

Party Time in Nuuk

Media on ice in Greenland's capital

BY FREDERICK KAUFMAN

The Russian subs were circling, Chinese spies lurking, European militaries mobilizing, stocks tumbling, gold surging, the dollar tanking. That was the situation this past January when my cab pulled up at the Hotel Hans Egede in Nuuk, the capital of Greenland. I had come to witness what the headlines had dubbed the “Battle on the Ice,” and to see firsthand how a country might be bought and sold.

I was not alone. Nuuk was swarming with reporters pecking at their phones, stowing their tripods and cameras in the corners of cafes where they retreated from the cold for an espresso and musk ox hot dog.

The locals had had it with the videos. “This is my 10th interview,” an exhausted Inuit street vendor complained. And to be blunt, the scenario painted by the international press had been nothing short of sensational: “NATO plans for fighter jet dogfights over Greenland as Kremlin issues ‘extraordinary statement’ to oppose Trump takeover.”

That said, any money columnist worth his salt would not have found himself slogging up and down Nuuk’s main drag—the unpronounceable Aqqusinersuaq Street (two traffic lights along the stretch, one of them directly beneath my window). By all rights I should have been hitting the groomed slopes and plush conference rooms of Davos, where the plutocrats, prime ministers, and Katy Perry were convening over mulled wine and canapes. It wasn’t as if this year’s World Economic Forum wasn’t already bloated with 3,000 participants from 130 countries—all of them, it seemed, talking at once about the island

Illustration by Michael Glenwood



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of ice that had somehow and suddenly become the earth's political jackpot, seeking a "graceful off-ramp" from the geopolitical morass in the arctic.

Instead of caviar and prawns I had to settle for *smørrebrød* with slices of pickled whale (mushy, with an aftertaste of calves liver) which was the special of the rooftop restaurant at the Hans Egede, named after the Norwegian Lutheran priest and missionary who arrived here in 1721, established a town he called "Good Hope," and taught the locals a version of the Lord's Prayer they could understand: "Give us this day our daily seal."

My room overlooked a bar and a grocery store called Brugseni, the two of which were connected to each other via a skywalk. Below ran a news ticker from KNR (Kalaallit Nunaata Radioa), Greenland's public broadcasting station and main news outlet, spewing a constant stream of Danish that I could not decipher, except for that oft-repeating proper noun "Trump."

Jens-Frederik Nielsen, Greenland's prime minister (and member of the national badminton team) had told his 57,000 fellow citizens to prepare for a possible invasion, to purchase at least five days' worth of food and a crank-powered radio, and to write down the phone numbers of their loved ones. My arctic war reporting began with an attempt to assess panic buying at Brugseni, where I found no crowds storming the refrigerators, which were well stocked with oversize chunks of salmon. I noted plentiful supplies of lactose-free chocolate milk, 2-kilo bags of frozen chicken nuggets, cases of frozen mini baguettes, and a plethora of prepared dill salads, not to mention fresh pomelos from Vietnam. A few disheveled Inuit ancients traipsed up and down the toothpaste aisle.

"Greenlanders are a hunting people," an employee of the Danish multinational NorgesGruppen told me the next evening between sips of Anarkist Brew at the hotel bar. Originally from Denmark, he had an inside scoop on what went on at the Brugseni, as NorgesGruppen is one of the largest privately held commercial companies in Greenland, and through its subsidiary, Pisiffik, runs the supermarkets. "They don't panic buy," he said—then asked that I keep his name off the record.)

I purchased an espresso from a kiosk on the windowed skywalk and gazed down at the TV stand-ups, as one after another they struck poses. Dominoes was the game of choice among the unemployed Greenlanders who had parked themselves at the table

next to mine. None of them looked particularly concerned about the dire newstream. That evening I made my way across the ice to Daddy's, a dive that features a long bar of scarred wood and brass, pool tables, and a large television that was broadcasting the handball match between France and Denmark. The game was close, and the local Danes had arrayed themselves on neat rows of folding chairs, ardently cheering every point Denmark won.

There were no European journalists at Daddy's, no camera-toting dudes, no harried producers checking their phones. But I did run into a local who worked for the main news outlet. He asked that I call him Malik, which was not his real name, as KNR oddly forbids its journalists from talking to the press.

It had been a long day, he told me. At an afternoon press conference, he had gotten into a fight with a German and an Italian journalist who wanted to know where all the German and Italian soldiers were being housed, and who had begun to scold a government spokesman who happened to be an old friend of Malik's, an Inuit like Malik, but whose English was not that great.

"Normally I shy away from confrontation," he told me. "But they come here and crash a press conference—." His voice trailed off. We sat in silence for a while. Malik finished his beer and got another. Cheers rose from the back of the bar. "A lot of people here are from Denmark," Malik observed. "If Trump gets his way, they will leave."

