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Tupilat Metaphysics: Exploring Other-Than-Human Subjectivity through the Lens of Rhizomatic Indeterminacy

By

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Abstract:

This paper examines three tupilak assemblages made by Kalaallit angakkok Mitsivarniannga in 1905 and1906, by request of Danish ethnographer William Thalbitzer, as well as "tupilat" carvings sold as souvenirs throughout Kalaallit Nunaat. Drawing upon a framework of rhizomatic indeterminacy, Kalaallit and post-reformation European understandings of Mitsivarniannga's tupilat are understood to come from incompatible metaphorical systems (Nadasdy 2011) and thus differ in their realities. Despite this incommensurability, perceptions of tupilat are complementary phenomena (Nadasdy 2021); they both make up tupilat truths. These different routes of perception allow for a multiplicity of perspectives of tupilat and "tupilat", adding to the inbetweenness of their qualities.

Understanding this, one can frame Mitsivarniannga's tupilat as something similar to material ghosts, as tangible forms of afterlife (Dawdy 2020), or as metapersons (Sahlins 2022)— though solely when in spirit form—as they lose their agential magic when embedded within a physical form. In delving into the realm of commodities, I ask: do "tupilat" carvings exist in a nuanced ontological space: transformed into fetishes through the agency of those who make and sell them and conjured to life through the act of the sale (Dawdy 2017)? When refracted through the lens of the fetishism, do Kalaallit artists act as mediators within a spiritual economy, transforming "tupilat" subjectivities through relationships within Kalaallit-tourist social networks?

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The Story of Nikkooq

Nikkooq became an old fellow who could catch nothing but sculpins. He ended up living at a settlement with a group of brothers. When the brothers began to catch many seals in the fall, Nikkooq found joy in his small sculpin-catches, as his settlement mates gladly traded them for meat, wanting fish soup for a change. That way, Nikkooq did not suffer.

One autumn day, when they started catching many seals, he went to his favorite fishing spot, and a large walrus appeared right in front of him. He caught the walrus. The meat was prepared, and it was served as a communal meal for the whole settlement - the middle one of the brothers did not come to eat. He felt too weak to eat and asked to set aside a piece for later.

The next day, everyone went hunting, and one by one, the hunters returned home. Late in the afternoon, the middle one came home empty-handed, which had never happened before. This continued for several days. The middle one always set out in his kayak before anyone else woke up. One morning, Nikkooq decided to try to follow him, but he couldn't catch up. He searched for him out at sea and saw a kayak covered with stones on the shore. Nikkooq pulled himself out of the water and searched. As he searched, he heard mumbling.

Slowly, he crept closer to look and immediately saw him standing there completely naked, straddling the Tupilak he had made, while it sucked on his genitals and repeated - saying, 'after Nikkooq, after Nikkooq'. Nikkooq pounced on him. The middle one was startled and choked on his breath. He died on the spot. Nikkooq returned to the settlement and pretended as if nothing had happened.

As the middle one never returned home, the whole settlement searched for him and found him at the place where the Tupilak still sucked life. They threw stones at it to kill it. All pieces of the Tupilak were thrown into different places so they wouldn't come back together. At night, Nikkooq could hear something bubbling under his pillow. He didn't get much sleep that night (Anonymous 5, 2024).

Figure 1: The story of Nikkooq, a tale of a tupilak encounter, shared by a Kalaallit community member (Anonymous 5, 2024).

Glossary

Angakkok (plural: angakkuit): an angakkok is a traditional healer and spiritual guide among the Inuit people of the Arctic regions. Angakkuit possess a great deal of knowledge about the natural world, particularly the spiritual realms, and they are involved in healing physical and spiritual ailments (Jakobsen 1999). As intermediaries between humans, souls, and spirits, angakkuit were essential for the well-being and cosmological balance of their communities.

Angakkuuniq: the traditional healing and spiritual practices found within certain Indigenous cultures, particularly among the Inuit people of the Arctic regions. It encompasses a deep understanding of the natural and spiritual worlds, including rituals, ceremonies, and knowledge passed down through generations (Jakobsen 1999)

Commodity Fetish: Karl Marx's commodity fetish is a phenomenon that posits that commodities are imbued with social power and significance outside their material attributes. Marx claims that within capitalist societies, commodities are not simply objects with use and exchange values, but also have mystical and fetishistic qualities, as though they have inherent value that is independent from the social relationships that produce them (Marx 1996).

Complementary Phenomena: aspects of culture or social organization that work together or complement each other in some way (Nadasdy 2021).

Ilitsiitsoq (plural: ilitsiitsut): practioner of harm to others; witch (Romalis, 1983, 152).

Inua: within every natural object, there lives a particular being; the inua (its owner; soul). According to Greenlandic knowledge, every stone, tree, lake, glacier, etc. has its own inua (Jakobsen, 1999).

Material Ghost: a concrete form of afterlife; both dead and not dead, often containing preserved parts of human bodies (Dawdy, 2020, 221).

Metaperson: an other-than-human subject that is endowed with shamanic powers. Marshall Sahlins writes of these beings, noting the "variety of metaperson forms—animistic spirits, demons, ghosts, and ancestors, species and place masters, and high gods and others—commonly populating the universe of cultures of immanence" (Sahlins, 2022, 73).

Rhizomatic Indeterminacy: interconnectedness in knowledge production; challenges fixed truths; allows for multiplicity of perspectives.

Tornak (plural: tornat): a spirit helper who is alive of its own power (Romalis, 1985, 20).

Tupilak (plural: tupilat): evil spirit of the dead that bring sickness, death, bad weather; ghost (Jakobsen 1999).

Introduction

"Indeterminacy, the unplanned nature of time, is frightening, but thinking through precarity makes it evident that indeterminacy also makes life possible" - Anna Tsing in The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins

I cannot say with complete certainty when the I first saw a Kalaallit [1] "tupilak" [2] carving, though I suspect I was quite young. Lining a large wooden shelf at my grandparents' farm in Brenderup Fyn, Denmark, the creatures exist in the fuzzy memories I have from my bi-annual visits to see my father's family as a child. The carvings always confused me, though I could never pinpoint the exact cause of my intrigue. I would spend hours poring over their intricate ivory curves, trying to understand exactly what drew me to them. They were beautiful but alien to me; exquisitely grotesque. It was only later that I learned of another type of Kalaallit tupilak, an evil spirit or ghost, historically fabricated into physical entities by ilitsiitsut [3] or angakkuit [4]. One such tupilak, created by angakkok Mitsivarniannga (Figure 4), consists "of the body of a dog with the legs of a fox and a human head" (Romalis, 1983, 184). Fashioned from wood and animal skin, the tupilak's back is pierced with a harpoon with two large wooden flotation bladders attached to its torso (Zolkos, 2023, 8). Said to have been seen alive by its creator, its ontological inbetweenness dares us to ask: How can we understand tupilat? Are they objects or living beings?

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[1] The word Kalaallit (West Greenland) or Kalaadlit (East Greenland) is commonly used instead of the term Greenlandic and means "the people".

[2] To distinguish between Mitsivarniannga's tupilat and carvings of other spiritual beings, labeled as traditional tupilat, I will use "tupilat" to describe the latter.

[3] Ilitsiitsoq (plural: ilitsiitsut): practioner of harm to others; witch (Romalis, 1983, 152).

[4] Angakkok (plural: angakkuit): an angakkok is a traditional healer and spiritual guide among the Inuit people of the Arctic regions. Angakkuit possess a great deal of knowledge about the natural world, particularly the spiritual realms, and they are involved in healing physical and spiritual ailments (Jakobsen 1999). As intermediaries between humans, souls, and spirits, angakkuit were essential for the well-being and cosmological balance of their communities.

These two entities, though called by the same name, are distinctly different in their form, material makeup, and meaning. However, they both possess liminal potential, urging us to question the stability of reality and embark on a journey of exploration in which we tear through the boundaries of established paradigms, welcoming the interconnectedness of diverse phenomenological understandings of the world. By embracing the fluidity of meanings and the multiplicity of interpretations, we engage in a process of continual reevaluation, challenging preconceived notions of reality and opening ourselves up to alterity.

The tangled rhizomatic tendrils of Kalaallit and Western [5] matrices of realiti(es) [6] serve to pull us closer, probing the fluid boundaries that shape collective understanding of existence. I will explore the nuanced world of tupilat metaphysics, where magical materiality is woven into the living loom [7] of the universe, challenging essentialist notions of truth and embracing the liminal complexities of indeterminate realities that shape perceptions of the world. There are many ways to define truth—it is enigmatic in this way—but for the purposes of this project, truth, in metaphysics, can be defined as "the property of sentences, assertions, beliefs, thoughts, or propositions that are said, in ordinary discourse, to agree with the facts or to state what is the case" (Blackburn 2023). I must also differentiate between what we call objective truth: truth that exists beyond the realm of opinion, perception, or understanding, and subjective truth: truth that lies in the subject or observer, depending on perceptions of phenomena. In the context of tupilat metaphysics, I write about the latter, agreeing with Friedrich Nietzsche's notion that "there are

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[5] The term "Western" is often used as a label for Euro-American peoples primarily because it denotes geographical, cultural, and historical connections to Europe and North America. This label emerged during the period of European colonial expansion when societies from these regions exerted significant influence globally. When I use this label, I am referring to post-reformation European intellectual tradition and Cartesian object-subject dichotomy. While I acknowledge this perception is not held by everyone in the "West", historically or contemporarily, it plays a large role in the separation between personhood and thingness.

