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Geopower and Sea Ice

Encounters with the Geopolitical Stage

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Introduction

When practitioners and experts of foreign policy speak of “geopolitical change,” it is typically in reference to certain geographical features gaining or losing influence over the course of international relations and global politics. Such thinking is part of a tradition of classical geopolitical thought (hereafter Geopolitics) dating back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹ From this perspective, the dominant feature of Geopolitics in the Arctic being sea ice (indeed the very idea of the Arctic as a fixed and knowable quantity) was for a long time taken for granted. Before and during much of the Cold War, sea ice was widely regarded as a barrier to the interests and activities that nation-states might seek to pursue in the region, whether searching for resources, trade routes, or encounters with the sublime. As a geopolitical stage, the Arctic was thus largely separated (in geopolitical terms) from the rest of the world, despite increasing scientific, military, and economic activity during the twentieth century. Eventually, this was viewed as an opportunity: A speech by Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987 marked the Arctic as a different kind of geopolitical stage, one where nation-state activity was defined more in terms of international cooperation and institution building instead of conflict. However, in the early twenty-first century, with Arctic sea ice thinning more and more each summer, a number of

1 commentators expect the behavior of nation-states to “revert to form.”² They argue that the
2 essential features of the international system are extending into the Arctic; what was once
3 regarded as a different kind of geopolitical stage, due to the presence of sea ice, is being brought
4 back into line with the “natural laws” of the international system.

5 “Critical” Geopolitics has, since the 1980s, sought to challenge Geopolitics by
6 reconceptualizing it as a “discursive practice by which intellectuals of statecraft ‘spacialize’
7 international politics and represent it as a ‘world’ characterised by particular types of places,
8 peoples and dramas.”³ Geopolitics is treated as a “problematic set of discourses, representations,
9 and practices” in order to expose the ways geographical knowledge is used to justify relations of
10 power between “selves” and “others”—relations that are subsequently reinforced and legitimated
11 through a range of texts, images, performances, and practices.⁴ The perceived openness of the
12 Arctic and indeterminacy of geographical space in general is thus read by Critical Geopolitics as
13 suggestive of a *vulnerability* to enrollment not just in various state-building projects (most
14 prominently in Canada, Russia, Norway, Denmark/Greenland, and the United States), but also in
15 schematics for how international relations should be orchestrated (in the Arctic, this is centered
16 largely on the privileges of a combination of the five Arctic Ocean littoral states, the eight Arctic
17 states, indigenous peoples groups, and the Arctic Council). The term *vulnerability* is important
18 here, as it implies that the Arctic (and geographical space more broadly) is powerless to resist the
19 ways in which it is put to use as a stage for geopolitical machinations.

20 Thus, in both “cClassical” and “Critical” formulations of geopolitics, geography
21 essentially provides the stage on which various political dramas can unfold. In the former, the
22 stage is relatively stable, resting on claims about enduring and objectively knowable
23 geographies, which naturally direct the course of international relations and global affairs. In the

1 For Ó Tuathail (drawing on Foucault), geopower concerns the way in which human actors use
2 the relationship between power and geographical knowledge to produce and manage physical
3 space (for example, through institutionalized or taken-for-granted ways of seeing, displaying,
4 and marking the earth). Ó Tuathail argues that with the emergence of a world of “closed space”
5 at the end of the nineteenth century, when there was virtually nothing left of value to discover or
6 occupy, geopower became Geopolitics: “governmentalized forms of geographical knowledge”
7 expressed in universal terms.⁹ As such, Geopolitics must be regarded as an overdetermined form
8 of “geo-politics,” in which the unnamed practices that make Geopolitics possible are hidden
9 from view.¹⁰

