

STILLS:
Poetic reflections on racisms in Denmark's
kindergarten

Naja Dyrendom Graugaard*

Introduction

The writings presented here are seven poetic reflections on my personal experiences of being a mother, raising a mixed family in present-day Denmark.

Becoming a mother has revealed to me that practices of cultural appropriation, blackfacing, redfacing, and stereotyping are disturbingly common in Denmark's 'kindergarten'. (By kindergarten, I refer to all those 'gardens' which comprise the places in which children spent their days playing, learning, growing, and unfolding). Generally, these practices seem to be left unquestioned and undebated, under guises of innocence and benignity. In the face of challenge, they are defended – often heartedly, and sometimes fierce-fully. In my experience, these practices have become so naturalized that it is difficult to direct any criticism without being displaced as “hyper-sensitive”, “overreacting” or “quarrelsome”. Perhaps poetic writings provide a different way of conversation. While I (humbly) hope to inspire more dialogues about the consumption and reproduction of racisms in Denmark's kindergarten, my intention is primarily to offer a few close-ups about how children of colour are affected by such in very minute, every-day-life and often subtle ways. And how it affects our lives and peace at heart, as their parents. These writings are meant as *Stills* that also expose the in-situ complexity, vulnerability, and uncertainty that accompanies resisting racialized regimes of representation. At large, they are (counter)stories that challenge the common notion that the current racializing practices in Denmark's kindergarten are benign and innocent.

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These *Stills* do not unearth from an easy birth. The topic invites for heartache. Unnerving questions surface from the depths: What are the consequences of these experiences? For my daughter? For my son? In this light, the *Stills* are essentially written for my children, *Atsa* and *Aapi*. Together, we are a Canadian-Danish-Inuit-Anishinaabe family. I cannot know or predict how my children's individual mixed-multi-racial experiences will unravel, what challenges they may encounter, whether they will identify with their ancestries. Yet, I am quite certain that being of mixed heritages will have some place and impact in their lives. So, this is an invitation for more conversations and more voices on the consequences of Kindergarten racisms. To my daughter *Atsa*, to my son *Aapi*, and to all kids who are learning to be comfortable in their own skin.

STILLS can be read by as pieces on their own or together, and/or listened to through the attached audio-files. I have gathered a marvelous group of readers who have been kind to record readings of my *Stills*, adding their voice and touch. Each reader relates to *Stills* in their own way, through their own experiences as individuals in and of families of colour, mixed or different-than-Danish cultural backgrounds. Please find their biographies in the end of the document.

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STILL 1: Frozen

“Who do you want to be, Anaana [*mum*]?”

You want to play with me and point to a picture of Elsa and Anna on your rubber ball. I would puncture that ball if I didn't know how much you liked it

none of them, I think to myself

“mmmh... Anna,” I say

at least Anna has something closer to brown hair. Or is it red? Or is it in fact just strawberry blond?

Well I'll take that over her wide-eyed, too-skinny-to-have-intestines, greyish white-haired sister.

Elsa. White as an eraser.

“Good. I want to be Elsa,” you say. “Because she is *light*.”

Fuck. TV shows. My brain is boiling, heart sore. What do I say to my five-year-old? How do we talk about this?

I tell you, you are beautiful. I love your dark hair, your brown skin.

“You like brown, right Anaana?” you say. “And I am Elsa because I like light”

a friend praised Frozen the other day. For once, the protagonist is not a man or a boy. Not a hero, a *heroine*. Someone for our girls to mirror themselves in, he exclaimed. Girl Power!

Well, we try to make something of all this girl power, but we don't really know how to play this game. Never seen the film. At least you've learned that you, as Elsa, can throw witchlike hands at me, yell “Freeze!” and make everything frozen.

“No, you can't move before I've unfrozen you, Anaana!” you yell

and twist and twirl around on the floor, singing

“let it go, let it go”

I am left frozen in an awkward position in the middle of the floor. Legs crossed and hands paused in the air. I must look like someone who can't hold it. Celebrating diversity arrested. Global privileging of white. Trickled down into our children's minds.

I am pathetic and sulky

all I can think of is a cup of strong black coffee

at night, I take refuge in the words by bell hooks

outraged about Frozen:

On the one hand, we really want the little ones to love themselves
while we still find it okay to feed black children and children of colour this white supremacist sense
of what is beautiful

she says

in order to decolonize and live fully anti-racist

there are specific actions that are required of you in your daily life.

I fall asleep and dream that I go

puncture that ball.

STILL 2: Pocahontas

It is not the first time this happens.

