

Not Just a Detective Novel: Trauma, Memory and Narrative Form in *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow*

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Summary

This article argues that Peter Høeg's "detective novel", *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow*, contains many elements relevant to postmodern and postcolonial experience. Smilla, the main character, who seeks answers to the death of a young Inuit boy in Denmark, encounters, in a profound way, the complexities of postmodern subjectivity, blended with postcolonial issues of identity formation and the power imbalances extant in any colonialist system. The journey of self-discovery Smilla undergoes in the narrative is the real "detective story", and cannot be untangled from the wider political story of Danish colonialism of Greenland, and the encounter between the two cultures. There is no neat "answer" to the problems of colonialism and the hybrid identities formed out of it. At best the future belongs to a continued and traumatic "Middle Passage" where past and present interchange so thoroughly that any journey towards a teleological future or "closure" is one fraught with trauma and suffering.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel voer aan dat Peter Høeg se "speurverhaal", *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow*, baie elemente bevat wat betrekking het op die postmoderne en postkoloniale ervaring. Smilla, die hoofkarakter, wat antwoorde soek vir die dood van 'n jong Inuit-seun in Denemarke, ervaar op 'n diepgaande manier die ingewikkeldhede van postmoderne subjektiwiteit wat gemeng is met postkoloniale kwessies van identiteitsvorming en die magswanbalanse wat voortbestaan in enige kolonialistiese stelsel. Die narratief oor Smilla se selfontdekkingsreis is die werklike "speurverhaal" en dit kan nie losgemaak word van die breër politieke storie oor Deense kolonialisme in Groenland en die ontmoeting tussen die twee kulture nie. Daar is geen netjiese "antwoord" vir die probleem van kolonialisme en die hibriede identiteite wat daaruit voortspruit nie. Ten beste behoort die toekoms tot 'n voortgesette en traumatiese "Middelpad" waar verlede en hede so deeglik verwissel dat enige reis in die rigting van 'n teleologiese toekoms of "genesing" besaai is met trauma en lyding.

Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow (1993) by Peter was first published as *Froken Smillas Fornemmelse for Sne* (1992). Briefly, a young Inuit boy, Isaiah, is found dead in the snow. The Danish police are quite satisfied to declare it an accidental death. However, Smilla is not convinced. Smillaraaq Qaavigaaq Jaspersen, the “product” of a Danish physician father and an Inuit mother sees in the now dead boy a lot of her own loneliness and the despair of exile. Smilla, whose early life was spent in Greenland, has an intuitive ability to read the snow. She befriends Isaiah because he is neglected by his alcoholic mother and her first reaction to Isaiah's death is that it was not accidental. She can tell by the pronation of the footprints leading to the edge of the roof from which Isaiah fell that he was trying to escape from something or someone.

The structure of Peter Høeg's novel is akin to a set of nested narratives, with each narrative joined to the other by a single thread. The thread holding the various narratives together is in this case the idea of mourning, but mourning construed as a permanent state: the narrative concludes that there is no “resolution”, no “conclusion” to the anguish and grieving that Isaiah, Smilla, and indeed the whole of Greenland, have endured and continue to endure. The levels of narrative may be interpreted, usefully, as a metaphor for the processes both of mourning and of detective work. Smilla must find who killed Isaiah, why she mourns and how she can overcome this state of torpor, all in one process or journey. As she says: “Isaiah's death is an irregularity, an eruption that produced a fissure. That fissure [may] set me free” (Høeg 1993: 204).¹

This article aims to “unpack” the various layers of meaning in the novel. This will mean exploring Smilla's private journey, showing how it is really not private at all but, in the colonised context, also national, and then finally showing how the journey, in a sense, cannot end, just as the text cannot have final closure. This last idea allows one to categorise the novel as postmodern, as do the layers of meaning. The emphasis on colonialism and conquest throughout the text encourages a postcolonial reading. Both of these readings can be linked via the notion of trauma, which becomes another dominant theme in the novel. Smilla's journey of discovery is one through trauma. The question remains whether she is able to find a “space” in which she can more positively interrogate and find ways of dealing with her trauma.

1. Subsequent references to *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow* will be indicated as follows: *Smilla*, page number(s).

“No Conclusions”: Postmodernism and *Smilla*

It may be argued that *Smilla* is an example of what Linda Hutcheon (1988) refers to as “historiographic metafiction”. By this she means a narrative which is avowedly fictional, which engages in metafictional modes, but which nevertheless does not ignore the history of the community it depicts. Despite Denmark’s claim in 1776 that Greenland was its northernmost neighbour (though it had been long populated by Danes and also Norwegians), the novel suggests that the claim to national unity between the Inuit and Danes is at best tenuous. It is more a tightrope on which the Inuit have to keep their balance than it is anything neighbourly.

Not one day of my adult life has passed that I haven’t been amazed at how poorly the Danes and the Greenlanders understand each other. It’s worse for the Greenlanders of course. It’s not healthy for the tightrope walker to be misunderstood by the person who’s holding the rope. And in this century the Inuit’s life has been a tightrope dance on a cord fastened at one end to the world’s least hospitable land ... and on the other end to the Danish colonial administration.

(*Smilla*, 79)

This colonial process has, by the twentieth century, on one level become a *fait accompli*, in which the Danish and Inuit worlds are blended – even in the very hybrid blood of people like *Smilla* herself. On another level, however, *Smilla*’s own discomfort with her hybridity and with the way in which the Greenlanders are still treated by modern Denmark, suggests that beneath a superficial national unity lies a deep rift. It leaves *Smilla* quite literally in the world of cross-cultural wanderings which Edouard Glissant calls *metissage* (quoted in Mongia 1996: 86).

This blurring of experiences and cultures within a single persona is figured in the novel’s narrative structure itself. *Smilla* blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction and by allowing fiction to bleed into “fact”. One of the ways this “bleeding” occurs is through intertextuality. The most important of these remain the multiple layers of meaning hidden in the text itself. As Worton and Still (1990: 1) suggest about the function of intertextuality, it “insists that a text cannot exist as a hermetic or self-sufficient whole and so does not function as a closed system”. Hutcheon’s (1988: 127) description of this is that an intertextual work is a “node with a network” of texts.

