

# The Presence of the Other in Knud Rasmussen's "The New People"

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**Abstract** The aim of the article is to discuss the presence of the Other in the most famous Danish polar explorer Knud Rasmussen's (1879-1933) first expedition account about Northern Greenland and its native people Inughuit entitled "The New People". Since the account was written in the period of Danish imperialism in the Arctic and Knud Rasmussen was a key agent in the colonization of Northern Greenland, I apply analytic tools within postcolonial critical theory, but instead of focusing on the oppressive power of colonial discourse in the text, my goal is to examine how the native agency and resistance understood as "counter-colonial properties" (McLeod 158) are manifest in "The New People". By applying the concepts of heteroglossia and the splitting of the subject I will show how Rasmussen's text challenges imperialist ideology and resists Eurocentric textual violence.

**Key words** Knud Rasmussen; the Other; heteroglossia; native agency.

Much has been said and written about Knud Rasmussen and his work<sup>1</sup>: the most famous Danish polar explorer, son of a Danish vicar and a half-Greenlandic mother, born in 1879 and grown up in Ilulissat, Western Greenland (and thus speaking Greenlandic), known as a bridge builder between Danes and Greenlanders because of his unique combination of language and negotiation skills. Rasmussen is best remembered as a self-taught ethnographer and commander of his scientific arctic expeditions including the most famous 5<sup>th</sup> Thule Expedition (1921-24) whose main aim was to study the Inuit communities spread along the north coast of the American continent and record their oral folklore. Rasmussen was made honorary doctor at the University of Copenhagen in 1924 and the University of Edinburgh in 1927. He died in 1933 as an unquestioned expert in Greenlandic issues and Danish national hero.

## **Knud Rasmussen and the Colonization of Northern Greenland**

From the Euro-American perspective Northern Greenland was a "no man's

land” when Knud Rasmussen embarked on a Danish Literary Expedition in 1902 (Müntzberg and Simonsen 210). The Danish state colonized gradually the western part of the island up to the settlement in Upernavik, a process that started in 1721 and resulted in Danish sovereignty over that territory with missionary activity and colonial administration managed by The Royal Greenland Trading Department (Den Kongelige Grønlandske Handel). However, Northern Greenland was not a *terra incognita* at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On the contrary, it was a territory that British, American and Scandinavian polar researchers and travellers were struggling to explore in order to gain scientific expertise and, as a consequence, obtain national fame and prestige. The Literary Expedition to Greenland (1902-1904) under the leadership of the writer and journalist Ludvig Mylius-Erichsen (1872-1907) was the first Danish initiative in the area north of the border of the Danish colony (Petersen 224). After coming back from the Literary Expedition Knud Rasmussen and Ludvig Mylius-Erichsen tried to convince the Danish state to colonize the region, but Danish officials were afraid of ruining their relations with USA and Great Britain that also showed interest in those distant territories. This made Knud Rasmussen establish the Thule trading post in North Star Bay in 1910 as a private enterprise in collaboration with a Danish engineer and businessman Marius Ib Nyeboe (1867-1946). It depended on the fur trade with the Inughuit living in the region, which turned out to be a profitable undertaking that provided the necessary financing for Knud Rasmussen’s scientific activity (the so-called Thule Expeditions, seven in all). The establishing of Thule trading post was the first step to the private colonization of the whole region<sup>2</sup>, which allowed Knud Rasmussen to act as a sort of absolute ruler of Northern Greenland. After his death Thule was bought by the Danish state from Dagmar Rasmussen (1882-1965) for 400.000 Danish crowns and became officially a part of the Greenland colony in 1937 (Petersen 243).

