Thule as Frontier Commons, Contested Resources, and Contact Zones in the High Arctic

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ABSTRACT

Located in Northwest Greenland, the Thule region is a remarkable frontier zone. This article focusses on the undecided nature of the frontier in both time and space. The article explores the unstable ground upon which ‘resources’ emerge as such. The case is made in three analytical parts: The first discusses the notion of commons and the implicit issue of spatiality. The second shows how the region’s living resources were perceived and poses a question of sustainability. The third centres on the Arctic as a ‘contact zone’; a place for colonial encounters and a meeting ground between human and non-human agents.

KEYWORDS

Arctic commons, contact zone, environment, governance, resources, sustainability, Greenland

Introduction: The Frontier

Just over three decades ago, the anthropologist Hugh Brody suggested: ‘The history of the far north is the story of frontiers’ (Brody 1987: 189). This is an apt preamble to this article.

Over the past ten years, I have made regular field-visits to the Thule region in High Arctic Greenland seeking to understand how people live with the tangle of transitions that their community undergoes in these years of global warming and other developments that increasingly affect their landscape. The total number of inhabitants in this secluded region is ca. 730 (more than half of these are children), of whom ca. 650 live in the town of Qaanaaq, while the rest lives in the three remaining, ever dwindling, settlements elsewhere on the coast. From a few years back, I recall a conversation with a friend in Qaanaaq sitting on the steps to his house and wondering about a small airplane approaching overhead and aiming to land at the local airstrip. It was not one of the regular, weekly, flights, nor was it a chartered flight with yet another film-crew wanting to document ‘the

last Eskimos'. The residents would have known about that and been prepared, knowing full well their part in such a script. So instead, speculations went freely. The conclusion was that it was most likely a plane with mineralogists, just stopping over for fuel before proceeding further north; 'they are probably looking for rare earth metals, up there', my friend suggested. As it happened, the plane got damaged when landing in an area farther north of the town. After this, other small planes started passing through the local airport to bring spare parts. Two weeks later, the repaired plane returned, fuelled, and disappeared southwards – no one the wiser (at least locally) about the purpose of the trip. The following year, new-found minerals on Inglefield Land (up north) did in fact figure on the official Greenlandic map of mineral deposits, implicitly indicating the potentially rich resource base of a future independent Greenland.

The plane gave vent to a sense of living in a shifting terrain of potential resources, attracting the interest of outsiders of unknown provenance. In Qaanaaq this fuels both anxiety and hope. The older generation fear that fragile hunting grounds will be further disturbed, whilst those young people who do not believe in hunting's viable future, potentially see themselves as working in the emergent mining industry – in line with the dream of many Greenlandic politicians. In any case, nothing much happens right now. The landscape is forbidding, even while it warms, and in the process it emerges as a frontier between the already gone and the not-yet.

Seeing Thule through the analytic of the frontier not only points back to old visions of opening up new Arctic regions, as suggested for earlier times by Hugh Brody (1987: 191), giving access to hidden or untapped resources. Certainly, emerging energy resources are already fuelling new dreams in the Arctic (Nuttall 2010). However, the present moment affords a broader understanding of the analytical portent of 'frontier', as suggested by Anna Tsing in the following manner:

A frontier is an edge of space and time: a zone of not yet – not yet mapped, not yet regulated. It is a zone of unmapping: even in its planning, a frontier is imagined as unplanned. Frontiers aren't just discovered at the edge; they are projects in making geographical and temporal experience. (Tsing 2005: 28–29)

In this understanding, the frontier is not simply a *place* of potential gains, mostly from an outsiders' perspective, it is also a *time* of particular quality, between lost possibilities and not yet emerging opportunities. It is, therefore, not simply constituted by exploitative

outsiders (although they are at the doorstep), but also by insiders (who have been there all along) scanning the horizon for new ways to find income. This applies to the hunters in the Thule region, or *Avanersuaq* (meaning the ‘Big North’ in Greenlandic), who see themselves as placed between disappearing histories and future possibilities, making do with the resources that are available at the moment, but circumscribed by rapidly changing natural and geo-political environments.

