

The US and the Arctic special issue

# AMERICAN STUDIES



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## **AMERICAN STUDIES IN SCANDINAVIA**

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# EDITORS' NOTE

## The US and the Arctic: Special Issue Editors' Introduction

In 2019 US President Donald Trump proposed that the US buy Greenland from Denmark. The latter nation rejected this suggestion and many news outlets poked fun of the idea. Trump's proposition, however, reveals a number of problematic implications about the Arctic as a place and concept. Since at least the 1860s, the US has attempted to buy the island several times, and this most recent attempt reveals the persistence of a certain kind of imperialist arrogance on both the Danish and US-American side of the question. It signals that Greenland (and the whole Arctic by implication) is a place to be purchased, a colonially controlled space without voice or agency. The two competing nations have even engaged in humorous exchanges, as a 1945 issue of *Grønlandsposten* [The Greenland Post] exemplifies. Among the news stories reported in its final pages, the readers discover that the American station at Skjoldungen, Angmagssalik, was almost buried in a sudden avalanche. The eleven men stationed there apparently managed to save themselves, but two American ships braved the ice to come to their rescue. Finding everyone in good health and good spirits, the ships' crew offered home passage to all eleven, an offer they cheerfully accepted. *Grønlandsposten* notes with some satisfaction that a group of Danish men replaced the Americans. Not only do Danes and Americans negotiate ownership of

Greenlandic land, but at least one Canadian also had his eyes on Greenland, Trump-style. After mentioning mundane small-town news stories, *Grønlandsposten* reveals casually that the Danish newspaper *Berlingske Tidende* on November 3, 1945, reported that Senator A. N. McLean, a liberal member of the Canadian Senate for New Brunswick, recommends that Canada take steps to acquire Greenland from Denmark. *Grønlandsposten* humorously advises readers to stay calm, since this scenario is clearly absurd. Attempts to buy Greenland apparently have become so routine that Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen also, at first, along with the Danish population outside of Greenland, considered Trump's offer a joke, another outrageous gesture from the unpredictable 45th President.

In this special issue, we explore the multiple ways in which the Arctic and the United States intersect discursively, culturally, ideologically, legally, politically, and economically. In our original call for papers, we invited potential contributors to reflect on the following questions: Why is the United States interested in the Arctic? What role has the United States and the Scandinavian countries historically played in the region? How has the Arctic been portrayed historically, culturally, and literarily? What kinds of decolonial and indigenizing processes are happening in the Arctic in the 21st century and in the past? What role does climate change play on Arctic communities and economies?

The four articles on the Arctic in this volume will not address all of these questions, since the fields of American Studies and Arctic Studies have just begun what could be a long relationship. Arctic Studies have found homes in places like UiT, The Arctic University of Norway, in Tromsø, at Copenhagen University and Aalborg University, Denmark, and in associations such as the Greenland Society housed in Gentofte, a suburb of Copenhagen, and several Greenlandic cultural houses in Odense, Aarhus, and Aalborg, to name a few. But Americanists—in Scandinavia and elsewhere—have only recently, and maybe thanks to Trump, begun to incorporate the Arctic into our discipline. We hope with this special issue of *American Studies in Scandinavia* to encourage further research about the Arctic seen through an American Studies prism, and the articles here are meant to initiate a conversation at various focus points that more research should take further, deeper, and elsewhere.

Alaska Native, Inuit, and other Arctic Indigenous voices are conspicuously absent from this issue, a flaw we hope future research will remedy. Originally conceived partially as an opportunity to explore and feature these voices, the issue fails in this mission. We see this failure not as an example of disinterest in or by Indigenous voices but as a failure to reach researchers, students, and others who could have added much-needed nuance to this theme. However, this absence of the Indigenous perspectives highlights a central tendency of research into the Arctic: a bilateral colonial focus on the history, politics, and

cultures of the Scandinavian countries and the United States, resulting in the exclusion of Greenland as a nation and the erasure of Indigenous peoples in Canada and Alaska.

The first article in this special issue confronts this historical erasure of the region. In his contribution, “No One Thinks of Greenland: US-Greenland Relations and Perceptions of Greenland from the Early Modern Period to the 20th century,” Ingo Heidbrink traces the history of US-Greenlandic relations, focusing on the erasures and exclusions of Greenland, culturally and politically, and accounting for historical perceptions of the Greenlandic people.

The second article by Susan B. Vanek, Andreas Mentrup-Womelsdorf, and Jette Rygaard, “An Odd Assortment of Foreigners in Greenland: Towards the Political Implications of Arctic Travel during the Late Interwar Years,” dives into a specific phenomenon and period in Greenlandic history to show how the expeditions and artworks by American scientists and artists exploring Greenland in the 1920s and 1930s aided in transforming the geopolitical relationships between the US, Denmark, and Greenland.

Switching focus from Greenlandic history and colonial encounters to different kinds of silences, Clara Juncker’s contribution, “Race to the Pole: Matthew Henson, Arctic Explorer,” investigates the memoir of the African American assistant explorer, Matthew Henson, whose travels and trials with the Arctic expeditions of Commander Robert E.

Peary highlight the complex racialized positionality of the explorer and the erasures of African Americans in the history of the region. Juncker critically recuperates Henson's narrative and details how the explorer skillfully constructs his centrality to the polar expeditions—and Arctic history—in spite of attempted racist erasure.

Zachary Lavengood's "China and the 21st Century Arctic: Opportunities and Limitations" ends the issue. This article continues to expand the scope of the special issue through an analysis of China's role in the Arctic in a more contemporary light. Lavengood analyzes the multiple drivers of Chinese engagement with the Arctic region and discusses how China's Arctic politics have evolved and continue to expand, concluding that there are still key factors to overcome before China moves from being a "near-Arctic state" to inevitably solidifying itself as a major power in the region.

