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## **On re-dressing remote places**

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# On Re-Dressing Remote Places: Imaginaries at the Margins

*Carina Ren*

## AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

In March 2017, I received an unexpected email in my inbox. It was an invitation to a meeting about destination development. As a tourism researcher, this was not unusual, but the location where this development was to take place was more so: the newly abandoned Danish naval base of Grønnedal situated in the Southern parts of Greenland. The most surprising thing about it all was the sender: the Danish Ministry of Defence. In the invitation, it stated:

The Ministry of Defence is in the process of planning the re-establishment of Grønnedal, and it is expected that the Armed Forces will only use a certain part of the facilities in the area. There will thus be the possibility that the area and its facilities will also be used by others. One option could be to include Grønnedal as a support point for tourism/destination development in Greenland. (my translation)

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Needless to say, my curiosity was awakened, and I decided to accept the invitation.

The meeting that followed soon after at the Ministry of Defence in Copenhagen was attended by a very broad range of representatives from Danish and Greenlandic institutions and companies: Aalborg harbour (from where all shipping to and from Greenland was connected at the time), Aalborg University, Air Greenland, the national tourism organisation of Visit Greenland, the Greenlandic Ministry of Business, Labour market, Commerce and Energy, the Municipality of Sermersooq, where Grønnedal is located, the Danish Ministries of Trade and Defence, the Arctic Command (which had recently moved to Nuuk from Grønnedal) and the property manager of the Defence Ministry. All in all, an unusual gathering for a discussion of tourism development.

Opening the meeting, representatives from the Ministry of Defence introduced the Danish plans for reopening Grønnedal after a brief period where the base had been shut down. Now, the Danish Government had imposed a reopening and a requirement to keep the naval base manned (or to “keep the thermostat on 5 degrees”, as it was described). This had created an opportunity (or need) to think about new, alternative uses of the physical structures and infrastructure, which included houses, a small harbour, fuel storage and a heliport. This was where tourism had come up as a novel idea with some potential, considering the lack of such facilities in the area. For this reason, developing Grønnedal as a tourist resort could seem obvious—and sorely needed—in a local setting.

In the discussions that followed, different views on the possibilities and potentials of Grønnedal and its surroundings were voiced. The Danish ministries were eager to ‘do something’, stressing how the recent activities to close the base had resulted in buildings left dilapidated or otherwise exposed. How long would there be left to act on the possibility to develop? Acting quickly seemed to be an issue here. The Greenlandic ministries however pointed in another direction, namely unresolved issues of soil pollution and waste disposal after many years of running the base—a theme that had also previously been addressed in the media (Sørensen 2015). Here, a slowing down of the process was considered crucial. A third position was taken by the municipal authority, expressing concerns about the possible rising public costs and responsibilities connected to an eventual reopening. More facts were needed before proceeding.

The only time during the five-hour meeting where attendees seemed aligned was during the exercise of mapping natural and cultural resources

present in the lush Arsuk fjord of South Greenland, where Grønnedal is located. While it started out with low expectations after an opening statement of one of the attendees that “there is absolutely nothing here”, people continuously kept coming up with things to do and see. After half an hour, trophy hunting, fishing, geology hikes and underwater diving in rare drip stone caves were some of the things that had been added to an impressive list of potential tourism products and experiences. However, as discussions diverted into talks of investments, time schedules, responsibilities and costs, affinity and excitement quickly vanished. After the day-long meeting and subsequent dinner, people went their separate ways. Over the following months, a few, smaller meetings were held between different parties mediated by the Ministry of Defence, but eventually the conversations died out.

What this story tells us is perhaps how apparent political inertia killed a project before it could ever take off. Or how timing, political flair, entrepreneurial drive and many other things are key to ‘getting things done’ in tourism (Jóhannesson 2012). Perhaps Grønnedal is simply too remote, too uninteresting, too abandoned for an investment of this size, for going out of the way? In this chapter, these questions are taken as a starting point to explore attempts to re-imagine Grønnedal as something more than a naval base located in a remote fjord in South Greenland and to ponder why to this day, nothing has come out of any of the many efforts—albeit filled with and fuelled by good faith—to re-dress Grønnedal.

