



Report

Performing Identity: Navigating Cultural Identities through the Arts

from the IETM Aarhus Plenary Meeting

By Julia Handelman-Smith



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through the Arts

Author
Julia Handelman-Smith

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Isabelle Van de Gejuchte

Proof-reading and co-editing
Lottie Atkin

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ietm@ietm.org

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Summary

Kuluk Helms is an Inuk¹/Danish performing artist who has navigated between Greenland and Denmark her whole life. Based on the poem and performance 'Jeg Hører Til – Uannut Inissaqarpoq' ('I Belong'), Kuluk explored and discussed some of the difficulties, gifts and challenges she has faced through her life of dual cultures. This performance lecture contained elements of Inuk culture pillars, performing arts, knowledge sharing and a Q&A session facilitated by Reneltta Arluk.

Speaker:
[Kuluk Helms](#), Performing Artist, Greenland

Facilitator:
[Reneltta Arluk](#), Canada, is Inuvialuk², Dene and Cree³ growing up in the Northwest Territories of Canada. She is the founder and Artistic Director of Akpik Theatre.

- 1 Inuk, plural Inuit - one of the several Indigenous Peoples from the Arctic who descended from the Thule.
- 2 Of the Inuvialuit people or Western Canadian Inuit living in the western Canadian Arctic region.
- 3 The Dene and Cree are North American Indigenous Peoples living primarily in Canada, where they form one of the country's First Nations.



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Performing Identity:

Navigating Cultural Identities through the Arts

Introduction

The session began with Kuluk's performance of an extract from her solo work *Jeg Hører Til – Uannut Inissaqarpoq, (I Belong)*. Performed with a qilaat (Inuit drum) and Indigenous epic storytelling, the piece is 'a poetic study of what happens to a person who lives between cultures.' Through physical theatre and storytelling, Kuluk retells her discovery of an untapped physical memory of Inuit mask dancing within herself.

The performance set the stage for a deep and intimate conversation exploring the challenges, pains and joys of preserving and rediscovering one's own cultural traditions, memory and heritage. The group talked about the role of the arts in celebrating, sustaining and empowering Indigenous Peoples and cultures, as well as the challenges of navigating between cultures. Among the themes discussed were hiding and revealing identities, coloniser guilt, platforms for anger and acknowledgement, the privilege, power and responsibility of the arts. The audience, including Indigenous Peoples from different cultures, were able to reflect and share on experiences from other parts of the world, making this a global and Indigenous conversation.

Masking and unmasking

Kuluk and Renellta identified some of the hard decisions they have no choice but to make everyday, between masking and hiding identity to 'fit in' or to stand out. This can be challenging when it is possible to physically 'pass' as one of the majority.

"It's very human to have different roles to play – you might be one person at home, or another with friends - all situations bring out something different in us. My situation being mixed – and so white passing – is that people will always assume that I'm not Indigenous." explained Kuluk. "In many ways, the ability to 'pass' and to speak two coloniser languages – Danish and English - gives a privilege to navigate western societies."

Denmark-Greenland is a common identity that comes with an historically skewed power dynamic that can affect how we see ourselves. Neglecting one's indigeneity can lead to shame, anger and resentment that is difficult to put your finger on. "My son is white passing and will find his own suffering. He will need to prove to his own community that he is one of them." stressed Renellta.

Lian Bell from Ireland reflected on how the post-colonial relationship between Ireland and England is a similar but different situation. In that dynamic, the coloniser and colonised are physically very similar, which can often mask cultural and social differences. She also asked "How do you deal with the anger that comes from what you experience?"



Performance lecture by Kuluk Helms, IETM Aarhus 2023, Photo: Gorm Brandrup

Aggression, micro-aggression and coloniser's guilt

The slow build-up of micro-aggressions is known to take up a lot of space in many lives, not only Indigenous or minority people.

Historic and ongoing aggressions, micro-aggression and injustice are themes that can be hard to explore in mainstream society because so much is at stake for everyone. People from 'colonising' majorities might find it shaming and emotional to have this mirror held up to them. In her one woman show, Kuluk explores the experience of small but innumerable micro-aggressions that, unknowingly, people commit every day.

"As we navigate racist structures, none of us stand outside of it. Exploring some of these themes through arts and culture can help us all to see it, recognise it and address it in a more objective, human, forgiving and impactful way. Artists have the opportunity to give that space with love, care and humour." stressed Kuluk.

Reviving and sustaining traditions and culture:

Kuluk started the conversation by lighting a Qulleq – the traditional oil lamp of the Inuit. The Qulliq/Qulleq is symbolic because it is the technology that sustained Indigenous communities in the Arctic for millennia – without it there would be no Inuit.

It is also a symbol of a heritage on the brink of extinction. She had not seen a Qulleq lit before she was 30 years old.

Renellta reflected that the Qulliq is in wider use in North American Inuit and this may be because they were colonised much later than Kallaallit Nunaat, keeping traditions closer in memory. The almost disappearance of the Qulliq symbolises the wider loss of traditions, skills, knowledge and language through colonisation and the encroachment of new technologies.