Ultimately, we are sending *American Studies in Scandinavia* on an Arctic journey, with all the excitement, commitment, and danger such an expedition involves. We hope this issue will land on an ice floe drifting in unexpected or interesting directions.

October, 2022  
Aarhus and Nyborg, Denmark  
Marianne Kongerslev and Clara Juncker



# "NO ONE THINKS OF GREENLAND": US-Greenland Relations and Perceptions of Greenland in the US from the Early Modern Period to the 20th Century

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## Key words:

Greenland, USA,  
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War, International  
Relations

**Abstract:** The history of US-Greenland relations and the perception of Greenland in the US is a near complete historical desideratum with only few works dealing with the subject at all and those publications covering mainly the few well-known historic events. Neither US nor Danish or Greenlandic historians have dealt with the perception of Greenland in the US from Early Modern to today in its entirety.

The article provides an overview of the history of the perception of Greenland in the US and the bilateral relations of these countries from Early Modern to today, but more importantly also asks the question why this subject has been largely ignored. The title of John Griesemer's novel *No One Thinks of Greenland* is used as a parable to describe these reasons and the attitude of the US and US foreign policy towards Greenland. Furthermore, it is analyzed why the US tried purchasing Greenland several times and why certain groups in the US had an interest in keeping the US-Greenland relations in the shadows. It is also described how not purchasing Greenland made perfect sense for the US and generated a political vacuum on the island that provided some unique opportunities for the US military. Throughout history it remained true that nearly nobody in the US thought about Greenland, resulting in a unique history of bi-lateral relations.



*No One Thinks of Greenland* is not only the title of a novel written by John Griesemer in 2003,<sup>1</sup> it is also a good analogy for US-Greenland relations throughout history and more importantly the perception of Greenland by and in the US. While there were a few short periods in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries when Greenland was in the focus of the US foreign policy, Greenland remained mostly the large and nearly uninhabited island not too far away from the US, nearly completely covered by ice and without any relevance or interest for the US. Public knowledge about Greenland in the US can be summarized as being the largest island on the globe, completely covered by an icesheet, in geological terms belonging to the North American continent and previously the stepping-stone for Vikings when they sailed to America. In addition, it might be known that Greenland was the home of US military bases during World War II and again a stepping-stone: This time for ferrying fighter airplanes from manufacturing facilities in the US to the European theatre of war.

Even in the historiography of US foreign relations, Greenland is barely mentioned. The situation might be different only when talking with military strategic planners or Arctic scientists, as for these two groups Greenland has always been of special interest, though for very different reasons.

This article analyzes the US-Greenland relations during the long 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries

with a focus on the perception of Greenland in the US and furthermore explains why the US-Greenland relations gained only little attention, or why it might have been even in the interest of certain groups in the US to keep the relations in the shadows. It might be true that the hospital for Vietnam War veterans with incurable wounds that is at the center of Griesemer's novel and the movie *Guy X* (based on the novel) never existed, but it might also be true that the novel and the movie are telling a deeper story that will help us understand the specifics of the US-Greenland relations and why there has been an interest in keeping it out of sight. This paper does not aim to provide a complete account of the US-Greenland relations throughout history. This would require not only a detailed discussion of the perception of the US in Greenland but also the effects on US policy on Greenland and Greenland-Denmark relations and in particular the questions of representation of the Greenlanders within the wider Danish system, and the issue of Greenlandic sovereignty at large. It might be said that the main aim of the paper is a discussion of the 'US's Greenlandic relations.'

A historical paper would normally begin with a discussion of the historiography of the subject in this place. The only reason why there will be no such discussion in this paper is the simple fact that such a historiography barely exists. Historians dealing with US foreign policy and/or relations have either not dealt with the US-Greenland relations at all or, if dealing with the larger question of US-Nordic relations, treated Greenland merely as a footnote.

1 John Griesemer, *No One Thinks of Greenland* (New York: Picador USA, 2001).

The same is true for the small community of Greenlandic historians and even the somewhat larger community of Danish historians. Of course, these historians have dealt with the history of Greenlandic foreign relations, but they have for a variety of reasons chosen to focus more or less exclusively on the Greenland-Denmark relations, which is up to a certain degree an obvious choice given the fact that Greenland was a Danish colony for most of the modern era. Few works mention the role of the US for Greenlandic history at all, despite its obvious importance, and in the end most of these publications provide only a few lines dealing with the US-Greenland relations prior to, during, and after World War II.<sup>2</sup> Exceptions are a 1997 study published by Dansk Udenrigspolitisk Institut on Greenland during the Cold War era that focuses mainly on Danish-American perspectives and does not really relate to the direct US-Greenland relations.<sup>3</sup> Another is a 2010 study by Beukel, Jensen, and Rytter on the phasing out of Greenland's colonial status incorporating the US-Greenland relations as one of the factors to be considered when discussing the decolonization of Greenland.<sup>4</sup> Recent publications looking at the US-Greenland relations from an American perspective are mainly highly

specialized works on the history of US Coast Guard activities in the Greenland region,<sup>5</sup> without a doubt important works, but shedding light only on a limited sector of the larger story. Overall, the US-Greenland relations and the perception of Greenland in the US are largely a historical desideratum, and this article will aim to stimulate further research on the topic.