The chapter uses the case of Grønnedal to explore and discuss *how remote places are re-dressed*. The aim is to situate and investigate the role not only of presence, but also of absences—what *is* absent, what *has become* absent or what *remains* absent—as crucial social, political and cultural phenomena in place-making. Looking at the ongoing reproduction of places such as Grønnedal as too difficult, too remote or too sensitive, the idea of *marginal imaginaries* suggests that perhaps the re-dressing of Grønnedal as a place for ‘something else’ perished under *a lack of love* (De Laet and Mol 2000)?

In the following, I unravel the story of absence and ‘presencing’ Grønnedal based on three propositions: Grønnedal as a tourism resort, as a refugee camp and as a place of mourning. Because although unusual, the above story from the Danish Ministry of Defence only reflects one out of many activities that took place to develop Grønnedal for tourism in the time after its reopening, as we shall soon see. The research on which this

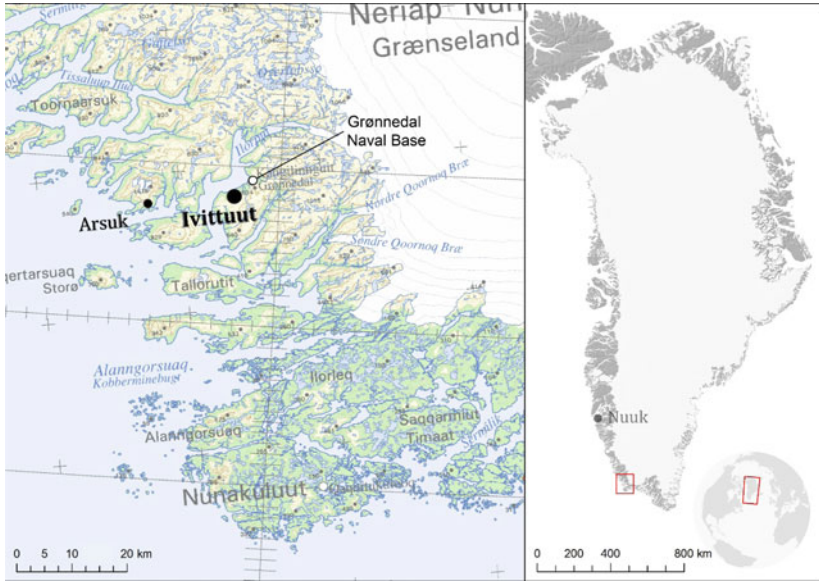
article is based consists of observations and notes from meetings related to tourism development in Grønnedal, on correspondence, conversations and interviews in 2017–2019 with various stakeholders interested in tourism development in Grønnedal, and on media sources and document studies predominantly of prospects and reports presented to the Greenlandic committee (Grønlandsudvalget) of the Danish Parliament (Folketinget).

By looking at how past, current and future landscapes are imagined, the chapter explores how a place and its landscapes, physical structures, past and neighbouring communities and cultural and natural heritage become subjects of remembrance, (re)discovery and contestation among different actors. The chapter shows how things, feelings and politics interfered with this ‘obvious’ idea and discusses ‘what it takes’ to re-dress marginal spaces.

### RE-DRESSING PLACE THROUGH ABSENCES AND PRESENCES

While being remote, uninteresting or abandoned might work as explanations to why Grønnedal to this day remains ‘closed for business’, other ways exist to narrate the story of Grønnedal after its closure in September 2014 and—following a shift in geopolitical interest in the Arctic—its reopening shortly after. One such way consists of seeing it as a (failed) attempts to ‘re-dressing’. The notion of re-dressing builds on the idea of *undressed places* first defined by Veijola et al. (2019) as places “left behind with only a little human life in it” (Veijola et al. 2019, 25), such as abandoned industrial facilities, decommissioned construction sites or settlements or mining towns in decay often found in what we may term as geographical margins or peripheries. Grønnedal in the Arsuk fjord is located in what once was Greenland’s prime tourism spot, South Greenland (Fig. 6.1). Today, the region is severely challenged by depopulation, degrowth, poor physical infrastructure and lack of connectivity. It is, we might argue, an undressed space.