### ***The New People***

After completing his education in Denmark, Knud Rasmussen embarked on the Danish Literary Expedition to Greenland in 1902. After coming back to Denmark in 1904 he wrote his expedition account entitled *The New People* (Nye Mennesker), published in 1905<sup>3</sup>. The book is very heterogeneous and consists of three parts: “The New People” being the actual account of the expedition’s stay at Agpat Island<sup>4</sup>, the ethnographic account of Inughuit belief system and practices titled “Primitive Views of Life” as well as “Fables and Legends” containing myths, legends and fables of the Inughuit. In this article I will only focus on the first part of the book titled “The New People”, which I perceive as a very unusual second-position expedition account<sup>5</sup>, differing from other known expedition accounts of the period not only because of the

fact that it was published before the first-position expedition account that is Ludvig Mylius-Erichsen and Harald Moltke's *Greenland* (Grønland, 1906), but first and foremost because of its unique representations of the Inughuit<sup>6</sup>, which are the object of my present reading.

### **Heteroglossia and Native Agency in Travel Writing**

My approach in this reading of "The New People" is the one offered by post-colonial critical theory<sup>7</sup> and, more specifically, within the colonial discourse analysis, aiming at uncovering the oppressive apparatus of European textuality through an analysis of how knowledge is produced via literary representations in order to subjugate individuals as well as whole cultures and societies (Brydon i Tiffin 81). In accordance with Edward W. Said's views presented in *Orientalism* (1978), I perceive colonial travel literature<sup>8</sup> about Greenland as closely interwoven with the imperialist discourse (that is, being the product of this discourse as well as contributing to its creation) but unlike Said I see the colonial discourse as a site of ambivalence containing an inherent possibility of native agency and resistance. As Mary Louise Pratt has shown in her study of colonial travel writing *Imperial Eyes*, the European subject of any travel account is always a transculturator, transporting to his/her homeland knowledge infiltrated by non-European knowledge, which results in a "heteroglossic dimension" in all travel writing (Pratt 135):

Its knowledge comes not just out of a traveler's sensibility and powers of observation, but out of interaction and experience usually directed and managed by "travelees", who are working from their own understandings of their world and of what the Europeans are and ought to be doing. (Pratt 135-136)

As I see it, the heteroglossia of colonial travel writing takes place in what Homi Bhabha calls "the space of the adversarial": "the place of difference and otherness, [...] never entirely on the outside or implacably oppositional" (Bhabha 109)<sup>9</sup> enabled by the inevitable splitting of the European subject resulting in "a persistent questioning of the frame, the space of representation" (Bhabha 46). Taking those theories as my point of departure I will examine through a motivated act of reading how the heteroglossia in the text of "The New People" (understood as the presence of the Other<sup>10</sup>) is manifested in the split European subject's experience and knowledge and, as a consequence, how native agency and resistance are present in Rasmussen's expedition account, challenging the monolithic imperialist discourse and subverting the hegemony of European textual violence.

### **The Split European Subject and the Presence of the Other**

Already in the preface to “The New People” the narrator’s words reveal the splitting of the European subject:

When I was a child I used often to hear an old Greenlandic woman tell how, far away in the North, at the end of the world, there lived a people who dressed in bearskins and ate raw flesh.

Their country was always shut in by ice, and the daylight never reached over the tops of their high fields.

Whoever wished to go there, must travel with the South wind, right up to the Lord of the wild northern gales.

Even before I knew what travelling meant, I determined that one day I would go and find these people, whom my fancy pictured different from all others. I must go and see “The New People”, as the old story-teller called them. (Rasmussen 1908, Preface)

The quoted passage shows clearly that the white, middle-class, male and European subject is not a “self-sufficient, monadic source of knowledge” (Pratt 136), but that his knowledge is a result of his interaction with the Other, whose “calling” (Islam 3) he hears even before he embarks on his first expedition. Listening to the old Greenlandic story-teller about the mythic people living in the Far North becomes a part of his experience<sup>11</sup> and while he repeats the story in the preface, the Inughuit are still present in his consciousness.

