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The Traditional Sources of Lana Hansen's Greenlandic Environmental Commitment

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Special Issue:
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Environmental Change in Nordic Fiction

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Abstract

Indigenous cultures have an integrated relationship with nature, and do not view it in opposition to culture, nor do they consider humans as separate from the environment. For example, the concepts of *nuna* and *sila* and the figure of Sedna, at the basis of the traditional Inuit thought, decenter the role of humans in the living world. In 2009, Greenlandic author Lana Hansen published a »tale about climate change«, *Sila*. She calls for a holistic view, using concepts that encompass humans, animals, languages, spirits, memories, plants, and resources. This article aims to review the context of publication of Hansen's tale from a point of view of Greenlandic and Inuit literature and to examine the traditional sources that it brings into play.

Zusammenfassung

Indigene Kulturen stehen in einheitlicher Verbindung mit der Natur, betrachten diese weder als kulturellen Gegensatz noch den Menschen als von der Umwelt getrennt. Die Begriffe *nuna* und *sila* beispielsweise und die Gestalt der Sedna, die dem traditionellen Denken der Inuit zugrunde liegen, marginalisieren die Rolle des Menschen in seiner Lebenswelt. 2009 veröffentlichte die grönländische Autorin Lana Hansen eine »Erzählung über den Klimawandel«, *Sila*. Sie plädiert darin für eine ganzheitliche Sichtweise und verwendet Konzepte, die Menschen, Tiere, Sprachen, Geister, Erinnerungen, Pflanzen und Ressourcen einbeziehen. Dieser Artikel kontextualisiert Hansens Erzählung aus Sicht der grönländischen und der Inuit-Literatur und untersucht die mit eingebrachten traditionellen Quellen.

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Introduction

For centuries, Greenland has fascinated Westerners.¹ We know its name is an illusion: »Greenland«, the green land, is actually a vast expanse of ice, a glacier called the *indlandsis* (or *sermersuaq* in Greenlandic), around which a narrow coast formed of rugged fjords is home to a few towns and villages. These form the *Kalaallit Nunaat*, the land of the Greenlanders, where Nuuk, the capital, and Qaqortoq, in the south – the birthplace of Lana Hansen – account for a good part of the 55 000 inhabitants of the country. The island is part of the Inuit world, a land that stretches from Siberia to Greenland and is home to 150 000 people who share a common language with great variations from one territory to another.

Karen Langgård and Birgit Kleist Pedersen, both professors at the University of Greenland, write that Greenlandic literature is exceptional and »often presented as a success story in a pan-Inuit context«,² although it has rarely been translated, except into Danish. The country now has a university, a national library, an association of writers, a national theater, a publishing company, and a large cultural center. By 1860, it reported a literacy rate of 100 percent, much higher than that of Europe at the same time. Greenland represents, for most other Indigenous peoples in the world, a hope and a model.

In this article, I wish to present the context of publication of Lana Hansen's tale, both from the point of view of Greenlandic literature and of Inuit literature in general, so as to examine the traditional sources (the concepts of *sila* and *nuna* and the figure of Sedna) which are brought into play by the author, in an environmental literary strategy which situates her work at odds with the political currents of her country, but in accordance with global positions on climate change.

***Sila*: A Positive Concept for the Environment**

Indigenous languages are a formidable reservoir of ideas and concepts that can help humanity to find sustainable ways of interacting with the rest of the living world and to find ways to survive. For this reason, the preservation of Indigenous languages is of paramount importance for World Heritage. Indigenous cultures are said to have a more integrated relationship with nature than Western ones, as they do not view nature in opposition to culture, nor do they consider humans as separate from the environment. Western notions of »ecology«, »environmentalism« and »sustainable development« are attempts to bring forth a holistic view of the world – in academic terms, we can call this »an interdisciplinary approach« – and to understand various phenomena from a diverse and broad perspective. However, when compared to Indigenous concepts, these notions appear bland and do not seem to go as far in their holistic understanding of the living world. The urgency of climate change that characterizes our times forces us to look for solutions outside Western thought systems. This explains the recognition of the importance, value, and usefulness of Indigenous knowledge and languages, including those of the Inuit world.

¹ On this question, see Ísleifsson 2015.

² Langgård & Pedersen 2015, p. 241. See also Berthelsen 1986; 1988.

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Climate change modifies the living environment of the Inuit, but it also has an impact on the relationship of the population, and particularly young Inuit, to traditional knowledge and the perception of the environment.³ For example, Ann Fienup-Riordan has shown in her studies of the *Yup'ik*⁴ in Alaska that current changes can reinforce traditional values, practices, and knowledge. Elders can thus transmit knowledge related to the territory, climate, and environment using traditional concepts, which respond to concerns related to climate change. As we can see here with Lana Hansen's tale, there is thus a telescoping between traditional Inuit values and contemporary political points of view, in the sense that contemporary authors, such as Lana Hansen, base themselves on traditional concepts but promote innovative political positions.

For example, the concepts of *nuna* and *sila* and the figure of Sedna, at the basis of traditional Inuit thought, decenter the role of humans in the living world. The complexity of these notions also demonstrates the richness and unity of the circumpolar Inuit cultures. These related concepts, which are difficult to translate into Western languages, locate humans within a whole, where they do not occupy the center. *Nuna*, territoriality; *sila*, the source of all movement and change; Sedna, the mother of the sea. The last is at the nexus of an incredibly expansive mythology that can take multiple forms – there are more than 37 ways to designate it – and whose variations can be renewed and adapted to new times, as the »story about climate change« by Greenlander Lana Hansen demonstrates.

