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# Qanilaarneq (Closeness/Being Close) as a Desired State: Mediating Conflict Through Storytelling in Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland)

# Qanilaarneq (proximité/être proche) comme état désiré: la médiation des conflits à travers l'art du récit à Kalaallit Nunaat (Groenland)

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See table of contents

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Article abstract

This paper focuses on storytelling as a site for knowledge creation and meaning making to better understand how relationships are established and community is made in Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland). The basis of this article is a selection of stories created by young Kalaallit (Greenlandic Inuit) adults as part of a research project engaging in *future memory work*, where participants were asked to create "future memories" for subsequent generations by producing stories that best represent what they consider to be worth preserving. Connecting these stories are the storytellers' evocations of solidarity, care, and responsibility, gesturing to other members of the Kalaallit community. Rather than centering on the stories' content, I conceptualize their intent through a focus on storytelling as a social activity. I argue that the young Kalaallit I worked with seek to mediate conflict and mend rifts in society through their storytelling practice, envisioning a future state of Kalaallit community relations that is "closer" in nature, and I propose the Kalaallisut term "qanilaarneq" (closeness/being close) as a metaphor to think with and make this notion more tangible.

# Qanilaarneq (Closeness/Being Close) as a Desired State: Mediating Conflict Through Storytelling in Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland)

Anne S. Chahine[i]

**ABSTRACT**

This paper focuses on storytelling as a site for knowledge creation and meaning making to better understand how relationships are established and community is made in Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland). The basis of this article is a selection of stories created by young Kalaallit (Greenlandic Inuit) adults as part of a research project engaging in *future memory work*, where participants were asked to create "future memories" for subsequent generations by producing stories that best represent what they consider to be worth preserving. Connecting these stories are the storytellers' evocations of solidarity, care, and responsibility, gesturing to other members of the Kalaallit community. Rather than centering on the stories' content, I conceptualize their intent through a focus on storytelling as a social activity. I argue that the young Kalaallit I worked with seek to mediate conflict and mend rifts in society through their storytelling practice, envisioning a future state of Kalaallit community relations that is "closer" in nature, and I propose the Kalaallisut term "qanilaarneq" (closeness/being close) as a metaphor to think with and make this notion more tangible.

**KEYWORDS**
Storytelling, Kalaallit Nunaat, Greenland, imagination, relations

**RÉSUMÉ**

**Qanilaarneq (proximité/être proche) comme état désiré: la médiation des conflits à travers l'art du récit à Kalaallit Nunaat (Groenland)**

Cet article se concentre sur le récit comme terrain de création de savoirs et de recherche de sens pour mieux comprendre comment les relations et les communautés se forment à Kalaallit Nunaat (Groenland). Cet article se base sur une sélection de récits créés par de jeunes adultes Kalaallit (Inuit groenlandais) dans le cadre d'un projet de recherche axé sur le travail de la mémoire du futur, où des participants étaient appelés à créer des « mémoires futures » pour les prochaines générations en produisant des récits qui représentent ce qui devrait,

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selon eux, être préservé. Le fil conducteur qui relie ces récits sont les thèmes évoqués par les narrateurs, notamment la solidarité, le soutien et la responsabilité, des gestes posés envers les autres membres de la communauté Kalaallit. En lieu de centraliser les contenus de ces histoires, je conceptualise leur intention sous l'angle du récit comme activité sociale. J'explique comment les jeunes Kalaallit avec qui j'ai travaillé visent à régler les conflits par la médiation et réparer les fractures sociales à travers leur approche narrative, en envisageant l'état futur des relations communautaires Kalaallit, plus « proches » de nature; et je propose le terme en langue kalaallisut « qanilaarneq » (proximité/être proche) comme une métaphore pour rendre cette notion plus tangible.

**MOTS-CLÉS**
Art du récit, Kalaallit Nunaat, Groenland, imagination, relations

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The basis of this article is a selection of stories created by young Kalaallit (Greenlandic Inuit) adults as part of a research project engaging in *future memory work*, with the focus on storytelling as a site for knowledge creation and meaning making, to better understand how relationships are established and community is made in Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland).[1] As I suggest elsewhere (Chahine 2022b), by adding a "future" dimension to memory work—a concept and methodological tool to better understand how we make sense of the world around us (Crawford 1992; Haug 1999; Kuhn 2000)—it becomes possible to not only acknowledge but proactively make use of how the future shapes the way we (re)construct the past in the now, creating a space for pluralising temporalities (Rifkin 2017) and, as such, unsettling temporal hierarchies that lead to Othering through time (Fabian 1990; Deloria 2004; Fabian and Bunzl 2014; Rifkin 2017). As part of *future memory work*, participants were asked to create "future memories" for subsequent generations by producing stories that best represent what they consider to be worth preserving. Connecting these stories are the storytellers' evocations of solidarity, care, and responsibility, gesturing to other members of the Kalaallit community, and I suggest that the young Kalaallit I worked with aim to mediate conflict and mend rifts in society through their storytelling practice, envisioning a future state of Kalaallit community relations that is "closer" in nature. I thus propose the Kalaallisut term *qanilaarneq* (closeness/being close) as a metaphor to think with and make this notion more tangible.

1. Throughout the paper, I use the local-specific terminology for "Greenland" (Kalaallit Nunaat), "Greenlandic Inuit" (Kalaallit) and "Greenlandic Inuk" (Kalaaleq) in Kalaallisut, the West-Greenlandic Inuit language.