Although the discursive practices of “othering” (Fabian 1990: 755) are already at work in the quoted passage, which contributes to the text’s colonial polarizations<sup>12</sup>, the presence of the native knowledge epitomized by the narrative of the Greenlandic story-teller is not only accepted by the young traveller as an equal world view to his own, but also represented by him as the actual point of departure for his travel to the North<sup>13</sup>. His narrative is written in a double mythical pattern: the ancient European myth of Hyperboreans living beyond the home of “the Lord of the wild northern gales”, on the edge of the known world, and the Greenlandic tale about the “new”, unknown people wearing bearskins and eating raw flesh. This double mythical order, based on European as well as Greenlandic knowledge helps the European traveller to find directions in the new, “uninscribed” space, ready to be “discovered” and filled with ambivalent meaning. His simultaneous recalling of both stories situates him in an “in-between” reality between them - just like the meaning of the whole statement, where they are juxtaposed)—“neither the one nor the other” (Bhabha 13, 36).

As I have shown above, the split European subject does not reject the indigenous world of knowledge and experience. After meeting the little community of Inughuit living near the Agpat Island the narrator and his comrades pitch their tents and live among the natives, observing their daily life. The narrator's observation of the Inughuit from a secure vantage point from which he carries out "a representation of difference" (Islam vii) transforms gradually into participation and real interaction with the Other. The first distinct step towards this is taken through the narrator's acquaintance with the old bear-hunter Sorqaq<sup>14</sup>. His name in English means "The Whalebone", but in Danish it is translated as "Bard"—a word having two different meanings: "whalebone" and "bard" (ancient poet and singer). The other meaning adds an extra dimension to the figure of Sorqaq in the narrative: the concise utterances of the Arctic poet are full of wisdom of his great ancestors and his life philosophy inspires the young traveller from Europe, who step by step lets himself influenced by the old "bard's" view of life:

Happy Sorqaq! Thou wast born with an energy that will never let thee rest. Thou must live travelling because thou canst not stand always and every day to return to the same pen. The domestic animal nature has never formed part of thy composition.

The world is large, that men may take it in possession. And so, when the travelling fever comes over thee, then do thou fling thyself on thy sledge, lord of thy day, master of thy dogs!" (Rasmussen 42-43)

For the narrator Sorqaq epitomizes freedom and independence, qualities that not only conform to his modern need for an authentic, primitive Other. Sorqaq's energy and nomadic lifestyle are set against the cultivated domesticity of the Europeans, a binary opposition between nature and culture in reverse where the first part is presented as positive and enabling the narrator to construct or find his Self by identification with Sorqaq according to what Simon During calls "self-othering" (During 47). The European traveller sets off on a bear hunt, following his "bard" and this taking the first step towards crossing the border between modernity and non-modernity<sup>15</sup> and becoming the Other: an Arctic hunter, free and unfettered by the bonds of Western culture, a real superhuman and Arctic authority<sup>16</sup>. Instead of the rigid boundary between Self and the Other, supporting the hegemony of the imperial order, the traveller leaves the door open onto the outside where he lets his travel pass along "supple lines" (Islam 9).

It is through the interaction with the Inughuit during their hunting journeys the narrator's gradual becoming-other reaches its peak<sup>17</sup>. Through experiencing the

real life of the Arctic hunters and what follows: hunger, hectic pursuit of game, hard frost in the mornings, and story-telling in the evenings he immerses himself in the Inughuit world of experience. This is reflected in his language where the Danish impersonal form “man” is preferred rather than the essentializing subject in the third person as well as the ethnographic present tense (Fabian 1983: 85) when speaking of the Inughuit. Such a subject construction includes the narrator himself, making him a part of what is represented by annihilating the distance between the world and his Self. This disrupts the construction of an autonomous and stable subject perceiving its objects at a distance. Instead of imposing European knowledge on the world perceived, his knowledge becomes the result of that fractured boundary and being in the world as the Canadian writer John Moss puts it: “if truly there, you cannot tell yourself apart from it” (Moss 5).

