

# **Reproducing the Indigenous: John Møller's Studio Portraits of Greenlanders in Context**

Ingeborg Høvik

UiT The Arctic University of Tromsø

## ABSTRACT

Between 1889 and 1922 John Møller (1867–1935), the first professional Greenlandic photographer, produced more than 3,000 glass plate negatives documenting life in Western Greenland around the turn of the twentieth century. Rooted in an internal understanding of self, Møller's photographs played an important part in the formation of a contemporary image of Greenlandic indigenous identity. At the same time, Møller's photographic practice was arguably entangled in and delimited by a historical reality that was structured by colonial relations of power.

This paper examines the social and art-historical contexts of Møller's work, focusing in particular on a selection of his formal studio portraits. My reading of these portraits suggests a case in which conflicting impulses coincide. On the one hand, Møller produced images that played out the “ethnographic convention”, a European form of representation dating back to the sixteenth century used for the documentation of non-western indigenous peoples as specimens. However, in acting out that convention, Møller's photographs hint at a subtle, progressive building up of identity that reclaimed images of Greenlanders for themselves, and turned an originally negative, external image of indigeneity into a positive sense of self.

Ingeborg Høvik

Centre for Women's and Gender Research

UiT, the Arctic University of Norway

PO. Box 6050 Langnes

9037 Tromsø

ingeborg.hovik@uit.no

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From 1889 until his retirement in 1922, the Greenlandic photographer John Møller (1867–1935) produced more than 3,000 glass plate negatives, which he developed in his studio in Nuuk. Now held in the collection of the Greenland National Museum (NKA), Møller's photographs document life, people, society, and the built and natural environments of Western Greenland around the turn of the twentieth century. During Møller's career, the main part of his oeuvre remained in the confines of Greenlandic and Danish homes, where they featured in private photo albums, or as framed photographs, carte-de-visits and postcards. However, a substantial number of his photographs also travelled beyond this local, domestic sphere and were published abroad in, for example, the Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen's 1890 narrative *Paa ski over Grønland* (published in English as *The First Crossing of Greenland*), the Swedish artist Ossian Elgström's 1916 travel narrative *Moderna Eskimåer* [Modern Eskimos] and the second volume of the Danish explorer Knud Rasmussen's 1924 collection of oral stories from Western Greenland, *Myter og Sagn fra Grønland* [Myths and Legends from Greenland]. Alongside his work as a photographer, Møller was also an active figure in Greenland's burgeoning cultural and political life, writing articles for the periodical *Atuagagdliutit* and holding seats in both local and national councils after 1900.

Now firmly established in the historical record of modern Greenland's cultural-political awakening, Møller and his photographs played (and continue to play) a part in forming a contemporary image of Greenlandic indigenous identity rooted in an internal understanding of self.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, Møller's work gave images of Greenland back to the people of Greenland, who could affirm their identities through the portraits on display in their homes and the homes of friends and relatives. On the other hand, when circulating in international publications, Møller's photographs potentially expanded, adjusted and even countered popular discourses on "the Eskimo" sustained in Europe at the time. As bell hooks argues, a full participation in the production of images is crucial for colonised peoples because "the field of representation (how we see ourselves, how others see us) is a site of ongoing struggle" (hooks 1994, 46). In her discussion of African-American photography, she reads the family photographs that decorated the walls of black homes before desegregation as an intervention and "disruption of white control of black images" (hooks 1994, 47). If Møller's photographs – at least those family photographs that similarly hung in Greenlandic homes – offered a comparable site of resistance, his photographic practice was nonetheless entangled in and possibly delimited by a historical reality that was structured by colonial relations of power.

From Møller's photographs of people, at least two types of portraits can be roughly identified. One involves photographs shot outside his studio that are more documentary in nature, featuring for example group portraits of particular professions such as midwives, *kiffat* (domestic help) and hunters. Many of these are from Nuuk and the surrounding area, but Møller also took a

number of photographs along the west coast of Greenland while working as an interpreter and scribe for the colonial inspectors during the summers from 1889 to 1913 (Møller, J., undated). The other type concerns formal portraits primarily staged at Møller's studio or in private homes, in which the sitters are customers or family members drawn predominantly from the urban, upper stratum of Greenlandic society to which Møller himself belonged. Taken at the initiative of the sitters, these photographs are more intimate and personal in nature, particularly those taken in the home where the surroundings lend a narrative, contextual aspect to the scenes. By contrast, the portraits shot at Møller's studio are markedly more spartan in their aesthetic. They are taken either against a rough exterior, whitewashed stone wall and earthen ground, or inside the studio with wooden floorboards and a bare, light-coloured wall as background. Generally characterised by little to no furniture or other adornments, and with the sitter(s) rather rigidly posed, the portraits are shot from a regular distance and overall are suggestive of production work.