The different Western definitions – by ethnologists, linguists, but also environmentalists – overlap with each other without exhausting the terms. What is certain is that these concepts are *holistic*, in the sense that they integrate into the same idea a large number of relationships, consequences, and characteristics, unlike the Cartesian way of thinking, which seeks to differentiate knowledge fields to better circumscribe them. There is no guarantee that Indigenous notions can be made operational in our way of thinking:⁵ our need for clear definitions can lead to the reduction of concepts, and therefore to a certain form of dissolution of their meaning.

The consistent use of these concepts may be surprising when one thinks of the vast expanse and the harshness of Arctic life, but the fact is undeniable: Louis-Jacques Dorais notes that the term *nuna* exists and is identical in all Inuit dialects.⁶ Nowadays, it is used to name most of the political territories in which Inuit live: traditionally, it represents »the land« or »the territory«⁷ in a broad sense, and includes not only its materiality, but also the practices, trajectories, and experiences of the living beings that inhabit it. *Sila* is, according to Bernard Saladin d'Anglure, »the great cosmic principle that gives meaning and movement to the universe«.⁸ It is the main component of what

³ See for example Stuckenberger 2010.

⁴ Cf. Fienup-Riordan 1994; 2010.

⁵ Timothy B. Leduc tried to incorporate traditional Inuit knowledge into scientific thinking on climate change, including the concept of *sila*. He found that scientists restrict this concept to the idea of climate, while it is more complex and broader among the Inuit. Cf. Leduc 2007.

⁶ Dorais 1990, p. 49.

⁷ Collignon 2002, p. 49.

⁸ »le grand principe cosmique qui donne à l'univers sens et mouvement« (Saladin d'Anglure 1990, p. 11).

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exists, as well as its very soul. It is associated with climate because it is a spirit of sky, wind, and time. Unlike the figure of Sedna, *sila* is shapeless. By extension, it refers to space, the intellect, the weather, the sky, and the universe.

The concept of *sila* is of paramount importance for the survival of humanity, since it allows for the integration of elements into a whole, forming a system where humans are not separate from the rest of living beings. It is therefore unsurprising that this concept is often referenced in relation to the climate crisis.

In her book, Lana Hansen uses both the concepts of *sila* and *nuna*, and reinterprets the figure of Sedna to promote an environmental pedagogy based on narratives rather than science. According to her, it is through the transmission of stories⁹ and legends that one can convince people to change their behaviors. Her story *Sila* is rooted in the Inuit cultural tradition. In updating the circumpolar legend of Sedna, she aims to bring environmental issues into everyday narratives and practices: »I explain that a small difference is always good«,¹⁰ she says in an interview.

»A Tale about Climate Change«

Sedna, the mother of the sea, is one of the oldest Inuit figures: living in the depths of the ocean, she controls the fate of humans, but they can influence her in return if they find the right way to do it. The concepts of *nuna* and *sila* and the figure of Sedna form the basis of Inuit circumpolar worldview.

Although the educational and ecological significance of Lana Hansen's book is obvious, she presents her tale first as a story for children and young adults.¹¹ It fits into the context of contemporary Greenlandic literature. Lana Hansen's book proposes an adaptation of the myth of Sedna who, as a punishment for the humans' bad treatment of the environment, disrupts the climate. A boy must coax Sedna by giving her gifts he has collected from Arctic animals and then combing her hair. Thus, the world will understand the urgency of climate change and can be saved.

Hansen first wrote this book in Greenlandic, her mother tongue. The publication of *Sila* marks both a break and a continuation in Greenlandic literature. Initially inspired by traditional tales and hunters' stories, and later by social realism and political activism, it now revisits its mythical figures, such as the Qivittoq¹² and Sedna. Hansen's pedagogical and environmental advocacy shifts the stakes of Greenlandic literary engagement, previously focused on its independence from Denmark and its struggle against colonialism, but remains in keeping with this tradition, not

⁹ The importance of the concept of »stories« over »theories« is at the core of Indigenous methodological empowerment. See Jeannotte, Lamy & St-Amand 2018.

¹⁰ »Jeg forklarer at en lille forskel altid er godt.« (Kalkrup 2017)

¹¹ Children's literature is experiencing a remarkable boom in Inuit societies, which sees in this literary form a way of transmitting Inuit and traditional knowledge to future generations. This is also true in all societies for the transmission of ecological knowledge to young people. Of course, children's literature is a subfield of general literature which has its own characteristics. Although these perspectives here are secondary to the study we are conducting, they raise interesting literary questions. See for example the work of Goga 2018.

¹² Qivittoq is an interesting figure of the marginalized. As contemporary Greenlandic novelist Niviaq Korneliussen reinterprets it in her novel *HOMO Sapienne*, LGBT youth who commit suicide are modern-day Qivittoq. Their spirits will haunt the living. See Barron 2017.

