

Whose knowledge counts? Inuit Epistemologies and sustainability governance in Arctic resource politics

Julia Alida Runnelid

Whose knowledge counts? Inuit Epistemologies and sustainability governance in Arctic resource politics¹

¿Qué saberes cuentan? Epistemologías inuit y gobernanza de la sostenibilidad en la política de recursos del Ártico

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ABSTRACT | Sustainability governance is a contested terrain where competing worlds, knowledges and futures collide, overlap and are selectively authorised. These tensions become particularly visible in contexts of state-building and resource extraction, where claims to sustainability are mobilised alongside projects of economic development and political autonomy. This article examines how Inuit onto-epistemologies are framed and differentiated within contemporary sustainability and resource governance in Greenland, and how such framings contribute to the reproduction of epistemic and colonial hierarchies. Drawing on pluriversal thinking, decolonial scholarship and political ecology, the analysis explores how knowledge, power and ontology intersect in debates on resource governance. More specifically, it suggests that Greenland's state-building ambitions generate tensions between Indigenous identity and modern development imaginaries, reinforcing epistemic hierarchies even within an Indigenous-led polity. Finally, the article highlights how struggles over sustainability governance are also struggles over territory, futures and competing projects of world-making, emphasising the limits of state-led sustainability approaches that remain grounded in inherited epistemic frameworks.

Keywords | Inuit onto-epistemologies; Sustainability governance; Political ecology; Coloniality of knowledge; Pluriversality; Greenland.

RESUMEN | La gobernanza de la sostenibilidad es un terreno en disputa donde mundos, saberes y futuros en competencia colisionan, se superponen y son autorizados de manera selectiva. Estas tensiones se hacen particularmente visibles en contextos de construcción estatal y extracción de recursos, donde las

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reivindicaciones de sostenibilidad se movilizan junto con proyectos de desarrollo económico y autonomía política. Este artículo examina cómo las onto-epistemologías inuit son enmarcadas y diferenciadas dentro de la gobernanza contemporánea de la sostenibilidad y los recursos en Groenlandia, y cómo dichos marcos contribuyen a la reproducción de jerarquías epistémicas y coloniales. A partir del pensamiento pluriversal, la literatura decolonial y la ecología política, el análisis explora cómo conocimiento, poder y ontología se entrecruzan en los debates sobre la gobernanza de los recursos. Más específicamente, se plantea que las ambiciones de construcción estatal en Groenlandia generan tensiones entre la identidad indígena y los imaginarios del desarrollo moderno, reforzando jerarquías epistémicas incluso dentro de una entidad política liderada por pueblos indígenas. Finalmente, el artículo subraya que las disputas en torno a la gobernanza de la sostenibilidad son también disputas sobre territorio, futuros y proyectos en competencia de creación de mundos, enfatizando los límites de los enfoques estatales de sostenibilidad que permanecen anclados en marcos epistémicos heredados.

Palabras clave | onto-epistemologías inuit; gobernanza de la sostenibilidad; ecología política; colonialidad del saber; pluriversalidad; Groenlandia.

1. Introduction

The Arctic² is often portrayed as a region that is both vulnerable and strategically important for the global green transition. Such framings, however, risks reproducing earlier colonial narratives that depicted Indigenous peoples³ in the Arctic as fragile, static, and environmentally dependent (Sejersen, 2015, pp. 6–7). More precisely, Indigenous peoples are portrayed as passive and vulnerable subjects, with livelihoods and identities assumed to be shaped by environmental conditions rather than by adaptive social and political practices. This article examines how colonial forms of knowledge continue to shape political identity, authority, and development, and how these dynamics risk marginalising