In this article I approach a selection of the latter, namely the formal portraits Møller took at his studio, in relationship to varying contexts: the socio-historical circumstance in which Møller and his customers operated, conventions of representation in terms of western portraiture and ethnographic imaging and, finally, other photographs of Greenlanders taken by Danes during the course of Møller's lifetime. My aims are twofold. First, I hope to contribute to the existing literature on Møller's photographs (Kleivan 1958, 1996, 1998) by extending the discussion beyond the local, biographical and descriptive to include more analytical, art-historical perspectives. Second, I am interested in how we might understand and think through Møller's photographs in relationship to emerging scholarly debates about modernity (modernities) and indigeneity (indigeneities). My reading of Møller's formal portraits suggests that they represent conflicting impulses. On the one hand, he produced images that played out a stereotypical form of representation of non-western indigenous peoples that can be traced back to the origins of the "ethnographic convention" in the sixteenth century. However, in the playing out of that convention, the interplay between photographer and sitter in Møller's photographs hints at a subtle, progressive building up of identity that reclaimed images of Greenlanders for themselves.

### **A Portrait of Lars and Louise Møller**

A portrait John took of his parents Lars (1842–1926) and Louise in 1917 shows the elderly couple seated on separate chairs in the simple and austere setting typical of John's studio photographs (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> The only ornamentation in this scene, which is framed by a bare wall and plain floorboards, are the two Danish medals worn on Lars's left breast and the white pattern on Louise's *kamiks*, which encircle her knees in the manner characteristic of the tops of Greenlandic women's boots. As natural highlights of the photograph, these patches of white immediately attract the

viewer's attention, pointing to – if unintended – the Danish-Greenlandic colonial relationship and the specific nature of that experience for the Møller family.

The historical situation to which the Møller family belonged has received differing scholarly interpretations. Roughly sketched out, certain popular and more traditional understandings of colonial Greenland emphasise the uniqueness of the Danish-Greenlandic relationship when compared to colonial situations elsewhere (Jensen 2008, 59). This type of literature tends to point to the generally peaceful relations that existed between Danes and Greenlanders throughout history. It lists as evidence an apparent absence of physical violence and physical resistance, as well as an initiative made by certain colonial administrators to develop a literate and textual Greenlandic culture and to incorporate Greenlanders in political bodies of local government at an early point in time. Danish colonial rule is in this vein of thought thus considered remarkably enlightened and humane, if not also advantageous and profitable for the subjected Greenlanders (Møller and Dybbroe 1981, 2–4; Thisted 2005, 17).

More recent scholarship challenges perceptions of Denmark as a rather insignificant colonial power somehow disconnected from the brute, imperial force of larger empires like those of Britain and France. Jørgen Viemose describes Danish colonialism in Greenland as a history of continued exploitation of people and natural resources that rendered an originally independent and self-sufficient people increasingly reliant on the colonising power for survival (Viemose 1977, 7–9, 44). Arguing that the same power paradigms as in other colonial relations were at play in Danish colonial ideology and practices, scholars such as Lars Jensen (2008), Pia Krüger Johansen (2008) and Christina Petterson (2012, 31) reveal instances of racism, violence and suppression in Denmark's dealings with Greenland, demonstrating how Denmark was anything but a humane and benevolent colonial master (see also Viemose 1977, 30). To this might be added a critique of the seemingly democratic efforts made by Danish colonial administrators in Greenland in the second half of the nineteenth century – namely, that the most significant Greenlandic journal *Atuagagdliutit*, first published in 1861 and distributed and read across Greenland, was edited by the colonial administrator who effectively edited out voices of critique or resistance (Oldendow 1957, 122). Furthermore, Greenlandic representatives in the local councils of 1862 and onwards exerted in fact little influence on the actual decision making of this political organ, which was run by a commercially oriented state trading company, The Royal Greenland Trading Department (Thuesen 1988, 37–38, 61–66). Instead, the local councils functioned as the extended executive arm of the colonial administration and Danish state, whose primary concern trade and resource extraction (Viemose 1977, 49–52).

These diverging understandings of Greenland's social history at the turn of the twentieth century seem to reflect the complexities of this colonial encounter. Nicholas Thomas points to this

issue with his concept of *colonialisms*, by which he draws attention to the different forms and contradicting, plural and competing elements within the practices and discourses of colonialism that were effected by, for example, the individual motives of the colonisers and the forms of resistance of the colonised (Thomas 1994, 2–3).