“How are you, Pocahontas?”

our neighbour is smiling at you

we are at a community dinner

and I am speechless

you look up at him like a question mark

for a second

and then scoot over to a more interesting place in the room

I thank the universe for your age

one-and-a-half

and you don't know who Pocahontas is yet

or really was.

Matoaka, Flower between two streams,

of Pamunkey and Mattaponi ancestry

daughter of Powhatan Chief Wahunsenaca

and married to Kocoum as a young woman

according to Mattaponi oral history

Matoaka suffered a horrid destiny

kidnapped by the English

raped, re-married and possibly killed

today globally immortalized in Disney images

romanticized, exoticized, sexualized, racialized

by the strokes of (m)a(ny) hand(s)

your people diminished to “savages”

the colonial history of Turtle Island distorted and white-washed

and gracefully veiled by the threats of *Colours of the Wind*.

“Are you a little Pocahontas?”

our neighbor seeks your attention again, clinging on to his cartoons

I am a coward and pretend like I don't hear

too embarrassed to embarrass
my mother doesn't pretend not to hear,

“did you call her Pocahontas? Don't call her that.”

“What?”

“I ask you not to call her Pocahontas”.

My mother has been called too many names
in her lifetime to allow anyone doing the same to her granddaughter
bastard mongrel fridge-Indian fucking eskimo

our neighbour has given up his Pocahontas, for now,
and while you sleep at night
I am on the floor practicing the strength of my mother
firing words and sentences like a ninja
working on an arsenal of anti-racist techniques
building muscle to courage up.

No-one shall call you Disney's Pocahontas again
without experiencing the resistance of your mother
and foremothers

STILL 3: The Doll's Test

To everyone's great joy, Little Brother likes to play with dolls
he loves kissing and hugging Big Sister's doll, going for a walk in the stroller
and tuck Doll under the blankets when she gets tired.

Soon Doll becomes so popular in our home that the two of you start fighting over her and I tell my
parents that a new doll for Little Brother would make a perfect christmas gift

my parents run all over town to find
a brown doll.

A doll with brown skin? Dark hair, brown eyes? they ask in every toy store.

But either they are sold out (which I doubt is actually the case)

or no brown dolls have ever set foot in their stores (which I think is probably the case).

I scavenge around the thrift shops but with no better luck.

In the christmas consumption madness, my parents settle on a light-skinned, blue-eyed doll, with
drawn eyelashes and limbs unusually flappy, her body covered in pink flannel fabric
pretty repulsive to my mothering eye

but you both love her from the moment you set eyes on her

you love her, adore her, admire her, so much

that you, Big Sister – with the cunning skills of a big sister – immediately trade your beloved brown
baby, who has followed you so faithfully on all your travels, for your brother's new pale marshmallow
doll

and soon the two of you start fighting over the new white doll

and our brown baby is left alone in the stroller

unwanted

rejected

forgotten

my heart is aching and my hands sweaty. I doubt my guts I try to explain I try to avoid. Perhaps it is
not really a problem. Perhaps the pink flannel makes the difference. A neighbour told me yesterday
that her girls always wanted to have what they didn't have, be what they weren't. I wonder if they
came home from kindergarten, age 4, exclaiming they wanted a different skin colour. Like Big Sister
did the other day. Perhaps it is because of my blue eyes and blond hair. Perhaps it is because Little
Brother is white as a polar bear. Could very well be.

I watch Hassan Preisler's *The Danish Doll Test* and I cry. 41 Danish children of colour, between the ages of 4 and 8 years, are asked to choose between two dolls that are identical except that one is white, the other brown. 35 of the children prefer the white doll. "Because she is nicer!" "She is so cute!" "And beautiful".

I ask you why
but you'd rather play
in my best moments, I try to bring Doll back into the warmth
"Look! Baby doll wants to go for a walk!"
"Oh sweet Doll. Isn't she cute?"
"I think baby is hungry. Should we give the babies some food?"

but you ignore me, fixated on new Marshmallow Doll
and my heart breaks
breaks breaks
the Doll Test has moved home with us
and I am pissing my pants.

STILL 4: It is not nice to call each other names, right mama?

In a kindergarten on Zealand, Denmark

they have named one of their playgroups: The Eskimos

alongside other playgroup names like

The Snow Owls, The Killer Whales, The Seals, The Igloo

Full stop.

it could just as well have been

The Whities alongside The Cows, The Goats, The Pigs, and The Farm

Full stop.

or The Pakis alongside The Camels, The Donkeys, and The Desert Tent

Full stop.

or The Negroes alongside The Lions, The Elephants, The Monkeys and The Clay Hut

Full stop.

institutionalized and all

our kids' first experience

with the education system

it wouldn't surprise me.

