



# CULTURE AND HISTORY

– STUDENT RESEARCH PAPERS



# INDHOLDSFORTEGNELSE



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# FORORD



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God læselyst! / Redaktionen

*This issue of Culture and History is a thematic issue where students have reworked exam papers from the elective 'Research Area', which is an element where students study with a teacher in their area of expertise. The articles illustrate what students can gain from an elective that is tightly connected to concrete research. We are proud to present articles written by students from history, ethnology and archeology, and on topics ranging from ancient to modern times.*

*The current editorial board consists of teaching associate professor in history, PhD, Peter Edelberg, assistant professor in ethnology, PhD, Katy Overstreet, PhD fellow in archeology, Margaréta Hanna Pintér, PhD fellow in Greek and Latin, Valentina Orrù, and PhD fellow in history, Rune Korgaard.*

*Culture and History, which is usually published online, presents articles by students at the Saxo Institute at the University of Copenhagen. The aim is to provide students from the institute's different disciplines an opportunity to publish articles based on projects, essays or Master's theses, thereby presenting their findings and acquiring experience with writing research papers. The journal publishes both special thematic issues, mixed volumes and separate single articles and is edited by an editorial committee, sometimes in collaboration with theme editors, including students. The editors jointly decide on article proposals and take care of the peer review process. The journal was originally supported by University of Copenhagen's U-2016 project Teaching-based Research.*



Forside: Fotografi fra Nationalmuseets samlinger er et loftsmaleri fra Grevinde Danners lejlighed i Ny Vestergade 13, tilflyttet i 1863. Lejligheden var blevet udsmykket af en rig tømmerhandler C.L. Maag i 1811 efter tidens antik-inspirerede mode af blandt andet malerne G. Hilker, P.C. Skovgaard og Constantin Hansen. Anvendes med Nationalmuseets tilladelse.

*Front page: Photograph from the collections of the National Museum. Ceiling painting from the apartment of Countess Danner, Ny Vestergade 13. Used with permission.*



# IN THE INTERFACES OF OXYGEN DEPLETION

A case study of the environmentalities of Carsten from Hjarbæk Fjord and the  
Danish Society for Nature Conservation in *The Green Tripartite*

By:  
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European Ethnology



**ABSTRACT:** This article explores biosocial frictions unfolding in the interfaces of oxygen depletion. The Green Tripartite (*Den Grønne Trepert*), a national Danish agreement aiming to reduce nitrogen, create more ‘nature’ and lower CO<sub>2</sub>, through agricultural restructuring, signals new forms of collaboration and combat. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and recent environmental scholarship, I analyze how Carsten, a daily visitor of Hjarbæk Fjord, and the Danish Society for Nature Conservation (*Danmarks Naturfredningsforening*) engage with oxygen depletion through divergent environmentalities. A central point is that these divergent ways of knowing, responding to, and being shaped by oxygen depletion reveal embodied political disagreements between urban, scientific bureaucrats and rural, anti-elitist populations, and their more-than-human relations.

**KEY WORDS:** *Den Grønne Trepert*, multiplicity, environmentality, governance, the Green Tripartite.



## Murky waters and the Green Tripartite

Eelgrass, eel rushes, eel fishing. No eels. Data production, discussions and daily evening visits with four dogs. A tar pot used for eel traps, once upon a time. A new political deal, a tripartite. On a July afternoon in the summer of 2024, Adrian and I met Carsten<sup>1</sup> and his four dogs by the sea kayak club by Hjarbæk Fjord. As the sun moved closer to the horizon of corn fields and common reeds, Adrian, Carsten, and I talked. We had many good ideas for how to create life in the fjords again, and with his daily visits to Hjarbæk Fjord, Carsten had a lot to share. He told us about the efforts he engages and believes in. About how politicians have been unable to live up to their responsibilities. About the histories of Hjarbæk Fjord. When Carsten was a ‘knejt’ (a term for big boys or young men particularly used by working class men from Jutland) there were many eels. Since the middle ages, Hjarbæk Fjord’s abundance of eels and herring has attracted and fed the people, among others, living there, Carsten told us. In the sixties, a dam was built to improve car infrastructure. This transformed the fjord from saltwater to freshwater, cutting Hjarbæk Fjord off from Limfjorden and creating excellent conditions for algae growth. Eels and fish disappeared, and fishermen had no fish to fish. In the nineties, the dam was removed, and saltwater entered Hjarbæk Fjord. But the conditions in the fjord did not improve.

After meeting Carsten, a lot of things happened. 2024 marked the year with the highest levels of oxygen depletion recorded in 22 years in Denmark<sup>2</sup>. Meanwhile, a national deal to “benefit both the climate, water environment, nature and biodiversity”<sup>3</sup> was agreed upon, with a strategy of “a historically large restructuring of agriculture”<sup>4</sup> (DN 2024; Aftale om et Grønt Danmark 2024: 2, 8). Oxygen depletion and

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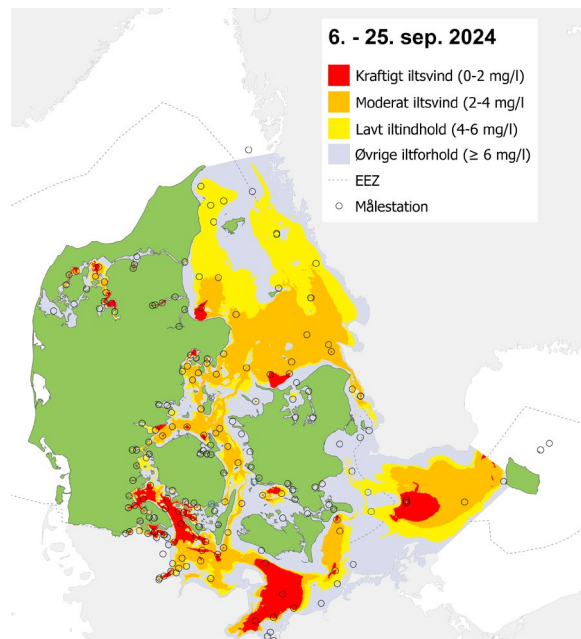
<sup>1</sup> Carsten is a pseudonym. I used internet groups to get in touch with him again. I asked permission to quote him and read aloud his quotes from the summer of 2024, which he elaborated on, and, once again, he asked important questions: “But what will it become?” (with it referring to the exam paper I wanted to write about him) “What concerns me most is pollution of the fjord. In Danish: Men hvad skal det blive til? Det, der optager mig allermost, er forurening af fjorden.”

<sup>2</sup> The high levels of oxygen depletion has been the subject of a large number of news articles (see e.g. Meesenburg 2024; Sølvsten 2024; Elkjær 2025).

<sup>3</sup> In Danish: “vil gavne både klima, vandmiljø, natur og biodiversitet”.

<sup>4</sup> In Danish: “en historisk stor omlægning af landbruget”.

the practices creating it were to be stopped. Out of the seven official stakeholders in the deal, one of them specializes in topics about nature, biodiversity, climate and environments. This is the Danish Society for Nature Conservation (DN). Through scientific knowledge about “nature”<sup>5</sup> and the management thereof, DN provided both guidance and requirements for the national agreement.



Map over recorded amounts of oxygen depletion in coastal waters in Denmark. The total area with oxygen depletion has increased significantly since 2010. The total amount of oxygen depleted waters was 80% larger in 2024 than in 2023 (Nationalt Center for Miljø og Energi 2024).

As I learned more about the agency and causes of oxygen depletion, something else struck me. In the interfaces of oxygen depletion, agreement and disagreement is interwoven, on different governance scales and with different embodied practices. Journalists, scientists, environmental activists, national and municipal politicians from both left- and right-wing parties, officials from the Danish Society for Nature Conservation, Adrian, Carsten and I, among others, agreed: Oxygen depletion must be stopped. But when it came to explanations of causes and proposed solutions, disagreements announced their arrivals, saturated with situated practices of knowledge, governance and power, along with the shaping of new subjectivities. And this is what I wish to explore in this article: *How do the two divergent environmentalities of Carsten and the Danish Society for Nature Conservation shape and take shape in the interfaces of oxygen depletion?*

<sup>5</sup> I write “nature” with quotation marks to signal the situatedness and boundaries of the specific nature that concerns DN.



Exploring this question is important, since the divergent relations with oxygen depletion tell stories of two almost mythological narratives. First, the narrative of a powerful state enforcing certain ways of living on local more-than-human populations, despite the humans in those entities vocalize strong opposition to the ways of living imposed by the state (de la Cadena 2015). Second, the narrative of the battle between effective agriculture and nature conservation (Pedersen 2010), sometimes formulated as *techno-optimist visions* against *eco-pessimist visions* (Cusworth et. al 2021). Besides that, the question is important since 70% of nitrogen in the Danish coastal waters, which is a major player in creating oxygen depletion (more on this later), is considered to derive from fertilizer-use in agriculture (Aarhus Universitet 2021). Moreover, production of animals and animal feed constitutes about 68,2% of Denmark's landmass, plus an area corresponding to 14% of Denmark's total landmass from imported animal feed (Odgaard et. al 2021). Oxygen depletion is thus deeply entangled in the reproduction of landscapes that are friendly towards effective production of animals and animal feed, while being hostile towards an array of different worldmaking practices and species, including but not limited to, species that thrive in nutrient poor environments. In the intersections of Green Tripartite, this relationship is being challenged. Through an ethnographic approach, I wish to bring forward some of the more-than-human frictions that are currently unfolding in the interfaces of oxygen depletion – between national governance, local belongingness, and the Green Tripartite's goals of transforming agricultural lands into both nature and even more productive agricultural lands. My main claim is that the divergent ways of knowing, relating to, shaping and being shaped by oxygen depletion can be a key to understanding some of the broader political disagreements between often urban bureaucratic-believers and anti-elitist often rural populations. And this is a more-than-human matter. I thus wish to draw attention to the separated spheres of political action, or political alliances (de la Cadena 2015), as well as the strikingly different tools for communication and democratic involvement which are of great importance to the making and understanding of governance practices, oxygen depletion and environmentalities, whether human or non-human.

### Material and analytical approach

For this case study I wish to juxtapose ethnographic material from an encounter with Carsten at Hjarbæk Fjord in July, 2024, with material from an internal meeting at The Danish Society for Nature Conservation

(DN) which I attended on November 4th, 2024. Carsten is born and raised in Knudby, a village neighboring Hjarbæk Fjord. During the daytime, Carsten works at a factory that produces *tegl*, clay-based bricks and roof tiles, some 40 kilometers away from his home. Every night, on weekends, and vacations, Carsten visits the fjord with his four dogs. He enjoys the visits, and he sees the fjord's seasonal changes - and other changes, too (I will elaborate on this later). Carsten is a person who truly cares about Hjarbæk Fjord, and is deeply saddened by the bad conditions that the fjord is in. The Danish Society for Nature Conservation truly cares about the bad condition of Hjarbæk Fjord, too. But this organization, Denmark's biggest green NGO, also cares about the bad conditions of other waters and many other issues of 'nature', 'environment' and 'access to nature' (DN 2024). The association was founded in 1911, and since then DN has played a crucial role in hearings when laws are being drafted. DN has a special legal right that allows them to appeal against decisions made by public authorities, pursuant to eg. the Nature Protection Act and the Environmental Protection Act. DN is considered the fifth most influential civil society organization (Løppenthin 2017). DN thus has an influential position in governance where they work on local, national and international scales in distinct ways. Importantly, DN is currently an official stakeholder in the Green Tripartite (GT), the national deal striving for a "historical restructuring and conversion of Denmark's land areas and production of food and agriculture in Denmark"<sup>6</sup> (Aftale om et Grønt Danmark 2024: 2).

To analyze these issues, I wish to draw on the concepts of *uncommonalities* (de la Cadena 2015), *scales of governance* (Kimura and Kinchey 2019) and *environmentality* (Green 2014). The different world-making practices unfolding along with oxygen depletion hint at heterogeneous ways of engaging with the troubles of our time; troubles of ecological destruction that are entangled with divergent ways of knowing and engaging with power institutions in a more-than-human world. These troubles are by many referred to as the Anthropocene. As many critical scholars have pointed out, the challenges of the Anthropocene are not solely technical issues to be dealt with or fixed by the natural sciences (Yates-Doerr 2014; Green 2014). Rather, our time's environmental problems are issues that require collaboration of different kinds; bringing ontological disagreement into the alliances (de la Cadena 2015), on different scales of governance (Kimura

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<sup>6</sup> Original Danish text: "en historisk omlægning og omstilling af Danmarks arealer og af fødevarer- og landbrugsproduktionen i Danmark".

& Kinchey 2019), and with attention to the relations of power and care emerging between state governance, scientific knowledge and local ways of nurturing and living in a shared world (Green 2014).

Marisol de la Cadena works with the interactions and struggles that occur between divergent practices as they connect across constitutive differences (de la Cadena 2015). Drawing on events of indigenous resistance against the expansion of markets for minerals, oil, and energy in Bolivia, Peru and Argentina, de la Cadena addresses the violence against local worlds enacted from nation-state governance in the name of progress. With the term *uncommonalities* she calls for a practice of politics that brings ontological disagreement into alliances and inaugurates multiple worldings. De la Cadena criticizes the idea of a universal nature: “what is enacted as humans and nature is *not only* enacted as such” (ibid.), and she thereby advocates for ontological multiplicity. This perspective has inspired me to scrutinize how oxygen depletion is *not only* the same thing, as Carsten, DN and oxygen depletion take part in a relational alliance with ontological differences.

Many of today’s environmental problems are unfolding not only at local scales, but on national and global scales, too. When dealing with the realities of ecological destruction, Kimura and Kinchey draw attention to the importance of *scales of governance* when participants want to solve environmental problems (2014). They argue that environmental problems unfolding at regional, national and/or global scales may necessitate state- or nationwide struggles, in order to stop the problems. While national scales of governance may be useful to create efficient shifts in governance practices, the standardized methods often used here may limit locals’ knowledge and participants’ attachments to a certain issue. Conversely, local scales of governance may facilitate local community empowerment, but without collaboration with larger governance scales, the local actions may not be effective. Attention to scale thus enables consideration of the qualitative, affective and infrastructural conditions of different strategies, where certain networks, skills and access to powerful stakeholders can be important components for struggles to be effective.

Lesley Green uses the term *environmentality* to discuss how environmental management practices, whether state or home based, navigate and transform power-embedded landscapes (2014). Environmentality, as explained by Green, emphasizes that intellectual heritages and biosocial technologies are crucial for *how*

environmental publics engage with environmental politics. Green draws attention to the violence at the core of compliance-based environmental management “in which science and governance operate to control a relation with a nature that is defined by its capital value” (Green 2014: 4). Echoing Bruno Latour, Green draws attention to the values of efficiency, profitability and objectivity as essential principles in establishing governance practices that are true to the modernist imaginary of separating subjects and objects (Green 2014). This is important in relation to the categories of experts and non-experts which are generated through objectification where scientific knowledge about ‘nature’, as DN has and uses, creates subjects with capacities to decide and influence national governance practices. Entities that do not live up to the knowledge economy’s values, eg. Carsten, do not have agency to take part in the national politics of environmental management, and are thus rendered as objects in that particular governance setting. Green’s text is, however, not only that of critique. Inspired by Rachel Carson, Green, too, calls for a revolutionary environmentality; an environmentality that begins with the ecologies of households, called oikos, where nurturing and attending cycles that support fertility and responsiveness are central. This is thus a call for an affective and relational approach to generating non-elitist environmental management and publics. In relation to Denmark’s current governance plans to reduce nitrogen nationally, I have found Green’s perspectives fruitful, since these decisions, too, are examples of environmental politics, guided by natural scientists who place faith in centralized political institutions. In this article, the term environmentality has been useful to explore how the entities of Carsten and DN shape and take shape through institutional arrangements, knowledge practices, and decision-making in relation to environmental governance of different scales – and contributed with attention for how oikos and ecologies can be nurtured.

### What is oxygen depletion?

Soft winds, warmth, summer, rain. Nutrient rich water rushes from fertilized fields through straightened streams. From the South, Fiskbæk Å runs through wetlands and what today are farm fields, but were once wetlands (and once upon a time, in the stone age, were covered by the Littorina sea). From the Southwest, the narrower Jordbro Å runs through a lake made in 2016 to decrease the amounts of nitrogen reaching Hjarbæk Fjord. From the East, Skals Å runs containing EU-protected Natura 2000 nature. From the Northeast, Simstedt Å, known as one of the cleanest rivers in Denmark, flows with sea trout populations.

These four streams' large catchment area lead nitrogen- and phosphorus-rich drain- and river water to the shallow Hjarbæk Fjord. Here, the brackish water meets saltwater, creating two layers, with cold saltwater at the bottom and warmer brackish water at the top – a relationship that creates good conditions for algae growth. With these excessive cycles of algae eating, living and dying light is prevented from penetrating the water, and the water plants are thus deterred from living and releasing oxygen to the water (Hansen 2025; SEGES 2020). This reinforces the release of hydrogen sulfide, ammonia, and phosphate from the fjord bottom, caused by the good conditions for algae growth, which reinforces the process even more. Furthermore, in order to decompose the great amounts of dead algae, bacteria uses oxygen, which thus can lead to oxygen depletion. This process, caused by nutrient enrichment in water bodies, is called eutrophication (Hunding 2024).

But the release of nitrate through rain water is not the only significant way that nitrogen compounds morph the life that they meet. When farm fields are added more nutrients than the amount of nutrients that the crops can absorb, the excess amount of nitrogen is discharged, either as nitrate through watercourses, or as ammonia or nitrous oxide to the atmosphere (Miljø- og Ligestillingsministeriet 2025). And as these specific nitrogen compounds move through air and water in large amounts, they change the livability of ecologies for certain species (ibid).

## The environmentalty of the Danish Society for Nature Conservation

The descriptions of nitrogen, nitrate, ammonium and phosphorus as essential partakers in the enabling of oxygen depletion are also presented by the Danish Society for Nature Conservation (DN). In their article “Oxygen Depletion in the Sea”<sup>7</sup> and at their internal meeting held to discuss the Green Tripartite (the GT), DN reference a national study from Aarhus University, explaining that approximately 70% of nitrogen emissions from land to sea comes from agriculture (Aarhus Universitet 2021). The study uses data from 210 water flow measuring stations, which have a catchment area amounting to 59% of Denmark's total landmass (NOVANA 2022). The study highlights the connections between agricultural practices' use of nitrogen fertilizers and the fertilizers' agencies in soils, seas and groundwater. This national (and in some

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<sup>7</sup> Original Danish title: “Iltsvind i havet” (DN, <https://www.dn.dk/vi-arbejder-for/vand/hav/iltsvind-i-havet/>).

ways also local and global) conjuncture between policy, nitrogen, agriculture, and water environment, among others, serves as an argument for creating an “effective” policy. The policy thus strives for effectiveness in both nitrogen reductions, implementation processes and agriculture production (Aftale om et Grønt Danmark 2024), on a national scale through top-down institutional technologies using scientific data.

Initially, as one might perhaps guess, the political agreement was not established from the outset. It developed through negotiations – a commons emerging through the interplay of heterogeneous worldmaking practices unfolding qualitatively as some practices became lively while others (were made to) disappear. The government, in this case, was not in favor of nitrogen reductions at the beginning of the negotiations. However, this did not last forever. This was something that Maria Gjerding, the president of DN, addressed at an internal meeting:

Nitrogen was the only thing the government had written into its terms of reference that we were NOT allowed to talk about. There was a specific sentence that said ‘nitrogen is not part of these negotiations’ – and what is a bit paradoxical, when you look at the agreement now, is that nitrogen has become the main focus of the GT.<sup>8</sup>

The GT shifted from not being *allowed* to deal with nitrogen to a deal *focusing* on nitrogen, hence creating space for a new question: How much should nitrogen be reduced? According to Gjerding nitrogen was such an integral part of the deterioration of climate, biodiversity, and the aquatic environment that a political agreement not regulating agriculture’s release of nitrogen “would not be something DN could vouch for,” as she said at the internal meeting. Calling for nitrogen reductions, DN required that the SVM-government<sup>9</sup> stepped away from protecting “effective agriculture production,” (a phrase used by both

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<sup>8</sup> Original Danish quote, from the internal meeting of The Danish Society for Nature Conservation on November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2024: ”Kvælstof var det eneste, regeringen havde skrevet ind i sit kommissorie, at vi IKKE måtte tale om. Der stod en decideret sætning, hvor der stod ’kvælstof er ikke en del af de her forhandlinger’. Og det, der jo er lidt paradoksalt, når man nu står og kigger på aftalen, er, at det er kvælstof, der er blevet hovedomdrejningspunktet for den grønne trepartsaftale.”

<sup>9</sup> The Danish SVM government, formed in December 2022, is a coalition government consisting of the Social Democrats (S), the Liberal Party (Venstre, V), and the Moderates (M). This is a rare coalition that includes both right-wing and left-wing parties, marking the first time in over 40 years that traditional rivals govern together in Denmark. Over time, this coalition has become increasingly unpopular. A recent survey shows that voters believe that this coalition is the worst at implementing favorable politics (Epinion 2024).



Gjerding at the internal meeting; DN 2024; Aftale om et Grønt Danmark 2024). These political negotiations can be understood as the desire of reducing nitrogen meeting another desire of *not* reducing nitrogen; a political alliance where practices connect across constitutive differences. If DN, as the only stakeholder with specialized knowledge of “nature”, stepped away from the agreement, the agreement would both lose its expertise about aquatic environments, and perhaps its democratic support, as 89% of Danes are worried about the state of the seas (WWF 2022) and 57% believe that political decisions are made without a proper scientific/professional basis (Mandag Morgen 2024). Divergent ontologies are met in the GT, signaling a shift in (environ)mentality, but, of course, kept at bay with scientific data, visions of compromise and effective agricultural world-making practices.

The GT marks a shift away from the previous agricultural policy of voluntary schemes as these, by DN among others, were deemed ineffective at reducing agriculture’s use of nitrogen (DN 2024). While targets for nitrogen reductions existed before the GT, the data that guided national policies for nitrogen reductions were based on farmers’ own reports. In 2022, authorities on average supervised 3,7% of Danish farms, and 35% of those farms “had an overuse of nitrogen” (Statsrevisorerne 2024) which was not detectable through the data created by the farms themselves. The wishes to make ends with the ineffective voluntary schemes thus makes an environmentality underpinned by efficiency, compliance and centralized control. While efficiency, along with profit and objectivity, function as essentials in compliance-based capitalist governance, efficiency can also be linked to desires and dedication to reducing environmental problems unfolding on larger scales than the local. The environmentality in the GT also creates subjectivities that come into being through coercion, even though the Danish government and official stakeholders in the GT uphold compromise as the ideal. This ideal of compromise, somewhat akin to de la Cadena’s concept, emphasizes the specific embodied practices and technologies at play in environmental politics, thereby revealing the relationality between environmental organizations, current policy frameworks, and perceptions of agriculture.

In the Green Tripartite, entities that do not reduce nitrogen or “benefit nature” are rendered as obstacles, as something that compliance-based politics can and should change through financial incentives. On their website, DN write:

So far, there have been no consequences for the voluntary schemes not working. With the GT it will become costly not to convert your land. The CO<sub>2</sub> tax on livestock, a tax on low-lying soil and increased regulation on nitrogen will ensure this.<sup>10</sup>

Farmers producing livestock are here understood as obstructive objects emerging in tandem with economic overrides, rendering fertilizers, the environment and (friends of) agriculture, among others, as entities to be controlled and managed through financial regulation. This establishes an environmentality where matters of nature, fertilizers, and caring for the environment are rendered as something outside the oikos (management of households), in the realms of the polis (state governance), thus creating a sphere of responsibility grounded in state control with clear ambitions in improving the conditions for nature and environment. At the core of this new policy runs an environmentality which does not care for the dependencies that have been created between farmers and fertilizers, for farmers to continue their jobs. Furthermore, it has little practice in bringing actual farmers and concerned citizens into the policy-creation rooms due to the alliance's top-down, scientific approach.

### Carsten's environmentality

Carsten does not connect agriculture's use of fertilizers with oxygen depletion. In fact, he is not interested in oxygen depletion at all. Or at least the phrasing of it. Rather, he is interested in the spatial conditions and changes that he experiences in Hjarbæk Fjord. As we speak, Carsten sheds attention to several things that worsen the conditions in the fjord. He calculates how many kilograms of fish seals eat per day and how many seals live in the Limfjord. He counts the amount of fish that cormorants eat – a bird species he despises about as much as the law protecting it. Although Carsten's observations of Hjarbæk Fjord are not conducted according to scientific standards, his observations reveal a truth that the scientific observations

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<sup>10</sup> Original Danish quote: "Hvor det hidtil ikke har haft konsekvenser at de frivillige ordninger ikke virkede, vil det med treparten blive omkostningsfuldt ikke at omlægge sin jord. Det vil CO<sub>2</sub>-afgiften på husdyr, en afgift på lavbundsjord og en øget regulering på kvælstof sørge for (DN 2024)".

do not. Seals and cormorants live and take shape in the oxygen depleted waters in Hjarbæk Fjord while being protected by bureaucratic international and national laws. And unlike particles of nitrogen and phosphorus, they are rather visible to Carsten. These two species are well-known competitors of fishermen due to their high fish consumption, and the history of fishery in Hjarbæk Fjord is very dear to Carsten. The nitrogen-rich fertilizers, on the other hand, that scientists point to as central factors in creating oxygen depletion and “bad ecological conditions” in coastal waters are determined through scientific measuring methods, such as measuring stations and chemical analyses (NOVANA 2023). So, what happens when someone who is highly critical of city elites and feels a cultural bond to agriculture is met with perspectives fueled by scientific knowledge which emphasize that agriculture plays a big role in creating bad ecological conditions in the fjord?

