at the International Center of Photography in New York and the Fatamorgana Photography School in Copenhagen. He has exhibited his photographic work internationally and published several books, including "Porcelain Souls" (2018), "Keepers of the Ocean" (2022), and "Necromancer" (2024). Through his projects Storch explores his roots and community in Greenland using both his own photographs and archival images. In 2024, with his work "Rise of the Sunken Sun," he became the first Greenlandic artist to exhibit at the Danish Pavilion of the Venice Biennale.

Alberte Parnuuna was born in 1995 in Nuuk and now lives in Copenhagen. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Film and Media Science and a Master's in Visual Culture. Since her graduation, Parnuuna has worked as a filmmaker and artist, as a project manager for festivals, as a consultant on various projects, and as a workshop host. Her work focuses on themes such as cultural codes, identity, and the impacts of colonialism, particularly in Greenland.

Salome Erni

For the exhibition about Greenland, the ALPS team undertook three trips, spoke with many Greenlanders, and viewed the place cinematically. Gian, as the director and co-curator, can you give us an insight into how ALPS approached this project?

Gian Suhner

Looking back, I see a significant shift. When we started two and a half years ago, we viewed Greenland primarily as a place where global climate change is evident. However, early in the process, we realized this was a very Central European perspective. In fact, Greenland is currently a site of other transformative processes that are much more important for Greenlanders: changes in tourism and mining, the relationship between urban centers and the periphery, decolonization processes, and shifts in cultural identities. We broadened our focus early on and realized we were on the right, much more exciting path. Over three trips, we spent a total of ten weeks in Greenland, conducted over sixty interviews, and learned about various local issues and perspectives. We aim to showcase this diversity of voices and highlight the contrasts and tensions within Greenland.

Salome Erni

The exhibition is titled "Greenland. Everything Changes." Is everything really changing in Greenland?

Inuuteq Storch

It really depends on whom you ask and what perspective they hold, as Gian mentioned. I'd like to pass the question on.

Alberte Parnuuna

I can take that. I believe everything is in transformation everywhere. There's no place that stands still. Given all the changes in the world, Greenland isn't transforming in a particularly unique way. However, it might be more visible in our society because the modernization process that began in many European countries hundreds of years ago only started in Greenland in the 1950s and 1960s.

Gian Suhner

One interview I particularly remember is with Nivi Christensen, the director of the art museum in Nuuk. She pointed out that every generation believes it is living in the time of most change. When we look back in history, we find many such moments characterized by a strong sense of rapid change. I can relate to that. At the same time, it's a helpful perspective for us to regard Greenland as a place in

transition—especially since we realized that many of these transformations are not happening in isolation in Greenland. They are connected to similar processes in Switzerland and around the world. That intrigued us, and a Swiss audience will discover that Greenland is not as distant as they might think.

Salome Erni

Given this variety of significant aspects, how did you decide which ones to feature in the exhibition?

Gian Suhner

We chose the locations we visited based on their relevance to the developments that interest us—whether it's changes in fishing, the urban music scene, or a mining hotspot. At each location, we looked for a diversity of local perspectives: a politician, a curator, an airport manager, fishermen, musicians, or students in Copenhagen who are back in Greenland for the holidays, to name just a few interviewees. However, it wasn't always easy to establish contacts and arrange meetings from Switzerland. But once we arrived in Greenland, people were very open and helpful. Sometimes we spontaneously got the chance to film a concert that very day. Other times, we discovered that someone we had been trying to contact for weeks turned out to be the cousin of our host. Or our Kalaallisut translator suggested subjects we hadn't even considered before. This local support was crucial for our project.

Alberte Parnuuna

I think this experience also shows something special about Greenland. There are only a few people living here—Greenland has 57,000 inhabitants. As a result, we often know what each other is doing and are connected in many different ways.

Salome Erni

While ALPS looks at Greenland from the outside, you, Inuuteq and Alberte, work within your own community. To what extent are the people around you part of your artistic work?

Alberte Parnuuna

I currently live in Copenhagen, but my projects revolve around Greenland, which is a bit impractical since I have to commute every few weeks. In Nuuk, where I grew up, I have a large network, so it's easy for me to work there. However, last year I spent six weeks in Tasilaq, a place in East Greenland. My team members grew up in that community, so they knew the locals well. I experienced once again that there's simply a different level of trust between members of the same community. We didn't have to start out earning respect or gaining access.