[6] I am using "realiti(es)" to emphasize the multiplicity of realities through the rhizomatic indeterminacy lens.

[7] Tsing refers to the living loom as the living fabric of the universe (Tsing, 2017, 102).

no facts, only interpretations" (Nietzsche 1967). Employing phenomenology, the study of our

lived experiences within the world (Sokolowski, 2000, 2), what we understand as "truth" is

subjective and thus, there can be multiple truths that exist simultaneously.

Guided by a framework of rhizomatic indeterminacy [8], I will first discuss angakkok

Mitsivarniannga's tupilat as material ghosts (Dawdy 2020): entities imbued with ghostly vitality

that transcend traditional boundaries between life and death, object and subject. Unlike

traditional commodities, material ghosts are not mere objects, but rather agentive actors within

social networks, facilitating relationships with the living and emphasizing the porosity of

existence. From an alternative angle of perception, I will analyze these tupilat in relation to

Marshall Sahlins' (2022) concept of metapersons: other-than-human subjects endowed with

magical powers and person-like consciousness. These entities possess agency and the capacity to

interact with both the spiritual and earthly realms, engaging in what Sahlins terms as "mutualities

of being" (2011a), transcending ontological boundaries. Finally, I will explore "tupilat" carvings

as fetishes, noting the entangled interplay of materiality and symbolism, wherein entities are

transformed into agentive actors through the agency of their creators and consumers. As

mediators in a "spiritual economy", I ask: do "tupilat" artists bring these entities to life within the

Kalaallit-souvenir social network?

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[8] The rhizomatic indeterminacy framework emphasizes the interconnectedness in knowledge production, challenges fixed truths, and allows for multiplicity of perspectives.

Methods

I conducted anonymous ethnographic interviews with Kalaallit community members and performed a thorough literature review to better understand the historical and contemporary perceptions of Kalaallit tupilat and "tupilat" carvings. The entirety of my research was done online, with the recruitment of research participants taking place on Facebook and via email due to geographical and temporal constraints. I began the process by joining three different Facebook community groups in Kalaallit Nunaat [9]: "Nuuk", "Sisimiut", and "Greenland". I recruited the research participants by posting a description of the project and a request for interviews in the groups. In addition, I contacted local museums, art galleries, and tupilat artists with this same description and request for interviews. Prior to the start of the interviews, consent was taken from all participants and those involved were informed that they were taking part in a study focused on learning about the historical and contemporary perceptions of Kalaallit tupilat and "tupilat", tupilat subjectivity, and "tupilat" commodification. Participants were reimbursed with honoraria and will be provided with copies of the final thesis.

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[9] I will refer to Greenland as Kalaallit Nunaat, or "the land of the Kalaallit", as Greenland is a colonial label for the island.

Background

The Kalaallit tupilak, an evil spirit or ghost, was historically fabricated into physical entities in or near bodies of water by ilitsiitsut or angakkuit through the conglomeration of animal parts, wood, seaweed, miscellaneous possessions, and pieces of children's corpses. While physical tupilat assemblages [10] could be made by ordinary members of Kalaallit society, the tupilat spirits were only visible to angakkuit. Animated in secret ceremonies through the use of magical songs, tupilat sucked on the genitals of their makers to gain strength and were then used to bring misfortune to a person or group (Anonymous 5, 2024). The tupilak was the "physical manifestation of revenge" (Jakobsen, 1999, 75), blindly following the instructions of its creator when sent to attack its intended target. Only angakkuit, together with their tornat [11], could destroy an approaching tupilak (Møller n.d.). However, if the prospective victim had stronger magical powers, they could turn the tupilak against its maker, with the sender becoming the tupilak's new prey.

Between 1905 and 1906, the angakkok Mitsivarniannga created three tupilak replicas made of driftwood and child body parts—teeth, eyes, and skin—for Danish researcher William Thalbitzer, breaking the long-held taboo of not showing settlers these spiritual "objects". Thalbitzer met Mitsivarniannga through his ethnographic research on Kalaallit culture and language in the settlement of Amassalik [12], with the latter being described as a talented craftsman (Oreskov 2006, 218; Zolkos, 2023, 7) and the first Ammassalik angakkok who was converted to Christianity (Thalbitzer, 1933-1934, 60; Zolkos, 2023, 7). While Thalbitzer believed he

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[10] Defined by Jane Bennett assemblages are "ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant. materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations" (Bennett, 23, 2010).

[11] Tornak (plural: tornat): a spirit helper who is alive of its own power (Romalis, 1985, 20).

[12] Present day Tasiilaq

requested replicas of tupilat, which other community members had previously made, Mitsivarniannga instead created physical entities that were endowed with agential powers (Oreskov, 2006, 219).

Mitsivarniannga's three tupilat, one resembling a human, the second a bird, and the third a harpooned dog with a human face, are some of the oldest known existing tupilat from Kalaallit Nunaat and represent the moment in Western records when tupilat became associated with material culture and the creation of "folk art", rather than as simply spiritual entities mentioned in Kalaallit stories and myths (Zolkos, 2, 2023). Today, Mitsivarniannga's three tupilat reside in the Danish National Museum's collections in Copenhagen, transferred from the Danish Maritime Museum (formerly the Museum of Trade and Shipping) in Elsinore in 2017 [13].

Over a century after Mitsivarniannga's tupilat were made, Kalaallit artists sell small carved figures of other spiritual beings made from stone, antler, wood, walrus, or whale tooth, and labeled as the mythic tupilat. These carved "tupilat" were first mentioned in anthropological and ethnographic literature in 1912, with William Thalbitzer describing the figures as helpful spirits, though Danes have erroneously credited Arctic explorer Gustav Holm with requesting a carved "tupilak" from the Kalaallit in the late nineteenth century. While Holm did not describe the carved "tupilat" figures as "relic ornamentation on implements, or as dolls, models, or toys" (Romalis, 1983, 154), he did write about the subjects of East Greenlandic carvings:

> among relief ornaments there occur occasionally effigies of certain mythical figures. The natives told us they were meant to represent tornarsuks and aperketeks, which, according to the description, are furnished with claws (Holm, 1911, 119-120).

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[13] The transfer date of Mitsivarniannga's tupilat was established through Magdalena Zolkos' email communication with Thorbjørn Thaarup, the curator at the Maritime Museum of Denmark on March 10, 2020 (Zolkos, 2023, 7).

These figures, what Westerners and many Kalaallit refer to as "tupilat", can often be matched

with these helping spirits, or tornat, through mythic and verbal descriptions. Some of these

carvings are described as:

> (…) having a particular appearance, such as the terrifying spirit Amô. Its body is small
> and shriveled and with small, shrunken legs, whereas the head is large and nearly bald
> and the eyes strongly luminous (…) the arms are very long, and it has three fingers on
> each hand and three toes on each foot. The dangerous terrifying spirit Ajummaaq, too,
> has three fingers and three toes. They are black all the way to elbow and knee, and it is
> said that everything these black extremities touch putrefies and dies. Ajummaaq has the
> head of a dog (Kaalund, 1984, 69).

Kaalund writes that while these figures represent a wide range of spiritual beings, they express a

uniform fear of evil through the graphic and grotesque: monsters with gaping jaws, bulging eyes,

and long grasping arms. It is through these ghastly displays that Kalaallit artists show off their

artistic prowess and create physical manifestations of their communities' cosmologies [14].

Despite sharing a name, traditional tupilat made by ilitsiitsut or angakkuit are markedly

different from carvings of other spiritual beings. Sheila Romalis claims that the "cover term

'Tupilaq', used in this application, may be considered a misnomer" (Romalis, 1983, 155)

because these carvings differ drastically in meaning and composition from traditional tupilat

representations. However, I argue that this is simply an evolution of the term, simultaneously

representing the physical manifestations of Kalaallit evil spirits, as well as the carved figures

sold as souvenirs in tourists stores in Kalaallit Nunaat. In Kalaallit communities, the label of

tupilak is used for both entities and carries significant cultural weight (Anonymous 3, 2024). It is

an inherent right for members of Indigenous communities to be able to self-define aspects of

their cultural identity, according to their own customs, traditions, and practices; the agency to

decide what a tupilak is, was, and will be lies solely in the hands of the Kalaallit community.

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[14] Cosmology is the science or theory of the universe as an ordered whole, and the general science of the cosmos or universe ((*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "cosmology").