The concept of frontier allows us to move both back and forth in the history of Thule, like the hunters do when comparing then and now. The name of Thule, bestowed on the place by outsiders, itself embodies many times and multiple perspectives; a sense of wildness that is both material and imaginative (Hastrup 2007). The local inhabitants evidently have their own view of the place. This is formatted as much by modern welfare state institutions (such as the school, the shop, the church, the nursing home, the police station, the airstrip, etc.) as by their traditional hunting occupations, family histories, and individual trajectories. The ‘frontier’ is an analytical device for discussing the lived ‘in-between-ness’ on various scales, temporal and spatial, not least owing to the massive socio-ecological implications of the changes in the Arctic cryosphere (Vincent et al. 2011).

In the following we shall explore the frontier in three analytical moves; the first, centring on the idea of commons, raises a question of spatiality. The second, centring on the living resources in the region, poses a question of sustainability. The third, centring on the contact zone, highlights a question of legibility. Together, these moves show how changing visions and practices reflect particular perceptions of the resources on the Arctic periphery in different historical periods.

High Arctic Commons: The Question of Spatiality

A persistent image of the High Arctic community is its extraordinary viability within a volatile natural environment, owing at least partly to an ingrained sense of equality including a vision of shared resources. An early visitor, Norwegian Eivind Astrup who was part of Robert Peary’s first expeditions, stressed that the community they met with in the late nineteenth century was ‘a community, where freedom, equality and brotherhood was not a distant and hopeless wish, but the genuine, true reality’ (Astrup 1895: 253). This view of a particular Arctic social space is confirmed in more detail by Peary himself, spending many

years in the region in the period from 1891 to 1909. This was mainly to fulfil his ambition of finding a way to the North Pole with the aid of the local hunters, whose skills truly impressed him. He writes:

There is no form of government among them, no chief, each man being supreme in his own family, and literally and absolutely his own master. Such a thing as real-estate interest is unknown to them. Every man owns the whole country and can locate his house and hunt where his fancy dictates. The products of the hunts are common property with slight limitations, as, for example, anything smaller than a seal is the property of the hunter who captures it; yet unwritten laws require him to be generous even with this, if he can do so without starving his own family. (Peary 1898, I: 492–493)

What transpires here is a notion of commons and of sharing the hunt, which surprised the frontiersmen arriving from places where different notions of ownership prevailed. In their view proper society was sedentary and possessions were more clearly delineated. This view has challenged anthropology since its inception (Hastrup and Olwig 2012). In the Arctic, a mobile lifestyle was a precondition for survival, as was equal access to the resources, Peary found.

The early explorers pushed back the frontier, or northwards as far as European interests in Thule went (and still go). They mistook local modes of managing nature's affordances for free access, also for newcomers looking for whales and other goods that were tradable in the south. Such extraction was clearly stretching the idea of 'commons', but it was part of an earlier European thinking of perceived no-mans-lands, sometimes leading to a 'tragedy of the commons', as famously argued by Hardin (1968). The tragedy reflected the misrepresentation of common property as an open source, free for everybody to exploit, to potentially deplete, or to turn into private property. For 'commons' to be viable, they must imply shared property rights and responsibilities by a particular group or community.

Such governance may have been invisible to southern visitors in the vast High Arctic landscape, where people were always few and the hunting grounds spread out on what seemed a limitless expanse. Here certain rules of sharing the catch with one's neighbours whose hunting luck had failed were expressed; this could go the other way some time in the future. Survival in this particular region hinged on a delicate sense of keeping the balance between immediate catch and future prospects. The future always depended on a strategy of non-depletion and of resources working locally. Commons require constant, collective attention to remain a resource.

In the Arctic, the landscape was always so volatile that newcomers from southern and more predictable climes could not even ‘see’ the local economy. As Brody suggests:

Hunters of the North were judged to have no real or viable economy of their own. This self-serving opinion removed, at an ideological stroke, any prospect for legal or moral opposition to European economic expansion into places where hunters lived. The possibility of a conflict of economic interest between frontiersmen and hunters were hypothesized into irrelevancy. (Brody 1981: 55)

The purported irrelevancy transformed the commons into a free space for colonizing activities. The need for regulated access to the resources, was a non-issue in the perception of the Arctic; the frontier was imagined as unplanned, as Tsing has it. In today’s Thule, the hunters remain masters of their terrain, at least to a degree, in spite of all kinds of outside interests. These interests proliferate partly in response to the emblematic nature of the place and its featuring as a showcase for global climate change, and thus it is seemingly an ideal setting both for studying a fossilized cultural form, prone to extinction, and for charting new commercial terrains – think only of the airplane incident above.

