

ISLANDS AND ICE

Rethinking Island Studies from the Polar Regions

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A recent collection of short stories entitled *2040* and published in the Allatta! series, a platform for young Greenlandic authors writing in Kalaallisut and Danish, imagines Greenland in the year 2040, with illustrations by Greenlandic artists. One of them shows an entirely green Greenland surrounded by a blue ocean – with pictograms of a beach and palm trees, as well as a car, a city, and factories. In this image, Greenland looks like a tropical island. The vision weds two representational traditions. On the one hand, it taps into a vast repository of utopias set on tropical islands. On the other, it also connects with the less well-known tradition of the polar utopia, which goes back to the Hyperboreans of Greek mythology, a happy people living beyond the north wind. Since then, polar utopia has re-emerged in many contexts including early modern utopia (Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* [1666]), 18th and 19th Century polar romance (notably the idea of a warm polar ocean beyond the Arctic ice), and, most recently, climate fiction (see Hansson, 2015). Thus, Tobias S. Buckell's *Arctic Rising* (2012) imagines a future in which Greenland is “a natural resources superpower” and various experimental societies are located in a “semi-country and series of ports... called Thule” on “an island of ice floating around the actual Pole” (in Hansson, 2015: 75). Buckell's novel thus combines polar utopia with another imaginary that goes back to classical antiquity, namely the idea of Ultima Thule, which became synonymous with the northern limit of the world since the Greek Pytheas's report in the 4th Century BC of an island far north of Great Britain, located near the frozen ocean.

Like the image of a tropical Greenland in *2040*, this thematic section of *Shima* moves between the tropics and the Earth's polar regions. An overwhelming majority of scholarly publications within the interdisciplinary field of Island Studies tends to focus on islands in the tropical and sub-tropical parts of the world. In western cultural imaginaries, too, islands are more frequently envisioned as tropical spaces and most classics of island fiction are set in warm waters (think of *The Tempest* [c1610], *Paul et Virginie* [1788], *Robinson Crusoe* [1719], *Treasure Island* [1883] or *L'isola del giorno prima* [1994]). In the wake of recent debates related to global warming and melting polar ice caps, however, the Arctic and Antarctic regions have gained increasing public visibility. Scientists have turned to the climate archives of the Greenlandic and Antarctic ice sheets while political and economic actors look to the increasingly navigable polar seas, notably the Arctic Ocean, to monitor possibilities of resource extraction and new shipping routes. Climate change connects polar and tropical islands in material ways. While global warming happens at a much faster pace in the Arctic and Antarctic regions, the low-lying islands of the Pacific and Indian Oceans, such as the coastal islands in the Gulf of Bengal or the Maldives, are most affected by the sea-level rise caused by ice melting in the polar regions. In this geopolitical and environmental context, there has also been an increasing number of fictional representations of polar islands, among them Kim Stanley Robinson's novel *Antarctica* (1999), Georgina Harding's *The Solitude of Thomas Cove* (2007), Alexei Popogrebski's film

How I Ended This Summer (2010), Buckell's already mentioned *Arctic Rising* (2012), Xavier Gens's film *Cold Skin* (2017), and the British TV series *Fortitude* (2015-2018).

Polar research has a lot to offer to Island Studies, and vice-versa. There are various reasons for this. For one thing, islands are arguably the most important landforms in the polar regions. In the absence of an Arctic continent, all landmasses that are located entirely in the Arctic (understood as an ecological region rather than one defined by a line on the map) are islands, among them what is usually considered to be the world's largest island (Greenland). The southern hemisphere has a polar continent, but Antarctica – like Australia – is frequently referred to as an 'island continent.' While the Antarctic region has no permanent residents, many of its research stations are located on the islands and ice shelves that surround Antarctica, such as the South Shetland Islands, Alexander Island, Ross Island (which hosts McMurdo, the largest Antarctic station), and Ross Ice Shelf.