The production of "tupilat" has developed at the nexus of Kalaallit art and Arctic tourism (Haagen 2014; Zolkos 2023). Through the selling of "tupilat" figures to Western tourists, the Kalaallit community works within the systems of settler-colonialism and capitalism to affirm their sovereignty and challenge racist tropes of Danish government dependence. The souvenir industry is an avenue through which Kalaallit communities can not only financially support themselves, but also celebrate and maintain cultural traditions that have historically been targeted by assimilationist violence deployed by Danish governmental and religious entities. Kalaallit community members describe "tupilat" as "being produced like real pieces of art (…) some of the stories of the myths are being reproduced in the art (…) as a really important bridge between the oral histories and myths and artistic practices of today" (Anonymous 3 2024) (…) they contain a part of our Inuitic history. They carry our culture and our history, even though they are only object of art" (Anonymous 1 2024). "Tupilat" are thus both symbolic and physical manifestations of Kalaallit sovereignty and survivance on an island that still experiences deeply rooted colonial entanglements. They are:

> what makes us (...) It is in us, it somehow resonates in us. And I think, I am actually happy that they make this figure (…) because it made us not forget it. Because so many of our oral stories disappeared with the Christianity. So, I am actually happy that it exists, and I think more and more people know about the story of it as it was, and I think we have an understanding about it. We imagine how it was, how it was made, I think somehow it is inside, we have a memory of it somehow that is very deep. So, when we hear these stories that are not in our everyday life anymore, we know, we get an image of how they were. So somehow it is a natural thing inside of us, without really knowing it. It means a lot that I know some stories of it (Anonymous 4 2024).

For many Kalaallit community members, "tupilat" symbolize cultural continuity, encapsulating ancestral knowledge, traditional art forms, and spiritual beliefs. As material representations of Kalaallit cosmologies, these carvings serve as conduits for cultural memory and sovereignty within an ongoing colonial context.

Dismantling Tupilat Essentialism: Rhizomatic Indeterminate Realiti(es)

"A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb 'to be', but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, 'and...and...and...'. This conjunction carries enough force to shake and uproot the verb 'to be'... The middle is by no means an average; on the contrary, it is where things pick up speed... The rhizome operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots..."- Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*

Indigenous and post-reformation European intellectual understandings of subjectivity are often understood through incompatible metaphorical systems and are contradictory in their realities. Despite this cosmological incommensurability, Kalaallit and post-reformation perceptions of Mitsivarniannga's tupilat can be understood as complementary phenomena [15]. To deconstruct the subjectivity of Mitsivarniannga's tupilat, I will use Paul Nadasdy's indeterminacy framework [16] and Giles Delueze and Félix Guattari's *rhizome,* a network of interconnected ideas, phenomena, and relationships that is characterized by its non-hierarchical, decentralized structure (Delueze and Guattari 2013), to explore the possibility of different understandings of the world and reveal important insights into the nature of realiti(es). When merged, Nadasdy and Deleuze and Guattari's conceptual frameworks of perceiving realiti(es) form a *rhizomatic indeterminate* [17] lens that acknowledges the inherent ambiguity and multiplicity [18] of knowledge, while also recognizing the intricate, interconnected nature of

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[15] Complementary, or mutually exclusive, phenomena "emerge from different 'material-semiotic assemblages'" (Nadasdy, 363, 2021), with neither phenomenon more real than the other. Instead, both are incomplete and cannot be enacted at the same time "because the material and discursive practices needed to enact them are incompatible" (Nadasdy, 363, 2021).

[16] In opposition to the colonial project of disenchantment, indeterminacy "trains our attention squarely on practice, and it, too, enables us to "listen carefully" to what people tell us without having to assume that they are mistaken if their views of the world do not accord with ours" (Nadasdy, 2021, 365).

[17] Rhizomatic indeterminacy is an approach that sees knowledge as inherently uncertain and interconnected. It acknowledges that reality is complex and made up of multiple perspectives.

[18] "Multiplicity is thus a meta-concept that defines a new type of entity, and the well-known (by name at least) 'rhizome' is its concrete image. The sources of the Deleuzian idea of multiplicity lie in Riemann's geometry and Bergson's philosophy (Deleuze, 1966), and its creation aims at dethroning the classical metaphysical notions of essence and type (DeLanda, 2002). It is the main tool of a 'prodigious effort' to imagine thought

realiti(es). This perspective underscores the fluid and subjective nature of world making, as well as how diverse viewpoints, contexts, and interactions mold the very matter that makes up the universe. Using the rhizomatic indeterminacy paradigm, I will discuss Mitsivarniannga's tupilat as material ghosts and metapersons.

Phenomenological Merging: Indeterminacy and the Rhizome

Karen Barad (2007) posits that Danish physicist Niels Bohr's theories on the indeterminacy of light in the early twentieth century constitute an epistemological shake-up of sorts, challenging what many considered to be fact within the classical physics field. Bohr claimed that the properties of light are inherently bound to the ways in which they are observed and measured by its subjects, or what Barad calls "*agencies of observation*" [19] (2007, 114-15). As a result, "'(…) there is no unambiguous way to distinguish between the 'object' and the 'agencies of observation'" (Barad 2007, 114; Nadasdy, 2021, 363) and therefore no inherent Cartesian subject-object dichotomy. Bohr and Barad argue that the world is not comprised of objects with inherent properties, but rather what Bohr called *phenomena*, units that describe "relations without preexisting relata" (Barad, 2007, 333). Thus, attempts to perceive the object as a stand-alone entity without also considering the ways in which it is observed or enacted, will fragment the phenomena. The phenomenological possibilities of an object, then, make it indeterminate.

Physicists in the twentieth century carried out experiments that conclusively showed that light is composed of particles. Curiously, other equally reliable experiments also determined that light is a wave. Bohr accounts for this misalignment by arguing that waves and particles are

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as an activity other than that of identification (recognition) and classification (categorization), and to determine what there is to think as intensive singularity rather than as substance or subject" (Viveiros de Castro and Skafish, 2014, 109).

[19] Karen Barad describes agencies of observation as "(…) the specific material practices used to observe/measure it" (Nadasdy, 2021, 363).

different kinds of phenomena; light cannot be both a wave and particle. While the experiments had been "designed to demonstrate either the wave or the particle character of light, no experiment can demonstrate both at the same time" (Nadasdy, 2021, 362). Therefore, the nature and the properties of light—its status as a particle or a wave—rely entirely on what Bohr calls the "*experimental apparatu*s" [20]. Bohr contends that "if one does not specify the experimental apparatus one is using to observe light, then the nature of light is indeterminate; it can be either particle or wave" (Nadasdy, 2021, 363). In other words, the nature of light, or an object, can only become determinate when one chooses the apparatus or frame with which to understand it. Bohr further argues that the wave and particle behaviors of light are *complementary*, or mutually exclusive, (Nadasdy 2021) with the nature of the phenomenon decided through its method of observation. Just as light cannot exist as both a wave and a particle simultaneously, the various properties of an object cannot exist at the same time; only once a set frame is enacted, can it become determinate. Despite their mutually exclusive nature, however, Bohr argues that the wave and the particle, or the properties of objects, are complementary: each is real yet incomplete (Nadasdy, 202, 363). Mitsivarniannga's necro-assemblages are like the light in Bohr's wave-particle experiments, indeterminate in their phenomenological status until interpreted by Kalaallit or fundamentally Cartesian, post-reformation European ontological frameworks. These frameworks act as the experimental apparatuses or angles from which the light shines through the experimental apparatus determining the tupilat's subject-object status. However, just as there is the option for either wave or particle, there are various possibilities for the ontological status of the tupilat; they exist simultaneously as complementary phenomena.

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[20] The entire setup or arrangement of instruments and equipment used to conduct a scientific experiment, particularly in the context of Bohr's work on atomic theory and quantum mechanics.

One can also draw upon Annemarie Mol's (2002) influential work on the ontology of arteriosclerosis to understand the indeterminate and complementary nature of phenomena. Mol posits that atherosclerosis, the build-up of plaque in the arteries, is not the same disease for vascular surgeons, pathologists, and hematologists. Instead, these different atheroscleroses are not compatible in their constitution nor in the ways in which they are understood. She argues that it is not simply a difference in perspective on atherosclerosis, as this would imply that the disease— like light—cannot exist as an independent entity. Instead, Mol maintains that nothing has self-contained existence, everything— atherosclerosis, light, objects, etc.—is connected to through the practices that enact it (Mol, 2002, 53-54; Nadasdy, 2021). Atherosclerosis, then, does not exist detached from the medical procedures through which it is put into effect, it is something that happens, whether it be in a clinic, a pathology lab, or an operating room. Each manifestation of atherosclerosis presents slight incompatibilities with the others. However, for Mol, this discrepancy doesn't simply signify "things" being slightly incompatible with one another; instead, it denotes conflicting, incompatible practices. For instance, to enact atherosclerosis in a pathology lab, "(…) the pathologist requires an amputated leg that he or she can use to prepare slides that, under the microscope, show evidence of blocked leg arteries" (Nadasdy, 2021, 362), while in the clinic "(…) surgeons would never amputate a leg just to determine whether a patient suffers from atherosclerosis" (Nadasdy, 2021, 362). The practices that enact atherosclerosis in the pathology lab are incompatible with the practices that enact atherosclerosis in the clinic, only when a set of material practices has been chosen can the disease exist as one or the other. Vascular surgeons, pathologists, and hematologists, thus, "produce widely disparate 'ontologies' of arteriosclerosis" (Palmié, 2023, 34). Similar to Bohr's theory of wave-particle incompatibility, the arteriosclerosis in the pathology lab cannot also be

the arteriosclerosis in the clinic. Without specifying the material practices that enact it, the disease is indeterminate. When framed this way, the mutually exclusive versions of arteriosclerosis can be understood to be complementary, both real and incomplete; "one learns nothing about the pain of atherosclerosis in a pathology lab" (Nadasdy, 2021, 363). Similarly, we cannot understand the ontological status of Mitsivarniannga's tupilat in the Kalaallit cosmological context when perceiving the assemblages using Cartesian frameworks of subject-object dichotomy.