10 Grosz’s use of geopower is markedly different. While in Ó Tuathail’s account geopower
11 marks a human force over the earth, for Grosz geopower refers to earthly forces that are
12 entangled and interfere (precede, enable, provoke, and restrict) with life in all its forms, whether
13 human or nonhuman. For Grosz, life both emerges from and capitalizes upon these forces,
14 transforming “the world into *its world*.”¹¹ Our understanding of the world around us thus rests on
15 both an encounter with the world and a capitalization of that encounter, which attempts to
16 reconfigure the world on our own terms. However, in the process of attempting to reconfigure
17 the world, new conditions emerge for how the world is encountered, producing new
18 combinations and new modes of organization and understanding that ultimately transform life
19 itself. Thus, as life and earth continue to mingle, new forces are unleashed that provoke and
20 incite new forms of life by “generating problems, questions and events that must be addressed
21 and negotiated, symbolised or left unrepresented.”¹² For Grosz, geopower is therefore always
22 provoking life to overcome itself, to vary itself and to change across space and time: “The
23 natural is *not* the inert, passive, unchanging element against which culture elaborates itself but

1 the matter of the cultural, that which enables and actively facilitates cultural variation and
2 change, indeed that which ensures that the cultural, including its subject-agents, are never
3 self-identical, that they differ from themselves and necessarily change over time.”¹³

4 The perpetual push of Grosz’s geopolitics works against the *negentropy* of geopolitical
5 practices that attempt to fix geographical fixtures in space and time, either to determine their
6 influence over international relations and global affairs or to invest them with meaning.
7 Negentropy describes emergent levels of organization where each level builds upon the achieved
8 orderings of the preceding level and provides the ground for the next level to emerge. Successive
9 orders are thus reliant on what has gone before and put to use in what comes after.¹⁴ To illustrate
10 this crudely, we might consider how the contemporary international system is not an enduring
11 ordering of international relations but an emerging order that has evolved from the Cold War,
12 which itself evolved out of World War II, and so on. Although these historical divisions are
13 somewhat arbitrary, the point is to emphasize that *wherever* the dividing lines are drawn, certain
14 elements (such as geopolitical tropes about the ongoing civilizational conflict between the
15 “West” and the “Axis of Evil”) may become so pervasive that they influence the shape of what
16 follows. In building on past relations among various elements, the negentropy of geopolitical
17 practices is working constantly to close down the possibility of alternative orderings and
18 constrains political debate. Geopolitics opens up such alternatives.

19 Grosz’s work draws heavily on the writings of Charles Darwin (as opposed to Social
20 Darwinism) as well as Michel Foucault, who has also been influential in Critical Geopolitics. As
21 Grosz notes, both retained “[a] fundamental commitment to the intangibility of the hold of
22 domination and its ongoing and transforming susceptibility to resistance and realignment by

1 virtue of the very forms of distribution or patterning that power itself takes...domination remains
2 precariously dependent on what occurs not only 'above' but also 'below.'"¹⁵

3 The implication for Geopolitics, we might infer, is that the seemingly enduring features
4 of the geopolitical stage are always dependent on the ongoing subordination of earthly forces
5 "below": forces that constantly recombine with life in ways that threaten to reconstitute the
6 geopolitical itself. As in Ó Tuathail's account, Geopolitics may be posited as an overdetermined
7 form of geopolitics. The difference between Grosz and Ó Tuathail is that in Grosz's case, the
8 hidden practices that make Geopolitics possible are found in a common realm where life (human
9 and nonhuman) and earth are intermingled, rather than in an exclusively human social realm.
10 Geopolitics might therefore usefully be (re)conceptualized as an attempt to arrest geopower
11 (earthly forces) and subordinate it to the power of people (for example, foreign policy
12 practitioners) or things (for example, enduring geographical features). Such a
13 (re)conceptualization would also draw attention to the capacity of the "geo" to subvert or resist
14 dominant forms of power, forcing us to reconsider whether the material world is as vulnerable to
15 geopolitical machinations as Critical Geopolitics suggests, with the implication that earthly
16 forces are taken more seriously as constituents in the production of the geopolitical, without
17 returning to the geographical determinism associated with Geopolitics, classically formulated.