Furthermore, rethinking the planet from its polar regions can bring new perspectives to what has been termed the "archipelagic turn" in island studies (see, among others, Pugh, 2013). Thus, for instance, as Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens write in *Archipelagic American Studies*, "the Americas' continental presumptions have tended to disrupt a hemispheric consciousness of Canada's Arctic Archipelago as constituted by 36,000 islands" (2017: 9). Adriana Craciun's reframing of Arctic exploration history is similarly informed by an archipelagic perspective on what she terms the "labyrinth" of (imagined) Northwest Passages to the Pacific and the texts related to it. For Craciun, engaging with these "archipelagos of inscriptions and artifacts across and outside books, disciplines, and authors" (2016: 232) challenges teleological views of Arctic exploration as a forward march centred around the fantasy of a single passage between oceans and continents. The circumpolar view of the Arctic and of Arctic cultures that has played an increasingly important role in indigenous political movements and cultural life can also be thought of as an archipelagic challenge to structures and institutions based on continentalist thinking and the borders of the nation-state (think of the Inuit Circumpolar, the Arctic Winter Games, and the leading role of Arctic peoples in global indigenous rights movements). For Craciun, "[t]he circumpolar Arctic... reaches out beyond territoriality in ways uniquely possible in a polar world encircling an ocean" (2009: 113) – in "connecting Asia, North America and Europe [it] peripheralizes all of the imperial centres of the northern hemisphere" (ibid: 104). The drawing of a polar projection map by Sámi artist Hans Ragnar Mathisen (Keviselie) entitled 'Davviálbmogat' (1990) portrays a fluid archipelagic Arctic without national borders, where regions flow into each other in the colours of the Northern Lights, where islands, peninsulas, and continental coastlines converge around a centre of concentric yellow circles, evoking the sun or a circular island, while the bulk of continental landmasses are outside the frame (cf. Craciun, 2009: 112).

The islands, archipelagos, and ice-shelves of the polar regions destabilise the territorial logic of the Westphalian state system in other ways, too. Greenland is a case in point: politically, it is an autonomous territory of a European state; geographically, it is much closer to North America; geologically, it belongs partly to the North American plate and partly to the Eurasian plate; culturally, it is linked to the North American and the Eastern Siberian Arctic; economically, it is tied to Denmark; in handball, the national team of participates in the Pan American Championship. Further east, the Svalbard Archipelago did not belong to any nation state before it became a demilitarised zone under Norwegian sovereignty in the 1920 Svalbard Treaty, which granted the other signatories (notably the Soviet Union) rights of commercial exploitation. In the southern hemisphere, South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands are a British Overseas Territory but are also

claimed by Argentina. More generally, the materialities of polar geography challenge territoriality; as Philip Steinberg and Berit Kristoffersen argue, “the production of static ontologies through cartographic representations becomes particularly problematic in an icy environment of extraordinary temporal and spatial dynamism” (2005: 625).

The uncertain territorial and legal status of ice shelves, ice islands, and icebergs adds to these ontological confusions. We might think, for instance, of the enigmatic ice islands discovered by both the Soviet and the US Air Force in the late 1940s and early 1950s, named T-1, T-2, and T-3 by the latter. While these islands, as N. N. Zubov writes about T-1 in the Russian journal *Priroda*, “from the air had an appearance so suggestive of ordinary Arctic islands that this was what it was taken to be,” it soon “became apparent that this ‘island’ was changing its position” (1955: 2). This questioning of the “island’s” status by placing it in quotation marks is echoed by Kaare Rodahl in *Scientific American*: “[b]ut the ‘island’ was in motion!” (1954: 41) The establishment of a manned meteorological station on T-3 (also known as ‘Fletcher’s Ice Island’) by the US in 1952 speaks to the entwinement of military strategy and Arctic research in the early Cold War (see Farish, 2006). Circling the Arctic Ocean like Allan Gordon and Nancy the polar bear on their iceberg in James Hogg’s 1837 novella *The Surpassing Adventures of Allan Gordon*, the station both participated in the domestication of the Arctic – the North Pole, concludes Rodahl, “has lost the terror of the unknown” (1954: 45) – and unsettled Western territorial and institutional frameworks when an electronics technician shot and killed his boss at the station: “[b]ecause of its location, it was unclear what state, if any, had jurisdiction to try the case” (Steinberg et al. 2015: 45).

It is, perhaps, in the fantastic geographies of fiction and art that the dynamic materialities of the polar regions can best unfold their subversive force. As colonial exploration increasingly pushed north and south in attempts to map and claim polar islands for various national territories, some fictional texts went in the opposite direction. Thus, a late 19th Century account of a legendary island that first appeared on maps in the 15th Century (Higginson, 2006: 99-100) by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, ‘The Isle of Satan’s Hand,’ constructs a highly mobile and indeterminate geography. The island “constantly change[s] place” (ibid: 57) and reaches out to crush boats in a conflation of volcanic and icy imaginaries. As the island finally topples over like the icebergs around it, “the whole water boiled for leagues around, as if both earth and sea were upheaved” (ibid: 58). A similar superimposition of heat and cold can be found in a group of fictional islands that respond to centuries of exploration in the South Pacific in search of the mythical Southern Continent, Terra Australis, and, later, 19th Century attempts to push further and further south. Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), whose protagonist’s last landfall on his journey towards the South Pole is on the island of Tsalal, is an influential novel in this textual archipelago. In Tsalal, he and his companions encounter a “vast chain of apparent miracles” (1999: 169), before they are swallowed by a cataract in an increasingly hot, milky sea, surrounded by white mist and a white powder that seems to be something between snow and ashes. Various fictional texts expand Poe’s fictional archipelago and its hybrid geography, notably Jules Verne’s *An Antarctic Mystery* (1897) and Charles Romyn Dake’s *A Strange Discovery* (1899), which projects a warm polar sea of over 200 islands with a volcanic island at the South Pole (Figure 1).