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only by updating the figure of the mother of the sea, but also by paying close attention to nature. Hansen sees her commitment as part of a legacy:

In our Inuit tradition, there is a desire to transmit the knowledge of the signs of nature to the next generation. From generation to generation, you can read the sea, the sky, animals, and flowers. But now, this tradition is disappearing because climate change is changing the world so much that it's hard to pass it.¹³

The story oscillates between the real and the imaginary,¹⁴ and introduces a love story between Tulugaq, chosen to visit the mother of the sea, and Asiaq, a girl with whom he is in love and who turns out to be Sedna, as well as an evil rival, Matisi, a whimsical boy on the school playground and moreover the raven that competes with Tulugaq for Sedna's love.

The young Tulugaq, the main character of the book, is at first puzzled by his mission, not knowing how to achieve it. He can hardly believe that he can really fly in the sky like a bird and that he will be able to dive to the bottom of the ocean: »Nuka is probably going to say, »Are you out of your mind? You can't fly – nor are you a raven. It's just your pet name – that's all it is.«¹⁵

As the story unfolds, Tulugaq discovers a link between everyday life and the mythical world of Greenland. It is only at the end of the story, when he visits the young Asiaq for her birthday, that he fully makes the connection between the two worlds. He then offers Asiaq a comb – the one he used to untangle Sedna's hair – made from feathers drawn from his own plumage while he was a bird. Asiaq simply remarks: »Everything is so much better since you combed my hair yesterday.«¹⁶

Hansen's story demonstrates how Inuit culture can help explain to children, in a simple way, the need to become aware of the importance of climate change:

This contemporary tale for children combines the millennial perspective of the Inuit of nature with current environmental issues. The story of the mother of the oceans is still relevant. All Inuit communities, as well as their culture, are now at the mercy of climate change.¹⁷

¹³ »I vores inuit-tradition har der været en skik med, at videregive kendskabet til naturens signaler til næste generation. Fra generation til generation kender man til, hvordan man kan læse havet, himlen, dyrene og blomsterne. Men nu er den tradition ved at forsvinde, fordi klimaforandringerne ændrer verden så meget, at man næsten ikke kan bruge den.« (Kalkrup 2017)

¹⁴ For example, in this excerpt, the reader feels the line blurring between dream, thought, imagination, and reality: »Tulugaq thinks it's boring to cram letters on the blackboard. And he's not bored only once in a while. In fact, it's every day! Instead, he looks out the window while his thoughts wander off in various directions. Within a split second, he's able to take to his wings like a raven, away from blackboard and school, off to explore the world. When bored, Tulugaq is capable of flying infinitely far on the wings of imagination.« (Hansen 2009, p. 11.)

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 53.

¹⁷ Hansen 2019.

An Environmentalist Inuit Activist

Lana Hansen is an environmental activist and multidisciplinary artist. The idea for this story¹⁸ came to her when, with her 17-year-old daughter Niini, she saw a bird staring at them on the beach. From this emotion she then had the idea of writing a story about our relation to nature and climate change, which would build on the traditional Inuit culture of Greenland. In an interview, she explains what motivated her to publish this story: »I first wrote this story for my daughter, Niini Malu Hansen, and I dedicated it to her, but also for all the children of Greenland, so that they could understand what climate change is and how we must stop pollution.«¹⁹

Today, she also carries an ecological message in international forums, through her work as a cultural animator with children, as well as in her multi-faceted work with songs, music, and literature. Greenlandic culture is always the source of her inspiration.

I was born in Qaqortoq,²⁰ in Greenland. My family is Inuit. Since my childhood, I have been listening to Ajar-sivasik. In the language of South Greenland, it means »the adorable fat aunt«. Her real name was Julian Mour-itsen. Her nickname was Ajarsivasik. She died more than 30 years ago. But her oral histories, as well as her traditional songs, continue to be broadcast on Greenlandic radio. Today, I am a multidisciplinary artist and a social activist on climate change.²¹

The Greenlandic and Danish editions of *Sila* were launched by their publisher Milik in 2009 in Nuuk, at the Katuaq cultural center, in the heart of the Greenlandic capital, Nuuk, and a few days later at the Nordatlantens Brygge²² in Copenhagen, where the ships that made the maritime journey between the capital of Denmark and its colonies in the North (Iceland, Faroe Islands, and Greenland) set sail. Nowadays, the historic harbor building has been transformed into an emblematic showcase for the cultures of these countries. Lene Therkildsen, the literary director of Milik, has published almost all contemporary Greenlandic literature since the foundation of the publishing house in 2003. Thanks to her, Niviaq Korneliusen's famous novel *HOMO sapienne*²³ has enjoyed worldwide success.

The publication of Lana Hansen's tale in 2009 certainly follows a tradition of political engagement that exists in Greenlandic literature, but it is also a break in its continuity. Examples of the revitalization of traditional Inuit figures can be found in publications from the 1970s and 1980s, but Hansen allows us to observe a contemporary case that takes place in a context of tense internal debates on the future of the relationship with Denmark (which

¹⁸ Cf. George 2011.

¹⁹ Hansen 2019.

²⁰ Hansen was born in 1970. Qaqortoq, the fourth city in Greenland by population, is home to some 3 000 people, including the writer Kelly Berthelsen, who has been translated into French. See Berthelsen 2015.

²¹ Hansen 2019.

²² Cf. Børnebog om klimaforandringer, 2009.

