

Writing and burning: A poetic inquiry into collaboration and self

Posted on November 18, 2024 by Josefine Baark
[vc_row][vc_column][vc_column_text css=””]Aka Hansen’s film *Qulleq* shows how to light and tend a qulleq. In Kalaallisut, the word means ‘lamp’ or ‘above’, as Aka explained to me, but in this case it refers specifically to an arctic invention, where cottongrass or dried moss is lit with seal oil on a half moon shaped soapstone. The film shows Aka seated at a table, lighting and tending the lamp filmed from head on, focused either on her torso or hands.

I want(ed) to write

that this article will show

‘Fragments

Of

A

Recent

Collaboration

Exploring

Ecocritical

Feminism.’

Instead, this article

will show

…….

Arriving at Museet KØN, I asked the woman at the front desk where I might find Aka’s film, since it was no longer being shown on a big screen in a room right off the foyer. I walked through the exhibition How Dare You? which showcased Greta Thunberg’s ecoactivism in relation to other groups and artists. I searched until I found it on one of four small screens, picked up a headset and stood eye to eye with it.

It was an intimate moment. I had to pay careful attention to the sound. I had maybe come upon the film two thirds of the way through and had no idea when it would loop. I had to adjust my headphones and move a bit closer, to see what Aka was scraping.

Of all the pieces contributed to the exhibition, this moment made me feel the most embodied. I too wanted to try to keep the fire going. I wanted to try bending over it and inhaling the smell. In the face of new knowledge, I felt desire. But desire has a difficult history here. Perhaps I wanted to be like Aka’s body or perhaps I wanted to learn to be like her body.

I’m meant to explain

who I am

in this article and

where I’m going

with this description.

This article will

show

.....

Underneath the film, the museum had exhibited a qulleq from the collection of the ethnographic museum, Moesgaard. Though there was no indication of how this qulleq had been acquired, it performed two tasks: first, it emphasised the physical engagement sparked by Aka’s filmmaking technique and second, it whispered snippets of a history of exploitative exploration and ethnographic collection methods. It sneaked Denmark in through the front door.

How, I felt myself asking, were Aka’s film and the qulleq performing in relation to my body in the museum space? It was a historical relationship, and one that I could not mediate. This is especially given my life lived in and between Hong Kong and the UK. I have only four or so years under my belt, residing in Denmark and coming to know its institutions and their biases. When at home, I could confront and digest Aka’s poetry, but while at the museum, I was faced with a flattening of my sense of self.

My editor here and my friend everywhere, Claire

asked me,

How does filmic and poetic activism propose decolonial thinking in my body?

As this article will show,

They

.....

Much has been written on the subject. I want to draw on Sandra L Faulkner before introducing moments of receiving Aka's poems and subsequently, her film. Faulkner publishes her poems as a part of her research methodology, positioning them in relation to autoethnography.

She writes: 'Feminist poetry offers a means of doing, showing, and teaching embodied inquiry.' She backs up the claim in the stanza,

'Our art bleeds down our legs

pools like rubies on piles of rubble

that can't be swept under rugs:

our rage refuses to ride shotgun.'

So far, you have read how my body

is one that

writes,

asks,

walks,

listens,

adjusts

and identifies.

I might as well confess to

bleeding.

Thus, in this article,

I

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Aka describes herself on the website of Museet KØN, where her film is exhibited, as ‘film director, debater and activist. She is active in the decolonisation debate in Kalaallit Nunaat, and works with this subject in her films, art and writing. Aka is particularly known for fighting for the Inuits’ right to tell their own stories. But her interest and activist practice also revolve around gender, queerness and matriarchal ways of life among inuit.’

In our discussions of filmmaking in the museum sphere, Aka and I return to how poems and films can offer personal insight into experiences and reveal new knowledge that is inaccessible in other formats. What knowledge? I ask.

Aka asks questions including, how are power structures, gender, historiography, nature, activism, matriarchy connected to the production and viewing or reading of activist art? And, how and when do works use ecocritical feminism to resist dominant ideologies in museums and social media?