18 Arctic Geopolitics

19 In the early-twenty-first-century Arctic, Geopolitics remains highly prevalent in the texts,
20 practices, and performances of foreign policy elites, political commentators, and the mainstream
21 media, whether in North America, Europe, Russia, or Asia. In particular, the thinning of Arctic
22 summer sea ice (the ten lowest minimum Arctic sea ice extents since the satellite record started

1 in 1979 have all occurred since 2007) has one way or another been described as an opening up of
2 the Arctic. Geographical features (sea ice, water columns, continental shelves, and sea beds),
3 which were once literally frozen or partly frozen, are being held responsible for determining the
4 course of international relations in the region. According to the worst-case scenario, the decline
5 of sea ice threatens to engulf the Arctic in resource scrambles and armed conflict unless law and
6 order are imposed, either by Arctic nation-states or, more broadly, the international community.
7 Such accounts are girded by an “uneasy synthesis between liberalism and neo-realism,” where
8 the existence of the Arctic as an objectively knowable space—its essential features and
9 exceptionalisms—and the practices and interests of nation-states and other actors are largely
10 taken for granted.¹⁶ However, in presupposing the existence of the Arctic as a stage for these
11 machinations, both the labor and the provocations posed by the humans and nonhumans involved
12 in assembling the Arctic-as-stage are hidden from view, constraining the possibility of providing
13 alternative geopolitical accounts of change and the possibilities of life in the Arctic more
14 broadly.

15 Assembling the Arctic Stage

16 “Stage making” has long been at the heart of classical geopolitical thought. As Ó Tuathail noted,
17 the West continues to retain a will to survey the world in order to sight (recognize and render
18 space visible), site (delimit global political space), and cite (judge and textualize place) the
19 realities of global political space.¹⁷ Foreign policy experts and practitioners attempt to simplify
20 and stabilize the global stage in such a way that the actions of nation-states may appear rational.
21 However, stage making is an ongoing process, one that continually provokes and incites further
22 kinds of encounters between earth and life while at the same time trying to contain potential

1 outcomes: “to slow them, to put them in service of life's [in this case the nation-state's]
2 provisional interests.”¹⁸

3 Contrary to the expectations of Geopolitics, the Arctic-as-stage is therefore far from a
4 permanent reality waiting to be discovered or, in the case of Critical Geopolitics, invested with
5 meaning. The Arctic-as-stage is a specific ordering of life and earth, and as such is constituted
6 from a common realm of both human and nonhuman elements including, but not limited to, sea
7 ice, sea beds, water columns, continental shelves, mineral resources, and myriad different plants
8 and animals as well as people and their various technologies, institutions, interests, and fantasies.
9 As such, the Arctic-as-stage might more usefully be conceptualized as an “assemblage” of life
10 and earth.

11 The term *assemblage* is ill-defined in the social sciences, owing to the diversity with
12 which it has been deployed by various scholars. However, within geography, the term has
13 generally been used to encourage us to be “deliberately open as to the form of unity, its
14 durability, the types of relations and the human and non-human elements involved.”¹⁹ More
15 specifically, as geographers Ben Anderson and Colin McFarlane argue, the term seeks to account
16 for four relational processes: the coming together, realigning, and/or dispersal of various
17 elements at specific junctures in space and time; the distribution of agency across multiple
18 elements within a collective; the ongoing emergence rather than resultant formation of
19 assemblages; and the provisionality with which elements gather and disperse.²⁰

20 Significantly, assemblages direct attention toward processes of territorialization and
21 deterritorialization, or what I here refer to as stage (un)making. Assemblages always attempt to
22 “claim” territory from combinations of earth and life as parts are gathered, marked, and held
23 together. However, this territory can also collapse as the same parts recombine or disperse,

1 The negentropy in Geopolitics is part of the hidden, unnamed workings of geopolitics—what Ó
2 Tuathail calls a convenient fiction—that suppresses accounts of novel encounters between life
3 and earth driven by geopower (earthly forces) in order that they might be displaced by more
4 conventional understandings of the essential features of international relations and global
5 politics.²² However, what Elizabeth Grosz argues is that there are some forces of geopower that
6 Geopolitics must always respond to: the forward drift of time, the force of variation and
7 proliferation of natural differences, and relations between the self and others.²³ These forces
8 provoke and incite responses from geopolitics by “generating problems, questions, events that
9 must be addressed and negotiated, symbolized or left unrepresented.”²⁴ They create moments
10 where gGeopolitics is exceeded by a geo-politics that has been brought into the open, however
11 temporarily. It is in these moments that the geopolitical stage is subject to change.