The collection of stories was published on the online platform *Future Memory Stories* (Chahine 2022a) parallel to the execution of the project, and can be understood as a collage of young Kalaallit voices at a specific moment in time. It has been lauded by Kalaallit interlocutors for its overall positive framing, shining light on the everyday life of young people without centering on hardship, but has also been criticized for not focusing on contemporary problems, with the risk of rendering them negligible. The following exchange between three Kalaallit attendees of a focus group session (see Figure 1) renders these different perceptions visible:

> A: I think [what is missing] are the negatives in general because it is sort of about the positives, you know? So, it's the other side of it, the dark side, that is not well represented in this.
>
> B: Can I say my opinion about this? […] There has been a lot of projects in Greenland [that focus on] social problems, and for me it is really good that there is finally a project that isn't about social problems.
>
> C: Well, of course, but at the same time it's just weird that it's all positive.

Although the attendees continue their conversation by identifying stories that do talk about problems in Kalaallit society, the initial disagreement remains unresolved. Another participant, in a focus group in late 2020, makes a similar observation: "the conflict in our society […], the division in our society, especially politically and ideologically [is missing]".

**Figure 1.** Focus Group, November 2019, Nuuk Kalaallit Nunaat.
Photo by Anne S. Chahine.

Whilst numerous social problems are addressed within the storytellers' narratives, the perception of an abundance of only "positives" lingers with me, especially since this observation was repeated by other Kalaallit acquaintances throughout the project's duration. I keep re-reading the stories, only realizing over time that the positive connotations do not stem from the content of the stories but rather from their *intent*. The affirmative nuances throughout are derived from the storytellers' way of corresponding with multiple recipients: me, a foreign, non-Danish researcher, and a wider imagined audience, primarily the Kalaallit community. Rather than centering on the stories' content, I conceptualize their intent through the lens of storytelling as a social activity, suggesting that the storytellers' goal is to mediate conflict and mend societal rifts through their storytelling practices. Whilst not central to this article, the future component of memory work functions as the underlying practice for generating these stories in the first place, creating a speculative space to imagine the contemporary in a new light: a Kalaallit society that comes closer together, tackling the societal problems addressed by the storytellers as a unified body.

## Positionality, Relations, and Language in the Kalaallit Research Setting

For the *Future Memory Stories* project, I worked with 28 young Kalaallit adults (aged between 18–32) living in Kalaallit Nunaat and Denmark. Participants' level of involvement varied from person to person. I met most people twice; once for an introductory meeting and once for a lightly structured interview, staying in contact via messenger and email until finalizing the story together. Some participants agreed to meet for additional focus group sessions, joining new people who would also comment on the generated material. I stayed in more regular contact with some of the initial participants of the project, and I would describe these relationships as oscillating between a continuing genuine interest in each other's lives on a personal level, in combination with me, in my role as researcher, asking for opinions and further feedback on the work that was being produced.

Initial contact was established through a variety of approaches, such as snowballing, advertisement on social media, and word of mouth. This approach directly relates to my positionality in the overall project, as I was a novice researcher in both research sites, having first worked in Kalaallit Nunaat and Denmark at the start of the project in 2018; prior to this, I primarily engaged with my own community, namely, East Germans living in East Berlin. I am also a white, non-Indigenous scholar who was part of a European research network based at a Danish university, researching in one of Denmark's (former) colonies. This setup deserves attention: Our world is marked by on-going colonial power structures in favour of a Western world view, with

this extending into the academic space (Anibal Quijano 2000, 2007; Grosfoguel 2013; Todd 2016; Mignolo and Walsh 2018), making it necessary to constantly reflect on and question the initial premises and overall framework of knowledge production. Danish colonialism has long been unacknowledged, emphasising exceptionalism, "benevolent" intentions, and non-violent execution. More recently, scholars have questioned these narratives (Petersen 1995; Thisted 2002; Lynge 2011; Naum and Nordin 2013; L. Jensen 2015; L. Jensen and Loftsdóttir 2016; Petterson 2016; Körber 2018; Mortensen and Maegaard 2019; Graugaard 2020c), connecting former colonial endeavours to present-day repercussions in previously occupied territories. In relation to contemporary Kalaallit Nunaat, Kalaaleq scholar Laura Lennert Jensen considers how "disregarding postcolonial realities is a bit like saying 'I don't see colour' when talking about racism" (L. L. Jensen and Chahine, in press).

The group of people who agreed to engage in the project is not a representative heterogenous example of young Kalaallit from all socioeconomic backgrounds and paths of life. Instead, the majority are highly educated (with the means to travel to study abroad) and speak 2-3 languages fluently. I was interested in conversing with everyone in a direct, dialogical format without the need for a translator, which left English, a second language to all of us, as one condition for participating in the study. As a result, I primarily conversed with university students I met in my own immediate surroundings in Aarhus and Nuuk, as they fulfilled this prerequisite. Although this group is highly diverse and cannot be understood as monolithic, there are many young Kalaallit with whom I did not have the chance to interact, such as individuals who primarily speak Kalaallisut and who do not attend high school or university.