Aka shares three poems with me. Hej Søster, addresses both the historical and recent history of Denmark’s relationship to Kalaallit Nunaat (known as Greenland) captured through the list of events where colonial violence is made explicit. Aka addresses a woman or ‘sister’, who is notably absent in each instance. In a second poem, Der er så meget, jeg ikke forstår, Aka laments the consistent need for her to educate others in any dialogue about Kalaallit Nunaat independence. She says that she was speaking to a specific Danish politician, though that person is unnamed. These two poems conjure up the moment of encounter. They are instances of direct speech. There is an I and a You. The poems are written in Danish.

My response to the poems was one of discomfort, guilt, and reflection. Subsequently, in October of 2024, I was asked to read her poems aloud at a workshop. It was unexpected and it brought to the fore the dormant historical violence of assuming another’s voice. The first line of ‘Hej Søster’

addresses the theft of culture from the Inuit by Danish missionaries. Standing at a secular pulpit, I choked and in an attempt to distance myself from the act of stealing, I interrupted my reading with the words,

‘this is an ‘our’ I have no right to take.’

The pressure of having an audience pushed me to attempt to continue. Body shaking and mouth dry, I stepped off to the side. Invisibly, my blood sugar soared to dangerous heights, pushed by the rush of adrenaline coursing through me. Graciously, a researcher of Inuit origin in the audience offered to read the poem aloud on my and Aka’s behalf.

Aka has described to me her anger and frustration in writing this poem. There is knowledge created in both of our responses about the relationship between Denmark and Kalaallit Nunaat and about how systems rely on grouping people. I am part of where the groups ‘Danish’ and ‘Women’ overlap. Aka is ‘Inuit’ and ‘Woman’ where these overlap. The possibility of belonging to the same community, ‘Women’ is called into question in the poems. My experience standing in for Aka as a voice, further isolates me in a vortex of multiplicities. I become disabled. Denmark devours my other lives in Hong Kong and the UK. I am emotionally institutionalised. I should respond poetically, but it is too soon.

At Være Respekteret i Nutiden og Fremtiden is another poem of ‘their’ and ‘our’ shared by Aka. In the poem, Aka rejects official (read colonially contingent) histories of life in Kalaallit Nunaat. Instead, she suggests that she ‘insists’ on ‘romanticising’ women in the past. She repositions history as a site of decolonial activism with present day consequences for the environment. The historiographic focus on ritualised subjugation of Inuit women is, she says, ‘illogical.’ A matriarchal history is instead an opportunity to romanticise respect for the environment and for women’s bodies.

I am a

Smut slut

Eating romance novels

I am an art historian,

Who has worked on material transculturalism between Europe and Asia.

My way of seeing stems from both privileged and marginalised positions, contingent on experiences

such as growing up and working in the post-Handover ex-British, stealthily Chinese colony of Hong Kong, but also

a university education at colonially entrenched institutions such as the University of Cambridge in the UK. My research and teaching has spanned seventeenth-century Indo Danish trade, European chinoiserie palaces, Chinese sculptures and poetry, as well as decolonial museum practice. I would love to claim that this wide scope was born from scholarly passion, but it also has its roots in opportunism and funding demands, as well as that darker side of academia, the dangers to my cis-gendered and disabled body posed by patriarchy and ableism. Here I am, finally.

See how, in this article, I

Will

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In Aka's poem, a lineage of romanticised women, whose choices have consequences and whose agency is paramount, reminds me of *Hej Søster*. My body is both a romantic opportunity to smell smoke and a dangerous site filled with blood. In the encounter with Aka's poems and film, my participation in the community 'women' allows for a conversation that may be inhibited by 'Inuit' or 'Danish' categories.

I trace my matriarchs

back to witches that were not burned

and to those who burned them.

I wish to tend to fire.

Alongside Aka,

In this article, I will show

How

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Photo: Nicolai Abildgaard 1743 – 1809, *A genio lumen. En siddende kvinde skriver, til højre for denne gyder en anden kvinde olie på en lampe*, 1743 – 1809, drawing, pencil and pen, brown ink, State Museum of Art, Denmark.
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