12 The Forward Drift of Time

13 The Arctic is far from an unchanging, enduring stage where Geopolitics plays out. This may
14 sound surprising, since for more than 2,500 years the Arctic has appeared relatively stable from a
15 Western (nonindigenous) perspective. However, there are at least four factors that have helped
16 produce and maintain this assumption about the relative stability of the Arctic stage in Western
17 history.

18 The first factor is that over the period that explorers from Pytheas (320 BC) to Peary
19 (1909) “discovered” the Arctic, from a geological perspective the Arctic has changed very
20 little.²⁵ According to data taken from ocean cores in the Arctic, the last major warm period (when
21 the extent of summertime ice was likely less than it is today) in the region was 5,000–8,000 years
22 ago. This is significant since it meant that despite warming events around AD 500 and 1500, the

1 major period of European and North American exploration from the seventeenth to the
2 nineteenth centuries coincided with the Little Ice Age (circa 1600–1850), when ice conditions,
3 particularly in the high Arctic, remained especially prohibitive to the navigational technologies
4 of the period.²⁶ Although there would have been variation over this period, overall, the Arctic
5 that European (and later North American) explorers would have encountered (at least in terms of
6 its most dominant geopolitical feature, sea ice) would have appeared relatively stable. Accounts
7 producing the Arctic stage-assemblage as a barrier to (nonindigenous) human activity in the
8 North were therefore largely uncontroversial throughout this period of discovery.

9 The second factor was that the earth adjacent to the Arctic was also remarkably stable
10 over this period. The earth that physically constitutes the Arctic is incredibly sensitive to changes
11 in the earth that surrounds it (note that earth as it is used here includes the atmosphere and
12 oceans). For much of the past two millennia, and again overlapping with the major period of
13 European and North American exploration, there was relatively little variation in the earth
14 surrounding the Arctic. The overall stability of the global climate, levels of pollution, and
15 oceanic temperatures thus contributed to maintaining the stability of Arctic earth in geopolitical
16 terms, since there was relatively little in the way of detectable shifts in the stage-assemblage
17 (despite incidents such as the collapse of the seal population in the Bering Strait area in the
18 1890s).

19 The third factor was that for much of the 2,500-year period in question, the Arctic was
20 encountered with only limited human technology, the effects of which were so localized that the
21 overall stability of the earth constituting the Arctic was not significantly disrupted. Sea ice alone
22 presented a formidable barrier to the wooden vessels that attempted to navigate passages around
23 and through the Arctic Ocean, while the region itself was too distant to be significantly impacted

1 by pollution from the preindustrial centers of Europe. Despite the presence of highly mobile
2 indigenous communities capable of traversing the ice, in the Western geopolitical imagination,
3 the Arctic stage-assemblage was still regarded as an obstacle to (or, in the case of the English at
4 least, an affront to—see below) human activities.

5 Lastly (although there are likely other factors as well), there were limits to Western
6 interest in the Arctic—limits to the imagination about what kind of place the Arctic could be. In
7 the sixteenth century, sea routes from Europe to Asia were sought in the Arctic by the English
8 and the Dutch in order to overcome Spanish and Portuguese naval dominance in the Atlantic
9 Ocean. However, as noted above, they lacked the technology to overcome the Arctic they
10 encountered in any significant way, and aspirations to turn the Arctic into a “polar
11 Mediterranean” dissipated.²⁷ By the nineteenth century, the Arctic was more a space of Western
12 masculinist fantasy, in part linked to economic activities involving hunting for furs, whale oil,
13 and baleen. Overcoming the Arctic for the most part meant surviving limited and highly
14 localized encounters with what was increasingly regarded as a hostile space. For the English at
15 least, the Arctic came to be seen as a sublime and monstrous space that threatened humanity to
16 its core.²⁸ Rumors of cannibalism among John Franklin and his crew fed fears of humans being
17 consumed by nature in their encounters with the Arctic.²⁹ However, while the Arctic
18 stage-assemblage was invested with fantasy and fear, these ideas were not enough to physically
19 transform the Arctic—if anything, they reinforced the stability of the Arctic-stage by
20 discouraging further encounters.

