

In conversation

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In Conversation: Shifting Narratives of Colonialism through Reconciliation in Greenland and Canada

Julia Christensen, Roskilde University, and Jens Heinrich, the Greenlandic Reconciliation Commission

During the *New Narratives of the Postcolonial Arctic* conference, Jens Heinrich, a postdoctoral research fellow and member of the Greenlandic Reconciliation Commission, sat down with Julia Christensen, a Canadian scholar working on state-Indigenous relations, settler colonialism and Indigenous geographies in Canada and currently an Assistant Professor in Geography at Roskilde University, for an interview-format presentation on his perspectives surrounding the role and scope of the Greenlandic Reconciliation Commission. As the interview progressed, however, it evolved into a discussion comparing and contrasting the aims and challenges of Reconciliation Commissions as well as the diverse conceptualizations of reconciliation, apology and the colonial present in both the Greenlandic and Canadian contexts. This article is an attempt to put these thoughts to paper.

The Greenlandic Reconciliation Commission (*Forsoningskommissionen*) was established in 2014 to address the colonial past and present in Greenland, relative primarily to its status as a former Danish colony and, currently, an autonomous country within the Kingdom of Denmark. First colonized by Denmark in the eighteenth century, Home Rule was achieved by Greenland in 1979, and in 2008 a referendum on Greenland's autonomy was held with 75 percent approval for increased self-government. On the 21st of June, 2009, the thirtieth anniversary of the establishment of Home Rule, the referendum results took effect, with Greenland taking control over law enforcement and the judicial system, and the Greenlandic language made the sole official language, removing Danish from its previous distinction. Under the increased self-government, Greenland will also transfer fewer funds from resource development to Denmark, and in turn, Denmark will transfer fewer subsidies to Greenland.

Yet regardless of these recent shifts to promote Greenlandic independence, there is a long and difficult shared past with Denmark that many Greenlanders believe must be addressed. Over the course of Greenland's positioning as a Danish colony, many events and processes, both intimate and structural, have negatively affected Greenlanders, from centralization policies to forced migration, to the cutting off of traditional hunting grounds, to the oppression of Greenlandic language and culture, to the forced removal and relocation of many Greenlandic children to schools and orphanages in Nuuk and even Denmark. Overarching all of these moments in Greenlandic history has been the privileging of Danish culture, language and social, political and economic structures through colonial administration and policy.

Though the Greenlandic Reconciliation Commission shares some similar objectives with the Commissions held in South Africa and Canada, the Greenlandic Commission emphasizes its different scope and expectations, stressing that the focus is on recognizing history and social memory, demanding an accurate representation of the colonial past and its role in the present, and not necessarily on receiving a formal apology or reparations.¹ The Commission is therefore based on four basic approaches: 1) reconciliation of the Greenlandic people with themselves and their own background; 2) reconciliation of the Greenlandic people with their own history; 3) reconciliation between the groups in Greenland; and, 4) reconciliation between generations, each of whom has had their own experiences in relation to the colonial past and present.

Within and across the borders of the Canadian state sit the traditional homelands of well over 600 different groups of Indigenous peoples. These First Peoples can be categorized into three broad groups - First Nations, Inuit and Métis - though within each is found incredible cultural and geographic diversity. There is also significant diversity in contact stories, and in relationships with the Canadian state, though all Indigenous peoples in Canada have undergone state efforts at cultural assimilation, the dispossession of Indigenous lands, and other, sustained oppressions resulting from the ongoing settler colonial project.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) was a truth and reconciliation commission organized by the parties to the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. The TRC was intended to provide a holistic, comprehensive response to the charges of abuse and other traumas for Indigenous children that resulted from the residential school policy that led to the removal of over 150,000 Indigenous children from their homes to church-run, state-funded schools

¹ <http://saammaatta.gl>

between the early nineteenth and late twentieth century. Many children suffered physical, psychological and sexual abuse in the schools, and there were also many fatalities. In addition, children were harshly disciplined for speaking their mother tongues, and their cultures, families and ways of life delegitimized by their teachers. The Commission was officially established on June 2, 2008, and had completed its work in June 2015. Unlike the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, the Canadian commission had no power to offer known perpetrators of abuse the possibility of amnesty in exchange for honest testimony about any abuses that may have been committed. The emphasis in the Canadian commission was to hear mostly from former residential school students and their families, with little to no testimony from persons of authority in the residential school system, nor from other Canadians.