In the twenty-first century, the regulation of the Thule commons has been made increasingly visible, due to scientifically based quotas that have been imposed on key species, such as polar bear, narwhal, and walrus. These and many other resources are sustained by the North Water polynya, an open-water oasis in the ice-covered sea during winter, while unmarked during summer, that belongs to no one in particular, but which serves as a communal reserve for game (Hastrup 2016; Hastrup et al. 2018a, 2018b). For the subsistence hunters, access is equal and quotas are shared, but the hunt is increasingly disturbed both by environmental changes and by new traffic in the Arctic Seas. An attempt at regulating the latter has been made by the *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea* (UNCLOS):

States shall cooperate with each other in the conservation and management of living resources in the areas of the high seas. States whose nationals exploit identical living resources, or different living resources in the same area, shall enter into negotiations with a view to taking measures necessary for the conservation of the living resources concerned. (UNCLOS, Article 118)

The challenge in enforcing this ambition in the High Arctic is precisely the nature of ‘living resources’, as mobile as ever and not

respecting territorial boundaries, whereby ‘states’ become a dubious entity to reckon with. Even if, contrary to Peary’s time, proper national economies are now made to appear in formal regulations like the UNCLOS, such ‘planning’ of the frontier is impossible to implement – for the Greenlandic government or any other authority, although this is attempted in various ways. The ‘conservation’ of living resources of which the Convention speaks, remains a regulatory experiment for mapping out resource spaces, which, as Tsing (2005) suggests for frontiers in general, cannot really be mapped. Spatiality is clearly an issue in demarcation of rights of access in a fluid environment.

This also holds when we scale down to the North Water as such. In 2017 a North Water Commission was set up by the Inuit Circumpolar Council on behalf of the Canadian and Greenlandic neighbours of the polynya. In the process they agreed on a (West Greenlandic) name for the polynya: the *Pikialasorsuaq* (‘The Great Upwelling’). Naming is a precondition for claiming, and the new name effectively delineates a specific source of public goods and stresses the right of access for selected groups, at the cost of strategically narrowing the relevant space within which the itinerant resources live.

Other agents have also worked towards a demarcation of this place, by suggesting that the North Water region be recognized as a Natural Marine World Heritage site, in line with other UNESCO heritage and Biosphere Reserve projects that have been set in motion (Speer et al. 2017). The emerging intellectual challenge, once again, is to define the boundaries of a non-marked fluid space, and to distinguish between what is alien and what is native to this particular piece of the ocean; it depends on a framing that is not at all self-evident (cf. Helmreich 2009: 169). Hemming in a fluid space – in this case for protection – is a spatial gesture not a factual demarcation, a gesture that represents a shift from a top-down management of natural resources seen as a common pool, to a local management regime able to distinguish between different stocks of animals and different community needs – as had earlier happened for the polar bear (cf. Dowsley 2008).

This takes us back to the far from simple question of spatiality as implicit in the delineation of the commons (Moss 2014). As suggested, ‘commons [are] not so much found as produced’ (Blomley 2008: 320); commons is a form of place-making. This is true for any attempt at delineating bio-reserves, which is always bound up with a politics of space, whether seen from within, as a local protection of resources, or from without, as protected areas of global interest – or commercial

possibility. In other words, the spatiality of the commons is ‘not only the product of societal interpretations, preferences and power constellations, but also, conversely, shapes the options for managing the commons’ (Moss 2014: 464).