In Kalaallit Nunaat, language skills and educational levels are closely interlinked: even though Kalaallisut became the official language in 2009, Danish continues to be the dominant language in secondary school and higher education, directly impacting who can proceed within that system and who cannot. The contemporary mix of languages has a direct influence on people's livelihoods, as it requires a high level of personal effort. One must ideally be fluent in both Kalaallisut and Danish to navigate everyday life—regardless of what language is spoken at home—and additionally acquire English skills to communicate on the international stage. Language politics in Kalaallit Nunaat are the direct aftermath of the country's colonization and have resulted in a generation of young adults who today speak different levels of Danish and Kalaallisut. Consequently, speaking English during the interviews—a language foreign to us all—was welcomed by the people I worked with, as it meant that everyone had to make an effort to express themselves. I am nevertheless convinced and would like to acknowledge that being able to converse in people's native languages instead

of English would of course have fostered different conversations and alternative stories. As I believe this is not only a question about ways of communicating but also one of ethics, I draw inspiration from Julie Cruikshank (1998), who after years of contemplation concluded that as long as people have the full right to alter and edit their stories, this process can be considered ethically sound. For the *Future Memory Stories* project, this translates to authorship; all authors thus had full control over their contribution and made the necessary changes to the original transcript, which I provided as a first draft of the story, before making it available to the public.

## Beyond a Eurocentric Frame

Indigeneity is another lens that becomes relevant in the context of knowledge production in Kalaallit Nunaat, as Indigenous people, such as Inuit in the Arctic, have been subjected to detrimental (Western) research endeavours (Smith 2012) focusing generally on the "darker side of things": primarily social problems and the pain and suffering of the research subject (Tuck 2009; Tuck and Yang 2014). Nevertheless, framing the Kalaallit experience as an Indigenous experience is still a rarity in Kalaallit Nunaat studies. Danish-Kalaaleq scholar Naja Dyrendom Graugaard (Graugaard 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2021), one of the first to bring these general experiences into the Kalaallit-Danish setting, suggests that academic work in Kalaallit Nunaat "avoid[s] aligning their conceptualization of Indigeneity […] with contemporary and present livelihoods" (Graugaard 2020c, 30). Consequently, Kalaallit narratives are stripped "of their lived relevance, except if they figure as counter-narratives that directly address (but are still confined to) colonial representation" (Graugaard 2020c, 33), thus objectifying Kalaallit and continually reinforcing Inuit stereotypes (Fienup-Riordan 1995). Closely following Graugaard, who builds on Papaschase Cree scholar Dwayne Donald (2012), I consider an engagement with decolonial methodology and Indigenous thought relevant for cultivating a research sensibility that acknowledges and draws attention to existing imbalances in my research relations. I concur that a sensible research practice does not necessarily "restructure colonial relations and power asymmetries in the research endeavour, […] rather, it is laboured as a way to nurture recognition of, responsiveness to and reciprocity with the relations that I engage and the stories that need to be told" (Graugaard 2020c, 51).

There have been shortcomings in reckoning with my positionality as a non-Indigenous scholar, due to my ignorance and lack of experience working in a Kalaallit-Danish research environment. I did not question the fact that I was not required to comply with any further guidelines for ethical and responsible conduct of research in Kalaallit Nunaat once I passed the

Danish ethics committee criteria—a circumstance that was criticised by the late Kalaaleq scholar Lene Kielsen Holm over a decade ago (Holm, Grenoble, and Virginia 2011). A persistent discomfort towards my complicity in perpetuating a Eurocentric research frame that disregards Kalaallit perspectives led me to rethink and adjust my practice over time, and I am deeply indebted to both Kalaallit scholars and acquaintances[2] who, through ongoing formal and informal conversations, reading recommendations, and their own practices, have generously proposed alternative ways of approaching the Kalaallit-Danish "field-site". In the context of this specific paper, decolonial applications can primarily be found in the phase of analysis and writing, where my intent is to share "knowledge" and not "information", making clear what theories and analyses inform my work and contribute to the construction of this knowledge (Smith 2012). The practice of *multimodal knotting*—oscillating between and reading across different modes/knots of engagement and media, me being one of these modes/knots—enables me to continuously unpack my discomfort by embracing a certain level of disorientation and ambivalence (Alvarez Astacio, Dattatreyan, and Shankar 2021) and staying with the "bad habitus" engrained in the discipline of anthropology (Takaragawa et al. 2019).

## Storytelling as a Social Activity

My interest in storytelling lies in its relational, social, and dialogical potential, and the knowledge and meaning-making practice it entails. The story is understood not as data or a product that can be extracted, but rather as what Julie Cruikshank (1998), relying on her long-term work with Yukon Elders, considers a "social activity", where context, as in situatedness (D. Haraway 1988), is key. In Michael Jackson's (2014) terms, stories can be considered a social currency upon which we all agree; a means to trade experiences in a format in which everyone is willing to partake. Storytelling is a highly social endeavour, a joint effort between storyteller and audience: a relational form of knowledge creation where the storyteller does one half of the work and the audience the other half. The practice of storytelling is not an individual activity but is rather part of what Hannah Arendt (1958) describes as the "web of human relationships" (1958, 184). Whenever someone tells a story, they are inserting themselves into a pre-existing web of relations, adding to what has been before, affecting everyone they encounter.

2. Such as, but not limited to (!): Birgit Kleist Pedersen, Kirstine Møller, Inge Seiding, Laura Lennert Jensen, Naja Dyrendom Graugaard, Vivi Vold, Arnannguaq Autzen, Berda Larsen, and Maannguaq Rosing.