Standing in the evening sun, looking at the fjord, I ask Carsten if I can swim there. Along the shore, the seabed looks mushy. I see green algae on the top of stagnant water. Carsten replies: “it’s not the best, but you can swim there. Just don’t swallow the water”.<sup>11</sup> Carsten explains that the bad conditions in the fjord are caused by sewage, seals, cormorants, and the municipality. Adrian says that agriculture plays a significant role too. Carsten replies:

Agriculture isn’t as bad as those over in the cities want it to be. It’s the EU that’s the problem. They’re the ones who decide that the French can still fish for eels when they’re small. That’s before they come up here, where it’s illegal.<sup>12</sup>

As this quote indicates, Carsten is not fond of both the way that the EU manages eels and the connections that are made between agriculture and bad conditions in the fjord. As mentioned in the start, eel fishing, and the fishing of herring and other animals, has been of great importance for the people living with Limfjorden. In 2022, the amount of eels measured was only 0,6% of the number measured back in 1980 (WWF 2023). While the drastic reduction of eels has given rise to regional conservation and ecological displacements, it has also given rise to frustration for people who feel connected to various species of eels

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<sup>11</sup> Original Danish quote: “Det’ ik’ det bedste, men du kan godt svømme i det. Bare ik’ drik’ vandet.”

<sup>12</sup> Original Danish quote: “Landbruget er altså ikke så slemt som dem ovre i byerne gerne vil have. Det er EU, den er gal med. Det er dem, der gør sådan, at franskmændene stadig kan fiske ålene mens de er små, inden de kommer herop, hvor det’ ulovligt.”

and the historical practices of fishing and eating them. While Carsten's statement can both be seen as a rejection of scientific knowledge, it can also be seen as an environmentality with an overall critical approach to forms of governance that are not local; expressing resistance to the ways in which regional and national governance practices create standardized practices of environmental governance, with attention to protecting endangered species, but without involvement with local connections, eg. practices of eel fishing.

Carsten's environmentality focuses on the local place, fish, and historical narratives of the people of Salling's connections to Limfjorden. Carsten tells us that it is our task to take care of nature, but as he sees it, the politicians are not taking on their responsibility. As we speak, anger becomes prominent in his voice. He takes out his phone, presses start on a video, and says:

Now I'm gonna show you who's destroying the life here in the fjord. I have it all on my phone. You can see it here.<sup>13</sup>

Carsten shows us a video of a yellow dump truck loading off huge amounts of grass into a small river:

It was the municipality that dumped all this grass into Skals Å, which flows directly out here.<sup>14</sup>

While Carsten's experience reveals something about the infrastructures through which he cares for Hjarbæk Fjord, it simultaneously reveals something about an environmentality present in the municipality's practice, and hence the mutual shapings of and by oxygen depletion.

For Carsten, bureaucratic practices, on both EU and municipal scales of governance, are leading practices that don't fully take responsibility for creating abundant nature. After the incident with the grass dumping, Carsten called the municipality, asking them to clean up the mess. They did not accommodate his suggestions. With the dumping of grass into Skals Å, for whatever the many reasons, and not responding to Carsten's call for help, Carsten, once again, fraught with disappointment, experienced that a state initiative contributed to bad conditions in the fjord. Hjarbæk Fjord, a place Carsten shares time with and tries to nurture, emerges from the conjunctures of multiple actors: Grass, seals, cormorants, mushy waters,

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<sup>13</sup> Original Danish quote: "Nu skal jeg vise jer hvem det er, der ødelægger livet her i fjorden. Jeg har det hele på min mobil. I kan se det her."

<sup>14</sup> Original Danish quote: "Det var kommunen, der læssede alt det græs ud i Skals Å. Den løber herud."

a truck driver from the municipality, and national governance practices. These all shape the Fjord in situated ways, showing the various relationalities emerging in the interfaces of oxygen depletion.

## Conclusion

This article explores how divergent shapings emerge in the interfaces of oxygen depletion. Drawing on the concept of environmentality, I explore how the Danish Society for Nature Conservation and Carsten, a local dweller at Hjarbæk Fjord, engage with oxygen depletion. They do so on different scales of governance, through diverse embodiments and ways of relating to and shaping oxygen depletion. These diverse interactions with oxygen depletion or “bad conditions in the fjord”, as Carsten puts it, tell stories of how constitutive divergence (de la Cadena 2025) emerges along with oxygen depletion in (un)formulated political alliances. And this is a story about the multiplicity of nitrogen. Effectiveness, scientific methods, and a mixture of visions of compromise and compliance in national politics characterize the environmentality of the Danish Society for Nature Conservation. Carsten’s environmentality is characterized by a feeling of local belongingness, fostered through everyday walks by the fjord, and histories about the abundant of fish and fishing in Limfjorden, along with experiences of politicians, on EU and municipal scales, failing to protect the life in the fjord. By exploring these different environmentalities and their positionalities, this article pushes for a deeper examination of how political disagreements and the knowledge practices engaged with environmental management take shape in a more-than-human world.



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# FAROESE PILOT WHALING IN A COSMOPOLITICAL WAR

A study on political ontologies, multinaturalism and eurocentrism

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**ABSTRACT:** This article examines the controversy surrounding Faroese pilot whaling (grindadráp) through the lens of political ontologies, encapsulating how differing worldviews shape the interpretation of pilot whaling in the Faroe Islands, and what implications these have for local-global dynamics and cultural sovereignty. By comparing Faroese perspectives of subsistence, cultural sovereignty, and sustainable local governance with activist framings of animal rights and global ecological protection, the article highlights the clash between multinaturalist and eurocentric “One World World” ontologies. The findings suggest that the conflict extends beyond debates on sustainability, revealing deeper struggles over authority and the right to define ethical relations with nonhuman life.

**KEYWORDS:** pilot whaling, tradition, political ontology, eurocentrism, anthropomorphism.



## Introduction

On September 24, 2024, The Great Escape Festival, the premier festival for emerging music in the UK, announced via Instagram that they would sever their partnership with the Faroe Islands as their lead country partner (The Great Escape Festival, 2024). This decision was prompted by criticism from the Sussex Dolphin Project (SDP), which condemned the traditional whaling practices (known as “grindadráp”) of the Faroe Islands (Sussex Dolphin Project, 2024). The partnership was part of a collaborative effort with Faroe Music Export (FMX) to promote Faroese musicians such as Æggrasoppar and Joe & The Shitboys, both of whom have earned international acclaim (Faroe Music Export, 2024). Previous collaborations between the festival and FMX had established the partnership, which was now under scrutiny. The Sussex Dolphin Project’s claim was that FMX engaged in “artwashing”, using Faroese music exports in attempt to distract from the negative international media coverage surrounding pilot whaling.

The case of Faroese pilot whaling is significant as it embodies a deeper conflict between global environmental advocacy and local cultural practices. This case highlights how multiple ontologies ascribe varying values to natural resources based on historical, social, and economic contexts. By investigating this topic, I hope to gain insights into how cultural practices can become battlegrounds for larger ideological wars and what this means for balancing tradition, environmental ethics, and global responsibility. In this case study I want to examine the conflict through the lens of political ontologies, seeking to understand the deeper cultural and environmental stakes at play. The primary research question guiding this analysis is: How do differing worldviews shape the interpretation of pilot whaling in the Faroe Islands, and what implications do these have for local-global dynamics and cultural sovereignty?

This case study draws on the article “Love-iathan, the Meat-Whale and Hidden People: Ordering Faroese Pilot Whaling” by Benedict E. Singleton (2016), which frames the conflict as a “cosmopolitical struggle” involving two opposing systems of ordering. Singleton’s approach is useful

for understanding how cultural practices and environmental ethics intersect in the debate. Additionally, statements from The Sussex Dolphin Project and comments by Fríði Djurhuus, the lead singer of Joe & The Shitboys, provide empirical material for assessing different perspectives. Key theoretical insights from the course are drawn from Marisol de la Cadena's work "Uncommoning Nature", which discusses the anthropo-not-seen and OWW (one world world), which John Law defines as a hegemonic metaphysics that assumes there is only one objective reality – being the Western – a colonial imposition that erases or subordinates other realities (Law 2015). To further discuss the OWW, I engage with the work of professor of anthropology Tania Murray Li, "What is Land? Assembling a Resource for Global Investment," which highlights how resources gain value through socio-cultural processes. Lastly, I will briefly touch on Emily Yates-Doerr's text "The world in a box? Food security, edible insects, and 'One World, One Health' collaboration", where I shall discuss the edibility of whale meat.

### Local governance and ecological protection

Li's notion that resources acquire "resourceness" through social, cultural, and economic assemblages is essential for understanding the Faroese perspective on pilot whaling (Li 2014). For the Faroese, *grindadráp* is more than a resource; it embodies cultural identity, sustenance, and local governance (Singleton 2016). Anti-whaling groups, by contrast, frame whales as part of a global ecological system that should be protected, reflecting divergent values surrounding nature and animal rights. Recognizing these different "assemblages" of meaning regarding whales could help both sides understand the cultural and economic stakes involved. Li's analysis of "inscription devices" like statistical data, maps, and regulations could relate to how anti-whaling groups use media and graphic documentation (images, videos) to make the Faroese whale hunts visible and morally questionable on a global scale (p. 594). These devices often frame whaling in terms of animal rights and ecological health, aiming to shift the perception of whales from a local resource to a protected global asset. Conversely, the Faroese use their own devices, such as communal gatherings, education on sustainable practices, and local regulatory frameworks, to legitimize whaling within their cultural context. The ethical debate over the "right manner of disposing things," as discussed by Li, frames

the conflict as a question of authority (p. 591). Who has the right to decide how whales should be treated, as a cultural and nutritional resource or a protected species? This framing leads to larger questions about the rationale behind resource regulation, and the tensions between local autonomy and global norms (which can be key to understanding the Faroese desire to retain local control).

Anthropomorphism plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of whales. As Rowley (2018) notes, animals perceived as intelligent, social, or capable of empathy are met with greater sympathy. Whales, known for their complex communication and social behaviours, are often anthropomorphized, creating a stronger emotional connection with humans. This contrasts with livestock animals, which are typically met with moral disengagement and thus evoke less public empathy (Camilleri 2020). Media portrayals and advocacy campaigns amplify these biases, influencing public opinion and policy. In the statement released by the SDP, the *grindadráp* is portrayed as a “medieval practice” that has “*no place in an ethical and progressive society*” (Sussex Dolphin Project 2024). This claim positions SDP within the modernist activist movement, as they portray whaling practices as incompatible with contemporary ethical values. They argue that “*Tradition can no longer be excuse for the barbaric massacre of animals*” as this conflicts with environmental stewardship (ibid.). This, however, leads to further debate on whose authority it is to define what is considered ethical or acceptable.

Resistance to external values is a recurring theme in Li’s work and is echoed in the Faroese response to anti-whaling activism. Friði Djurhuus, the frontman of Joe & The Shitboys, encapsulates this sentiment in a popular Instagram post, which circulated among Instagram users, by pointing out that replacing traditional whaling with imported industrial meat does not offer a sustainable or ethical alternative (Djurhuus 2024). His argument challenges the selective moral focus of global environmentalism, questioning why Western nations, such as the US, which leads in oil and beef production (Reuters 2024; Ritchie 2017), are not subjected to similar boycotts. It also frames the importance of recognizing the limitations and potential backlash when global norms conflict with local customs. He challenges critics to “*compare the grind to what’s going in your backyard*” (Djurhuus 2024). Friði’s statement offers an aggregate of opinions and assertions expressed by critics of anti-



whaling groups, such as biologist Bengt Holst which states that the *grindadráp* is no different to what happens in other abattoirs and therefore not permitted the immense global criticism (Thomsen 2015). In 2015 the Faroese political party Tjóðveldi (republican separation party), campaigned for the upcoming election with a draft bill for a Faroese constitution, as a replacement to the current Danish constitution (Floksskrivstovan 2015). In the proposal Tjóðveldi highlighted the “fundamental right to kill pilot whales”, which demonstrates the importance of *grindadráp* in the continuation of a Faroese national and cultural identity. Thus, the *grindadráp* practice symbolises the Faroese separatist struggle against Danish rule.

Singleton’s analysis of pilot whaling highlights the clash between Faroese Pro Whaler (FPW) actors and the anti-whaling activist group Sea Shepherd Conservation Society (SSCS) (Singleton 2016). The FPW view *grindadráp* as a lawful, sustainable practice integral to Faroese heritage and livelihood. It supports local food security, reinforces cultural identity, and is regulated to ensure minimal suffering. Proponents argue that the practice is a form of resistance against globalization and the imposition of foreign values preserving a connection to local resources and reinforcing Faroese identity. (Many Faroese people, including government officials, see whaling as a right backed by national autonomy within the Kingdom of Denmark, with *grindadráp* considered a purely Faroese matter.) SSCS, on the other hand, frames *grindadráp* as an unethical assault on marine life and opts for direct action to prevent it. Their confrontational tactics are intended to raise international awareness and frame the practice as a “barbaric” and “sadistic” act that must be stopped (Singleton 2016: 37). The killing is performed in a glass abattoir; a spectacle in which the locals take part or stand by and witness, utilized by the SSCS and appealing to global audiences through powerful visual and emotional storytelling, illustrated in the picture with bloody waters and emotive text (p. 29).



This argument points to the selective moral outrage that prioritizes certain animals like whales, dolphins, and elephants over others, based on perceived intelligence, social complexity, and emotional behaviour. Whales have sophisticated communication skills, live in family pods, and exhibit behaviours interpreted as empathy or mourning, making them relatable to humans, who project human-like qualities onto them. Public perceptions are shaped by media portrayals and advocacy that highlight these traits, fostering empathy and a sense of responsibility. Conversely, animals used for food, such as cows, receive less sympathy as their behaviours are less

anthropomorphized and society rarely portrays them as individuals with complex lives (Rowley 2018). Valentina Crast, second in command at Sea Shepherd Denmark, asserts that there is no need for pilot whale consumption in a modern globalized world, and that the hunting is therefore only for entertainment purposes (Thomsen 2015). She states that the *grindadráp* is a barbaric and unnecessary act of violence against the ocean's ecosystem and points to the same barbaric acts committed in other commercial abattoirs. The whales serve an important role in the ocean's ecosystem, which the Faroese people disturb. She emphasises the difference between the slaughter in commercial abattoirs and the *grindadráp*, where commercialized meat-animals are production animals and do not affect the surrounding ecosystem (ibid.). This argument does however disregard the considerable methane emissions in the meat and dairy industry (Foodrise/Friends of the Earth/Greenpeace Nordic/IATP 2025). Crast highlights the importance of a healthy ecosystem and simultaneously enacts the ecocentric ontology of anti-whalers. Captain Alex Cornelissen, CEO of Sea Shepherd Global, denotes the same nature-centred system of ordering:

*“Considering the times we are in, with a global pandemic and the world coming to a halt, it’s absolutely appalling to see an attack on nature of this scale in the Faroe Islands. [...] If we have learned anything from this pandemic is that we have to live in harmony with nature instead of wiping it out.”*

(Sea Shepherd 2021)

Alex Cornelissen expresses deep respect for nature and the earth. In his statement, nature is personified and sacralised, where “the attack on nature” evokes imagery of violence, implying that nature itself is a moral subject deserving protection. This reflects an ecocentric environmental ideology, common in Western activist discourse, where nature’s purity is contrasted against human exploitation. However, this also works a discursive move that universalizes Western environmental ethics, while implicitly “othering” local, culturally embedded practices like the *grindadráp* – a moral framing positioning the Faroese as “perpetrators” of ecological violence, while Sea Shepherd assumes a universal moral authority over what counts as right or natural.

Archaeological findings prove that people in the Faroe Islands have hunted pilot whales for food since the Viking Age, with official records dating back to 1584.<sup>1</sup> This long-standing practice is seen as a vital component of cultural heritage and food security. FPW actors view pilot whales as a sustainable local food resource, embedded in Faroese culture and heritage. They assert that the *grindadráp* practices are scientifically managed and regulated, with government oversight and measures in place to ensure minimal suffering (Singleton 2016: 29). This is however a relatively recent change in the organization and execution of the practice, as described in the folk ballad *Grindavísan*<sup>2</sup>, it was a rather ruthless and violent affair.

48. Hård var striden og kostede blod,  
her kunde man få at vide,  
at Færøs drenge med mandemod

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<sup>1</sup> Whaling.fo: “450 years of statistics”.

<sup>2</sup> The old Faroese folk ballad *Grindavísan*, was translated from Faroese to Danish by the Danish bailiff Christian Pløyen and published in Copenhagen in 1835.

- tør gå i kampen og stride.
49. Til grinden iler med glæde enhver;  
det rinder ingen i tanke,  
at mellem døden og ham der er  
ikkun en skrøbelig planke.
50. Hisset knuses en båd med brag,  
den fyldes med blodigt vand;  
her får en mand et vældigt slag  
og bæres, som død, på strand.

The ballad recounts the warlike nature of the *grindadráp*, as practiced before modern regulations, similarly depicted in the painting below. The chaotic watercolour brush strokes portray the bloody ocean during a hunt, hence successfully conveying the fragility between life and death during the struggle. The picture also portrays the men as a swarm of shadowy figures, looming over the whales, symbolizing death and suggesting that this is a slaughter. At the same time, man, boat, ocean and whales flow into one another in Mikines' brushstrokes, becoming hard to tell apart, illustrating that man and nature are inseparable.



*Sámal  
Joensen-  
Mikines,  
1942,  
painting,  
Watercolor  
over pen and  
brown ink on  
yellow paper.  
Statens  
Museum for  
Kunst,  
Copenhagen*

The massive critique of *grindadráp*, solicited the Faroese people to reflect on the execution of the practice, and for the better, as it incited legal changes to and regulations on the practice to ensure minimal suffering. FPW proponents argue that this tradition respects the natural cycle of resource use and is no more harmful than industrial livestock farming (Singleton 2016: 35). They see SSCS's stance as imposing foreign values and misconceptions onto Faroese society, especially given that international industrialized nations contribute more to ocean pollution than localized whaling does, and view the SSCS ordering as "*ethnocentric cultural imperialism*" dependent on emotional and irrational thinking (p. 36). The clash reflects a broader cosmopolitical struggle between differing worldviews, one rooted in global environmentalism and animal rights, and the other in local cultural traditions and sustainable resource use, reflecting the multinaturalism ingrained in the conflict rather than multiculturalist views (Blaser 2005: 11). Multinaturalism represents a challenge to the Western notion of nature as a singular, objective reality, that can be scientifically proven and factual. It instead emphasizes the importance of acknowledging different perspectives and lived experiences, rather than promoting a single, universal truth. The multinaturalist understanding deviates from the multiculturalist understanding that "*refers to the modern ontological assumption that multiple cultures are more or less partial perspectives on a single nature or reality.*" (p. 15).

As Singleton notes, the two groups draw on different systems of ordering, deviating vastly from one another (Singleton 2016). The SSCS ordering deems *grindadráp* to be highly unnecessary in 'civilized' Europe and claims it to be preventing the Faroe Islands from taking part in the 'modern world'. The 'crisis ontology' of the SSCS is clearly stated as a SSCS member says "*We view the whales the same way we would view a human: that to kill a whale is murder. I have the same reaction if someone were to attempt to kill you: I would interfere*", which supports the notion of anthropomorphizing of whales (p. 33). Ólavur Sjúrdaberg, head of the Grindamannafelag (the official pilot whaling committee) says:

*"Tað skal vera ein mønustingari, sum er gjørdur eftir tekning, og sum lýkur ávís krøv, so at vissa fæst fyri, at hann hevur tað rættað sniðið sum tryggjar, at hvalurin verður avlívaður skjótt og pínuleyst."*

*("It must be a spinal lance, produced according to specific dimensions, that passes certain safety*



*regulations, to ensure it has the right design guaranteeing that the whale is killed quickly and painlessly") (Bertholdsen 2013).*

As demonstrated in the quote, the FPW's exhibit profound respect for, and around, the whales during the *grindadráp*, as the ocean envelops them in the same way as the cetaceans, consequently making it vital for survival and sustenance in the harsh subpolar climate. In the Faroe Islands it is a part of cultural practices to hunt birds and whales, raise sheep and catch fish, which the economy currently relies heavily on<sup>3</sup>, in the form of industrial fishing. These practices have been foundational and life sustaining for the Faroese people consequently representing the self-sufficiency of the culture. The precariousness of living in the Faroe Islands has for centuries made *grindadráp* essential for survival as it is, and always has been, a free food source, although not bearing the same essential role today. Today it remains as the only food resource that is not monetized or commercialized, where all people will receive their share if they wish, even if they do not participate in the killing. As Singleton points out, *grindadráp* mitigates the precariousness of living in the North Atlantic Ocean (p. 29). Following centuries of becoming-with pilot whales, they are not considered superior or inferior to other meat-animals, but as a natural food resource necessary for subsistence in the precariousness of the Faroes (ibid.).

While the SSCS claims that there is not enough sufficient data on long-finned pilot whales surrounding the whale population and sustainability (Singleton 2016: 35), the North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission (NAMMCO) claimed that *grindadráp* is inconsequential to the whale population. There seems to be no successful outcome, as it becomes clear to me that this conflict lies deeper than a difference of opinion or practice. It constitutes a political ontology, which Mario Blaser defines as "*the conflicts that ensue as different worlds or ontologies strive to sustain their own existence as they interact and mingle with each other*" (Blaser 2009), which consequently creates dysfunctional interactions between the groups. A FPW says "... *we apparently seem to be living in two different worlds. The urban culture trying ... to impose their point of view to the Faroe Islanders.*

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<sup>3</sup> The fishing industry accounts for majority of export in the Faroe Islands, fluctuating between 81-99%, 96,8% in August 2025 (Hagstovan).



... *[telling] us how we shall live in the Faroe Islands.*" (Singleton 2016: 33). The FPW's remark demonstrates the political ontology in its whole. The opposed systems of ordering are "living in two different worlds", constructing a political ontology turning into a cosmopolitical war. As described by Crast and Cornelissen, the anti-whaling ordering is founded in an ecocentric ontology as opposed to the anthropocentric ontology of the FPW's – as defined by Crast (Thomsen 2015). However, this definition doesn't account for the self-sufficient ontology that underpins Faroese whaling practices. *Grindadráp* enacts the self-sufficient Faroe Islands as an ontological world in which human, animal, and environment are interdependent rather than oppositional. The practice does not merely represent a means of subsistence but performs an ordering of life that ties community, ecology, and identity together. Within this framework, whales are not simply resources or protected species but part of a relational system that sustains both material and social reproduction. Thus, the Faroese ontology resists external ecocentric classifications by asserting a locally embedded cosmology of balance and reciprocity, where whaling becomes an act of belonging rather than domination.

### Uncommoning the Faroese ocean, my predecessor

The term "commons" traditionally describes shared resources (like forests, rivers, or knowledge) that communities manage collectively for mutual benefit. "Uncommoning" highlights the processes that break apart these communal relationships, often through privatization, commodification, or state intervention (De la Cadena 2015). Such interventions have been successfully executed by the SSCS and other environmental organizations since the 1980's, which have gained an audience around the world, creating a whirlwind of critique and backlash on pilot whaling in the Faroe Islands and the Faroese culture (Singleton 2016). Uncommoning points to the systemic and institutional forces that alienate people from shared resources and communal practices. For instance, when indigenous lands are seized for industrial development, the communal and cultural bonds tied to those lands are eroded (De la Cadena 2015). Uncommoning often criticizes the historical processes of colonization and capitalism that transformed commons into private property, sidelining local or indigenous practices of collective care and governance. In essence, "uncommoning" is not just about the loss of shared resources but also about the loss of shared practices, knowledge systems, and relationships

that sustain ecological and social balance. Marisol de la Cadena analyzes these (local-global) dynamics in her text “Uncommoning nature”, which she illustrates through the struggle between the Awajun-Wampis indigenous group and the police force, taking place in northern Peru, where the indigenous group protested oil extractions. The conflict is a clash between worlds; between what is seen as real and what is *not seen*. This is what she calls the anthropo-not-seen, a world-making process that isn’t made through the human-nonhuman divide dictated by the eurocentric OWW but rather focuses on what is *not seen* in the anthropocentric separation of nature and culture and serves as a direct criticism of the anthropocentric ordering (ibid.). The same uncommoning seems to be the case for the Faroese ocean and cetaceans, where a loss of *grindadráp* practices is a loss of shared practices, knowledge and relationships for locals. The immense criticism from environmental organizations, tourists and other spectators does not solely result in a loss of resources, but also creates boycotts of the Faroese culture, production and other commodities.

In their text “The world in a box? Food security, edible insects, and ‘One World, One Health’ collaboration”, Emily Yates-Doerr states: “*what is non-toxic for most, might still be deadly for some*” (Yates-Doerr 2015). This highlights the complexity of the OWW notion and questions Eurocentric worldmaking. Following multinaturalism, multiplicities in food consumption will manifest, which is the case for many indigenous groups. Whale meat being no exception. However, due to ocean pollution and climate change, whale meat is contaminated with mercury, PCB and other toxins, and consumption of whale meat is therefore under dissuasion (Heilsufrøðiliga starvsstovan 2011). The SSCS considers whale meat inedible because of moral reasoning and claims it to be just as bad as committing child abuse, rape or serial killing. The FPW and Faroese anti whalers, on the other hand, may find whale meat unfit to be a qualified food source because of the contamination. The discrepancy between the arguments highlights the political ontology in the struggle between the groups.