It is hoped that the article will provide a first overview of the US-Greenland relations, and that it might contribute to a better understanding of US foreign relations with extremely small nations or relations that need to be considered extremely asymmetric from the outset. It is also hoped that the article will shed light on US foreign relations with nations the average American has no idea even exist or has no knowledge about beyond some stereotypes. Finally, it will be discussed how these relations could be exploited for various interests in the US and in particular for projects that could not be realized in the US due to the fear of public non-acceptance. In other words, this article is also about US policy towards a nation 'no one thinks about' in the US.

2 Axel Kjær Sørensen, *Denmark-Greenland in the Twentieth Century* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum, 2009).

3 Henry Allen Myers, *Greenland During the Cold War: Danish and American Security Policy 1945-68* (Copenhagen: Danish Institute of International Affairs, 1997).

4 Erik Beukel, Frede P. Jensen, and Jens Elo Rytter, *Phasing out the Colonial Status of Greenland, 1945-54: A Historical Study* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 2010).

5 Thaddeus D. Novak, and P. J. Capelotti, *Life and Death on the Greenland Patrol, 1942* (Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida, 2005); John A. Tilley, and United States Coast Guard, *The Coast Guard & the Greenland Patrol* ([Washington, D.C.]: [Coast Guard Historian's Office], 1992).

### Early US-Greenland relations

Scattered reports about Greenland can be found in American newspapers and chronicles since the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Although these reports were not based on personal knowledge of Greenland, as their writers did not visit Greenland, they provide information on the beginnings of a US-Greenland history, as these articles have shaped the image and perception of Greenland in Colonial America and consequently the early US.

One of the earliest of these reports about Greenland was featured in a 1744 issue of *The American Magazine and Historical Chronicle*.<sup>6</sup> This thorough article provided an overview of the geography of Greenland, the inhabitants of the island and their culture, and discussed the economic potential of Greenland.<sup>7</sup> The article is based on information provided by the Danish missionary Hans Egede after his return from Greenland to Denmark in the year 1736.<sup>8</sup>

The picture of Greenland drawn in the article is typical for early reports on all Arctic regions and Greenland in particular. The island is described as an extreme and hostile Arctic environment that is nearly uninhabitable and without any relevant features for economic activities. The Inuit population is described as 'savages' of low

intellectual capacity and without any higher level of social organization or civilization.<sup>9</sup>

While this picture can be found in several variations in most articles about Arctic regions in American or European newspapers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there are a few details unique to this article: The Greenlandic economy is described as a subsistence economy based on fishing and to a minor degree hunting, even though the hunting of sea-mammals was clearly the main basic economic activity in Greenland.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the article discusses minor deposits of minerals, but states at the same time that they have not been explored in detail. The article concludes that there is no potential for a future economic cooperation between Greenland and America. On top of this already bleak perspective, it is mentioned that the Inuit were not supportive of, even hostile to, the only American economic interest in the region, the whaling industry: "The Greenlanders, for as indifferent they are, do not want industry to avail themselves of the plenty of their seas."<sup>11</sup>

This text can be seen as the beginning of a tradition of articles typical for the perception of Greenland in the US: in essence a country that might be interesting as a curiosity for the feuilleton sections of the media but without any real relevance for Colonial America or the early US and by no means an economic partner.

6 L.N. Richardson, *A History of Early American Magazines, 1741-1789* (Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1931). 38.

7 "Conclusion of the New Description of Greenland," *The American Magazine and Historical Chronicle* 1 (1744), <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=834454692&Fmt=7&clientid=3505&RQT=309&VName=HNP>.

8 "Conclusion of the New Description of Greenland."

9 "Conclusion of the New Description of Greenland."

10 Ole Marquardt, *From Sealing to Fishing: Social and Economic Change in Greenland, 1850-1940* (Reykjavík: North Atlantic Fisheries History Assoc.).

11 "Conclusion of the New Description of Greenland."

Half a century later, the picture of Greenland remained unchanged. Considering that most articles were still based on second-hand accounts or information already published in America, nothing else was to be expected. When for example the *New York Magazine, or Literary Repository* reported about Greenland in March 1792,<sup>12</sup> even the title of the article referred directly to an older publication that was available in an English translation as early as 1767.<sup>13</sup> At least the original publication by David Crantz was based on first-hand experience, as Crantz had lived for one year in Greenland in the Moravian missionary stations. Covering the same topics as the earlier article in *The American Magazine and Historical Chronicle*, the only new aspect was an extensive report on the missionary activities of the Moravians on Greenland.

*The United Brethren's Missionary Intelligencer* occupied a somewhat unique position among 19<sup>th</sup>-century American newspapers reporting on Greenland. Published since 1822, the *Intelligencer* was a hybrid between an internal newsletter for the American branch of the *Unitas Fratrum* (Moravian Church) and a missionary newspaper for a broader

audience.<sup>14</sup> While it was not uncommon that such newspapers reported about missionary activities overseas, it was unique for the *Intelligencer* to include such relatively thorough coverage of Greenland. As the Moravians operated four missionary stations in Greenland, the reports were primary records, although they were translations of reports and letters sent to the main headquarters of *Unitas Fratrum* in Europe. Although the focus of these reports was the missionary activities, they provided detailed insight into everyday life in Greenland. These insights consisted of news on health and epidemics, results of hunting and fishing, population growth or shrinkage, educational topics, etc. – in other words, topics found in coverage of rural villages within the US.<sup>15</sup> This is at the same time the main reason why these articles were so unique. Originating with Moravian missionaries who lived in Greenland, they were not seeking the spectacular but provided plain information about everyday life.

The religious journals of the US continued to be a most valuable source of information about Greenland as some American clergy were allowed to visit Greenland despite the official Danish closed-country policy for Greenland.