The indeterminate nature of realiti(es), whether it be in the context of light, arteriosclerosis, or tupilat, points to a fundamental *inbetweenness* of things [21]: an "anti-anti-essentialist' position (…) defined by its 'essential connectedness'; a double consciousness born from; histories of borrowing, displacement, transformation, and continual reinscription" (Paul Gilroy, 1993, 102). Inbetweenness provides an opportunity to escape the post-reformation European essentialist search for a singular nature of things, instead understanding the material world as being shaped by movement and mediation (Basu and Coleman 2008). All entities are what Paul Basu terms diasporic objects: "entanglements of ongoing social, spatial, temporal and material trajectories and relationships, dislocations and relocations" (Basu, 2017, 2). In this way, inbetweenness is a sort of middle ground—a borderland—that "unsettles settled categories and destabilizes stable boundaries" (Basu, 2017, 2). Like Bohr's experimental apparatus, the inbetween is an agent of observation, a metaphorical conduit that translates meaning between contexts. While commonly understood to describe the fuzzy ontological status of entities or phenomena that do not neatly fit into existing categories or classifications, inbetweenness can

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[21] Similar to William James' notion of "embracing the vague", "an approach to the study of human sociality where ambivalence, ambiguity, equivocation, fuzziness, and gradualism are not taken to be enemies of thought, but, on the contrary, their very condition of possibility" (Pina-Cabral, 2020, 786).

also be used within the indeterminacy framework as an instrument that disrupts post-reformation European intellectual phenomenological understandings of the world. Indeed, it is a metaphysical *punctum* [22] (Barthes, 1982, 27), a "prick" that brings to light the fluidity and multiplicity of realiti(es).

The ontological entanglements characteristic of inbetweenness is akin to the concept of *rhizomatic thought* developed by the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Rhizomatic thought, the principle behind what writer Édouard Glissant calls the Poetics of Relation, is a conceptual framework in which "each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other" (Glissant, 1997, 11). Rhizomatic relationships and connections between people, cultures, and ideas are neither hierarchical nor fixed, but rather spread out like the roots of a plant, interconnected in complex and dynamic ways. For Deleuze and Guattari, the *rhizome* represents a radically different form of thought that operates based on the principles of connection, diversity, multiplicity, and "asignifying rupture" [23] (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013). Innately nomadic, the rhizome builds connections between many, often incompatible elements. Paul Basu posits that through the lens of the rhizome, we can examine how the properties of things are constituted by their relationships: all things are inbetween (2017, 11). The world, then, can be understood to be a web of connectivity rather than an assemblage of "bits and pieces" (Ingold, 2011, 92). Or as Stefan Helmreich writes, "life forms and forms of life not only inform one another (especially after biopolitics) but the two may be impossible to disentangle" (Helmreich, 2011, 693; Pina-Cabral, 2020, 792).

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[22] The punctum is a concept introduced by philosopher Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography (Barthes 1982).* As defined by Barthes, the punctum is a detail or element within a photograph that "pierces" or "pricks" the viewer, catching the observer's attention in a personal and subjective way that evokes an emotional response.

[23] Asignifying rupture is the idea that cutting a rhizome doesn't destroy it; instead, it fosters its expansion and reterritorialization.

*Rhizomatic indeterminac*y is a conceptual approach that recognizes the inherent inbetweenness and multiplicity of knowledge production, while also acknowledging the complex, networked nature of realiti(es). When applied to Bohr's theories of light, this frame of understanding emphasizes the decentralized and interconnected nature of knowledge production and understanding. Bohr challenges the Cartesian subject-object dichotomy through his claim that the properties of light are not inherent, but instead contingent on the ways they are observed or measured by agencies of observation. He rejects the notion of a fixed, independent reality and points to the entanglement of the observer and the observed in the construction of knowledge. By this, I mean that the observer is not separate from what is being observed, but instead is tangled with it in a complex web of interactions. In an experiment, the observer (the physicist), makes design choices that act as the experimental apparatus, shaping how the phenomena is observed and understood (the properties of light: wave or particle). This suggests that understandings of what constitutes reality are not based on an objective, fixed truth, but are instead formed through the interplay between observer and observed, measurement and interpretation. Bohr's assertion that the nature of light is indeterminate until an experimental apparatus or frame is chosen underscores the rhizomatic nature of knowledge. Just as in a rhizome, where multiple entry points and connections exist, the choice of experimental apparatus determines the nature of the observed phenomenon. Thus, the selection of experiential apparatus opens different pathways of observation and understanding, allowing for a multiplicity of perspectives on the phenomena being studied. This multiplicity contributes to the indeterminacy of the object's properties.

Interpreting Entities: Kalaallit and Post-Reformation European Intellectual Perspectives on Persons and Things

Not unlike Mol's work on arteriosclerosis or Bohr's experiments on light, Mitsivarniannga's three tupilat pose significant challenges to conceptions of the world, bringing into question many of the established "truths" about the nature of causality and blurring the distinction between subject and object. Produced through colonial exchange, these tupilat are perceived through incompatible metaphorical cosmology systems: Kalaallit and post-reformation European realiti(es). These frames of perception, or experiment apparatuses, shape the subjectivity of the tupilat within each context.

The traditional [24] Kalaallit ontological worldview is deeply rooted in a rich tapestry of stories, and traditions that have been passed down through generations. At its core lies an animistic [25] understanding of the world, wherein inua [26] inhabit natural phenomena such as animals, plants, and landscapes. In fact, even abstract conceptions have inua, with ethnographers noting discussions of the "inua of particular instincts or passions" (Sahlins, 2022, 74). This points to a broader understanding of the universe as a dynamic and interconnected web of relationships, where humans are but one part of a larger whole. From this perspective, nearly everything can be an other-than-human entity that exhibits forms of agency and subjectivity, albeit different from human consciousness.

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[24] I write traditional here to denote that many Kalaallit worldviews have evolved, with many contemporary community members identifying as Christians. This section focuses on pre and early colonial contact Kalaallit conceptions of the world, the period in which Mitsivarniannga's tupilat were created for William Thalbitzer.

[25] Animism "refers to cultural schemes of subjective presences in empirical entities. Within the physical bodies of things, whether animate or inanimate (by our lights), are indwelling somethings with more or less the same subjective capacities as human persons" (Sahlins, 2022, 74).

[26] Inua: within every natural object, there lives a particular being; the inua (its owner; soul). According to Kalaallit knowledge, every stone, tree, lake, glacier, etc. has its own inua (Jakobsen, 1999).

Magdalena Zolkos writes that within the Kalaallit cognitive system, or cultural reality, there is a distinction made between other-than-human beings that coexist with humans and have agency similar to the Kalaallit and other-than-human beings that are created by humans for the sole purpose of carrying out the will of their creators. Thus, she posits that there is no singular classificatory system in which to group spiritual beings like tornat, and tupilat (Zolkos, 2023, 33). Tupilat exist as agential spiritual entities prior to being assembled into tangible forms, inhabiting the spirit realm until channeled by angakkuit through magical rituals. Knud Rasmussen, a Danish-Kalaallit explorer and anthropologist, explains that these evil spirits are "dead people or killed animals who, on account of some breach of taboo, have not obtained peace after death[27]" (Rasmussen, 1931, 239), restless and dangerous to humans. However, once constructed, the tupilak spirit and its physical manifestation become one spiritual phenomena, "(…) making a tupilak sort of like the different ingredients in a cake. Once the cake is done, you can't really separate the flour from the moisture (…) everything is formed together" (Anonymous 3 2024). They are in a sense "man-made spirit beings" (Romalis, 1985, 21), creatures formed through assemblage. Thus, while tupilat are alive in the sense that they are spiritual entities who interact with the world around them, "they had no minds for themselves because they were made to only harm or destabilize the opponent (...)They were like an automated spiritual being" (Anonymous 1 2024). Further, while the physical components used to fashion the concrete tupilak—human remains, wood, dead animals, seaweed, etc.—may have their own inua [28], when combined they become one entity whose actions are controlled solely by its creator. Tupilat,

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[27] These spirits are distinguished from Kalaallit ancestors who "remain members of their house holds or descent groups, usually with some authority over the living members" after death (Sahlins, 2022, 88).

[28] Within every natural object, there lives a particular being: the inua (its owner; soul). According to Greenlandic knowledge, every stone, tree, lake, glacier, etc. has its own inua (Jakobsen, 1999).

then, possess spiritual vitality but lack human-like agency: operating within the parameters set forth by their creators.

In post-reformation European ontologies of subjectivity, there has been a foundational division between persons (subjects of recognizable capacities and rights) and things (objects of their exercise) dating back to Roman times (Palmié, 2023, 55). This dichotomy has been deeply ingrained into post-reformation European culture, with persons defined based on the belief that they are not things, and things by the belief that they are not persons; "(…) every entity the law deals with, if not an action, is either a person or a thing, according to a simple, clear distinction— a thing is a non-person and a person is a non-thing" (Esposito, 2015, 16). In order to qualify as a person, an entity must have agency: the ability to define oneself as a person and an awareness of the consequences of one's actions (Moore, 2016). Only the self possessing the ability to think and perceive the world (homo noumenon) qualifies as a person, whereas the outward behavior of an individual (homo phaenomenon) is only deemed as personhood when it conforms to the dictates of the rational self (Kant 1929). By this, Kant means that the rational nature of a being is central to their personhood, with rationality granting the capacity for autonomy and moral responsibility. Through this framework, concrete tupilat assemblages would be considered to be objects, rather than beings that contain consciousness or the ability to define themselves as persons; they do not possess agency in the same way that human beings do. Thus, any behavior a tupilak may exhibit would be classed as homo phaenomenon, as it was caused by its creator and is separate from the tupilak being itself.