Despite similarities in name, and despite a common aim to address the workings of colonialism in the undermining of Indigenous peoples, knowledge and self-determination, the Greenlandic Reconciliation Commission and the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission are very different. Each sets out to approach the notion of reconciliation from different angles, and yet both have experienced apathy, distancing or outright rejection from those with whom Indigenous peoples have been enmeshed in relationship since colonization. In the following conversation, we explore these contrasts and commonalities and discuss their significance to the writing of new narratives in Indigenous-state relations as well as in the circumpolar North.

Julia: What was the motivation behind the creation of a Greenlandic Reconciliation Commission? What are you hoping to accomplish? What does reconciliation look like in your mind?

Jens: The Greenlandic Reconciliation Commission was formulated politically by Aleqa Hammond, Siumut and the nationalistic party Partii Inuit, following an election for the Greenlandic parliament in March 2013. Towards the summer of 2014 the terms of reference for the Commission was written, and within these terms there was room for the appointed members to² and take an independent course. Even though the Commission is politically appointed, the Commission itself is not political. Within the Greenlandic society there is a need to confront the historical development, and especially the period from 1940 onwards, which represents the beginning of the modern

² <http://da.bab.la/ordbog/engelsk-dansk/manoeuvre>.

Greenland. Hopefully the Commission will be able to contribute towards an altered historical awareness amongst the population in Greenland. One of the problems in Greenland today is a lack of this historical awareness. Reconciliation in this view would be to gain knowledge and understand the society, by knowing and understanding the historical development. The aim is to formulate a different history with the perspective from the population in Greenland. Until recently Greenland has been described primarily from outside, by Danes or other foreigners.

Julia: It is very interesting that the period around the Second World War and beyond is so significant in Greenland, because the same can be said for Indigenous peoples in the Canadian North. There was a predominantly laissez-faire attitude from the Canadian government towards northern Indigenous peoples before that time. This attitude was fuelled in part by a patronizing belief that the less the government involved themselves in the daily lives of northern Indigenous peoples, the less they would be dependent on government for relief. On the other hand, the government seemed to naively believe that northern Indigenous peoples had been largely untouched at that point by outside influences, and yet for decades and even centuries they had been enmeshed in trade relations with Europeans and southern Canadians, first through the whaling industry and then through the fur trade. By the time the Second World War was on the horizon, northern Indigenous peoples were very much a part of the northern capitalist economy and as a result they suffered greatly when the fur trade took a downturn in the first part of the twentieth century. The military presence in the Arctic in the 1930s-1940s was the first real exposure many southern Canadians had to the devastating effects of the downturn, as well as a significant drop in caribou populations.

After the war, the Canadian government realized that it could use the North as a means of protecting its sovereignty in the Arctic. People were used, in a sense, as human flagpoles. The biggest change at this time, however, came from the social welfare state. Following the war, there was a shift in Canada in general towards greater support for the health and social welfare of Canadians. When it came to Indigenous peoples, however, and especially northern Indigenous peoples, the extension of the social welfare state was used as a tool for cultural change and, in the words of a bureaucrat at the time, to create 'northern suburbs' with visions of 'productive' Inuit men participating in the wage economy while their wives tended to domestic responsibilities in housing modelled after that found in the south. Thus, the social welfare state itself proved to be a very significant colonial tool

because through social policy Indigenous practices of homemaking and livelihoods were undermined.

Why is this period so profound in the Greenlandic context?

Jens: The period is profound because people still remember it, and a lot of people have experienced the modernization and live with these experiences. These experiences also influence the younger generations, as part of the social legacy. For a lot of Greenlanders this period meant a feeling of inferiority, simply by being Greenlandic. At the same time, the historical representation of the period and the modernization has been made by others, so part of this is that the understanding of the period is based on another cultural view and the Greenlandic population needs means to understand the reason behind this period. The aim of the Commission is to deliver a way for the population to understand.