² This paper follows scholars who understand *the Arctic* as a socially constructed imaginary, that is, shaped largely by actors *outside* the region through policy, politics, and aesthetic representation. This perspective emphasises that the contested nature of the Arctic imaginary is inseparable from wider geopolitical dynamics (cf. Keskitalo 2004; Sejersen 2015; Nuttall 2017). Some authors propose the term *the North* as a way to de-link from these conceptual and geopolitical layers (e.g. Ingold, 2013, cited in: Körber, MacKenzie & Westerståhl Stenport, 2017, p. 7), however, this distinction is itself contested and risks reproducing other forms of essentialisation. To avoid an extended discussion on what constitutes the Arctic, sub-Arctic, or the North, this paper uses *the Arctic* to refer to a constructed discursive site, and *the circumpolar region* to denote the geographical area spanning Alaska, northern Canada, Greenland, Sápmi, and Arctic Russia. For further debate on Arctic terminology and conceptual boundaries, see for example, Keskitalo (2004), Dahl (2015), and Sejersen (2015), Nuttall (2017),

³ While this paper focuses on the Inuits on Greenland, it is important to note that Indigenous peoples inhabit seven of the eight Arctic states – Canada, USA/Alaska, Greenland/Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia (with Iceland being the exception). The circumpolar region has been home to Indigenous peoples for thousands of years and despite their varied cultures and livelihoods – they share similar experiences shaped by the long-lasting consequences of colonisation (Nuttall, 2018, p. 67).

the Inuit people within the emerging Greenlandic state.⁴ This is particularly significant because enduring narratives rooted in colonial history still influence perceptions of the Inuit today, shaping the conditions under which political visions of development and independence are negotiated.

The Inuit understand the world through relational connections among humans, animals, land, water, ice, and more-than-human beings. Their livelihoods have traditionally been collectively centered on hunting, fishing, and seasonal mobility, and today also include work in public services and extractive industries. These practices serve as the foundation of Inuit knowledge systems, developed over many years of engagement and interaction with Arctic environments (Nuttall, 2017).

Historically, Danish colonial rule in Greenland relied less on direct assimilation and more on forms of epistemic governance that defined what counted as legitimate knowledge and identity. Through ethnographic discourses and administrative categories, the colonial authorities created particular versions of Indigeneity that were aligned with colonial ideals and economic goals. Inuit were therefore governed not simply as Indigenous subjects but into a colonially produced Indigeneity that emphasised specific traditions while suppressing others (Rud, 2017, pp. 37–41).

Contemporarily, Greenland is undergoing a process of state-building that generates new internal tensions and forms of separation. More specifically, Indigeneity has become politically sensitive not through formal legal distinctions, but through its shifting role within governance and nation-building projects. Thisted (2017) argues that public discourse on Indigeneity in Greenland is increasingly transformed from a language of resistance into a language of governance, whereby Inuit identity is rearticulated in relation to state formation, reconciliation, and economic development. This transformation produces a dual—and at times contradictory—position in which Greenland simultaneously asserts itself as an Indigenous polity and as an emerging state actor. Kristensen and Rahbek-Clemmensen (2017, p. 4) demonstrate how this dual identity becomes particularly visible in international arenas, where Indigeneity is selectively mobilised to strengthen diplomatic legitimacy or downplayed when it risks constraining state-led development agendas. Similarly, Søbye (2013, p. 22) argues that this tension is reflected in competing visions of identity—between cultural preservation and modern development—and conceptualises this as two distinct orientations: *Inuit Nunaat* (land of the Inuit) or *Kalallit Nunaat* (land of the Greenlanders).

These tensions are not restrained to the historical or discursive debates. Recent reporting made by the *International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs* (IWGIA, 2025) highlights how questions of Indigenous rights, extractive development and political autonomy remain

⁴ The Inuit are not exclusive to Greenland; they live across the circumpolar region as a single transnational Indigenous people, whose homeland *Inuit Nunaat* stretches from Greenland to Canada, Alaska and Chukotka (the coastal region of Russia) (ICC, 2009).

central to contemporary governance in Greenland. Despite formal recognition of Indigenous rights and self-determination, ongoing debates over mineral extraction and land governance reveal persistent frictions between state-led development strategies and Indigenous ways of relating to land and resources. These dynamics underscore the continued importance of examining how Inuit knowledge systems are positioned within sustainability and resource governance.