According to Judeo-Christian theology, there is an understanding that when a person dies, the soul separates from its physical body to undergo judgement by God, going either to heaven, hell, or purgatory. For instance, in Luke 16:19-31, Jesus tells the story of a rich man who lived in

luxury and a poor beggar named Lazarus who lay at his gate, his body covered in sores. Though

he saw Lazarus suffering, the rich man ignored him and thus, when both men died, it was

Lazarus who was carried by angels to Abraham's side in paradise, while the rich man found

eternal torment in Hades. This parable emphasizes that after death, people will face judgement

based on their actions during their lives, the eternal consequences of one's choices, and the

unbridgeable gap between heaven and hell [29]. This understanding is further reflected in

Ecclesiastes 12:7, in which it is said "and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the

spirit returns to God who gave it", with many interpreting this to support the belief that the soul

or spirit returns to God rather than remaining on Earth. From a post-reformation European

intellectual, Judeo-Christian perspective, there is typically a level of skepticism when discussing

souls who linger on Earth as ghosts. This narrative contradicts the principle of tupilat spirits

inhabiting physical assemblages and thus having a tangible presence in the human world. The

existence of malevolent spirits like tupilat is generally not acknowledged, as supernatural beings

are categorized as either angels or demons: with angels working as God's messengers and

demons as entities aligned with Satan. The concept of people—like angakkuit—creating spiritual

beings for malicious intent would be classified as sorcery or witchcraft and be incompatible with

the Judeo-Christian understanding of God as the sole creator and ruler of all things

(Deuteronomy 18:10-12).

Despite their incommensurability, Kalaallit and post-reformation European ontological

and cosmological refractions can be understood as complementary phenomena; they both

metaphysically construct the tupilat. From a viewpoint of rhizomatic indeterminacy, conceptions

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[29] After the rich man learns of his fate, he begs Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers to repent, but Abraham tells him that they have Moses and the prophets to guide them. This points to the importance of listening to divine teachings during one's earthly life. The parable emphasizes the finality of death and the importance of living a life that aligns with God's will in order to have a good outcome in the afterlife.

of the tupilat by Kalaallit and Westerners can co-exist and both be part of what is understood as truth. Their realiti(es), as well as how they define an entity's "thingness" or personhood, are formed from starkly different angles of understanding. Rhizomatically, these realiti(es) determine the nature of the observed phenomenon, the tupilat, acknowledging the existence of multiple entry points and connections. The angles of understanding create different pathways of perception and allow for multiple perspectives of the tupilat assemblages, adding to the indeterminacy and inbetweenness of their properties. Indeed, there will always be an inherent entanglement of observer and observed in the construction of reality or knowledge, with reality shaped through the relationship of observer-observed, its tools of measurement and interpretation.

Figure 2: Tupilak in the form of a doll/child, made by the angakkok Mitsivarniannga in Ammassalik, 1905- 1906 (Zolkos 2023). Photograph by Roberto Fortuna, CC-BY-SA, with permissions from The National Museum of Denmark.

Figure 3: Tupilak in the form of a bird, made by angakkok Mitsivarniannga in Ammassalik, 1905-1906 (Zolkos 2023). Photograph by Roberto Fortuna, CC-BY-SA, with permissions from The National Museum of Denmark.

Figure 4: Tupilak in the form of a dog, made by Mitsivarniannga in Ammassalik, 1905-1906 (Zolkos 2023). Photograph by Roberto Fortuna, CC-BY-SA, with permissions from The National Museum of Denmark.

Mitsivarniannga's Tupilat as Material Ghosts?

As entities containing both human remains and spiritual beings, the ontological status of the tupilak is ambiguous, simultaneously: an "active agent in the lives of the receivers through a long-lived relationality" (Dawdy, 2020, 211); a "site of thick condensation of medicine and magic, science and enchantment (Hagerty 2014); and the location of malicious ghosts. I argue that Mitsivarniannga's tupilat can be classified as something similar to what Shannon Dawdy (2020) terms *material ghosts*: entities composed of human remains [30], which are conceptualized as both commodities and quasi-subjects, designed to serve as social agents within their respective social networks, extending beyond mere memorialization (Dawdy, 2020, 211).

Dawdy's material ghosts are entities created using cremated human remains and designed to facilitate relationships with the deceased. These "commodity relics" highlight the porous boundary between life and death, possessing both agency and the capacity to interact with the living world. Material ghosts are a "concrete form of afterlife" (Dawdy, 2020, 221) and more than mere memory objects, as they embody the unique subjectivities of the deceased within their biological makeup. Although these entities are produced and marketed like commodities, they are more than just objects—they act as active agents in the lives of those who possess them— fostering relationality that transcends typical commodity transactions. The material ghosts I describe are distinct in that they are not commodities in a strict sense, nor are they tied to the subjectivity of the human remains they contain [31]. Instead, they exist in the rhizomatic

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[30] In *American Afterlives: Ghost in Commodity (2020)*, Dawdy writes about commodified entities, created using cremated human remains.

[31] Dawdy posits that material ghosts/commodity relics are quasi-subjects, with the biological composition of the human remains they contain thought to make these "objects" uniquely reflective of the individuals from whom they originated. They retain the capacity for emotions and intentions consistent with the living subjects they once were (Dawdy, 2020, 211).

inbetween: as *quasi-commodities* [32] and *quasi-objects* (Latour 1993) imbedded with ghostly vitality.

Between 1905 and 1906, the angakkok Mitsivarniannga created three tupilat for Danish ethnographer William Thalbitzer. The first assembled tupilak resembles a large wooden doll, its mouth agape and sightless eye sockets hauntingly fixed. Though at first glance both orifices may appear relatively empty, Thalbitzer writes, "in the open mouth (…) there are inserted two teeth of a child, and the eyes of a dead child are stuck into deep orbits" (Thalbitzer, 1912, 643-644). The second tupilak is a wooden bird-like carving, made using the body parts of a dead bird and infant, animated by the angakkok before Thalbitzer's arrival in Kalaallit Nunaat. In his description of the assemblage, Thalbitzer writes that Mitsivarniannga assured him that "he had seen later [the tupilak] moving or creeping across the water in the neighbourhood of Qernertuartiwin in the Ammassalik Fjord" (Zolkos, 2023, 10; Thalbitzer, 1914, 644). The third and final tupilak, which Mitsivarniannga was also said to have seen alive, "consisted of the body of a dog with the legs of a fox and a human head" (Romalis, 1983, 184). Fashioned from wood and animal skin, the tupilak's back is pierced with a harpoon with two wooden flotation bladders attached (Zolkos, 2023, 8).

Mitsivarniannga's metaphysical necro-assemblages, like Dawdy's material ghosts, are attached materially to death. The tupilat's cadaverous elements—the body parts of dead infants—locate them in an ontological inbetween, as liminal objects "suspended between two states, two worlds" (Dawdy, 2020, 210). The human corpse, as a hybrid entity, threatens subjectivity and destabilizes the boundary between life and death: it is "leaky" (Schwartz, 2015,

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[32] Quasi-commodities are entities that possess some of the characteristics of a commodity, but do not completely meet the criteria to qualify as a traditional commodity. Inspired by Karl Polanyi's "fictitious commodities" in *The Great Transformation (Polanyi 2001)*, quasi-commodities similarly are subjected to market forces despite their inherently non-commodifiable essence.

29) with permeable borders. Mitsivarniannga's tupilat scramble the subject-object divide, simultaneously objects in a Cartesian sense and subjects with embedded ghostly vigor. Though these assemblages do not contain the subjectivities of the dead humans that constitute them, they still represent tangible representations of afterlife. They are both alive and dead: "the powers of the dead—whether conned out of their graves or produced (…) —are pressed into the service of the living, resulting in a precarious blurring between persons and things, agency and its object" (Palmié, 2022, 56). Tupilat and the evil spirits of the dead that enliven them are boundary "objects" (Zolkos 2023), existing at the nexus of life and death, subject and object.

Through its role as a mediator within Kalaallit social networks, the tupilak acts as a quasi-object: a hybrid being containing subjective and objective features; markedly not human nor human-like (Dawdy, 2020, 208). Mitsivarniannga's tupilat blur the subject-object boundary, simultaneously shaped by and shaping human actions and interactions. Using the example of utilizing a fast wheel in the production of a pot, Latour argues that if something can "modify a state of affairs by making a difference" it is an actor and thus has a form of agency (Latour 2005, 71). He emphasizes the active role of both human and other-than-human entities in producing social outcomes and argues against the traditional distinction between human agents and passive objects. Although I do not claim that Mitsivarniannga's three tupilat are people or even entities with human-like agency, it is important to note the complexities of inter-subject-object enmeshments. As Ian Hodder says, "humans rely on things, things rely on other things, things rely upon humans, and humans upon other humans (…) these mutual dependences entrap humans within entanglements from which it is difficult to find an exit" (Esposito, 2015, 207). The tupilak, as a quasi-object, helps shape interactions between its creator and its intended

victim: evil magical actors in the social realm. Its ability to interact with the world is a type of relationality (Dawdy, 2020, 209), occurring between the entity, the creator, and the victim.