A member in the leadership of the Peruvian indigenous group Awajun-Wampis affirms that “*The river is our brother, we do not kill our brother by polluting and throwing waste on it*” (De la Cadena 2015). He exhibits kinship with the river and acknowledges it to be more than non-human (De la

Cadena 2014). He is grateful for the water the river gives him and cherishes it as it is his own predecessor. The human defines the river as much as the river defines the human, hence one cannot be without the other, human cannot be without non-human. In this co-becoming, the river is not only non-human, and the Awajun-Wampis is not only human. The animism portrayed contrasts with eurocentric world-making and highlights differing systems of ordering between the colonizer and the colonized. Animism is often misunderstood or undervalued within eurocentric frameworks, with the colonized being unfairly characterized through stereotypes that position them as "other" or in need of change. Similarly, Faroese culture is sometimes viewed through an external lens that labels it as unusual or in need of adjustment, reflecting a lack of appreciation for its intrinsic values and practices.

## Conclusion

This case study illustrates a broader cosmopolitical struggle between global environmentalism and ecological protection, and local cultural sovereignty. The analysis demonstrates that competing systems of ordering around resources, in this case whales, can lead to deep-seated conflicts over values, rights, and representation. While the Faroese view *grindadráp* as an essential cultural practice embedded in sustainability, anti-whaling groups argue from a standpoint of ecological protection, conservation and animal rights. The opposed systems of ordering seem to agree on sustainable ecological protection, however the question of correct sustainable practice and nature governance arises in this political ontology. The analytic approach, drawing on political ontologies and resource assemblages, underscores the importance of understanding both perspectives in their respective contexts. Future analyses could explore alternative frameworks, such as postcolonial perspectives, to further examine power dynamics, climate crisis and stakeholder visibility in these debates



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# MELLEM KVINDEKAMP OG MILJØKRISE

Økofeminismens indtog i den danske kvindebevægelse

Af:  
Stine Søby Fogh  
Historie



**ABSTRACT:** This article explores the emergence of ecofeminism in 1970s Denmark through a dual focus. First, it analyses two foundational voices — Ninon Schloss and Lis Thorbjørnsen — and their diverging positions on the relationship between gender, nature, and societal change. Second, it explores the public debate in the newspaper Information in 1977 between ecofeminists and other parts of the women's movement. The study reveals internal ideological differences within ecofeminism as well as its contested status within the broader women's movement in the 1970s, highlighting ecofeminism's role as both a feminist critique and a political response to ecological crisis.

**NØGLEORD:** Økofeminisme, miljø, Danmark, 1970'erne, feminisme



## Introduktion

Klimaforandringer og økologisk ustabilitet er i dag en uomtvistelig realitet, mens kønsforskning og kampe for ligestilling i disse år oplever modstand fra konservative bevægelser. Samtidigt er spørgsmål om klima og miljø blevet debatteret og anskuet fra mange vinkler, blandt andet ud fra kønsperspektiver. I en dansk kontekst har miljøbevægelsen NOAH og dens undergruppe ØkoKøn i de seneste år arbejdet ud fra en økofeministisk forståelse af klima- og miljøkriser, der betoner, at ”Kønsretfærdighed og miljøretfærdighed er uadskilligt” (Noah.dk).

Men den økofeministiske kobling mellem miljøforandringer og køn er ikke ny. Allerede i 1974 opstod begrebet *økofeminisme*, og samme år dukkede begrebet op i Danmark, da rødstrømpen Ninon Schloss tog begrebet til sig og dannede gruppen Økofeministerne. Økofeminismen har været til stede i Danmark siden begrebets fødsel, og den feministiske retning i Danmark var omdrejningspunkt for en diskussion i kvindebevægelsen i sidste halvdel af 1970’erne. I denne artikel analyserer jeg, hvordan økofeminismen blev formet og modtaget af den danske kvindebevægelse i 1970’erne, og hvilke ideologiske brudflader, der opstod i mødet mellem kvindekamp og miljøslag. Min analyse af økofeministernes dialog med kvindebevægelsen bidrager til et historisk perspektiv af sammenvævninger mellem køn, rettigheder, klima og miljø, der fortsat præger nutidige anskuelser af ligestillings- og klimapolitik.

Trods økofeminismens tidlige tilstedeværelse i Danmark, er der skrevet betydeligt lidt om økofeminismens indtog, positioner og kampe. Drude Dahlerup har som den eneste berørt Økofeministerne som gruppe i sit centrale tobindsværk om Rødstrømpebevægelsen. Dahlerup fremhæver Økofeministerne som en gruppe, der var i konflikt med dele af kvindebevægelsen og den ikke-feministiske venstrefløj. Ifølge Dahlerup kritiserede Økofeministerne såvel nye som etablerede strømninger i kvindebevægelsen for at prøve at tilpasse kvinden til patriarkatet og vækstsamfundet. Modsat mente kvindebevægelsen, at Økofeministerne var reaktionære og idealiserede moderskabet, mens den ikke-feministiske venstrefløj anså Økofeministerne som et meget problematisk element i

kvindebevægelsen. Modstanden mod den økofeministiske gruppe medførte, at Rødstrømpebevægelsen i højere grad tog afstand fra gruppen, og gruppen blev ekskluderet fra Kvindehuset i København (Dahlerup 1998, bind 2: 81-82). Dahlerups bidrag indrammer gruppen, men økofeminismens indtog, positioner og dens konflikt med kvindebevægelsen er underanalyseret i den eksisterende forskning.

Denne artikel giver et indblik i økofeminismens indtog, positioner og konflikten med kvindebevægelsen i 1977. Artiklen bidrager til en nuancering af Økofeministerne som gruppe. Dahlerup har fremhævet Lis Thorbjørnsen som en skikkelse i Økofeministernes tidlige år, mens Thorbjørnsens værk *De kvindelige værdier* fra 1975 bruges af Dahlerup som eksempel på en feministisk essentialisering af køn (Dahlerup 1998, bind 2: 80-81). Min analyse tager udgangspunkt i Thorbjørnsens værk, men også Ninon Schloss' centrale kronik om økofeminisme fra 1974 samt andre økofeministers og personer fra kvindebevægelsens indlæg i Information i 1976 og 1977. Med dette udgangspunkt, argumenterer jeg for, at de tidlige økofeministiske koblinger mellem køn og natur i 1970'erne ikke var et samlet standpunkt, med udtrykte divergerende positioner indenfor økofeminismens tidlige år. Ligeledes udfolder og nuancerer jeg de økofeministiske positioner og gruppens konflikt med kvindebevægelsen med udgangspunkt i skriftlige indlæg i Information. Undersøgelsen giver et væsentligt indblik i økofeminismens indtog og tidlige positioner i Danmark samt belyser en flig af kvindebevægelsens dialog om køn, klima og miljø i perioden.

I denne artikel analyserer jeg økofeminismens indtog og debatten derom i 1970'ernes Danmark. Først redegør jeg for økofeminisme som begreb i 1970'erne og den miljøpolitiske kontekst i 1960'erne og 1970'erne, som økofeminismen i Danmark opstod i. Herefter introducerer og skitserer jeg to tidlige økofeministiske divergerende stemmer fra 1974 og 1975: Ninon Schloss og Lis Thorbjørnsen. Derefter følger min analyse af kvindebevægelsens debat om økofeminisme, der manifesterede sig i udvalgte indlæg fra Information i hovedsageligt 1977. Debatten fandt sted efter en udelukkelse af Økofeministerne fra Kvindehuset i København og Kvindefestivalen. Dialogen resulterede i, at Økofeministerne fik mulighed for at deltage i Kvindefestivalen i 1977 alligevel. Med henblik på at forstå debatten, identificer jeg brydninger og positioner. Jeg skelner mellem den interne uenighed i økofeminismen og konflikten mellem økofeminister og kvindebevægelsen,

herunder rødstrømpebevægelsen. Trods Økofeministernes produktion af interne tidsskrifter, fokuserer jeg i denne artikel på den offentlige, skriftlige debat i Information mellem økofeminister og kvindebevægelsen for at belyse dialogen om køn, klima og miljø. Gennemgående i artiklen er, at den refererer til bestemte historiske og diskursive konstruktioner af køn, natur og miljø. Disse forstås i analysen som de betydninger, begreberne blev tillagt af økofeminister og kvindebevægelsen i perioden, snarere end binære, biologiske eller essentialistiske kategorier.

### Økofeminisme som begreb i 1970'erne

Begrebet økofeminisme blev introduceret i 1974 og bliver tilskrevet Françoise d'Eaubonne. I bogen *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* foreslog d'Eaubonne, at økofeminismen var løsningen på den globale miljøkrise. Ifølge d'Eaubonne var miljøkrisen og underordningen af kvinder forbundet i kraft af deres fælles undertrykker, det patriarkalske samfund. Den kønnede undertrykkelse var indlejret i det kapitalistiske, industrialiserede samfundssystem. Et system, der var skabt af de patriarkalske samfundsstrukturer, men også skabte miljøkrisen og udnytter jordens ressourcer. Et økofeministisk argument i tiden var, at kvinden grundet disse samfundsstrukturer måtte gøre op med det herskende system og omvælte det (Gorrecki 2022).

I 1970'ernes økofeministiske terminologi blev kvinden tillagt særlige egenskaber og dermed en specifik forbindelse til naturen. Den antagede forbindelse pegede på kvindens særlige rolle i at udfordre undertrykkelsen af naturen og håndtere miljøproblemer, men hvilke egenskaber der blev tillagt kvinden, var omdiskuteret og fortolket forskelligt af økofeministerne. Nogle økofeminister argumenterede for, at det særlige bestod i den biologiske evne til at reproducere. Andre, såsom d'Eaubonne, pegede på, at forbindelsen snarere udsprang af en fælles erfaring af patriarkalsk undertrykkelse (Warren 2001: 5495-5499). Løsningen på miljøproblemer var i denne optik at skabe en anden kultur og dermed et andet system med andre værdier end de patriarkalske (Danielsen 1996: 24-44). Økofeministernes interne uenighed om hvad der konstituerede forbindelsen mellem kvinde og natur pegede på, at økofeminismens allerede fra begyndelsen rummede forskellige positioner og fortolkninger.

K. J. Warren identificerer brydninger i og teoretiske forgreninger af økofeminismen. Warren skelner mellem de såkaldte retninger kulturel økofeminisme, social økofeminisme og materialistisk økofeminisme. Ifølge Warren dominerede den kulturelle økofeminisme som teoretisk udgangspunkt i 1970'erne, men senere opstod der brudflader og nye teoretiske retninger indenfor økofeminismen. Det var særligt koblingen mellem køn og natur, der lagde til grund for en videreudvikling af social økofeminisme og materialistisk økofeminisme. Social økofeminisme opstod som en udfordring af den kulturelle økofeminisme og kritiserede den for essentialisme, universalisme og ahistoricisme. Social økofeminisme anså forholdet mellem køn og miljø som en sociokulturel konstruktion og fokuserede på konkrete undertrykkelsesstrukturer. Marxistisk økofeminisme anså relationen som både socialt konstrueret og biologisk påvirket qua bestemte kropes reproduktive evner. Her var det den materielle og politiske relation mellem køn og natur, der var interessant og blev påvirket af økonomiske systemers undertrykkelse (Warren 2001: 5495-5499).

### Miljø kommer på dagsordenen

Økofeminismen blev debatteret i en tid, hvor miljø var på dagsordenen i Danmark. I 1960'erne kom et øget fokus på forurening og en opblomstrende alternativ politisk kultur. Der var studenteroprør på Københavns Universitet i 1968. Miljøorganisationen NOAH blev oprettet i 1969. Tiden var præget af ungdomsoprøret. I 1973 vedtages Danmarks første samlede miljøbeskyttelseslov, og senere samme år oprettes et selvstændigt miljøministerium under Anker Jørgensens socialdemokratiske regering. (Farbøl, Sørensen og Olesen 2018; Jamison 1990: 67-88). Økofeminismen i Danmark var en del af den alternative politiske kultur både i kraft af ønsket om et opgør med det nuværende system, men også grundet dets rødder til Rødstrømpebevægelsen (Dahlerup 1998, bind 2: 80-81).

Økofeminismen skrev sig ind i en kritik af kapitalismen og miljøproblemer, der havde et stigende globalt fokus. Allerede inden oliekrisens udbrud i 1973 og rapporten *Grænser for vækst* i 1972, beskæftigede miljøorganisationen NOAH sig med vækstkritik. Hougaard betragter denne vækstkritik som en moddiskurs til venstrefløjens parlamentariske vækstopoptimisme. Samtidigt havde Socialdemokratiet og DKP allerede miljømæssige forbehold overfor vækst. Oliekrisens udbrud i 1973 populariserede vækstdebatten (Hougaard 2015: 17-20, 99). Det øgede fokus på vækst tog

blandt andet udgangspunkt i *Grænser for vækst*, der pegede på, at befolkningstilvækst, forbrug og forurening ville true menneskehedens levevilkår. Rapporten præsenterede et ønske om at gøre op med vækstparadigmet, men også en ny miljøforståelse. Miljødebatten skiftede fra at være lokalt fokuseret på forurening af luft og vand til at være globalt fokuseret på ressourcemangel, energikrise og overbefolkning. Man blev opmærksom på, at miljøudfordringer gjaldt både lokalt og globalt (Farbøl, Sørensen og Olesen 2018; Fog 2010).

Miljø blev i perioden et grundbegreb, som man var nødt til at forholde sig til, men debatten oplevede et skifte i 1970'erne. På den ene side blev opgøret med vækstparadigmet mere udbredt på venstrefløjen, hvor blandt andet den socialdemokratiske minister Ivar Nørgaard tog idéen om et nulvækstsamfund til sig. Nørgaard udgav tre kronikker om et muligt nulvækstsamfund i Politiken i 1975, men hans standpunkt blev kritiseret af politikere og centrale personer i fagbevægelserne for at være utopisk, urealistisk og uden stillingtagen til økonomisk ulighed. (Danielsen 2021: 50-54; Fog 2010; Hougaard 2015: 17; Nørgaard 1975). Samtidigt manifesterede det nye fokus på miljø sig i stiftelsen af organisationer som Organisation om Oplysning til Atomkraft i 1974 og Organisationen for Vedvarende Energi i 1975. Tilblivelsen og udviklingen af disse organisationer afspejlede et nyt fokus på teknologiske løsninger og senere en professionalisering i organisationerne (Jamison 1990: 90-119). Forskeren Francis Sandbach sporer et skifte i miljødebattens diskurs i 1972 med udgangspunkt i amerikanske og engelske forhold. Inden skiftet var diskursen radikal og konservativ. Den opstod i kølvandet på miljøbevægelsernes fremkomst og rapporten *Grænser for vækst*. Med skiftet i 1972 blev den generelle diskurs mere løsningsorienteret, optimistisk og med et teknologisk fokus. Den var formet af økonomiske og politiske forandringer. Dette skifte i miljødebatten er også repræsentativ for den danske miljødebats udvikling i 1970'erne, hvilket blandt andet afspejles i de nye miljøorganisationer og deres organiseringsformer (Sandbach 1978: 495-496, 512; Jamison 1990).

### Økofeminismens første stemmer i Danmark

I november 1974 skrev Ninon Schloss kronikken "Økofeminisme?" og foreslog, at kvindebevægelsen burde tænke den økologiske krise ind i kvindesagen (Schloss 1974). Efter årsskiftet blev gruppen Økofeministerne dannet på baggrund af Schloss' kronik (Thorbjørnsen 1977). Økofeministerne

voksende ud af kvinde- og Rødstrømpebevægelsen. Schloss selv var med til at starte den første rødstrømpegruppe i 1970 og fremhæves af Dahlerup som en af de mere kendte personer i bevægelsens københavnske miljø (Dahlerup 1998, bind 1: 171, 468-469; Kruckow 2023). Rødstrømpebevægelsen var et opgør med og en forlængelse af den nye venstrefløj (Holgersen mfl. 1970). Den var kendetegnet som en græsrodsbevægelse med en flad gruppestruktur og aktivisme. Bevægelsen kollektiverede kvinders individuelle erfaringer gennem basisgrupper og italesatte kønnet ulighed (Dahlerup 2018: 15-17). Denne praksis blev videreført til Økofeministerne. Økofeministerne organiserede sig også i basisgrupper, havde en flad gruppestruktur, holdt sommerlejre og lavede aktivisme (Thorbjørnsen 1977). I løbet af gruppens første år udkom udgivelser og artikler, der giver et indblik i økofeminismens indtog i den danske kvindebevægelse.

I det følgende kapitel undersøger jeg de første danske stemmer i økofeminismens begyndelse med udgangspunkt i Ninon Schloss' kronik fra 1974 og Lis Thorbjørnsens bog *De kvindelige værdier* fra 1975. I værket *Rødstrømperne* fremhæver Dahlerup Lis Thorbjørnsen som en central stemme i økofeminismen første par år, men inddrager ikke Ninon Schloss som en økofeministisk stemme (Dahlerup, bind 2: 80-82). I min undersøgelse repræsenterer disse forfattere for centrale, men forskellige positioner indenfor økofeminismens spæde år. Generelt for Thorbjørnsen og Schloss er, at de begge var aktive debattører om kvindepolitik. Dahlerup fremhæver Ninon Schloss som en af de tidlige, mere kendte skikkelser i Rødstrømpebevægelsen med forbindelse til venstrefløjen. I løbet af 1970'erne engagerede Schloss sig redaktionelt i Rødstrømpebevægelsens blad *Kvinden* og venstrefløjens centrale tidsskrift *Politisk Revy*. Som en af de få rødstrømper meldte hun sig ind i Socialdemokratiet i 1975 og etablerede en af partiets første kvindegrupper (Dahlerup 1998, bind 1: 171; Ibid., bind 2: 22, 169, 203, 205; Kruckow 2023). Lis Thorbjørnsen og hendes bog *De kvindelige værdier* placeres af Dahlerup som en af de økofeministiske stemmer i kvindebevægelsen. Ifølge Dahlerup, var Thorbjørnsen allerede en aktiv skriftlig debattør om kvindepolitik i 1960'erne, men med udgivelsen af sin bog i 1975 bliver hun en økofeministisk stemme, der essentialiserer køn og argumenterer for, at kvindelige værdier kan redde jorden (Dahlerup 1998, bind 2: 80-81). Kendetegnende for Schloss og Thorbjørnsen er, at de indtog et økofeministisk standpunkt, var medlemmer af Økofeministerne og bidrog aktivt til debatten om kønspolitiske spørgsmål i 1970'erne. Jeg argumenterer for, at det er centralt at medtage både Schloss' og Thorbjørnsens bidrag



for at forstå økofeminismens første stemmer i Danmark. Det følgende vil udfolde deres økofeministiske positioner.

### Ninon Schloss' sammenkobling af miljøkrise og kvindesag

Ninon Schloss argumenterede i sin kronik "Økofeminisme?" for, at kvindebevægelsen burde medtænke den økologiske krise i kvindesagen, da krisen kunne påvirke ligestillingen og bevægelsens politiske indhold. Schloss' argumenter er formet af en marxistisk forståelsesramme, økosocialistiske argumenter og samtidens nye miljøforståelse. Hun argumenterede, at miljøproblemet blev kendetegnet af ressourcemangel, forurening, overforbrug og befolkningstilvækst. Dermed var hun formet af sin samtids diskurs med fokus på væstkritik og ressourcemangel. Ifølge hende, blev miljøkrisen skabt af det kapitalistiske system og borgerne gennem deres forbrugsmønstre og ressourceforbrug. Alle var ansvarlige for miljøproblemet uanset køn. Schloss argumenterede for, at miljøproblemer og ligestilling hang sammen, og at "Den økologiske bevidsthed må betyde en skærpelse for kønskampen" (Schloss 1974).

På den baggrund advarede Schloss om, hvad der kunne ske, hvis ligestillingen ikke blev realiseret i tide: miljøkrisen risikerede at forstærke kønnet ulighed. Hvis ligestillingen ikke blev opnået, inden miljøkrisen for alvor ramte, ville det betyde en tilbagegang for ligestillingen i hjemmet og på arbejdsmarkedet. Sænket energiforbrug, reparationer og genanvendelse ville gøre, at maskiner ikke kunne erstatte arbejdet i hjemmet, hvormed der var brug for mere manuelt arbejde. Behovet for manuelt arbejde ville ifølge Schloss udvide kvindens pålagte arbejde i hjemmet (Schloss 1974). Det er tydeligt, at løsningerne for den økologiske krise og kønnet ulighed forudsatte hinanden for Schloss.

Schloss modgik en marxistisk vækstorienteret forståelse af ligestillingen og et feministisk argument om, at industrialiseringen ville frigøre kvinder økonomisk og dermed underforstået øge ligestillingen. Med udgangspunkt i arbejdsdelingen på arbejdsmarkedet, argumenterede Schloss, at kvinder stadig blev underordnet i et kapitalistisk samfund. Ifølge Schloss, kunne kvinders arbejde karakteriseres som det kedeligste og dårligste betalte. Hvis kvindebevægelsen ikke fokuserede på "et samfund med en mindre energikrævende produktion, bliver resultatet større og større

automatisering og mere og mere idiotarbejde til kvinder” (Schloss 1974). Hun mente, at fagforeninger skulle prioritere miljø fremfor højere lønninger. Manglende lighed i industrien, arbejdsfordeling og miljøproblemer blev koblet sammen med kapitalismen (Schloss 1974).

I kronikken fremstillede Ninon Schloss, at ”kvinder har særlige interesser i vore søster, moder jords fremtid” (Schloss 1974), og derfor burde miljøproblemer være en kvindesag. Jeg vil hævde, at Schloss’ kobling mellem kvinder og natur minder om d’Eaubonnes argumentation, fordi sammenkoblingen eksisterer qua kvindens og naturens fælles erfaring af systemets undertrykkelse. Samtidigt beskrev hun jorden i feminine vendinger. Hun havde dog ikke læst d’Eaubonne. Hun skrev i en boganmeldelse i *Information* i 1975 om den norske bog *Vil vi sprelle med? En bok om kvinner og olje*: ”Dette er den første økofeministiske bog, der er falder mig i hænde” (Schloss 1975). Jeg antager, at hun havde hørt om begrebet økofeminisme inden udgivelsen af kronikken i 1974, selvom hun ikke havde læst d’Eaubonne. Schloss’ kronik indikerer, at økofeminismen var ved at sprede sig i Europa.

Jeg identificerer Schloss som en kulturel økofeminist i lyset af Warrens kategorisering af økofeministiske retninger, fordi Schloss kollektiverede kvinders erfaring, anskuede en fælles interesse i miljøet og iscenesatte jorden som noget feminint. I sin kronik fremstillede hun kvindens forbindelse til naturen som en fortælling om kollektiv undertrykkelse. Min analyse viser, at Schloss ikke ønskede en direkte samfundsomvæltning, men derimod at samfundet blev ændret nedefra af individer, fagforeninger og bevægelser. Hun så nærsamfund som en del af løsningen, men foreslog ikke socialisme. Kronikøren ønskede ikke at overbevise om en samfundsomvæltning, men derimod skabe opmærksomhed på forbindelsen mellem miljøsagen og kvindesagen. Kvindebevægelsen burde ifølge Schloss forholde sig til den økologiske krise (Schloss 1974).

### Lis Thorbjørnsens biologisk-deterministiske økofeminisme

Lis Thorbjørnsens bog *De kvindelige værdier* udkom i 1975 og præsenterede anderledes argumenter for økofeminisme, der adskiller sig fra Ninon Schloss’ økofeministiske position. Hun byggede sin argumentation op omkring myter, litteratur, populærkultur og feministiske teoretikere som Simone de Beauvoir og Aleksandra Kollontaj. Hun nævner også kort Françoise d’Eaubonne (Thorbjørnsen

1975: 75-75, 84-85). Thorbjørnsen ønskede et opgør med det, som hun kaldte mandssamfundet, og skabelsen af:

et system i økonomisk - og økologisk - ligevægt. [...] Et samfund hvor befolkningsmængde og produktivitet er konstant [...] Et samfund, der ikke har effektivitet, produktion og økonomisk vækst som kriterier, men de kvindelige værdier (Thorbjørnsen 1975: 77).

Thorbjørnsen fremhævede de kvindelige værdier som løsningen på miljøproblemerne, mens hun samtidigt talte ind i samtidens vækstkritik. Hun forholder sig til rapporten *Grænser for vækst* og skriver i lighed med rapportens diskurs om overbrug, ressourcemangel, befolkningsmængde og menneskehedens overlevelse. Ifølge hende er det tydeligt, at der findes anden vækst end økonomisk vækst, idet kvinder kan skabe cyklisk vækst på grund af deres reproduktive evner (Ibid.: 68-71, 77-78). Menneskeheden kan overleve ifølge Thorbjørnsen overleve, hvis samfundet vejledes af kvinder og formes af såkaldte kvindelige værdier som "kærlighed, følsomhed, omsorg for andre" (Ibid.: 65).

Thorbjørnsens argument om kvindelige værdier er rodfastet i biologien, men samtidigt kan de kvindelige værdier spredes i samfundet. Jeg tolker Thorbjørnsens argumentation som udtryk for, at hun opfatter køn som grundlæggende biologisk determineret, men samtidigt påvirkeligt og formbart af sociokulturelle normer og værdier. Derfor er jeg enig i Dahlerups udlægning om, at Thorbjørnsen underspillede det biologiske element til fordel for det sociale (Dahlerup, bind 2: 81). Thorbjørnsen forholdt sig til uenigheden i samtidens feministiske kredse om de såkaldte kvindelige værdier var skabt af biologi eller kultur, men ifølge hende var det:

ligegyldigt, om disse værdier er blevet kvindelige værdier fordi de er mere rodfastet i kvindens natur end i mandens, eller fordi magthaverne, mændene, fik kvinde til at leve ud fra disse værdier i ønsket om at kunne undertrykke hende (Ibid.: 88).