In Thule, the hunters have had their own measures of governance. While the UNCLOS aims at regulating the harvesting of the High Seas generally, the *Thule Law* (1929), to which the hunters in Thule have adhered for generations not only works on a different geographical scale but also with much more detailed management rules. One such rule is to make sure that narwhals are never hunted from motorboats or shot until after they have been harpooned and fastened by a line equipped with a sealskin floater. In that way the narwhals are neither scared away by the noise of engines, thus slipping away, nor wasted by potentially sinking or swimming away wounded. This is a rule, along with other rules to which the Thule hunters proudly adhere. It is worth noting that, so far, hunting sea mammals has provided the main income, sometimes supplemented with reindeer and arctic char; over the past ten years the hunters have found a new resource in halibut, fished with longlines through holes in the sea-ice, for selling as well as home consumption. The catch is frozen and may be carried south by larger ships, having passage through the ice-packed sea only for some two months during summer. A freezing plant has been established – offering a new kind of work for some.

While the hunters do not control the actual resources and their abundance, they seem to adjust effectively to the fluctuations of wild-life, and to the transition of the Arctic socio-ecological subsistence system (cf. Fauchald et al. 2017). In this context it is important to note how much they rely on a ‘diagrammatic reasoning’ to assess the possibility of game (Hastrup 2013). As another spatial technology it enables a kind of scenario planning, being ‘a disciplined practice of imagining *plausible* future events’ (Matthews and Barnes 2016: 13), built neither around UN conventions, nor scientific quotas or boundaries. The question of spatiality in the High Arctic commons remains a matter of social practice in a fluid world, defined by its mobile resources and allowing for either extending or shrinking the hunting territory according to circumstances. This is why an unlimited access to the entire coastal region is non-negotiable, even while more circumscribed spaces of new resources, such as minerals, may open up. The Thule commons cannot be sliced up or divided between different interest groups, given that so far hunting is the predominant source of income in this region. Some may not find it

worthwhile, and some move south to friends and family elsewhere in Greenland.

Living Resources: The Question of Sustainability

In the earliest historical report on people living in ‘The Arctic Highlands’ as the British naval explorer John Ross called the place where he first met the Thule Inuit in the nineteenth century, he shows a keen eye for the resources that could be of interest for the European market. There is nothing much in terms of vegetable products, he says (to his implicit agriculturalist readers), in fact, there is no vegetable food at all, but people make use of ‘the moss, which is found in greatest plenty, is six or eight inches in length, and when dried and immersed in the oil or blubber of the seal or sea-unicorn, serves for a wick, and produces comfortable fire for cooking and warmth as well as for light’ (Ross 1819: 118). For Ross, and other frontiersmen, such tiny elements of life were not really resources in the larger scheme of things.

This serves as a reminder that resources are never simply given; they are identified and classified according to particular knowledge regimes and interests (Rathwell et al. 2015; Bricet and Hastrup 2018). In the Thule region, the principal resources are living, animal species. This immediately links up the discussion of spatiality with the question of sustainability, the latter indirectly presupposing a bounded space and a clear sight of the future. These features seem to be implied by the *Brundtland Report* (1987) where sustainability is defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. In the rapidly changing environment of the High Arctic, the future is unknown, both in terms of animal presence and of human needs. This points us towards a notion of sustainability in the vein of Tsing, emphasizing that far from being just an issue for *human* generations to come it is, and must be, a multi-species affair (Tsing 2017: 62).

Living resources are only ‘resources’ at particular places and particular times, as acknowledged also by the early explorers in the region, assessing ‘resources’ in relation to potential international trade and commercial gains. John Ross mentions the possibility for some fishing. This would, however, only be possible for the brief months of open water during summer. He continues:

Besides this, it is more than probable, that a valuable fur trade may be established; numbers of black foxes were actually seen by the officers

and men, who were ashore at Crimson Cliffs, and also the traps used by the natives in catching them; and we were informed that the country abounded in them. There can be no doubt that people who are of so harmless a disposition as the Arctic Highlanders, might be easily instructed to collect these skins, which they do not seem to value, or make so much use of as those of the seal and the bear. The ivory of the sea-unicorn, the sea-horse's teeth, and the bear's teeth may also be considered as articles of trade. All these could be procured for European commodities, such as knives, nails, small harpoon-heads, pieces of iron, wood of any description, crockery ware, and various cheap and useful utensils and tools; both to the great benefit of the merchant, and to that of this secluded race of human beings. (Ross 1819: 119–120)