One of the dominant intertextual (one might usefully use the term “paratextual” with regard to the maps since they appear in the text itself) motifs in *Smilla* is to be found in the use of mapping. In mapping, especially colonialist mapping, the dominant power’s interpretation of geography is imposed as the final and true interpretation. But all such maps, the novel suggests, are open to question because they are of limited point of view, either in their scientific instrumentality or in their ideological assumptions.

Smilla can “read” a map, not by merely interpreting its signs and symbols, but by experiencing the “landscape” at an intimate level. As she puts it: “I only have to look at a map once and the landscape rises up from the paper. It’s not something that I learned. Although, of course, I had to acquire a nomenclature, a system of symbols” (*Smilla*, 71).

This ideological imposition (not unlike the imposed science that Tørk brings to Greenlandic bodies) makes mapping a contentious exercise since *who* maps determines quite literally the nature and meaning of the physical body of a country. Most twentieth-century maps used Mercator’s projection in which Western views of the world’s geography take precedence. Mapping becomes coextensive with power and “ownership” in the colonial regime. In this regard, José Robana, in this analysis of Mercator’s Atlas shows “how the projection map became a major tool of Eurocentricism, defining European latitudes as pivotal reference points for the points for the conception of a world hierarchy [I]n effect, the European map created what has remained the contemporary geographical world reality” (Norseng 1997: 203; my italics). Or as he further suggests:

Colonial frontiers were created as imperial discourses sought to define and invent the entities it shaped from its conquests. The numerous ruler-straight frontiers of imperial maps indicate how colonial cartography existed as much as to invent as to read actual features and distinctions between various places and peoples. The frontier that limited the space ... was a crucial feature in imagining the imperial self, and in creating and defining othering.
(Norseng 1997: 208)

Denmark has mapped (i.e. assumed the rights of knowledge over) Greenland, as merely one of its colonies. Smilla’s quest to find her own version of meaning suggests that neither the interpretation of the Greenlandic landscape nor of the value of the bodies of its people by the Danes can be trusted to be true or fair. The struggle for free land and free personal body space is mounted in textuality itself, in the freedom to interpret in ways which are beyond the forms of knowledge given in the West and by the colonising country. For this reason, Smilla “senses” the snow, more than intellectually reads or interprets it.

By breaking up the narrative cartography of his text into deeper but interrelated layers, Høeg shows that there can be no final coherent “map” of who owns who or what, or who owns truth. There can only be an unending, painful, journey of discovery. This national allegory of mapping is figured in the novel by Smilla’s own personal remapping, as it were, of her own past. She must return to her “motherland” Greenland, where she can “feel” the snow, by entering the Kronos (Time), retrace her steps into childhood, re-experience the loss of her mother and be reborn into a new and adult existence in order to be able to map her own future.

This return and remapping is triggered by the loss of Isaiah, whose footprints in the snow offer a kind of map in which Smilla reads his final moments, and begins the subsequent search for the meaning behind his death. It is akin to the prizing open of each new, though interrelated, level of meaning. A map of the narrative levels may therefore be diagrammatically depicted as follows:

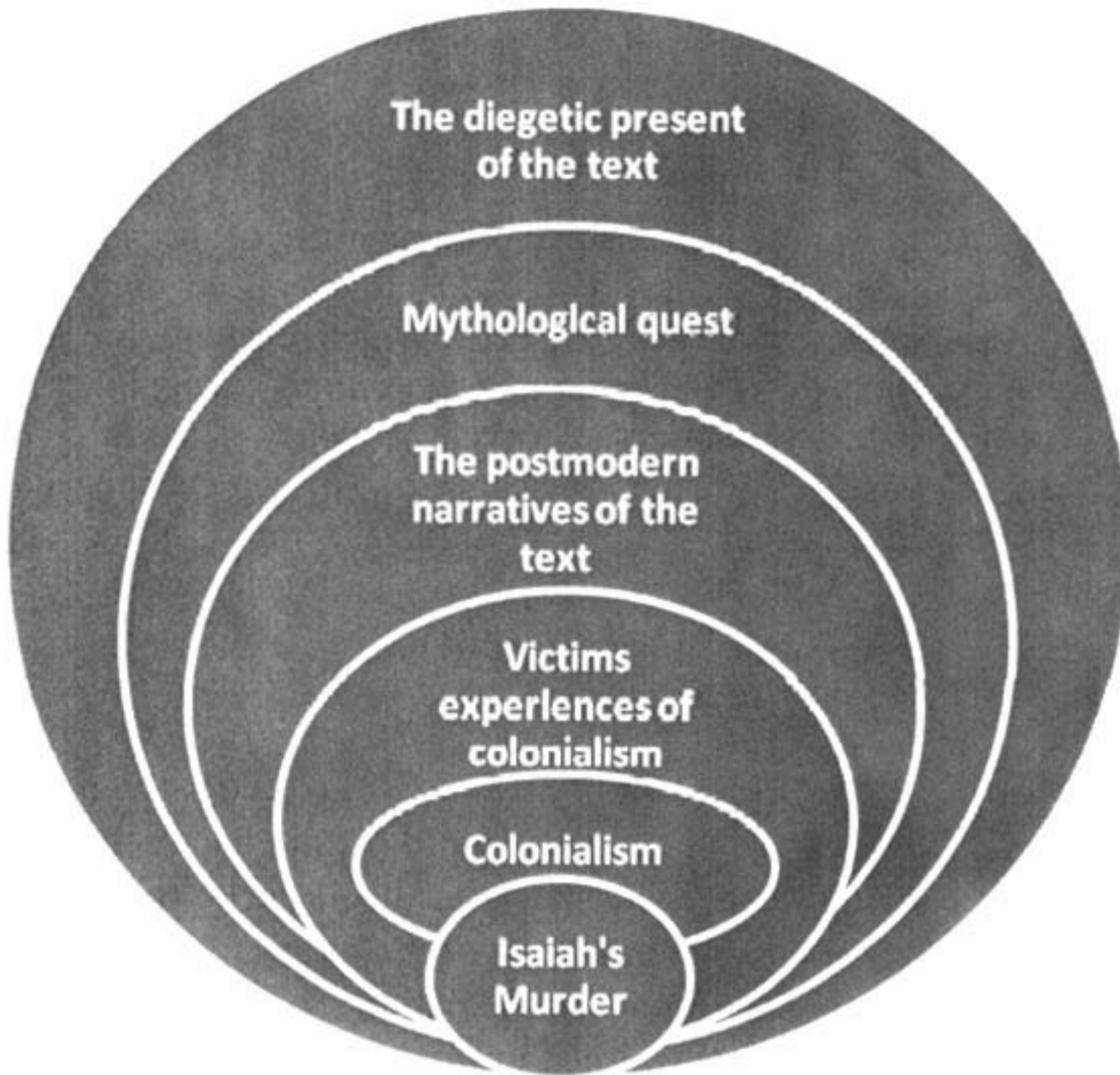


Diagram 1: Narrative Levels

The circular diagram is suggestive here because it suggests the interrelated nature of the various narratives. Level one lies at the heart of the narrative. To solve its riddle all the other layers of meaning must first be unpacked. In level two the narrative offers a picture of the Danish colonising mission, taking over Greenland like a parasite taking over a host. Surreptitiously, like the equally surreptitious penetration of the parasite of Gela Alta into the body of its Greenlandic hosts, the narrative of colonisation nests within the larger narrative, ultimately taking it over as the predominant theme. Isaiah's death is the hidden object in the body of the narrative and it may not be by the literal parasite (unlike his father's and many others') but is the result of the desire for power by Danish authorities, which is ultimately the real parasite in the society. As with all hosts and parasites and as with colonialism generally, the one cannot do without the other. Without Isaiah's story (the parasite of death by colonial power) there would be no narrative, without his vacant footprints there would be no sign or map of a mystery to unravel.

In the third level textual meaning is suggestive of the consequences of colonisation, especially for the Inuit. This includes alcoholism, suicide and a general sense of social, psychological and economic dislocation. The fourth level of the narrative belongs to Smilla's reminiscences and her philosophical ruminations on life and the state of the world, which include existential angst and a fascination with mathematics. It is not entirely coincidental that when we (and Isaiah) first meet Smilla she is reading Euclid's *Elements*. Of the relation between human life and numbers she says:

[T]he number system is like human life. First you have the natural numbers. The ones that are whole and positive. The numbers of the small child. But human consciousness expands. The child discovers longing ... [and] the mathematic expression for longing is ... negative numbers. The *formalization* of the feeling that you are *missing something* ... [and then] the child discovers the in-between spaces. Between ... stones ... moss ... on stones and between people ... [h]uman consciousness... [then goes] beyond reason ... [it] produces irrational numbers. It is a form of madness because irrational numbers are infinite. They can't be written down. *They force human consciousness out beyond the limits.*

(Smilla, 102; my italics)

One might suggest here that the narrative's layered structure, whose innermost core is the mysterious loss of a child, is an enactment of Euclid's ideas about irrational numbers. The narrative itself seeks to "force human consciousness out beyond the limits". This encourages a certain elliptical quality in the text, mostly through the mediation of Smilla's remembering and philosophising and her constant need to link the (diegetic) present of the text with her childhood, the other "lost" child of the novel. In this the reader is thrown from present to past to philosophical enquiry and back again. The text itself becomes in a sense infinite, and the search for closure of meaning and the recuperation of the lost past as irrational as Euclid's numbers.

The fifth level of meaning is the novel's metafictional nature. Self-reflexive in the sense that it alerts us to its own methods, the novel is the story of a borderline, acculturated woman whose methods of narrating serve to expose the inadequacy of narrative's attempt to close the borders both of geography and of meaning generally.

We might add two more levels. The sixth is that of the mythological quest narrative, making the novel a version of a romance narrative or *Bildungsroman* in which Smilla engages in a quest for self-discovery and also social and historical discovery. The fact that she never quite succeeds does not make it less a journey of discovery, it only ensures that just as no true map of Greenland can be drawn, so neither can any true map of Smilla's journey of self-encounter.

The final layer of meaning is the diegetic present of the text itself. Smilla's quest and its import for the postcolonial present is placed in the hands of the reader, a narrative whose meaning he or she must decipher as Smilla does the clues to Isaiah's murder.

Like the multiple meanings hidden in snow, there are multiple ways of reading the conflicts which have formed Smilla and thus also her narrative. The physical and emotional borderlessness of the Inuit community is reflected in the textual borderlessness of the narrative. The quest motif suggests that Smilla is not afraid to confront her past, and the text's embedded narratives lead us into that past. Its borderlessness means it is not a past which can be coherently read or easily defined. Rather, like the snow which has so many different names for its different types, it can only be read with regard to its variation. Foreigners are generally marked as alien by their assumption that the snow is uniform and fixed. The Greenlander understands the snow's apparent uniformity to be a multitude of differences, which only experience can properly interpret.

That the text is not teleological is observed at the end of the narrative when Smilla thinks of the world beyond that of the slippery ice, and realises that the authorities ("they") will demand answers, but she realises there will be no "conclusion". She certainly will not be any the wiser, for Denmark has sought to make an aberration of her people. As she remarks: "Tell us, they'll come and say to me. So we may understand and close the case. *They're wrong*. It is only what you do not understand that you can come to a conclusion about. *There will no conclusion*" (Smilla, 410; my italics).

There is no conclusion because, despite gaining certain knowledge of what the Danish were doing, she has no solutions. More questions, perhaps. Like all colonised countries Greenland will undergo its own transformations, veering away from fixities and the recovery of a (fictitious) Edenic past; for resolutions (conclusions) cannot be so easily forthcoming. Therefore, the postmodern aspect of the text brings to it a certain "play" where even anguish and pain must hang in limbo. Perhaps, it may be argued that the transformations and ruptures brought about by colonialism mean that no amount of suture will allow the Inuit to live in "the old narratives of the past" (Hall 1996: 112).