Building on Arendt (1958), Jackson (2014) advocates moving away from a European tradition that largely focuses on the individual and rationalises narratives as being singular creations removed from others and external influences. He argues that a story is a construct of social relations, as in "ongoing dialogue(s) and redaction(s) within the field of intersubjectivity" (Jackson 2014, 40), bringing together three entities: the individual, the relations we have with each other, and the connections to the world around us (Jackson 2014, 13). Looking beyond the individualism of the European tradition leads me to Indigenous and non-Indigenous thinkers working within Indigenous research paradigms, who consider relationality to be central to understanding the social fabric of this world and our place in it (Wilson 2008; Kovach 2009; McGrath 2011; Andersen and O'Brien 2017; Hokowhitu et al. 2020; Tynan 2021). Wilson (2008) considers relationships as omnipresent, being "what forms us, our world, our cosmos and our reality," and likens the individual to "a huge knot—a point where thousands and millions of relationships come together" (2008, 76). Thus stories are not only repositories for knowledge but, as Margaret Kovach (2009) suggests, they also signify relationships and are "active agents within a relational world, pivotal in giving insight into a phenomenon" (2009, 94). My interest thus lies in the potential of stories to tell us something about our relationship with the world around us, and I embrace Haraway's notion of relation as being "the smallest possible unit of analysis" (Haraway 2003, 20). Stories offer what Katherine McKittrick (2021) describes as an "aesthetic relationality that relies on the dynamics of creating-narrating-listening-hearing-reading-and-sometimes-unhearing" (2021, 6); only through this interdependence does a story come into existence, unfolding its narrative and action onto this world.

Without understanding why a story might have been told in the first place, we can only grasp part of its meaning. The embeddedness of the story—the time, place, and audience for whom it is generated—is an ingrained part of its content and fabric. In the context of Black studies and anticolonial thought, McKittrick stresses the fact that stories do not provide answers but instead serve to "signal ways of living" (McKittrick 2021, 7), advocating to also pay attention to what a story does not tell, what stays hidden, and what can be found between the lines. In relation to Indigenous storywork, Jo-Ann Archibald (2008) speaks of a "surface story", whereby a story functions as a metaphor for something else, a different kind of story. Once listeners understand and decipher the overall metaphor, they can return to the story and create new meaning from it.

To better understand stories and the practice of storytelling, we must go beyond the obvious and embrace a constant oscillation between the stories; "front- and backend", teller and listener, time and space, and any other combination of these relations. Following Cruikshank's idea that we

must move past analysing the story as text to understand it as "part of a communicative process", I offer my own reading of two *Future Memory Stories*, written by Arnannguaq Autzen (2019) and Paninnguaq Lind Jensen (2020), which I perceive to be marked by deep-seated notions of solidarity, responsibility, and care towards their fellow landsmen. In this, I attend to "what the story says" and "what the story can do" (Cruikshank 1998, 41) with regards to better understanding Kalaallit community relations. I also suggest an overall metaphor—*qanilaarneq* ("closeness")—that helped me connect these stories in their general intent to mediate conflict and mend rifts in the contemporary colonial landscape of Kalaallit Nunaat. Though I understand the observed notions of solidarity, responsibility, and care as the social activity executed through the practice of storytelling, I use the metaphor of *qanilaarneq* to better conceptualize the imagined future state of community relations as part of that action. I thus add a third component to Cruikshank's notion of the story as action, not only paying attention to "what the story says" and "what the story can do" (Cruikshank 1998, 41), but also *what the story imagines otherwise*.

## Relational Accountability and Multimodal Knotting

The relevance of making stories also applies to our research practices and goes beyond how stories are told by others by extending to the way they are retold or re-presented through other means and mediums. Ben Okri (1998) considers the moment of reading a story to be the creation of "world[s] from words", a "co-production between writer and reader" (1998, 64), solidifying the responsibility we, as researchers telling stories of other people's stories, and you, as readers making "world[s] from words" have. Within an Indigenous research paradigm, this responsibility amounts to what Shawn Wilson (2008) refers to as "relational accountability," where researchers form respectful relationships with the people and ideas they study and, by clearly positioning themselves as part of this setup, allow the reader to form a relationship with them as well. Relational accountability is not a straightforward act; it demands reflection on the specific practices that inform my thinking when engaging with stories and their situatedness. This requires ongoing negotiation with my interlocutors and colleagues, making it possible for me as a non-Indigenous researcher to reflect on my positionality within that mesh of human relations. The challenge is how to use but not misuse Indigenous thought as part of my own thinking. While I have no clear-cut solution, I consider it important, as Zoe Todd (2016) points out, to always present Indigenous knowledge in its context, for it is grounded in relationality, and not consider Indigenous knowledge as a remedy for problems generated by Western states. I also concur with Rauna

Kuokannen (2008), who builds on Spivak's (1995) "disinterest in being 'pure', theoretically or otherwise" when arguing that knowledge constantly emerges from all sides. I work towards developing the craft and sensibility to traverse between more-than-one way of thinking and understanding of being in this world, a task that Indigenous people have been doing by default for centuries, perpetually "finding ways to negotiate with dominant discourses" (2008, xvi).