That furs were not valued is a mistake; they were always used in clothing, but they remained invisible as resources unless stacked, apparently. What Ross suggests is actually a re-definition of the High Arctic commons as a 'resource frontier', in the sense discussed by Tsing much later: 'Most descriptions of resource frontiers take for granted the existence of resources; they label and count the resources and tell us who owns what. The landscape itself appears inert: ready to be dismembered and packaged for export' (Tsing 2005: 29). This is apt; the resources are mapped, counted, and envisaged as trade-goods, without any sincere consideration of the life lived locally from the totality of edibles and 'huntables'. The commons could be packed up piece-meal and make real money. Value was redefined in the process, singling out individual parts of the whole, and potentially threatening the long-term viability of particular species.

After Ross and Peary (and others) had made their assessments of local resources, a private trade-station was established in mid-district on the initiative of Knud Rasmussen in 1910. The station acknowledged people's recent dependence on foreign goods, such as rifles, ironware, cloth and so forth, and gradually formalized the trade relations between locals and newcomers. The Thule Station, lasting until 1953, also served as a mission, and in due course as a health station. It was relocated when an American airbase was built in the region, ousting people from this vital spot in their land; they were invisible to the strategists of the Cold War, who certainly considered these commons as free to be privatized, seeing that no state was actually present and that people moved around anyway (Hastrup 2017).

In the early twentieth century, walrus hunting had intensified thanks to foreigners, often actively hunting themselves and supplying local hunters with firearms as payment for furs and various kinds of help. Major slaughters occurred, not least by a headland called

Neqé (meaning ‘meat’), described in graphic detail by several authors, including Peary (1898, I: 421-422). Rasmussen added a celebration of Neqé in summer-time, writing how ‘Out there, in the deceitful ocean, blood-heavy walruses swim about as the living daily bread. They populate the waters, when the brief summer loosens the binds of the ice and opens for the exciting kayak-hunt’ (Rasmussen 1915: 14; translated from Danish by KH). What had been a long-term, local interest in the walrus hunt, sustaining both material and (probably) spiritual needs, since prehistory (Gotfredsen et al. 2018), had suddenly become a major sport also for outsiders. This affected the abundance of game in the region negatively, and spurred a new need for management of the commons. In 1929, the Thule law was instituted, as was the Hunters’ Council designed to administer it. The Thule law contained an important section on the protection of game:

Any free hunter may provide food and hides for himself and his family through hunting. But the game is no longer available in unlimited numbers. All over the world, free peoples have therefore decided that the game animals must be protected at those times of the year, when they are breeding, because there shall otherwise be less and less game for every year. In our land, it is particularly important to protect eider ducks, foxes and walruses against extinction, and any free hunter should be pleased to go along with such protective measure, because these animals otherwise would be extinct, when those people, who are children now, become adult. (*Thule Law* 1929: 98; translated by KH)

Then come the actual stipulations. I shall cite only one of them: ‘Walrus must not be shot by rifle, unless they have first been harpooned’ (E, § 28, stk. d). Implicit in the laws of protection is the fear of over-exploitation due to the new guns and the concomitant thirst for income that could be spent at the Thule trading station, making all sorts of provisions available, from ammunition, wood, pots, cloth, and sewing machines, to small boats with outboard motors. Fox skin and eiderdown in particular were valuable export goods. Given that shared resources had to be managed responsibly, wasting was generally unacceptable.

Today, resource management has become a field of study where the supremacy of the earlier external (‘objective’) point of view is now enriched by local or indigenous knowledge (e.g. Rathwell et al. 2015). Unintentionally, the well-meaning acknowledgement of ‘indigenous knowledge’ easily stifles the dialogue, or *bridging*, between indigenous and scientific knowledge systems. ‘We define bridging knowledge systems as maintaining the integrity of each knowledge system while

creating settings for two-way exchange of understanding for mutual learning' (Rathwell et al. 2015: 853). 'Integrity' here seems to signify closed knowledge systems, denigrating the ongoing conversation between locals and outsiders.