Min analyse tydeliggør, at Thorbjørnsens økofeministiske position adskiller sig fundamentalt fra Schloss' standpunkt, selvom de begge kan fremhæves som kulturelle økofeminister ud fra Warrens terminologi. Schloss tillagde kvinder en kollektiv interesse i miljøspørgsmålet, idet løsninger for den økologiske krise og kønnet ulighed for hende forudsatte hinanden. Modsat mente Thorbjørnsen, at såkaldte kvindelige værdier var løsningen på miljøproblemerne, og at samfundet skulle formes

derefter for at gøre op med vækstsamfundet og sikre menneskehedens overlevelse (Thorbjørnsen 1975: 77-78, 101).

### To divergerede positioner i økofeminismens første år

Ninon Schloss og Lis Thorbjørnsen repræsenterer to divergerende positioner indenfor økofeminismens første år i Danmark, hvilket jeg uddyber i det følgende. Hvor Schloss var mere fokuseret på en reformation af samfundet nedefra, ønskede Thorbjørnsen en konkret omvæltning af samfundet fremfor en tilpasning til det eksisterende vækstsamfund. Fælles for dem er sammenkoblingen mellem kvinde og natur, miljøkrise og kønnet undertrykkelse, fokus på ressourcemangel, overbefolkning og befolkningstilvækst samt en kritik af den eksisterende kvindebevægelse og feministiske teori.

I den økofeministiske kritik af den feministiske teori og kvindebevægelsen anser jeg Thorbjørnsen som mere radikal, idet hun udtaler: "De sædvanlige kvindekamp-teoretikere er optaget af at integrere kvinder i et mandssamfund og overtage dets værdier" (Thorbjørnsen 1975: 65). Hvor Schloss foreslog at inkludere det økologiske perspektiv i kvindebevægelsen, mente Thorbjørnsen, at kvindebevægelsen havde overtaget det patriarkalske samfunds værdier såsom egoisme og egocentri. Thorbjørnsen eksemplificerede det med, at kvindebevægelsen "ser ned på ubetalt arbejde og kæmper for at også kvinderne skal ind i markedsøkonomien" (Thorbjørnsen 1975: 65). Thorbjørnsen havde et centralt kritikpunkt: Kvindebevægelsen havde tilpasset sig vækstsamfundet fremfor at forandre det. Hun mente, at bevægelsen opfattede ligestilling som, at kvinder skulle handle ligesom mænd, præstere i kultur- og erhvervslivet og støtte op om vækstparadigmet, forurening og overforbrug (Ibid.: 90). Ifølge Thorbjørnsen, støttede kvindebevægelsen en kultur, der skabte miljøproblemer, mens de kritiserede hjemmegående og miljøvenlige husmødre for ikke at tilpasse sig systemet.

I min analyse fremgår det, at Schloss ønskede, at en økofeministisk tankegang indfandt sig i kvindebevægelsen, mens Thorbjørnsen ønskede at ændre ikke blot kvindebevægelsen, men også samfundet mere radikalt. Familiestrukturer, kulturliv, børnepasning, synet på sex og teknologi måtte ændres (Ibid. 89-120). Begge aktører ønskede, at mænd og kvinder fik "deltidsarbejde ude og er fælles om husarbejde og børnepasning" (Thorbjørnsen 1975: 94). Thorbjørnsen mente, at

ordningen ville frigøre kvinden og manden fra systemets kønsroller. Hvor Schloss ikke fokuserede på en fuldstændig samfundsomvæltning, ønskede Thorbjørnsen et samfund præget af lavvækst og decentraliseret socialisme (Thorbjørnsen 1975: 128).

Jeg argumenterer for, at de to aktører præsenterer to poler inden for den kulturelle økofeminisme i økofeminismens spæde år i 1974-1975. De delte en forestilling om en kollektiv kvindelig erfaring og bar præg af den væstkritiske diskurs, men positionerede sig forskelligt, når det galdte forholdet mellem natur og kvinde og hvilke midler, der skulle til for at opnå ligestilling og løse miljøproblemer. Thorbjørnsens bog medtog i højere grad spørgsmålet om cyklisk vækst og kritikken af vækstsamfundet, mens Schloss' intention med kronikken var at samtænke miljøsag og kvindesag i sin kronik. Deres divergerende definitioner af kvinde og natur var centrale, men de var også forment af forskellige referencerammer. Schloss forholdt sig til marxistisk teori og egne erfaringer. Thorbjørnsen havde en udvidet referenceramme og trak ikke kun på feministisk teori, men også myter og populærkultur. De havde ligeledes divergerende holdninger til kvindebevægelsen. Argumenterne i de to udgivelser var vidt forskellige, hvormed aktørerne udfoldede to centrale standpunkter inden for økofeminismens første år i Danmark. Min analyse af de to positioner viser, at der allerede fra økofeminismens indtog var interne brudflader fremfor et samlet standpunkt i gruppen Økofeministerne.

## Debatten om økofeminisme i 1977

I 1976 opstod der en konflikt mellem Økofeministerne og andre dele af kvindebevægelsen, hvilket udviklede sig til gruppens eksklusion fra Kvindehuset og Kvindefestivalen i 1977. I månederne juli til september i 1977 fulgte en skriftlig debat i Information, hvor min undersøgelse tydeliggør brudflader mellem den økofeministiske gruppe og andre dele af kvindebevægelsen, særligt rødstrømperne. Debatten resulterede i, at Økofeministerne fik lov til at blive repræsenteret ved Kvindefestivalen i 1977 alligevel. Indlæggene uddyber ikke, hvorvidt gruppen fik adgang til at bruge Kvindehuset igen. I dette kapitel belyser jeg debatten mellem de forskellige parter og identificerer positioner, argumenter og brydninger.

Rødstrømpen Ingrid Hinds anmeldelse ”Hvor langt kan vi nå med det gode?” af Thorbjørnsens bog i Information kan tolkes som om, der allerede i 1976 var en begyndende konflikt mellem Økofeministerne og andre dele af kvindebevægelsen. I perioden var Ingrid Hind ansat i NOAH omkring miljø- og vækstproblemer og var derfor optaget af miljøproblemer. Samtidigt var hun med i redaktionen på Rødstrømpebevægelsens blad *Kvinder* (Dahlerup 1998, bind 1: 580; Hind 1976). Hun var uenig med Lis Thorbjørnsens udlægning og kritik af kvindebevægelsen. Ifølge Hind, tog Thorbjørnsen ikke stilling til ulighed mellem klasser. Hind argumenterede, at kvinders indflydelse burde trænge ind overalt og dermed også på arbejdsmarkedet (Hind 1976). Hinds problematisering af bogen fremhæver, at dele af kvindebevægelsen var uenige med Økofeministerne. Debatten om økofeminisme begyndte dog først for alvor på skrift i en række indlæg i Information i juli til september 1977. Forud var der sket en udelukkelse af Økofeministerne fra diverse feministiske fora: De måtte ikke bruge Kvindehusets lokaler i København og måtte ikke have en bod ved Kvindefestivalen. Lis Thorbjørnsen forholdt sig til udviklingen i kronikken ”Er økofeministerne reaktionære?”, hvorefter medlemmerne i Økofeministerne Kirsten Aggerholm, Kis Kapel og Marianne Jensen skrev ”Økofeministerne med til kvindefestival”.

I min analyse forstod og forklarede de to økofeministiske afsendere udelukkelsen af Økofeministerne og kritikken af dem som gruppe forskelligt. Desuden var det forskelligt, hvordan disse aktører definerede, hvad det ville sige at være økofeminist. Aggerholm, Kapel og Jensen pegede på misforståelser, om hvad Økofeministernes dagsorden var. Det understøttede Thorbjørnsen, men

hun mente også, at udelukkelsen handlede om politisk uenighed. Aggerholm, Kapel og Jensen brugte Schloss' argumenter og forholdt sig ikke til Lis Thorbjørnsens udgivelse i 1975. For dem, var økofeminismens opgave at forbinde økologi, socialisme og kvindekampen. Ulighed mellem klasser og køn samt miljøproblemer var alle kvindesager. De fokuserede på Økofeministernes minimale skriftlige materiale om emnet, mens Thorbjørnsen vægtede rødstrømpers kritik af økofeminismen. Rødstrømpebevægelsens kritik gik ifølge Thorbjørnsen på, at økofeminismen var reaktionær, og at kvinden kom tilbage i deres førindustrielle position. Thorbjørnsen afviste påstanden og mente, at forskellen var, at Rødstrømpebevægelsen var marxister, mens Økofeministerne er socialister (Thorbjørnsen 1977; Aggerholm, Kapel og Jensen 1977).

I de to indlæg er der uenighed om økofeminismens mål. For Lis Thorbjørnsen, var økofeminismens mål kvindefrigørelse på kvinders egne præmisser frem for systemets. Økofeminister havde en anden agenda end rødstrømpernes, der var fokuseret på vækst. Aggerholm, Kapel og Jensen mente derimod, at det var vigtigt at få en økologisk bevidsthed i kvindebevægelsen. De forklarede ikke løsningen på miljøproblemer ud fra kvindelige værdier ligesom Thorbjørnsen, men anvendte Schloss' argument om en fælles kvindelig interesse i miljøspørgsmålet (Thorbjørnsen 1977; Aggerholm, Kapel og Jensen 1977). Disse indlæg i Information understøtter og eksemplificerer de to tidligere skitserede økofeministiske positioner i min analyse, men tydeliggør også interne brudflader i den økofeministiske gruppe i Danmark.

Jeg vil hævde, at de forskellige positioner og brudflader i Økofeministerne ledte til kritikeres forvirring omkring et samlet økofeministisk standpunkt, men tydeliggør også en intern tolerance i den økofeministiske gruppe. Da Birgit Kristensen kritiserede økofeministerne i sit indlæg "Økofeminisme lig utopisme", bemærkede hun, at økofeministerne har ændret holdninger undervejs. Jeg tolker det som om, at det var svært for debattens kritikere at gennemskue det egentlige økofeministiske projekt, når der var divergerende økofeministiske stemmer. Økofeministernes samlede standpunkt var uklart for aktører i kvindebevægelsen. Min analyse viser, at Økofeministerne var opmærksomme på denne forvirring, men de forholdt sig forskelligt til den: Enten tog de forvirringen på egen kappe, eller også pegede man som Lis Thorbjørnsen på, at misforståelsen var kritikernes egen skyld. Trods forvirringen omkring økofeminismens projekt og standpunkt i



Danmark og interne brudflader i den økofeministiske gruppe, fremgår der ikke nogen intern kritik i den økofeministiske gruppes indlæg og værker. De forskellige økofeministiske positioner fremstod i indlæggene som internt tolererede. Ligeledes vil jeg hævde, at selvom økofeminismens projekt ikke var tydeligt for kvindebevægelsen, fremstod den økofeministiske gruppe som samlet i kraft af deres insisteren på, at miljøkrisen skulle gøres til en kvindesag. For gruppen repræsenterede økofeminismen en mulig løsning på miljøproblemer og kønslige ulighed.

Birgit Kristensens og Lise Sørensens indlæg afspejler centrale kritikpunkter af økofeminismen. Deres kritik gik på emner som arbejdsmarked, arbejdsfordeling og økonomi, samt hvorvidt økofeminismen var reaktionær. De var begge en del af kvindebevægelsen og uenige med Økofeministerne. Lise Sørensens positionerede sig ud fra en interesse i arbejderbevægelsen i sin kommentar med titlen "Økofeminisme og arbejderbevægelse". Birgit Kristensen var rødstrømpe og ville have kvinderne på arbejdsmarkedet (Kristensen 1977; Sørensen 1977). Sørensen forholdt sig kun til Aggerholms, Kapels og Jensens indlæg, mens Kristensen forholdt sig til de to økofeministiske divergerende positioner i sine debatindlæg "Lodret løgn" og "Økofeminisme lig utopisme". Generelt kritiserede både Sørensen og Kristensen Økofeministernes syn på arbejde. Sørensen stillede spørgsmål ved kritikken af fagforeningens krav om lønforhøjelse, idet "ikke også lønforbedringer skulle hænge sammen med økologisk stræben" (Sørensen 1977). Jeg tolker det som, at Sørensen pegede på, at højere velstand og dermed vækst kunne medføre en større økologisk bevidsthed. Kristensen fremhævede, at Thorbjørnsen havde misforstået Rødstrømpebevægelsen, hvilket kan tolkes som en kritik af Thorbjørnsens læsning af rødstrømpernes agenda. Bevægelsen var ifølge Kristensen ikke marxister, men "kvinder, der vil bekæmpe kvindeundertrykkelse" (Kristensen 1977). Kristensen mente, at økofeminister og rødstrømper ikke delte dagsorden, da økofeminismen var reaktionær og ikke bekæmpede kvindeundertrykkelse. Senere forholdt Kristensen sig til Schloss' kronik. Kristensens kritik af Schloss synes mindre skarp, men hun mener stadig, at Schloss heller ikke tog kvindesagen alvorligt ved at anbefale manuelt arbejde i hjemmet. I min analyse af disse to indlæg positionerer både Lise Sørensen og Birgit Kristensen sig gennem deres kritik af økofeminismen som reaktionær og økofeminismens syn på arbejdsfordeling, arbejdsmarked og ligestilling. Trods en fælles interesse i arbejdsmarkedet, havde de forskellige kritikpunkter. Sørensen var en del af

kvindebevægelsen og fokuserede på fagforeninger. Kristensen var rødstrømpe og ønskede, at kvinder kom ud på arbejdsmarkedet og dermed opnåede ligestilling (Sørensen 1977; Kristensen 1977).

Jeg argumenterer for, at særligt økofeministernes holdning til kvinde- og arbejderbevægelsen er centrale for debatten og eksklusionen af gruppen fra diverse fora. Synet på emner som arbejdsfordeling, ligestilling og økonomi skabte konflikt mellem økofeminister og rødstrømper samt andre aktører fra kvindebevægelsen som Lise Sørensen. Et eksempel på dette er uenigheden om, hvorvidt det var reaktionært at være hjemmegående. Det argumenterede kritikerne for at det var, mens økofeministerne var af den holdning, at det ikke var reaktionært, så længe manden også var hjemmegående. Uenigheden mellem grupperne blev også afspejlet i spørgsmålet om kvindens indflydelse på samfundet: Rødstrømper og andre aktører ønskede, at kvinden fik indflydelse overalt i samfundet, herunder i erhvervslivet og økonomien. Modsat mente økofeminister, at samfundsreformer var nødvendig. Der måtte skabes et mere miljøvenligt samfund fokuseret på lav vækst og forbrug. Debatten var derfor fokuseret på primært spørgsmål om ligestilling i relation til økonomiske forhold, arbejdsfordeling og -marked.

Hinds, Kristensens og Sørensens kritik tydeliggør, at kritikken af den økofeministiske gruppe drejede sig mere om kvindekamp og klassekamp fremfor miljøspørgsmål. Det er væsentligt, at debatten var fokuseret på økofeminismens løsninger fremfor miljøproblemerne. Kritikere af økofeminismen anså løsningerne som en tilbagegang for ligestillingen, mens økofeministerne samtidigt overså andre former for ulighed i samfundet.

Uenigheden peger i min analyse på en grundlæggende divergens i forståelsen af forholdet mellem ligestilling, miljø og vækst. Rødstrømper og aktører fra kvindebevægelsen prioriterede kvindens økonomiske ligestilling, mens økofeminister syntes, at den reelle ligestilling først kunne opnås, når det økologiske aspekt blev integreret i kvindekampen. Set i lyset af Hougaards analyse af venstrefløjens divergerende vækstdiskurser i perioden kan debatten mellem økofeminister og øvrige dele af kvindebevægelsen forstås som et udtryk for en bredere uenighed om vækst, økonomi og samfundsforandring. Jeg argumenterer for, at økofeministerne repræsenterede et mere væstkritisk udgangspunkt (Hougaard 2015: 17-20, 99). Rødstrømperne afviste dog ikke miljøproblemet, hvilket Hinds position som rødstrømpe og aktiv i NOAH eksemplificerer. Min analyse påviser dog,

at debattens kritikere af økofeminismen generelt havde et andet syn på sammenhæng mellem miljøproblemer og kvindesag. Jeg vil hævde, at uenighederne i debatten bidrog til, at rødstrømper og andre aktører fra kvindebevægelsen ikke anså økofeminisme som en legitim løsning på hverken miljøproblemer eller manglende ligestilling.

Trods kritikernes fokus på kvindekamp og klassekamp og Thorbjørnsens kritik af rødstrømper, var der økofeminister og økofeministiske sympatisører, der ønskede, at kvindebevægelsen var mere tolerante og inkluderende over for grupper, der delte bevægelsens grundlæggende mål. Økofeministen Aggerholm argumenterede i sit indlæg "Tiden er altid inde", at kvindebevægelsen burde forenes på trods af interne uenigheder (Aggerholm 1977). Ligeledes spurgte Lise Hansen i sit debatindlæg "Økologi og kvindekamp" til forholdet mellem kvindebevægelsen og Økofeministerne: "Hvorfor udelukker de hinanden så konsekvent. De ville være stærke i deres sammenhold om kvindens frigørelse" (Hansen 1977). Hansen sympatiserede med Thorbjørnsens økofeminisme og kritik af Rødstrømpebevægelsen. Hansens indlæg udtrykker udover et ønske om forenelighed, at økofeminismen var mere fremadskuende end Rødstrømpebevægelsen, og en økofeministisk verdensanskuelse var nødvendig (Hansen 1977). Aggerholms og Hansens indlæg påviser, at der var et ønske om tolerance og inklusion i kvindebevægelsen med plads til varierende forståelser af ligestilling, køn, miljø, klima og økonomi.

Min analyse af debatten om økofeminisme i 1977 tydeliggør spændinger mellem økofeministerne og øvrige dele af kvindebevægelsen, særligt rødstrømperne. Konflikten udsprang af uenighed om forholdet mellem miljø, ligestilling og økonomiske forhold. Økofeministerne anså en integration af miljøspørgsmålet som en forudsætning for reel ligestilling, mens kritikere af økofeminismen prioriterede kvinders økonomiske ligestilling og deltagelse på arbejdsmarkedet. Begge fløje var præget af samtidens vækstdiskurser og miljøforståelser, heriblandt venstrefløjens forskellige diskurser omkring emnerne. Økofeministerne fremstod ikke som en samlet gruppe, men repræsenterede forskellige positioner og forståelser af bevægelsens formål. Den interne mangfoldighed i gruppen skabte forvirring blandt kritikere, der havde vanskeligt ved at identificere et klart økofeministisk projekt. Trods de interne brudflader fremstod økofeministerne udadtil som en samlet gruppe gennem deres fælles insisteren på, at miljøkrisen måtte gøres til en kvindesag. Kritikernes fokus på

kvindeskamp og klassekamp frem for miljøproblemer afspejlede samtidigt en grundlæggende forskel i, hvad kvindefrigørelse indebar. Samtidigt viser Aggerholms og Hansens indlæg et ønske om større tolerance og inklusion i kvindebevægelsen, hvor forskellige perspektiver på ligestilling, miljø og økonomi kunne sameksistere.

Som resultat af debatten tilbød planlæggerne af Kvindefestivalen Økofeministerne at deltage i 1977 alligevel, og dermed fik gruppen mulighed for at blive repræsenteret ved festivalen (Teltgruppen 1977). Artiklens kilder udfolder ikke, hvorvidt Økofeministerne fik adgang til at bruge Kvindehusets lokaler i København igen. I 1980 fik miljø større relevans for kvindebevægelsen, idet bevægelsen begyndte at tage højde for de økologiske problemer (Pape 1980). Den øgede relevans indikerer, at Ninon Schloss' ønske lykkedes: Den økologiske bevidsthed spredte sig i kvindebevægelsen.

## Konklusion

Økofeminismen kom til Danmark i 1974 med Ninon Schloss' kronik "Økofeminisme?", hvorefter gruppen Økofeminister blev dannet. Økofeministerne kobkede underordningen af kvinden og naturen sammen. De ønskede, at kvindebevægelsen blev økologisk bevidst. I min analyse karakteriserer jeg gruppens stemmer ud fra Warrens terminologi som kulturelle økofeminister, der var en økofeministisk, der dominerende i 1970'erne. Ninon Schloss og Lis Thorbjørnsen repræsenterer i min analyse to hovedpositioner. Deres to koblinger mellem kvinde og natur afgrænser tydeligt disse positioner. Thorbjørnsen pegede på, at forholdet skyldtes såkaldte kvindelige værdier og evnen til at reproducere. Schloss derimod mente, at forholdet udsprang fra en såkaldt kollektiv kvindelig interesse i at afbøde en miljøkrise. Derudover påviser min analyse, at deres argumentation, vinkling, referenceramme og syn på kvindebevægelsen var forskellige. Fælles for positionerne var økofeminismen, kapitalismekritikken og afvisningen af vækstsamfundet som afgørende i ligestilling. Dermed skrev de sig ind i samtidens væstkritiske diskurs. De to divergerende positioner anser jeg for et forvarsel på den senere udvikling i økofeminismen, som Warren identificerer internationalt, hvor interne brydninger dannede grundlag for nye økofeministiske retninger.

Min analyse af debatten om økofeminisme påviser, at debatten særligt drejede sig om, hvorvidt Økofeministerne hørte til i kvindebevægelsen. Det manifesterede sig gennem forskellige positioner og brydninger i debatten. Det er tydeligt, at der var en uenighed mellem rødstrømper og økofeminister, men andre aktører fra kvindebevægelsen såsom Lise Sørensen deltog også i debatten. Debattens stridspunkter omhandlede særligt ligestilling i relation til arbejdsfordeling, arbejdsmarked og økonomi samt økofeminismens forhold til kvindebevægelsen. Grundet uenighed omkring disse emner, anså kritikerne af økofeminismen gruppens løsninger på ligestilling som ugyldige. Jeg tolker det som sandsynligt, at de interne positioner førte til forvirring om Økofeministernes agenda. En forvirring, der muligvis øgede kritikken af gruppen, idet modstanderne argumenterede mod forskellige økofeministiske positioner fremfor et samlet standpunkt eller en generel teori. Trods kritik af forskellige økofeministiske positioner, skar de kritiske stemmer økofeminismen over en kam og anså retningen som reaktionær. Selv med debatten i 1977 lykkedes økofeministerne med dele af deres samlede agenda: Den økologisk bevidsthed spredte sig i kvindebevægelsen, og økofeminismen blev inviteret til Kvindefestivalen i 1977 trods varslet udelukkelse fra selvsamme.

Selvom hverken Rødstrømpebevægelsen eller Økofeministerne eksisterer som aktive bevægelser i dag, markerede økofeminismens indtog i kvindebevægelsen en væsentlig dialog om miljø, klima og køn, der fortsat er relevant i dag. Koblingen mellem køn og miljø var ikke blot en teoretisk position, men også en politisk uenighed internt i kvindebevægelsen. Min analyse af de forskellige positioner i Økofeministerne og debatten i Information i 1977 understreger, at miljøargumenter kan anses som både styrkende og underminerende for ligestillingsdagsordener – og vice versa. Klimaforandringer og økologisk ustabilitet er en uomtvistelig realitet, mens kønsforskning og kampe for ligestilling oplever modstand fra konservative kræfter. Økofeministernes dialog med kvindebevægelsen i sidste halvdel af 1970'erne kan derfor ses som en forløber for nutidige og fremtidige diskussioner om sammenhæng mellem køn, rettigheder, klima, miljø og vækst.

Økofeminismens fremkomst i Danmark er stadig et forholdsvis underbelyst område, og min artikel udfolder kun en flig af økofeminismens historie. Til videre forskning vil det være oplagt at undersøge økofeminismens videre udvikling, herunder de skiftende positioner og argumenter, og dens

betydning i den nutidige debat om miljø, klima, køn og ligestilling. Ligeledes kunne gruppen Økofeministernes projekt, struktur, argumentation og interessefelter undersøges nærmere gennem deres publicerede interne tidsskrifter fra 1970'erne. Det ville også være relevant at nuancere dialogen om økofeminisme i 1970'erne yderligere med udgangspunkt i venstrefløjens kritikpunkter af og dialog med gruppen samt økofeminismens placering hos miljøbevægelsen. Endelig kunne en sammenligning af kvindebevægelsens dialog om økofeminisme med andre interne brydningspunkter i perioden bidrage til dybere forståelse af kvindebevægelsens interne kampe.



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# GENDERING THE ‘AQUEOUS TERRITORY’

A study of free Afro-Caribbean women and spatial practices in Charlotte

Amalie on St. Thomas in 1803

By:

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History



**ABSTRACT:** This article examines how free Afro-Caribbean women shaped the transimperial space of Charlotte Amalie on St. Thomas in 1803. Using Ernesto Bassi’s concept of an aqueous territory, the study highlights women’s economic roles and mobility through an analysis of the 1803 Register of Free Afro-Caribbeans on St. Thomas. Focusing on migrants from Curaçao and Martinique, it shows how occupation, length of residence, and cultural competencies influenced integration. The article argues that free Afro-Caribbean women were not merely present in the free port but acted as spatial agents, actively contributing to the social and economic networks that defined the Caribbean’s interconnected colonial world.

**Keywords:** Caribbean history, gender analysis, migration, colonialism, early 1800s.



## Introduction

In the early 1800s, the Danish island of St. Thomas in the Caribbean was a small but strategically important colony within Denmark's Atlantic possessions. Claimed by Denmark in 1672, the island had become a key node in the wider Caribbean's sugar economy and maritime trade. Although it lacked the large plantations that characterized neighboring islands, its deep natural harbor made the capital, Charlotte Amalie, a vital trading hub for the circulation of goods, people, and information across imperial boundaries. Charlotte Amalie's status as a free port – granted in 1764 and allowing ships of all nations to trade without custom restrictions – made it a commercial and social center in the region and attracted free Afro-Caribbean<sup>1</sup> migrants from other islands. In this period the town experienced a significant influx of such migrants, drawn by economic opportunities, mobility, and

legal flexibility.



View of Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, c. 1881. The painting shows the harbor, warehouses, and hillside residences overlooking the bay. Source: Painting by Frederik Visby. M/S Museet for Søfart.