²³ The novel was translated into French by Inès Jorgensen and published in Québec by La Peuplade, in its »Fictions du Nord« imprint in 2017; in 2020, it became the first Inuit narrative to be issued in paperback in France, by the publisher 10/18. It was then published in English under the title *Crimson*. See Korneliusen 2018.

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has an impact on the environment, the use of natural resources, and geopolitics), but also in a global context, from an Inuit and Greenlandic perspective, on climate change. By contributing to the ecological movement, Lana Hansen is thus seen against the industrial and mining development of her country, on which the supporters of independence nevertheless rely to promote the economic autonomy of Greenland against Denmark. Hansen is therefore against the political currents of previous decades, proposing a position that seems, at first glance, in contradiction with the legitimate desire for political autonomy of the Inuit. Lana Hansen situates herself in a risky literary position: against the dominant Greenlandic political discourse, but in favor of contemporary environmental trends.

From a Nordic perspective, *Sila* was well-received by the literary community. In 2010, it was nominated for the *Vestnordisk Råds børne- og ungdomslitteraturpris*, a children's literature prize for North Atlantic cultures, alongside a Faroese and an Icelandic book, which won the award.²⁴ A few years later, Lana Hansen's book was selected for a remarkable public reading initiative during an event featuring »Winter in the Nordic countries«:²⁵ in one day – November 11th, 2013 – the story was read in 2 000 public libraries.

There is little literary criticism on Greenlandic literature, and in particular on children's literature. For novels and poetry, there is some scattered critical commentary on translated works, in addition to some academic articles. The small size of the Greenlandic readership (55 000 people) and the historical disinterest of the Danish cultural circles in Greenland (slowly changing,²⁶ as Niviaq Korneliusen's case shows) explain this frailness of critical discourse, despite the relatively quite large number of publications that have been issued over the past century, the importance of literature in Greenland, and the vigor of academic Inuit studies.

Lana Hansen's work as an environmental ambassador has allowed her to take part in international gatherings, which in turn favored the translations of her book. It is the norm for books written in Greenlandic to be translated into Danish. The two versions often come out at the same time in Greenland. In 2009, Milik also took the initiative to have Hansen's tale translated and published in English,²⁷ a rarity. In an interview, the author also mentions Chinese, Faroese, and Icelandic translations, all of which should be forthcoming, in addition to the Northern Sámi translation,²⁸ published in 2017. Furthermore, a translation into French²⁹ as well as into Inuktitut,³⁰ the first literary translation between two Inuit languages, were published in 2020.

²⁴ Cf. Grønlandsk bog indstillet til litteraturpris 2009.

²⁵ Cf. Sommer 2013.

²⁶ For a recent study of Greenlandic literature, see Langgård & Thisted 2011.

²⁷ There are very few Greenlandic works in translation, even in English; in fact, there are more in French today, thanks in particular to the work of Inès Jørgensen, who has translated a number of them, in collaboration with the initiatives we took at the Université du Québec à Montréal to disseminate Greenlandic literature. Cf. Pélovas 2016; Cornellier 2016.

²⁸ Cf. Hansen 2017.

²⁹ Published by the Presses de l'Université du Québec in the »Jardin de givre« imprint.

³⁰ Published by the Avataq Cultural Institute in cooperation with the International Laboratory for Research on Images of the North, Winter and the Arctic, and translated by Lisa Koperqualuk.

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Since the publication of *Sila*, Hansen has been frequently invited to conferences and events to talk about climate change and the protection of the environment. She thus exchanged with other artists and activists, namely from Denmark, Norway, Spain, Mexico, and China. In 2010, she moved to Copenhagen, home to over 8 000 other Greenlanders; she then settled in Berlin, where she has been living ever since. As Jane George writes: »Hansen now serves as of a kind of ›cultural‹ climate change ambassador for Denmark and Greenland, traveling around the world talking about a natural world that's melting.«³¹ She is currently working on two other books: a story about the mining boom in Greenland, in which the country, newly independent, is dominated by the values of neocapitalism and forgets environmental issues, as well as a work dealing with relationships between all living things.

The Environmental Message

Tulugaq Tulugaq gets up and stretches his limbs. And when mother sits down beside him, he asks her, »Mom, what does climate change mean?« Mother hugs him. »Did you learn about that in school today?«
»No, the Spirit of the Inland Ice told me. He also asked me to go see the Mother of the Sea.«
Mother laughs. »You must have been dreaming.«³²

Lana Hansen's book carries a political message, as the author says: »I am concerned about climate change. Its acceleration is important. Inuit are the ones who have had to adapt as quickly as possible. Nature is changing and Inuit must change.«³³

Hansen gives her story a depth that goes beyond mere pedagogy and calls for a holistic view of the living world. She does this using the concepts of *nuna* and *sila*, which have meaning only in the context of an ontology where the earth is part of a set that encompasses humans, animals, and resources.³⁴ Arctic specialist Mark Nuttal defines this Inuit way of thinking as »total habitat«,³⁵ which includes the sea, ice, mountains, air, animals, fish, and even spirits, memories, events, and people who have lived in the past. This echoes John Amagoalik's saying: »I am Nuna, the voice of the land, the animals, and the fish in the waters.«³⁶ The amalgamation of all living beings and their environment as well as memories and spirits gives way, as Julien Pongérard³⁷ suggests, to cosmological myths in which animals, humans, spirits, and natural elements are knitted together with very close relationships. This cosmocentric vision of the world decenters the place of humans and is conducive to an environmental perspective.