Undressed places may be defined through metaphors of loss or lack, where people, resources, competences or dreams disappeared abruptly or slowly, along the way. Now, these abandoned places have been left behind, idling. Yet in many cases, people or institutions remain connected to a higher or lesser degree to these places, whether emotionally (current or former inhabitants or descendants), financially (investors, property



**Fig. 6.1** The location of Grønnedal Naval Base and neighbouring Ivittuut. Data: Arctic DEM; Grønlands Topografiske Kortværk; Natural Earth Data; QGrenland (Map by Michaël Virgil Bishop)

owners) or institutionally (local administrators, planners). In the case of Grønnedal, we see actors that wait around, dreaming and planning for ‘something more’ and how in that process, reversed attempts of re-dressing take place.

It is these processes of re-dressing, of dreaming and planning, that are explored in the following, where we turn to the relational place-making surrounding Grønnedal. What enables, or reversely disables, the re-dressing of places is the ability to orchestrate a certain ‘presencing’ (Bille et al. 2010) by way of balancing or ‘proportioning’ absences and presences. This entails bringing forth, bringing together and spatially distributing people, funding, infrastructure or importance as developers, politicians, tourism stakeholders, past residents and researchers attempt to conjure place-related resources to rethink and renegotiate the re-dressing of places.

## “KEEPING THE THERMOMETER AT FIVE”: THE CLOSING AND REOPENING OF GRØNNEDAL

How did the naval base become a centre of discussions around tourism development in the first place? Already in 2011, a decision was made as part of the 2010–2014 defence settlement to shut down the Greenland Command that was based in Grønnedal at the time. A few years later, in 2014, a report from the National Audit describes the ongoing activities that had now been initiated in connection to the closure of the Grønnedal naval base. The report describes how the decision was “based on a desire to streamline the structure of the North Atlantic Commands” (Rigsrevisionen 2014, 1, my translation<sup>1</sup>). The decision was seen as strategic and aimed to consider the expected development in and around Greenland and the Faroe Islands at the time. This meant, among other things, a relocation of the military marine station in Greenland from Grønnedal to capital Nuuk by the Armed Forces. The armed forces began to leave Grønnedal around 1 January 2012 and were, according to the report “expected to be finally vacated in 2017” (Rigsrevisionen 2014, 1).

The expected closure marked the end of a long Danish military presence in South Greenland, as the Greenland command was established in 1951 in Kangilinnuit at the bottom of the Arsuk fjord. The main purpose of the time was to protect shipments from Ivittuut, the nearby cryolite mine, and to provide support, repair work and supplies of ammunition and fuel among other things. However, as the mine was closed in 1987, the necessity and strategic position of the naval base slowly diminished. After the decision to close Grønnedal, the base and, along with it, its sizeable structures, were put up for sale for a few years after the Greenlandic government had turned it down as a gift. This reluctance to take over the base was explained by the costs that the clean-up after suspected major pollution problems would cause.

At this point in time, we see how resources, use-value and strategic importance vanish, leaving behind only the physical structures. The personnel are called home or elsewhere, the weekly sailing route is terminated. Hereby, regular passage to the nearby settlement of Arsuk, at the time inhabited by around 170 people, are also cut off, also hindering the onward connection to larger towns in the area and, further away, the

<sup>1</sup> This and many other quotes have been translated by the author from Danish into English.

airport of Narsarsuaq. The closing disrupts not only the naval base itself, but also the marginality of the settlement and broader region.

But somewhere far away, things begin to change and other things, things deemed significant, are moving closer as around 2016, shifts take place on the global geopolitical scene. The “expected development” mentioned in the 2014 national audit report in and around Greenland and the Faroe Islands did not play out as planned, as geopolitical circumstances in the Arctic and North-Atlantic radically changed in the years to follow. In its Arctic analysis that almost overlapped with the closing of Grønndal, the Danish Ministry of Defence (2016) described how “China’s desire for access to natural resources outside China has in recent years meant increased Chinese interest in the Arctic, including Greenland” (Forsvarsministeriet 2016, 29).