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<sup>1</sup> The term *free Afro-Caribbeans* refers to people of African descent living in the Caribbean who were either born free or later emancipated. In contrast, the term *Euro-Caribbeans* refers to people of European descent residing in the Caribbean.

Across imperial boundaries, often outside formal colonial regulation but tolerated within the open system of the free port, free Afro-Caribbeans migrated from islands such as Curaçao and Martinique to St. Thomas. Through their movement and settlement, they helped make Charlotte Amalie a fluid, transimperial urban space. This article examines how free Afro-Caribbean women participated in shaping this space – not merely as individuals adapting to an existing society, but as active spatial agents in a colonial port city marked by mobility and diversity.

Drawing on Ernesto Bassi's concept of an *aqueous territory*, this article analyzes Charlotte Amalie as a fluid and interconnected geographic space created through the movements and practices of historical actors. Bassi's analysis is implicitly gendered: his maritime world was populated primarily by men – sailors, merchants, and ship captains. This article seeks to complement and expand his approach by attending to the women largely absent from his narrative. It asks: How can Charlotte Amalie on St. Thomas in 1803 be understood as an *aqueous territory*, and how did female free Afro-Caribbean migrants participate in shaping this space through their work and social mobility?

Through an analysis of the 1803 Register of Free Afro-Caribbeans on St. Thomas,<sup>2</sup> – a census-like record compiled by the Danish colonial administration to document and control the island's free population – the article shows that free Afro-Caribbean women actively participated in and helped shape the social and economic structures that connected the Caribbean archipelago. It argues that women, too, must be recognized as co-creators of a transimperial space, that has so far been described predominantly from a masculine perspective.

## Free Afro-Caribbeans in Caribbean Historiography

In Caribbean historiography, free Afro-Caribbeans have traditionally received far less attention than enslaved populations and European plantation owners.<sup>3</sup> This article examines free Afro-Caribbean

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<sup>2</sup> NARA Record Group 64, Censuses: St. Thomas Commission for the Registration of the Free Blacks: Proceedings and Register of Free Blacks, 1803.

<sup>3</sup> An example of this is Higman, *A Concise History of the Caribbean*, from 2010.

women in Charlotte Amalie and explores how their economic opportunities and social positions were shaped by mobility and settlement across imperial borders. Their ability to migrate and establish themselves on new islands demonstrates a remarkable capacity for adaptation within the transimperial world.

This article aligns with a newer historiographical trend that shifts focus from viewing Caribbean islands as isolated national or colonial units to understanding them as part of a dynamic and interconnected interimperial space. In this approach, the islands are not seen as closed societies under a single colonial power but as nodes in a network of mobility, trade, and cultural exchange across imperial boundaries. Danish research in this area remains relatively limited, and the article therefore draws on a broader tradition of Caribbean historiography rather than the narrower Danish West Indian tradition, which tends to emphasize administrative and national perspectives, whereas newer Caribbean scholarship has been more concerned with mobility and everyday life in the region.<sup>4</sup>

A key contribution to this approach is Ernesto Bassi's work *An Aqueous Territory* (2017), which shows how maritime actors – especially sailors – created a transimperial “Greater Caribbean” (Bassi 2017: 57). Bassi challenges fixed national boundaries and instead conceptualizes the region as an ‘*aqueous territory*’: a fluid and flexible geographic space shaped by mobility, communication, and interactions across empires (Bassi 2017: 75-81). His work demonstrates that these actors did not simply move within existing structures but actively produced the connections and social dynamics that bound the region together (Bassi 2017: 56-60).

Bassi's approach provides a valuable analytical tool for understanding free Afro-Caribbeans as active agents within a complex, transimperial reality. However, Bassi focuses on men, while women's practices and contributions remain largely invisible. By combining his conceptual framework with studies of women's economic roles, this article seeks to make these gendered dynamics explicit and

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<sup>4</sup> The article's interimperial focus in itself invites a perspective beyond the Danish West Indian historiography. Examples of studies with an interimperial approach include: Scott, *The Common Wind*, from 2018 in which he examines the role sailors played in spreading rumors and news about the Haitian Revolution. Also, Bassi, *An Aqueous Territory*, from 2017.

to expand the understanding of spatial practices through the experiences of free Afro-Caribbean women who, in many Caribbean port towns, gained economic agency despite social and legal constraints that limited their right to property, regulated their mobility, and participation in formal trade (Hall 1994: 179-183).

Susan Socolow shows in her study of Cap Français that women acted as *ménagères* – housekeepers for Euro-Caribbean men, often in relationships that combined domestic labor with intimate cohabitation – as well as traders and property owners (Socolow 1996: 280-282). The role of *ménagères* was significant because it provided women with access to housing, social status, and in some cases, economic independence. Rogers and King add that many women also functioned as *rentières* – female property owners who earned a living by renting out real estate – often combining several economic activities in parallel (Rogers and King 2012: 358-61). In Martinique, Jessica Pierre-Louis and Anne R. Epstein demonstrate through their analysis of property transfers that free Afro-Caribbean women not only received but also actively donated property, consolidating social ties and ensuring economic stability (Pierre-Louis and Epstein 2019: 114-19).

What these three studies share is a site-specific focus – an approach also present in the work of Han Jordaan and Victor Wilson, who examine the free ports of St. Thomas, St. Eustatius, and St. Barthélemy, emphasizing their role as neutral trading posts (Jordaan and Wilson 2014: 275-78). They show how free ports attracted migrants and trade across empires. These studies primarily treat these islands as individual rather than as components of a shared interimperial space. Bassi differs here by arguing that space should be understood as something created through actors' actions and interactions rather than as something that precedes action.<sup>5</sup>

Existing research shows that the occupations of free Afro-Caribbeans in ports like Charlotte Amalie were shaped not only by colonial structures but also by interimperial networks, mobility, and cultural competencies. Women's practices were deliberate and helped shape the urban space – not merely as a static setting for social life but as something continually produced through everyday

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<sup>5</sup> For an overview of recent spatial approaches in historical research, see Fabian, *Spatiale Forklaringer*, from 2018.

action. This perspective situates the analysis within a growing historiographical interest in how women's actions and spatial practices contributed to the making of Caribbean port cities.

By situating St. Thomas and its free Afro-Caribbean population in a broader regional context, it becomes possible to analyze how women participated in the creation of what Bassi calls an *aqueous territory*. The daily practices of free Afro-Caribbean women contributed to maintaining and expanding connections between islands, and thus they were not merely part of the space but co-creators of it. This perspective opens up a more nuanced understanding of colonial societies, where identities, affiliations, and possibilities for agency are shaped by transimperial relations rather than by singular national belonging.

### Reflections on Source Selection

This approach requires historical source material that allows both quantitative mapping and qualitative analysis of socio-spatial practices. The 1803 Register of Free Afro-Caribbeans on St. Thomas,<sup>6</sup> compiled by the Danish colonial administration, serves as the central source for examining patterns of occupation and migration among various groups in the free port of Charlotte Amalie. The register was created in response to the colonial authorities' concern over the growing population of free people of color arriving from other islands, reflecting both a desire for administrative knowledge and social control (Hall 1994: 180-182).

While censuses of the Danish West Indies existed, the 1803 Register was unique in its exclusive focus on the free Afro-Caribbean population, revealing the authorities' specific concern with mobility and social order. As James C. Scott argues, such practices of registration made populations "legible" to the state by simplifying complex realities into administrative categories that enabled surveillance and control (Scott 2020: 11-13, 53-56). The source contains information on

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<sup>6</sup> NARA Record Group 64, Censuses: St. Thomas Commission for the Registration of the Free Blacks: Proceedings and Register of Free Blacks, 1803. Hereafter referred to simply as the 1803 Register.

individuals' gender, age, occupation, and migration patterns, forming the basis for an analysis of group composition and social position within the colonial society.

The register has been transcribed and processed<sup>7</sup> to facilitate a quantitative analysis of the material, with the aim of identifying patterns and trends within the population. However, the register primarily captures formal occupations and basic demographic data, thus offering little insight into the social relations, networks, and informal practices that were also central to the spatial agency and everyday lives of free Afro-Caribbeans. As such, the source reflects the colonial administration's classificatory logic more than the lived experiences of the registered individuals. The quantitative data provide the foundation for an overall demographic and social mapping, while the qualitative analysis focuses on the types of occupation and economic conditions that shaped the agency of free Afro-Caribbeans on St. Thomas in 1803.

## The Mobility and Spatial Practices of Free Afro-Caribbean Women in the Free Port

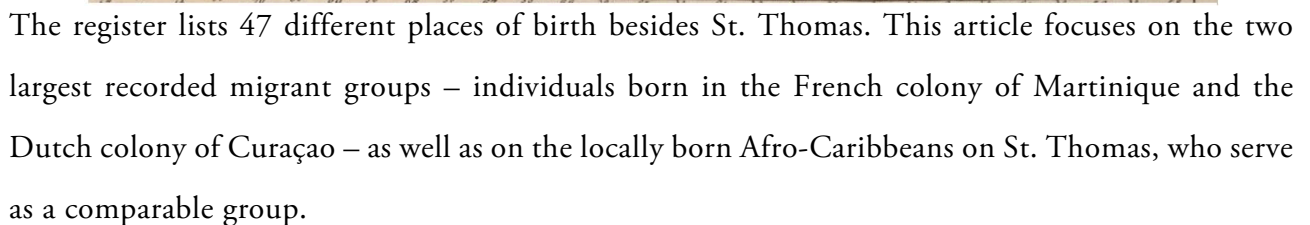
In 1797, the free Afro-Caribbean population on St. Thomas was estimated at 239 individuals (Hall 1994: 146). By 1803, the number had increased to 997, of whom 719 were born elsewhere. This development reflects a significant migration and mobility within the Caribbean region and confirms St. Thomas's role as a transimperial hub.<sup>8</sup> As a free port, St. Thomas offered exceptional opportunities for trade and mobility across colonial boundaries, attracting free Afro-Caribbeans seeking economic opportunities, social networks, or an alternative to the conditions in their birth colonies. These patterns exemplify the image presented by Bassi of an *aqueous territory*, where movement and connections define the geographic space.

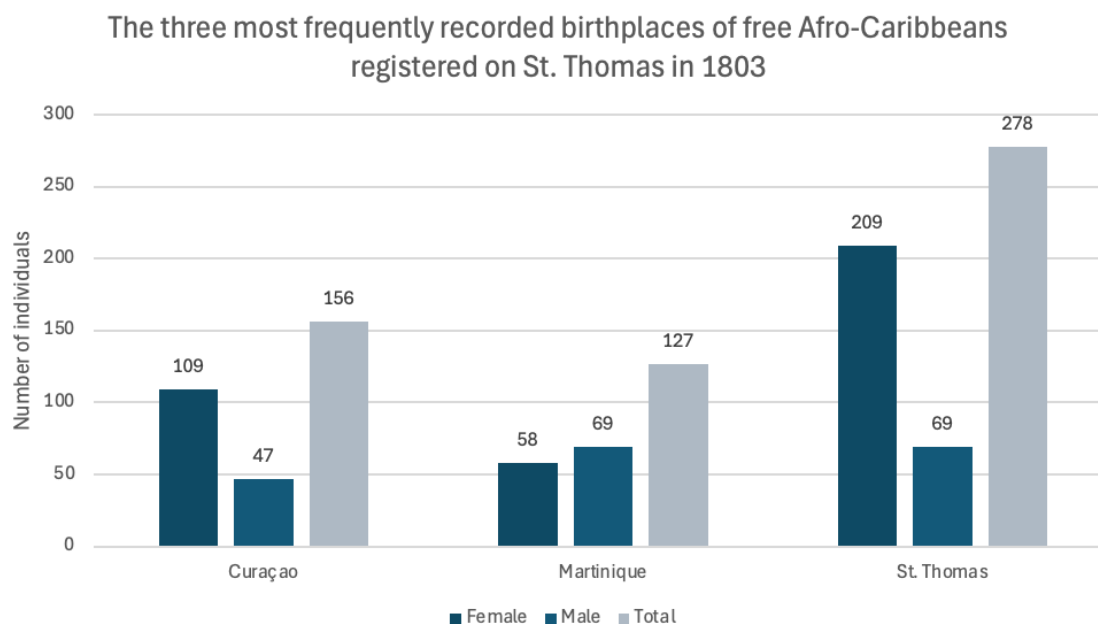
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<sup>7</sup> The register was transcribed and processed by Hannah Katharina Hjorth as part of her master's thesis from 2023. For a more detailed account of the background and creation of the register, see the thesis.

<sup>8</sup> NARA Record Group 64, Censuses: St. Thomas Commission for the Registration of the Free Blacks: Proceedings and Register of Free Blacks, 1803.







Map from 1777 of the Lesser Antilles highlighting St. Thomas, Curaçao, and Martinique. Arrows indicate the main routes of migration and maritime connection between islands, illustrating the transimperial mobility that linked the Danish, French and Dutch colonies. St. Thomas, marked in the northern Virgin Islands, functioned as a central free port in this network, with Curaçao located to the west (red arrow) and Martinique to the east (green arrow). Source: John Carter Brown Librar, Oldendorp, C. G. A., C. G.A. Oldendorp's *Geschichte der Mission der Evangelischen Brüder auf den caraibischen Inseln S. Thomas, S. Croix und S. Jan, 1777*.<sup>9</sup>

As shown in Figure 1, women outnumbered men among both the local free Afro-Caribbeans and the migrant group from Curaçao, while the gender distribution among those from Martinique was more balanced. Overall, the data suggests that women played a central role in migration patterns.

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<sup>9</sup> I would like to thank my academic advisor, Hannah Katharina Hjorth, who transcribed and processed the dataset used in this article and for producing the map that forms part of the visual material. The arrows indicating routes of connection were added by Hjorth for illustrative purposes, based on the patterns of mobility discussed in this article. All remaining errors are mine.

Figure 1 source: The 1803 Register of Free Afro-Caribbeans on St. Thomas

St. Thomas likely attracted women already experienced in navigating urban life – skills, such as managing household economies and trading goods, which were essential to survival in Caribbean port towns and had likely been acquired in places like Curaçao and Martinique. Free Afro-Caribbeans were mainly concentrated in urban centers such as Charlotte Amalie, where they engaged in small-scale trade and domestic service rather than rural agriculture (Hall 1994:180-184).

In the historiographical tradition, mobility in the Caribbean archipelago has often been associated with men as the primary agents connecting the region. Bassi's concept of an *aqueous territory* captures how sailors and merchants shaped a transimperial space through maritime movement and exchange (Bassi 2017: 75-81). The 1803 Register challenges this view: free Afro-Caribbean women actively participated in transimperial mobility – not necessarily at sea, but through migration and interaction in urban environments. Female migrants from Curaçao and Martinique were recorded as seamstresses, cooks, or washerwomen, occupations that depended on maritime traffic and trade. Through such work, women established relationships with sailors, merchants, and households, positioning themselves within the networks that sustained the free port economy. Charlotte Amalie's dense urban environment offered both economic and social mobility, attracting women who could navigate its fluid boundaries between domestic, commercial, and maritime spheres (Hall 1994: 180-184). Viewing these women as spatial agents means recognizing that they not only moved within space but also actively shaped it. Drawing on Louise Fabian's notion of spatial practice, space is here

understood as something socially produced through everyday actions and interactions (Fabian 2018: 22-27). Women's economic and social activities in Charlotte Amalie thus contributed to shaping the urban environment itself.

Looking at Figures 2, 3, and 4, the occupational distribution among free Afro-Caribbean women shows that one profession recurs across all three groups: seamstress. This suggests that sewing constituted an important and gender-specific form of labor accessible to free Afro-Caribbean women regardless of their place of birth. Among those from Martinique, seamstress was the most frequently listed occupation (22 out of 43). The inclusion of "wife" among this group as an occupation may reflect both inconsistency in the register and the blurred line between marital and economic status; in some cases, it may denote a role like *ménagères* (Socolow 1996: 280-282). Nonetheless, the register generally records only one occupation per individual and does not capture cases in which women combined several forms of labor.

The group from Curaçao shows a more diverse pattern. While seamstress also dominates (51 out of 86), many worked as sellers (20 as "seller" and 5 as "seller\_street"), indicating active participation in the urban trade economy – consistent with Rogers and King's portrayal of women as dynamic actors in informal trade (Rogers and King 2012: 359-61). The 1803 Register does not specify what kinds of goods were sold or what was being sewn, reflecting the general limitations of this type of administrative source.

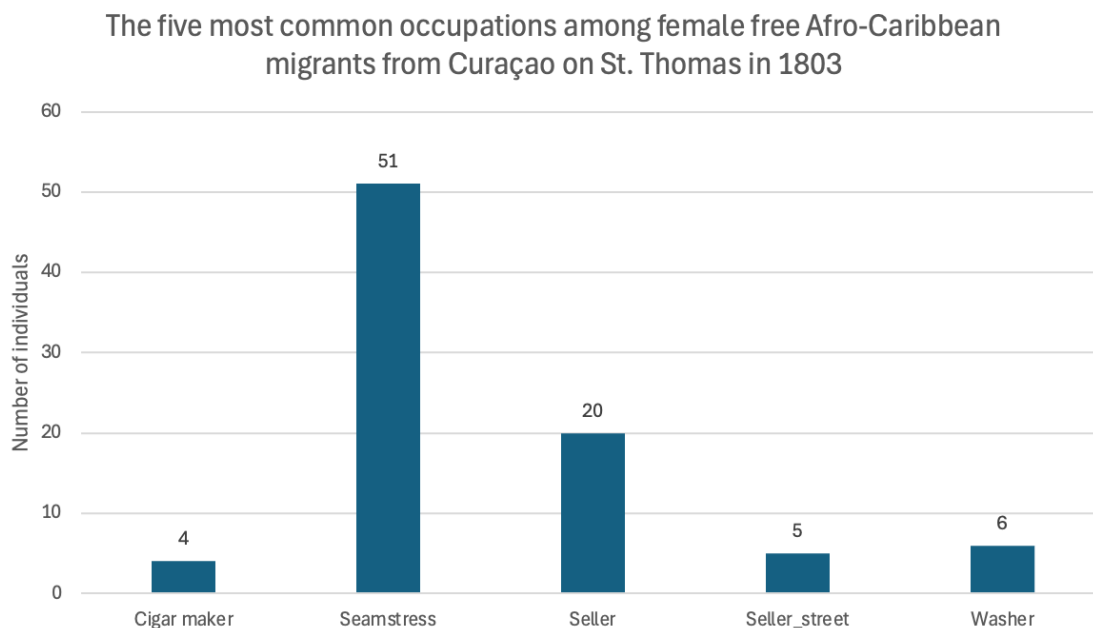


Figure 2 source: The 1803 Register of Free Afro-Caribbeans on St. Thomas

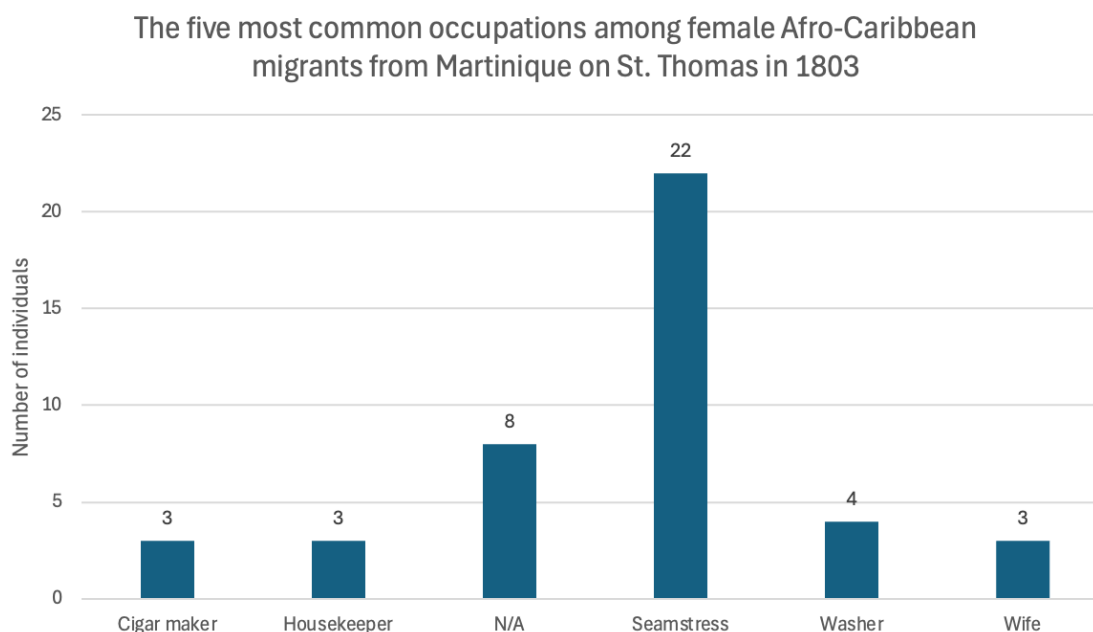


Figure 3 source: The 1803 Register of Free Afro-Caribbeans on St. Thomas

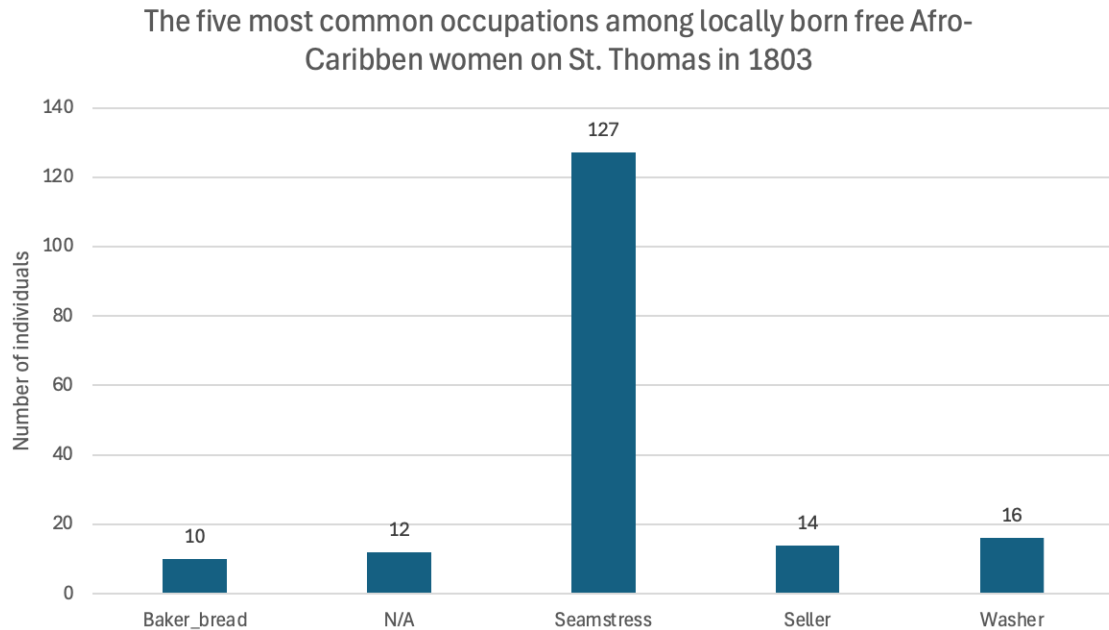


Figure 4 source: The 1803 Register of Free Afro-Caribbeans on St. Thomas

Locally born free Afro-Caribbean women had the widest occupational range. In addition to seamstresses (total of 127), there were a large number working as washers (total of 16), sellers (total of 14), and bakers (total of 10). This suggests that they benefited from possible pre-established social networks, linguistic competence, and familiarity with local norms.

These women exploited the port city's social and economic structures to build a livelihood through textile work, trade, and small-scale production. Their movements across colonial borders and adaptation to new systems testify to a female form of transimperial mobility, which has been underexplored in previous research but aligns with the analyses of Rogers and King (2012) and Socolow (1996), who argue for recognizing women as central actors in colonial contexts. Their mobility may not have been maritime in the traditional sense, yet it remained closely tied to the sea and the rhythms of the port city.

Because Charlotte Amalie functioned as a free port – where goods, people, and information crossed the sea daily – the practices of free Afro-Caribbean women must be understood as part of the maritime sphere. Sewing, washing, and baking in a port city like Charlotte Amalie did not mean isolation from maritime life, but participation in it. They created connections and relationships that



linked the free port to the wider Caribbean. They did not navigate with ships, but with goods, relationships, and a knowledge of the port's rhythm – and that made them co-creators of space.



Charlotte Amalie was not merely a stage upon which their lives played out – it was a space they themselves helped shape.

Market scene from Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, c. 1881, depicting women selling goods such as fruit, poultry, and seafood. The image illustrates the everyday

economic activities that structured urban life and sustained the free port economy. Source: Painting by Frederik Visby. M/S Museet for Søfart.

Although the 1803 Register offers little detail on where and under what conditions these women worked, comparable studies show that free Afro-Caribbean women typically engaged in small-scale, home-based, and service-oriented work. Socolow describes women in Cap François who sold old furniture, ironing tools, and washing equipment such as kettles and tubs – goods central to domestic and urban life (Socolow 1996: 285), while Rogers and King note others managing public bathhouses and dance halls (Rogers and King 2012: 362). Such occupations provided both income and independence, and their services were indispensable to sailors, merchants, and townspeople alike, making women's practices essential to the functioning and cohesion of the free port.

In contrast, the 1803 Register shows that free Afro-Caribbean men were often carpenters, seamen, shoemakers, tailors, or fishermen – occupations closely tied to the maritime trades and manual



craftsmanship that underpinned the island's export economy.<sup>10</sup> While men's work was connected to the movement of ships and goods, women's labor sustained the social and domestic infrastructure that enabled that movement.