Hansen wants to disseminate her message in the simplest and clearest way possible. In an interview, she said:

³¹ George 2011.

³² Hansen 2009, p. 24.

³³ Hansen 2019.

³⁴ Cf. Purich 1992, p. 67.

³⁵ Williamson 2006, p. 19.

³⁶ Amagoalik 2000.

³⁷ Cf. Pongérard 2016.

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I wrote this story to tell the world that Inuit, all humans, and all living things are affected by the climate. Without nature, we are nothing. We must protect nature and the environment. As Sedna would tell us, we will be punished if we do not respect nature and all living things. Nature will take revenge on humanity.³⁸

She believes that Greenland – despite the perception of this issue among its own citizens, which I will discuss later – has become a symbol of climate change in the world but lacks the means to inform humanity of its situation, which has immediate consequences on the life of Inuit: »It's because I'm from Greenland that I work on the climate.«³⁹

To convey her worldview and her environmental message, Hansen uses narratives, which she believes are more powerful than statistical and political discourse, to convince people of the urgency to act. For her, it is in the daily stories that one can best perceive the importance of what is happening. She believes that great summits are useful, but elitist, in the sense that they do not arouse emotion and, therefore, do not lead to personal changes. Talking about climate in a simple, direct way, while drawing on the Inuit language and culture, raising awareness of the urgency to act through art, literature, and narrative: this is the originality of Lana Hansen's work, which thus offers an original contribution, stemming from the Arctic, to the struggles of our time.

***Nuna*: Territory at the Heart of a Worldview**

This worldview is based on an Inuit perspective that differs from Western ways of thinking, especially with regard to the perception of territory. Indeed, there is a fundamental distinction between the Western and Indigenous conceptions of territory. The first, based on the organization of the Civil Code, divides the world in two parts: goods and people. As for goods, there is a right to own, sell, buy, and yield parcels of land, which then become »private property«. Conversely, it is forbidden to divide, sell, yield, or buy people. Thus, we separate people – humans – from goods, a category that includes everything that is not human, like other living beings, plants, and land. Indigenous peoples have a more integrated understanding of the relationships between humans, animals, inert things, and even spirits, experiences, and memories. As a result, Indigenous rules and practices, particularly those of the Inuit, almost never allow the land to become »private property«, so that it cannot be transferred, sold, purchased, or possessed. This causes profound disagreements when it comes to »territorial negotiations« between Indigenous peoples and Westerners. The major conflicts that most often create opposition between them concern the distribution, use, and control of territories. When we watch the news, the problem seems political, but it is in fact philosophical or even ontological.⁴⁰ Westerners find it normal to give up a piece of land; Indigenous peoples believe that the territory is part of a whole, inextricable from practices, experiences, living beings, and therefore, community.

³⁸ Hansen 2019.

³⁹ »Det er fordi jeg er fra Grønland, at jeg arbejder med klima.« (Kalkrup 2017)

⁴⁰ As Hamelin 2014 clearly demonstrated, the territorial issues between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people denote a distinct conception of the world. A similar situation is perceived among the Sámi, as illustrated by Britt Kramvig in her work or, for example, by Østmo & Law 2018.

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To bridge these two separate conceptions, Indigenous peoples have had to »invent« names for the territories they live on as part of the self-government negotiations. For example, the Innu of the North Shore in Québec now speak of *Nitassinan* (»Our territory«), a term different from the sacred *Nutshimit* (a concept designating the interior, in a more encompassing perspective than *Nitassinan*). Taamusi Qumaq recounts in his autobiography how the notion of *Nunavik* became necessary to bring together all the Inuit communities of Québec,⁴¹ so that they could discuss their common stance in negotiating with the governments. Before that, the community had a more pragmatic understanding of *Nunavimmiut*, covering a smaller range.

In the same way, the term »Inuit« used to refer to themselves (along with, curiously, the Innu of the North Shore and the Ainu of northern Japan) simply means »humans«. However, the intensification of relations between the North and the South has changed the meaning and the ways in which the Inuit refer to themselves, and has caused demonyms to appear: *Inuit* no longer means only »humans«, but rather »humans of Inuit culture«. Inuit decided to name their territories from a political perspective: the place-names Nunavik (1975), Kalaallit Nunaat (1979), Nunavut (1999), and Nunatsiavut (2005) emerged in the last half-century, followed by the general terms referring to »the Inuit world«:⁴² Inuit Nunaat (2009) for the circumpolar space and Inuit Nunangat for Canada (2016). A long historical and linguistic explanation would be needed to shed light on the emergence of these terms, but let us simply note here that they all stem from the same root: *nuna*.