### **Reversed Colonial Codes**

The European subject's immersion in the North-Greenlandic Other manifests itself in a subversive inversion of colonial binary codifications. The presence of other European travellers than the narrator himself is almost totally effaced in the narrative alongside with the Inughuit being represented as its key agents. Effacement is a conventional colonial trope used for representing “new” territories as an empty space, a country without mythology or memory and thus ready for the introduction of a new beginning (Slemon 11), but in “The New People” that trope is reversed by highlighting the native presence while obliterating the Europeans and the effects of the Western presence in the region. In contrast to the standard colonial narratives, the narrator of “The New People” makes an effort to mention all the quoted Inughuit by name and focuses on their distinctive and unique features<sup>18</sup>. His immersion in the totality of the surrounding environment results in a representation of The North Greenlandic space as satiated with local meanings, myth and history. Also the Other's language is incorporated in the narrative in the form of (sometimes unglossed) Greenlandic words and quotations or translating them into Danish in such a way that they reflect the Inughuit way of thinking<sup>19</sup>. The infiltration of the native knowledge and language into the narration of “The New People” questions the superiority of European knowledge and perception of the world. Of course, this strategy also serves imperialist ideology by putting stress on the primitive, natural and undisturbed way of life in Northern Greenland, but it still enhances the narrator's being *in* the represented world while distancing him from what in the very beginning of his account was his European center.

The narrator's shifted position in reference to the Other is also manifested in another inversion of the most conventional tropes in colonial travel writing: the traditional asymmetry in the relation between the Europeans and the natives reflected

in the dichotomy between the passivity of the perceived native objects and the activity of the observing European subjects (Karlsen 2011(a) 48). Already in the scene of the Europeans' arrival at Agpat the Inughuit are represented as active agents while the newcomers are assigned the role of *passively* perceiving subjects, which makes the Inughuit be the active part in the cultural encounter taking place in the North Greenlandic contact zone. That strategy as well results in challenging fixed colonial binarities and disrupting the unidirectionality of the imperial discourse of power.

### **The Other Speaking: Native Agency and Resistance**

The Inughuit are not only *represented* by the European newcomer, they are also *representing* themselves: the European subject recognizes the Other by giving him/her the possibility to speak. It is on this level that the heteroglossic dimension of "The New People" is most evident in the narrative. Unlike Caliban or Friday the Inughuit do not speak through the voices of the Europeans, but according to the phenomenon by James Clifford called "inverse-ethnography" which means a process where the perspectives of the subject and the object are reversed (Clifford 9). In this way the Inughuit become the initiators and not the objects of the cultural encounter. This transformation from the objects into the subjects of the narrative is an expression of native resistance against the imposition of unambiguous, fixed meaning from the outside.

In the following I want to examine what the Inughuit speak of when they get the permission to speak. Firstly, they reveal themselves as subjects who perceive actively the European traveller, his customs and behavior by which he sometimes holds himself up to ridicule, especially when women are involved (Rasmussen 10, 47). Moreover, they do not hesitate to reprimand him if they think he did something against the local custom. During the ceremony of conjuring up spirits, the old shaman Saqdloq<sup>20</sup> puts the blame on the newcomers for bringing the dog illness to the village with them and as a consequence causing the illness of this wife:

The white men brought the Evil Fate with them, they had a misfortune-bringing spirit with them. I saw it myself, there are no lies in my mouth; I do not lie, I am not a liar, I saw it myself! (Rasmussen 19)

"The wisdom of his forefathers" (22) is speaking through the mouth of Saqdloq, but the narrator adds very quickly that although Saqdloq's utterance has made an impression on the people, they soon "separated and went back to their work and play" (21). He is pretty convinced that the Inughuit do not feel like worrying about the words of the old shaman, but—or: because - he *cannot* know, how the native people

have interpreted the Saqdloq's pronouncement. His uncertainty about it makes him choose to ignore the accusation and not a word more is said about the dog illness in the narrative - a silence that is very meaningful and tells a lot about the European subject's lack of authority and control.