My practice is informed by multimodality as an overarching principle in the research process. Here, "multimodal" does not primarily relate to the implementation of specific tools or new technologies as part of my multimodal ethnographic practice; rather, it points with heightened attention to distinct modes of engagement throughout the research's design, practice, analysis, and writing phases (see e.g., Hurdley and Dicks 2011; Pink 2011; Collins, Durington, and Gill 2017; Collins and Durington 2020; Takaragawa et al. 2019; Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamón 2021; Moraitopoulou 2021). In my usage of the term multimodal—"having or involving several modes" (Merriam-Webster 2021)—I recognise the interrelatedness of different media and modes in these research phases and I am interested in how they connect to the knowledge creation process itself. I hereby offer *multimodal knotting* as the guiding concept in my engagement with the fabric of my field and the data it generates. Following Christos Varvantakis and Sevasti-Melissa Nolas (2019), I thus understand the process of analysis as an "embodied sense-making practice" (2019, 367) that allows me to position myself in relation to my field, the participants, and my data. Similarly, Wilson (2008) considers it imperative to "look at an entire system of relationships as a whole" (2008, 120) as the basis of analysis. Rather than attending to only one knot or mode of exchange/site/space, I consider the strings that connect these knots and the mesh they form; a structure Wilson describes as a "data and analysis […] circular fishing net" (2008, 120). Through the notion of *multimodal knotting*, I explicate how connections are made between the different modes and media I encounter, giving insight into my process of analysis and weaving new stories in the process (Varvantakis and Nolas 2019). I therefore bring together the following "knots": the Kalaallit storytellers and their intended audiences; the stories generated as part of *future memory work* in the form of their textual and visual representations; the feedback generated through their online publication (as cited above in the focus group); and the social and political background that shapes their creation. By reading across these different materials and sites, I draw attention to the relations that connect them, oscillating back and forth, creating more and more string combinations—string figures, if you will (Haraway 2013), that tie these multiple modalities together.

## Notions of Solidarity, Care, and Responsibility in Kalaallit Storytelling

By agreeing to refine and publish their stories on the *Future Memory Stories* website, the storytellers moved from an audience of one (me, the researcher) to an audience of many, virtually anyone with access to the stories online. During my fieldwork in 2018–20, I encountered an abundance of derogatory narratives about Kalaallit society in Kalaallit, Danish, and foreign media, often centering on social problems or political issues, such as the "child-neglect issue" in Tasiilaq in 2019 or the fight for liberation from Denmark (see e.g., Grønbech 2018; DRTV 2019; Turnowsky 2019a, 2019b; Gronholt-Pedersen and Skydsgaard 2020). It is thus feasible to suggest that the people I worked with felt the need to offer nuanced alternatives to an otherwise negative and one-sided portrayal of life in Kalaallit Nunaat when engaging with me as a first recipient of their stories. I acknowledge that my presence is part of the context and situatedness of the creation of the stories, but I would also like to move beyond people's initial objectives and focus rather on the way people communicate and shape their relations with the Kalaallit community through their storytelling practices.

What struck me most about the general intent of the written stories were the gestures of solidarity towards other members of Kalaallit society and a clear positioning of the storytellers: envisioning their respective roles within their society, formulating common values, expressing notions of care, and assuming responsibility. For example, Pivinnguaq Mørch (2020) shares his vision of talking about emotions more freely and aims to set an example through his writing, wanting to "motivate and inspire [his] fellow Greenlanders," and Suuluaraq John Petersen Motzfeld (2019) explains how important it is for him that "people still care for one another and help each other out." Lasse Kyed (2019), in his story *The Concept of Being Good Pitsaassuseq pillugu*, advocates for society's need to agree on what is a "good thing"—such as centering on the needs of Kalaallit children—and then "work on it together no matter [the] standpoint." Paninnguaq Huusfeldt (2021) conveys her message within the story's title, *We Are Inuit. We Are Strong. Uagut tassa Inuit. Inuit nukittuut*, wishing for Kalaallit society to know more about the "old ways" and drawing attention to the fact that Kalaallit "have always been strong and resilient." Through their narratives, the authors reach out to Kalaallit society in an inclusive manner, advocating for unity and a shared focus on what can bring society forward. Below, Autzen's (2019) and Jensen's (2020) stories are presented in full, as published on the *Future Memory Stories* websites, followed by my own reflections on their storytelling practices within a community context. Here, I observe Jackson's (2014) urge to look beyond a focus on the individual and draw inspiration from Gerald Alfred's (1999) suggestion that "it is impossible to

understand an indigenous reality by focusing on individuals or discrete aspects of culture outside of a community context" (Alfred 1999, xvi). The story therefore functions as a site to better understand relationships, the way connections are established between human beings, and, building on Cruikshank (1998), "provides ways of thinking about how human communities continue to hold together" (1998, 2).

> ***I Want to Take Action Iliuuseqarusuppunga***
> by Arnannguaq Autzen, Nuuk Kalaallit Nunaat, October 2019
>
> I want to be remembered as that person who took action: that person who voiced her opinion and took action.
>
> Right now, I'm doing everything I can to overcome my performance anxiety. Because if you want to be heard, you have to speak up. In Greenland, we are still recovering from the turbulent times of Danification in the 1950s-60s and, until now, it has been taboo to talk about our feelings. We don't talk about the rape and violence in our society but slowly, very slowly, we are beginning to open up about our feelings. I think now is the time to take action. I want to be the voice that helps people get on the right track. I want to guide them, and I want them to know that it's ok to be afraid. It's ok to be a little lost. It's ok to be sad.
>
> In the picture, you can see me as a child sitting beside my dear grandmother, who is holding my hand. The most valuable thing my grandmother taught me is that it's important to be there for people in life. And even today, I can still feel her holding my hand, no matter if I am happy, afraid, sad, angry, frustrated or living my life to the fullest.
>
> I would like to take your hand and show you that you are not alone.