The political use of *nuna* (and nowadays, its many derivatives in various fields), however, dilutes the primary meaning of the term, retaining only the territorial dimension. Dual uses persist among the Inuit, as Michèle Therrien pointed out in the case of Nunavut:

To prevent the negotiations concerning the creation of Nunavut from failing, the Inuit agreed to consider *nuna* (territory) as a property that must now be legally possessed, but in reality, they allow the coexistence of two images of *nuna*: the first, faithful to the description of the landscape under Canadian law, is intended for specialists in the political, legal, and economic world. It appears in official texts written in English, French, and Inuktitut. Its purpose is strategic (to obtain the guarantee that the powers previously held by the central government are vested in the Inuit); the second representation of *nuna*, expressed only in Inuktitut, circulates at the family and community level, and is reflected in behaviors; it concerns a certain relationship with the natural

⁴¹ On this question, Taamusi Qumaq's autobiography is one of the most important books on *Nunavik*. Cf. Qumaq 2010. A bilingual edition (French and Inuktitut) was published in 2020 in the same imprint.

⁴² The use of this encompassing term to designate the Inuit should not mask the considerable cultural, linguistic, economic, and political differences between the various Inuit territories, caused among others by the colonial period which accentuated the differences. Today, this can be seen, for example, in the imbalance between the advanced quest for independence for Greenland and the political governance of the Canadian Inuit territories, or by the status of language policies. On the other hand, some intellectuals, following Knud Rasmussen's quest, want to revive a »pan-Inuit« spirit, such as the Greenlandic poet, politician, and intellectual Aqqaluk Lyngé.

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environment, reproduced by education, tending to develop attitudes of respect and modesty with regard to all the natural elements among young people, far from any feeling of appropriation.⁴³

Nuna does not simply mark a political territorial assertion, *nuna* also denotes »a term of identity«,⁴⁴ recalling the intimate relationship between living beings, things, minds, and experiences. In his dictionary of the Inuit language of Nunavik, *The True Inuit Words*, Taamusi Qumaq defines *nuna* as follows:

Does not move. For a very long time, it has been the inhabited land and the place of growth for human beings and animals, and it is also where they die. Nuna has plants, water, food, people, in very large quantities and in many shapes, and it is full of groups of [different] languages.⁴⁵

Nuna is a complex concept, specific to the circumpolar world and to Inuit culture, used among several peoples in the Arctic world, which defines »the earth as a substrate of habitat and cultural facts«,⁴⁶ according to Louis-Edmond Hamelin. It is also a holistic concept, which underlies a relationship with the world that we would describe today as »ecological«.

In this sense, it is inseparable from the figure of Sedna and the concept of *sila*, both of which are based on the idea that humans form one of the forces of the world, but without occupying the center. One should know what *nuna*, Sedna, and *sila* mean to fully appreciate Lana Hansen's tale, as they give it a deep cultural foundation.

Sedna, a Circumpolar Figure

There is no circumpolar myth more widespread, rich, and varied than that of the figure of the mother of the sea, Sedna.⁴⁷ According to Michael P. J. Kennedy, »[d]espite variations in its content, the Sea Goddess myth is pan-Arctic in scope«. ⁴⁸ In 1980, for an exhibition at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Nelda Swinton identified 37 different ways of naming Sedna in the Arctic,⁴⁹ over a vast territory from Siberia to Greenland. In the terms used

⁴³ »Pour que les négociations concernant la création du Nunavut n'échouent pas, les Inuit ont accepté de considérer nuna (territoire) comme un bien devant être désormais légalement détenu mais en réalité, ils ont fait coexister deux images de nuna : la première, fidèle à la description du paysage selon la loi canadienne, s'adresse aux spécialistes du monde tant politique que juridique ou économique. Elle figure dans les textes officiels rédigés en anglais, en français et en inuktitut. Sa finalité est d'ordre stratégique (obtenir la garantie que les pouvoirs détenus jusque-là par le gouvernement central soient dévolus aux Inuit) ; la seconde représentation de nuna, exprimée uniquement en inuktitut, circule au niveau de la famille et de la communauté, et se traduit par des comportements ; elle concerne une certaine relation au milieu naturel, reproduite par l'éducation, tendant à développer chez les jeunes des attitudes de respect et de modestie à l'égard de l'ensemble des éléments naturels, loin de tout sentiment d'appropriation.« (Therrien 1999, pp. 47–49)

⁴⁴ »un terme d'identité« (Chartier & Désy 2014, p. 60). The words are by Louis-Edmond Hamelin.

⁴⁵ »Ne se meut pas. Depuis très longtemps, c'est la terre habitée et le lieu de croissance des êtres humains et des animaux, et c'est là aussi qu'ils meurent. Nuna a des plantes, de l'eau, de la nourriture, des gens, en très grand nombre et dont l'apparence varie beaucoup, et elle est pleine de groupes de langues [différentes].« (Qumaq 1991) Translated into French from Inuktitut and quoted in Dorais 2008, p. 11.

⁴⁶ »la terre en tant que substrat de l'habitat et des faits culturels« (Hamelin & Lavallée 2002, p. 440).

⁴⁷ To better understand the figure of Sedna, see Swinton 1980; Laugrand & Oosten 2011.

⁴⁸ Kennedy 1997, p. 211.

⁴⁹ See in particular the excellent table reproduced in Swinton 1980, p. 13.

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by Swinton in 1980, these peoples are those of Baffin Island, as well as of the »Caribou«, »Copper«, Greenland, Igloodik, Labrador, the Mackenzie, »Netsilik«, the »Pole« and »Siberia«. The meaning of Sedna varies according to place and culture: she is in turn »the goddess of the sea«, »the one who dispenses good things«, »a big bad woman«, »the one from below«, »the force giver«, »the woman overturned over the ledge«, »the woman of abundance«, »the one who is miserable and frightening«, »the one who is at the bottom of the sea«, »the one who precedes« or »the terrible one that is below«.