In a self-reflexive way, when talking of the discourse of mathematics and "Fermat's theory" which was never completed, we are told that the proof to the theory lay in the margin. Fermat wrote in the margin: "I have discovered a truly wonderful proof for this argument. Unfortunately, the margin is too narrow to contain it" (p. 22). Subsequently, both theory and proof disappeared. The implication, therefore, is that the margin should not be ignored. One might read into this that the novel is telling its readers that its apparently marginal notes about postcolonial and postmodern experience are in effect the real "answer" to the detective mystery which is written large in the novel's main body.

Postcolonial “Spaces”

In an interview with David Attwell (1987), Homi Bhabha talks about the “three spaces” that may be detected in the colonising project. The first two can be described as the space of the coloniser and the space of the colonised which are frozen spaces, initially. By this Bhabha means ideologically frozen, neither group able to assimilate the other’s ideology in any significant way. Only the imposition of the powerful over the colonised can change the status quo. In terms of this hierarchy, the colonised suffers various losses. These include the occlusion of their histories which are palimpsestically written over by the coloniser.

Similarly, the languages and cultural rituals of the colonised are relegated to the margins while the language and cultural rituals of the coloniser gain more credibility and currency. According to Bhabha, this hierarchically frozen situation may be ruptured through the third space of enunciation which he sees as a space of creativity. This is a space from which the colonised can begin to recuperate their own histories, languages and culture, hitherto overwritten by the coloniser. However, this space, while it may be creative, is also, I would like to contend, a space of anguish and trauma. It is from this space that Smilla tells her stories of the consequences of the colonisation for the Inuit.

These “spaces” of the colonial encounter, of course, become literalised in the takeover of land and the control of the colonised people. This is represented in *Smilla* by the opposition between the geographies of Denmark and Greenland. Denmark’s economic advancement is figured in the rigid cartography of its landscapes and cityscapes. The “White Cells” of Copenhagen, in which Smilla must live, are a metaphor for this division, as much a “divided body” as the white blood cells of the infected from Gela Alta make them a “divided body” from the rest of society. But “white” also has an apartheid-like meaning, separating Danes from the colonised Inuit. Greenland, by contrast, is a pristine land of vast open space, readable only by those who have an intimate relationship with the land. Denmark’s colonising mission soon litters this pristine land with Shell and Boron oil tanks. What the text lays bare is the penetration (ultimately bringing the disease of Gela Alta’s parasite) by the Danish and the raping and pillaging of Inuit lands. Furthermore, the text reveals the various ways in which the Danish ruptured the Greenlandic way of living. Those, like Smilla’s hunter brother, who can no longer maintain their relation to the land, become outcasts, and, in his case, eventually commit suicide.

The idea of colonising geographical space may be taken even further. The novel provides its readers with two maps, both Eurocentric and therefore discriminating against the Inuit. The first map charts how the Inuit live in Denmark (see Map 1, p. 33). The removal of the Inuit to the “White Cells”, a block which has won the coveted prize for “Beautification of the City”, is

really a way of keeping them under the panoptic gaze. It is instructive that in the Danish original the “White Cells” are called “Det hvide Snit” which means literally “the white cut”, strongly suggestive of lobotomy. The suggestions about scientific experimentation and control are obvious. Even the Inuit cemetery is cordoned off so that it bears the interred bodies of the Inuit only. In these instances it is very interesting, even ironic, that in a post-colonial society, our maps continue to be Eurocentric.

The second map (see Map 2, p. 34) shows Greenland to be relatively close to the Danish mainland. In truth, however, the distance between Thule in Greenland and Copenhagen is 3842 kilometers, suggesting that the “neighbour” is indeed a very distant one. The map shows that, ironically, to get to their northern neighbour, Danes would have to navigate around the British Isles and travel another 2000 kilometres and be almost on the coast of Newfoundland by the time they reach Greenland. This suggests that Denmark’s own sense of spatial geography is influenced by a colonising ideology. Moreover, it reflects a view of the world that might be summed up by Smilla’s response to Tørk’s apparent “icy” nature. “Suddenly it has become a symbol. At this moment it becomes the crystallization of the attitude of Western science towards the world. Calculation, hatred, hope, fear, the attempt to measure everything. And above all else, stronger than any empathy for living things: the desire for money” (*Smilla*, 404). Tørk’s acquisitive science is simply an enactment of the mapping process. In stark contrast to such mapping, Smilla records how as a child, she was put at the head of the sleigh when the weather was poor and visibility difficult. Her sixth sense (sans any map) would “create” a straight line for her that mapped her route directly home. This sixth sense that she possesses may be attributed to her feeling for snow. The novel catalogues various different types of snow: to read the specific type of snow and to act in a way deemed fit is an important method of survival. This “feeling for snow” goes beyond traditional mathematical logic, and beyond the confines (physical and mental) symbolised by the “White Cells”. Smilla’s ability to “read snow” tells her the “truth” about Isaiah, and it also saves her life at the end of the narrative. Tørk cannot read the snow, and falls in to his death. Smilla knows literally where to walk, what depth and density the snow has and so survives.

It is therefore not coincidental that the novel begins with Smilla’s “feeling” for the snow, one of yearning for a lost past: “It is freezing, an extraordinary -18 °C, and it’s snowing and in the *language that is no longer mine*, the snow is *qanik*-big, almost weightless crystals falling in stacks and covering the ground ... [and] for a brief instant my yearning comes across like madness” (*Smilla* 3; my italics).

In addition, the act of mapping pays no attention to how in this specific instance, the Inuit measure distance. Smilla tells how it could take many *siniks* (the relationship between distance and time) to cover a short distance, while a longer distance could be covered in a relatively short space of time. The number of *siniks* depends not on distance but rather on the charac-

teristics of the terrain that was being covered. It is “not a number of days or hours [i]t is both temporal, a concept of space-time that is taken for granted by the Inuit but cannot be captured by any European in everyday language [or experience]” (*Smilla*, 278). It is her sense of *sinik* that saves Smilla on board the *Kronos*, because not only does *sinik* give her a sense of orientation, it also tells her how far they are travelling. In this sense *sinik* saves her from falling in a black space of timelessness.