What about him?

"This is where I live, where my kids are, where my parents are from."

The sum of \$700 billion had been suggested as a fair price for the frozen island, which would value the property at just under \$1 million per square foot, roughly 100 times the price per foot of an apartment on New York City's Billionaires' Row.

That was a pretty good offer, I suggested—an observation met with silence.

I asked Malik how many billions he figured Greenland was worth. "I refuse to put a monetary value on it," he said. "That would imply it costs something."

Early the next morning I trudged through the darkness to visit the man who had served for more than a decade as Greenland's chief statistician. His name was Birger Poppel, and he met me wearing pajama bottoms and seal-skin moccasins. His white beard, clear blue eyes, and carved

Nordic features gave off a good-natured Gandalfian vibe, enhanced by the strange pendant hanging from his neck—a polar bear claw attached to a carving of a polar bear head. The head had been fashioned from narwhal bone, Poppel told me, by a Greenlandic artist from Qaanaaq ("four a's," he stressed), almost 1,000 miles to the north, not too far from the United States' Pituffik space base, itself right across the frozen ocean from Russia, where America houses a family of flying squadrons, satellite control networks, and missile early warning sensors.

I settled into a minimalist Scandinavian office chair that looked like an emaciated space alien, and noted the books stacked on the floor next to piles of charts and reports and his orange foul weather gear. No doubt, if anyone could tell me how to price a country, it would be the chief statistician.

I did not expect that Poppel would offer lessons in economic history. He told me that Norsemen from Iceland had settled southwest Greenland in the 10th century and that three centuries later, the colony had grown to 280 farms, 16 churches, and a population that some estimate to have reached 5,000. Then, as would become a pattern for Greenland, no Europeans paid the place any attention. The Norse colonies collapsed, and no one cared or even noticed—that is until Hans Egede arrived in 1721. He had raised \$9,000 from Danish merchants who hoped to profit from the frozen realm, but within a year the company had gone bankrupt.

At which point, in the midst of what was no doubt a tragic business narrative, Poppel inexplicably began to smile.

Eight more decades lapsed before a failed German actor named Karl Ludwig Giesecke landed in 1806, made friends with the Inuit, learned how to travel in an *umiak*, and began to explore the coastline. Near Erik the Red's ancient settlement he discovered masses of vibrant red, pink, black, and magenta rocks, which he summarily hammered, hewed, and threw in the back of his little boat. Giesecke had planned a two-year visit, but logistical difficulties brought his stay to longer than seven years, and when he finally returned to Europe with tons of strange rocks, he was dressed in fur and feathers. The mineralogists who examined his findings were struck by a white substance—evidence of a rare mineral called cryolite. Thus was Giesecke the first to discover that beneath the ice of Greenland lay a huge store of what we now call "rare earths."

Poppel spread a circular world map on the oval table between us, *Kalaallit Nunaat* at the center, the Inuit name for the place the Danes call *Grønland*. Next came a statistical tour of Greenland's extractions. He explained that cryolite—or "white gold"—was required to manufacture aluminum, and as a result Greenland's cryolite mines became an extremely lucrative investment during World War II, by the end of which America had manufactured around 300,000 military planes. We hunched over the map as Poppel narrated the discovery of graphite in 1845, lead in 1854, zirconium in 1893, pyrite in 1933, molybdenum in 1954, uranium in 1955 ... his list went on until I had lost track of the dates for chromium, copper, niobium, phosphorus, tantalum, tungsten, zinc, diamonds, silver, and gold.

He explained that a company called Energy Transition Minerals runs mines near Narsaq, and that its largest shareholder is the Chinese rare earth company Shenghe Resources, listed on the Shanghai Stock Exchange. Recently, an American company called GreenMet entered into a strategic partnership arrangement with fully-permitted critical minerals mining project in south Greenland known as Tanbreez in order to unearth tantalum, niobium, hafnium, and a variety of other metals that, while unpronounceable, are vital for a future in which America's high-tech military and computer engineering will reign supreme.

The CEO of GreenMet is a former U.S. Marine and Army Green Beret named Drew Horn, who personally briefed Donald Trump on the Greenland mining project at Mar-a-Lago. Meanwhile, GreenMet's former chief geologist, ex-CIA analyst Ned Mamula, has been confirmed as director of the U.S. Geological Survey. The company's investors include George Sorial, former executive vice president and chief compliance counsel of the Trump Organization, and Keith Schiller, the Trump Organization's former director of security.

What an extraordinary public/private effort, I noted. At which point Poppel posed a rhetorical question. "So why has so little happened?"

I waited.

"It's not so easy to access," said Poppel. "There's no connective infrastructure."