21 And yet, despite the relative stability of the Arctic stage-assemblage during this period,
22 time continued to press on. By the end of the nineteenth century, encounters with the Arctic
23 stage-assemblage were accelerating and intensifying in a variety of ways.³⁰ Rapid

1 industrialization in the nineteenth century was accompanied by the development of new
2 technologies and renewed fantasies, such as those of Vilhjalmur Stefansson about the Arctic as a
3 potential polar Mediterranean and the northward course of empire, which to a lesser or greater
4 extent have been sustained through the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. As the global
5 atmosphere has warmed, the earth around the Arctic has also changed, affecting atmospheric,
6 oceanic, and cryospheric systems on a global scale. The diffusion of pollution from industrial
7 development continues to alter the chemical composition of the earth that physically constitutes
8 the Arctic. Sea ice, the dominant geopolitical feature of the Arctic stage-assemblage, is
9 disappearing at an unprecedented rate as the ocean and atmosphere warm. All of these factors are
10 implicated in further encounters between earth and life in the Arctic, a process that is also
11 transforming life and earth beyond the Arctic.

12 The Arctic, or more specifically, the earth constituting it (land, sea, ice, tundra,
13 permafrost), is always physically changing over time, whether we consider it in terms of
14 temperature, chemical composition, or state of matter (for example, gas, solid or liquid). This
15 means that the stage, as an assemblage, is inherently unstable, shifting with changes in the
16 physical condition of the earth. Time therefore provides an irresistible push to the future, forcing
17 the stage-assemblage to constantly overcome itself as elements combine, shift, and recombine.
18 However, as the above account has shown, although many of these changes may seem
19 inconsequential to human affairs, over time they may drastically alter our perception of the kind
20 of stage the Arctic represents. We see this today in claims that the Arctic Ocean is undergoing a
21 fundamental state (stage) change from being permanently ice covered to seasonally ice free with
22 tremendous implications for the kinds of lives (human and nonhuman) that can be lived there.³¹

1 Over time, the effectivity of individual elements within a stage-assemblage may also be
2 overcome. For example, over time, the physical effects of the Little Ice Age during the Middle
3 Ages on the extent of sea ice in the Arctic will become minimal as other elements in the
4 stage-assemblage come to exert a greater influence. The loss of human effectivity is overcome
5 through the creation of collective forms of organization that allow action and meaning to be
6 sustained over time in the same way that a ball is passed in rugby in order to keep it moving (to
7 use one of Bruno Latour's metaphors).³² One way classical theories of geopolitics have been
8 sustained over generations is through the teaching and dissemination of texts and practices
9 among students. However, time poses a constant provocation to these geopolitical texts and
10 practices because over time, the further intermingling of earth and life invariably exceeds the
11 boundaries established by taken-for-granted geopolitical tropes. This excess is found in
12 encounters with the stage-assemblage that undermine what has previously been taken for
13 granted: encounters brought about by new technologies, new ideas, as well as changes in the
14 environment both in and beyond the Arctic. This excess, brought about by change over time, is
15 thus a resource that creates the space to rethink the stage-assemblage so that the Arctic is no
16 longer regarded as an obstacle or a monstrous place but a knowable quantity where, for foreign
17 policy practitioners and experts, the interests of nation-states (largely associated with nation
18 building and economic activity) can be more easily pursued and justified, albeit in novel ways.

19 The Force of Variation

20 Life, both human and nonhuman, does not emerge from or encounter the earth that constitutes
21 the Arctic in any prescribable fashion. Natural differences among various forms of life therefore
22 pose a further provocation to geopolitics and the Arctic stage-assemblage. Variation propels life

1 toward a variety of encounters with the stage-assemblage, producing novel interactions that, like
2 time, may exceed geopolitical discourses. For example, the relative success indigenous
3 communities have had living in the Arctic over thousands of years contradicts long-standing
4 Western assumptions about the inhospitability, if not hostility, of Arctic space, a situation that is
5 now being reversed as novel forms of Western life (facilitated by new technology and new ideas
6 combining to create an “urban Arctic”) and changes in the environment encounter the region and
7 cause the stage-assemblage to shift, at times endangering indigenous lives in the process.