Today, there is a lively scholarly discussion of the changing hunting conditions in the Arctic, and it has recently been suggested that the spatial and temporal ramifications of the hunt are 'dynamic events that emerge, disappear, re-emerge (e.g., seasonally), and transform over space and time' (Flora et al. 2018: 245). This has led to a notion of 'resource spaces' of immediate analytical value when it comes to conceptualizing the dynamics of living resources, as equally owed to historical trajectories, fluctuations in ice-cover, animal movement, and to political and economic interests on various scales. The notion of resource space allows for an explicit acknowledgment of its dynamics, and adds an important dimension of temporality to the question of sustainability in the Arctic commons.

The proposed bio-sphere reserve, mentioned above, would possibly protect the wildlife, not least the marine mammals in the region, and regulate the access of tourist cruises that are likely to multiply as the ice dwindles and new passages open. It may even prevent high-tech explorations of the sea bottom, possibly already affecting the migration routes of narwhals for instance (Heide-Jørgensen et al. 2013). The question is where this leaves the hunters. In principle, the idea of a biosphere reserve would allow a certain degree of sustainable hunting – but the measure of this would be defined by outsiders. There is a potential friction here, between ancient local and modern global commons.

This reminds us that people in the High Arctic are still embodying the frontier, defined by its being in-between past certainties and future possibilities. They are left in a state of uncertainty in a landscape of 'unintentional design' – the result of 'overlapping world-making activities of many agents, human and not human' (Tsing 2015: 152). In the Thule region, the unintentionality of the design follows directly from the human dependence on *living* resources that must be protected and shared, but cannot be formally governed. Even sustainability becomes a contested concept in this resource landscape as has recently been thoroughly discussed on the basis of anthropological and biological observations and analysis (Andersen et al. 2018). Interestingly, the Thule hunters now claim to have actually invented the notion of sustainability. The Greenlandic government has also recently acknowledged this by expressing how: 'The principle of sustainability

originates in Greenland; the first provisions about sustainable use of game (*fangstdyr*) were formulated in the Thule laws, and these principles must be claimed and glorified' (Kielsen et al. 2016: 14; quoted in and translated from Danish by Andersen et al. 2018: 276.)

Even so, the notion of sustainability remains a concept of many meanings, depending on particular interests and scholarly perspectives. For biologists, seeking to generate trustworthy models of future abundance, it is a key issue, while for hunters (and anthropologists) it remains an issue of constant negotiation in relation to particular human livelihoods and elusive animal habitats (Andersen et al. 2018: 278).

In a larger perspective, questions of sustainability in this region are also linked intimately with the destabilized pattern of the sea-ice and hence of the relative accessibility of game at this time of suspension between a long-known and well-researched past, and a rapidly encroaching future of unknown nature. In the north, this suspension affects social welfare, irrespective of whatever national welfare schemes are in place as citizenry services.

Contact Zones: The Question of Legibility

In her work on travel writing and enculturation, Mary Louise Pratt defines contact zones as 'social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination, such as colonialism and slavery' (Pratt [1992] 2008: 7). This 'grappling' is a token of an initial, and mutual illegibility. Yet, there is always more to the contact zone than skewed understanding and lop-sided social relations, as suggested by James Clifford, refining Pratt's notion and discussing entanglements across borders and at various regional, national, and transnational levels. He continues, 'contact approaches presuppose not sociocultural wholes subsequently brought into relationship, but rather systems already constituted relationally, entering new relations through historical displacement' (Clifford 1997: 7). This view fits the notion of frontier zones, already working on the presumption of moving relations, responding to shifting historical placements. Even while staying in place, people in Thule's placement changed with each new encounter, pushing their horizon in new directions. This also alerts us to Donna Haraway's addition of natural-cultural and multispecies relations to Clifford's definition of the contact zone (Haraway 2008: 216–217). Here, the question of legibility further expands.

Contacts are of motley kinds, but they always involve emerging relations, not simply a repetition of old ones, whether defined as colonial or not. This we know from anthropology, where each encounter makes a first – with new theorizing to follow in its wake. For Thule we get a vivid sense of such first encounter as seen from Jean Malaurie's description of his own (first) arrival in 1951. Quoting his classics on Ultima Thule, he looks through the mists, and sees how the fabulous Thule becomes a reality.