He noted that all of Greenland's mining sites, from Amitsoq to Kangerluluk to Ymer, were situated along the coastline, which meant that—and here, he stopped. A fly had landed on the map's periphery, somewhere in the North Atlantic. Poppel

examined the *Drosophila* as if it were an extraordinary beast, which in the middle of a Greenland winter, it was. "An effect of global warming," Poppel concluded.

Poppel reminded me that warming doesn't only mean a receding coastline and the opening up of more areas for exploration, exploitation, and profit. It also means the uncertainty of thawing ice. Greenland's ice sheet has been deteriorating, shrinking by nearly 2,000 square miles from 1985 to 2022. In the past year, 105 billion metric tons of Greenlandic ice melted into the ocean. Going forward, that would mean an ever-shifting, virtually unmappable landscape, without rail or road. Climate change meant that in the near to medium term, mineral extraction was going to be just short of impossible.

Poppel had little interest in hordes of miners, politicians, and financiers descending upon the austere glaciers of the place he called home. That was why he was smiling.

That same day, a few thousand miles away, Trump declared: "We are going to do something in Greenland, whether they like it or not. If we don't do it the easy way, we're going to do it the hard way." In response, the European finance ministers at Davos unveiled a potential trade "bazooka" that would shut off American access to their markets.

I noted the ever-escalating war of words to Aviaq Fleischer, assistant professor of

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language and media at the University of Greenland. She explained that the traditional Inuit court system utilized a ritualized violence of conflict resolution, in which the disputing parties sang their accusations, satirizing and mocking one another to settle disputes. "It's just like the drum duel," she said, "where two people battle against each other to regain balance between them. We are used to the rap genre."

We sat in her cozy office at the University of Greenland—an edifice of concrete, glass, and blond wood that seems to float

atop a sea of ice and snow. An Inuit whose great-grandfather was a Dane, Fleischer grew up on an island called Upernavik (population 1,000), about 600 miles north of Nuuk. "We ate fish and seals."

Like everyone else in Nuuk, Fleischer had been giving numerous interviews over the past several days—but none of them with local press. She explained that before recent Danish budget cuts, there had been at least four Greenlandic radio news broadcasts a day. But local news had been hit by the loss of government funds, and there was a shortage of journalism students at the university. There were no resources to do in-depth reporting, she said. Three quarters of all Greenlanders get their news from Facebook.

I was going to ask her about that incessant KNR newsfeed outside my hotel room, but instead found myself mesmerized by the beauty of the fjord flowing less than 100 yards from her office window—and beyond the icy blue water an endless horizon of snow-drenched beachfront. Who owns that real estate? I asked.

"You are only here temporarily," responded Fleischer. "You die. The land remains. You can't own the land. The land owns you."

I asked her if she feared the Americans might not feel the same way.

"I do not let the president invade my thoughts," she said. "I sleep very well at night."

She suggested I track down Ikimalik Pikilak, who she believed might help me

had been suppressed by Christian missionaries. She answered the question anyway. “We embody knowledge through our markings,” she said. “It’s a way of knowing very different from the Western world.”

I brought out the chart of Greenlandic mines Birger Poppel had given to me, and asked what she thought of America’s recent obsession with Greenland’s rare earth minerals. She examined the paper for a while, seemingly perplexed. “There’s no reciprocity mapped out,” she said. “When you picked up the gold what did you give back? A hole. Emptiness.”

But the map was for people who wanted what was underneath the ice, I explained. They wanted the minerals, which they would then sell. They wanted to be rich.

“That concept is not coming from the right place,” Pikilak said, and smiled as if she were taking pity on my ignorance. “Your questions give me a sense of how new Western culture is. It’s a very young culture that hasn’t learned how to solve the problems it’s creating.”

Western culture may not be as ancient as that of Pikilak’s Inuit ancestors who trekked across the Bering Strait more than 10,000 years ago. But buying and selling land had been an American obsession since 1626, when the Dutch famously purchased Manhattan for 60 guilders (rough modern-day equivalent: dinner for two at Thomas Keller’s Per Se). American expansionism has always been about commodities—the timber that towered over the northwestern territories, access to rum, sugar, and slaves that came with the Louisiana Purchase (with the Port of New Orleans as the prize), the silver of Texas, the gold of California, the sugar of Hawaii. Now it was Greenland and its metals—essential for everything from EV batteries and computer screens to lasers, radar, sonar, turbines, missiles, MRI scanners, and headphones.

Yet Malik and Fleischer and Pikilak had inspired me to contemplate a question seldom asked: What was real estate, anyway?

For Jews, that question is answered by Leviticus 25:23, where Hashem makes it clear: “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is Mine; for you are strangers and settlers with Me.” In other words, humans are tenants, not owners of the earth. There is not a single synagogue in Nuuk, and definitely not enough Jews for a minyan, but Greenland maintains

the traditional Jewish view. Here, the land is considered a communal resource, to the extent that the country does not grant private title to real estate. Greenlanders don’t purchase a portion of the earth in order to build a house on top; instead, they apply for a site allotment, which is the right to construct a shelter, but not to the ground beneath.