Another example of the Inughuit acting as speaking agents is a situation where Qisunguaq<sup>21</sup>, a young Inughuaq, reproaches the narrator for not respecting his dead kinsmen: "[y]ou are so strange, you white men! You collect things you will never require, and you cannot leave even the graves alone" (72). Also here the narrator cannot really respond to the articulated reproach and chooses to ignore it, firstly by giving a cunning answer saying that the corpse has got "exchange gifts to the soul" (72) and therefore should be satisfied<sup>22</sup>. But Qisunguaq does not let the narrator delude him by an argument apparently consorting to the Inughuit logic of thinking and asserts: "[t]he thoughts of the dead are not as out thoughts; the dead are incomprehensible in their doings!" (73) Although the narrator does not let the young Inughuaq deliberate further on the problem, the last word in this discussion is Qisunguaq's. He questions the authority of the European traveller and it is his accusations that unanswered still resound in the air after reading the passage.

In both cases it is clear that the European narrator is represented by the Inughuit as a stranger, whose presence in Northern Greenland is called into question. Saqdloq as well as Qisunguaq's utterances reveal distrust and suspicion towards the European traveller perceived as coming from outside their world, driven by unknown intentions and not respecting their traditions. By questioning his innocence they question the ideology of anti-conquest, all pervasive in the text. The native resistance to the preeminence of the European narrativizing of harmonious relations between them and the Inughuit lurks in the interstices of the text of "The New People" contributing to its ambivalence.

The discoursivizing of resistance by the Inughuit can also take the form of parables—as is the case with the legend about the white boy who was found in a box from a plundered European ship and who grew up among them until he began to yearn for "milk and the sweet dishes" (Rasmussen 82) and disappeared without a trace. One of the old Inughuit who tells the story ends it with following words: "[...] you are strange, you white foreigners; one fine day you appear in our country, and as soon as we have learnt to care for you, you vanish, and we do not know where you go" (82). The second maxim is told by an old Inughuit woman named "The Sinew" and at the same time the passage constitutes the end of the whole book:

You are like the sea-king. When the spring warms the country, it visits us. It comes from a country far, far away, which we do not know.



You came here like the sea-king, with the welcome spring; but when the summer was over and the flight began, you stayed. So that is why you are eager now to get back to your country and your people; and it is good for you to go.

Do you hear? Your dogs are whining. Never wait for the dawn, when you are eager to be gone! (217-218)

While the end of the first Inughuit story about the white people can be read as a native request for a permanent presence of the Europeans in the region, legitimizing a possible imperial expansion, the content of the legend itself suggests a rather different message: it highlights what is later on confirmed by The Sinew's words. "White foreigners" come *and go*, they are supposed to be at home in the metropole and not on the distant periphery situated "far north of the civilization" (79). It is a native call towards the European newcomer to go home, supported by the knowledge passed on to them by their forefathers and wisdom drawn from the observation of the surrounding environment.

### Conclusions

The uniqueness of "The New People" as a polar expedition narrative written in the period of Danish colonialism lies in the distinct presence of the Other in the text, which becomes visible while applying the concepts of heteroglossia as well as the splitting of the European subject offered by postcolonial critical theory. The presence of the Inughuit manifests itself on two levels: in the European narrator's utterances as well as in the voices of the indigenous people. On the level of the European subject, it is expressed in the presence of native knowledge, language and worldview as well as in his crossing the boundary between the Self and the Other. On the level of the native voices in the narrative the Inughuit are able not only to express their contrary view of the world to that of the Europeans', but also to verbalize their resistance against the European presence of in Northern Greenland. Consequently, "The New People" can be read as a colonial expedition account where the Inughuit are not produced as "instrumental subjects" (Pratt 130), but as active agents in the cultural encounter with the Europeans and their presence in the split subject's knowledge, experience and language challenges the dominance of imperialist Eurocentric ideology.