And this was true indeed. In early 2016, a Chinese company had expressed interest in purchasing Grønndal, supposedly to develop a resort, and from that point on, things began to move fast. The view of Chinese presence in South Greenland, a place known for its rich deposits of rare minerals, led the Danish Government, strongly encouraged by the United States of America, to reconsider the selling of the naval base. A brief press release was issued in December 2016 by the Ministry of Defence stating that a depot and training facilities were still needed in Grønndal. For that reason, it was decided to preserve the area with a few men on foot and in 2017; the base reopened only a year after it had been abandoned.

The decision was surprising and propelled Grønndal right into the centre of geopolitical interest. According to Søfart, a Danish online maritime media, “the Danish base in South Greenland has become a pawn in a grand political game between China and the United States. The prospect of a Chinese presence in southern Greenland is unacceptable for the Americans - and the Danish allies” (Søfart 2016, n.p.). For the Greenlandic Government however, the Danish intervention clashed with the country’s attempt to attract foreign investors to assist in developing and diversifying the economy and confirmed—once again—the unwillingness of the Danish government to involve Greenland in decision-making about central matters concerning the country. On the website of the Greenlandic Broadcasting company (KNR), then-minister of Independence, Nature, Environment and Agriculture Suka K. Frederiksen stated her dissatisfaction, but eventually, no official complaint was made.



Others found the decision downright incomprehensible. As argued by Christian Brøndum, editor of the media *Defencewatch*, the new Danish presence “made no sense” as to him, Grønnedal was only “a small pickle jar with a few men running around” (Fischer 2018, n.p.), reducing the re-dressing of the base to mere window-dressing? In an interview in 2023, foreign minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen recounts his past as Danish minister of state with reference to the last decade of Arctic security, which the authors describes in the following way: “As I remember we concluded, based on some rational considerations, that we still needed Grønnedal’ says Lars Løkke Rasmussen with a small laugh. He knows very well that it was a ruse to keep the Chinese out of Greenland. Not a rational military strategic decision” (Krog 2023). However, while a ruse, it was also an expensive one and on top of that a very unpopular decision in Greenland, displaying the lack of dialogue and involvement in the Danish/Greenlandic relationship. For this reason, the Ministry of Defence—as well as others—were working on new (tourism) plans for the base to mend the fact that a vast structure was ‘idling’ for no obvious reason and without any value in a picturesque South Greenlandic fjord.

### PROSPECTING GRØNNEDAL—FROM LIABILITY TO ASSET

The series of meetings instigated by the Danish Ministry of Defence was not the only initiative seeking to re-dress Grønnedal in the time between its closure and reopening. Two other propositions were officially put forward. The first was a feasibility study for a *Grønnedal Arctic Village and Resort* project published in 2018 and led by the architect Peter Barfoed, an outspoken critic of the original closing. After the reopening, Barfoed, who had lived on the base as a child, became a strong advocate of developing the place through tourism.

The first feasibility study was developed by Arsurk Fjord Real Estate and concluded that “The development of Grønnedal will provide both Danish Defense, Sermersooq Municipal, Naalakkersuisut [the Greenlandic Government] and private investors with a unique opportunity to do something good for Southern Greenland. Grønnedal is an attractive investment opportunity both from a business perspective and from a development impact perspective benefitting the local community and the region” (Barfoed 2018). The Arctic village study was complemented with media-directed activities, which created headlines such as “Architect: Grønnedal is forgotten when it comes to tourism” (Turnowsky 2018).

The study suggested that Grønnedal as a destination would be able to attract 4000 tourists a year, generating a yearly profit of 10 million Danish crowns and creating 40 jobs. These were, it was argued without further explanation or documentation, investments that could convert Grønnedal “from a liability to a valuable asset over a 10 year period” (Barfoed 2018).

A second initiative was the prospectus *The future of Grønnedal*, presented to the Greenland committee of the Danish Parliament in 2015 after the decision to shut the base, a decision which the prospect sought to challenge. The work was led by Kjeld Wetlesen, a retired computer engineer living part-time in Denmark, part-time in Thailand. He also had lived in Grønnedal in his childhood. In the project, he was assisted by the then chief of staff of Grønnedal, Jan Bøgsted. Like the feasibility study, the prospect offers a view of Grønnedal as a positive part of larger plans to develop the region and improve local connectivity (Wetlesen 2015). The authors make use of comparison to insert Grønnedal in a Northern context, first by contrasting Greenland’s tourism numbers to Iceland’s (much higher) numbers, hence suggesting an unfulfilled potential in the nearby South Greenland region (for more on Icelandic-Greenlandic comparisons in tourism, see Ren and Jóhannesson 2023).