The notion of cartography and abuse of or indifference toward the Inuit may be taken a step further. The Danish scientists working with Tørk have quite literally taken over the use (essentially as slaves) of the bodies of some Inuit by using them as experiments to test the influence of the parasite. Isaiah is the primary example. The Inuit men dive into the parasite-infested waters around Gela Alta [see Map 2, p. 34] so that the Danish can continue their scientific experiments aimed ultimately at creating a means of protection in times of war. The waters of Gela Alta contain a parasite which, once it makes its way into the body of the human, rapidly multiplies. But it is a bad parasite in the sense that it multiplies and kills its host too quickly. It is a symbol of colonialism, penetrating and eventually “eating” the Inuit: “[W]hen it penetrates the skin, it pushes its womb out and emits a white fluid of millions of larvae” (*Smilla*, 390). Cells of the dead are then grafted onto the bodies of the HIV positive Inuit to explore the consequences of such “implantation” to determine if it may be used for further scientific knowledge or ideally as a weapon of destruction during war. Isaiah, who dives into the waters after his father, in a fit of panic, is surprisingly unharmed. It is for this reason that he is monitored monthly to assess the growth of the parasite in his little body. When Isaiah plunges to his death, in the process of being chased by the “icy cold” Tørk, the last thing that Tørk does is to take a muscle biopsy to see what the parasite does when its host dies. The biopsy of the dead may be read as the ultimate form of colonial mapping, assuming authority even over dead bodies of children.

Home and Exile

That Smilla considers herself an exile in Denmark is clear. But quite interestingly, the text also raises the issue of “what is home”? The meta-narrative of going into exile, or into the diaspora and then returning home has itself collapsed because the colonised no longer, in the diasporic experience, has a clear sense of where “home” is. Under these circumstances, a question must be raised. “What is exile?” To Smilla, Greenland is home, which she links with the maternal space. Her mother Ané features very strongly in this space; it is the space of openness where she can take the hunting party back home, where she can count the *siniks* to a place rather than using a map. In stark contrast to this, she must live the life of an

exile in Denmark, largely because of the job she does and because her father, a Danish physician, is her financial lifeline. Her exilic status is marked by the high-fashion she wears, counter to most people she knows; her inability to settle into any single job or finish a degree, despite her expert knowledge of glaciers; and also by her inability to have a long-term relationship. She cannot settle in one place or with one person for long. She is more comfortable with a young boy than with a man. Smilla is a loner; she does not belong to any community. Her link to Denmark is the work she does, her link to her father is mostly for his money, and to Isaiah because he is alone and can hold his own even in her presence. Her constant analeptic reminiscences regarding Greenland, her dead mother and brother keep her in a state of depression and render the text elliptical. Of her depression she says that she would rather not be on mind-numbing antidepressants. Of the despair of being in exile she says: “You think that the despair will stop you cold, but it doesn’t: it wraps itself up in a dark corner somewhere inside and forces the rest of your system to function, to take practical matters which may not be important which keep you going, which guarantee that you are somehow still alive” (*Smilla*, 80).

While her “exile” becomes important, it concomitantly raises the issue of identity. “Am I my name?” she asks (*Smilla*, 80). We know that Smilla is named by her mother who from adventure at sea returns home with the name Millaraaq. Her father, who was still with them at the time, adds the appellation “S”, so that her name may evoke laughter. So, this is how she comes to be called Smillaraaq. Smilla’s name is therefore literally shared by her father and mother, but also carries a cultural division rather than union. Her “imagined space” is therefore also a divided one. She is an embodiment of Eduoard Glissant’s *metissage*, a character who must deal with a personal and social history which keeps her an alien from herself. As Glissant puts it: “For history is not only absence for us. It is vertigo. The time that was never ours, we must now possess. We do not see it stretch out and calmly take us into tomorrow, *but it explodes in us as a compact mass pushing through a dimension of emptiness*” (quoted in Mongia 86; my italics).

Smilla has no sense of affiliation to a group, so that her history is also gone.

I tell myself it’s the loneliness that’s getting to me. I grew up in a community. If I have sought out brief periods of solitude and introspection, it has always been to return to the group a stronger person But, I haven’t been able to find that group. I seem to have lost it ... I am still searching. I haven’t given up. But I don’t seem to be making much progress.

(*Smilla*, 325)

Her journey back to Greenland is a return to the maternal space, the womb of her childhood, and it is quite literally in the womb of the ship Kronos itself. She boards the Kronos (significantly, a reference to time eating its children) and soon realises that the ship has been manned by people who have no other choice. They are in a way prisoners, slaves to modern-day

capitalism. As Smilla remarks: “[T]hat’s how they’ve manned the Kronos [w]ith people so compromised that they had no choice. Not until now, after all this time, do I see the ship’s mess for what it really is, a microcosm, an image of the network that Tørk and Claussen created” (*Smilla*, 325).

Her journey on board the Kronos is one on which she is physically violated and mentally challenged on several occasions. She is bruised and damaged by “time”. When the Kronos finally arrives in Gela Alta she is emaciated and tinged blue from bruises. Her injuries are reminiscent of a mental and physical crucifixion:

Anyone interested in death would benefit from looking at me ... [t]here’s no skin on my kneecaps, [b]etween my hips is a wide-yellowish-blue patch of blood ... [t]he palms of both my hands have suppurating lesions that refuse to close. At the base of my skull I have a bruise the size of a gull’s egg ... [my] skin is broken ... my ankle swollen ... [and] [I] won’t even mention the black and blue marks on my skull.

(*Smilla*, 326)

Her return “home” has brought her to a kind of death and rebirth experience, with all the bruises to show for it. However, as with most exiles returning home after a long absence, she is no longer “at home” with her surroundings. Her cultural hybridity is not shown to be a positive or creative space, and does not necessarily go hand in hand with Bhabha’s assertion above that this “third space” of the colonised is a regenerative one. Smilla remains in the twilight world of “unbelonging”, a state which engenders her deepest trauma.