Mitsivarniannga's tupilat are also quasi-commodities: entities that possess some of the characteristics of a commodity [33], but do not meet the criteria to qualify as a traditional commodity. While not formerly exchanged in markets or shaped by economic forces, these tupilat are nevertheless consumed—non-market goods [34]—through their access on the internet and as displays in museums. It only takes a quick Google search of "Mitsivarniannga's tupilat" to find images of these spiritual assemblages available for intake by anyone who has an internet connection. I argue that when a person perceives and learns about Mitsivarniannga's tupilat, engaging and deriving cultural value from the entities online or in-person, they are performing an act of consumption: they are not passive observers but active participants in the process of meaning making and social negotiation (Mitchell 1986). When consuming the tupilat, observers are participating in a form of exchange that facilitates the transmission of cultural knowledge, interpretations, and cross-cultural understanding. Images, as cultural artifacts, are not perceived passively. Instead, they gain meaning through their consumption, with observers actively engaging in the process of meaning making and cultural exchange through their participation with the images (Manovich 2001). The image of the tupilak itself becomes a cultural artifact, a commodity, circulating within social networks and acquiring meaning through its consumption by various individuals or groups.

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[33] A commodity is "is a product intended principally for exchange, and that such products emerge, by definition, in the institutional, psychological, and economic conditions of capitalism. Less purist definitions regard commodities as goods intended for exchange, regardless of the form of the exchange" (Appadurai, 1986, 6)

[34] Goods can refer to tangible items or products that satisfy human wants and needs, often having economic value.

The element of exchange is vital for framing the tupilat as quasi-commodities, with Arjun Appadurai writing that relaxed definitions "regard commodities as goods intended for exchange, regardless of the form of the exchange" (Appadurai, 1986, 6). Their visual consumption, however, is but one of the ways Mitsivarniannga's tupilat have participated in exchange. Assembled for and gifted to William Thalbitzer, the tupilat were actors in a gift economy in which goods are given or received as social obligations or signs of solidarity, rather than for explicit economic gain (Mauss 1954). For Mauss, gifts are embedded within social, cultural, and economic systems, with gift exchanges developing social connections and strengthening community relationships. These commodities of sorts are thoroughly socialized things (Appadurai, 1986, 6) with agential inter-actor potential. Their role as actors in social gift networks unsettle subject-object dichotomies, further constructing them as quasi-commodities and as material ghosts.

Mitsivarniannga's Tupilat as Metapersons?

As an other-than-human entity, an unattached [35] tupilak spirit can be described as a type of *metaperson*, (Sahlins 2022): an other-than-human subject that is endowed with spiritual powers and person-like consciousness. However, from both traditional Kalaallit and post-reformation European, foundationally Cartesian perspectives, the physical tupilat necro-assemblages made by the Kalaallit angakkok Mitsivarniannga, as well as the spirits that exist within them, do not qualify post-embedment.

Marshall Sahlins writes of these magical beings, noting the "variety of metaperson forms—animistic spirits, demons, ghosts, and ancestors, species and place masters, and high

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[35] By unattached, I mean that the spirit is not embedded within a physical tupilat assemblage.

gods and others—commonly populating the universe of cultures of immanence [36]" (Sahlins, 2022, 73). Within these milieus [37], anything and almost everything can have forms of agency, but some phenomena have more capacity for personhood than others. In order for an entity to qualify as a metaperson, or a person for that matter, it must have the ability to perceive the world around it. The capacity for rationality is essential for the personhood of a metaperson, as it gives the other-than-human being its autonomy. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro speaking within the context of his research of the Amazonian Araweté people, posits that there "is no way to distinguish unequivocally between humans and what we would call spirits, a notion that covers very heterogeneous beings" (Viveiros de Castro, 1992, 64). Spirits, while not fully human, can be classed as "similar to humans" (Sahlins, 2022, 73) in their capacity for autonomy, along with yielding shamanic powers (Viveiros de Castro 1992).

A tupilak spirit, an evil agential being with human-like consciousness, qualifies as an other-than-human person through the animistic frames set forth by Sahlins and Viveiros de Castro. These tupilat have the capacity for agency before their embedment within physical assemblages, roaming both spiritual and earthly realms. Franz Boas describes these magical entities: the "spirits of the dead, the tupilaq, knock wildly at the huts, which they cannot enter, and woe to the unhappy person whom they can lay hold of" (Boas, 1964, 195-6). Through their agential participation in Kalaallit social networks, interacting with living humans in what Sahlins calls "mutualities of being" (2011a; Pina-Cabral 2019), the tupilat can be classified as subjects, as metapersons. By recognizing the agency and personhood attributed to entities like the tupilak, we can challenge post-reformation European intellectual notions of personhood which often

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[36] Immanent societies are communities that emphasize the presence and importance of the divine or spiritual within the material world.

[37] A milieu is a social environment.

prioritize human-centric perspectives. This allows us to consider alternative ways of conceptualizing agency, consciousness, and personhood.

Mitsivarniannga's three physical tupilat assemblages, conversely, cannot be understood to be metapersons because of their inherent lack of agency. As I have written earlier, once assembled by angakkuit, tupilat function exclusively within the confines established by their makers. Mitsivarniannga's tupilat, while alive in the sense that they can interact with the world around them, do not act because of their own needs or desires: their "agency", or lack thereof, is tied to Mitsivarniannga. While animated, these entities lack the autonomy required of personhood from both Kalaallit and post-reformation European intellectual perspectives; they are not metapersons.

Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Nature of Mitsivarniannga's Tupilat as Material Ghosts and Metapersons

By framing Mitsivarniannga's tupilat within the classificatory systems of material ghosts and metapersons, I aim to point to the flimsy nature of the boundaries between the animate and the inanimate, the living and the dead, and challenge our notions of subjectivity and objectivity. As material ghosts, tupilat exist in the liminality between life and death, as cadaverous actors in social networks that mediate relationships between the living. Similarly, as metapersons, tupilat spirits blur ontological borders: possessing agency and a level of consciousness distinct from human-centric perspectives. While Mitsivarniannga's physical necro-assemblages lack the subjectivity that would grant them metaperson status, their animation by angakkuit challenges post-reformation European subject-object dichotomy.

The classification of Mitsivarniannga's tupilat within these frameworks serves as a catalyst for exploring the indeterminacy of the universe. By acknowledging the inbetweenness of

these entities, we are prompted to question fixed notions of realiti(es), embrace the multiplicity of perspectives that shape our understanding of the world, and rethink our preconceived notions of agency, consciousness, and personhood. Through this ontological exploration, we navigate the entangled web of humans, spirits, and the material world, gaining a greater understanding of the intersections of the physical and the metaphysical.

Conjuring Commodities: Transformation Through the Magic of the Sale

"Magic (…) doesn't just happen. It has to be conjured."- Shannon Dawdy in *The Prostitute and the Dandy; or, The Romantic Complications of Capitalism as Viewed from New Orleans*

"Suppose all the 'magical' things that make our current lives— all the appurtenances, meaningful and technical, whose substance and forces we did not make ourselves— were recognized by and as their humanized effects"- Marshall Sahlins in *The New Science of the Enchanted Universe: An Anthropology of Most of Humanity*

In delving into the realm of commodities, where entities have a phantom-like liveliness in the cultural imagination and a simultaneous deadness as mere market goods, Kalaallit "tupilat" navigate a nuanced space. When sold as souvenirs to tourists, I ask: are "tupilat" transformed into fetishes [38] through the agency of those who make and sell them, conjured to life through the act of the sale (Dawdy, 2017, 179)? Through the lens of the fetish, do Kalaallit artists selling "tupilat" representations act as facilitators between spirituality and the market, transforming "tupilat" subjectivities? I do not have the answers to these questions, for this, further ethnographic research and collaboration with Kalaallit community members is necessary. Instead, I will discuss the theoretical narratives surrounding these inbetween commodities and introduce readers to the rhizomatic roots of these queries.

While commonly associated with Indigenous cosmologies, fetishism is arguably universal. In *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, Bruno Latour posits that the empirical

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[38] The idea of the fetish, coming from the Portuguese *feitiço,* is "proper to neither West African nor Christian European culture" (Pietz, 1987, 240), and is in its "essence hybrid and inbetween" (Basu, 2017, 7).

According to Alfonso Maurizio Iacono in *The History and Theory of Fetishism* (2016, 88), there are three definitions of fetishism:

a) Fetishism is the name given to the cult of so-called savage and/or primitive peoples who worshipped inanimate beings and/or animals (de Brosses).
b) Fetishism is the name given to the attribution of things commodities of what are in fact social relations (Marx).
c) Fetishism is the name given to that perversion that replaces the normal sexual object with one of its parts or something that belongs to it (Freud)"

I will be focusing on the entanglements of the first two definitions.

methods of traditional Western science are fetishistic, using the example of experiments carried

out in French chemist and pharmacist Louis Pasteur's laboratory. In an experiment, when a

scientific hypothesis is confirmed, it becomes a fact, and the fact gains autonomy within the

system that created it. Latour compares this to how European colonizers classified West Africans

as fetishists for producing "objects" and viewing them as autonomous entities that magically

created themselves. He emphasizes how Western science, built upon empirical methods,

constructs "facts", and treats them like they have a life of their own. Thus, there is a false

dichotomy between "modern" [39] Western societies (non-fetishists) and "non-modern" non-

Western societies (fetishists) because both groups attribute autonomy to the "objects" that they

have constructed. Mauss echoes this sentiment in *The Gift,* claiming that even in the West, there

is a "powerful contemporary tendency (…) to regard the world of things as inert and mute, set in

motion and animated, indeed knowable, only by persons and their world" (Appadurai, 1986, 4).