Another comparison made to insert Grønnedal in a Nordic setting is coastal connectivity, as the authors suggest rethinking the Sarfaq Ittuk, a coastal ship sailing between the towns and settlements on the West coast of Greenland similar to the Norwegian Hurtigruten connecting 1400 km of the Norwegian west coast from Bergen to Kirkenes. The authors argue that Greenland should have a similar route that would run between Prins Christianssund and Ilulissat, an 1100 km stretch on the Greenlandic West coast. With ports of call in both Narsarsuaq and Grønnedal in South Greenland, this solution would not only reduce (high) travel costs for local inhabitants, the authors argued, but at the same time make the challenging and lengthy) travel a part of the experience.

By way of actual and prospective numbers (tourists, jobs, profit, travel costs), comparison (with Iceland, with Hurtigruten) and future scenarios, the *Grønnedal Arctic Village and Resort* project and *The future of Grønnedal* prospect attempt to re-dress Grønnedal as a place, a destination of high economic value, creating local jobs and improving local and national connectivity.

## TOO MANY FEELINGS? AFFECTIVE PLACES AND MEMORIES

Another activity seeking to intervene into the closing of Grønnedal is a *Keep Grønnedal open* campaign, started in 2013, raising signatures in support of the continued use of the naval base. The signature campaign, according to its website, was initiated “On behalf of a number of citizens in Denmark and Greenland, many with connections to Ivittuut and Grønnedal, in connection with work stays, or because you grew up or were born in the place, know the place from visits, or are simply a curious taxpayer” (Barfoed 2014, n.p.). The campaign, also presented in the Danish Parliament, highlights the benefits of reopening Grønnedal beyond the naval base by referring to the nearby settlement of Arsuk. Also, different types of costs connected to the potential closing of the base are foregrounded, for instance, by stating that “the decision of the military defense to move also entails other costs. As a consequence of the move, the nearby settlement of Arsuk has lost its helicopter route, as well as medical and dental services” (Barfoed 2014, n.p.).

Like the prospect, the campaign also makes use of comparisons to other places by referring to how Arsuk in the 1960s had been ‘Greenland’s Kuwait’ because of its great prosperity due to extensive cod and salmon fishing that has now disappeared. The campaign material envisaged that the closure of Grønnedal, whose buildings and facilities it claimed are among the best kept in Greenland, would lead to the depopulation of Arsuk. This, it is argued, would contribute to and further propel the centralisation of Greenlandic society with the consequence that “a long stretch of coast would lay bare” (Barfoed 2014, n.p.). As well as massive local impacts, this would influence the capital of Nuuk, where “rental properties are also in a situation where there is a major housing shortage” and where people are gathered in “housing silos” and are “as little integrated into the surrounding society as possible” (Barfoed 2014, n.p.).

In the conjuring of a future for Grønnedal, we see how vivid past comparisons (Kuwait), bleak future prospecting (bare coastal stretches, housing silos), ‘facts’ and emotions entangle. In a study of memories in the Arsuk fjord, Bjørst et al. (2022) explores cultural encounters between residents of the settlement of Arsuk, miners in Ivittuut and military personnel at the Grønnedal naval base. While today Ivittuut is a ghost town and Grønnedal dramatically reduced, Bjørst presents the confluence of three very different worlds in the Arsuk fjord: a Greenlandic fishing and

trapping settlement, a modern industrial complex, and a naval station with Danish marines. As she shows, life in the Arsuk fjord afforded cultural encounters and connected stories.

Today, the grounds for cultural encounters have changed due to the closing of the mine, the cuts in naval station personnel and the (related) drastic reduction of Arsuk's population. Yet, stories and memories of cultural encounters and relationships across Arsuk, Ivittuut and Grønnedal prevail, offering a historical view into the power relations connected to the industrialisation in Greenland. Bjørst's analysis of remnants in the landscape from past lives, combined with 'troubled stories', sets up alternatives to the one-sided narrative often presented about cultural encounters in the Arsuk fjord according to which all parties feel an attachment to the fjord. As she shows, sadness is embedded in many memories and stories in the landscape, in which grief and worries link closely to thoughts about the past and future of dwelling in the regions.