Adopting a pluriversal and decolonial understanding of sustainability and recognising the broader historical context in which struggles over knowledge, power, and development unfold, this article critically examines how Inuit knowledge systems are framed and differentiated within contemporary debates on resource governance in Greenland. More specifically, a pluriversal perspective challenges the idea that environmental change and sustainability can be understood through a single and universal epistemic framework. Rather, it emphasises the coexistence of multiple worlds and ways of knowing (Kothari *et al.*, 2019), which is particularly relevant in a context where conflicting ideas about autonomy, identity, and sustainability collide with colonial legacies.

Accordingly, the aim of this article is to scrutinise how knowledge systems are framed and differentiated, and how these constructions reinforce epistemic-ontological colonial hierarchies. These discursive framings shape the conditions under which political decisions are justified and gain legitimacy. The central questions guiding the analysis are:

1. *How are Inuit onto-epistemologies situated and articulated within Greenland's sustainability and resource governance?*

Crucial to this question is the concern of how these dynamics are situated within the material and political terrain of resource governance. Insights from Leff (2021) and Escobar (2006) offer an additional lens underscoring how struggles over land, extraction, and sustainability reflects a deeper conflict between divergent understandings of territory, nature, and development. This leads to a second question:

2. *How – and why – does this positioning reproduce epistemic and colonial hierarchies?*

Answering this question requires attention to the broader power structures that organise and differentiate knowledge. Coloniality is understood as the lasting power structures and epistemic hierarchies, rooted in colonialism that continue to organise the modern world by reinforcing hierarchies that privilege Western epistemologies while marginalising others (Mignolo, 2007).

These questions are analytically important because they illustrate how epistemic distinctions are embedded in governmental processes, shaping which ways of knowing are acknowledged or not. By examining how knowledge systems are framed, the analysis can identify the mechanisms that reproduce epistemic and colonial hierarchies.

Methodologically, the paper adopts a qualitative and interpretive literature review, in which academic sources are read critically to examine how Inuit onto-epistemologies are positioned within sustainability and resource governance. Rather than adopting predefined analytical categories, I let the literature itself point out the directions in which epistemic tensions and ontological assumptions were emphasised. Conceptual tools from pluriversal thinking, coloniality of knowledge and epistemic clashes structure the interpretation of these texts. The review focuses on scholarly debates rather than attempting to map the full empirical landscape. The paper proceeds by outlining the theoretical framework, followed by two analytical sections corresponding to each research question, and concludes with reflections on the implications of the findings.

2. Whose Knowledge, Which World?

This section outlines the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings that guide the analysis. To examine how Inuit knowledge systems are framed and differentiated the paper draws on three interrelated strands of theory. It considers how these constructions interact with epistemological and colonial hierarchies. Pluriversal thinking provides the overarching position for understanding sustainability governance as a space where multiple world-making practices coexist and sometimes collide, offering a holistic understanding of world-sensing and world-making (Escobar, 2006; Kothari *et al.*, 2019). While decolonial scholarship provides analytical tools to interrogate the structures of knowledge and power that sustain epistemic hierarchies, political ecology complements these perspectives by situating such tensions within the material, territorial, and institutional dimensions of resource governance. Combining these approaches allows for engaging in how ontological and epistemic differences become structured within governance processes.

2.1. Pluriversal Thinking & Indigenous Epistemologies

Pluriversality provides the central theoretical anchor of this paper. Drawing on the theoretical contributions from Kothari with coauthors (2019) and Escobar (2006), the pluriverse challenges the assumption that modern Western ontology represents a universal and objective frame for understanding the world. Instead, it posits that reality is constituted by a multiplicity of coexisting ontologies or, a world where many worlds fit (Kothari *et al.*, 2019, p. xxviii). This perspective is particularly crucial for analysing sustainability governance, where dominant frameworks often rest on universalist models that treat Western scientific knowledge as neutral, superior and ontologically objective, while alternative world-making approaches are treated as secondary. A pluriversal approach highlights how governance initiatives operate from within specific ontological premises, privileging certain temporalities, forms of reasoning, and human-nature relations.