12 "Account of the Greenlanders, Their Habitations, &C. From Crantz's History of Greenland," *The New York Magazine, or Literary Repository* 3, no. 3 (1792), <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=789332472&Fmt=7&clientId=3505&RQT=309&VName=HNP>.

13 David Crantz, *The History of Greenland Containing a Description of the Country, and Its Inhabitants: .... By David Crantz. Translated from the High-Dutch, ... In Two Volumes* (London: Brethren's Society for the Furtherance of the Gospel among the Heathen, 1767).

14 Gisela Mettele, *Weltbürgertum Oder Gottesreich: Die Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine Als Globale Gemeinschaft 1727-1857* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009). 187.

15 See for example: "Greenland," *The United Brethren's Missionary Intelligencer, and Religious Miscellany; Containing the Most Recent Accounts Relating to the United Brethren's Missions among the Heathen; with Other Interesting Communications from the Records of that Church* 3, no. 9 (1830), <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=559659652&Fmt=7&clientId=3505&RQT=309&VName=HNP>.

For example, in 1864 two members of the Religious Society of Friends (Quaker) got the chance to visit Greenland.<sup>16</sup> One of them, Isaac Sharp, wrote a detailed article on the trip to Greenland after his return that was published 1865 in the *Friends' Review*.<sup>17</sup> Like the earlier articles by and about the Moravians, Sharp focused on the missionary activities in Greenland, but embedded this information into a personal story of his own (religious) experiences. This story was again similar to reports by missionaries to rural areas all over the world and did not use the common stereotypes about Greenland. Of course, it also needs to be recognized that Sharp's visit occurred at a time when Danish missionaries had been working in Greenland for a substantial period and thus the society had undergone more than a century of development.

While the scattered reports in religious journals provided a more or less realistic picture of Greenland to their American readership in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – at least between the main lines that dealt with the success of the missionary activities—other journals of the 19<sup>th</sup> century continued in the style of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to report about Greenland as a cold wilderness inhabited by 'savages.'

16 "Quaker Evangelists Going to Greenland," *New York Evangelist* 35, no. 19 (1864), <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=846034442&Fmt=7&clientId=3505&RQT=309&VName=HNP>.

17 Isaac Sharp, "Narrative of Isaac Sharp's Visit to Greenland in 1864," *Friends' Review; a Religious, Literary and Miscellaneous Journal* 19, no. 1 (1865), <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=1115755472&Fmt=7&clientId=3505&RQT=309&VName=HNP>.

During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the attitude towards Greenland in American newspaper shifted completely. The question of the Viking settlements in Greenland and the Viking journeys from Greenland to America came into focus.<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, American journals combined their reports on the Vikings with information on contemporary Greenland and, even more interestingly, introduced a new perspective on the Inuit:

*A few of those legends and scenes of modern life in Greenland have been illustrated by wood-cuts [sic], executed by the Esquimaux [sic] themselves under Dr. Rink's direction, which afford considerable proof of their intelligence and capability of improvement.*<sup>19</sup>

Additional articles in a variety of American journals followed this line when they stressed the differences between Inuit and Native American cultures,<sup>20</sup> but did at least not directly construct Greenlandic culture as inferior. One of the

18 "Discoveries in Greenland," *Army and Navy Chronicle* 7, no. 6 (1838), <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=792305062&Fmt=7&clientId=3505&RQT=309&VName=HNP>.

19 "Traditions of the Esquimaux," *The Ladies' Repository; a Monthly Periodical, Devoted to Literature, Art and Religion* 29 (1868), <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=1592985012&Fmt=7&clientId=3505&RQT=309&VName=HNP>.

20 See for example: "Courtship in Greenland," *Flag of Our Union* 24, no. 18 (1869), <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=776992092&Fmt=7&clientId=3505&RQT=309&VName=HNP>, and "Dress of a Greenland Bell," *Harper's Bazaar* 2, no. 30 (1869), <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=753055142&Fmt=7&clientId=3505&RQT=309&VName=HNP>.

reasons for this minor shift might have been the writings of Danish colonial administrator Heinrich Rink now being available in the US and thus publications that praised the success of Danish colonial administration of Greenland.<sup>21</sup>

At the same time more first-hand accounts on Greenland became available in the US, although the general coverage remained sparse. Reports and short notices about scientific expeditions began to dominate the stories about Greenland, and while it was an improvement to have first-hand reports, it also meant that the focus of the news shifted towards scientific research, mainly in the context of geography, geology, and the natural sciences at large. In addition, a few articles and reports started covering the cryolite deposit near Ivigtut – the only Greenlandic natural resource that would become critically important for the US economy.<sup>22</sup>

The next period of US-Greenland relations was directly related to the acquisition of Alaska by the US in 1867. One of the most prominent advocates for expansion beyond the territory that constitutes the 48 contiguous states of the US was William H. Seward. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Seward thought that the aim of the US was not limited to expanding

the territory from coast to coast but also to the North. As early as 1846 he stated: "Our population is destined to roll its resistless waves to the icy barriers of the north, and to encounter oriental civilization on the shores of the Pacific."<sup>23</sup> After becoming Secretary of State in 1861, Seward did not prioritize the idea of an expansion to the North due to the Civil War. After the war Seward came back to his idea that the US was destined to expand to the Arctic and the Pacific shores, an idea that finally resulted in the purchase of Russian America / Alaska in 1867.