Differing drastically from post-reformation European intellectual understandings of Cartesian

subject-object dichotomy, this framing of the fetish is indicative of the multiplicity and evolution

of thought within any given context. And while contradictory, this shift opens the door to new

tupilat possibilities.

By framing the commodity as a fetish in *Das Kapital*, Karl Marx points to the

contradictory nature of societies that consider themselves to be above the worship of objects,

assumed to be characteristics of "primitive" religions (Stallybrass, 1998, 186). As Peter

Stallybrass writes "to fetishize commodities is, in one of Marx's least-understood jokes, to

reverse the whole history of fetishism. For it is to fetishize the invisible, the immaterial, the

supra-sensible. The fetishism of the commodity inscribes immateriality as the defining feature of

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[39] I am not stating that Western societies are more modern than their Indigenous counterparts. I have placed modern and non-modern in quotations to highlight that these are labels that have been heavily influenced by both historical and current colonial entanglements.

capitalism" (Stallybrass, 1998, 184). Thus, within capitalist systems, the value of a commodity is not simply based on its physical properties or its possible utilities, but also on the symbolic and intangible meanings that it is tied to within market exchange.

In dissolving the flimsy borders between fetishists and non-fetishists, subjects and objects, it is essential to acknowledge the role of context in forming the autonomy of an "object". Framed in a Bohrian fashion, the ontological status of any entity depends on its experimental apparatus, the framework of understanding through which its community perceives the world. As Judith Butler and Stephan Palmié argue, "'the 'coherence' and 'continuity' of 'the person' are not logical or analytical features of personhood, but rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility" (Palmié, 2023, 55; Butler, 1990, 17). Personhood, as well as the separation between persons and things, is defined by its milieu; everything is socially designed. Just as other "objects", commodities exist in the inbetween—shaped by the angle at which they are perceived—inherently indeterminate in their ontological nature. The nature of a commodity is in a constant flux of becoming [40]. When grasped as objects, they become objects. And when understood as entities with subjectivity, they become entities with subjectivity.

The Commodity and the Milieu

In *Das Kapital*, Marx asserts that the commodity is bestowed with sensory and affective agency, forming relationships that are not limited to economic exchange. The commodity "communicates, speaks of individual stories, of the bodies that have passed through them, and of the interactions of these bodies" (Schuler, 2023, 223) and becomes "an agent: it affects the subject, it communicates with those who can no longer just verify that they possess them. Even away from its economic fetish, the commodity continues to communicate: like animistic

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[40] According to Eduardo Kohn (2007), *becoming* entails the blurring of ontological boundaries, with the qualities of entities dislodged from the bodies that produce them.

elements and fetish objects, the commodity acquires a certain equivalence with the subjects with whom they come into contact" (Schuler, 2023, 225). The commodity is a vehicle that carries the traces of its milieu, of who and what it encounters: living and dead, human and not-human. Similarly, Walter Benjamin (1968) posits that things are not just inert, passive objects, but instead are made up of hidden powers, tensions, and magic that are being exchanged. It is a web of social forces, and accordingly it can be understood as a vector of potential agency and subjectivity. A commodity is more than a mere object, as Ian Schuler argues, it is "a condensation of social forces. (...) It can go beyond representation and become creative in the sense of a transformation of the relations that define it" (Schuler, 2023, 228). Thus, while the commodity takes the shape of a physical entity, the "commodity-form" is unrelated to its tangible nature (Marx 1996), tied to the social networks it inhabits. It is limiting to argue that "non-living" beings cannot be social, "they are constituted in relations with others. They react; they are transformed. There is no reason not to extend social theory to rocks and rivers" (Tsing, 2013, 28-29), or in this case, commodities.

Commodity Fetishism

According to Marx (1996), the commodity is formed through value. In addition to its use value, it is a material object with specific properties that makes it a consumer item or a means of production. That is to say, as well as "performing a technical function in the process of material production, the commodity also performs the social function of connecting people" (Iacono, 2016, 119). Thus, within capitalist economies, material "objects" take a social form when they adopt the characteristics of the commodity. These social relations are embedded within a commodity's exchange value, or its fungibility in the market. It is this exchangeability that allows the commodity to behave as an actor in a capitalist social network. In his analysis of

Marx's *Das Kapital*, Michael Taussig (1980) writes "a palace is equal to a certain number of shoes, just as a pair of shoes is equal to a certain amount of animal skin" (Schuler, 2023, 222). By this he means that the social interactions between human actors can be disguised as the social interactions between "things". Marx argues that when a commodity becomes a fetish, it detaches itself from the processes entailed in its material production and gives the appearance of having originated autonomously, as if possessing its own inherent rationality. However, by proposing the concept of commodity fetishism, Marx posits that the "spell" of its fungibility should be deconstructed, so that the commodity "reappears in its concrete material form – as an effect of the organized labor, of the productive process, that shaped it" (Schuler, 2023, 222). The commodity, then, is a "crystallization of social labor" (Iacono, 2016, 119) and represents a sort of "social hieroglyphic" (Esposito, 2015, 83) in which the natural qualities of the "object" are instead an assemblage of its social relations.

Marx's concept of commodity fetishism posits that we attribute agency to commodities when they are really just things, the magical fetish is "a metaphor for the trick that the commodity plays" (Tsing, 2017, 219). While commodity fetishism can be framed as an "obfuscation of the alienated social relations of production" (Dawdy, 2017, 182), Dawdy argues that within transactions in the market, the social webs of consumption are in fact alive with affect and relationality. Speaking with Achille Mbembe, while production creates, exchange transforms (2019, 478). And as Marx implies, there is "a form of magic in the material transformations that capitalism performed" (Stallybrass, 1998, 200). The commodity is thus transmuted: enlivened and imbued with agency through its sale. It is through this exchange that social relations are built, connecting agential actors within a given network. Agency is not inherent to commodities but exists between them and the subjects they interact with (Tsing 2014). Commodities are

designed to be agentive: to be actors within their given social networks and maintain interdependent relationships with those who make, use, and buy them.

"Tupilat" as fetishes

"Tupilat" carvings, as tangible symbols of Kalaallit cosmologies, hold deep cultural significance within Kalaallit communities. They are "a reminder of culture" (Anonymous 2), with "some of the stories of the myths being reproduced in the art (…) a really important bridge between the oral histories and myths and artistic practices of today (Anonymous 3). While their cultural importance is irrefutable, "tupilat" value is often informed by their exchange value in the market, rather than their roles as cultural arbitrators. According to Marx, when commodities like "tupilat" are marketed as souvenirs, their true meaning and context is obscured, reducing them to mere objects of consumption. While not understood as such by the Kalaallit, from the standpoint of the Western tourist, "tupilat" are transformed into tokens of their experiences in Kalaallit Nunaat and divorced from their broader cultural context. In this way, the essence of the "tupilat" is commodified, transmuting them into fetish objects that embody not only their material form but also the desires and experiences of those who consume them. I argue that this act of consumption grants the "tupilat" a form of agency, allowing them to influence and shape the narratives and identities of their consumers. Through this process, "tupilat" transcend their status as mere artifacts, emerging as agentive participants within the exchanges between Kalaallit artists and Western tourists. Thus, as commodity fetishes, "tupilat" are not passive things nor simply objects, but rather dynamic entities endowed with agency, capable of mediating relationships and evoking diverse interpretations within the complex tapestry of commodity culture. A "tupilak" carving is in effect a congealment of its social web, performing the function of connecting other actors in the network. These entities are enlivened and embedded with

agency through exchange—the magic of the sale—rippling the fabric of their ontological makeup.

Each "tupilak" carving is a piece of unique art, existing within a nexus of agency (Gell 1998) in which it can be an actor or be acted upon, agent or patient. These entities can take many forms and have various effects on one another, but Alfred Gell posits that "one may thus see an art object in the same way as one may see a person" (Strathern, 1999, 17) regarding its role as an actor in a social network. While from a Cartesian ontological standpoint, agency is rarely applied to "inanimate" beings due to an erroneous assumption that agency is strictly linked to intention, Gell and Latour argue that one must simply look at the effects of entities upon each other. "Things" and "persons" can both exist as equally influential actors within their social webs. Kalaallit artists engaged in the sale of "tupilat" carvings function as human actors and mediators within the entangled social network of the souvenir market. The artists work in collaboration with other-than-human actors—"tupilat"— transforming them into entities that participate in and act with other subjects within the network. Through the process of creating these entities, carvers infuse "tupilat" with symbolic meaning and aesthetic qualities drawn from Kalaallit cosmologies and traditions, endowing them with agency and influence within the social web. Simultaneously the artists negotiate economic exchange within the network, participating in the production, distribution, and sale of "tupilat" carvings. Through the establishment of relationships with "tupilat" buyers and collectors, Kalaallit artists shape the flow of commodities and resources within the network and dictate the value of "tupilat" within the marketplace. This begs the question: as entities imbued with both cultural significance and community value, how do "tupilat" carvings navigate the intricate dynamics of exchange and consumption, shaping experiences and perceptions within the social fabric of these networks? I argue that the agency of

"tupilat" extends beyond their material form, contributing to the construction and negotiation of cosmological meanings and identities within the context of Kalaallit-tourist interactions.