Furthermore, Lalander, Fortes & Lembke (2025, p. 114) emphasise that the pluriverse does not require abandoning all universalist principles but rather rejecting the universalist model that upholds colonial power structures by treating one worldview as normatively superior. From their perspective, certain universalist commitments, as those grounded in social

justice and Indigenous resistance, themselves to be understood as one world within the pluriverse, even though they may sit uncomfortably alongside other worlds due to the one-dimensionality of universalism. This insight illustrates why the pluriverse is not a relativistic framework, but a political project aimed at disturbing the dominance of singular, hierarchical world-making logics.

Approaching Inuit onto-epistemologies through a pluriversal lens means recognising them not as cultural alternatives to an otherwise universal system, but as distinct ontological configurations. Pluriversal thinking makes it possible to analyse sustainability debates in Greenland without assuming that all actors understand or perceive the world in the same way. Instead, it situates the debates within a landscape of coexisting ontologies, each with different ways of sensing, interpreting and enacting with their surroundings.

2.2. Coloniality of Knowledge, Epistemic Clashes & Epistemic Violence

The concept of coloniality was originally developed by Aníbal Quijano and was used to describe how colonial rule in the Americas established a new, enduring structure of power that was grounded in racial classification and labour control. He further argued colonialism to have produced a global epistemic order in which Western knowledge came to function as the dominant rationality of the world (Quijano, 2000, pp. 216–221). Crucially, through what Quijano identifies as a Eurocentric perspective, other ways of knowing were posed as particular, local, or less objective, while Western epistemology was naturalised as universal. This perspective provides the foundation for comprehending the coloniality of knowledge, referring to how epistemic hierarchies established during colonialism continue to structure modern governance.

Mignolo elaborates further with this dimension of coloniality and conceptualises coloniality of knowledge as the persistence of a *zero-point epistemology* that represents Western scientific rationality as neutral and disembodied while simultaneously silencing other epistemologies to the margins (Mignolo, 2007, pp. 160–161). For Mignolo, coloniality is seen to be inseparable from modernity – it is understood to be ‘the darker side of modernity’ – and modern forms of governance are built upon epistemic assumptions that mask their geopolitical origins (Mignolo, 2007, p. 162). Coloniality is thus functioning as a structuring condition that shapes what counts as legitimate knowledge, whose perspectives are taken in considerations in decision-making, and which worlds become actionable within institutional settings.

It is from within this context that epistemic clashes emerge. Following Vásquez-Fernández & Ahenakew (2020) such clashes arise not from differing perspectives but from incompatible ontological and epistemic assumptions. Such clashes can also manifest as epistemic violence, which is the harm produced when dominant systems erase, reduce or instrumentalise subaltern ways of knowing (Spivak, 1988).

2.3. Political Ecology & Resource governance

Political ecology constitutes the final component of the theoretical framework by grounding epistemic tensions in the material, territorial and institutional dimensions of governance. Escobar (2006) shows that environmental conflicts are never solely about resources, they involve clashes over economic models, ecological relations and cultural meanings. He argues that resource struggles reveal how modern development projects impose specific forms of territorialisation that reorganise landscapes according to capitalist logics, often in direct tension with Indigenous relations to land (Escobar, 2006, pp. 6–9).

Leff (2021) deepens this argument by conceptualising this confrontation as one between *the ontology of capital* and *the ontology of life*. Where capitalist territorialisation reduces land to resource potential and privileges accumulation, optimisation and control, thereby undermining Indigenous modes of inhabiting and sustaining territory (Leff, 2021, pp. xi–xiv; 249–252). From this point of view resource governance is never neutral, but reflects dominant ontological and political-economic orders.