Lesser known than the Alaska purchase is the fact that proponents of a further expansion of the US, for example the expansionist Robert J. Walker, suggested in 1867 to Seward that he consider not only obtaining the Caribbean islands of St. Thomas and St. John from Denmark, but also Greenland and Iceland.<sup>24</sup> While Seward's reaction to the suggestion did not result in immediate political action, he had at least a somewhat positive attitude towards the idea. Seward asked Walker to put his suggestions in writing and to substantiate his ideas with facts about the islands to be readily available, whenever the government might consider the topic.<sup>25</sup> Walker had the United States Coast Survey prepare a report

21 H. Rink, *Danish Greenland: Its People and Products* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1974) (originally published 1877 by Henry S. King & Co. in London).

22 "Cryolite - Aluminum Minerals," *Scientific American* Vol. VIII., no. 23 (1863), <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=164236801&Fmt=7&clientId=3505&RQT=309&VName=HNP>.

23 Cited after: Thomas Andrew Bailey, *A Diplomatic History of the American People* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1980). 360.

24 Brainerd Dyer, "Robert J. Walker on Acquiring Greenland and Iceland," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 27, no. 2 (1940). 263.

25 Dyer. 264.

about Greenland and Iceland, including sections dealing with the resources available on the islands. When the report was completed, Walker delivered it to Seward, who must have not only been convinced of the importance of the report, but also of the idea of acquiring the territories. Why else would he have authorized the printing of the report with an introduction by Walker that highlighted not only the most relevant passages of the report but furthermore stressed the potential and relevance for future American economic activity?<sup>26</sup>

Nonetheless, not all members of Congress were in favor of further expansion, and in particular the purchase of Alaska was by no means undisputed. In a discussion about the appropriation of the 7,200,000US\$ required for the purchase, critical voices limited their response to Seward's ideas not to Alaska, but they included cynical comments about St. Thomas and St. John as well as Greenland, as the Walker report had become available to some members of Congress prior to official publication.<sup>27</sup> While the critical voices sarcastically called on the great need for the US to acquire the valuable Greenlandic glaciers and Icelandic geysers, moderate members of Congress argued that the idea of any further purchases would have to wait until the national debt had been substantially reduced.<sup>28</sup> As Seward's immediate targets besides Alaska

were neither Greenland nor Iceland, but still the Danish possessions in the Caribbean, he did not officially bring up the two islands in the North. When Congress finally somewhat unexpectedly denied the plans for the acquisition of the islands of St. Thomas and St. John, Seward and Walker had to realize that there was no chance of getting any kind of approval for a potential purchase of Greenland or Iceland by Congress.<sup>29</sup> The US expansionism had been brought to a halt for now. When the report on Iceland and Greenland was finally published in 1868, the debate on an actual acquisition of the two islands was already obsolete, as Seward and Walker had realized that they would never be able to secure a majority in Congress. Although the Walker report ultimately failed its primary purpose, it had served another: Greenland had entered the stage of public discussion in the US and among US policy makers.

Thus, with the publication of the Walker report in 1868, a good deal of information about Greenland had become available in the US and, more importantly, American companies had already begun to import Greenlandic cryolite.<sup>30</sup> In addition, polar research was no longer limited to the search for a Northwest Passage, the somewhat Romantic ideas related to the search of the lost Franklin expedition of 1845-1848 (identifiable in the context of the Grinnell expeditions

26 Dyer.

27 Dyer. 265-266.

28 Dyer. 266.

29 Dyer.

30 Benjamin Mills Peirce, and United States Department of State, *Report on Resources of Iceland and Greenland* ([Washington?]: U.S. G.P.O., 1868).

of the 1850s), or the search for an open Polar Sea.<sup>31</sup> Now, attempts to reach new Farthest Norths and ultimately the North Pole became hot topics. Especially the expeditions of Robert E. Peary and Frederik Cook received substantial attention in the US, but they were mainly discussed in the context of exploring uncharted lands in the High Arctic or reaching the North Pole and did not change the American understanding of Greenland as an Arctic wilderness.<sup>32</sup>

### The Danish Virgin Islands

The next time that Greenland surfaced on the political agenda of the US was in 1916-17, when the US negotiated with Denmark about the purchase of the Danish Virgin Islands. Although the main interest of the US was to secure the approaches to the Panama Canal and the Danish interest was to get rid of a financially struggling colony, the final agreement between the parties included a clause that the US accepted Danish sovereignty over the whole of Greenland, which was to a certain degree contested by Norway that had split from Denmark in 1804 to join a union with Sweden and become a sovereign country only a few years prior (1905). Although there was an intense public debate in the US on the US-Danish Virgin Islands treaty, the Greenland

clause was never a real point in this discussion. It seems that the Danish government had managed to add this clause to the treaty without gaining major attention in the US. 'No one thinks about Greenland' was once again true in the US.

Given the fact that since Peary's various expeditions to North Greenland, there was at least certain US interest in North Greenland, it is astonishing that the Greenland issue never became a real element of the debates on the US-Danish Virgin Islands Treaty.<sup>33</sup> While the Greenland clause of the treaty might be considered as a minor concession to Denmark, it also sheds light on the relevance given to Greenland in US foreign policy. Traditionally, US foreign policy towards Latin America was based on the principles of the Monroe Doctrine and the Roosevelt Corollary of 1904 became a justification for direct intervention against European colonial nations in Latin America. Nevertheless, the US granted with the Greenland clause a European colonial nation full sovereignty over an island that belongs to the western hemisphere. Thus, the clause needs to be understood as a complete contradiction to US foreign policy, which can only be explained by the US not caring too much about Greenland.

31 Elisha Kent Kane, *Arctic Explorations: The Second Grinnell Expedition in Search of Sir John Franklin, 1853, '54, '55* (Philadelphia: Childs & Peterson, 1856).