By analyzing the historical source material through the lens of Bassi's theory, it becomes clear that his understanding of an *aqueous territory* can be fruitfully expanded: women, too, created space in the Caribbean – not through seafaring, but through the practices that held the free port together. This space was profoundly social, geographic, and economic, and it helped shape the social and commercial dynamics of port cities on par with the male actors who otherwise dominate the narrative.

## Migrants from Curaçao and Their Potential Advantages in the Free Port

As stated earlier, St. Thomas was granted free port status in 1764. This made Charlotte Amalie a central hub in the region's interimperial networks, especially for nearby colonies with limited access to free trade, such as Spanish-controlled Puerto Rico. Unlike Martinique, Curaçao – like St. Thomas – was a free port, which meant that migrants from there arrived with prior knowledge of the economic mechanisms of the free port and the practices of informal trade and smuggling (Pålsson 2017: 319-321) – knowledge that could potentially be turned into economic advantage.

As shown in the 1803 Register (see Figure 2), free Afro-Caribbean women from Curaçao were strongly represented in trade-related occupations, primarily listed as “seller” or “seller\_street”: 25 out of 86, corresponding to approximately 29%. These categories likely covered small-scale vending of food, textiles, or other everyday goods in the port's markets. In contrast, none of the women from Martinique were recorded in this type of occupation.

This difference suggests that women from Curaçao were more successful in taking advantage of the trading opportunities offered by the free port and in establishing themselves as actors within the

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<sup>10</sup> NARA Record Group 64, Censuses: St. Thomas Commission for the Registration of the Free Blacks: Proceedings and Register of Free Blacks, 1803.

commercial economy. Curaçao itself worked as a regional trading hub under Dutch control, where free Afro-Caribbean people actively participated in trade (Hjorth 2023: 30; Rogers and King 2012: 358-362). A noteworthy explanation for this occupational success may also lie in the migrants' place of birth and linguistic skills. Curaçao was, like islands in general, a multilingual society first under Spanish and later Dutch colonial control. It is reasonable to assume that many migrants from Curaçao spoke Spanish, which could have been a key advantage in trade with Spanish-speaking colonies.

As previously mentioned, Socolow's analysis shows that free Afro-Caribbeans were economically independent actors who used their income to consolidate social relationships and ensure economic stability (Socolow 1996: 285-87). This perspective aligns with the 1803 Register, in which free Afro-Caribbean women from Curaçao appear in occupations that allowed flexibility – work that could be adapted to seasonal demand, shifting trade flows, or domestic needs – and thereby enabled a certain degree of social mobility. While opportunities for advancement were limited by race, gender, and legal status, the ability to accumulate savings, build networks, or acquire property nonetheless offered some women visible improvements in social standing.

Jordaan's study of Curaçao further shows that, despite discriminatory practices and local restrictions such as unequal legal rights and racialized local ordinances, free Afro-Caribbeans maintained some legal and social room for maneuver. The legal framework led to arbitrary court rulings, yet there were still structural limits to how far the discrimination could go. As Jordaan notes, the colonial authorities depended on the free Afro-Caribbean population as traders, craftsmen, and agents in the island's economy, and therefore could not completely exclude them from legal and economic participation (Jordaan 2010: 66-72).

It is therefore plausible that migrants from Curaçao transferred these experiences to Charlotte Amalie. In this analysis, they appear to have possessed structural and cultural advantages rooted in birthplace, language, and commercial experience from a comparable urban environment – factors that likely facilitated their integration into the transimperial economy of St. Thomas and enhanced their ability to navigate its social and economic networks.

In Bassi's theory, space emerges not only through movement but through the ability to engage in and shape connections (Bassi 2017: 75-81). These connections – social, economic, and spatial – link people, goods, and places across imperial boundaries, echoing Fabian's concept of spatial practice: the everyday interactions through which space is socially produced (Fabian 2020: 22-23). Free Afro-Caribbean women from Curaçao had not only moved to Charlotte Amalie but also actively participated in its economy. They did not merely adapt to the city, but they created it through daily practices that sustained their livelihoods. Following James C. Scott's notion of everyday resistance, such practices can be read as small, pragmatic acts of agency that, while constrained by racial and legal hierarchies, nonetheless redefined the social and economic boundaries of the free port (Scott 2008: 29-31, 50-52).

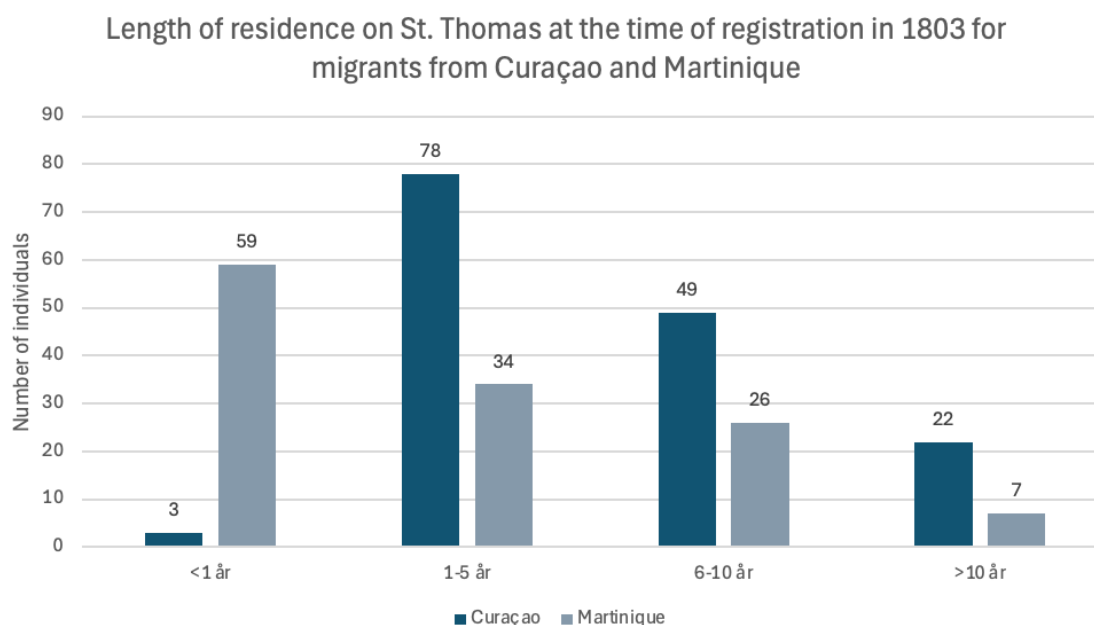
### The Significance of the Duration of Stay for Spatial Practices in the Free Port

In addition to birthplace and linguistic competence, length of residence can also be seen as an indicator of a migrant's ability to gain a foothold in the urban space of Charlotte Amalie. As previously mentioned, there were significant differences between the groups – the locally born free Afro-Caribbeans, the migrants from Curaçao, and those from Martinique. Free Afro-Caribbean women from Curaçao were more strongly represented in trade-related occupations (approximately 29%) than those from Martinique where none were recorded in this category. At the same time, the 1803 Register (see Figure 5) shows that the two migrant groups differed markedly in terms of how long they had resided on St. Thomas. These differences are crucial for understanding how – and to what extent – free Afro-Caribbean women participated in the creation of what Bassi calls an aqueous territory.

Figure 5 source: The 1803 Register of Free Afro-Caribbeans on St. Thomas

The vast majority of migrants from Curaçao had resided on the island for several years: 78 individuals for 1-5 years, 49 for 6-10 years, and 22 for more than 10 years. Only three had arrived within the past year. By comparison, most migrants from Martinique (a total of 59) had been on the island for less than one year, while significantly fewer had stayed for a longer period. The difference in length of residence reflects on the one hand, different forms of migration – migrants from Curaçao appear to have been economic migrants, whereas the group from Martinique was more likely political refugees<sup>11</sup> – and, on the other hand, varying degrees of opportunity to establish themselves and remain.

The difference in length of residence is crucial for understanding migrants' social roles and positions within the urban space. A longer presence can be both precondition for and a result of the ability to build networks and gain access to the local labor market. It suggests a dynamic interaction where networks and adaptability make it possible to remain and where this, in turn, enables further



<sup>11</sup> The migrants from Martinique were political refugees because of the revolutionary events and riots in the French colonies. For a more detailed account, see Hjorth's master's thesis from 2023.

networking and rootedness, which potentially fosters a desire to stay. In this context, integration should not be understood as complete equality but rather as access to a certain degree of economic stability, social networks, and mobility within the framework of the free port. The longer presence of the migrants from Curaçao indicates a certain level of establishment and continuity – key indicators of integration.

It is noteworthy that several free Afro-Caribbean women from Martinique as well as locally born women, are registered with the occupation N/A (not specified) (see Figure 3 and 4). This applied to 8 out of 43 free Afro-Caribbean women from Martinique (approximately 19%) and 12 out of 179 locally born free Afro-Caribbean women (about 6.5%). By comparison, none of the free Afro-Caribbean women from Curaçao was registered as N/A. This may indicate that several women from Martinique had not yet established a fixed occupation, which – when considered alongside their short length of residence – points to a low degree of integration and demonstrates that mobility did not automatically lead to access to the urban space.

However, the lack of occupational information does not necessarily indicate unemployment. As Hjorth notes, the register reflects the classificatory logic of the colonial administration rather than the full complexity of social and economic life. Certain types of informal or socially stigmatized labor – such as domestic service or prostitution – may not have been recorded or recognized as formal occupations (Hjorth 2023: 16-17, 43).

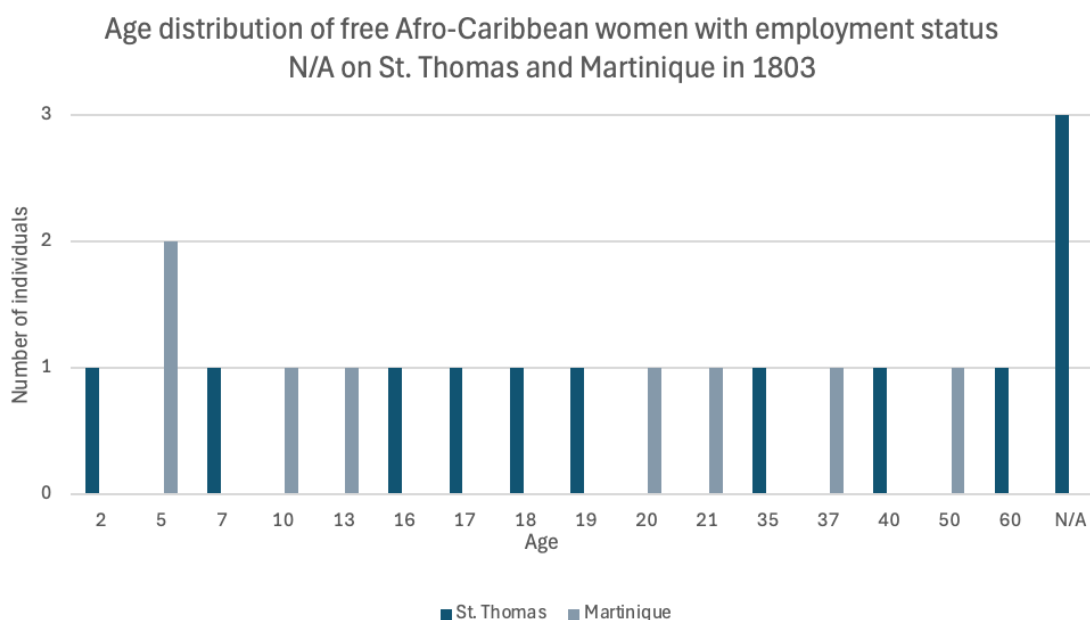


Figure 6 source: The 1803 Register of Free Afro-Caribbeans on St. Thomas

This point is further nuanced when considering the locally born free Afro-Caribbean women. The fact that some of them were also listed without an occupation indicates that integration into the labor market was not automatic but influenced by factors such as age. A closer look at the age distribution of women recorded without an occupation (see Figure 6) reveals important nuances. Among the eight women from Martinique marked as N/A, four were aged 13 or younger, and one was over 40 (aged 50). Only two were in their early twenties. This suggests that many of the Martinique-born free Afro-Caribbean women without a listed occupation were either too young to support themselves or perhaps beyond typical working age.

The pattern is different for the twelve locally born free Afro-Caribbean women where the majority were between 16 and 40 years old – an age range generally associated with active participation in the labor market. This raises the question of why these women who would be expected to work based on age alone, were not registered with an occupation.

These differences point to a key limitation of the historical source: the category N/A does not clearly indicate why a woman was not assigned a profession. It may reflect life stage, recent arrival, or simply gaps or conventions in the registration process. Thus, N/A must be interpreted cautiously and in context.

To gain a deeper insight into the specific living conditions and agency of these women, it is necessary to consult other types of historical sources<sup>12</sup> that can shed light on their everyday lives and economic practices beyond what is captured in the population register. Only through a broader use of historical sources can we begin to understand how these women navigated urban life – and how they, in doing so, actively shaped the space they inhabited. It shows that space-making was not given but something that had to be created.

Overall, the analysis shows that integration into the free port of Charlotte Amalie was differentiated and depended on a combination of length of residence, place of birth, language, and gender. Free Afro-Caribbean women from Curaçao appear to have been relatively more integrated than women from Martinique, as reflected in their longer stays, access to networks, and prior experience with similar free port environments.

This difference in integration can be viewed through Bassi's theory of the *aqueous territory*. While Bassi's framework is centered on male maritime actors whose mobility shapes the transimperial space, reading it through women's experiences reveals another dimension of the aqueous world. From this perspective, free ports like Charlotte Amalie appear as fluid spaces in which the ability to navigate across linguistic, economic, and social boundaries was crucial for determining who could gain a foothold.

## Conclusion

This article has examined how Charlotte Amalie on St. Thomas in 1803 can be understood as an *aqueous territory*, and how free Afro-Caribbean female migrants participated in shaping this space through their occupation and social mobility. Based on Ernesto Bassi's spatial theory and a gendered

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<sup>12</sup> Historical sources such as court record, tax lists, household inventories, or preferably personal letters.



analytical perspective, it becomes clear that free Afro-Caribbean women were not merely passive inhabitants of the colonial port city but active participants in the production of space whose practices were essential to the functioning of the free port as a trans-imperial hub.

The analysis of the 1803 Register shows that migrants from Curaçao differed from other groups by being more engaged in trade, indicating a more active participation in the urban economy and thus a greater degree of integration into the urban space. In contrast, migrants from Martinique appeared as a more recently and less rooted group. The overall analysis thus demonstrates that access to and participation in the *aqueous territory* was not equally distributed but conditioned by factors such as place of birth, length of residence, language, and prior experience.

These findings speak directly to the newer Caribbean historiography, which challenges earlier views of the islands as isolated colonial units and instead emphasizes their role in a dynamic, interimperial network. Through the lens of Bassi's concept of an *aqueous territory*, St. Thomas and its free Afro-Caribbean population emerge as part of a flexible geographic space shaped by mobility, trade, and cultural exchange across imperial boundaries. From this perspective, free Afro-Caribbean women appear as active creators of urban space, adapting to and taking advantage of the free port's economic and social opportunities.

This article thus contributes to a more nuanced understanding of free Afro-Caribbean women in a colonial context. Rather than viewing them as subordinate individuals within an enslaved society, the analysis shows that free Afro-Caribbean women played an active role in shaping the transimperial connections that underpinned the foundation of the free port. In particular, free Afro-Caribbean women from Curaçao succeeded in establishing economic and social footholds within interimperial trade and social structures that characterized the free port of Charlotte Amalie in the early 1800s. Free Afro-Caribbean women should therefore be recognized as co-creators of the transimperial space. This does not imply that their positions were equal to those of men; while their opportunities were shaped and often constrained by both racial and gendered hierarchies, acknowledging their economic and spatial practices on their own terms allows for a more balanced understanding of how the free port functioned.

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Records of the National Archives and Record Administration,

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#### **Censuses:**

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# HOMOEROTICISM AND ORIENTALISM

The 'oriental' men in Western ethno-pornographic photography, 1850s to  
1900s

By:  
Emil Theodor Hansen  
History



**ABSTRACT:** In the recent years, the field of Colonial Middle East has seen a great revision. Taking outset from Edward Said's seminal work on 'Orientalism', this paper aims to explore the sexual – or rather the homoerotic – implications of this scholarly debate. By examining ethnographic photography depicting supposedly 'Oriental' men, I argue that the portrayals of these models – which are characterised by a feminine and highly sexualised modelling – emphasise the colonial implications of the 'Westernised' perspective on 'the Orient'. The feminine portrayal of the 'Oriental' models mirrors the conception of a subaltern 'Orient' from the perspectives of the European consumers.

**KEYWORDS:** Orientalism, homoeroticism, middle east, sexuality, effeminacy.



## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Just as the various colonial possessions—quite apart from their economic benefit to metropolitan Europe—were useful as places to send wayward sons, superfluous populations of delinquents, poor people, and other undesirables, so the Orient was a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe (Said 1978: 190).

This quote from E. Said's *Orientalism* is one of few places he dwells on the role of sexuality in colonialism and 'Orientalism'. Here, 'the Orient' serves almost as a haven for 'free sex', which were impossibly obtained 'at home'. For Said, 'the Orient' thus became a place where colonisers and Europeans sought out their sexual desires (whatever those might have been), and "[v]irtually no European writer who wrote on or travelled to 'the Orient' in the period after 1800 exempted himself or herself from this quest" (Said 1978: 190). Problematic as this generalisation might be, I aim to examine this 'Oriental sexuality'.

From the 19<sup>th</sup> to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, European colonial regimes gained considerable influence over the crumbling Ottoman Empire. Consequently, there was a substantial rise in 'Orientalist' academic and literary writing, as well as in artworks and other depictions of 'the Orient'. In this cultural landscape, writers, painters, and scholars became obsessed with 'the Orient' and depicting what they considered its 'true form' to Europeans back at home (cf. Alkabani 2024: 17-22; Said 1978). In this essay, I will focus on this 'Orientalist' tradition which erupted during the increasing European dominance in discourses concerning the Middle East. More specifically, I will study the visual images that spewed out of a European fascination of 'the Other', which had significant homoerotic implications. This choice in sources is partly due to a general scarcity of textual sources on homoerotic depictions of 'the Orient', as well as visual sources being highly influential for a discussion of the colonial perceptions of 'the Orient'. As will be clear, visual sources display

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks are due to Daniel Steinbach, who not only gave a very inspiring and fruitful course on colonialism in the Middle East but also supervised the essay that preceded this article.

the common conceptions of ‘the Orient’ by Europeans by emphasising how those representations display the colonised Other and, as such, becomes manifestations of ‘Orientalist’ discourses.

## Historiography

Traditionally, the historiography on eroticism and sexualisation of ‘the Orient’ has focussed on the sexualities of ‘Oriental’ women, rather than those of men and boys (e.g. Alloula 1986). My study is therefore an important extension of the field in nuancing an understanding of the sexualisation of ‘the Orient’, and the ways it plays into the power structures of colonialism.

Edward Said’s *Orientalism* is seminal for discussions on the notion of ‘the Orient’, in which the term itself emerged. Although Said, as stated above, only sporadically examines the question of sexuality in an ‘Orientalist’ perspective, his use and assertion of the term ‘Orientalism’ will prove important for the coming analysis. As Said argues, ‘Orientalism’ is the style of thought in which ‘the Orient’ is being displayed as culturally different to ‘the West’. ‘Orientalism’, to Said, is a discourse of cultural dominion; a way ‘the West’ – in trying to come to terms with ‘the Orient’ – distinguishes itself from ‘the Orient’ to exercise (cultural) power over ‘the Other’. ‘The Orient’, therefore, does not necessarily reflect reality but is a way Europeans (particularly Britain and France) display and represents ‘the Other’ (Said 1978: 1-48). Important for this study is that these representations should be understood “*as representations*, not as ‘natural’ depictions of the Orient” (Said 1978: 21, author’s italics). In terms of sexuality, Said argues that there existed an assumption that ‘Oriental people’ were more promiscuous and sexually available to the European colonialists (see e.g. the introductory quote; Said 1978: 190).

Although influential, Said paradoxically generalises about ‘the Orient’ and ‘the West’, and these generalisations make it difficult to assert the relationship between the so-called ‘Orientals’ and ‘Westerners’ (Hallaq 2018: 27-64). Such generalisations potentially create a narrative of ‘colonisers’ who collectively colonise a collective entity, thus leaving out variations, nuances and (most important of all) leads to a one-sided way to study ‘Orientalist’ depictions. I aim to examine a specific

case within the field of 'Orientalist' depictions, in order to show that these discourses were created by specific individuals rather than by a collective entity, and that they subsequently resonated and were consumed throughout 'the West' (especially Europe). Being conscious of the problematic features of the term 'Orientalism', such word is still useful for the present study, since what I essentially examine is exactly the generalising nature of the homoerotic depictions of 'the Orient'.

In terms of homoeroticism and colonialism, Robert Aldrich's monograph *Colonialism and Homosexuality* is seminal. He argues that 'the Orient' was perceived by Europeans as especially homoerotic and, therefore, contrary to the moral features of Europe. This, in turn, framed 'the Orient' as especially exotic and interesting to 'the West'. I, however, find Aldrich's study problematic in various areas: firstly, his study is conducted from a very wide variety of source materials, periods, people and geographical places. Therefore, he often comes off as generalising and does not examine his cases fully. Secondly, his study seems highly influenced by a presupposition that most of his historical actors were homosexual, which I often find difficult to argue for (this is e.g. visible on Aldrich 2003: 1-11; 302-26). This is both a very tendentious assumption as well as a very binary way of understanding sexuality. Nonetheless, Aldrich is an important starting point with essential observations that, in reference to others, are imperative for the present study.

Another source for examining the implications of sexuality in an 'Orientalist' gaze is Joseph Boone's *The Homoerotics of Orientalism*. Through a study of different depictions and portrayals of 'Oriental people' in homoerotic settings, Boone shows that 'Orientalist homoeroticism' has various effects. Boone argues that 'homoerotic Orientalism' destabilises Western conceptions of gender and sexuality; they result from trying to understand the 'Other's' sexuality and, as such, cause a questioning of their masculinity (Boone 2014: 16-8). Although his analytical study suffers similar problems as Aldrich's, Boone's arguments concerning the political and cultural implications of homoeroticism are very important for the coming discussion of the colonialist implications of homoerotic portrayals of 'Oriental people'. Especially his contention that such representations are never one-dimensional but rather moveable along multiple vectors of social, cultural, and political influence will be used as a fundamental assumption (Boone 2014: 18).



Recently, Feras Alkabani has conducted a study of the 'Orientalist' perception of homoerotic desire. Although specifically focusing on the travelogues of R. Burton and T. E. Lawrence, his conclusions and arguments will be an important perspective of the last chapter. Namely, I will use Alkabani's contention that 'Orientalist' descriptions of 'the Orient' rarely correlate with reality, both because 'the Orient' is itself a problematic generalisation and because such depictions are prejudiced and do not reflect reality (Alkabani 2024: 17-21). Alkabani states that an 'Orientalist' construction of reality is connected to an 'Orientalist' 'enchantment', with a strong desire and attraction to a mysterious and exotic 'Orient' (Alkabani 2024: 17). I will use these contentions as a prerequisite for analysing the visual images, in order to discuss their contexts and reasons, as well as the effects of such generalising depictions.

### Sources and theoretical prerequisites

The sources in question are, as previously mentioned, visual depictions of 'the Orient' by European artists. They are vastly different source material than textual sources, in that what we 'read' is an artistic rendering of reality; the content has often been greatly tampered with. As will be clear, the artists took elements of what they either knew or thought apparent in 'Oriental culture' and created an imaginary reality. These visual works were also commercial; they needed to be sold. Therefore, we must think of these constructed images as an attempt by the creator to facilitate and visualise 'the Orient' as their audience perceived it.

This should not mean, however, that I argue for a collective European/Westernised/colonialist perception of an 'Orient'. Such a hegemonic perception of a collective, homogenous entity called 'the Orient' is impossible to discern and can hardly be said to have existed, since it is an oversimplification of a very diverse region. Furthermore, as scholars have argued, labels such as 'the Orient' or 'the Middle East' are problematic by nature, since they are stereotypical and homogenising perceptions of a commonality, which essentialises a place of vastly different people, cultures, and societies (Foliard 2017: 57-72; Yilmaz 2011). What I aim to show is that certain groups (i.e. consumers and producers of ethno-pornographic photography) had noticeable presuppositions and generalisations of 'the Orient', which the photographers tried to mimic. Furthermore, I do not, as Aldrich often

does, try to claim any specific traits of either the consumers or creators. I refrain from assuming they were or were not homosexual, paedophilic etc., since this essentially is unimportant to the present study. The argument pressed in this paper should therefore not be viewed as an encapsulating discussion of either a collective 'Orient' or of 'Europeans'. Even though the photography in question was widespread and commonly consumed in many European countries, I am not arguing that every inhabitant of the European countries is part of this development. Important is that such ethnographic photography was part of a history of normalisation of such discursive portrayals of 'the Orient'. As such, photography in fact emphasises exactly this perception of 'Europeans' and 'the Orient' as historically constructed terms and should hence be viewed as such. Furthermore, I do not operate with a common definition of 'Europeans' or 'Orientals', since this only further essentialises a stereotypical categorisation.

Therefore, by homoeroticism I do not necessarily mean actual homosexuals, or people consciously perceiving themselves as homosexual. By homoeroticism, I subscribe to Boone's use of the term, which connects it with Said's *Orientalism*. Here, the 'homoerotics' refers to ways which 'the Orient' is objectified by a sexualised exoticism. In other words, 'the Orient' is constructed through an 'othering gaze' where the 'homoerotics' does not necessarily describe homosexuality in our modern understanding, but rather the construction of 'the Orient' as homoerotic (Boone 2014; Ze'evi 2006; Massad 2007: 1-5; 73). The 'othering gaze' therefore describes the process of perceiving the 'Other' as inherently different from oneself; thereby Europeans inherently viewed the people of the so-called 'Orient' as innately different, which was further emphasises and facilitated by the homoerotic portrayals on ethnographic photographs.