3. When Knowledge Counts Unevenly

This section presents the results and analysis. It is structured around the two research questions, where the subsections are first outlining the main patterns that were identified in the literature and then analysing how these relate to the theoretical framework. In this way, the analysis highlights both how Inuit ways of knowing appear within sustainability and resource governance, and how these processes connect to broader political and historical dynamics in Greenland.

A final brief methodological consideration, given the article’s topic, concerns positionality. Analysing Indigenous onto-epistemologies through academic texts inevitably creates a distance from the lived and relational worlds these texts describe. Therefore, this review approaches the literature not as neutral representations but as sites where epistemic authority, conceptual boundaries, and colonial inheritances are both produced and contested. With this stance, I acknowledge that any study of Indigenous worlds conducted through academic literature is conditioned by broader knowledge hierarchies, including my own academic standpoint.

3.1. Inuit onto-epistemologies in sustainability and resource governance

The literature demonstrates that contemporary sustainability and resource governance in Greenland functions within epistemic conditions shaped by earlier representations of Inuit identity and knowledge. Rud (2017, p. 33–54) shows how the Danish administrators relied on ethnographic observation and administrative categorisation to promote certain practices as *authentic* or *traditional* to perpetuate those aligning with colonial expectations, which resulted in the establishing of an image of Inuit as culturally static, homogenous, and tied to subsistence. Already here, coloniality of knowledge helps illuminate how these

representations produced epistemic hierarchies when certain practices were determined as culturally *true*, while others, especially those who were associated with mobility, modernity, or adaptive livelihoods, were discouraged or claimed to be disruptive. These practices did not simply describe Inuit worlds but actively constructed an epistemic order in which Inuit identity came into existence only through colonial categories.

These narratives persisted in postcolonial discourses as shown by Nutall (2017) and other scholars, where Inuit are continued to be portrayed as vulnerable and environmentally dependent, and Inuit identity is still inscribed within a fragile Arctic ecology, reinforces an ontological hierarchy in which Indigenous worlds appear risky and in need of external management. Sejersen (2015, p. 21) conceptualises this as a *triple marginality*, that is, being marginal in one's own culture, to the environment and to modern culture. This concept can be contextualized within three spheres: the Danish state, environmental governance, and global development. Körber, MacKenzie and Westerståhl Stenport (2017, pp. 1–8) identify similar patterns in environmental imaginaries that portray the Arctic as an extreme, endangered, and precarious space. While Thisted (2017, pp. 231–244) also identifies these imaginaries, she further illustrates how postcolonial identity projects, including the Greenlandic Reconciliation Commission, emerged in the context of these enduring narratives. While seeking to address colonial legacies, such initiatives continued to deal with discourses that essentialised Inuit culture and linked identity to moral authority over the environment. Collectively, these framings shape the epistemic conditions through which Inuit knowledge continues to be articulated in sustainability and resource governance.

In contrast to these portraying discussed above – Inuit as fragile or static – anthropological literature highlights how Inuit onto-epistemologies are grounded in relationality and continuous transformation; they describe a world co-produced by humans, non-humans, more-than-human beings, land-, ice-, and seascapes that is in a constant flux, more specifically as Nutall (2017, p. 62–64) defines it – *a world of becoming*. More specifically, this perspective rejects the nature/society divide, emphasises interdependence, multispecies relationality and responsiveness to environmental change. Livelihoods centered on hunting, fishing, and mobility — along with participation in public-sector and extractive economies — are embedded in these relational ontologies. They constitute ways of knowing that emerge from lived experience in Arctic environments and evolve over time (Nuttall, 2017, pp. 74–84).

Inuit experiences of environmental change are situated and shaped by local conditions, social organisation, technology and economic opportunities. What constitutes climate-related risk or possibility varies considerably between communities; for some hunters, changing ice conditions open new opportunities, while others experience profound constraints (Sejersen, 2015, p. 4; Nuttall, 2017, p. 88). This diversity challenges universalist framings of Arctic vulnerability and highlights instead a plurality of ontological relations with land, water, and ice.