Yet the question of Greenland’s future suggests that a number of evolving conceptions about private property and real estate will be impossible to avoid, including an idea that has been floating around Silicon Valley known as the “network state” or “tech Zionism”—a term fraught with irony.

This new idea of ownership, widely reported by *The New Republic*, Reuters, Wired, and Gizmodo, has been appraising the idea of corporate startup countries, a new kind of privately owned nationette with its own constitution, laws, and tax structures, not beholden to anything other than the dictates of profit and loss. To such libertarian ends have tech gurus Sam Altman and Marc Andreessen invested in a startup called Praxis, which has raised more than half a billion dollars to help create and structure this new conception of sovereign statehood.

Rumors now surfaced that the outlines of a network state might soon be carved out of the Greenlandic ice, a homeland for Web3 true believers. As Praxis’ college-dropout co-founder Dryden Brown told Reuters “We must build a prototype of Terminus on Earth before departing for Mars. I believe Greenland is the place, @elonmusk.”

Terminus is Musk’s term for a settlement on Mars.

Morning dawned, Davos adjourned, and there was no trade bazooka, no 51st state, no \$700 billion purchase, no tech Zionism, and no war. Europe’s multinational Operation Arctic Endurance took their satellites, drones, and cyber-defense equipment and went home.

That night there was a party at the only disco in town, Nuuk’s Skyline Bar on the top floor of the Hotel Hans Egede. Half-price drinks began promptly at 10:30, which was when the Danish businessmen descended, many with heavily tattooed Inuit companions in backless dresses. While the men shouted to each other over the dance-pop, the women draped themselves across the black leather couches, sipping

orange cosmos and Long Island iced teas.

There was a growing sense that this past week had worked out quite well. To be blunt, the Vikings were deliriously happy. One of them made an entrance wearing pajamas, much to everyone’s uproarious delight. I bellied up to the bar next to a banker who stroked his beard and boasted that his institution had \$1trillion under management, but before I could gather the ticker symbols of the stock traded on the Danish exchange he was off with three drinks in hand.

In a bloodless victory worthy of Cnut the Great, the Danes had stared down the mighty Americans while keeping the native proletariat—and their own profits—safe from outside interference. No one was going to forget the frozen kingdom of the north this time. Their colony was more valuable than ever. Their investment had accrued.

A towering Norseman named Tom, who ran Nuuk’s laundry and janitorial services, invited me to his table to play dice. When I declined, a half-dozen beer distributors from Copenhagen offered to buy me shots. No American beer served here, one of them proclaimed, subsequently providing a guided tour through the taps. Except for one local brew, all were Kronenbourg brands—that is, made in Denmark. Around midnight I made my excuses. It was my last night in Nuuk, and I needed to go over my notes, so I headed downstairs.

Then was when Greenland went dark—all the lights in the hotel, all the lights in the bar across the street, all the lights in the Brugseni supermarket, all the lights from Aqquinersuaq Street to the university. And at long last, terror struck the tundra.

Electronic warfare would be the first step if American special forces were to hit the frozen beach. Now it looked as though the time had come. Swarms of shadows hurried across the intersection out my window, iPhone flashlights bouncing zig-zags off the ice. At first there were screams, but after 15 minutes of chaos an eerie silence descended, and for a moment Greenland appeared as it must have to Hans Egede three centuries before, when he saw its jagged peaks fade into starless gloom, and felt a shiver of sublime terror. No doubt, the Inuits and ancient Israelites were right. The land owned us.

About three hours later the electricity returned, along with the traffic light and my bedside lamp—everything except for that news feed from KNR, which so far as I could tell never came back. ☪

Pérez Art Museum Miami



Hank Willis Thomas, *Guernica*, 2016. Mixed media, including sports jerseys, 131 x 281 inches. Private Collection. © Hank Willis Thomas

Get in the Game

Sports, Art, Culture

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Get in the Game: Sports, Art, Culture is organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The exhibition is curated by Jennifer Dunlop Fletcher, Helen Hilton Raiser Curator of Architecture and Design SFMOMA; Seph Rodney, independent curator and writer; and Katy Siegel, former Research Director, Special Program Initiatives, SFMOMA. The Pérez Art Museum Miami presentation is organized by Franklin Sirmans, Sandra and Tony Tamer Director, and Fabiana A. Sotillo, Curatorial Assistant. The exhibition is presented at PAMM by Bank of America and made possible with the support of the Miami-Dade County Tourist Development Council, the Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs, the Cultural Affairs Council, the Miami-Dade County Mayor, and Board of County Commissioners. Additional support from John P. Meyer and Andrea Salazar is gratefully acknowledged.

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