32 See Lyle Dick, "Robert Peary's North Polar Narratives and the Making of an American Icon," *American Studies* 45, no. 2 (2004), and Bruce B. Henderson, *True North: Peary, Cook, and the Race to the Pole* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005).

33 For the nexus of Robert E. Peary's activities in Northern Greenland, related US designs for the wider Thule region and the US-Danish Virgin Islands Treaty, see Marc Jacobsen and Sara Olsvig, "The History of the United States' Securitizations of Greenland," in *Greenland in Arctic Security: (De) Securitization Dynamics under Climatic Thaw and Geopolitical Freeze*, ed. Marc Jacobsen, Ole Wæver, and Ulrik Pram (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, forthcoming).





*The abandoned cryolite mine in Ivigtut in July 2022. Besides using Greenland as a stepping stone for ferry-flights between the US and Europe, the cryolite mine in Ivigtut was one of the main reasons for US military engagement in Greenland during World War II. (Copyright: Ingo Heidbrink, 2022)*

### **Cryolite and World War II Bases**

The main reason why Greenland gained US interest during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was cryolite. The only known natural deposit of this mineral that is large enough for commercial exploitation is in southwest Greenland, close to the village of Ivigtut. While described by Danish veterinarian and physician Peder C. Abildgaard as early as in the late 1790s, it was the Pennsylvania Salt Manufacturing Company that would become the first major user of the

mineral. First used by Penn Salt for manufacturing caustic soda, it was the Hall-Héroult process of aluminum production that caused the main demand for cryolite in the US. Penn Salt never became directly involved in the operation of the mine, as the Danish Kriolith Mine og Handels Selskabet A/S owned a monopoly on the extraction of cryolite since 1864. Nevertheless, Penn Salt managed to negotiate a contract with the Danish government that made the company the exclusive US importer of cryolite.

As long as cryolite was only used for caustic soda production, it had no major relevance for the US-Greenland relations. It was an exotic mineral brought to the US from Greenland by a single company and without much relevance for the economy at large. This situation changed when the US industries increased aluminum production for aircraft manufacturing at the beginning of World War II. As the Hall-Héroult process was the only known method for industrial scale aluminum production and required the use of cryolite, the deposit in Ivigtut was now of crucial relevance for the war industries, as aluminum required for war-plane production could only be manufactured by using cryolite and the only known deposit for this mineral was in Greenland. Consequently, Greenland was no longer the country nobody cared about in the US, but a country that was instrumental to the American war effort.

US Coast Guard (USCG) cutters had even begun operating in Greenlandic waters prior to the US officially entering the war, and the so-called Buskø-Incident<sup>34</sup> sparked public debate in the US, as the USCG had seized the Norwegian-flagged ship belonging to the so-called home fleet in Greenlandic waters and brought it to Boston, de-facto bringing the first prisoners of war to the US in October 1941, at a time when the US was officially not

even part of the war.<sup>3536</sup> With Japan attacking Pearl Harbor a few weeks later and the US officially becoming a combatant, the Buskø-Incident quickly became overshadowed, but Greenland remained a country of relevance, at least in military circles. But why was the USCG operating off Greenland at a time when the US had not entered the war? The first reason is the simple fact that the USCG was responsible for the operation of the International Ice Patrol, a monitoring service for drifting icebergs in the North Atlantic established after the loss of RMS TITANIC in 1912,<sup>37</sup> which was suspended for the war only in December 1941.<sup>38</sup> The second and more complex reason was that after the German occupation of Denmark, the Danish ambassador to the US, Henrik Kaufmann, refused to cooperate with the Nazi-German forces in Denmark and negotiated on his own initiative with the US an agreement related to the defense of Greenland. The agreement was signed by Kaufmann and US Secretary of State Cordell Hull on April 10, 1941, and later approved by President Roosevelt.

With Greenland not being occupied by Nazi-German forces and the local governors being

34 Frode Skarstein, "'A Cursed Affair'—How a Norwegian Expedition to Greenland Became the USA's First Maritime Capture in World War II," *Polar Research* 26, no. 2 (2007).

35 During the German occupation of Norway, the vessels of the so-called home fleet, the fleet of German-occupied Norway, flew the Norwegian flag as well as the ships of the Notraship fleet under the control of the Norwegian government in exile.

36 Skarstein.

37 Robert De C Ward, "A Cruise with the International Ice Patrol," *Geographical Review* 14, no. 1 (Jan) (1924).

38 "Icy Waters Patrolled," *The Science News-Letter* 49, no. 12 (1946).

in support of the agreement, Greenland had become de-facto a sovereign nation.<sup>39</sup> Key elements of the agreement were the defense of the island against a potential occupation being provided by the US, the background for the seizure of the BUSKØ by the USCG, and the right to establish all kinds of US military installations in Greenland. The main reasons for the US to sign the agreement were to secure access to the cryolite deposit and the geo-strategic position of the island as a stepping-stone between the US and Europe. This stepping-stone was of particular importance in the context of the lend-lease agreements and the delivery of US-manufactured military aircraft to Europe, as these aircraft could not cross the Atlantic without having a base available for re-fueling. Other reasons why Greenland was of special interest to the US Army Air Force (USAAF) included long-range reconnaissance flights to cover the mid-Atlantic gap, weather observation for forecasts for Europe, and simply a deterrent against Nazi-German occupation of the island. The agreement marked a substantial change in US-Greenland relations. Now Greenland had become a country for which a foreign policy needed to be developed. An American consulate had already opened in Godthåb (today Nuuk) in 1940.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, the

agreement provided the US nearly unlimited rights to establish military installations and finally with Greenland being dependent on imports for daily life, a potential market for US consumer products.