### Notes

1. Only within the recent 2 years there have been published three exceptional biographies of Knud Rasmussen: Kirsten Hastrup's *Heart of Winter* (Vinterens hjerte, 2010), Knud Michelsen's *The Young Knud Rasmussen Presented through Letters and other Sources* (Den unge Knud Rasmussen

belyst gennem breve og andre kilder 1893 – 1902, 2011) and Niels Barfoed's *The Man Behind the Hero: Knud Rasmussen at Close Range* (Manden bag helten: Knud Rasmussen på nært hold, 2011) but his expedition accounts are still waiting to be analyzed as *literary* works with the postcolonial approach.

2. The trade station was a private enterprise, but the Danish state supported it unofficially, e.g. helped Rasmussen to equip his scientific Thule Expeditions.

3. In this article I use the English translation of *Nye Mennesker* that was published in 1908 in London within a compound work *The people of the Polar North: A Record* compiled and edited by G. Herring.

4. I use the old spelling of the name used in "The New People". In modern Greenlandic the name is spelled Appat.

5. The terms "first- and second-position expedition accounts" are used by Silje Solheim Karlsen in her article about Fridtjof Nansen's *Farthest North* (Fram over Polhavet, 1897) (Karlsen 113).

6. Taking into account that *The New People* was written before Knud Rasmussen's private colonization of North-Western Greenland which started in 1910, his travel to the region *can* be interpreted as a physical reconnaissance in the region and its literary result that is The New People as a successful attempt to create an image of "friendly North Greenland" in order to win the interest of the Danish reading public and, last but not least, the favor of political decision makers.

7. But, as the Canadian literary critic Stephen Slemon points out "[r]egardless of where one stands on the question, there is no single post-colonial theory and no one critic can possibly represent, or speak for, the post-colonial critical field" (Slemon 2001, s.101).

8. According to Elleke Boehmer colonial literature can be described as "reflecting a colonial ethos" and "concerned with colonial perceptions and experience, written mainly by metropolitans, but also by creoles and indigenes, during colonial times." (Boehmer 2) In this view, Knud Rasmussen's expedition accounts, written in the period of Danish colonialism, can be undoubtedly treated as colonial travel writing.

9. For Bhabha, resistance is "the effect of an ambivalence produced within the rules of recognition of dominating discourses as they articulate the signs of cultural difference and reimplicate them within the deferential relations of colonial power—hierarchy, normalization, marginalization, and so forth" (Bhabha 110-111).

10. I understand "the Other" as everything which is "unfamiliar and extraneous to a dominant subjectivity, the opposite or negative against which an authority is defined" (Boehmer 21).

11. As Johannes Fabian claims, it is owing to the subject's reflexion "to be in the presence of others precisely inasmuch as the Other has become content of our experience" (Fabian 1983: 91-92).

12. However, it has to be noticed that the construction of the Inughuit "other" is created against not only the European, but also against the West Greenlandic "same" since for the old Greenlandic woman the wild people living in the Far North are as strange and exotic as for the little European boy listening to her stories.

13. In accordance with Tvetan Todorov's rhetorical question in *The Conquest of America* Tvetan Todorov: "Is not a travel narrative itself the point of departure, and not only the point of arrival, of a new voyage?" (Todorov13)
14. In the Danish text of "The New People" the name is spelled "Sorkrark".
15. For During that border is not a geographical fact a set of discursive practices dividing the present from the past (During 50-51).
16. Being the typical way in which the Inughuit were represented at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Fienup-Riordan 15; Gaupseth 214).
17. My conclusions regarding the European subject's becoming-other in the following paragraphs are based on the chapter in Danish entitled "Efter Vildren", which is unfortunately missing from the English translation of "The New People".
18. Rasmussen's narrator does not use generalizing (and dehumanizing) expressions as "our skimos" "a few Eskimos", frequently used in narratives of exploration.
19. For instance the Greenlandic name of June translated as "the breeding month" (Rasmussen14).
20. The name is spelled Sagdlork in the Danish original text.
21. The name is spelled Krisunguark in the Danish original text.
22. One can notice here a strategy Peter Hulme calls "a polytropic man", which can mean being cunning, intelligent, slippery and deceitful while coping with obstacles of various kinds. Hulme 1984, s.20.

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