Closely associated with both Danish culture and the colonial government in Greenland, Møller's family belonged to an endogamous elite of Greenlanders with European predecessors that made up the colony's upper social stratum (Rasmussen 1986, 1987). Employed in the colonial administration and socially accepted by the Danish upper class, individuals of this small and tight-knit group knew Danish and usually had some form of European education – although for women this meant training as midwives or working as *kiffat* (domestic help) in Danish homes, where they learned European manners and housekeeping to make them eligible for marriage (Rasmussen 1986, 148; see also Vebæk 1990, 139–142).<sup>3</sup>

Towards the end of their lives, John and his father Lars each accepted in turn the Danish King's offer of knighthood, carrying the title of "Dannebrogsmænd" (H. Knutt[?], 4 April 1917; His Kongelige Majestæts Ordenscancelli, 11 May 1931). A colonial strategy for turning "others" into allies, the bestowing of medals and the like, not only facilitated the running of colonised territories through indirect rule, but often became a symbol of status in local communities and a source of individual pride. John's portrait of his parents suggests as much, with Lars clearly having chosen to wear for the occasion of the photograph both the cruciform silver cross of the knighthood he received in 1917 and the circular *Kongelige Fortjenstmedalje* he was given by the Danish King in 1892 (Ordenscapituleet, 8 June 1892). Pinned to Lars's anorak, these medals meant a pledge of allegiance to the Danish Crown, and may be read further as signifying the historical subordination of Inuit beliefs and customs to the faith and rules of the coloniser.<sup>4</sup> The implication is that Lars, at least in part, has been successfully assimilated into and become a proponent of Danish culture.

However, D. C. J. P. Aagaard's late nineteenth-century portrait of a Danish "Dannebrogsmænd" pictured wearing two medals, one being the same silver cross as that of Lars Møller, suggests that this is not necessarily so clear-cut as it first appears (Figure 2).<sup>5</sup> The Dane's European-style waistcoat and suit jacket, blond complexion, straight back and open, slightly upwards looking gaze contrasts with Lars Møller's cotton-based anorak, more rounded posture, clasped hands and disengaged look. While for the Dane, the wearing of his royal awards appears like an undivided honour, the more modest and pensive body language adopted by Lars seems less convinced and self-assured about the meaning of these medals (although this might on the other hand be an expression of Greenlandic ideals of humility).

This reading may be supported by a biographical anecdote recounted by Knud Oldendow (1957, 140) of a meeting between Lars Møller and Frederik VI, the King of Denmark, in

Copenhagen in the winter of 1861–62. On that occasion, Frederik VI – the ruler of Greenland since 1818 – apparently told Lars that this was his first meeting with a Greenlander, to which Lars replied that this was the first time he had met a king. While Lars's answer may suggest a subtle critique of the absurdities of colonialism, the literature on him rather puts weight on the work he did throughout his lifetime to tie Greenland to its "motherland" (Oldendow 1957, 144). Indeed, although Lars's expression in the photograph may suggest a more contemplative response to what it meant to faithfully serve "my hereditary king [...] and fatherland", his award of knighthood almost certainly spoke to his Danish background and, by extension, the social standing of the Møller family and his son John in particular (Møller, L., 4 April 1917).

With Danish grandfathers on both sides of his family, and a father who was chairman for the colonial government, it is perhaps unsurprising that Lars Møller came to work for the Royal Inspector of Southern Greenland, Hinrich Rink, instead of pursuing a traditional Greenlandic life as a hunter (Møller, L., undated).<sup>6</sup> In 1857 Rink received a printing press, which he needed locals to run, and selected Lars, then a boy of fifteen, as one of his employees and sent him to Denmark for a year of training. Throughout his life, Lars worked for the colonial administration as a printer and draughtsman in Nuuk's printing house, and became nationally known for his long-lasting role as editor of *Atuagagdliutit* for a period of almost 50 years (Lynge 1936, 178). In addition to this, Lars frequently accompanied colonial inspectors and other Danes on official travels in Greenland, functioning as guide and interpreter (Møller, L., undated). Through his connection to the colonial administration in Nuuk, Lars came in contact with prominent Europeans; in addition to the Danish king, this included the polar explorers Fridtjof Nansen and Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld, all of whom he corresponded with by letter (Møller, 23 September 1884, 27 February[?] 1889, 21 September 1891, 23 May 1922; Christian R. [King of Denmark], 28 May 1923).

The high regard and social standing Lars built up continued with John, who followed closely in his father's footsteps. When John was twenty-one, Carl Ryberg, later a Royal Inspector of Southern Greenland, encouraged him to go to Copenhagen for professional training. Here, John spent a year as an apprentice with the printer A. Rosenberg, learning typography, printing and etching, followed by a six-month apprenticeship at the graphic studio of Gustav Pauli – according to John, one of the best-known photographers in Copenhagen at the time (Møller, 1 February 1930, 102). Upon his return to Greenland in 1889, John opened a photographic studio connected to the printing house in Nuuk. The colonial administration similarly supported him in this venture, providing him with photographic equipment and, at times, European customers in the case of visiting scientists or travellers (Møller, 1 February 1930, 106). Alongside his work in the studio, John assisted Danish officials on their annual inspection rounds in southern Greenland between 1889 and 1913, functioning like his father before him as interpreter and guide (Møller, J., undated).