8 The relative stability of the Arctic stage-assemblage (from a Western perspective) over
9 the past 2,500 years owes much to the limited presence of nonindigenous peoples in the region
10 that lasted into the twentieth century.³³ It was not until the sixteenth century that the exploration
11 of the Arctic even became an imperative for some emerging nation-states and their empires.³⁴
12 However, when it did become an imperative, it did so for a variety of reasons. Encounters with
13 the Arctic produced markedly different reactions among Westerners alone. Imperial navies and
14 explorers were interested in the possibility of discovering and utilizing passages to Asia through
15 the sea ice.³⁵ Whale hunters from Europe and America followed after the discovery of huge
16 whale populations in and around the Arctic seas. Resource exploitation also became a theme on
17 land as the fur trade expanded northward in Russia and North America, often following
18 land-based explorations tied to nation-building projects. Exploitation, trade, settlement, and
19 exploration were all examples of the various forms of life that emerged from Western encounters
20 with the Arctic.

21 For the nation-state, containing this variation in ways that suited national interests was
22 relatively straightforward as exploitation, trade, settlement, and exploration facilitated and
23 benefited one another as well as the state. Increased human presence in the North facilitated

1 deeper explorations, which in turn had the potential to uncover new routes and resources that
2 could be exploited for trade and provide the foundations for new settlements. Despite the
3 different objectives, actors, and sites involved in these cross-territorial activities, the central role
4 of the nation-state in both facilitating and benefiting from such encounters allowed for this
5 variation to be viewed by foreign policy practitioners and experts collectively in terms of the
6 national interest.

7 However, while Geopolitics may attempt to contain or manage variation, it cannot
8 prevent it. The unstoppable proliferation of variation that inevitably occurs over time ensures that
9 life and the earth that constitutes the Arctic are constantly encountering each other in novel ways,
10 threatening the stability of the Arctic stage-assemblage. Since the beginning of the twentieth
11 century, the proliferation of variation has increased rapidly. This proliferation is associated with
12 the acceleration and intensification described earlier of activities that have brought the Arctic
13 stage-assemblage into more frequent encounters with both humans and nonhumans. Over the
14 past century, as more interest has developed in the Arctic, the environment has changed and new
15 technologies and ideas have been deployed. The region has been physically transformed, through
16 encounters with different actors, into a variety of cross-cutting stages for resource exploitation—
17 shipping; tourism; indigenous life; monitoring climate change; environmental stewardship; and
18 military-strategic operations, tests, and exercises. Pollution, development, and changes in the
19 atmosphere and oceans both in and beyond the Arctic have further contributed to the physical
20 transformation of the Arctic stage-assemblage. This in turn has facilitated novel encounters with
21 forms of life keen to explore, exploit, manage, preserve, and ultimately capitalize on the
22 changing qualities of the stage-assemblage to support various interests. Geopolitics has therefore
23 also been precariously balanced on an ability to manage excesses of variation (as well as time) in

1 ways that allow the overall stability of the Arctic stage-assemblage to be sustained in spite of
2 constant encounters with difference, for example, by continuing to emphasize the central role of
3 national territory and sovereignty and the essential laws of the international system while at the
4 same time suppressing, ignoring, and forgetting the variation that exists among different interest
5 groups.

6 Relations between Self and Other

7 The variation described in the previous section propels Arctic earth into a multitude of different
8 encounters with life. In attempting to account for these differences, distinctions between “self”
9 and “other” or “us” and “them” begin to emerge. The elaboration of these differences poses a
10 number of challenges to Geopolitics: Specifically, how do self and other interact and how should
11 this relationship be managed? While the Arctic stage-assemblage does not determine the
12 formation of self and others—or relations between them (and thus my argument should not be
13 confused with geographical determinism)—it does condition the kinds of encounters that can
14 occur. For example, the disappearance of summertime sea ice in the Arctic affects how both
15 humans and animals encounter the Arctic and other kinds of life in the region. This is the Arctic
16 at its most stage-like. With Geopolitics, foreign policy practitioners and experts attempt to
17 structure relations between the self and other by claiming knowledge of the essential nature of
18 these relations, often in ways “which privilege the bodies and activities of some at the expense of
19 others.”³⁶ Through discourse, practice, and performance, these practitioners and experts attempt
20 to fix in place and manage relations between the elements that constitute not just the
21 stage-assemblage, but also life on that stage. However, as with the forces of time and variation,

1 uncontrolled relations among different elements always threaten to go beyond established
2 geopolitical tropes centered on interstate relations and the rules that govern them.