Smilla and Trauma

That Smillaraaq is traumatised is unquestionable. In the context of the novel, however, her experiences become a synecdoche for those of her colonised people, and her return to a motherland an attempt to reclaim lost memories which have been deliberately extinguished by the colonial encounter. Since this encounter is figured in her very own hybrid genetic make-up, any attempt at “rememory” (to use Toni Morrison’s phrase from *Beloved*) is itself traumatic because it reinforces the split in her own personal history.

In this sense the text’s depiction of trauma can be read as both post-modernist (because it uses particular textual strategies) and postcolonial (because it deals largely with the trauma of colonisation and forced removal). Smilla’s personal being represents the hybrid mix of colonisation, but it also represents some of the ineradicable differences and lacunae in meaning which are the hallmark of postmodernist culture. According to van der Kolk and van der Hart, “[t]raumatic memories are the unassimilated

scraps of overwhelming experiences, which need to be integrated with existing mental schemes, and be transformed into narrative language. It appears that in order for this to occur successfully the traumatized person has to return to the memory often” (quoted in Caruth 1995: 176).

The analeptic sequences in the text and Smilla’s constant references to her childhood in Greenland and the various ways in which her people have fallen prey to the Danes present as “traumatic memories that are unassimilated”. Smilla’s own hybrid nature makes any simple “language” or memory equally difficult to attain. She effectively exists in an in-between space, historically, genetically and linguistically.

The early psychoanalyst Pierre Janet offers some insight into her type of experience. He suggests that among the reasons for this “unassimilation” are that severe trauma breaks down the mental schemes the subject has in order to process reality. When there is no way to “express” or tell or understand what is happening, the trauma becomes deeply embedded in the unconscious and takes years to be processed, if it ever finally is. In Janet’s words, from 1919, cited by van der Kolk and van der Hart:

It is only for convenience that we speak of it as “traumatic memory”. The subject is often incapable of making the necessary narrative which we call memory regarding the event; and yet he remains confronted by a difficult situation in which he has not been able to play a satisfactory part, one to which his adaptation had been imperfect, so that he continues to make efforts at adaptation.

(quoted in van der Kolk & van der Hart 1995: 160)

Smilla’s attempts at social assimilation, her numerous but failed efforts to attain a university degree, her inability to maintain relationships, her fixation with fashion as a replacement for lost warmth, can all be read as attempts to find a narrative for herself which replaces the “lost” one she is not willing to remember. This “lost narrative” is the early memory of her mother’s warmth, drinking from her breast even as an older child, of the variations of Greenlandic snow and of the wide open spaces that represent her motherland.

“Smilla”, [her mother says], “I have carried you in *amaat*” (pregnancy) ... [H]er hair is pulled back into a bun at the nape of her neck and she is big and beautiful. Even now when I think of her, she is the most beautiful woman I ever saw At moments of great intimacy, she lets me drink from the milk that is always there, beneath her skin just like her blood is I go to her breast which is brilliantly white, with a big delicate rose areola. There I drink *immuk*, my mother’s milk.

(*Smilla*, 30)

The loss of the mother (who simply disappears one day on a hunting expedition) together with the loss of the motherland by the removal to

Denmark, are traumas she seeks not to remember. One might argue that this “narrative” is replaced by one in which she takes some pride in being able to read the various aspects of snow, a skill which reconnects her to her mother and to a lost past and one which is not available to the colonising power.

The result is not so much a healing brought about by retelling the past, a past which vividly returns to her at the sight of Isaiah’s peculiar and “telling” footprints in the snow, but rather the experience of living in a parallel world of doubled lives (*Smilla*, 177). The structure of the novel actually hinges on Smilla’s parallel existence as both Greenlandic and Danish and neither Greenlandic nor Danish. This is shown in the ways in which the text disallows her forgetting the past. “Trauma [has] stop[ped] the chronological clock and [has fixed] the moment [of loss] permanently in memory and imagination, [which are] immune to the vicissitudes of time (*Smilla*, 177).

Isaiah’s sprint over the edge of the roof towards his death figures a death wish which may reflect not only Smilla’s and his mother’s psyches, but also those of other primary characters in the text, some of them Danish. The “prophet boy” Isaiah’s most telling prophecy becomes his final act: death is preferable to the continued existence he must bear under the hands of the colonising and body-abusing Cryolite Company. In a classic Freudian sense, Isaiah’s drive for death (and Smilla’s and Julianne’s respective senses of meaninglessness in life – a kind of death) originate in a defence against life, a way of escape. One must read even the actions of Smilla’s father and Tørk in similar terms.

If, as Kai Erikson (1995: 184) maintains, “our memory repeats to us what we have not yet come to terms with, [that which] still haunts us”, then we may argue that it is not only Smilla who is traumatised but also her father Moritz, who does not come to terms with his wife Ané’s death. His second marriage, to a woman younger than Smilla, may be read both as a way of retrieving his own lost daughter (Smilla is estranged from him because of the loss of her mother and of Greenland) and also as a way of forgetting his past with Ané, Smilla’s Inuit mother. In neither objective is he successful and he lingers in a perpetual zone of emotional emptiness and uncertainty, in much the way Smilla does. His attempt to forget therefore becomes a form of perpetual memorialising of the lost past.

Tørk’s actions are motivated, one might suggest, from a similar state of ennui, or a death wish. We are told that he was neglected by his parents, and as a result is “ice-cold”. He has no qualms about testing Isaiah for the Gela Alta virus on a monthly basis. One might argue that his “cold” actions, like taking a biopsy from the dead child, are evidence of “a constellation of life experiences” (Erikson 1995: 185) which have affected him more deeply than even he himself realises, because he enacts his coldness on others.

The trauma of colonialism and forced removals (to the “White Cells” of Denmark) leaves the Inuit in a state of haplessness. This is specifically

evident in the cases of Julianne, Isaiah's mother, and also of Smilla's brother. The experimentation on the bodies of the Inuit emphasises the way in which they are perceived by the Danes merely as forms of capital, merchandise with which to enrich the empire. The Inuit seem to have little control over their own bodies, or their own social structures. They can be used by unscrupulous scientists like Tørk with ease, have few medical facilities in Greenland and until recently no place for an autopsy. The new one is only three years old and is temporary (p. 18). This, of course, begs the question of what really happens to Greenlanders who die under suspicious circumstances in Greenland.