Counting the renowned explorer Knud Rasmussen among his friends, John gained access to political life in Greenland, becoming a member of the local council in 1901, and later securing a seat in the first national council of 1911 (Rasmussen, 20 March 1905). In 1921 he received a *belønningsmedalje* (medal of reward) from the Danish King, followed by a knighthood in 1931, four years before his death (Hs Kongelige Majestæts Ordenscancelli, 16 August 1921, 11 May 1931).

John's portrait of his parents is in a sense a fitting biographical image. It not only captured the nature of his father Lars's social position in the Danish-Greenlandic colonial context in the second half of the nineteenth century, but also speaks to John's own experiences as a Greenlander who worked closely with the colonial administration while simultaneously – and perhaps paradoxically – contributing to the progressive awakening of a national sense of self. As captured in the photograph, the respective life stories of Lars and John suggest that they were not oppressed by Denmark's colonial rule, but rather benefitted at least to some degree from it.

### **Lines of Tradition: The Artist in His Studio and The Ethnographic Convention**

At some point between 1906 and 1908, John took a portrait in his studio of his brother, the artist Stephen Møller, and Stephen's wife Hansine (Figure 3).<sup>7</sup> For this occasion, John's studio was atypically furnished with a dark wooden, finely carved chair, a few landscape paintings on the wall, and an easel supporting another landscape painting. In a further deviation from John's standard studio set up, the sitters are positioned almost perpendicular to the camera. Dressed in a European suit and waistcoat with the chain of his pocket watch visible, Stephen poses in three-quarter profile, seated in the chair with his legs crossed facing the easel. His left arm supports his neatly groomed head, with his gaze falling on a block of paper in his lap. Though the page is not visible to the viewer, the paintings decorating the room suggest Stephen is studying one of his own sketches, perhaps for the work on the easel in front of him. This aspect of the photograph fits in an established trope in western art featuring artists in their studio; examples include Rembrandt's self-portrait *The Artist in his Studio* (1626–28) and the Danish artist Christen Købke's *Portræt af Landskabsmaleren Frederik Sødring* [Portrait of the landscape painter Frederik Sødring] of 1832. As in John's photograph of his brother, this motif characteristically shows artists together with objects linking them to their profession.

Stephen's wife Hansine is standing behind him with one hand resting on his shoulder, in a pose suggestive of the supportive, western housewife as well as the artist's muse. Unlike Stephen, she is dressed in Greenlandic style, although she too is drawing on European fashions. She wears a necklace that looks to be made of a precious metal, and has her hair in a braided top that is looser and placed further back on the head than was traditional for Greenlandic women.<sup>8</sup>

This photograph of Stephen and Hansine stands out within John's studio portraits for its compositional and formal qualities. It was also an image that John himself seems to have valued. In 1916, the portrait was published in Ossian Elgström's *Moderna Eskimåer*, as one of "several excellent pictures" (Elgström 1916, 52) that John had selected and provided Elgström with during his travels in Western Greenland the previous year. There appears to be a clear intention behind John's decision to give this particular photograph to Elgström for publication, since in the book his brother is named, referred to as an artist, and John credited as the photographer (Elgström 1916, 50). Not only does the image communicate a strong statement about contemporary Greenlanders through its subject matter (who the sitters are, how they are dressed and how they pose), it is also an image produced by a Greenlander using modern photographic technologies and adeptly employing a mix of artistic conventions and reference points.

Circulating to an international audience through Elgström's book, John's portrait of Stephen and Hansine thus had a clear potential to counter popular ideas about what Greenlanders were and could be in the first decades of the twentieth century. Except for her clothing and Stephen's *kamiks*, there is little that associates the couple with the uncultured, illiterate and primitive "Esquimaux" of nineteenth-century literature on Greenland and the Arctic. Simultaneously, and because of their fluency in European culture, the indigeneity John as photographer and Stephen and Hansine as sitters performed emerges as an immediate, thoroughgoing challenge to longstanding stereotypes in the European imagination. However, the conviction and compositional force of John's photograph of Stephen and Hansine is rarely found in the rest of his studio portraits. His more common approach to portrait photography pointed back to a totally different tradition of western imaging used for representing others.

A typical example of Møller's studio portraits is his photograph of Johan and Bolethe Kreutzmann, both dressed in Greenlandic clothing (Figure 4). Reminiscent of Møller's portrait of his parents as opposed to that of his brother Stephen and sister-in-law Hansine, Johan and Bolethe are positioned against the light coloured wall of his studio and facing the camera directly. Like Johan's and Bolethe's serious expressions and direct gaze, the mood of the image is sombre, a feeling heightened by the composition's emptiness and the stiffness of the sitters who, despite the physical contact between them, seem to be separated by a tangible space. While the composition and style seem an awkward manifestation of Greenlandic self-representation, John's portrait of Johan and Bolethe – which is representative for the majority of his studio work – may in part be explained by a consideration of the earliest stage of his professional career.