In *I Want to Take Action Iliuuseqarusuppunga*, Arnannguaq Autzen (2019) reflects on her own role as an agent of change in Kalaallit society. She situates her story against the background of Danification in the 1950s and 1960s, pointing out its far-reaching consequences, such as the many social problems that must be constructively addressed in Kalaallit society today. Her criticism of past and present-day negligence of these issues is clear-headed and formulated in a manner of stating facts, building on everyday lived reality. Autzen writes of her belief that changing the status quo is now possible, positioning herself as an actor bringing that change into effect. She reaches out to her fellow countrymen with a clear message of what she can offer: "I want to be the voice that helps people get on the right track" (2019). Autzen considers it her responsibility to actively contribute to achieving the social changes conducive to moving forward. She

offers herself as both a companion and a source of strength, in body and mind, enabling others to work through traumatic experiences. Accompanying the textual component of the story, Autzen provides a picture of herself as a young child holding the hand of her grandmother (see Figure 2), contextualising the image as emblematic of her own development, having received guidance from her Elder and offering to pass it on. By sharing her experiences and acknowledging her vulnerability and processes of becoming, she normalises receiving guidance as part of a healing process. In her final sentence, she addresses the reader directly: "I would like to take your hand, and show you that you are not alone" (2019). The intimate and caring gesture of "taking someone's hand" extends beyond the corporeal towards establishing a mental and spiritual connection between Autzen and her envisioned audience.

**Figure 2.** "The day I was baptized", October 1996, Nuuk Kalaallit Nunaat. Photo by Arnannguaq Autzen.

***Planting Seeds Naasussamik naatitsineq***
by Paninnguaq Lind Jensen, Nuuk Kalaallit Nunaat, January 2020

> I am from Narsaq, in the south of Greenland. When I think back to my childhood, the colonial structure was right inside my home. We weren't allowed to speak Greenlandic around my father and when we ate traditional food, he would eat something else. I felt really misplaced, like I didn't really belong, and I couldn't understand who I was.
>
> When I started working with traditional tattoos, I was able to finally discover this part of myself and a whole new world opened up. The more I learned about our culture, the more I started to understand myself. I don't feel angry or frustrated anymore because I am finally nursing a part of me that wasn't allowed to exist when I was a kid.
>
> I think that's why I dedicate myself to this kind of work. There are so many people that have the same identity problem as I have. They are being told that they are not good enough as people. Here in Greenland, nationality and ethnicity are put in the same box and there is no end to figuring out who is truly Greenlandic or Inuit. People use tattooing as a way to clean up the mess that this has created inside their souls. They are claiming their identity as a mixed person. And being 'mixed' doesn't mean half and half. Half and half sounds like you are broken to begin with and only glued together. No, being mixed is being everything at once. Many people that I work with are just like me, the product of colonialism.
>
> Our society is not ready to talk about race yet. But I want to start planting seeds here and there, and in a couple of years, we can open the subject. I want to be remembered as a person that did not accept the way things were, who was able to make a difference and who pushed for change in our society.

Taking responsibility through care is also closely interwoven in Paninnguaq Lind Jensen's (2020) story *Planting Seeds Naasussamik naatitsineq*. Jensen is an acclaimed Kalaaleq tattoo artist specialising in traditional Inuit tattooing, and the story revolves around her initial reasons for pursuing this specialisation. A child of a Kalaaleq mother and a Danish father, Jensen experienced her home as a place of innate "colonial structure" (2020). Her father would reject anything Kalaallit—from speaking the language to eating Kalaallit food—which left her feeling misplaced, not understanding who she was. Later in life, working with traditional tattooing, she began learning about Kalaallit culture and discovered a part of her "that wasn't allowed to exist" (2020). Today, she uses her skills as an artist to help members of Kalaallit society who are being told "that they are not good enough as people" (2020). As Jensen explains, many of her clients are living with the consequences of an environment where "nationality and ethnicity

are put in the same box" and where the tensions of "who is truly Greenlandic or Inuit" remain unresolved. Care is transferred through every drop of ink she places below the skin, making it possible for individuals to claim their plural ethnicities and place in Kalaallit society. The picture accompanying Jensen's story makes this care visible: Jensen can be seen in the middle of a tattooing session, the hand of a client resting in front of her; she holds a tool in her right hand, putting on what appears to be the final touches of two fine lines on the person's finger (see Figure 3). Jensen concludes her story by pointing out that "society is not ready to talk about race yet" but she nonetheless aims to lay the groundwork in the now, "plant[ing] seeds here and there" in the hope that future discussions will grow. Echoing Autzen, Jensen's own body and mind become sites of and vectors for care; through her skills as a tattoo artist and the acquired knowledge of traditional tattooing, she helps people mend the inner rifts they carry.