Figure 1: The Antarctic archipelago in Charles Romyn Dake’s *A Strange Discovery* (1899)

Other creative re-mappings of the polar regions are more overtly political. Thus, a map entitled ‘Denmark’ (2004) by Inuk Silis Hoegh and Asmund Havsteen-Mikkelsen shows Denmark as a Greenlandic colony (Figure 2). The map depicts Qallunaat Nunaat (‘the land of the white people/Danes’) as an Arctic archipelago with mountains and ice sheets that resemble those of Greenland. Its archipelagic appearance is underscored by the fact that the Jutland peninsula is cut off from continental Europe, and the Swedish mainland does not appear (instead, we only see the blue sea). The cities, seas, ice sheets, glaciers, and coastal regions carry the names of well-known Greenlandic personalities from different time periods, such as politicians and artists, while others are given a range of other Greenlandic names, sometimes with the Danish names written added in small letters and in brackets, inverting Danish colonial naming and mapping practices. Copenhagen, for instance, is renamed as “Nunap Utsussua” (‘The Land’s Great Vagina’), mockingly evoking figurations of colonial lands as female bodies. Two small islands on the west coast of

Jutland are named ‘Independence I’ and ‘Independence II,’ referring not only to the Greenlandic independence movement but also to the archaeological names of the Paleo-Inuit cultures that settled Greenland several thousand years ago. The choice to attach these names to two of the westernmost islands of the Danish archipelago thereby signals the direction from which the early Inuit arrived in Greenland. Silig Hoegh and Havsteen-Mikkelsen’s map comments on a tradition of claiming islands through colonial cartographic practices that goes back to early modernity. In this, too, polar and tropical islands are linked, as both have long histories of suffering colonial oppression.