Julia: In Canada, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) aimed to address the Indian Residential School System and its legacy. However, while residential schooling was a primary colonial tool, and its legacy continues to drive colonial relations in present day, the colonial project in Canada was and is far more extensive. Yet this bigger picture was not effectively addressed in the Commission, particularly when it came to the State and the Canadian public. How challenging do you think it is to frame the Greenlandic Commission around the colonial encounter in general, rather than around a specific issue or colonial tool? Is this what you are hoping to accomplish by centering the focus of the inquiry around the *danisering* [*Danification*] period?

Jens: It is challenging, and might be part of why a lot of people (in Greenland and in Denmark) have had trouble understanding the reason behind the Commission. Aleqa Hammond, the Premier of Greenland at the time, used an aggressive rhetoric concerning reconciliation and Denmark was more or less accused of being guilty of all the problems in Greenland. Denmark refused to participate in the Commission. This was not an approach the Commission saw as fitting. The Commission does not accuse Denmark of any wrong doings, but will however most likely recommend further examinations of certain historical matters. Denmark was a crucial part of the modernization of Greenland and should partake in future examinations. As a side note, Denmark does need to confront its own colonial past and hopefully Denmark will do this in the future. One of the first steps agreed on by the Commission was to start a dialogue with the population in Greenland, and thereby gain an understanding of what the public sees as relevant. The formulation

of which subjects to address has been an ongoing process since the Commission began its work. The Commission is a tool from which Greenland will be able to define one itself, so the colonial encounter is the starting point. The dialogue with the public will facilitate this different history of the population in Greenland. Hopefully, as the approach of the Commission is understood, Denmark will be able to participate. So, as of now the work of the Commission is the preliminary and eventually more thorough examination will be possible, hopefully as cooperation between Greenland and Denmark.

The modernization of the Greenlandic society was characterized by *danisering* – Danish language and culture was seen as tools to further the development – and ultimately Greenland was to become a Danish society. This meant all things Greenlandic came to be regarded as inferior. This feeling of being wrong still has a great impact on Greenland. Addressing this aspect of the historical development is an important part of the work of the Commission.

Julia: You have written before about the need to tell a different story about Greenland, and about the relationship between Greenland and Denmark. In many ways, this is what the entire conference has been about: the dominance not only of certain stories, but of certain storytellers. Of course, within this lies the power of story and what the telling and retelling of dominant narratives can do in terms of the way a place and its people are understood. What is the story, and who are the storytellers, left out in current discourses around Greenland, and the Greenland-Denmark relationship?

Jens: The story is the story of the Greenlandic population, and the storytellers are these people. The Commission sees the existing literature on Greenland as lacking this perspective. The literature has been focusing on Polar explorers or highly placed civil servants, and the Greenlanders have been the canvas. The approach of the Commission has been to interview as many persons as possible. Special focus groups have been identified, such as relocated groups, people influenced by lower salaries (the birthplace criterion) and the legally fatherless. Besides this approach people have been given the possibility to give interviews, and an overwhelming number has had the urge to tell their story.

Another aspect is the influence of the Greenlandic elite on the modernization period – often the literature neglects to look at what actual influence for instance the Greenlandic politicians had. In my work so far it has been clear that these politicians did have a great impact, even though the

Danish authorities had the upper hand. Even so, a lot of the matters would have taken a completely different course if everything had been controlled from Copenhagen. This means the Greenlanders in many respects have a responsibility of how things came about.

Julia: The Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission was notable in that it did not include many testimonies from those people who implemented the Residential School System, nor did it demand much in the way of dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada. At the same time, the objective was clearly to promote the truth-telling of residential school survivors and their families, not potentially increase their vulnerability by making the entire process somehow dependent on the participation of people who may not understand, or who may not support the TRC's intent. At the same time, I have often felt very frustrated by the fact that reconciliation is something that is seemingly put into the laps of Indigenous peoples - it is made their responsibility, rather than a collective responsibility to change a relationship that has been built upon unequal ground. Today, with suicide rates and poverty so much higher amongst Indigenous children and youth, it is clear that collective responsibility must be taken, and yet I feel so disheartened when I see how easy it seems for so many Canadians to just except these disparities as given.