**Figure 3.** "Revitalization", August 2019, Nuuk Kalaallit Nunaat.
Photo by Paninnguaq Pikilak.

## Mending Rifts and Mediating Conflict

Within their storytelling practice, both Autzen and Jensen not only position themselves in society but also address fellow Kalaallit as part of their storytelling practice, thus performing a "social activity" (Cruikshank 1998) that is embedded in an existing web of human relations (Arendt 1958). Autzen reaches out to lost individuals who were caught between Danification in the 1950s and Greenlandification in the 1970s and who suffer the consequences today. She inserts herself as an actor wishing to bring release to the affected people and points towards the overall need to break existing taboos in Kalaallit society, highlighting the importance of talking about real-life consequences, such as violence and rape. While Autzen shares her intention for the near future—lending a hand both conceptually and literally to other community members—Jensen reflects on the role she already occupies, which is bringing closure to people with mixed identities. Jensen considers her work as having an effect in the now whilst laying the groundwork for a time yet to come, a time when talking about issues of race will be possible. My thesis is that both authors use storytelling to mend rifts and mediate conflict, similar to what Cruikshank (1998) describes as "build(ing) connections where rifts might otherwise appear" (1998, 3). Their stories are being used to contextualize as well as communicate their own practices and intentions (planned or ongoing) to a wider audience, envisioning the contemporary differently in the course of it. If stories serve to "signal ways of living" (McKittrick 2021, 7), Autzen's and Jensen's storytelling practices demonstrate a caring and pragmatic approach to reconciling conflicts experienced by different groups in Kalaallit society. They both implement individually-based solutions whilst addressing broader issues, such as taboos that must be overcome for society to move forward. Indeed, both storytellers bring together what has been fragmented, building connections where they detect fractures, creating a platform for possible dialogue, drawing opposing parties close, and inserting themselves by clearly communicating their intent and personal rationales.

Following Kovach's (2009) suggestion that stories are indeed "active agents within a relational world, pivotal in giving insight into a phenomenon" (2009, 94), I wondered how best to describe the phenomena observed in Kalaallit storytelling practices. Above, I term them as expressions of solidarity, care, and responsibility towards Kalaallit society in an effort to mend fractures, but I believe these categories do only limited justice to describing imagined community relations in Kalaallit Nunaat. Until recently, not knowing how to express myself better, I used the gesture of embracing someone with both arms and then pulling them close to describe these relations. Two people apart would represent Kalaallit society as it is now; the movement of embracing resembles the storytelling practice, with the two people hugging becoming the desired state of an imagined future

society. Irritated by having to use my whole body every time I wanted to make that observation clear, I went back to the stories in search of a concept that was more applicable. I found my answer in Maannguaq Rosing's (2019) story *Qanilaarneq*, its title translating to "closeness" as a state of being, as well as "being close" as an action. I suggest that the term can be used as a metaphor to conceptualize the expressed future state of community relations in Kalaallit society: two people hugging in close embrace, entangled in each other's arms. In the following section, I contextualize *qanilaarneq* by first sketching out Rosing's story, which leads me to Kalaaleq artist Bolatta Silis-Høegh's artwork of the same name. This is followed by a brief excursion into the term's etymology and insights into its contemporary usage, as discussed with Kalaallit native speakers as part of developing this paper.

## Qanilaarneq ("closeness/being close") as a Desired State

The materials Rosing (2019) provided to complement her story *Qanilaarneq*, namely, a personal object and a photo, further convey the meaning of its title on visual and embodied levels. The material object is a self-made cyanotype displaying her niece's hand placed in the palm of her own, fingers outstretched and slightly interwoven (see Figure 4). The blue colour of the cyanotype chemicals accentuates the contrast between light

**Figure 4**. "Cyanotype Picture" by Maannguaq Rosing, May 2019, Nuuk Kalaallit Nunaat. Photo by Anne S. Chahine.

and shadow, giving the image a solemn yet intimate appearance. The accompanying photo is a snapshot of an indoor scene and shows Rosing in close embrace with her niece, leaning towards the girl and planting a kiss atop her head (see Figure 5). The photo does not signify a gesture of ephemerality, as in a brief display of affection between two people; rather, it conveys a kind of closeness that demands a pause from whatever else is occupying the couple's attention, a willingness to commit fully to this moment of embrace. Rosing considers the cyanotype of their interlinked hands to be a representation of the love and affection she feels for her niece, best summarised as *qanilaarneq*. She continues, describing how this connects to Kalaallit society as a whole, touching upon the high pace of the contemporary and the ubiquitous consumption of social media, which, in her opinion, creates "a distance between people even though they are in the same room" (Rosing 2019). Rosing ends her story by contending "that we are all human and that we all need closeness, love and affection. No matter how busy we are." The combination of story, cyanotype, and photo hereby forms a dense multimodal description of *qanilaarneq* as a relational concept that elucidates the state of two people engaging in close affection as well as the corporeal, mental, and spiritual meanings of the term.

**Figure 5.** "GU Gymnasium", June 2013, Sisimiut Kalaallit Nunaat.
Photo by Maannguaq Rosing.

From the affection between an aunt and her niece, I move on to *qanilaarneq* brought to life in the form of a sculpture created by Kalaaleq artist Bolatta Silis-Høegh (see Figure 6). Silis-Høegh's *Qanilaarneq* stands in Copenhagen's Vestre Kirkegård, one of the largest cemeteries in Scandinavia, and consists of four oblong stones made from rocks donated by each of the four Kalaallit municipalities: Sermersooq, Qeqqata Kommunia, Qaasuitsup Kommunia, and Kommune Kujalleq (Sumut 2021). Arranged in a circle and leaning into each other, the stone slabs mirror an *inussuk*, a man-made stone citadel that usually functions as a landmark in Kalaallit Nunaat. The large size of the single stones, almost like oversized human beings, enables visitors to further explore the sculpture, walking in between and being embraced by them.[3]

**Figure 6.** "Qanilaarneq" sculpture by Bolatta Silis-Høegh, September 2021, Vestre Kirkegård, Copenhagen Denmark. Photo by Anne S. Chahine.