Inuuteq Storch

I usually take pictures in places I know. My subjects are part of my everyday life. I know many people, who in turn know many others—I go with the flow. I just meet up with friends, and I end up somewhere; it feels very natural to me. I'm a homeboy. My artistic practice is rooted in where I feel at home, where I grew up.

Salome Erni

Your images really convey that intimate sense of community. You can tell that you know the people and they are used to having you around. In 2024, you'll be exhibiting at the Venice Biennale. Do you think your project challenges some stereotypes an international audience might have about Greenland?

Inuuteq Storch

It's hard to say. Although all the images were taken in Greenland, the main theme of my photography is everyday life. The audience's reaction isn't primarily, "Oh, that's Greenland!" but rather, "Oh, that's everyday life!" Moreover, my exhibition in Venice also focuses on the history of photography and includes archival material.

Salome Erni

I can see that your images primarily evoke a sense of home. Still, you seem to contradict some expectations by not presenting the typical images of Greenland that an international audience might expect—like icebergs,

for instance. Did that even cross your mind when selecting the photographs for your exhibition?

Inuuteq Storch

I really didn't have the international audience in mind. Besides, I don't have many photographs of icebergs—there are none in my hometown, Sisimiut.

Salome Erni

Gian, how did you handle such expectations, especially since the exhibition is aimed at a non-Greenlandic audience?

Gian Suhner

I remember some people were surprised that there weren't many mountains visible when we presented at ALPS another film-based exhibition about North Korea called "Let's Talk About Mountains." But we weren't interested in mountains as a geographical reality; we focused on their significance for people. In our exhibition about Greenland—returning to icebergs—we treat them as a stage or backdrop. We examine their relevance for global tourism and how they shape the reality and identity of the Greenlandic town of Ilulissat. When we mention icebergs, we don't present them as symbols of Greenland, but as one aspect of Greenland that helps us illustrate and explain these often-overlapping themes.

Salome Erni

What were the reactions of the interviewees to being part of an exhibition in Switzerland, thus gaining a platform abroad?

Gian Suhner

I can't generalize about that. Some protagonists rely on an audience, like an activist fighting against uranium mining in southern Greenland. On the other hand, a hunter from the northern village of Kullorsuaq, who misses hunting whales with his kayak, just wants to share his perspective and story. At the same time, Greenland has a small population. We were often told that the growing interest from international media and research can lead to what's called "research fatigue"—we experienced firsthand that some people declined interviews because they had received so many requests.

Salome Erni

And how is it for the people in your pictures, Inuuteq? Do they welcome the attention, or is it not important to them that an image of theirs hangs somewhere in New York or Venice?

Inuuteq Storch

It varies. Some people are interested in art, but I have many friends who are fishermen. They don't tell me where their fish eventually end up, and I don't ask. It's the same.

Salome Erni

Greenland is becoming increasingly visible internationally, such as at the Venice Biennale. Does this change the Greenlandic sense of identity?

Inuuteq Storch

That's a big question. For example, I do everything I can to support other artists and be a trail blazer for them. Many Greenlanders are very good at what they do—this also applies to the music scene, even though many have never had formal musical training. There are plenty of Greenlandic artists who are more than capable of exhibiting anywhere in the world. However, it's difficult for us to export our work because Greenland has always been taught to import as much as possible. Additionally, while we live modern lives, we don't have the mindset of a Western country.

Salome Erni

Alberte, as a young Greenlandic filmmaker, do you think Greenlanders feel better represented in the world now that more films focus on Greenland?

Alberte Parnuuna

Yes, to some extent. The more stories that are told, the greater the chances that people will see themselves reflected on screen. But of

course, we need nuanced stories and diverse narratives. I make films for a very specific audience: young Greenlandic women. They are not often portrayed in the media. If others can also see themselves in my films, that's great, but it's not my primary goal.

Salome Erni

Even though there's a growing international interest in Greenlandic filmmaking and more films are being shot in Greenland, many important positions on set are filled by outsiders.