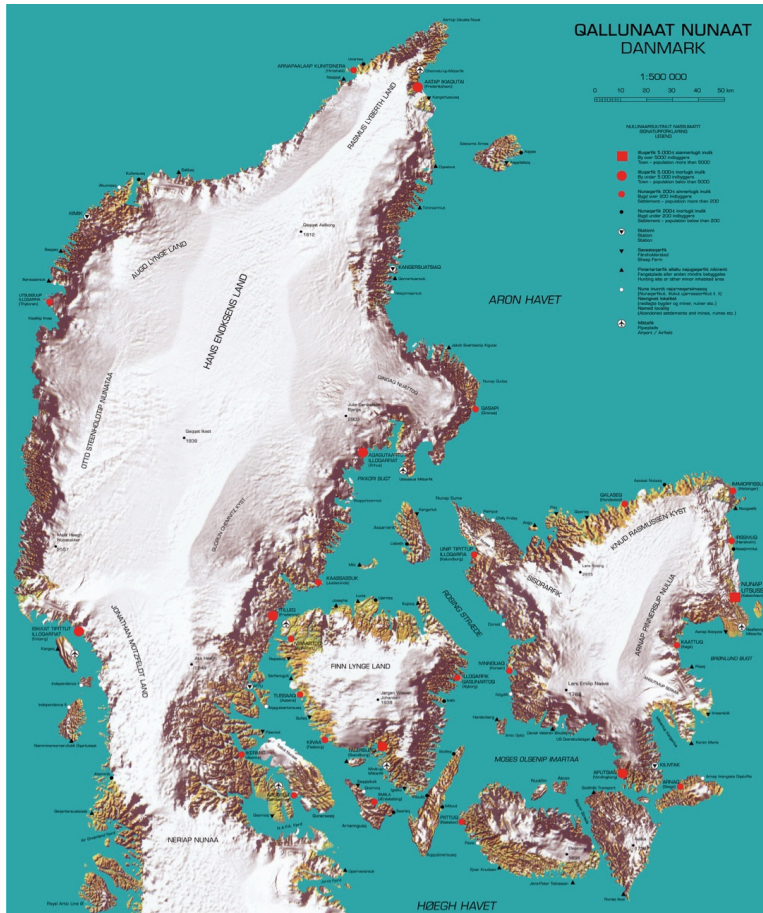


Figure 2: ‘Denmark’ (2004) by Inuk Silig Hoegh and Asmund Havsteen-Mikkelsen

This brings us back to the links between cold- and warm-water islands I started with. This link is also the subject of the first essay in this thematic section, Daniel Graziadei’s ‘Caribbean Snow and Ice: Exploring Literary Tropical-Arctic Island Relations,’ which traces the presence of snow, ice, and coldness in the writings of various Caribbean authors. As Graziadei demonstrates, these texts create surprising connections between Caribbean islands and the cold regions of the Earth to figure experiences of colonisation and diaspora, decolonise representation, and create global relations. If Graziadei is interested in how the poetics of snow and ice challenge stereotypical representations of tropical islands, Barney

Samson explores how literary phenomenologies of cold-water islands can question – and ultimately dissolve – appropriations of islands as vehicles of metaphor. In ‘Resisting Metaphor: A Phenomenology of Cold and Heat in Pincher Martin,’ he argues that William Golding’s lesser-known island novel presents us with a northern island that ultimately only exists in the bodily sensations of the protagonist and thereby questions assumptions of essential island identities. The next article, Johannes Riquet’s ‘Filming Bear Island: Arctic Island Narratives, Polar Exploration, and Poetic Geometry,’ is similarly interested in phenomenology’s potential to challenge conventional representations. Unlike Samson’s contribution, however, it focuses on the filmic life of an existing island, Bjørnøya in the Svalbard Archipelago. Examining the poetic geometries through which experiences of the Arctic island are mediated in a Cold War thriller and two recent documentaries, it offers a geocritical exploration of how these films interact with the materialities of polar geography to transform the spatial ideologies of island narratives.

The second group of articles focus on lived experiences of cold-water islands as well as the representational forms that mediate these experiences. Like Riquet’s essay, Eimear Tynan’s ‘Arctic Islands, Archival Exposures’ is invested in an expansive and multifocal exploration on the Arctic islands off the Norwegian mainland, including Bjørnøya (as well as Hopen and Jan Mayen). Alternating between historical photographs and site analysis, she includes her own fieldwork notes and drawings in an attempt to engage with the shifting coastlines of these islands through both human inscriptions and non-human objects and processes, thereby adding new perspectives to the discipline of landscape architecture. Hans Connor, Laurie Brinklow, and Adam Fenech’s ‘An Icy Layer of Isolation: Prince Edward Island’s Sea-Bound Particularity’ also discuss coastal experiences, yet the island they focus on is fully inhabited. Taking the old debate of island isolation v island interconnection as a starting point, their article investigates the complex sense of place emerging from the sea ice around the island – from the beginnings of European settlement to contemporary coastal erosion in the wake of climate change. With Michael Pearson’s ‘“Knowing” the South Shetland Islands: The Role of Sealers’ Charts,’ we leave the northern hemisphere and turn to the Antarctic. Carefully examining the charts and journals of early 19th Century sealers, Pearson is attentive to the differences between British and American contexts and argues for a nuanced understanding of the complex and sometimes contradictory interests that came together in the mapping and naming of the islands. As he demonstrates, these interests ranged from colonial appropriation and commercial exploitation to patronage and very practical concerns related to navigation.

Finally, Felicity Greenland and Philip Hayward’s contribution, ‘Ningen: The Generation of Media-Lore Concerning a Giant, Sub-Antarctic, Aquatic Humanoid and Its Relation to Japanese Whaling Activity,’ follows the erratic movements of a 21st Century mythical creature through (and beyond) sub-Antarctic waters and digital communication channels. Evoking icebergs in its whiteness and shape-shifting characteristics, the ningen, as Greenland and Hayward demonstrate, negotiates the politically charged discourse about Southern Ocean whaling. Greenland and Hayward’s engagement with the notion of the “aquapelagic imaginary” in sub-Antarctic waters is also significant in another regard. While there has been considerable critical debate concerning the manner in which the notion of the aquapelago extends concepts of islands and islandness into integrated aquatic and terrestrial spaces (see the online *Shima* anthology on the topic, nd), discussion of manners in which ice extends and/or complicates both islands and aquapelagos has been conspicuous by its absence. The contributions to this thematic section suggest manners in which the aquapelago concept can be developed to be more globally inclusive and the journal invites further exploration of this topic.

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