All of these elements come together in a myth shared in the Inuit world. Frédéric Laugrand and Jarich Oosten have identified its common core:

In the past, there was a woman who did not want to get married. Her father rushed her into the ocean and cut her fingers off at the level of the knuckles, fingers that turned into marine mammals. She lived at the bottom of the sea and held back the sea animals from the Inuit when she was angry with them. They called her innua – person, owner, or resident of the sea.⁵⁰

Sedna trapped marine mammals in her hair, preventing the Inuit from feeding. A shaman had to plunge into the depths of the sea, first to distract Sedna, then to comb her hair, to free the animals and thus relieve the humans.

Laugrand & Oosten note that the Christianization of Inuit societies has turned the myth of cosmology towards art: Sedna has been abundantly represented, both in visual arts and in oral and written literature.

In an interview, Lana Hansen recounts that this story was told to her by her mother many times before she heard it in school: »Sedna is a mythical Greenlandic figure«, she says. »The mother of the sea punishes humanity for its greed by gathering the animals in its long hair at the bottom of the sea.«⁵¹ The figure thus makes it possible to explain respect for the laws of nature. Hansen believes that »the Inuit religion is animistic and consists in respecting nature. [...] Our religion is that we must respect nature.«⁵² By transforming the traditional myth of Sedna, she draws on ancient heritage and values long shared by the Inuit, but updates and adapts them to contemporary issues: »The Mother of the Sea serves as a symbol of the fact that we should protect nature – not exploit and pollute it.«⁵³

Lana Hansen's story, in which the young Tulugaq is chosen to fight climate change by bringing the gifts of Arctic animals to the Mother of the Sea, is part of a long tradition of updating the Sedna myth among Inuit and foreign writers.

⁵⁰ »Autrefois, il y avait une femme qui ne voulait pas se marier. Son père la précipita dans l'océan et lui coupa les doigts à la hauteur des phalanges, doigts qui se transformèrent en mammifères marins. Elle vivait au fond de la mer et retenait auprès d'elle le gibier lorsqu'elle était en colère contre les Inuits. Ceux-ci l'appelaient innua – personne, propriétaire, ou habitante de la mer.« (Laugrand & Oosten 2011, p. 31)

⁵¹ Hansen 2019.

⁵² »Inuit-religion er animistisk og drejer sig om at respektere naturen. [...] Vores religion er at vi skal respektere naturen.« (Kalkrup 2017)

⁵³ George 2011.

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The pervasiveness of this myth in Inuit culture explains this significant number of new versions. In each case, humans are punished for actions construed as negative, but which are no longer necessarily related to the taboos of the original myth. For example, children's playwright David Holman has entwined the myth with the true story of the three gray whales caught under the ice in October 1988 at Point Barrow, Alaska:⁵⁴

To have revenge on the Inuit who caused her such suffering she entangles her creatures in her beautiful hair and does not allow them to surface when they are food for the Inuit. The struggle with icebreakers and helicopters to rescue the whales is set against a mythological background of attempts to appease Sedna and make her happy, so [she finally] releas[es] the whales from her kingdom.⁵⁵

In children's versions, the crudest parts of the myth are softened so as not to shock: »The cutting off of the finger digits and the sexual relationship with the bird are depicted in euphemistic narrative aimed at young readers.«⁵⁶

In another example, the famous Inuit author from Nunavut, Alooook Ipellie, wrote in *Arctic Dreams and Nightmares* (1993) a version of the myth that broaches the delicate topic of rape. In the chapter »Summit with Sedna, the Mother of Sea Beasts,« the narrator warns the Inuit that they are heading for ruin because they can no longer appease Sedna, who, as punishment, is keeping the marine animals prisoners. Sedna, who in Ipellie's story has never had an orgasm, asks the shamans who visit her to give her one, after which she will free the animals. Since no one can satisfy her, they come together to create a creature that could satisfy her, which they present to her. They then discover that Sedna was sexually abused by her father, an event that prevents her from experiencing sexual pleasure. But the creature succeeds in giving her an orgasm with its song; in turn, Sedna frees the animals. This version of the legend of Sedna allows to tackle a contemporary social problem and is a testament to the adaptability of this myth:

The legend of the Woman Beneath the Sea has evolved from a basic spiritual belief of the Inuit linked to the provision of food through hunting, to a story which has been transcribed from the oral to and adapted in presentation to remain relevant for a variety of Inuit and non-Inuit contemporary audiences. [...] The narrative of the Mistress of the Sea Creatures has been expanded to encompass contemporary themes told in imaginative ways. The legend of Sedna endures.⁵⁷

The complex figure of Sedna makes it possible to denounce situations that keep Inuit societies from thriving, such as sexual violence⁵⁸ or climate change.

⁵⁴ This story also inspired the script for Ken Kwapis's British-American film *Big Miracle* (2012).

⁵⁵ Holman 1992, p. viii.

⁵⁶ Kennedy 1997, p. 215.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

⁵⁸ While ancient and recent interpretation of Sedna is based on the same narrative schema, the motivations linked to the latter's action differ depending on the period. As Birgitte Sonne has shown, it was once the »secrets« (abortions, etc.) that clogged Sedna's hair (cf. Sonne 1990). With Hansen, it is rather the harmful actions of humans towards the environment that cause this.