Feelings are also present in the discussions and reporting from the closing of the base from the viewpoint of representatives of the naval base. In an article for the Greenlandic Broadcasting network entitled "Captain on Grønnedal: Closing not without feelings", commander Michael Hjort, who served as head of the operating unit of the Arctic Command, stated that: "As we shut Grønnedal, we are also writing the last part of a significant chapter in the history book of our armed forces. And that section is also associated with many emotions, also for the many who have worked there" (Søndergaard 2014).

We also discern the contours of affect around the possible futures of the area in the 2013 campaign as it warns against the closing of the base, comparing it to the previous temporary closure of the Narsarsuaq airport in 1958 by the Danish state after it had been abandoned by the American army that same year: "In 1958, the Danish state decided to close down Narsarsuaq. And in 1959, the Danish state decided to reopen Narsarsuaq. This was due to Hans Hedtoft's shipwreck on 30 January 1959. Unfortunately, a Norwegian demolition contractor had already managed to demolish parts of [the airport], so some costly restoration was necessary. But it is expensive not to think about it. Then as now, the *storis* [Danish term describing very difficult sailing conditions caused by drift ice around the Southern tip of Greenland, literally 'big ice'] that caused the shipwreck in January 1959 is still there" (Barfoed 2014, n.p.).

In this passage, the authors point to the rushed closing of Narsarsuaq as an example of good money having gone to waste in the past. At the same time, they allude to a bleak future if Grønnedal was to close by referring to one of the most tragic disasters in Danish-Greenlandic shipping history, the sinking of the M/S Hans Hedtoft. Named the Danish Titanic, M/S Hans Hedtoft sank during its maiden voyage south of Cape Farewell, the southern tip of Greenland. All 95 passengers and crew perished. It is suggested how something similar *could happen again* today due to dangerous sailing conditions and that this would have even more catastrophic consequences should Grønnedal (and the Arctic command placed there) be shut down.

Kramvig and Avango (2021) have shown the strong discursive power associated with the right to judge what may count as ‘reason’ and what must be dismissed as ‘emotional’. To have the power to define *what counts* as facts as well as getting the facts *right* are essential parts of gaining control, of defining *what is*. In a Greenlandic context, Bjørst et al. (2022) explore similar discursive oppositions between facts and emotions in the support of and resistance against mining in South Greenland, which they see as a firmly established rhetorical configuration in conflicts concerning extractive industries. In the hegemonic discourse on mining and extraction, financial gain is equated with ‘facts’, while ‘softer’ values such as well-being and ecology are equated with ‘emotions’.

The decisions and effects of first closing and then reopening Grønnedal and ongoing attempts to re-dress it for other purposes unravels itself as emotional as place is imagined as affording more, different, impactful or valuable human activity, connectivity and liveability. While a clear distinction of emotions and facts might be discernible in the analysis of mining discourses in South Greenland, emotions do not ‘reside’ or attach themselves neatly to one party in the case of Grønnedal. Rather, emotions are distributed broadly across former residents, tourism planners, naval officers and signatories of the *Keep Grønnedal open* campaign.

## THE DETENTION CENTRE: AN UNEXPECTED IMAGINARY

The above shows a diverse range of activities and emotions put forward to convey and perform the importance, the value and the capacity of Grønnedal as a motor for tourism, job creation, local regeneration and improved regional connectivity. Amidst this, a new set of actors unexpectedly entered the stage seeing Grønnedal as a resource for a completely

new activity that of the *detention centre*. First proposed during a newspaper interview by MP Søren Espersen from the nationalist right-wing party Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti/DF) in 2015, the idea was to send asylum seekers and rejected refugees to Grønnedal. As he argued at the time, the naval base was highly useful and “could be put into use today” (Lilmoes 2015). As he continues, “Everything is ready. From a dental clinic, a library, classrooms and wonderful lodging. And then there is the exceptional nature, that all of us that have been there are crazy about” (Lilmoes 2015). It is interesting how Espersen describes facilities and the surrounding nature in a way similar to those prospecting Grønnedal as a tourist resort.