Sustainability and resource governance often privilege Western scientific models where land and subsurface are commonly understood in these frameworks as resources with the potential to be extraction-oriented development trajectories. Nuttall (2017, p. 1; 23; 34) illustrates how this is materialised through the construction of a *resource frontier* in Greenland, wherein geological mapping, mineral exploration and infrastructural expansion reorganise landscapes as zones of value, logistics and economic opportunity. Such frontier-making represents not a neutral form of development but an ontological project that stabilises capitalist understandings of territory (Leff, 2021, p. 59–60). It is within this terrain that frictions emerge between relational Inuit ontologies and universalist, extractive governance assumptions, frictions that take the form of epistemic clashes where ways of knowing cannot be aligned without distortion.

This section has analysed how Inuit onto-epistemologies are articulated within sustainability and resource governance, illustrating that the articulation appears under epistemic conditions shaped by both colonial legacies as well as contemporary (Western) development imaginaries. Although Indigenous knowledge is increasingly acknowledged in policy discourse, its inclusion is often structured by Western governance logics which risk limiting the influence of Inuit epistemologies. These findings set the stage for examining how such conditions reproduce epistemic and colonial hierarchies that is addressed in the next section. Furthermore, from a political ecology perspective, these tensions disclose how sustainability governance has come to operate as a form of territorialisation where land, subsurface resources and futures are reorganised according to capitalist and technocratic logics – often in direct tension with Inuit relational ontologies.

3.2. Epistemic and colonial hierarchies in Greenlandic governance

While the previous section highlighted how Inuit onto-epistemologies are articulated within sustainability and resource governance, the present section examines why this articulation occurs under uneven epistemic conditions and how such conditions contribute to the reproduction of epistemic and colonial hierarchies. The literature highlights Greenland's political landscape as shaped through a tension between Indigenous identity and emerging statehood. Where Kristensen and Rahbek-Clemmensen (2017, p. 11–15) show how Greenland positions itself simultaneously as an Indigenous polity and an aspiring state actor engaged in diplomacy, economic development and sovereignty-oriented projects. Thus, reflecting a dual positioning emphasising two divergent political imaginaries, one that is grounded in Inuit relationality and shared circumpolar identity, while the other aligns with modern state-building logics.

Gerhardt's (2017, pp. 113–118) analysis of scalar politics underscores this point. The Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) articulates Inuit identity at a transnational Indigenous scale, drawing legitimacy from relational histories and shared lifeways across Alaska, Canada and Greenland. In contrast to this, the Government of Greenland increasingly articulates a state-oriented scale that emphasises development, investment and global market integration. Where these scalar orientations materialise different ontological commitments

and world-making projects. The coexistence illustrates how epistemic hierarchies are embedded in political practices where some epistemologies are praised as forward-looking and development-oriented, while others are rendered culturally significant yet politically inconvenient.

Even as Greenland advances in self-government, a zero-point epistemology remains present in governance structures which is privileging technocratic, administrative and scientific rationalities while posing Inuit ways of knowing as contextual or cultural. Rud's work (2017, pp. 65–68) shows how colonial education and administration historically and actively established a Greenlandic elite that was trained to operate within these epistemic frameworks, which continues to structure whose voices are centred in development planning today.

These dynamics shape how Greenlandic futures are imagined. Nuttall (2017, pp. 28–33) illustrates how political and business elites, consultants and transnational corporations participate in constructing narratives grounded in extraction, technocracy, infrastructure expansion and globalism. These imaginaries are not neutral. They privilege ontologies that align with capitalist modernity, framing resource potential and development as a question of optimisation, logistics and growth. Restricting Inuit knowledge to consultative or symbolic functions rather than allowing it to inform decision-making substantively. Within such imaginaries, Inuit relational epistemologies struggle to gain political power. However, Sejersen (2015, pp. 3–4) argues that Inuit are not just adapting to external pressures but are actively engaged in future-making. His discussion of the proposed aluminium smelter in Maniitsoq shows how extractivist projects reshape how communities interpret their landscapes and conceptualise desirable futures. Thus, demonstrating how epistemic hierarchies are reproduced not only through institutional structures but also through proactive practices.