But unless

you just woke up in year 2017

after a long hibernation in an undiscovered time machine invention

that made you sleep for a few hundred years

and you didn't know that

we have resisted the Eskimo for a long time

alongside other derogatory ways of naming peoples

and succeeded to have our wish acknowledged

to at the least be called human

Inuit

Full stop.

it can no longer be an excuse

that you just didn't know

and therefore decided to put an offensive dehumanizing label on the door

to your kindergarten playgroup

Full stop.

STILL 5: Chief Sitting Bull

there is a poster on the walls of your daycare
I look closer and to my surprise
it is Chief Sitting Bull staring back at me
captured in a print of an old photo
his forehead is covered by the title

Indian Day – coming up

his face with the subtext

On Thursday the great Chief will come to visit us
to dance and sing Indian songs in the tipi around the fire.
As a special feature, all children will
dress up in feathers and face paint
to welcome Chief Sitting Bull

my intestines seem to shrink as
I imagine the daycare's music teacher
dressed in a remarkable headdress of coloured plastic feathers
redfacing her way through the tipi door
to introduce the children to the first world practice of Othering

my stomach shriveled to a dried raisin as
I imagine you dressed up in a hypocritical Indian costume
artificial feathers in your dark hair, scuffed paint on your brown cheeks
unknowingly partaking in the cultural appropriation of your own heritage
seeming to learn about your ancestry through the stereotypes of Danish children's songs
about the Indian
the weight of parenthood is pressing against my temples

heart racing like reindeer on the tundra
I go to the Head of Daycare's office
to explain my worries about Indian Day

it proceeds with bla bla and bla
but ends with a

“so you are saying that Indians are actually people living today?
And portraying them in certain ways can be offensive?
Word taken. I will take it up with my boss
but I can’t cancel the event
now that it’s on the poster and everything
...and you should probably get used to it
because these Indian images are everywhere.
What will you do when she starts school?”

I keep you at home on Indian Day
Atsa Louise Nagweyaabkwe
and I decide that on every Indian Day we encounter in the future
we will celebrate the courage of freedom fighters like Lakota warrior, Sitting Bull
Martin Luther King Gabriel Dumont Annie Mae Aquash Paula Gunn Allen Berta Caceres
Winona LaDuke Sheila Watt-Cloutier Tanya Tagaq Lido Pimienta and all the new voices
refusing the pipelines of privileging
racialized regimes of representation
in place
practicing our own sing song dance

STILL 6: Ten Indian Kids

1 little, 2 little, 3 little Indians, 4 little, 5 little, 6 little Indians

7 little, 8 little, 9 little Indians. Ten little Indian kids

They jumped in the boat and the boat tipped over

10 little Indian children

They swam and they swam and they got to the shore

10 little Indian children

There stood Big Bang and welcomed them

He kissed them and hugged them and put them on the pillow

10 little Indian children...

the tunes are seeping out from the playroom

I haven't been able to delete it from the app

with Danish children's songs on your tablet

they still sing it in your daycares and kindergartens

who haven't yet reflected on

the history of violence against the Indigenous peoples of North America

Big Bang gunshots

Big Bang colonial politicians

Big Bang pastors and nuns

who hugged and kissed and put kids on the pillow

committing unforgiving crimes of physical and sexual abuse

against native children

imprisoned in residential schools

Big Bang cultural lobotomy

institutionalized to wipe out some savage, sever some roots, cut off some mother tongues

this is also y/our history

Your paternal grandfather, a residential school survivor

intergenerational ghosts, showing their faces in our mirrors at home

served up in a Danish children's song

that claims its own innocence

its Danish fans pointing fingers at the "sensitivity" of a mother

perhaps over-reacting a little, perhaps a little too quarrelsome, perhaps with a little too little (Danish)

humour

"it's not meant like that; the kids don't get it anyways; it's not as bad as you think"

they say
and if their arguments are not convincing enough
they pull out the ultimate striking blow
that stiffens stifles strangles the critique entirely
dumping it as obsessiveness with “political correctness”
- one of the greatest Danish crimes and swearwords of the decade.
Kids left behind with their tablets
and racist children’s songs.
Long live abstractions!