In the following, I examine the photography two studios: the duo studio of Rudolf Lehnert and Ernst Landrock as well as the one of Wilhelm von Gloeden. First, I will assume their position as historical sources and their capacities as facilitators of an 'Orientalist' visual discourse. Thereafter, I examine the meanings and effects of such portrayals by focusing on contextualising the observations and drawing colonial implications thereof.

## Ethno-pornographic photography in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century

In the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the evolution of print photography, ethnographic photography rose to popularity. Allegedly, this tradition erupted out of a growing fascination of 'the Orient' and an ambition to photograph the 'real and authentic Orientals' from what was at the time deemed a scholarly viewpoint (Siegel 2000: 859-62). The purpose of some of those photographs was, however, pornographic rather than ethnographic, which is indicated by the way these photographs are constructed and used. The photographs could both be reprinted as postcards to send back home from 'the Orient' or be secretly sent, bought and consumed as pornography in the metropolises (Siegel 2000: 859-62). Their use differed according to the consumer, but they all shared a sense of fascination with 'the Orient', with varying degrees of sexual undertones. Therefore, as will be clear from the following, I will use the term 'ethno-pornography', since these photographs both display fetishisations as well as ethnographic 'explanations' of the 'Oriental people' they portray.

Both of the photographic studios examined here use homoerotic motifs and construct a perception of 'Oriental' men as alluring, desirable, and feminine objects of European subjugation. Although they all use 'Orientalist' motives to construct this notion, the two studios greatly differ in whether they are actually taken in the Middle East. The photographs by Wilhelm von Gloeden examined in this paper are all taken in Europe, with most of them taken in his own garden in Italy - despite clearly being meant to give the impression of being in 'the Orient'. His models were mostly Italian men who were dressed up in 'Oriental' clothing and garments. These photographs should therefore be seen as constructed realities, fostered by von Gloeden's own perception and his idea of his audience's perception of 'the Orient'. By examining the photographs, it is possible to discern what ideas, presuppositions and generalisations von Gloeden and his consumers had about 'the Orient'.

On the other hand, Lehnert and Landrock travelled to and set up a studio in Egypt, Palestine and Tunisia. Therefore, their models were locals. This does not mean that their photographs should be considered authentically depicting reality; they are still constructed and modelled to fuel European standards and perceptions of 'the Orient'. Thus, they should be seen as a way to model locals into a European 'Orientalist' discourse that they did not necessarily fit into. In the following section, I

examine a selection of these ethno-pornographic photographs from the studios and home in on different themes and aspects that are apparent throughout the source material.

## The Desirable Arab

Across the photographs, one common feature is their far-off, melancholic, almost longing gaze to the side, thus away from the viewer. This is especially apparent in Wilhelm von Gloeden's photographs *Boy dressed as an Arab* (fig. 1), *Youth dressed in Arab garb* and the two variations of *Jeune Araber* (fig. 2). Such sensual, daydream-like looks create a sense of access into the private spheres of the model (Boone 2014: 275). The viewer gains privy to the intimate act of the sensual gaze, which creates a closeness and connectivity to the subject (Boone 2014: 275). It also awakens a sense of wonder in the viewer: What is he longing for? Who or what does the model desire?



Fig. 1: *Boy Dressed as an Arab*, Wilhelm von Gloeden. Boone 2014: 276. The Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction.

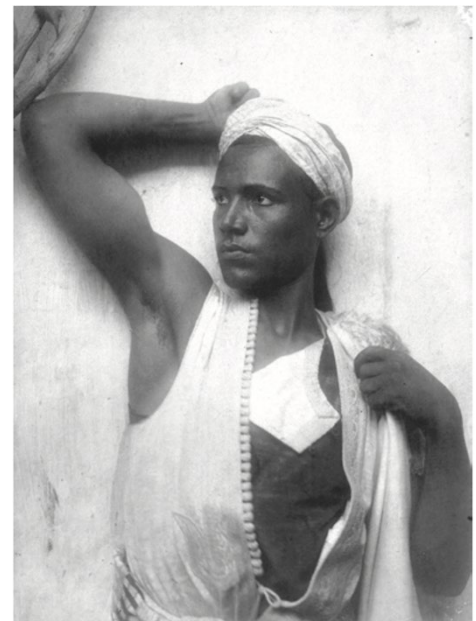


Fig. 2: *Jeuner Araber*, Wilhelm von Gloeden. Boone 2014: 274. The Living Room, Andrei Korymashy Collection.

In *Boy dressed as an Arab* (fig. 1) this gaze is combined with a feminine pose and 'Arab' garments, that alluringly open to his bare chest underneath. The lighting emphasises the opening in his robe, which creates desire for the model by revealing that more bare skin hides under his clothes. The naked neck, which is also emphasised by the lighting, creates a perception of vulnerability, which again constructs a sensation of personal and intimate connection between the viewer and subject. Thus, the consumer of the picture is visually 'undressing' the model – hence resulting in a strong desirability of the 'Oriental' model.

The same tendency shows in various other photographs, where similar motifs of the longing gaze are displayed (see e.g. Boone 2014: 276; 278). Significantly, the von Gloeden photograph *Jeuner Araber* (fig. 2) features both this desirable gaze, as well as implying the model's desirableness. The model, a young man in Arab attire, looks off to the side with one arm raised above his head. This accents his bare, muscular arm and also reveals his armpit and bare skin underneath his clothes. These elements too serve as a way to create a sense of appeal in the viewer.

Such seductiveness is further emphasised by tempting exhibitions of the skin, which is connected to a perception of sexually available and promiscuous 'Oriental people'. In 'European culture', where the exhibition of the skin was considered a feminine promiscuity, such modelling of 'the Other' was clearly meant to stir up sexual desire (cf. Alloula 1986; Siegel 2000). This is further emphasised by the feminine portrayal of these models, which give the impression of a promiscuous and sexually desirable 'Orient' to the European audiences.

### Sexual availability and promiscuity

A notion that is apparent in most of the examined photographs is de-clothing, or the illusion thereof, to create an alluring suspense for the viewer. Here, de-clothing is similar to the practice of 'un-veiling' the otherwise veiled women of Harams on colonial photographs (Alloula 1986). Un-veiling makes the naked bodies of 'Oriental women' appear more erotic, intimate and exotic, since it is contrary to Muslim practises of covering the female body. A similar observation can be found on depictions of 'Oriental men' (Boone 2014: 275-7). Their disrobing is sometimes subtle but nevertheless exposing in the use of loose clothing and naked skin. Both beckons the viewer to desire a nakedness underneath the clothes, as well as emphasising the supposedly looser morals and promiscuity of the models.

Especially the photographs of Lehnert and Landrock display this notion. On Lehnert's *Tunis* (fig. 3), he depicts a boy in Arab-looking headwear, completely nude except for a scarf that conveniently lies over his crotch. He has a longing, melancholic gaze upon his face. His position and general appearance displays him as sensual, eroticised, and almost vulnerable, especially in the way in which his arm is positioned, his crossed legs and how his whole body curves. He appears to be in the

process of undressing himself while still wearing a turban-like headwear - undoubtedly to distinguish him as 'Oriental'.



Fig. 3: Tunis 1904-14, Rudolf Lehnert. Boone 2014: 278. Private collection.



Fig. 4: Moorish Boy, Wilhelm von Gloeden. Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gloeden,\\_Wilhelm\\_von\\_\(1856-1931\)\\_-n.\\_0115A,\\_renumbered\\_as\\_1041.\\_Lad\\_in\\_moorish\\_garb.\\_Cm\\_1](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gloeden,_Wilhelm_von_(1856-1931)_-n._0115A,_renumbered_as_1041._Lad_in_moorish_garb._Cm_1)

Two of Lehnert and Landrock's photos show so-called 'Oriental' models fully nude. One is an unnamed photo (fig. 5) of a model, leaning over the opening in a wall, thus showing his back to the camera. In this way, the viewer is still left greatly allured by the model's non-visible parts. His pose of bending forward emphasises his behind and, as his sight is directed into the camera, a connection between the viewer and the model is constructed (Boone 2014: 275; cf. 277-8). His face looks startled, surprised or questioning, giving the photograph a voyeuristic connotation, as if the viewer has just caught the model in some act.

These sexual implications of the photographs are ways in which the photographers create an exotic perception of people who they view as 'Oriental'; they are a created impression of a 'Westernised' view of reality. This is especially evident when we consider that many of the models, as previously stated, are in fact not from the 'Middle East'. Remembering that such photographs could be bought, distributed and consumed in Europe, it becomes clear that these representations are a way to foster an already-existing perception of desire or exotic fantasy of 'the Orient' (Siegel 2000; Boone 2014).



If they were to be consumed, they needed to appeal to the consumers, as well as applying to their perceptions, fantasies and notions of an 'Orient'.



*Fig. 5: Untitled, Rudolf Lehnert. Boone 2014: 276. The Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction.*

### Effeminacy and androgyny

Another theme spanning across the photographs is their use of feminine and androgynous motifs. On a postcard by Lehnert and Landrock (fig. 6), we see a boy in Arab clothing, which reveals his bare chest underneath. Most noticeable here are two small flowers placed in his turban-like headwear. This is a recurring feature on 'Orientalist' photographs and often appears in the same fashion in their headwear (Boone 2014: 277-8, 273). It is unclear if it represents some local traditions among young men and boys in the Middle East, and thus an appropriation, or part of the European photographer's construction of reality. However, it could be argued that the inclusion of a flower as a decorative element brings a certain feminine character to the model and should thus be considered an effeminate depiction.

Many of the abovementioned pictures also express a feminine version of the population groups they supposedly display, both via said flowers but also with how they pose. On von Gloeden's *Jeune Araber* (fig. 2) and *Boy dressed as an Arab* (fig. 1), he clearly instructs the models as androgenous and sexual. This, in *Jeune Araber* (fig. 2), becomes further mixed with his bare, muscular arm, which creates an amalgamation of different notions of gender and sexuality (Boone 2014: 274). Similarly, Lehnert's *Ahmed Tunisie* (fig. 7) is clearly modelled in the same fashion, both with flowers in his headwear and an effeminate pose. His arms emphasise both his neck/head and hips in similar poses to photographs of colonial women, to draw attention to those areas on the model's body (Siegel 2000; Alloula 1986). Further, his bare chest and direct eye-contact with the camera creates an intimate relationship between the viewer and model (Boone 2014: 275). Overall, the pose, facial expression and general appearance create a perception of the 'Oriental' model as feminine and desira-

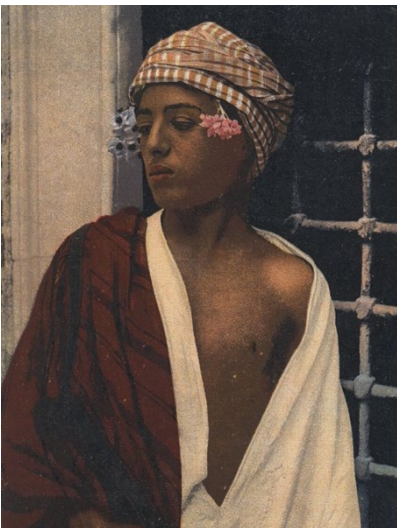


Fig. 6: *Jeune Arabe*, Rudolf Lehnert.

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:689\\_-\\_Jeune\\_arabe.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:689_-_Jeune_arabe.jpg)

ble.



Fig. 7: *Ahmed Tunisie*, Rudolf Lehnert. 1904. Boone 2014: 277. Musée l'Elysée.



Fig. 8: *Boy dressed as an Odalisque*, Wilhelm von Gloeden. Source: Wikimedia commons. Fondazione Alinari, Florence.

Some of the pictures even display men dressed as women. The same model who was photographed for *Boy dressed as an Arab* (fig. 1) appears in another photo in female attire. While the clothing remains the same as in *Boy dressed as an Arab*, the model appears in a wig to make him woman

(Boone 2014). The same is also apparent on von Gloeden's *Boy dressed as an Odalisque* (fig. 8). Here, von Gloeden has dressed up a model as a Turkish court lady, complete with robes, veil and accessories. Odalisques had a reputation of being concubines for the finer circles of Turkey, which further emphasises the sexual and feminine nature of this picture. The model from *Boy dressed as an Arab* only needed a wig to suddenly appear a girl. So, notions of male/female and masculine/feminine become easily transferable, overlapping and fluid (Krishnaswamy 1998).

In sum, the ethno-pornographic photographs of 'Oriental' men are constructed discourses, deliberately not depicting reality but rather made to foster European exotic fantasies. As such, the photographs depict the 'Orientals' by using effeminacy, sexual desirability and notions of veiling or unveiling; all to cater the European illusion of colonial sexuality and eroticised exoticism. The photographers needed to exhibit 'the Oriental' in ways that correlated with their consumers, which is why these representations of people, who were made to visually fit into this category in photographs, should be viewed as part of the broader 'Orientalist' discourse. The photos are both a product as well as constitutive of a discourse that 'Oriental' men are feminine, erotic beings. They express an ideal, where 'the Oriental' becomes an object of European desire, rather than a self-governing subject, which renders these figures implicitly – and at times visually – subordinate to Europeans.

### Homoeroticism and colonialism

The different homoerotic depictions of so-called 'Orientals' display an overall tendency to perceive them as exotic and remarkably different from Europeans. This othering of 'the Orient' draws on tendencies and aspects of a radicalised discourse. As Stuart Hall argues, race is often discursively constructed by different components or signifiers that are perceived as indicators for racial difference (Hall 2021: 364-5). This form of Othering presents itself in the ethno-pornographic photographs by continuously emphasising specific idiosyncrasies that make them appear vastly different to the viewers' life.

Of course, the depictions are not that one-dimensional but, as will be clear from the following, racial aspects of 'Orientals' *vis-à-vis* 'Occidentals' are part of a broader discourse with a clear power structure between colonialist and colonised (Schiels and Herzog 2021; cf. Bayly 2002). As I have just

demonstrated, these ‘Orientalist’ depictions are concerned with portraying the Other as vastly different to the norm, ‘the Europeans’. Remembering that ‘Orientalist’ visuals were a product of ‘coming to terms’ with ‘the Orient’ (i.e. understanding it from a European perspective), it becomes clear that these differences were products of a *perceived* racial difference, which further emphasised the social gap between the coloniser and colonised (Said 1978; Hall 2021). Furthermore, by them being exotifications and colonial fantasies also fuelled consumers’ presuppositions of racial indicators. It created a perception or point of reference for features common for ‘Oriental people’, where androgyny and homoeroticism became connected to other notions of racial difference.

Furthermore, ethnographic photography facilitates a perception of cultural, sexual and racial uniformity within what was perceived as ‘the Orient’, defined solely as an opposite to ‘Europeans’. Europeans were certainly aware that European sexual morality was far more heteronormative than those of the non-European societies (Aldrich 2003: 5; cf. Ze’evi 2006: 169). Even though I refrain from arguing for a *de facto* ‘homosexual haven’ as Aldrich does, it is clear that sexuality (in terms of promiscuity and homoeroticism) was a notion which was seen as distinguishing Europe from the colonies (Aldrich 2003). With this as a prerequisite, in the following section I discuss the discourse on racial difference in terms of what implications and effects this had on the colonialism of the Middle East.

### Colonising properties of homoerotic Orientalism

Effeminising ‘Oriental’ men was crucial to the way the colonised Other was delegitimised and discursively constructed as non-autonomous. As Krishnaswamy has argued, in the case of the British Raj, British portrayals effeminised Indian men and, in doing so, implicitly represented them as subordinate to British control (Krishnaswamy 1998: 166-7). If projected unto the case of ‘Orientalist’ homoerotic depictions, the effects of the homoerotic ‘Orientalist’ discourse become clear. The photography examined above presents an effeminised portrayal of ‘Oriental’ men, in settings with obvious sexual implications and in erotic poses with clear effeminate connotations. This facilitates a perception of ‘the Orient’ as both culturally and racially distinct from ‘the West’ (Schiels and Herzog 2021).

In this fashion, the 'Europeans' implicitly become the masculine actor, which imply a power relation between them, where the 'Orient' is the subaltern (cf. Krishnaswamy 1998). In a society highly influenced by patriarchy, such associations with gender ultimately connote the power structures inherent in those relationships. This tendency relates, from a Eurocentric perspective, to a supposed inferiority of the Middle East, where the latter is perceived as unmodern and uncivilised (Derengil 2003). Effeminism, therefore, results in a cultural subjugation of the Middle East, where the autonomy of the 'Oriental' men is delegitimised by having them appear feminine. This ultimately reflects the colonial properties of 'homoerotic Orientalism'. As J. Massad contends, 'Western' discourses were often concentrated upon asserting 'the Orient' as perverse and degenerate (Massad 2007: 5). Therefore, depicting the so-called 'Orient' as homoerotic and androgynous could be seen as part of a colonialist discourse where Europeans are being framed as the stronger, civilised people in control of 'the Orient'. This should, however, not be understood as a (necessarily) deliberate portrayal by the artists examined above. Rather, I would argue that they are part of an already existing colonialist-'Orientalist' discourse, which they both are a product of and continue to facilitate. They themselves are formed by this 'Orientalist' discourse, which in turn constructs their pre-conditions to understanding Middle Eastern societies and, hence, they inadvertently continue to produce this perception of 'the Orient' as more homoerotic and androgynous.

If seen in light of a study conducted by Alkabani, it becomes clearer how this discourse is to be understood. According to Alkabani, an 'Orientalist' discourse is concerned with Europeans 'seeking cultural difference' in the Middle East (Alkabani 2024: 21). European scholars and travellers used this cultural difference to foster a story which put the writers themselves as 'heroes of their own stories'. They used elements, stories (fictional or otherwise) to conduct a picture of 'the Orient' that was not necessarily reality, but rather a fantasised or perceived image of 'the Orient' (Alkabani 2024: 17-8). This notion is also evident from the way ethnographic photography was artistically produced.

Not only did European scholars travel to the Middle East to construct their own views of 'the Orient' – so did Arab scholars travel to Europe. Due to a tendency of opposing Ottoman culture, Arab scholars sought out European culture for facilitating an anti-Ottoman nationalism (Alkabani 2024: 19-20). *Nahda*, as this emerging Arab culture is called, was a product of growing European influence

in Middle eastern countries, but it also fostered responses to ‘Western Orientalist’ discourse (Massad 2007). According to Massad, ‘Orientalist’ depictions of Arab desires created a counter-discourse among Arab scholars, which was aimed towards framing Arab and European sexuality as similar - opposed to what ‘Orientalist’ discourse would let believe. Thus, Arab scholars countered ‘Orientalist’ claims of vast difference by stressing cultural similarities, which was done by reframing homoe-roticism as archaic, while, on the other hand, following ‘Western’ conceptions of sexual morals (Massad 2007: 5; 1; 73; cf. Ze’evi 2006). This points to a remarkable effect of European influence in the Middle Eastern societies, where the discourse of a ‘homoe-rotic Orient’ (in addition to other effects) led to the counter discourse of emphasising similarities between the ‘Orient’ and ‘the West’. One might argue that ethnographic photography posed eventual differences to the perception of the so-called ‘Orient’, both by Europeans and Arab scholars.

It is, however, important to understand that this ‘homoe-rotic-Orientalist discourse’ is not a homogenous viewpoint – and definitely not the whole picture. As Alkabani argues, “While such writers, Europeans and Arabs, may have been united in their intellectual desire to seek cultural difference [...] their individual discourses were never unidirectional” (Alkabani 2024: 21). This is contrary to the impressions Aldrich and Boone hold, which clearly present an ‘Orient’ with a shared (Western) perspective (cf. Hallaq 2018: 28-9). As I have stated earlier, Aldrich clearly follows a one-sided view of ‘homoe-rotic Orientalism’, where the ‘colonialism’ of the Middle East becomes synonymous with some supposedly ‘homosexual’ Europeans viewing ‘the Orient’ as a sexually free space for homoe-rotic doings. Even though some of the arguments above could be read as fostering the very same tendency, they should not be seen as such; my contention should solely be viewed as an attempt to display the ways *some* Europeans (such as von Gloeden and Lehnert/Landrock’s studio) have created marginalising descriptions of people whom they considered ‘Oriental’.

Drawing on the conclusions from the visual images of ‘the Orient’, those should not be seen as an argument claiming that this is the full scope of ‘homoe-rotic Orientalism’; the reality is more complex. Rather, they are an example of ways in which the discourse on ‘Orientalism’, projected through homoe-roticism, results in the colonialist and generalised portrayal of the inhabitants of the so-called ‘Orient’. That is not to say that alternative views did not exist, or that opposing interpretations



could not be argued for, but such perspectives would go beyond the scope of this article. What I have tried to show is how 'homoerotic Orientalism' tended to portray 'the Orient' as exotic. Some of these cases might be ways the artists manifest homoerotic fantasies, but since the artists' true sexual orientations are difficult to discern, we simply cannot know for certain. However, what is clear is that these photographs were made with a distinct consumer in mind, and that they demonstrate an aim to cater to their presuppositions of 'the Orient'. As such, they could both be used to facilitate homoerotic fetishisation, but also as a way of placing Europeans as morally and culturally superior to the so-called 'Orient'.

Ultimately, this narrows down to what Alkabani deems a discourse of 'the unchanging East' (Alkabani 2024): what I have shown with the visual images of 'Orientalism' is that they create a specific illusion of the Middle East. They are perceived as internally culturally homogenous while also being simultaneously contrived as vastly different to Europeans, which emphasises the perceptions of racial differences between 'the West' and 'the Orient', as argued above.

## Conclusions

Throughout this paper, I have aimed to carry out a study of the colonialist implications of homoerotic portrayals of 'the Orient' by ethnographic photography conducted by the two studios of Wilhelm von Gloeden and of Rudolf Lehnert and Ernest Landrock. In sum, the photographs of so-called 'Oriental men' are arranged by European photographers to foster a perception of 'the Orient' as subordinate to European culture. This is done by portraying the 'Orientals' as effeminate, androgenous and homoerotic, which is especially apparent on the representations where young, 'Oriental'-looking boys are positioned to appear alluring and seductive to the European viewers. As such, 'the Orient' is portrayed as culturally different as well as subordinate to 'the West' - thus displaying the ways some Europeans perceived 'the Orient'.

Effectively, this view of 'the Orient' as culturally subordinate fitted into the European colonialist view of 'the Other' as both socially and racially different. This difference, as I have argued, revolves around effeminacy, as it is evident from the composition of the pictures. Furthermore, such effem-



inacy resulted in a very colonialist power dynamic (at least discursively), where the feminine appearances clearly reflected the perceived worldview. In patriarchal societies such as those of European countries in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, effeminate portrayals emphasised the subaltern position of the depicted. These effeminate and homoerotic depictions effectively facilitated a conception of ‘the Orient’ as non-autonomous, with the feminine appearances intended to mirror the perceived power dynamic between the colonised and the coloniser. Thus, by displaying ‘Oriental’ models as feminine and homoerotic, such representations legitimised the colonisation of these societies and people.



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# ICONOLOGY REVISITED

Ambiguity, hybridity, and the limits of Panofsky's methodology

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**ABSTRACT:** This article re-examines Erwin Panofsky's iconology through two case studies: a Gandhāran toilet tray (1st–2nd c. CE) and the grave stele of Eupheros (c. 430 BCE). Panofsky's tripartite ladder retains pedagogical clarity but presumes stable meanings and shared symbolic codes. The Gandhāran tray's hybrid motifs resist unitary synthesis, while the Eupheros stele's apparent coherence dissolves once reception and performativity are foregrounded. Both cases show that cultural stability is produced, not given. The article proposes an *iconology-plus*: a framework that keeps Panofsky's steps but embeds them within approaches attentive to hybridity, biography, and image agency.

**KEYWORDS:** Panofsky, iconology, image agency, object biography, reception theory.



## Introduction

Erwin Panofsky's iconological method has long shaped the study of classical art and archaeology (Panofsky 1955; Lorenz 2016: 2–5; Holly 1984: 38–42). At many universities, including Copenhagen's Saxo Institute, it remains a default framework for teaching visual interpretation. Panofsky's tripartite ladder—pre-iconographical description, iconographical analysis, and iconological interpretation—aims to uncover the “intrinsic meaning” of images<sup>1</sup> as expressions of cultural worldviews (Panofsky 1955: 26–40). Yet this orientation presumes that images possess stable meanings, that audiences share symbolic literacy, and that such meanings can be systematically recovered.

As a teaching tool, the method provides clarity and rigour. As a research tool, however, it falters in the face of ambiguity, hybridity, and plural reception. Later critics emphasise instead the instability of images, their rhetorical and affective force, and the formative role of audiences (Berger 1972; Mitchell 1986; Freedberg 1989; Bredekamp 2018). These debates raise the central question of this article: Does Panofsky's search for intrinsic meaning illuminate cultural coherence, or does it conceal how stability is actively produced?

To explore this question, the article tests Panofsky's model against two contrasting artefacts. The first is a Gandhāran toilet tray from Sirkap (c. 1st–2nd century CE), featuring a hippocamp and rider, whose hybrid motifs resist synthesis (Pons 2011; Falk 2010; Francfort 1979). The second is the grave stele of Eupheros from Kerameikos (c. 430 BCE), unusually complete in its archaeological context and long regarded as a “textbook case” of iconology (Schlörb-Vierneisel 1964; Stroszeck 2002; Margariti 2019). Juxtaposing these least and most favourable conditions — one marked by hybridity and cultural entanglement, the other by apparent homogeneity — is exactly why these

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, “image” is used in Panofsky's broad sense, referring to visual representations in material culture (e.g. reliefs, sculptures, and decorated objects), rather than exclusively to painted or two-dimensional works.

cases were chosen: together they test the limits of Panofsky's framework, revealing that it falters not only in hybrid, cross-cultural settings but also in the supposedly coherent Classical world.