The ontological status of a "tupilak" carving is shaped by the angles at which it is perceived, it is in a constant state of becoming. When an entity is understood as a fetish, whether it be as a commodity fetish (Marx 1996), a form of religion in which animals or "objects" are endowed with magical subjectivities (De Brosses 2017), or even as a perversion where a sexual object is replaced by one of its parts or something that belongs to it (Freud 1905), "it's made to perform the work of an epistemological crowbar" (Palmié, 2023, 38), breaking down rigid ontological frameworks that restrict alternative interpretations. In this way "tupilat", just as other commodities, are indeterminate and are constantly in flux. They emerge within a rhizomatic network, with tendril-like branches meandering through the realms of Kalaallit cosmology, ontology, and social interactions. Just as a rhizome propagates through entangled branches and offshoots, "tupilat" resonate through multi-faceted connections with those who make and buy them, shaping and being shaped by the cultural landscape in which they are situated. Through the framework of rhizomatic indeterminacy, "tupilat" are therefore fluid in their classification and interpretation. Similar to the ways in which a rhizome destabilizes hierarchical structures of understanding through horizontal dissemination (rather than vertical), "tupilat" representations subvert conventional boundaries and hierarchies, embodying a dynamic interplay of agency and multiplicity.

Conclusion

"In dialectical fashion, ghosts and monsters unsettle Anthropos, the Greek term for 'human,' from its presumed center stage in the Anthropocene by highlighting the webs of histories and bodies from which all life, including human life, emerges"- Tsing, Swanson, Gan, and Bubant in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*)

In unpacking the ontological status of an entity, it is essential to "unmask the doctrines of objectivity" (Haraway, 1988, 778) that impedeour understandings of what constitute truth(s). Ways of knowing and forms of "truth" are formed from positional perspectives: the construction of knowledge systems is positional, and objectivity is located in a particular context. Thus, "objectivity cannot be about fixed vision" (Haraway, 1988, 588) and our positionality is inherently tied to what is possible to know. We must be open to the existence of multiple truths and the important roles of perspective and mutually exclusive knowledge systems on umwelt [41] to have a fuller understanding the world and its phenomena. Put simply, our realiti(es) are a translation of the phenomena we observe, perception is always partial and subjective. This constructionist epistemology can be likened to the Saussurean formula in which the "point of view creates the object—the subject being the original, fixed condition whence the point of view emanate" (Viveiros de Castro, 2004, 476). What is constituted to be reality and truth is constructed through what we "see", our positional perspective. In other words, reality is not determined by variance in representations of the world, it is determined by how it is engaged with, "not just on the basis of different conceptual schemes or even language games and the forms of life of which they are part, but in realizing that subjects and objects of knowledge were part and parcel of the same (however contingent) constellations" (Palmié, 2023, 33). Our

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[41] Umwelt is the subjective world or environment as experienced by an organism (von Uexküll 1934).

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understanding of the world is shaped by not just our conceptual frameworks or language, but also by how we engage and participate with it as part of a larger interconnected system.

This is the basis of rhizomatic indeterminacy: an epistemological approach that acknowledges the inherent inbetweeness and multiplicity of knowledge production, as well as the entangled nature of realiti(es). The framework posits that the umwelt that constitute reality are not based on objectivity or a fixed truth but are instead shaped by the relationship between the observer and observed, measurement and interpretation. Similar to the rhizome, where multiple entry points and connections exist, the experimental apparatus chosen determines the nature of an observed phenomena. The selection of a frame of perception opens different pathways of observation and allows for a multiplicity of understandings of the phenomena studied. As complementary phenomena, different frames of understanding are mutually exclusive: to shift one's angle of perception thus constitutes a phenomenological gestalt switch.

Understood through the lens of rhizomatic indeterminacy, traditional Kalaallit and post-reformation European intellectual ontological and cosmological refractions are simultaneously incommensurable and complementary. Kalaallit refractions are based in animistic understandings of the world in which inua inhabit natural phenomena such as animals, plants, and landscapes; nearly everything can be an other-than-human entity that exhibits forms of agency and subjectivity. However, there is a clear distinction made within the Kalaallit cognitive system between other-than-human beings that can coexist with humans and have agency similar to humans and other-than-human beings that are created by humans for the sole purpose of carrying out their will. Tupilat spirits can be classified as agential entities prior to being assembled into their tangible forms, but once assembled into its physical manifestation it becomes one spiritual, non-agentive phenomena.

Mitsivarniannga's tupilat necro-assemblages, then, possess spiritual vitality but lack human-like agency; operating solely within the parameters set by their creators. In the traditional Cartesian, post-reformation European intellectual phenomenology of subjectivity, there is a divide between persons (subjects of recognizable capacities and rights) and things (objects of their exercise). In order to be classified as a person and thus have subjectivity, an entity must have agency: the ability to define oneself as a person and an awareness of the consequences of one's actions. Through this lens of understanding, concrete tupilat assemblages would be considered as objects, rather than agentive beings that contain consciousness or the ability to define themselves as persons; they do not possess agency in the same way that human beings do. Therefore, any behavior a tupilak may exhibit, such as attacking its creator's enemy, would be caused by its creator and separate from the tupilak being itself. These starkly different conceptions of reality can co-exist and contribute to the "truth" of the tupilat. The angles of understanding create different routes of perception and allow for multiple perspectives of Mitsivarniannga's tupilat assemblages, adding to the indeterminacy and inbetweenness of their properties.

One frame to consider when discussing Mitsivarniannga's tupilat is that of material ghosts (Dawdy 2020): commodity relics made with human remains that act as social agents within social networks. Shannon Dawdy's material ghosts are entities created using cremated human beings and designed to facilitate relationships with the deceased, emphasizing the porous boundary between life and death, object and subject. Although these entities are produced and marketed like commodities, they transcend the status of objects, they are agentive actors in the lives of those who possess them. The material ghosts I describe differ from Dawdy's in that they are not commodities in a strict sense, nor are they tied to the subjectivity of the human remains

they contain. Instead, they exist in the rhizomatic inbetween: as quasi-commodities and quasi-objects imbedded with ghostly vitality. Mitsivarniannga's tupilat occupy the liminal area between the physical and the metaphysical, characterized by their ability to transcend traditional boundaries and categories. This magical ambiguity is exactly what makes them agentive and "spiritually potent" (Dawdy, 2020, 209), evoking a sense of uncertainty harkening back to the indeterminate nature of light in Bohr's theories. When considering the rhizomatic nature of knowledge production, it becomes clear that we can recognize these tupilat assemblages as dynamic entities that cannot be easily defined, existing in a state of constant flux and interaction with their milieu.

Another lens through which to interpret Mitsivarniannga's tupilat is as metapersons (Sahlins 2022): other-than-human subjects endowed with magical powers and person-like consciousness. While tupilak spirits qualify as other-than-human people through the animistic frames set forth by Sahlins and Viveiros de Castro, they lose their capacity for agency after their congealment within physical assemblages. Thus, Mitsivarniannga's tupilat, while alive in the sense that they can interact with the world around them, lack the autonomy required of personhood and as metapersons. Through rhizomatic indeterminacy, the malleable metaphysical status of tupilat spirits challenges reductionist frameworks that aim to compartmentalize multiple realiti(es) into one understanding the world. This multiplicity, phenomenological refractions, fosters a rhizomatic approach to agency and personhood in which cultural understandings of the world resist hierarchical categorization. On the other hand, Mitsivarniannga's tupilat necro-assemblages cannot be easily categorized, encouraging us to embrace the indeterminacy innate in constructions of personhood and agency. While acknowledging the deep interconnectedness of diverse belief systems and the fluidity of realiti(es), Mitsivarniannga's tupilat assemblages'

inability to be categorized as metapersons within these contexts is but one of many possible constituents that construct their "truth".

In the world of commodities, "tupilat" carvings exist in a liminal ontological space. I question if these commodities are transformed into fetishes through the agency of those who make and sell them and conjured to life through the act of the sale (Dawdy, 2017, 179). When refracted through the lens of the commodity fetishism, do Kalaallit artists act as mediators within a spiritual economy, transforming "tupilat" subjectivities through relationships within Kalaallit-tourist social networks? To answer this, further research and ethnography is necessary. However, I can say that the ontological status of a "tupilak" carving is determined by the angles at which it is perceived, indeterminate and in constant flux. Similar to rhizomatic propagation via entangled tendrils and offshoots, "tupilat" resonate through multi-faceted connections: shaping and being shaped by their milieu, fluid in their classification and interpretation.

What is clear is that it is impossible, perhaps even foolish, to attempt to understand the world as determinate or to constrain it within the rigid boundaries of a singular reality. To perceive the world, then, we must resist hegemonic homogenization in the navigation of rhizomatic complexities. As errant explorers, we cannot see or know something in its entirety, for what is universal?

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