Over the course of World War II, the US established several military installations in Greenland, including two complete airbases. Based on various accounts of cooperation between the Greenlandic authorities and the US military, it is safe to state that the relations between Greenland and the US were characterized by a situation in which the Greenlandic authorities de-jure were responsible for everything going on in Greenland, but that de-facto the US military could do whatever it pleased. Given the special circumstances of the war and Greenland being completely dependent on supplies brought to the island from the US, this situation was no surprise, but it would also become a pattern characteristic for the US-Greenland relations ever since. Furthermore, all developments in Greenland were more or less outside any political control. From the American perspective, developments in Greenland were developments in a foreign country, thus outside the direct control of the political institutions of the US, and while Greenlandic institutions were in theory responsible for the political control, they were de-facto not able to oppose any development proposed by the US military, as the 1941 agreement provided the US military nearly unlimited rights. The island had become an area where the US military basically could do whatever

39 Aviâja Rosing Jakobsen, and Jens Heinrich, *Sorsunnersuaq Kingulleq Nunarpullu = Anden Verdenskrig og Grønland* (Nuuk: Nunatta Katersugaasivia Allagaateqarfialu, 2005). 2005 37.

40 Thomas P. Ostrom, *The United States Coast Guard in World War II: A History of Domestic and Overseas Actions* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2009). 81.

they wanted without effective parliamentary control. The US congress cared little about what was going on in Greenland, if the military objectives were met, and the Greenlandic institutions were not strong enough for any opposition to the US military given the complete dependence on US supplies and the US military being the only protection against potential occupation by Nazi-German forces.

When it comes to the Greenlandic institutions during World War II, it needs to be noted that these were not representatives of a Greenlandic nation, but Danish colonial administrators with the Danish Ambassador to the US, Henrik Kaufmann, and Governor Eske Brun being the most important actors. They might not have agreed with the official Danish policy during the German occupation and have established a de-facto independent government for the island, but not because they were interested in developing Greenland into an independent sovereign nation. They were looking for pragmatic solutions for Greenland and making sure that a potential Nazi-German attempt to occupy the island could be averted.<sup>41</sup>

On the other hand, the US activities in Greenland resulted in modernization of the island. While the former Danish colonial policy was determined by a paternalistic approach

with a strict no-contact policy at the center, the US did not continue this policy, but even opened the island to US mail-order trade. Thus, the World War II period is remembered in Greenland as a period of rapid modernization. Kerosene instead of train-oil lamps, electricity and radio sets as well as a news service providing information on the world outside Greenland, widespread use of rifles instead of hand-held harpoons are just some examples of the modern amenities that became available in Greenland during the war.<sup>4243</sup> Several administrators in Greenland remained skeptical about the modernization of the island and demanded that the US military continue the no-contact policy, but in the end, the pragmatic approach of the US prevailed, resulting in the indigenous population having for the first time ever real access to the consumer world of the 20<sup>th</sup> century without the colonial administration controlling the indigenous population's access to the world.

After the end of World War II, Greenlandic officials decided to return to Danish rule and thus a colonial status again. Nevertheless, Pandora's box had been opened with the Greenlandic population now having access to 20<sup>th</sup>-century consumer culture and consequently a balance between traditional and modern life had to be found. The former

41 For a discussion of the actions and motifs of Eske Brun and Henrik Kaufmann during World War II see: Bo Lidegaard, *I Kongens Navn: Henrik Kauffmann I Dansk Diplomati, 1919-1958* (København: Samleren, 1996).

42 Of course, rifles had been introduced to Greenland earlier within the context of various expeditions and by the colonial administration to increase efficiency of the hunt, but during World War II, they finally became accessible to all Greenlanders.

43 Jakobsen, and Heinrich.

Danish no-contact policy was paternalistic and no longer acceptable in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, but it had helped preserve a unique culture that was now at risk of being eaten up by US consumer culture.

### Post-World War II Developments

While the 19<sup>th</sup>-century proposals for acquiring Greenland were more or less of a theoretical nature, the US had a vital interest in Greenland after the end of World War II, as the bases in Greenland—in particular the two airbases—were now of crucial relevance for the developing conflict between the US and the Soviet Union. More importantly, Greenland's geographical position in the middle between Washington and Moscow made the island prime real-estate for the development of future military installations. However, the Danish position on the future of US military installations in Greenland was completely opposite to the American stance. Denmark considered the 1941 agreement on US bases on Greenland obsolete and as an agreement that had lost its justification with the end of the war. Danish politicians were asking for a phasing out of the US military presence in Greenland, but the US was not willing to give up the bases.<sup>44</sup>

When the Danish Foreign Minister, Gustav Rasmussen, visited Washington in 1946 to discuss a potential withdrawal of US troops, US Secretary of State James F. Byrnes presented him with a memorandum including three

proposals for the future of US military presence in Greenland. Two of the options were modifications and amendments to the 1941 agreement, while the third option was a straightforward proposal that the US purchase Greenland for US\$ 100 Million,<sup>45</sup> thus basically reverting to the same politics that have characterized the US Denmark/Greenland relations in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>46</sup>

While the US considered purchasing Greenland as the easiest and best solution to secure future base-rights in Greenland, the Danish side was taken by complete surprise. From the point of view of the Danish Government, giving up sovereignty over Greenland or selling the island to another nation was not an option at all. It remains unclear if the American offer to buy Greenland was openly rejected or simply ignored,<sup>47</sup> but the result was that Denmark retained the recently regained sovereignty over Greenland and did not sell the island to the US.<sup>48</sup>

It is also unclear if the proposal of an American purchase of Greenland was discussed on the island itself, but it is doubtful. On the one hand, Governor Brun was definitely in favor of continuing with Denmark, as his behavior

44 Beukel, Jensen, and Rytter. 49.

45 Beukel, Jensen, and Rytter. 50.

46 Peter Hough, *International Politics of the Arctic: Coming in from the Cold* (New York: Routledge, 2013). 25.

47 Beukel, Jensen, and Rytter. 51

48 Natalia Loukacheva, *The Arctic Promise: Legal and Political Autonomy of Greenland and Nunavut* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007). 132.