In the years that followed, discussions around Grønnedal's suitability as a detention centre continued in the Danish press and solidified further in 2021 as DF put forward a proposal in the Danish parliament to use the idling structures to house so-called unwanted migrants to Denmark (Kjærsgaard et al. 2021). During a debate at the first reading on 6 May 2021, head of DF Pia Kjærsgaard declared: “We wish, and we believe, that a Danish deportation centre in Greenland can be a success. Both for Denmark and for Greenland” (Kjærsgaard et al. 2021).

This new imaginary of Grønnedal as a place for a detention centre—emphasising just how marginal it was now considered by Danish politicians—was contested on multiple occasions by Greenlandic member to the Danish Parliament Aaja Chemnitz. In the television programme *Detektor* and in later interviews, she argued that no political parties in Greenland were interested in establishing a deportation centre in Grønnedal. According to Chemnitz, “The facilities are not there, because they have actually been neglected [...]. It is not a place to send deported asylum seekers” (Blach 2021, n.p.). In her argumentation, Chemnitz accentuates the poor quality of the building mass as well as the lack of facilities, and in the later press coverage, Grønnedal's suitability for habitation continues as a returning issue. In 2021, the Building Department of the Ministry of Defence was officially asked to report on the issue. In an answer to *Detektor*, the department stated that Grønnedal was composed of 60 buildings, such as a school and kindergarten, a large cafeteria and a service building with a gym and 36 hotel rooms. The department was not able to assess how many people would be able to move into the buildings and in an email to *Detektor*; it was specified that “50% of the buildings would be able to be used after cleaning and thorough ventilation and that an additional 25% would be able to be taken into use through

relatively little effort” (Blach 2021, n.p.). But as experts and the Greenlandic MP repeatedly stated, time was running out for Grønnedal as the harsh sub-Arctic weather is quick to degrade unheated and unmaintained structures.

In the debate between Greenlandic and Danish Folk Party MPs, Chemnitz argued that she was “not dismissive of Grønnedal being used for tourism” (Blach 2021, n.p.). Elaborating on this view, she continues: “Greenland did wish for Grønnedal to be used for something that was not an immigration centre. And then there were the Chinese who have shown interest in doing various activities, and they have been rejected by the [Danish] government. I think it’s interesting to look at. Could [Grønnedal] have a function in relation to tourism? However, there was no support for this from either the government or any of the other parties” (Blach 2021, n.p.).

### RE-DRESSING REMOTE SPACE: MESSMATES, POWER AND RE-IMAGINING THE ARCTIC IMAGINARY?

In the end, the idea of deporting asylum seekers and refugees to Grønnedal never materialised. To this day, in 2023, a new Danish government is still in the process of searching for other places outside Denmark and Europe as detention centres. The story told at the outset of this chapter bears witness to how Chemnitz’s claim of a Danish lack of interest in tourism might not be entirely true—the government *did want* and *did try* to look at tourism prospects in Grønnedal. But once again, absence is at the core of re-dressing Grønnedal: an absence of responsibility, interest and support but also of suitable buildings and infrastructure.

As we follow Grønnedal from the closure in 2014, through the ensuing interest from Chinese developers to the reopening as ‘logistical strong-point’ in 2016 and across the many dispersed attempts of re-dressing Grønnedal for tourism, local revitalisation, regional (re)connectivity and deportation, we see how gaps and absences prevail. According to Cheer et al. (2022), place-making in peripheral areas has become an increasingly critical research agenda in tourism geography. So what does this story about a (so far, seeming) ‘failure’ to develop tourism in the abandoned and dilapidated naval base in Greenland tell us about marginal imaginaries and about how remote places are reimagined and re-dressed through place-making?

In the first instance, it might be able to instruct us on how re-dressing places is *not a straightforward and purified activity*, often far from being only about ‘planning’, ‘development’ or in our case ‘tourism’, in a narrow, functionalist sense. The meeting in the Ministry of Defence, the reports, the concerns, the conjuring of absent or potential resources—resembling almost elegies to lost places, to lost opportunities—make us think of tourism development somewhat differently. In this case, it more seems like what Ren and Jóhannesson term an *overflowing activity*, seen as “an effect of and addition to a world ‘continually on the boil’ (Ingold 2008, 14), coming together thanks to – and reversely leaping into – many corners of the social, the natural and the more-than-human” (2018, 25). As the authors argue, a more inclusive tourism mapping brings forth the many actors that abound in assembling and holding together tourism, actors that “have to an extensive degree been labelled as ‘other’ to tourism as an industry: those which have been made invisible or absent and whose impacts, roles and stories have been left out of the models, metrics and accounts of tourism for far too long” (Ren and Jóhannesson 2018, 25).