As well as bringing a more sustainable way of being back into mainstream culture, these traditions have a story and identity built into them that makes their place in the arts so powerful.

Place, territory and identity

Kuluk talked about her experiences working in Taiwan and the UK as both periods of discovery but also as a kind of escape. Away from Denmark, she was free from the colonial structure and internalised racism that exists between Denmark and Greenland that she is forced to navigate.

“Being Indigenous in an occupied country we are inherently political. Every day actions like going to school, the post office and the bank are all a product of colonisation.” underlined Renellta.

Through unknowingly internalising the dominant narrative about Greenland, Kuluk felt “reluctant to see Greenland as a rich, exciting, nourishing place to be.”

The internalisation of dominant negative narratives in majority cultures have the risk of making ‘elsewhere’ more comfortable for Indigenous Peoples and people of minority cultures, as new and larger communities grant you some level of anonymity. In a new community, you have a chance to recreate yourself or your image, which can be tempting if one doesn’t feel free to be wholly one’s own self at one’s home community due to circumstances outside their purview.

Arts, Industry and representation

Renellta is the first contemporary artist in her family. “This is always a question I think about, because my ancestors did not have the opportunity. My family had to just survive. Being an artist can be perceived as a luxury or a privilege but it is the most powerful way to heal yourself.” she explained.

“Film and TV industry has so many preconceptions about what Indigenous ‘is’.” added Renellta. This is both exclusory, but also perpetuates stereotypes of Indigenous Peoples.

Many Indigenous representations in the arts are conformed to a colonialist image. As someone who does not look like a Greenlander, Kuluk finds that she is rarely cast in Greenlander roles.

Similarly, the loss of language and literature that was traditionally predominantly oral means that the stories and the history available for us to study are often not from an Indigenous perspective and, as such, are only interpretations.

In this way, the arts industries have a duty and a responsibility to empower, widen and diversify Indigenous voices across the arts.

Colonising values

It can be hard to navigate between values held by mainstream colonising societies, Indigenous societies and values that we hold today. “Colonisation is a slippery snake that subverts in a number of ways whether we acknowledge or talk about it or not.” claimed Kuluk.

Renellta has also experienced being excluded because of strong gender roles in traditional practices.

At the same time, Indigenous participants reflected on how many of the strict gender distinctions are in fact inherited from Christian colonising values. Flexibility of gender rules was essential for Indigenous Peoples to survive. For example, Cree societies had seven gender identities prior to Christianity – possibly closer to our values and respect for LGBTQ rights today.

“There’s a global tendency to polarise Indigenous communities as either inhumanly good or bad but always simple.” reflected Kuluk.

Ihot Cihok Fitolol, a member of the audience from the Gaoshan⁴ people in Taiwan, expressed the anger she can feel towards the strict gender roles of her tribe. “I hate and love my traditions at the same time. Tribe is not utopia, it’s home.” shared Ihot.

“The reality is that whatever issue any person might have, we have them as well but with the additional trauma of colonisation. And if we are part of any other minority besides our indigeneity, we experience the micro aggressions of that as well. It’s connected to the violent trauma we have had to endure and having to navigate systems we’re not familiar with over generations. Our circumstances are difficult and extremely complex.” stressed Kuluk.

“In the end, it isn’t that we want to go back to the way we were but to go forward with the tools that we have.” added Renellta.

The right to feel angry

As Peoples who only recently started to have a legitimate voice in mainstream societies, there needs to be a safe space for Indigenous Peoples to express the anger and pain of many generations of oppression. In the discourse about Greenland-Denmark, this anger tends to be suppressed. “Anger is not the same as being destructive. If it stays in your body, you can get sick. Expressing it allows it to leave your body.” claimed Kuluk.

Sharing new stories that have been deeply dehumanised by colonisers is an important role for the arts.

Canada has taken steps to redress this through a *Truth and Reconciliation* process. “As much as we want to preserve our intergenerational knowledge, we need to release our intergenerational trauma [...] Allowing Indigenous Peoples to be angry publicly, and to allow non-Indigenous people to hear it, turned it into something else. It creates the space needed to hear the anger. It feels like blame, but it’s not blame, it’s a deep hurt that needs to be healed.” added Renellta.

Final remarks

Kuluk and Renellta’s conversation shed light on the challenges and complexities faced by Indigenous artists in preserving and rediscovering their cultural traditions while navigating between different cultures. The conversation delved into themes of identity, coloniser guilt and microaggressions. It highlighted the responsibility of the arts to seek diverse representation, as well as its important role in amplifying and empowering Indigenous voices. The session emphasised the right to feel anger and the healing power of art in addressing intergenerational trauma for both victims and aggressors.

Overall, this global and inclusive conversation reinforced the importance of the arts in fostering understanding, healing and cultural preservation.

⁴ Indigenous Peoples of Taiwan, with the nationally recognized subgroups numbering about 569,000 or 2.38% of the island’s population.