These tensions also appear in identity politics. Søbye (2013, pp. 1; 22) proposes two contrasting orientations – *Inuit Nunaat* and *Kalaallit Nunaat* – representing different world-making projects. The former emphasises Indigenous relationality and land-based identity; the latter, a unified national identity connected with state formation. When put together, these dynamics show how these epistemic and colonial hierarchies are reinforced through governance structures, scalar politics, elite formation and future-making practices. Even in frameworks that formally commit recognising Indigenous knowledge, incorporation tends to occur on terms defined by Western governance models. This produces conditions where Inuit epistemologies are employed symbolically with limited power and capacity to shape political decision-making. Resulting in governance structures to continue to privilege particular ontologies and ways of knowing, shaping the sustainability and development debates while narrowing the scope of political possibility in the emerging Greenlandic state.

Greenland's movement toward greater political independence introduces additional tensions to these epistemic dynamics. Although independence is frequently framed as a

route out of colonial relations, the vision guiding state-building relies on development models rooted in technocratic, economic and extractive logics. As Nuttall (2017, p. 28) shows, the debates about mineral extraction, infrastructure expansion and economic growth are closely tied to imaginaries of future sovereignty, meaning that Western forms of expertise are coming to set the terms for imagining an independent Greenland. This produces another dilemma in which Inuit identity is mobilised symbolically to legitimise aspirations for self-determination, while the practical tools used to pursue independence risk reproducing the very epistemic hierarchies that marginalise Inuit ways of knowing.

4. Conclusions

The aim of this article was to critically examine how Inuit onto-epistemologies are framed and differentiated within sustainability and resource governance in Greenland, and how such framings contribute to reinforcing epistemic and colonial hierarchies. Through a qualitative and interpretive literature review, the study analysed how knowledge systems are represented in academic debates, and how these representations are shaped by both historical and contemporary governance logics.

The first research question explored how Inuit onto-epistemologies are articulated within sustainability and resource governance. The analysis suggests that these articulations take place under epistemic conditions shaped through colonial knowledge formations and by contemporary development imaginaries that privilege Western technocratic and extractivist assumptions. When Inuit relational ontologies encounter governance frameworks grounded in universalist understandings of environment and development, epistemic frictions emerge. These frictions limit the capacity of Inuit epistemologies to influence policy trajectories substantively, which instead contributes to their largely symbolic incorporation within governance processes.

While the second research question addressed how, and why, such conditions reproduce epistemic and colonial hierarchies within the emerging Greenlandic state. These findings indicate scalar politics, elite formation and future-making practices contribute to reinforcing hierarchical epistemic orders. While Indigenous identity is mobilized to legitimize state-building and aspirations for greater autonomy, the visions guiding political and economic development are frequently grounded in technocratic, extractive, and modernist ontologies. The tools used to pursue self-determination, however, risk reproducing the very epistemic structures they seek to overcome.

Taken together, this highlights that struggles over sustainability and resource governance in Greenland are not only epistemic but also deeply material and territorial. Decisions regarding extraction, land use and development simultaneously shape which ontologies are authorised to inform political futures, revealing how colonial and capitalist relations to nature continue to structure governance even within an Indigenous-led polity. While Inuit identity provides a moral and political foundation for claims to self-determination,

governance models oriented toward economic growth and modernisation remain embedded in inherited epistemic frameworks.

If Greenland's future is to be shaped by the plurality of Inuit ontologies rather than by inherited epistemic structures, state-building processes must confront how colonial knowledge formations continue to organise authority, legitimacy and political possibility. Genuine decolonisation, therefore, requires more than jurisdictional autonomy; it necessitates a rethinking of the epistemic foundations upon which the state itself is imagined.

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Notes

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** *Note.* Front page image: A croos made of ice. Photo by Tom Barrett, January 21, 2018, United States.