Alberte Parnuuna

In European filmmaking, there's a tendency to collaborate internationally to secure more funding and bring experienced people onto the team. However, these collaborations are different because outsiders don't share the same understanding. When I work with Danish filmmakers, they usually have their own ideas about how Greenlandic society should be portrayed. It's challenging to counter those perspectives. As a Greenlander on film sets, you often find yourself educating others about its culture; you're constantly the one saying no. That feels more like a burden than a creative endeavor.

Salome Erni

What can international film productions do right in Greenland?

Alberte Parnuuna

It's important to show a lot of respect—it's not just about taking but also giving back to the community. In filmmaking, this can mean sharing knowledge and skills. Greenland doesn't have its own film school, so some of us have trained abroad or attended workshops. Many learn filmmaking on the sets of local and international productions in Greenland. Sharing knowledge makes film-making more sustainable. This way, we ensure that one day, Greenlanders will hold important positions in major productions.

Salome Erni

You give workshops and mentor young filmmakers—passing on knowledge is also part of your own practice. Can you tell us more about that?

Alberte Parnuuna

As a mentor, I want to create a space where others can develop and grow. I'm not just passing on filmmaking techniques or explaining how to tell a story. I want to encourage young people to find their own path. I still stay in touch with my previous mentees—I help them with their scripts or provide them with contacts. It's always good to expand your network. To create art, we need each other.

Salome Erni

I've come across workshops, platforms, and festivals that refer to the Arctic not just as a geographical space. Are there cultural and historical ties that unite people in the North? Can we speak of an Arctic consciousness in filmmaking?

Alberte Parnuuna

Yes and no. We have cold winters and long summer nights, which create similar geographical circumstances. Whenever we create a space for people from the Arctic—excluding Denmark, for instance—a different conversation emerges, with a different understanding and respect for one another. When I speak with the indigenous Sámi, we see similarities in how we confront the impacts of colonialism. With Finns, we share living conditions and transformation processes. People from the Faroe Islands often have a similarly challenging relationship with Denmark. I'm not sure if that qualifies as an Arctic consciousness, but I believe it's at least an interesting concept.

Salome Erni

Gian, what does it mean for you as a Swiss person to create an exhibition about Greenland for a Swiss audience?

Gian Suhner

Essentially, this question revolves around representation and perspective—who tells a story. This is something we often discuss at ALPS. We could have chosen to create an art exhibition about Greenland featuring only the works of Greenlandic artists. However, ALPS is not

an art museum. We want to be transparent about our Swiss perspective and invite the audience on a similar journey to the one we undertook during this project. We invite them to listen to the stories and thoughts of over thirty interviewees and to get to know a complex and diverse Greenland. At the same time, Greenland has always represented a space where global connections can be observed, prompting reflection on our own situation. During our three trips, we realized that our interviews were becoming increasingly lengthy—we started to understand what we didn't understand, which led to new questions being asked. I believe that's the best indicator of such an evolution. Of course, it was also a challenge to condense all that video material and those experiences into an exhibition that can be experienced in two hours.

Alberte Parnuuna

What assumptions do Swiss people have about Greenland? I'm very familiar with the Danish stereotypes, but not the Swiss perspective.

Salome Erni

When I talk to others about the project, I notice that for many in Switzerland, Greenland is a place of longing. The common images include ice, snow, and remote villages. These projections of authenticity and untamed nature are very appealing. I also believe that many people are not aware that only the coasts are inhabited or that there are urban areas as well. This lack of knowledge fuels curiosity.

Gian Suhner

I see it similarly. There's either this romantic idea of people living in harmony with nature, or Greenland is viewed as a place with long, dark winters, social issues, and alcohol problems.

Salome Erni

What would you say is the most important thing that a Swiss audience should know about Greenland?

Inuuteq Storch

We know your word "Chuchichäschtli."

Salome Erni

Where did you learn it?

Inuuteq Storch

In California.

Gian Suhner

Greenlandic music fascinates me, and many people I play it to feel the same way—the artists, the lyrics, the different genres. I believe that art and culture in general, not just photography and film like ours, but also literature and music, are a great way to reflect and connect with others.

Alberte Parnuuna

I just want people to know that we are humans in Greenland, just like in Switzerland. The stories I want to tell are stories of everyday life—they're not primarily Greenlandic stories, but stories about people. And of course, a Swiss audience can connect to that. Our shared experiences are much stronger than geographical differences and variations in cultural codes. We're not that different.

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