I know there is some reluctance in Denmark to acknowledge the relationship with Greenland, in past and present, as a colonial one. Is it possible to achieve reconciliation if the Danish state does not wish to participate?

Jens: Reconciliation can be between two parties, but it can also be an act of self-reconciling with the past, with one's own history. So, yes, Greenland can reconcile on its own. And besides this, there are many tensions within the Greenlandic society, between people from different areas, with different language skills, with different educational levels and between the generations. As mentioned earlier hopefully Denmark will be able to participate in future historical examinations. When Denmark realizes the work of the Commission is not an attack on Denmark, the attitudes of the Danish politicians might alter. It should be said a lot of Danes do support the Commission, but again many have been having trouble understanding what it really was about. In many respects the whole concept of reconciliation provoked a lot of people because it sidelined Denmark with other colonial powers. The Danish self-image was challenged, and confronted Denmark as a colonial power, which is often forgotten in Denmark. Towards Greenland Denmark has always seen itself as the better part, and maybe the Commission is a sign of Greenland being the more mature part,

wanting to confront its own past, whereas Denmark still harbors some reluctance towards doing this.

Julia: What kind of impact can a Commission like this have on changing the narrative from the Danish side (knowing of course there is not just one narrative)? I think of, for example, the way in which both the Canadian North and Greenland are often framed, as living off generous subsidies from the Canadian government and the Danish government, respectively. And yet there is little acknowledgement of the fact that much of the wealth of both countries comes from the resources that have been gleaned from the Canadian North, and from Greenland. How do we change the kind of colonial, patronizing discourse that perpetuates these kind of myths?

Jens: Part of this process entails Denmark needs to confront its own history as a colonial power – within this lies the fact that Denmark has secured its own position by using Greenland, among other things through the earnings from the cryolite mine in Ivittuut, which functioned from the 1850s till the 1980s, and by using the strategic importance of Greenland from 1940 onwards. There is a growing consciousness that Greenland actually means a lot to Denmark, and has meant a great deal historically. Part of the myths surrounding the relationship between Greenland and Denmark stems from the historical development, as I see it. Denmark was seen by Greenlanders and saw themselves as the natural educators and benefactors of Greenland. Denmark felt it as their responsibility to develop Greenland, and this perception still lives on. At the same time many Danes know almost nothing about present-day Greenland, and this ignorance is the breeding ground for these misconceptions. So, the way to eliminate these myths would be to increase the knowledge and understanding about Greenland.

Julia: What about Greenlandic perceptions of the Commission? What are your thoughts on how the idea of a Commission has been received by Greenlanders?

Jens: There has been some criticism from Greenlanders, but as an understanding of what it really is about emerges, a lot of the skepticism has evaporated. There are still those who don't want to participate, and that is okay. The reconciliation is for those with the need to do so. There are however still those who see the Commission as a political tool to further certain agendas, but trying to talk reason with these persons has been futile. Another debate in Greenland stemming from the Commission was about whether Greenland was actually ever a colony. A former employee at the

University in Nuuk claimed Greenland never to have been a colony and therefore regarded the Commission as an abomination.

Julia: Interesting. To many, being a colony or being colonized implies some kind of mass violence, as a population is, by force, brought under the control of the colonial power. This myth is precisely what allows settler colonial doctrine to remain steadfast, and we can see evidence of this same story in places like Australia, Canada and the US. Our own former Prime Minister Stephen Harper had the audacity to say that Canada has no colonial history. Settler colonialism requires these kinds of stories in order to legitimize itself, to allow itself to persist by disregarding the claim that Indigenous peoples have to the very territories upon which the State exists. Robert Paine has written about welfare colonialism and I think in many ways this kind of colonial relation is what underpins the relationships between the Greenlandic people and the Danish state, just as it does the relationship between Indigenous peoples in Canada and the Canadian state. It also explains how or why the extension of the welfare state in both contexts was such a fundamental, transformative point in the history of those Indigenous-state relations. Social policy imposed a social framework imported from the colonizing culture—its language, its values, its stories. The power of welfare colonialism is its ability to proceed largely undetected as it reproduces narratives of Indigenous deficiency. Health disparities, poverty, overrepresentation in the justice system, then, all become justification for the superiority of colonial policy over Indigenous peoples, when in fact they are the symptoms of colonial policy.

