

CURRENT AFFAIRS

Greenland's Resistance

There may be only about 57,000 Kalaallit in the world, but we know how to fight off US imperialism

BY LAKKULUK WILLIAMSON BATHORY
ILLUSTRATION BY NINGIUKULU TEEVEE

MY MOTHER'S paternal grandmother, Maaliaana, was born in Kangaamiut, in western Kalaallit Nunaat, sometime in the beginning of the 1900s. (Kalaallit Nunaat is an endonym for my motherland; Greenland is what the international community generally calls it.) She was the product of a one-night stand with a British whaler, at a time when ships filled with men from other places sailed up and down the Arctic coasts.

Maaliaana grew up as a beloved child and knew that her biological father was a British whaler. In our Inuit culture, babies are not born “out of wedlock,” and we consider that babies themselves choose their parents. Adoption is much celebrated. My great-grandmother was adopted by her Kalaaleq (Greenlandic) stepfather, Tobias Mouritzen, who loved her as his own.

Also part of our culture are aqaatit (singular aqaaseq)—pet songs, nonsense words, oft-repeated sayings, witty aphorisms, and exaggerated noises of affection, mostly directed at children but which often spill into adulthood and stick for life. Sometimes, people even

aaq (the verb for making these songs) themselves. Maaliaana would often say “tul-luuvunga, tul-luuvuuvunga” — “You can't get a truer Brit than me.”

As I had a father from Britain, like Maaliaana, my mom and aunts say that I have some of her looks and demeanour. I love the loops of similarity in the ways our minds and bodies work, in the way history echoes back and forth.

There are echoes ringing in my ears now. Because what we're bearing witness to in the current American endeavour to take over my family's homeland is not new. I am part of a family that has experienced—and resisted—both Danish and American exploitation of our people and lands for generations. The US tried to include Greenland in the Alaska Purchase in 1867, so one could argue that Denmark and the US have been fighting over the ownership of Greenland for over a century.

For a time, we even had a particular aqaaseq to remind us that the seeds of American imperialism in Kalaallit Nunaat were planted before the time of my great-grandparents: “Bang bang tonight ok ok.” This is the story of how we co-opted it, how we made it our own.

GREENLAND WAS a closed colony of Denmark from 1721 until after the Second World War, meaning that no outsiders were allowed into the country except for Danish colonizers and their designated visitors. This was a suffocating policy for Kalaallit, but it gave exclusive access to Danish missionaries and resource developers. Denmark, for example, had a monopoly on the extraction of minerals such as cryolite, which was key to the production of aluminum used in military weapons and brought in billions of dollars in profit.

During the Second World War, Greenland became a strategic asset for another reason: the weather there helped predict the weather in Europe, which in turn could shape military strategy. Allied forces sought to prevent the Germans from establishing weather bases on the island or from gaining access to meteorological intelligence. Even before the US entered the war, it patrolled Arctic waters, particularly along the coast of Greenland, to monitor German military activity. Denmark was by then occupied by Nazi Germany; if the Allied powers hadn't utilized Greenland to their advantage, the Nazis might have taken

over there as well. As such, Greenland briefly became a US protectorate.

The US wasn't necessarily protecting Greenland; it was defending its own interests. The rapid buildup of American military technologies in the early twentieth century coincided with rising

coasts of Greenland. The American presence continued beyond the Second World War, as the island was still a strategic place during the Cold War. In 1946, the US offered Denmark \$100 million (US) for the island but was rebuffed.

In 1951, Denmark and the US signed

northwestern coast and stockpiled nuclear weapons there, even though Denmark declared itself free of such weapons in 1957. In 1968, an American B-52 bomber carrying four thermonuclear explosives crashed near the base. All but one passenger survived, and the bombs detonated, causing significant environmental damage. Though most historical records are thoroughly unclear, one wonders how the long-term health of the Inuit who lived in the area was affected by radiation contamination, especially when people were exposed to everything from physically touching contaminants during the cleanup and from the animals that people hunt.

In 1992, Greenland took over control of the Kangerlussuaq air strip, which went on to become Greenland's de facto international airport. (A new international airport opened in Nuuk, Greenland's capital, last November, and is still experiencing some growing pains.) But traces of the town's military birth remain in the barracks—the North American 120-volt plug-ins for electricity and the nearly cookie-cutter similarity between the buildings there and in Iqaluit, which also owes some of its founding infrastructure to the US military.