This mysterious point of the globe was nakedly revealed through the mist. The decor was hostile, severe, pitiless. A rocky dirty shore, a small hospital, about twenty igloos [houses] covered with earth, a few Danish dwellings, rags and bits of packing cases scattered on the beach with bones and old saucepans—disillusion for the commentators. Thule, legendary, remote Thule. (Malaurie 1956: 29–30)

Malaurie blamed the trading station for destroying the 'true Thule' of his dreams; he resented the transformation that commerce and money had made to people's lives. 'By slowly awakening in the native new needs which only commerce can satisfy – needs that apparently will increase out of all proportion to local economic resources – the treaty every day increasingly subjugates him to a risky kind of exploitation' (ibid.: 49). The mercantile spirit of the trade station allegedly destroys the original solidarity of the group. Malaurie quickly moved north to the less infested settlement of Siorapaluk, where he lived for a year among 'real' hunters and their families. All while cherishing the traditional way of life, he – and they – were well served by the shop that had been stocked up for the year by the annual provision vessel that also took him there. What Malaurie (and other anthropologists, elsewhere) demonstrated – at least by implication – is how the contact zone is truly dynamic, moving with both people and times, and always up for a re-reading.

Thule remained on the margins of the state until very recently: it had its own law until 1963; only then was it incorporated into the general Danish/Greenlandic administrative system. It also remained untamed, as it were, and 'discovered' over and again. Such margins are not simply peripheral, under-determined spaces; they are also creative spaces asserting their own imagination of sovereignty (Das and Poole 2004). Malaurie, so well versed in the classics, was unable to see Thule's sovereignty for what it was; it was not legible to him. New forms of illegibility constantly emerge, in the granting of licenses to foreign companies, exploring unmapped mineral potentials of marginal landscapes – as exemplified by the small airplane-excursion with

which this article opened – licenses that come surprisingly cheap. It is also present in the discussion of hunting quotas, based on solid biological knowledge, yet never translated into numbers before it has passed political muster in government offices.

Another, scarier feature of illegibility is the pollution of the sea, affecting the game and consequently human health in the region (Arctic Assessment 2015). Here is a contact zone where systems already constituted relationally enter into new relations through historical displacement, to paraphrase Clifford's definition above. While previous contacts with outsiders, be they newcomers, colonialists, scholars, Danes, or representatives from the Greenlandic board of natural resources, were for all to see, the present, invisible contact zone surpasses them all in terms of its ominous implications. The accumulating contamination in marine mammals on the higher trophic levels is reaching frightful levels, undermining both the health and the trust of the people in Thule (Dietz et al. 2018). It is no longer possible to yearn for a 'true' hunting life, localized in the dreamland of Thule, without tempering it by recommendations not to eat too much of it. Over time, the contaminants accumulate and may change the frontier irreversibly. Despite the natural economy that has governed life in Thule, the dire state of the deep seas shows how even in the quintessential wilderness, life is heavily marked by global malaise.

What for a long time remained totally the hunters' own was the dump, full of waste that will not rot or corrugate in the freezing temperatures of the High Arctic, for as long as they last. It is a new commons, if you wish, not susceptible to outsiders coming in and wanting to know the people, count the animals, or measure the pollution of the sea. It is a region within the region, bearing witness to many encounters and bygone dreams, a contact zone between times and things. It is a fascinating place for an anthropologist to go with people in search of re-useable items, like a broken screwdriver that may make a new tip on the ice-stick, or bits of a rubber tube that may be needed for a washing machine. It can be anything, really, and it makes sense to see it as a kind of resource landscape in its own right. This, too, is unstable, however; during my visit in Qaanaaq in the autumn of 2017, the dump had recently been partially cleared out, in that everything wooden, like old vessels having kept well in the cold, suddenly had been burnt. A resource space had folded in. I was taken there by a friend to witness the waste of waste.