STILL 7: Cultural Awareness Event

it is the annual Spring Party in your kindergarten
you have looked forward to this day
to perform with your friends on stage
to show your grandparents from Canada the playgrounds
everything is lined up, organized, prepared
we get out the door on the late side of things

Little Brother pooped just in time
last-minute diaper change, rubber boots, umbrellas, rain gear, in the car and go!
I take you straight to the indoor stage
leaving behind Little Brother, Daddy and Grannies at the outdoor activities
while you get ready for the performance, backstage.
“We’ll check out the playgrounds afterwards”, I assure you
before I go to take a seat in the front
I glance at the tickets we purchased at the door.
Spring Party – A Trip Around the World
they really did it up this year

“They set up an Africa-land and an America-land outside”, my partner whispers in my ear
taking a seat beside me
I am not sure what he is talking about
“Some of the teachers dressed up in blackface, with black baby dolls tied to their back. They’ve got
bongo music playing, dancing around all hunched over, handing out bread-on-a-stick.”
I can see how much he hates to tell me this
I cringe. The kids come out on stage. I swallow something. Mouth dry as sand paper. Really?
“They also have a tipi and some ‘Indians’”.
Oh shoot. So, this is the trip around the world.

Stunned. Blank. Blank. I look at my parents-in-law in the back. I wish we hadn’t invited them.
Embarrassed.
Focus. Focus. On stage. Where are you? I find your eyes. You are smiling.
Proud.

I wave and find a smile for you. My daughter. The only brown girl on stage among the blond heads and blue eyes. My four-year-old Anishinaabe-Inuk-Danish girl. How do I protect you from the hurt of stereotypes? Sudden deep tiredness overwhelms me.

“Let’s just go straight home after the performance. Perhaps she doesn’t have to see this,” I whisper we clap, as the kids leave the stage. Encore! We praise the Itsy Bitsy Spider and Cat Song

I tell you that we have a party waiting for us at home. Which we luckily do. Family. And rush out the door.

In our escape attempt, we run into one of your favourite teachers. Dressed up in full buckskin costume with dangly flounces, face paint, head-band full of ridiculous feathers.

I don’t know what to do. You point at him, laughing.

“Anaana [*mum*], look! He looks funny!”

I am grateful for your good humour and relax a bit more. You do not know that he is, actually, attempting to portray your people, relatives, heritage

with stereotypes forged in and through the history of
slavery colonialism imperialism
still

thriving cultivated sold consumed

the childish passive Eskimo

the peaceful pipe smoking Indian

frequently used for school themes when in lack of some
cultural awareness

you don’t know, not yet

and we go home to be with family

where I apologize to my in-laws for the lack of sensitivity in Danish kindergartens. They tell me not to be sorry. It was like this in Canada when they grew up
sure, sixty years ago

we eat rye bread and herring and I buy myself some time
to figure out what the fuck I am going to do about it

Biographies of readers

Ingrid Magnifique Baraka was nine-years old when she came to Denmark in 1998, as a refugee, with her parents and brother. As the only African family in her new hometown, she then realized that she was black and all her friends white. Today, Ingrid is co-host of “A Seat At The Table”, a Danish podcast series that focus on representation and diversity in media in Denmark and abroad. Ingrid reads *Still 1: Frozen*.

Helle Dyrendom Sørensen has grown up in a Greenlandic Inuit/Danish family in Denmark. She holds a Master in counselling and works at Holstebro Sprogcenter, providing council service for refugees and immigrants. Helle is also a mother and *ningiju* (grandmother). Here, she reads *Still 2: Pocahontas*.

Anne-Kathrine Perez Rüz is mother in a bi-cultural family. She lives in Denmark with her two children and husband from Ecuador. Anne-Kathrine is a practicing doula and volunteer breastfeeding counselor. She is currently undertaking a Masters in Culture, Communication and Globalization (Aalborg University), specializing in Gender studies. Anne-Kathrine reads *Still 3: The Doll's Test*.

Paarnaq Rosing Jakobsen is of Greenlandic Inuit background, having grown up in Nuuk. From 2011-2017 Paarnaq lived in Denmark, where she completed a Master's degree in Psychology (Århus University). Her studies focused on identity, trauma and coping strategies. Today, she works in Nuuk as a psychologist. Paarnaq reads *Still 4: It is not right to call each other names, right mama?*

Moussa Maanaki was 5 years old when he came to Denmark with his family, as refugees from Lebanon. Today, he works at Holstebro Sprogcenter, teaching Danish as a second-language to refugees and immigrants. Moussa is also a columnist at the local newspaper. Moussa reads *Still 5: Chief Sitting Bull*.

Parnuna Egede is of Greenlandic Inuit and Swedish background and has grown up in Nuuk, Greenland. Today she lives in Denmark with her fiancé and son. She is undertaking a Ph.D. in environmental planning (Aalborg University/Ilisimatusarfik). Parnuna has previously worked for the Inuit Circumpolar Council (Greenland), focusing on indigenous peoples' rights and environmental policy. Parnuna reads *Still 6: Ten Indian Kids*.

Naja Dyrendom Graugaard reads *Still 7: Cultural Awareness Event*.