The Difficulty of Talking about Climate in Greenland

Although the Arctic is currently the region most affected by global warming, it isn't always easy to convince its population of the urgency to take action. Lana Hansen deplors the way that the desire to achieve Greenland's political independence is always linked to industrial development, which contributes to rampant mistrust of environmental issues, which are often left behind. In 2017, following her participation in international summits, she stated:

In the parliaments of the big countries, during the negotiations in the G20 for example, climate is the top priority. But in Greenland, this is not a priority because there are a host of other challenges, related to violence and social problems. [...] The Paris Climate Agreement has not been ratified by Greenland. Greenland wants to be an industrialized country, which does not give priority to climate change, even though it affects the daily life of its inhabitants. [There are] people from outside who talk about the change in the Greenlandic climate, while Greenlanders do not say much. [...] Rather than hearing foreigners speak in Greenland, I would rather show how we view change ourselves and talk to them about climate change in the Arctic.⁵⁹

Writing a story about climate change is therefore, for Hansen, part of a cultural, literary, and political strategy to convince Greenlanders of the need to think about climate change from their own perspective – borrowing from the geographic context of the Arctic and from Inuit mythology. Hansen wants to show how Greenlanders could convince the rest of the world that the Arctic can also contribute, through its original concepts – *sila* and *nuna* – to finding solutions for the survival of humanity.

In Arctic Literature

Nowadays, we have access to a corpus of Greenlandic works translated into foreign languages – besides Danish, mostly in French, some in English – which gives us an idea of its scope. Among these works, we can thus read, in translation, the tales of Knud Rasmussen,⁶⁰ the autobiography of the shaman Georg Quppersimaan,⁶¹ the first two novels of Greenlandic literature (utopias imagining the country in the future) by Mathias Storch and Augo Lyngé,⁶² a children's book by Pipaluk Freuchen,⁶³ the political poems of Aqqaluk Lyngé,⁶⁴ a novel by Hans Anthon Lyngé,⁶⁵

⁵⁹ »I de store landes forsamlinger, når der bliver forhandlet i G20 f.eks., så er klima førsteprioritet. Men i Grønland er det bare ikke noget man prioriterer særlig højt, for der er så mange andre udfordringer, med vold og sociale problemer og al den slags. [...] Paris-klimaaftalen ville Grønland ikke underskrive. Grønland vil være industriland, de prioriterer ikke klimaforandringer, selv om de er så tæt på deres dagligdag. Så der er ikke så stor diskussion, og så er det folk udefra der taler om forandringen i det Grønlandske klima, mens grønlænderne ikke fortæller så meget. [...] jeg vil hellere vise hvordan vi selv ser på forandringen, end at høre fremmede komme til Grønland og fortælle om arktiske klimaforandringer.« (Kalkrup 2017)

⁶⁰ Cf. Rasmussen 1921.

⁶¹ Cf. Quppersimaan 1992.

⁶² Cf. Storch 2016; Lyngé 2015.

⁶³ Cf. Freuchen 1966.

⁶⁴ Cf. Lyngé 2012.

⁶⁵ Cf. Lyngé 2003.

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and the stories of Kelly Berthelsen,⁶⁶ as well as the great Greenlandic literary bestseller, now translated into ten languages, the novel *HOMO sapienne* by Niviaq Korneliussen.⁶⁷ Lana Hansen's tale has now been added to this short list.

However, in bookstores and in libraries, one can find a greater number of literary texts, novels, and accounts of travel and exploration on Greenland: they form a more abundant corpus, older, but diverse, written by Danes and foreigners fascinated by the Arctic and the »Far North«. In contrast, the works written by Greenlanders, which can now be read, give a voice from the interior to those who live on this Arctic island, and they make it possible to measure the distance between external images of the North as constructed by European and North American cultures and the very different Inuit discourse from the interior. These two perspectives are complementary while opposing each other in a process of »recomplexification« of the North and the Arctic, as I proposed in an essay on this question,⁶⁸ which joins both the thinking of other researchers on the Arctic and on autochthony, and which is part of a decolonial process,⁶⁹ where both internal and external voices⁷⁰ on the same territory need to be heard.

Lana Hansen's story positively adds to these voices from the inside: through her political and environmental activism, this author succeeds in imbuing a thousand-year-old mythological tradition with contemporary concerns shared by the Inuit and the rest of the world. This work is intended for all audiences and is perfectly consistent with the tradition of the great literary texts of the Arctic.

⁶⁶ Cf. Berthelsen 2015.

⁶⁷ See note 23.

⁶⁸ Cf. Chartier 2018. This book has been published in several multilingual editions in 14 northern languages, including Inuktitut, Danish, Finnish, and Norwegian. All are available for download online. To read the English edition, visit archipel.uqam.ca/11349.

⁶⁹ Multiple essays in this direction are getting published, and more and more by Indigenous authors. For the Nordic countries, we will find such a point of view in Ryall, Schimanski & Wærp 2010.

⁷⁰ This is true in general, but also specifically in the case of the figure of Sedna, which has been used many times by Inuit authors, but which has also been of interest for non-native authors.

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