Zooming out a little, abandoned settlements are also now becoming a resource beyond regulation; a contact zone between past and

present placements. Houses are generally left standing, since they may serve as hunters' cabins on longer hunting trips, but smaller things are constantly recycled by passers-by and form a shared resource for the initiated. In such small spaces of freedom – including the actual hunting activity, people are still at home at their frontier. The general point is that changing times generate shifting resource projects. Resources are not simply 'there'; they are configured and reconfigured in an unending process of living and responding to the environment, including outsiders who come and go.

The 'Thule subject' is not simply a native, whose culture anthropologists are called to chart; he or she is an intercultural traveller, having always been embroiled in travels and historical encounters (cf. Clifford 1997: 24). The contact zone transforms into a mode of existence, suspended between past experience and future imagination, between closure and openness, and becomes as much a temporal as a spatial concept. Film crews have popularized the Arctic as an imaginative resource for a century, and now wildlife tourists set out to the Big North to experience the last wilderness. This has become another living, unpredictable resource for the hunters, without whose dog sledges nobody can go anywhere, given that snowmobiles are prohibited on the sea ice because they scare away the wildlife upon which subsistence still hinges. While the ice itself is increasingly unreliable as a highway to potential hunting grounds, the hunters have to balance their relative economic security by either taking out the (still very few) 'tourists' for daily fees (fixed by the hunters' union) or going on their own for the potential pleasure of catching a walrus and being able to feed the dogs properly from its meat for some time to come. While present inhabitants live with a safety net provided by the welfare state, most still prefer to sustain their families from their own resource literacy in the human/non-human contact zone.

For a long time, European travellers posited the Arctic hunters on the margins of the liveable world, reading them through a sedentary optics. Meanwhile, the active hunters sought and still seek to place themselves strategically in relation to the living resources that were always their resource base. While obviously, the world and the outlook has changed – not least due to new means of communication – social life in the region has remained remarkably recognizable all while changing. The weekly air connection makes it possible to go south, but few can afford it, unless they have to go to hospital, in which case it is free. The population is small, and the hunters have to earn the keep of their families, old and young, and of their dogs, so essential for the

hunt. The mind-set is modern, of course – but their source of income and their hunting practices have old roots. The contact zone between humans and other species is still essential for life there.

Conclusion: Interstitial Knowledge

We began at the frontier in northernmost Greenland, discovering that it is just one case among other frontier regions in the Arctic. Yet this one has a particular twist because one cannot define it in the simple terms of the expansionist European perspective, suggested by Pratt (2008: 6). While certainly, in the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century the Thule frontier was co-constituted by people coming from more southerly regions believing that their discoveries were truly theirs to exploit, they also soon realized that they could do very little without collaborating with locals. They, too, were permanently engaged in discovering resources that they knew of, but could not always locate. Even today, their hunting trips north or south often resemble the exploratory flight by which we began this article. Their (sometimes vague) knowledge of potential resources is translated into actual movements in the landscape, being the only way to ascertain whether the potential holds any real promise in a region where livability is and always was a pertinent question.

In this brief conclusion I want to take note of Tsing's suggestion that the 'frontier' is not a natural or indigenous category. 'It is a traveling theory, a foreign form requiring translation. It arrived with many layers of previous associations' (Tsing 2005: 31). As such the frontier is neither a place nor a process, 'but an imaginative project capable of molding both places and processes' (ibid.: 32). In other words, the frontier is first and foremost an undecided space of possibilities – not between 'us' and 'them' but between then and now.

In that sense, the frontier is as 'thrown together' as other places (Massey 2005), and as are the anthropological fields that we create through fieldwork *and* analysis. In the Arctic, science has served to impose legibility on the troubling wildness of the region, and has contributed to the establishment of particular 'truth spots' even in a highly mobile environment (Bocking 2013). Wherever we work, anthropological knowledge remains interstitial; it emerges from between the 'here and now', and the 'there and past'. It remains tentative, even precarious, all while creating its own truth spots. Concerning Thule, the provisional conclusion is that however secluded geographically, it was

always implicated in another world through multiple material and imaginative relations between people and their resources. Knowledge always being interstitial, and anthropological analysis always part of ethnographic description.

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