Erikson defines this kind of trauma as "collective" rather than "individual". She is referring to the disruption of the tissues of social life that damages the bonds joining people together and impairs the prevailing sense of community: "[it] is a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support" (1995: 187). As a result of this the relationship between "I" and "you" exists at a damaged and altered level. The "we" no longer exists.

Significantly, the only time we are given a sense of the Inuit as a community of exiles in Denmark is at Isaiah's funeral, when the women all cry together with Julianne – a dirge – like the crying and singing that remind Smilla of Greenland and her people.

With Isaiah and his coffin has come a procession consisting of those of Julianne's friends who are now holding her upright The pastor is now saying something that makes me think that he must have actually met Isaiah, even though, as far as I know, Julianne has never gone to Church. Later his voice disappears because the other women are weeping with Julianne They let their sorrow wash through them like a black flood.

(*Smilla*, 4)

The image of the Dane presented in the text is of a cold and sneering character. There are two exceptions: Laggerman, who carries out the autopsy on Isaiah and informs Smilla that a biopsy was taken from him after he had died. The second Danish exception is Elsa Lübing, who quite literally hands the keys to the Danish Cryolite Company to Smilla enabling her to grasp fully the shocking reasons for the company actually going to Greenland. Lübing becomes testament to how the Danish have not only abused Greenland's resources, but also the bodies of its people.

One must read this trauma as both ethnographic and nonteleological. It is a trauma ignited by ethnic differences between colonised and coloniser, and it is also one which does not have the comfort of an "end" because "there will be no conclusion" (*Smilla*, 410) to quote Smilla. This lack of a conclusion, this perpetual and reluctant memory of past trauma, is akin to what Victoria Burrows terms "a ghosting of the word" (2008: 161). By this she means that a continuous "re-enactment of memory underlies an unconscious search for

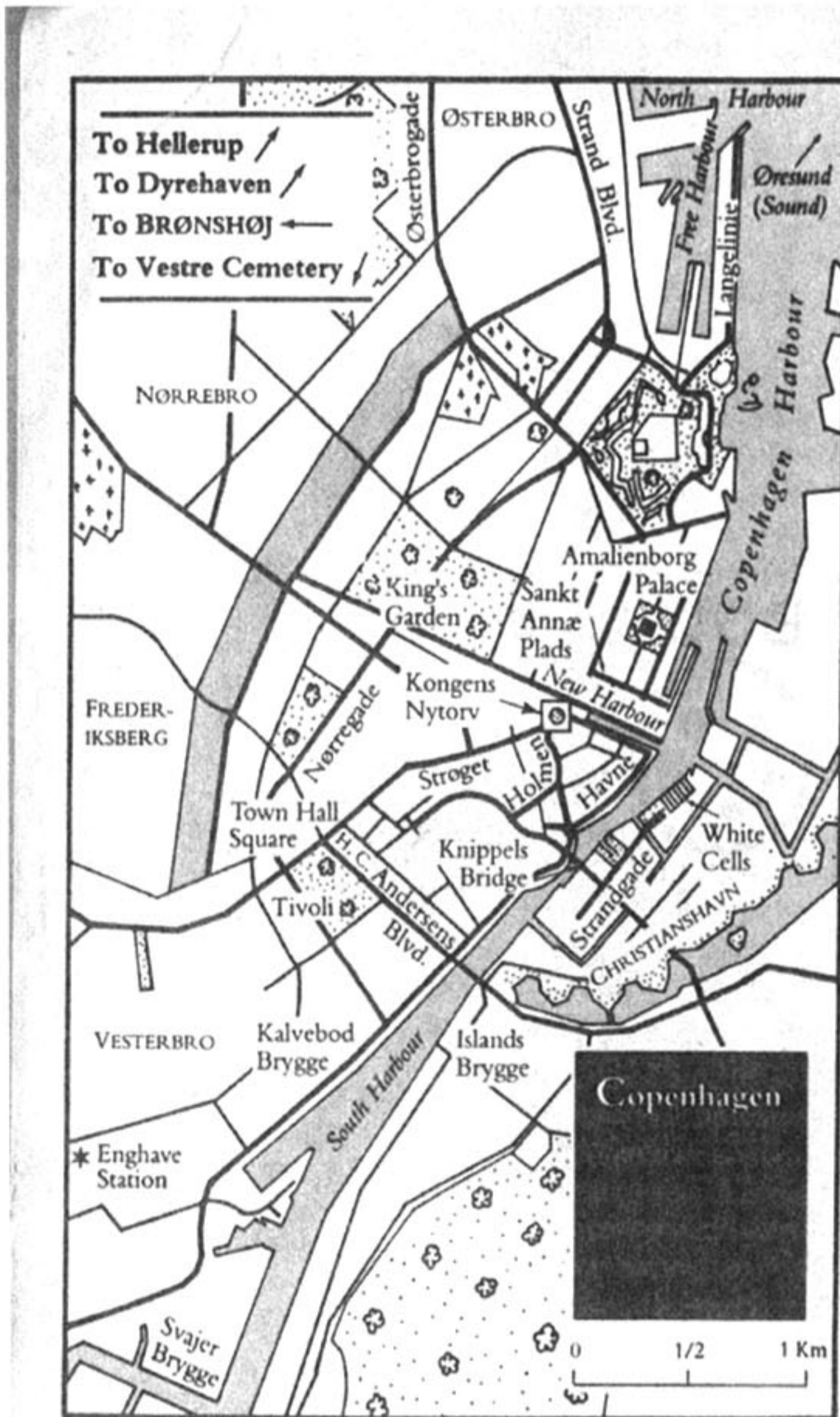
located, homely-affirmation and reconnection” (p. 162). But for the post-colonial subject living in the house of the coloniser (as Smilla does) there is no “homely-affirmation” or any “reconnection”. The novel suggests that this “lack” of a place or time of “reconnection” may, in fact, be one of the ways in which the developed world turns away from the trauma that so often accompanies the process of decolonisation. The result is that we as readers question whether the process of colonisation can really be over. What happens to the subject in the “gap” between being a “colonised” subject and then suddenly a “decolonised” one? The transition is by no means clear or definite. This is what Burrows suggests may be the “habit of detour”, often the focus of trauma theory itself (p. 162). This “detour” is literalised in Smilla’s journey back to her motherland past in Greenland, while never being able to leave Denmark, despite its association with the largely absent father.