Cultural stability, I argue, is not uncovered but constructed. Iconology must therefore be reframed as an *iconology-plus*: a framework that preserves Panofsky's descriptive and identificatory steps while embedding them within methods that foreground hybridity, object biography, and the agency of images. The article first revisits Panofsky's tripartite model and its intellectual genealogy, then tests it through two contrasting case studies—a Gandhāran toilet tray and the Eupheros funerary stele—before drawing comparative conclusions on how cultural stability is actively produced rather than merely recovered.

### Panofsky's iconology revisited

Panofsky introduced his influential distinction between iconography and iconology in the early 1930s, developing it fully in *Studies in Iconology* (1939) and later revisiting it in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (1955). His interpretive framework is organised into three successive levels. The first stage, pre-iconographical description, concerns the recognition of the basic subject matter of an image—the figures, objects, gestures, and events represented—identified through everyday experience and knowledge of style. The second stage, iconographical analysis, moves to the level of conventional subject matter, situating motifs within a broader repertoire of stories, allegories, and themes transmitted by textual and visual traditions. The third stage, iconological interpretation, seeks to disclose the intrinsic meaning of a work of art, treating it as the symbolic expression of a culture's fundamental values or worldview (Panofsky 1955: 26–40).

The aim of this interpretive process was not only to clarify the content of individual works but also to illuminate “the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, essential tendencies of the human mind were expressed by specific themes and concepts” (Panofsky 1955: 39). In this way, Panofsky positioned art history as a humanistic science with an anthropological dimension, capable of uncovering the cultural mentalities embodied in images.

Panofsky's iconology crystallised out of a contested genealogy of art-historical method. As Holly notes, by the early twentieth century, the discipline was institutionally secure yet increasingly self-critical, as Marxist, feminist, and semiotic critiques exposed its blind spots (Holly 1984: 21–27). It

was in this climate that Panofsky's method took shape, promising a rigorous way to recover the 'intrinsic meaning' of images (Panofsky 1955: 26–40).

The roots of Panofsky's project go back to Aby Warburg, who traced the migration of motifs across time and initiated the Hamburg tradition of cultural-historical art history (Bredekamp 2017: 12–13). Panofsky systematised what Warburg left open, turning a cultural-historical agenda into a replicable method. Equally decisive was Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms, which defined art, myth, and language as autonomous meaning-systems and provided the framework for Panofsky's notion of iconology as the recovery of a culture's *Weltanschauung* (Holly 1984: 44–52). Panofsky also drew on the broader historicist horizon of Burckhardt's cultural cross-sections and Dilthey's hermeneutics, but it was Cassirer's symbolic forms that proved decisive (Holly 1984: 34–37, 114–119). Contemporary methodological debates—from Hans Tietze's call for a *Kunstwissenschaft* to Carl Robert's archaeological hermeneutics—supplied additional precedents but remained closer to philology and can be seen as precursors rather than direct models (Holly 1984: 98–100; Isler-Kerényi 2015: 558–559).

At the same time, stylistic analysis and connoisseurship dominated—Wölfflin, Dvořák, Berenson, and Beazley provided chronological scaffolding and attributions, but left iconographic meaning largely unexplored (Holly 1984: 46–51, 104–105; Donohue 2015: 450).

Panofsky's originality lay less in inventing iconology than in combining Warburg's cultural-historical vision, Robert's archaeological hermeneutics, and the broader historicist tradition into a coherent, teachable ladder of analysis.

At the University of Copenhagen's Saxo Institute, Panofsky's tripartite model remains the default framework for teaching visual interpretation. Especially in bachelor-level courses and monument assignments, its clarity and stepwise logic make it effective as a pedagogical scaffold (cf. Lorenz 2016: 4–5; Holly 1984: 178). Yet beyond its didactic clarity, Panofsky's framework endures because it still provides a systematic vocabulary for linking visual form, textual reference, and cultural meaning. This scaffolding remains indispensable even for approaches that seek to move beyond it. The "synoptical table" of *Studies in Iconology* presents the three levels—description, analysis, interpretation—as distinct operations, even though Panofsky stressed their interdependence (Panofsky 1939: 15; Holly 1984: 178). This didactic clarity explains the method's lasting appeal, even if, as Holly notes, it is often reduced to a "mere technique of deciphering" rather than a broader

theoretical inquiry (Holly 1984: 159, 174). Lorenz likewise warns that its neat structure risks turning iconology into a tautological exercise, where interpreters confirm only what they presuppose (Lorenz 2016: 33).

Yet what makes iconology effective in a teaching setting—its promise of a stable progression from surface description to intrinsic meaning—also risks obscuring the instability and performativity of images. Panofsky assumed that images contained inherent meanings tied to cultural worldviews, recoverable through analysis, implying that artworks reflected stable historical truths. Still, it would be reductive to cast Panofsky as an uncompromising essentialist. His notion of symbolic form and his insistence on historical conditioning already acknowledge that meaning is culturally mediated rather than fixed. While he did not employ terms like hybridity or polyvalence, his framework presupposes a dynamic relation between form, content, and worldview that allows for multiplicity within coherence. Even so, his synthesis reflects the epistemological climate of its own time (Panofsky 1939: 5–8; Panofsky 1955: 16, 31–39, ). But as Lorenz and Holly have shown, even iconology itself is historically conditioned, a product of early twentieth-century intellectual traditions rather than a universal law (Lorenz 2016: 4–5, 20, 33; Holly 1984: 10–12, 147–174).

Later critics have extended this challenge. John Berger argued that “every image embodies a way of seeing,” shaped by ideology and context (1972: 7–11, 33). W. J. T. Mitchell stressed that images act as agents that “want” things, structuring how they are perceived (1986: 1–12, 151–59; 2005: 11, 28–35). David Freedberg emphasised their affective force, the power of images to move, persuade, and provoke (1989: xxi–xxiv, 1–26, 82–98, 136–60, 283–319, 402–24). Horst Bredekamp developed this further in his theory of *Bildakte* or “image acts,” analysing how images themselves produce effects (2018: 29–37, 98, 265–78).

Such critiques highlight problems already visible in ancient contexts. Greek funerary reliefs often replaced biographical accuracy with idealised personas, revealing symbolic rather than factual truths (Margariti 2019: 123–159). Gandhāran art, with its hybrid motifs and audiences, illustrates even more starkly how meanings fragment across cultural boundaries (Stoye 2020: 29–49; Lo Muzio 2011: 337; Falk 2010: 91–95). In both traditions, the gap between maker intention and viewer reception undermines any claim to stable intrinsic meaning.

Panofsky’s framework thus remains foundational as a pedagogical scaffold, but it must be reframed as an *iconology-plus*: a basis to be complemented by approaches that foreground contingency,



hybridity, affect, and performativity. The following case studies put this to the test. A Gandhāran tray exemplifies how hybrid imagery resists synthesis, while the grave stele of Eupheros shows that even the apparent coherence of Classical Athens was itself a constructed stability rather than a given.

## The Limits of Iconology in Hybridity

Tray No. 37 (No. 74 in Marshall 1951), now in the Taxila Museum (inv. no. 183/1932–33), was excavated in 1932–33 from Sirkap, the Indo-Greek and Indo-Parthian city at Taxila. The object dates to the early first century CE and belongs to Henri-Paul Francfort’s Group B3 of Gandhāran trays, which comprises more schematic marine scenes rendered in a stylised Indo-Parthian manner (Francfort 1979: 7, 39).



*Figure 1. Tray No. 37, hippocamp with rider. Taxila Museum, inv. no. 183/1932–33. After Lo Muzio 2011: 333.*

Carved in grey schist and measuring approximately 12 cm in diameter, the tray was turned on a lathe before being finished in low relief (Francfort

1979: 39). At its centre appears a hippocamp, a composite sea creature with the foreparts of a horse and the tail of a fish, moving rightward. A semi-draped rider sits astride the beast, her garment crossing the torso and her coiffure or crown rendered as radiating lines. Beneath the animal’s tail are a stylised palmette and two “goose-foot” motifs, while the rim bears a band of small comma-shaped incisions outside a single line—features characteristic of Group B examples. The hippocamp’s eye, nostril, and musculature are rendered with single incised lines, a schematic treatment contrasting with the volumetric naturalism of Group A.

The archaeological context of the find is equally significant. Tray No. 37 was recovered from House 2A, a large elite residence immediately behind one of Sirkap’s major stupa-courts. The house contained imported Greco-Roman jugs, ornaments, and amulets alongside the tray, which Marshall catalogued as “toilet-tray with rider on hippocamp” (Marshall 1951: 144–46, Pl. 145, no. 74), suggesting an affluent household with access to hybrid material culture. Its placement just behind a major stupa-court highlights the domestic–ritual interface of Sirkap—a placement that underlines

how sacred and domestic spheres intertwined in elite life, where household practice, Buddhist ritual, and elite display converged.

Within Francfort's typology, Group B trays are marked by schematised versions of Hellenistic motifs—"debased" Nereids, stylised banquets, and simplified marine creatures—mediated by Indo-Parthian artistic conventions. Whereas Group A preserves more naturalistic mythological scenes and Group C moves toward frontal Indian-style drinking couples, Group B occupies the transitional middle ground (Francfort 1979: 6-7, 39). Tray No. 37 exemplifies this hybridisation. Its hippocamp recalls Greek thiasos imagery, as in the Altar of Domitius Ahenobarbus (Rome, late 2nd c. BCE), yet its streamlined anatomy and ornamental fillers signal a local workshop adapting imported models. The rider's radiant crown evokes both Helios and Sūrya, combining Hellenistic and South Asian traits. As Jessie Pons notes, such sea-monsters are best understood as "composites" rather than copies—recognisable forms recombined into new visual languages that resonated differently across audiences, from Indo-Parthian elites to Kushan women (Pons 2011: 157).

Beyond questions of style, the tray's life history also complicates fixed meaning. Approached through an object biography, the tray emerges not as a static vessel but as a circulating artefact that may have served multiple functions. Its fine material and decorative rim suggest use as a luxury object, perhaps in cosmetic or dining settings. Scholars have debated their precise function: Francfort emphasised their domestic, cosmetic use (Francfort 1979: 5), while Harry Falk argued that they also played roles in libation rituals, particularly in nuptial contexts (Falk 2010: 97–102). As with many Gandhāran artefacts, its function was polyvalent: it could shift between domestic, ritual, and gift-exchange settings, with each use generating new meanings. This dynamic is well captured by Igor Kopytoff's concept of 'object biography' (Kopytoff 1986: 64–91).

The tray's polyvalence in function finds a parallel in its visual hybridity. Borrowed motifs were reconfigured into new forms: a Greek-derived hippocamp is paired with a rider whose crown recalls both Hellenistic divine attributes and local solar iconography. The decorative fillers echo Mediterranean forms, stripped of original associations. Tray No. 37 thus embodies Gandhāra's cosmopolitan environment, where motifs from multiple traditions were recombined into new visual languages. This hybridity makes the tray a limit case for iconology—an issue that becomes clear when Panofsky's method is applied next.

At the pre-iconographical level, Panofsky's method would simply register: a hippocamp in motion, a semi-draped rider, stylised palmette and goose-foot motifs, and a decorative rim. The calm rightward glide and the rider's closed, composed pose lend the scene a restrained, ceremonial character.

At the iconographical stage, the motif points toward Greco-Roman thiasos imagery—hippocamps bearing Nereids or accompanying Poseidon along marine processions (cf. Pons 2011). Yet the rider resists secure identification. What would be a Nereid in a Mediterranean context slips here: the figure's mantle and posture diverge from classical formulae, while the radiant coiffure/crown evokes solar or divine associations — Helios in the Hellenistic repertoire, or Sūrya in the Indian — a link emphasised by Falk (2010). The attributes that would anchor a conventional identification are conspicuously missing: there is no trident, hydria, billowing himation, accompanying Triton, or inscription. Even the so-called "fillers" — palmettes and goose-foot repeated across related trays — operate less as narrative cues than as elements of a local decorative vocabulary whose meaning remains opaque (Francfort 1979). Even when tested against Panofsky's own correctives — the history of types, of style, and of cultural symbols — the image resists determinate classification.

At the iconological stage, a conventional Panofskian synthesis would read the tray as expressing an Indo-Parthian worldview in which Hellenistic forms were recontextualised to signal cosmopolitan prestige, divine favour, or cultivated taste. The tray's small scale, fine carving, and recovery from House 2A would seem to support such an interpretation, suggesting use in intimate domestic or ritual settings. Yet precisely where it seeks a single *Weltanschauung*, the reading falters. Is the rider Nereid, a solar deity, an allegory, or none of these? The same forms circulate across Greek, Iranian, Buddhist, and local systems without stabilising into one symbolic code. The method's ladder can be climbed, but at its summit it yields not 'intrinsic meaning' but polyvalence: a hybrid play of motifs that resists reduction. Instead of encoding a clear ideology, the tray reflects a fluid visual negotiation, in which meaning is contingent and activated differently depending on the viewer's background and the contexts of use.

Tray No. 37 exemplifies the limits of Panofsky's method in hybrid, transcultural contexts. Iconology rests on the assumption that images contain retrievable "intrinsic meaning," the symbolic expression of a shared worldview. Yet this tray destabilises that premise. Its power lies in ambiguity: it does not resolve into a singular reading but resonates differently across audiences. An Indo-Parthian aristocrat

might see Greco-Roman prestige; a Kushan woman might see ritual efficacy or protection. These divergent literacies exceed what Panofsky's framework can accommodate.

Scholars themselves diverge: Jessie Pons interprets Gandhāran sea-monsters as “composites” recombining Greek and Indian forms, while Harry Falk stresses Indo-Iranian solar and aquatic symbolism. The coexistence of such readings shows that meaning is not fixed but negotiated.

Moreover, the image is performative. As Freedberg and Bredekamp argue, images act—persuading, provoking, enchanting. W. J. T. Mitchell similarly describes images as “desiring” entities that demand interaction rather than passive viewing. Tray No. 37, likely handled in intimate domestic or ritual contexts, did not merely depict hybridity; it enacted it. Its meaning was contingent, activated through bodily engagement, ritual action, and social framing.

Instead of encoding a stable ideology, the tray reveals hybridity as a strategy of openness: a fluid negotiation of forms that refuses closure. It is precisely this instability—its refusal of a single *Weltanschauung*—that exposes the limits of Panofsky's iconology.

### The “textbook case”

The Eupheros stele is a Classical Attic funerary relief recovered in 1964 from a child's burial in the Kerameikos, south of the Sacred Way (Stroszeck 2002: 468; Schlörb-Vierneisel 1964: 88). The grave lay about two metres below the later Hellenistic surface; the stele was found face-down above the southwest corner of the tomb, suggesting deliberate removal and careful deposition rather than casual destruction. The inhumation, placed in a wooden coffin, was accompanied by a compact but carefully chosen assemblage: six white-ground lekythoi (one of exceptional quality), a red-figure oinochoe, a kantharos, a salt-dish, terracotta toys (including a small ape), two strigils, two styli, an astragal, and writing implements (Stroszeck 2002: 468–69; Schlörb-Vierneisel 1964: 99–101). These goods situate the burial firmly within the socialised funerary program of a well-to-do Athenian child, combining athletic, educational, and domestic registers of commemoration.

The monument itself is a mid-fifth-century gabled relief showing the youth Eupheros standing draped in a mantle and holding a strigil beneath a pediment with palmette ornament. The architrave bears the neatly cut single name “Eupheros,” without patronymic, providing the sole on-monument identification of the deceased (Schlörb-Vierneisel 1964: 94, 102–3; Stroszeck 2002: 469, 474).

Conservation notes and UV photography revealed traces of a thick blue painted ground with additional pigments, consistent with the canonical three-part polychrome schemes of Attic gabled stelai (Schlörb-Vierneisel 1964: 88; Stroszeck 2002: 469, 473). Stylistic parallels with the Parthenon frieze situate the relief in the Parthenon-period milieu (c. 430 BCE), though scholars have debated whether the mason was a local Attic craftsman or trained in Boeotia (Schlörb-Vierneisel 1964: 102–4).

Because inscription, pigment, figural type, and grave goods all survive in situ, the Eupheros monument offers a remarkably complete conjunction of epigraphic, pictorial, and archaeological evidence. For precisely this reason, it has often been treated as a “textbook case” for Panofskian iconology. At the pre-iconographical level, we can describe a mantle-draped youth with a strigil, framed by a gabled pediment and named “Eupheros,” set above a child’s inhumation furnished with vessels, toys, and grooming implements. At the iconographical stage, these elements resolve into conventional motifs of Attic funerary art: the strigil and athletic kit index gymnastic culture, the styli and writing implements evoke *paideia*, the *lekythoi* function as ritual tokens, and the inscription provides the dispositive identifier. At the iconological level, the ensemble synthesises into a coherent civic identity — an Athenian youth formed by elite domestic conditions, athletic training, and literacy — commemorated in a public place of remembrance.

Methodologically, the Eupheros stele appears to exemplify Panofsky’s vision: inscription, pigment, grave goods, and iconographic motifs align into a coherent synthesis of Athenian *paideia*, athletic cultivation, and civic commemoration. It seems to be precisely the kind of monument his method was designed for — one where material, iconographic, and archaeological



*Figure 2. Funerary stele of Eupheros. Kerameikos Museum, inv. no. I 3876, Athens. Mid-5th century BCE. After Stroszeck 2002: 471.*



evidence converge to recover cultural meaning. But coherence on paper is not the same as stability in practice. Once we consider not only how different audiences encountered the monument, but also the polyvalence of its symbols and the performative force of its display, the neat mapping from motif to single cultural meaning begins to fracture.

The stele constructs an idealised Eupheros, projecting civicised youth over the biological remains of a child (Schlörb-Vierneisel 1964: 90; Stroszeck 2002: 468). This rhetorical strategy asserted polis values while veiling personal grief. Meaning, therefore, lay less in transparent biography than in rhetorical projection: an idealised Eupheros embodying civicised youth, which invited viewers to grieve, admire, and reflect on Athenian values (Berger 1972: 7–10; Mitchell 1986: 1–4, 44–68, 151–59; Mitchell 2005: 11, 28–35, 46–48; Freedberg 1989: 1–26; Bredekamp 2018: xi, 29–35, 160–90, 283). The monument thus reveals more about Athens’ ideals of youth than about Eupheros himself.

Second, the individual motifs themselves were never univocal. The strigil could index gymnastic culture for some viewers, but for others it might evoke erotic grooming, ritual purification, or metaphors of cleansing and rebirth. White-ground lekythoi functioned simultaneously as funerary tokens, canvases for mythic imagery, and objects of visual display. Meaning, therefore, varied according to social position, gender, memory, or personal association. A metic or slave, for example, might not read Eupheros as an embodiment of civic virtue but as a lost child; a grieving parent might focus on the toys, not the gymnasium. Panofsky’s assumption of a culturally literate, homogeneous viewer overlooks this variability.

Panofsky’s account also risks reifying Athens as a closed, homogeneous system. Even within Attica, reception was plural, and in multi-ethnic contact zones such as Samos the same imagery circulated among Greeks, Persians, and Egyptians, underscoring that poleis were never as ideologically sealed as Panofsky’s model presumes. Indeed, the very framing of Eupheros as a “textbook case” of civic ideology reflects not only the monument itself but also the historiography of iconology: its role as a didactic example may tell us as much about modern interpretive traditions as about Athenian funerary practice.

Third, the stele’s original setting amplified its performative and affective force in ways iconology cannot capture. Erected along a trafficable route in the Kerameikos, vividly painted and life-sized, the bright colour fields heightened its impact, soliciting attention in ways that monochrome stone

cannot convey today. The monument worked upon passersby, eliciting grief, admiration, and civic reflection. As Freedberg (Freedberg 1989: 1–26) and Bredekamp (Bredekamp 2018: xi, 29–35, 160–90, 283) argue, images act: they project affect, solicit bodily responses, and inscribe the deceased into communal memory. The stele was not only a sign-system but an active participant in Athenian civic and familial self-fashioning. This performative agency is drastically diminished in a museum vitrine, where the monument becomes an aesthetic specimen rather than a site of mourning and public pedagogy.

What appears at first as ideological coherence is, in fact, structured ambiguity. The stele mediates between public memory and private grief, between the codified signs of civic *paideia* and the irreducible pathos of a child's death. Idealisation here produces a meaning that is both stabilising and unstable: it asserts social values while leaving room for plural, personal receptions. Panofsky illuminates what Eupheros represents but not what it does. His method highlights symbolic structure but neglects reception, affect, and performative agency. The stele shows that even in Classical Athens — the most “favourable” context for iconology — cultural stability was actively constructed, not simply recovered.

### Constructed stability

Placed side by side, the two monuments illuminate different stress points in Panofsky's framework. The Eupheros monument seems almost tailor-made for iconology: relief, inscription, pigments, and grave goods align and can be synthesised into a coherent civic narrative about *paideia*, virtue, and commemorative practice (Schlörb-Vierneisel 1964; Stroszeck 2002; Margariti 2019). As seen already with the Gandhāran tray, hybridity destabilises Panofsky's search for intrinsic meaning. Its forms and functions were polyvalent, resisting reduction to a single symbolic code (Francfort 1979; Pons 2011; Falk 2010).

Yet the contrast is not as simple as dividing “coherent Athens” from “hybrid Gandhāra.” Even in the supposedly ideal case, the Eupheros stele is less a transparent reflection of civic ideology than a rhetorical construct aimed at plural audiences. Its motifs—the strigil, the *lekkythoi*, the toys—were multivalent, read differently across gender, status, and personal memory. Its vivid colour and monumental scale worked performatively upon passersby, soliciting attention and emotion, while its idealising depiction of a youth overlays the biological reality of a child's body and the private



grief of a family. Gandhāra makes the limits of iconology explicit, but Athens reveals that the same instabilities were already present, if less immediately visible.

What these cases expose is not the futility of Panofsky's model but the fragility of its central presupposition: that recurrent motifs can be reliably synthesised into a unitary *Weltanschauung*. Three correctives emerge. First, meanings are produced through plural literacies, not a single shared code. The same object may index citizen ideology, mercantile prestige, or ritual efficacy depending on who views or handles it (Berger 1972; Mitchell 1986). Second, images act as well as signify: they persuade, console, and enchant in ways that are historically consequential (Freedberg 1989; Bredekamp 2018). Third, objects have careers. A static reading obscures the fact that artefacts accumulate and shed meanings as they circulate through different contexts of use and re-use, a dynamic well captured by Kopytoff's notion of object biography (Kopytoff 1986). When these perspectives are added, "intrinsic meaning" becomes less a universal truth than a best-fit synthesis valid for particular audiences, sites, and phases in an object's life.

The comparative lens sharpens this point. In Gandhāra, hybridity and polyvalence are not flaws but deliberate strategies of openness: composite sea-monsters, ambiguous riders, and schematic fillers invite multiple recognitions and thus widen social reach (Pons 2011; Francfort 1979). In Athens, the Eupheros stele appears to instantiate civic coherence, but closer analysis shows that such coherence was itself a rhetorical achievement of funerary display. Its apparent stability derives not from any intrinsic essence but from the conventions of genre, the choreography of display, and the institutions of civic commemoration that temporarily narrowed interpretive possibilities. Both cases, therefore, suggest that cultural stability is not something that iconology uncovers but something that societies actively construct.

For this reason, the way forward is not to discard Panofsky's ladder but to reframe it as an "iconology-plus." Description, identification, and synthesis remain valuable steps, especially pedagogically, but they must be embedded within approaches attentive to object biographies, audience variability, and the performative agency of images. Intrinsic meaning, in this light, is less a universal core to be uncovered than a contingent synthesis, valid only for specific audiences, contexts, and moments of use.

In practical terms, an iconology-plus approach would follow three successive steps after Panofsky's descriptive stages. First, it would trace the object's material and social biography, mapping its

production, circulation, and recontextualisation over time. Second, it would examine audience variability, reconstructing how different viewers or users might have engaged with various layers of meaning. Third, it would analyse the performative and affective dimensions of the image—how its material presence, scale, or sensory qualities elicited responses in specific settings.

Collectively, these steps transform iconology from a search for intrinsic meaning into a dynamic analysis of how meaning is created, enacted, and transformed.

## Conclusion

This study has revisited Panofsky's iconology by testing it against two sharply contrasting artefacts: a Gandhāran toilet tray and the Eupheros funerary stele. The comparison demonstrates both the continuing value and the inherent limits of the tripartite model. In Gandhāra, hybridity, polyvalence, and shifting contexts of use render the search for an "intrinsic meaning" untenable; in Athens, the apparent coherence of civic symbolism unravels once reception, affect, and performativity are brought to the fore. What appears stable under Panofsky's schema thus emerges as a rhetorical construction rather than a cultural essence.

Placed side by side, the two cases reveal that Panofsky's framework falters not only where hybridity makes instability explicit but also in contexts traditionally regarded as coherent. Iconology remains powerful as a heuristic scaffold, yet its promise of recovering a unitary worldview rests on fragile foundations. Stability arises less from intrinsic meaning than from social practices of display, reception, and commemoration.

Reframed as an "iconology-plus," Panofsky's method can retain its descriptive and analytical discipline while opening itself to the contingencies of object biography, audience, and affect. Rather than seeking universal meanings, it invites us to trace how artworks negotiate coherence amid diversity, how they act upon viewers, and how they construct—rather than merely reflect—cultural worlds. Panofsky's framework remains foundational, but its relevance depends on recognising the very instability it sought to master: cultural coherence is always achieved rather than given, and ambiguity often proves the most potent strategy images possess.



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