3 In the Arctic, relations between the West and the Arctic have changed considerably over
4 the centuries since European explorers first sought to navigate passageways through the sea ice.
5 The Arctic is implicated in these changes to the extent that it has been enrolled in different ways
6 to provide the stage on which encounters between self and other have been elaborated. By way
7 of example, three prominent (if oversimplified) accounts of the Arctic stage-assemblage have
8 been particularly important to how relations between the West and the Arctic are constructed and
9 managed in the early twenty-first century. The first has cast the Arctic as a resource base,
10 primarily in terms of its potential offshore hydrocarbon deposits, which are only just starting to
11 be tapped.³⁷ As a resource base, the Arctic has been used by some commentators as a stage for
12 competition among nation-states. Encounters among nation-states have subsequently been
13 elaborated in terms of a zero-sum free-for-all competition over access to resources. In the
14 second, the Arctic provides the stage for international scientific cooperation. This has facilitated
15 a very different kind of encounter between nation-states based on collaboration and seemingly
16 universal common interest where self and other are engaged in positive-sum cooperation. The
17 third account of the Arctic stems from the Cold War. The Arctic is presented as the stage for
18 interstate conflict, a military-strategic theater where the qualities of the Arctic stage-assemblage
19 are felt in terms of their implications for military installations, operations, and exercises.
20 Encounters between nation-states on opposing sides tend to be characterized by displays of
21 power and acts of secrecy by the self, while the other is treated with suspicion and fear.

22 These various accounts of the Arctic as a stage for encounters between self and other
23 illustrate how, as in the case of Heidegger's Greek Temple, the Arctic has in different ways been

1 time, including, for example, in the extent and thickness of sea ice; in the ecosystem (for
2 example, species collapse and migration); in indigenous habitation and use of the Arctic; and in
3 motivations for different kinds of nation-state activity. However, since encounters between earth
4 and life cannot be repeated, the only way that the stage-assemblage can be stabilized is by
5 sustaining the outcomes of specific encounters (reduced to their lowest common denominator
6 such as the national interest) through some form of collective or institutional structure or legal
7 regime (the nation-state, international law, academic institutions, the media), which is then used
8 to discipline further encounters between earth and life so that they appear to produce the same
9 outcome each time. In trying to fix the Arctic as a specific kind of geopolitical stage (through
10 discourse, practice, and performance), Geopolitics thus works to suppress the provocations of
11 geopolitics described above.

12 Consequently, there is a politics to how the Arctic is encountered, organized, mapped,
13 and used to facilitate certain kinds of life at the expense of others that have been used, for
14 example, by nation-states to forcibly relocate indigenous peoples, or, in the case of the European
15 Union, to impose restrictions on certain economic activities linked to sealing. To presuppose a
16 natural order to these encounters is to hide the technical labor as well as the provocations that
17 this labor has had to overcome, involved in establishing the Arctic as a specific kind of stage for
18 specific kinds of life. Alternative possibilities for life are closed down in the process. However, it
19 is more than likely that over the coming years, there will be yet more novel encounters between
20 earth and life as new elements emerge and arrive in the Arctic and old ones dissipate.

21 This, Grosz argues, is the challenge that all cultures (geopolitical or otherwise) are
22 presented with in the face of geopolitics.³⁹ Grosz has developed Darwin's work on the struggle for
23 existence in nature to show that all culture is engaged in a similar struggle. When the boundaries

1 of a culture, in this case Geopolitics, are exceeded, the only way to survive is through
2 self-transformation: the adoption of “ever more viable and successful strategies” for containing
3 geopower, which over time may leave a geopolitical culture completely unrecognizable from
4 itself.⁴⁰ The success of Geopolitics is therefore only ever provisional, dependent on an ability to
5 cohere in spite of internal tensions brought about by the suppression of geopower.⁴¹ It is this
6 ability to still cohere that allows Geopolitics to arrest geopower and stabilize the geopolitical
7 stage over the *longue durée*—by accommodating variation and change without exposing it.
8 However, when the tension becomes too great, the only way Geopolitics can survive is through a
9 self-transformation capable of providing new solutions to the problem of geopower.