While texts like *Smilla* focus on identity, pain and the hopelessness of the postcolonial condition, perhaps Cathy Caruth, one of the foremost theorists in trauma studies today, makes a valid point when she suggests that the memory of trauma, caught in the narrative of the event itself (be it fiction or otherwise) is not to be fully overcome, but endlessly repeated in a kind of psychic dislocation: “It is the fundamental dislocation implied by all traumatic experience that is both its testimony to the event and to the impossibility of its direct access” (1995: 9). It is this very endless repetition, like the seemingly endless to and fro of the *Kronos*, real or imagined, between Greenland and Denmark, which disallows any final “conclusion”.

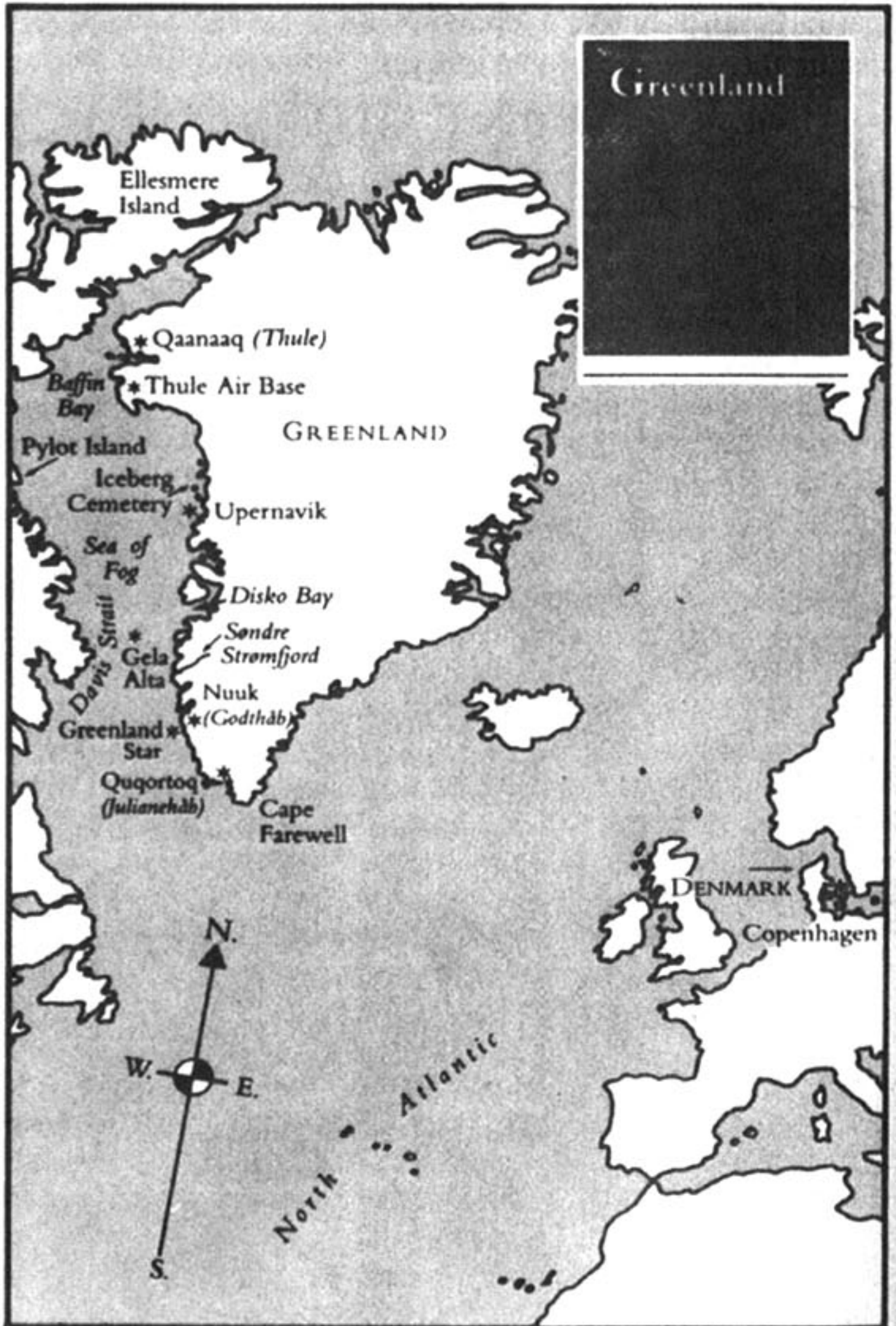
“It is not a story to be concluded” may be Smilla’s epigraph or motto. Such a lack of conclusion is the strongest argument for the novel’s postmodernist nature, as it is for its postcolonial concerns. Both of these forms of discourse are founded in the text on a consideration of the nature of trauma and the loss of the individual subject’s sense of identity. For Smilla, and for the reader, the only way forward is backward, but backward is not shown to be a fully satisfactory resolution to the trauma. The text resonates beyond its ending.

Høeg’s “detective novel” has therefore shown that to be a “detective” in the postcolonial world of Denmark, enquiring into the apparently innocent death of an Inuit boy, is to encounter, in a profound way, the complexities of postmodern subjectivity, blended with postcolonial issues of identity formation and the power imbalances extant in any colonialist system. The text demonstrates in the person of Smilla the radical effects this encounter has, but it also shows that there is no neat “answer” to the problems of colonialism and the hybrid identities formed out of it. At best the future belongs to a continued and traumatic “Middle Passage” where past and present interchange so thoroughly that any journey towards a teleological

future or “closure” is one fraught with trauma and suffering, the same death and (partial) rebirth Smilla experiences on board the Kronos, going “home” to find a mother who is no longer there.



Map 1: Copenhagen



Maps by Virginia Norey

Map 2: Greenland

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