The similarities between Rosing's and Silis-Høegh's translation of *qanilaarneq* into a medium outside of the textual form become most apparent when placing them side by side (see Figure 7). While Rosing's

3. I would like to thank Bolatta Silis Høegh for taking the time to further explain her intent behind the sculpture during an interview in the fall of 2021.

photo displays two people embracing, connected through a kiss, the picture of Silis-Høegh's larger-than-human stone slabs, through their arrangement, appear to mirror Rosing's and her niece's bodies leaning into each other, locked in an affectionate embrace.

**Figure 7**. Left: "GU Gymnasium", June 2013, Sisimiut Kalaallit Nunaat. Photo: © Maannguaq Rosing. Right: "Qanilaarneq" by Bolatta Sillis-Høegh, September 2021, Vestre Kirkegård, Copenhagen Denmark. Photo by Anne S. Chahine.

The etymology of *qanilaarneq* gives further insight into the fabric of its meaning[4] and expands the idea of closeness to humility. According to German/Danish missionary linguist Samuel Petrus Kleinschmidt (1871), *kanilârpok* (here in its previous orthography) translates to Danish as "er ydmyg" (is humble), "er sagtmodig" (is meek) and "føje sig efter andre" (accommodate others). More recently, *qanip* translates to "be near (to)" in its Greenlandic versions and in other Inuit dialects (Fortescue, Jacobson, and Kaplan 1994, 283).

I further discuss the contemporary usage of the term with Kalaallit native speakers[5], and in the following I share a condensed version of its various meanings as conveyed to me. In direct translation, the word has been

4. I am grateful for the help of Professor Emiratus Ilisimatusarfik, University of Greenland, Birgit Kleist Pedersen, and linguistics PhD student Camilla Kleemann-Andersen, also affiliated with Ilisimatusarfik, who developed this section with me.
5. I would like to thank Brigit Kleist Pedersen, Berda Larsen, Maannguaq Rosing, Vivi Vold, Arnannguaq Autzen, and Thor Autzen for taking the time to have these conversations in the fall of 2021 via e-mail, video-chat, or over a home-cooked dinner.

equated with such terms as intimacy, closeness, nearness or being close, being empathetic, and being present with others, as well as being caring, considerate, and warm-hearted to others. The concept refers to an action (being close, being empathetic, caring) and describes the fabric of the relationship addressed (intimacy, closeness, nearness). One of the most prominent attributes of *qanilaarneq* as a concept describing people-relations are seemingly built-in notions of reciprocal care and responsibility. Although *qanilaarneq* was described to me as being restricted to an intimate notion between people, the term also prompted reflections among my discussants on the overall state of Kalaallit society. For example, *qanilaarneq* was mentioned as a starting point to better describe how Kalaallit society was initially set up to work in pre-colonial times, referencing innate relations between people but also between humans and more-than-humans, such as animals, spirits, and the land and its resources across space and time. Finding *qanilaarneq* in these relations is equated with achieving balance in one's engagement with the world, such as taking only as much as you need and being there for others, which in turn allows for a sustainable way of life on a mental as well as physical level.

## Conclusion

My interest in storytelling as a "social activity" lies in its knowledge and meaning-making practice, how it functions "as a strategy of communication" (Cruikshank 1998, xv), and its potential for better understanding how we make sense of the world around us. Storytelling is not an individual nor straightforward endeavour; it is deeply intertwined with our social fabric and situatedness and is directed at a plurality of audiences, the presence of which re-shapes the nature of our stories. Terry Tafoya advises us to "listen in circles because there are stories inside and between stories" (Tafoya 1995, 12, cited in Wilson 2008), prompting iterative listening practices that enable us to notice the changes we undergo in our own understanding of these stories. The Kalaallisut term *qanilaarneq* is one of these "stories inside and between stories," conjured by Kalaallit storytelling practices, and I suggest *qanilaarneq* as a metaphor for conceptualizing a desired state of Kalaallit community relations.

My iterative "listening practices" rely on *multimodal knotting* as a way to draw connections between the storytellers and their contributed multimedia, their concrete and imagined audiences, and the specific Kalaallit-Danish research setting. What becomes visible in reading across these different modalities, each understood as a single knot, is a mesh-like structure marked by deep-seated notions of care, solidarity, and responsibility towards Kalaallit society: from Autzen's wish to "take your hand, and show you that you are not alone" to Jensen's application of ink below the skin of

her client to "clean up the mess that this has created inside their souls"; from Rosing's hand embracing the fingers of her niece, kissing her head and wishing for society to be less distanced, to Silis-Høegh's sculpture that functions as a Kalaallit landmark on Danish soil, offering embrace to anyone who wanders through. *Qanilaarneq*, I argue, is a fruitful metaphor to comprehend the fabric of this mesh, representative of imagined Kalaallit community relations as envisioned by the young Kalaallit storytellers with whom I interacted. The Kalaallisut term, in my understanding, is representative of how the Kalaallit community perceives the individual as being part of a complex societal web spanning space and time. The corporeality of *qanilaarneq* can be traced through textual and visual representations of the storytellers' narratives: hands and bodies are everywhere, reaching out, pulling close, giving care, extending kindness. Stories function as tools to communicate the need and willingness to overcome pressing societal issues by inserting oneself as an actor of change and actively mediating these conflicts by reaching out to the Kalaallit community, while the concept of *qanilaarneq* transpires as a "between story" across these different story sites, describing the envisioned relationship between people: a desire for being, once again, close with one another; creating a common mindset that is more forgiving and understanding; embracing a willingness to tackle problems that are often ignored; and envisioning a community that comes together as one voice focused on the well-being of a people while also acknowledging—and not disregarding—the complexity of the colonial present.

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