Shortly after his return from Copenhagen to Nuuk in 1889, Møller received a commission from Fridtjof Nansen through the Colonial Inspector Carl Ryberg. Two plates resulting from this assignment number amongst the very first Møller took following his homecoming. The portraits



show two Greenlandic couples – one being the hunter Lars Heilmann with his wife Ane, the other a hunter named Joel together with his wife Ragnhild, people with whom Nansen had interacted during a winter's stay in Nuuk after his expedition crossed the inland ice from east to west in 1888 (Nansen 1890). Reproduced as illustrations in Nansen's subsequent expedition narrative, Møller's photographs show his sitters in full-length, statically facing forward and posing outside against the white-washed stone wall appearing in many of his later portraits (Figure 5).<sup>9</sup>

During his studies in Copenhagen, Møller would have had access to a variety of artistic productions displaying the human body that may have inspired his artistic expression. In addition to the variety of images he came across as an apprentice at the printing house of A. Rosenberg and the graphic studio of Gustav Pauli, he may have viewed works in the city's art institutions, such as the collection of European sculpture at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, which was opened to the public in 1882, or the contemporary painting and sculpture production at *Kunstakademiet* (the Art Academy).<sup>10</sup> While further investigation into the visual language of Pauli is warranted, full-length European studio portraits around the turn of the century commonly drew on the language of traditional portrait painting, similarly conveying ideas about the sitters' personalities, accomplishments, gender, wealth and virtue through dress, posture, gaze, props and background.

Two representative examples of this genre from the Nordic countries at the time are an undated Augusta Olsson studio portrait of an unidentified woman and man with a bicycle and dog shot in Uusikaupunki/Nystad, Finland, and an 1890 portrait of Fridtjof and Eva Nansen taken at Ludwig Szacinski's studio in Christiania (Oslo), Norway (Figure 6).<sup>11</sup> Posing with sports equipment in front of elaborately painted landscapes, the portraits respond to current upper class ideals regarding leisure time and physical activity in the outdoors.

In Olsson's portrait, notions of class and gender are clearly communicated through the sitters' clothing. His three-piece suit and her large-sleeved blouse and long skirt are complemented by light-coloured hats, deemed suitable for the gentle activity of a stroll or cycle in the park or countryside that for women also served as a marker of class distinction. The couple's association with the upper classes is further articulated through the accompanying props, with both the bicycle (which became popular among the elite and middle classes in Europe in the 1890s) and little dog being symbols of luxury.

Gender is similarly enacted in Olsson's photograph. Drawing on Lena Richert's (2012) analysis of Olsson's work, this is particularly recognisable in the contrast between the looks and postures of the female and male sitters. The woman's gaze, which moves out of the frame, thus avoiding eye contact with the photographer and viewer, and the positioning of her left arm and hand, which rests on the seat of the bike, make her appear as passive and submissive – more of a mannequin or an extra in a play than an active, participating person. By contrast, the man calmly

meets the look of the viewer and, with his firm grip on the steering wheel of the gentlemen's bike, performs his gender as active, confident and leading.

Szacinski's portrait of the Nansens is a performance of Norwegian national identity. Dressed in practical and traditional Norwegian wool clothing, Eva and Fridtjof pose on skis in front of a mountainous winter landscape, epitomising the ideal of the active and hardy Norwegian (see also Berg and Lund 2011, 30–33). Although Eva is included in this narrative, gender is still performed in much the same way as in Olsson's photograph. We recognise the same disengaged look in Eva, as if she is not quite present, which allows the viewer to gaze at her freely. She is clearly a sideshow – an attribute – to her husband, whose physical and psychological presence is much stronger. With his body turned towards the viewer, Fridtjof takes up a larger visual space than his wife, with his serious look, direct gaze and nonchalant pose – his jacket half open, one hand in pocket – exerting an air of confidence. These masculine virtues were of course connected to his recent accomplishment, two years prior, of leading a party of men on skis across the Greenland ice sheet.