10

Conclusion

11 If we take geopower seriously, it should become evident that as life and earth in the Arctic
12 continue to encounter one another in novel ways, our experiences of geopower—of time,
13 variation, and relations between selves and others—in the Arctic should be provoking us to
14 consider the possibility of alternative solutions to how the Arctic is set up as a stage and how
15 encounters between different forms of life on that stage are elaborated. This chapter has sought
16 to reconceptualize geopolitics as an attempt to arrest geopower and subordinate it to the power of
17 people or seemingly enduring geographical features to determine the course of human affairs. An
18 alternative “geo-politics” has been proposed to place encounters with geopower to the fore of
19 geopolitical analysis. Three forms of geopower have been considered (time, variation, and
20 relations), and each has been shown to be provocative to the extent that they provide a constant
21 pressure to the kinds of stage-assemblages established through geopolitical discourses, practices,
22 and performances. “Geo-politics” should be understood as an attempt to manage and contain this

1 pressure: a provisional solution that allows for a geopolitical discourse to be asserted in spite of
2 the fact that earth and life are constantly encountering one another in novel ways.

3 To this end, geopolitics/geo-politics might fruitfully be conceived as what Grosz calls a
4 “style of living” that prompts “innovation and ingenuity” in response to the “endless generation
5 of problems” geopower creates in order that a stage-assemblage (and relations on it) can be
6 constructed, constrained, and capitalized upon.⁴² Geopolitics therefore leads to the suppression of
7 the ways in which the Arctic has varied over time (for example, in terms of the extent to which
8 sea ice has been a persistent feature) and across space (for example, that sea ice is thicker in
9 some parts of the Arctic, making those parts less accessible than others), as well as suppressing
10 and constraining the variety of ways in which the Arctic has been encountered and experienced,
11 usually to the detriment of indigenous cultures and local knowledge. What is left is a simplistic
12 constitution of the Arctic as an imagined stage, dominated by the presence and interests of states,
13 relations between which tend toward conflict or cooperation depending on the volume of sea ice
14 present (as measured by satellite) or the strength of international institutions or legal regimes.

15 To the extent that our understanding of geopolitics as a style of living means foreign
16 policy choices and limits are rooted in knowledge of earth and life, the means we use to acquire
17 this knowledge matters whether it occurs through direct encounters with the Arctic or forms of
18 what the political geographer Anssi Paasi has called “geopolitical remote sensing” from afar.⁴³
19 Earth and life constitute fields of technical uncertainty that must be brought under control if they
20 are to be made useful. Geopolitics therefore emerges as a technical solution to the problem of
21 containing geopower and building negentropic structures that are then used to inform and
22 legitimate foreign policy. Competing assemblages of the Arctic emerge because every encounter
23 between life and the Arctic is a historically and geographically localizable response to

1 uncertainty, the elaboration of which relies on what is encountered, modes of technological
2 development, and the human imagination. Throughout history, indigenous cultures, nation-states,
3 international institutions, and nonstate actors have all produced very different accounts of their
4 encounters with the Arctic.

5 At the same time, by conceiving of geopolitics as a style of living, we might recognize
6 the imperative for Critical Geopolitics to not only deconstruct Geopolitics, but also to chart
7 alternatives for different ways of seeing the world. There is obviously a need to generate
8 knowledge from past encounters and experiences in order to help us understand the present and
9 guide policy decisions about the future. However, it is important that we do not fall into the trap
10 of forgetting that other possibilities, including ones that may not have been encountered before,
11 could exist. It is in these alternatives, in novel encounters with the only-ever-partially realized
12 materiality of the earth, that we might find a valuable political resource for interrogating other
13 ways of imagining the Arctic, facilitate the elaboration of alternative accounts and experiences,
14 and seriously begin to question what kind of taken-for-granted stage is being constituted in the
15 Arctic (including the various roles and relations of those who occupy it). Foregrounding the
16 stage in this way might just provide a new basis for displacing dominant geopolitical scripts and
17 start a more dynamic and, ultimately, more positive set of discussions about the future of
18 political, economic, legal, social, and cultural activities in the Arctic.

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