While the Inuit in Kalaallit Nunaat began to organize for self-determination after the Second World War, Denmark worked consistently to maintain its ownership. In 1953, Greenland ceased to be a colony, though it was still administered by Danish officials. In a powerful artist- and student-led movement, Greenland gained *Namminersorneq* (home rule) in 1979; the people elect their own parliament, with a prime minister who leads a coalition government, though the island remains part of the Kingdom of Denmark.

In 2009, Greenland achieved self-government, overseeing its own education, health, justice, and infrastructure needs while partially depending on block payments from Denmark. (The documentary *Orsugiak: The White Gold of Greenland*, released in February, outlines how the block payments—about \$15,000 per person—pale in comparison to the



American imperialism around the world. The US Army built weather stations and established air strips in the towns of Kangerlussuaq and Narsarsuaq, as well as smaller bases on both the east and west

a treaty that allowed the US Army unrestricted rights to fly over or land in Greenland. In 1951, the army built the Thule Air Base (now known as the Pituffik Space Base) along the far

riches of Danish resource extraction there. *Orsugiak* was so controversial in Denmark that it was taken off the national broadcaster's streaming service.) Denmark maintains control of foreign affairs, monetary policy, citizenship, and military presence. There are ongoing debates among Kalaallit about whether to pursue full independence; many are still conflicted, as a good number have strong ties to Denmark through family and commerce.

Meanwhile, Denmark is still in denial about its own colonial atrocities, including the destruction of Indigenous spiritual beliefs and forced conversions to Christianity; the systemic isolation of Inuit that resulted in widespread poverty; the forced use of intrauterine devices and the resulting sterilization of Kalaallit girls (including my aunt); the removal of Inuit children (including my mother and many of her siblings) from their families for them to be sent to Danish schools; and forced relocation (including my family).

MY FAMILY'S HOMELANDS are close to Kangerlussuaq, on the west coast of Kalaallit Nunaat, an hour-and-a-half flight from Iqaluit's twin American-built air strip. To this day, many of my aunts and uncles and cousins travel into the long, lush fjord (Kangerlussuaq means the Great Fjord) every August to hunt for the year's

supply of caribou. When the Americans first arrived to build the Kangerlussuaq air strip, Kangaamiut was the closest Inuit community, and so my great-grandparents and their peers got a lot of exposure to the first Americans in Greenland.

The arrival of the soldiers in Greenland brought a new wave of marauding white men to follow the explorers, whalers, and Danish colonizers before them. At one point, there were so many cases of American beer lying around that Inuit used them to hold their summer tents down. American men would come up to women in Kangaamiut and say the same thing to them over and over again. The saying was so common that it became a community joke, a sort of aqaaseq. Kangaamiormiut would dance with their babies, thumping their backs and bums to lull them to sleep, and sing the little American aqaaseq to them.

My mother spent many of her childhood summers in Kangaamiut with her maternal grandmother, Hanna, in the late 1950s and early 1960s. My little mom, with her square black bangs cutting across her forehead, would sleep in her grandmother's little bed with her, taking in the vision of her grandmother climbing onto her kitchen counter so that she could get the best light from her window for sewing. My mother's grandmother would often marvel at all the

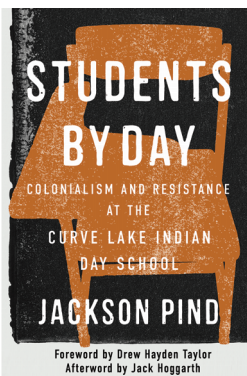
children and grandchildren she was surrounded by and would remark, "aaliuna suak ataatsimiit"—"To think this all came from one little fish roe"—referring to herself.

It wasn't until my mother moved to Canada, learned English, and perhaps even sang it to baby me, that she realized what that little American aqaaseq was: "Bang bang tonight ok ok. Bang bang tonight ok ok." American soldiers were soliciting women in Kangaamiut for sex, over and over again, in the same practised sing-song voice.

IN DONALD TRUMP'S first speech to Congress during his second term, on March 4, he said the US respects Greenland's right to rule itself. He also said that the US needs to take it over for security reasons. Then he said that the US will get the island "one way or another," to the approving snickers of his supporters. But Trump wasn't joking, neither this time nor, apparently, when he floated the idea of buying Greenland in his first administration.