Despite reports and presentations stipulating the opposite, the tourism development idea for Grønnedal did not prove to be a universal solution for its re-dressing. Attempts to re-dress an abandoned space became an occasion for actors to deliberate about the future as well as remembering, and grieving, the past of the naval base, as well as of the broader Arsuk fjord and of South Greenland. In that process, messmates gathered around common and diverse concerns and issues, not to offer “simple or quick solutions but [...] a common process of becoming-with” (Ren and Jóhannesson 2018, 35)—or in our case of non-becoming, of failure to re-dress. This re-dressing of Grønnedal according to set plans and prospects perhaps failed due to other absences during the first meeting in the ministry, in the project, prospectus and campaign, as well as in the Danish and Greenlandic press. Namely, those that were *missing* around the table.

The most obvious absence was that of local community representatives and elders of nearby Arsuk, but also previous Greenlandic residents of Grønnedal, local tourism operators or teachers and students from the guide school in South Greenland. While actors such as naval officers, politicians, previous Danish Grønnedal residents (often adult who had spent their childhood there in the 50s and 60s), municipal planners and clerks (and a Danish tourism researcher) emerged, the lack of local and regional representation was blatant. This points to another story, tucked



away between the lines, about how South Greenland has moved over the decades from being a prosperous locality to becoming marginal in the context of tourism, infrastructure and development.

This brings us to the second way in which this story on place-making at the margins may instruct us on *marginal imaginaries*. The Arctic is often portrayed as sublime, extraordinary and beyond comparison (Ryall et al. 2010). According to Abildgaard (2022), the Arctic became a literary trope following an increased influx of stories from explorers in the early nineteenth century. Arctic imagery became to represent “the Sublime, a greatness, which was both terrible and awe-inspiring, beyond imitation and measurement, and thus, unmappable” (p. 6). But Arctic realities may also be perceived and framed quite differently: as mundane, dreary and depleted as they lay back undressed and abandoned. In the case of Grønndal, the reopened naval base is not only stretched between continuously shifting perceptions of marginality and centrality in geopolitical and economic terms, but activities to develop it also draw on imaginaries of liminality and centrality, abandonment and potentiality.

In this process, Grønndal is perceived as being everything from ‘nothing of interest’ to a ‘bucketful of unique experiences’, as suggested during the first tourism meeting in the Ministry of Defence. Exploring the Grønndal activities as projects of valuation, the margin imaginaries of Grønndal feed into ongoing, larger discussions on the future of Greenland as entangled into geopolitical, climatic and economic events (Bjørst and Ren 2015). As we learn, nothing came of the many plans for Grønndal and to this day, there is no organised tourism or other development activities connected to the now reopened naval base of Grønndal. However, as Veijola et al. (2019) remind us: “just because the land is ‘undressed’, it does not mean it is without a destiny. Its clothes may be waiting in the wings” (p. 27).

This leads us to the last insight generated by this story, which is that re-dressing places is not an *innocent endeavour*. As with all place-making, tourism or destination development are taxing and troubling tasks of valuation, ordering and drawing boundaries. Despite powerful actors—politicians, national institutions, well-educated elites—none of the attempts at re-dressing came into existence. The plans to turn Grønndal into an Arctic village and resort, or into a deportation centre, never materialised but withered away as attempts failed “to marshal a community around it” (De Laet and Mol 2000, 245). The Grønndal

naval base was never recognised as a suitable object for tourism development despite attempts from various authorities to repurpose Grønnedal. The vision, the idea and ultimately hope withered away, perhaps from a lack of love. Arsuk, ‘the loved one’ in Greenlandic, might fascinate and leave visitors in awe, but re-dressing place to a degree that creates lasting change is yet to come or perhaps, waiting in the wings.

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