The Commission plans to travel to communities across Greenland. What outcome are you hoping for from these community visits? Is there a healing or reconciliatory possibility that emerges simply through having the stories of community members recognized in such a public way?

Jens: The Commission hopes to let people feel included in the reconciliation process and thereby give the people a sense of ownership. The visits will also make people realize their stories, their perspectives and their problems to be important and relevant for the reconciliation process. Sadly, a lot of people feel a lack of control over how matters develop, and there is a democratic deficiency. Hopefully, these visits will make people open up and let them start putting words to how they feel, what problems they have and how these problems could be handled. The Commission sees many of the present problems as directly linked to the historical ones, as many of the problems haven't been formulated.

The Greenlandic Reconciliation Commission is a sign of Greenland wanting to define itself – to write the history of Greenland and to let the general population of Greenland enter into this history, simply by letting the population share *their* history. Yet at the same time, the people are not only sharing their story, their history, they are marking it be told. The taking of this discursive space is powerful, not because it is an act of resistance and, indeed, resilience. It is an effort to directly confront ‘official versions of history, which begin as cultural and contextual interpretations of events, [and] morph into hegemonic expressions of existing value structures and worldviews of dominant groups in a society’ (Donald 2009: 3). In response to this provocation, the Commission has exposed the persistence of certain fixed views and conceptions of Greenland, all of which will need to be addressed as part and parcel of the Commission if the project of reconciliation is to move forward.

Similarly, in Canada, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission provided a national and even international platform for the telling of truth from the perspectives of residential school survivors and their families. Even more than this, it provided, as the Greenlandic Reconciliation Commission intends to do, a space for the telling of another story, another history, and one that has been shut out of the history books and the collective Canadian imaginary. From this space, as Justice Murray Sinclair has said, comes ‘a period of change that, if sustained by the will of the people, will forever realign the shared history of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada’ (2015). What he knows, is that the only way this history could be aligned is by Indigenous stories, experiences and knowledge taking their rightful place in the story of Canada.

And yet Sinclair knows the momentum gathered through the Commission must be moved forward by the will of the people - all people - in Canada. There is still a considerable amount of individual and structural racism in Canada. The recent calls for an inquiry into murdered and missing Indigenous women is only one example of the racialized aggressions experienced by Indigenous peoples. The December 2015 decision by the Canadian Broadcasting Company to deactivate comment threads on Indigenous-related stories on their website was made in response to persistent racism and hate speech presented there. In Denmark, too, racialized narratives of Greenlanders can be found in everyday speech. In the fall of 2014, a young Greenlandic man died during the hour he

spent waiting for an ambulance that only came after several calls, one of which was met with the skeptical response from the emergency centre worker: ‘Is he a Dane or Greenlander?’ (Hjort 2015). To many Danes and Greenlanders, Daniel’s death revealed deep-seated attitudes from Danes ranging from racism to resentment and apathy over social problems. Framing these attitudes is also the paternalism that frames dominant narratives of Greenland’s dependency on Denmark, a narrative that neglects the geopolitical gains Denmark has reaped by having Greenland within the realm.

In light of these persistent relations, how can reconciliation occur if non-Indigenous Canadians and Danes are not willing to hear Commission stories? How can reconciliation occur if they too are not willing to do the hard work to rebuild a relationship, and to ‘realign the shared history’ (Sinclair 2015)? As the intent of the Greenland Reconciliation Commission conveys, however, perhaps there is little purpose in waiting around, once again, to be recognized by the colonial power. Perhaps the most powerful form of reconciliation is actually reconciliation with oneself, to tell one’s own story without waiting for permission to do so.

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