While Møller was likely aware of this type of portrait photography, as evidenced for example by his photograph of Stephan and Hansine and a number of portraits he shot in private homes, the underlying reference for his studio portraits overall seems to connect instead to a somewhat problematic Western visual convention for representing others. Labelled the "ethnographic convention" by Bernard Smith and Rüdiger Joppien (Smith and Joppien 1985; Smith 1992), this mode of representation can be traced back to travel and expedition imagery originating in the New World, and images of those non-western individuals that were brought back to Europe as early as the sixteenth century.<sup>12</sup>

The ethnographic convention was driven by a scientific interest in the sitter, employing neutral backgrounds and full-length, *en face* views to convey knowledge about the dress and material culture of distant peoples. The sitters in such imagery, together with their clothing and the implements with which they are pictured, are typically meant to stand in for their cultures at large. Reminiscent of taxonomical images of plants and animals, this schematic and de-contextualised mode of representation thus displayed individuals as generic specimens, uprooted from their social and natural habitat and systematically composed and consistently presented so as to give as much physical information as possible, maximise legibility and allow for ease of comparison.<sup>13</sup>

The two plates Møller produced for Nansen at the start of his career in 1889, and their re-contextualisation as illustrations in Nansen's expedition narrative in particular, can be firmly placed within the lineage of the ethnographic convention (Figure 5). In *Paa ski over Grønland*, Møller's plates feature in immediate succession, most likely to facilitate cross-referencing for Nansen's readers. The illustrations are further given captions that *re-present* the sitters within racial categories, with Lars and Ane Heilmann acting as examples of a "mixed" type, contrasted with the

"less mixed" variant illustrated by Joel and Ragnhild. Nansen enacts an additional categorisation on top of this ethnic distinction, labelling the men as "good" and "bad" hunters respectively. While the way Nansen used Møller's plates in his narrative was highly common for travel and expedition accounts in the nineteenth century, what is more intriguing is the way in which these plates seem to have come to act as prototypes for much of Møller's subsequent studio photographs – thereby pulling a part of his oeuvre into the very same tradition of representation of which Nansen partook.

Considering that Nansen commissioned the photographs for the specific purpose of being published in his expedition narrative, it is perhaps not surprising that Møller's images suggest similarities with the ethnographic convention. A young man at the start of his career, Møller may have been more susceptible to external influences – indeed, he may have received specific instructions from Nansen (or Ryberg, 24 June 1889, who seems to have acted as a middleman) as to how the photographs should look. Alternatively, Møller might have himself recognised the type of imaging traditionally deemed suitable for European-authored expedition narratives, and complied with this.

### **The Greenlandic Context**

Although pre-camera representations of Inuit date back to the sixteenth century, the first known photographs of Greenlanders are those taken in 1854 by the British captain E.A. Inglefield during a search expedition for Franklin (Kleivan 2004, 128; Lewis-Jones 2008, 28). In the following decades explorers, scientists and Danish colonial employees produced an increasing number of images of Greenlanders – many, though not necessarily all, conforming to the ethnographic convention and bound up in arguments about the characteristics and condition of Greenlanders. From his home in the colonial headquarters in Nuuk, it is likely that Møller would have come across several of these images.

One example, probably from the 1860s, is a series of photographs shot in Nuuk and Northern Greenland by the Royal Inspector of North Greenland, Christian Søren Marcus Olrik (in office 1864–1866).<sup>14</sup> Hinrich Rink, the employer of Møller's father, owned fifteen of these prints, which he kept in a photo album that John may have seen (Figure 7). The similarities between Olrik's and Møller's photographs are in any case striking. As in Møller's photographs, the sitters in Olrik's images appear stiff and serious, are arranged in pairs, and pictured against a neutral backdrop – in this case, a temporary structure consisting of a light-coloured sheet or blanket mounted on a wall.

Other examples Møller may have encountered include photographs taken during the multiple scientific expeditions that the Danish government sent to Greenland in the 1880s. Captain G.F. Holm's *Den østgrønlandske Expedition* (1883-1885) to Eastern Greenland and C.H. Ryder's

various mapping expeditions along the west coast, all returned with photographs of (in most cases) anonymous Greenlanders posing against exterior walls or the canvas of a tent. Some of the photographs resulting from these expeditions were later reproduced in publications by the Danish medical doctor and anthropologist Søren Hansen (1888; 1893) on the physical anthropology of Greenlanders (Figure 8). In Hansen's texts, these images functioned to corroborate notions about the Inuit's remoteness from Europeans, with his 1893 *Bidrag til Vestgrønlandernes Anthropologi* [Contribution to the West-Greenlanders' anthropology] stressing the significance of the visual when analysing Greenlanders. The first point Hansen (1893) argues in his conclusion to this text is that "the Eskimo race" was on a lower stage of development with respect to physical appearance. He goes on to claim that "the Eskimo" was closer to the so-called "*barnlige type*" [child-like type] than any other human race on the planet (save women).

Regardless of which specific images Møller may or may not have seen, he was clearly familiar with the nature and genre of such imagery and – most likely – the intellectual baggage it carried. As Søren Thuesen (1988) has pointed out, Southern Greenlanders at the turn of the twentieth century were highly aware that the Danish regarded them as a primitive and uncivilised people. It is thus curious that Møller created indigenous self-portraits in an objectifying mode that, at an extreme, could be said to re-enact the symbolic violence associated with colonial ethnographic descriptions of non-western, non-white peoples in this period. Evidence suggests he would have had alternative sources to look to, as there were distinctly different images of Greenlanders being produced by men with whom Møller was in contact.