As in Canada, Trump's imperialist interests have caused paroxysms of nationalism in Greenland. In March, Kalaallit Nunaat held an election like none other in its history; it was covered by international news outlets and marked by Trump loyalists flying in from the US while mass anti-Trump demonstrations

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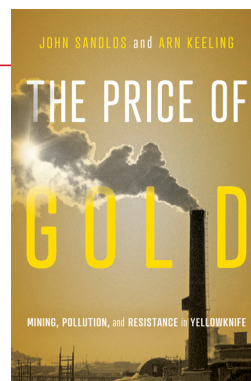
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filled Greenland's streets.

Within weeks of Trump's speech to Congress and before Inatsisartut (Greenland's parliament) was able to negotiate a new coalition to form a government, massive grey Hercules planes were bringing advance security to Nuuk ahead of US second lady Usha Vance's planned visit. Thirty-three-year-old Jens-Frederik Nielsen, soon to be premier, of the Demokraatit Party dispatched statements to the Greenlandic newspaper *Sermitsiaq* that the US was being aggressive and unwelcoming during a time when the government had yet to be formed.

Soon afterward, US vice president J. D. Vance announced that he would be joining his wife for the visit. On the day they arrived, the new coalition government was formed, with Nielsen taking the helm, becoming Greenland's youngest ever premier.

In the lead-up to the Vance visit, the streets were filled with Kalaallit flags (designed in the 1980s by Thue Christiansen, an artist from Maniitsoq, where my family comes from) and cries that Greenland can never be sold: "Kalaallit Nunaat, Kalaallit Pigaat!"—"Greenland belongs to the Greenlanders!" The Vances wound up changing their agenda; rather than attempt a public relations appearance in a Greenlandic community, they scheduled a visit only to the Pituffik Space Base.

English has become commonplace in Greenland now. My generation of Greenlanders are completely bilingual, speaking Kalaallisut and Danish and also English as a third language. The next generation of kids in our family sometimes refuse to speak Danish, and some of them are nearly at the point of speaking English more often than Kalaallisut, at least among their peers. Americanisms slide into my cousins' kids' speech as they play together—something the parents refer to as "youtube-titut."

I live in a part of Inuit homelands that are experiencing the same language loss caused by the same forces of colonization that are hitting Kalaallit Nunaat right now, so I am apprehensive about young people's rapid switch to English.

At first, the use of English was a defiant challenge to the ubiquity of Danish as a colonizing language in Greenland, and its use was encouraged. Kalaallit used to credit the arrival of the Americans in the Second World War with the introduction of values such as independence, liberty, and freedom in the movement to discard Danish colonization. Now, the use of English has become necessary to protest the American takeover attempt. In a viral video, Josef Tarrak, a Kalaaleq rapper, tells an American visitor, "You don't give a shit about us." Kalaallit have been encouraging one another to turn their backs on any Americans who approach them on the streets and to boycott American products.

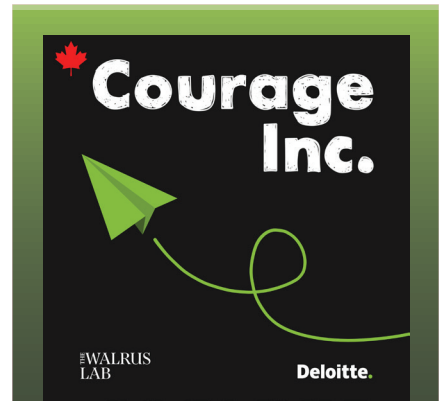
There are only 57,000 Kalaallit on this planet. But they join the many others around the globe protesting US imperialism. Against such a foe, you need hope to survive. Hope comes in the stories and the arcs of history that families tell each other, the ties of blood to the land, to the aqaatit—the little songs of love we sing to each other.

I now think of "Bang bang tonight ok" as an upside-down little aqaaseq, an Inuk claim on a phrase rife with sexual exploitation and racism, in the same manner that a word like "queer" was once a slur and is now proudly claimed by the LGBTQ2S+ community. I say it as a rallying cry, a reminder of our family's resistance to American imperialism.

For me, it joins the cries you hear at the mass demonstrations in Greenland today and all the others that challenge American imperialism: Kalaallit Nunaat, Kalaallit Pigaat; Land Back; Black Lives Matter; Say Their Name; Idle No More; From the River to the Sea, Palestine Will Be Free; Until We Are All Free, None of Us Are Free. Bang Bang Tonight, OK OK. 🇩🇪

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With thanks to the Gordon Foundation for supporting the work of writers from Canada's North.



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