Although the colours have faded, and their application was perhaps not successful in the first place, a number of images by Hinrich Rink (1819–1893) – the Danish geologist and pioneer of glaciology, colonial administrator and, of course, close associate of Møller's father – present a different take on photography that brought in an artistic dimension. A painter of landscapes, Rink's interest was apparently in colour and aesthetics and, by applying colour to his photographs, he seems to have played down the scientific and documentary dimension of photography to move more in the direction and tradition of painted portraiture (Figure 9). The resulting images, taken in the 1860s, are characterised overall by a greater sensitivity and compositional complexity, with more attention to detail, depth, interplay of light and shade, and the timing of the shot.

A similar artistic interest is clearly present in the portraits of Greenlanders the Danish medical doctor Thomas Neergaard Krabbe (1861–1936) shot and developed during his eleven-year residency and multiple travels in Greenland between 1889 and 1909 (Krabbe 1929, Preface). Krabbe and Møller met at least once, when in August 1906 Krabbe photographed Møller together with a group of inhabitants of Nuuk. Krabbe later published the photograph in his 1929 book on Greenland, discussed in more detail below, wherein he mentions Møller and male members of

Møller's family by name and profession, and describes Møller to be "widely known as an exceptionally clever photographer" (Krabbe 1929, description of plate 115). With shared interests in ornithology and photography, Møller had both reason and opportunity to view Krabbe's photographic work.

Taking pictures during his official travels for the purpose of "inquiring into health conditions and reporting thereon to the authorities in Denmark" (Krabbe 1929, v), Krabbe created a comprehensive photographic documentation of Greenland, including images from remote and less accessible areas such as Thule in the North and Ammassalik in the Southeast. His images show people of a variety of ages and sexes from separate Inuit groups, with the sitters dressed in native, regional clothing and photographed in the landscapes they inhabit. Ethnographic in intent and expression, several of Krabbe's images were reproduced as illustrations in his *magnum opus*, *Grønland, dets natur, beboere og historie* [Greenland, its nature, inhabitants and history]. Published in a combined, bilingual Danish-English volume in 1929, Krabbe's large book gives a thorough description of the Greenlandic climate, flora, fauna and people, in addition to its history and the current political and social situation from different aspects.

Despite the underlying scientific agenda in Krabbe's work, there is nonetheless an apparent concern for aesthetics in his photographs. This is particularly noticeable in his choice of background, which transforms even his rather rigid type-like photographs, such as those of Ajukotok and Ajukotok's daughter, into far more visually interesting compositions (Figure 10). As well as adding depth and space through the overlapping of objects and the interplay of light, shade and different forms and textures, the stony terrain not only places the sitters in the type of landscape inhabited by the Inuit in Ammassalik, but also lends a narrative element to the scenes. Combined with this landscape, the postures, facial expressions and gazes of Ajukotok and his daughter render the portraits highly suggestive of personalities and attitudes. This is particularly noticeable in the portrait of Ajukotok's daughter, where hints of resistance, discomfort and insecurity can be read into her serious look, clasped hands and stance (with one leg slightly lifted as if ready to run off if need be).

The same attention to composition and narrative is present in Krabbe's portrait of a Greenlandic boy named Kalé, taken in Thule in 1909 (Figure 11). Although the motivation for the photograph was predominantly to depict the child's otherness (the distinctness of both his Inughuit features and clothing), this striking portrait again goes beyond the remit of the ethnographic convention. Carefully framed by the surrounding landscape, Kalé is standing just off centre with his body slightly turned, leaving his left side partly in the shade and his right side highlighted. The chiaroscuro-like changes between light and darkness falling on his face and body, the stone he is standing on and the ground below, add a dramatic dimension to the portrait. Standing solidly, Kalé

looks calmly at the viewer and unknowingly convinces us of his unquestioned belonging to this environment through a captured moment of toddler-like self-assurance.

If Krabbe's scientific agenda seems oddly in tension with the captivating aesthetic quality of his resulting portraits, something of the inverse seems to be the case with Møller's studio work, where personal portraits somehow seem to transform into ethnographic documentation. However, Møller's apparent continuation of the ethnographic convention did not necessarily mean the same thing in his photographic practice as it did in the line of type images created by explorers, colonial administrators and scientists both before and during his lifetime. Unlike the ethnographic images taken by westerners in Greenland, which were produced with varying degrees of participation from their sitters, the people appearing in Møller's portraits ultimately turned up at their own request and as paying costumers had the authority to affect their representation by way of dress, posture and gaze.

## **Conclusion**

In her 1985 article on the *performative* aspect of gendered identities, Judith Butler draws on Simone de Beauvoir's observation that one is born female but *becomes* woman and that "woman" is an historical idea and not a natural fact. Understanding gendered identities as cultural constructions regulated by social conventions, taboos and punitive actions, Butler argues that an important site for the expression and affirmation of gender is the body. Through repeated mundane acts, the body materialises the self in compliance with current discourses on gender, so that the corporeal styles produced and constituted by these acts appear as "the natural configuration of bodies into sexes which exist in a binary relation to one another" (Butler 1985, 524).

Butler's conception of cultural identity as constituted by performative acts opens for a potential understanding of Møller's studio portraits and, by extension, the construction of indigenous identities in colonial societies more broadly. There are in particular two aspects of Butler's theory that seem relevant, that individual "acts" reflect a collective experience and that they repeat a set of already established meanings.

The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again. (Butler 1985, 526)

Møller's portraits may be read as the results of repeated acts that, involving both photographer and sitter, responded to a shared experience of indigenous identity in colonial Greenland. Like "gender",

"indigeneity" here may be understood as an act bound up in an historical situation and continued discourse delimited by colonial relations of power specific to the Danish-Greenlandic experience. Although repeating a rehearsed act by reproducing the ethnographic convention, Møller and his sitters were also potentially reclaiming that representational mode as their own – injecting it with new meanings, local and individual inflections and progressively turning an originally negative, external image of Greenlanders into a positive sense of self. Indeed, the characteristic traits of Møller's studio portraits may be rooted in Greenlandic people's own habits – that is, in what were social norms for Greenlanders around the turn of the twentieth century. In traditional Greenlandic society, physical distance between husbands and wives was standard practice in public, with spouses for example not even saying each other's names but rather referring to the other in the third person.<sup>15</sup> Thus the apparent awkwardness of many of Møller's sitters, which hints at an uneasiness with the terms of their imaging, may ultimately have less to do with the ethnographic convention and European points of reference, than a genuinely different form of cultural expression.

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Nb\_Ms. fol. 1924: 1b (1) Møller, Lars letter to Fridtjof Nansen. 27 February [?] 1889.

Nb\_Ms. fol. 1924: 1b (1) Møller, Lars letter to Fridtjof Nansen. 21 September 1891.

Nb\_Ms. fol. 1924: 1b (1) Ryberg, Carl letter to Fridtjof Nansen. 24 June 1889.

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<sup>1</sup> Møller has been commemorated by the inscription of his name into the urban plan of Nuuk (the street in which his studio was located is today called "John Møllerip"). A number of his photographs are also included in the current permanent exhibition at the NKA.

<sup>2</sup> The photograph has been dated by Kleivan (1998: 107).

<sup>3</sup> Women were barred from any education beyond middle school except midwifery until 1930.

<sup>4</sup> Inscribed with the text "Gud og kongen" [God and the King), the silver cross medal was followed by a Royal Open Letter written over a hundred years earlier stating that the King expected unwavering allegiance from the knights (28 January 1809).

<sup>5</sup> The sitter is presumed to be Danish. The second medal he is wearing was one that was awarded to soldiers who fought in the Second Schleswig War of 1864, dating the photograph to that year or later (Kolding Stadsarkiv. 5 January 2016. url:

<http://aagaardsbilleder.tumblr.com/post/117074003170/ridder-af-dannebrog-sl%C3%A6gtsforskningskursus-og>).

<sup>6</sup> Men in the upper social stratum were usually employed as wage labourers within the structures of the colonial government (see Rasmussen 1986, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> Stephen and Hansine married in 1906, with Stephen dying of tuberculosis two years later in 1908.

<sup>8</sup> For more on the influence of European material and fashion in Greenland see Toft and Mackinney-Valentin, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> While Ragnhild is the name used in the database at NKA, Nansen's caption calls Joel's wife Ane Kornelia (1890 625).

<sup>10</sup> Møller did not have the opportunity to view the paintings in the Royal Collections as the building that housed these burned down in 1884, and his stay in Copenhagen predated the establishment of a new museum building in 1896.

<sup>11</sup> Olsson worked as a photographer in the period between 1898 and 1954 (Richert 2012: 7).

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<sup>12</sup> Important instances of this convention include John White's collection of watercolour sketches of the Algonquian he encountered in Roanoke, Virginia, in the 1580s, and images produced by the artists on board James Cook's voyages in the Pacific between 1768 and 1779.

<sup>13</sup> The ethnographic convention was also used in imagery of other "others", for example the "cries" that originated in Paris in 1500 and quickly became an established tradition of visual imagery that sought to document and catalogue the poor and social outcasts in European cities (Shesgreen, 2002). Examples include the late seventeenth-century cries of Marcellus Laroon and the illustrations in Henry Mayhew's nineteenth-century *London Labour and the London Poor*.

<sup>14</sup> Now part of the Hinrich Rink collection at the Museum of Cultural History, Oslo.

<sup>15</sup> Thank you to the peer-reviewer who contributed these very useful insights.