The US Narsarssuak airbase on Greenland in the mid-1950s. The base was originally established during World War II (1941) with the code-name Blue West One. Adjacent to the airbase was since 1943 a military hospital with 250 beds. (Source: Wikimedia Commons, Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license. URL: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:NarsarssuakAB1956.jpg>)

at the end of the war had demonstrated when he decided to give up the de-facto sovereignty and to return the political power back to Copenhagen.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, the domestic discussion in Greenland in the immediate post-war period was characterized by the question of simply returning to the old administrative structures of the pre-war period or to modify the administrative structures within the Danish context and to provide better representation of the Greenlandic

49 For a precise discussion of the return of the political control over Greenland to Danish institutions, the role of Eske Brun in this context and Eske Brun's post-war activities, compare: Jens Heinrich, *Eske Brun Og Det Moderne Grønlands Tilblivelse 1932-64: Ph.D.-Afhandling* (Nuuk: Ilisimatusarfik, 2010).

population in the political process or even to give up the trade monopoly.<sup>50</sup> Opting to become part of another country was not on the agenda, as neither constituted sovereignty. Ultimately, the proposal to purchase Greenland demonstrated that the US had understood the geostrategic relevance of the island in the new global political order that emerged post World War II and would finally result in the Cold War with Greenland being right in the middle of a situation defined by nuclear deterrence, strategic bomber fleets, ballistic missiles, and long-range radar.

50 M. J. Dunbar, "Greenland During and since the Second World War," *International Journal* 5, no. 2 (1950). 134.

The Danish request to the US to give up its military installations in Greenland demonstrated equally clearly that the Danish government had by no means understood this new global order or had not yet decided on which side of the new conflict Denmark would be, when the US offered to purchase Greenland, but was just hoping to be able to return to a pre-war world. Asking the US to give up all military installations in Greenland might be understood as naïve, but it needs to be understood that Denmark was in a very special situation with Soviet troops having left Bornholm only in April 1946 after nearly a year of occupation since the surrender of the German troops. From the Danish perspective, selling Greenland to the US might have looked very much as an invitation to the Soviet Union to return to Bornholm. In the end, every US military base in Denmark or Greenland as well as in Norway or Iceland could also be understood as a justification for Soviet demands for military bases in the same countries, in particular on Bornholm or within the Spitsbergen archipelago.<sup>51</sup> Thus, the Danish position might not have been naïve, but simply focused on an island much closer to home than Greenland.

For the US it might have been convenient to be able to purchase Greenland and thus avoid the need to negotiate with Denmark in the future about military developments, but simply ignoring the Danish request for withdrawing US troops from Greenland

demonstrated as early as 1946 the pattern that became characteristic for the military aspects of the US-Greenland relations during the Cold War. This pattern might in the end have been even more convenient for the US military, as the military could still basically do whatever it pleased and did not need to fear that domestic politics of the US or concerns for the local population affected them too much. In an oversimplified version, the final answer to the question of purchasing Greenland from Denmark might have been as simple as: Why purchase something when you can use it for free?

This approach remained characteristic for the US-Greenland relations over the following decades. While Greenland became a testing area for US military activities and equipment, it remained officially a part of Denmark and thus US politics did not need to worry too much about it. Probably the clearest case of this policy was the construction of Camp Century and the related plans for the so-called project Iceworm.<sup>52</sup> This new US policy towards Greenland became obvious for the first time when the US military decided to build a new airbase in the North of Greenland. Once the best location for this new airbase had been determined, a region close to the Greenlandic village of Thule in the far North of the island that was already the location of a small US military installation

51 Norman Friedman, *The Fifty-Year War: Conflict and Strategy in the Cold War* (Naval Institute Press, 2007). 51.

52 For a complete history of Camp Century, see Kristian Hvidtfelt Nielsen, and Henry Nielsen, *Camp Century: The Untold Story of America's Secret Arctic Military Base under the Greenland Ice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

during World War II, Danish and American authorities cooperated in a way that would become stereotypical for the US-Greenland relations of the Cold-War period. In short, the US requested from Denmark everything that was required for the construction of the base, most importantly the land, and Denmark simply agreed to the request without consulting the Greenlandic population. In fact, the local population of Thule was forced to resettle to nearby Qaanaaq, resulting in substantial hardship and, ultimately, only a 2003 [sic!] judgment by the Danish Supreme Court classified the relocation as an unlawful act against local population, granting ex-post compensation for expropriated property.<sup>53</sup>

Once Thule airbase had become a reality, the projects became more extreme with Camp Century as the first step of Project Iceworm. Camp Century was a US military station literally in the Greenlandic ice-shield, designed to prove the concept of an autonomous military station in polar regions. The design even included a small nuclear power station that operated from 1960 to 1963. This nuclear power plant is a good illustration of the US-Greenland politics at this time: Denmark was skeptical of the use of nuclear power, but the Danish administration and parliament did not question the US idea of establishing a nuclear power plant at Camp Century. In other words, while Denmark was

critical against such projects on the Danish mainland, it was not an issue for them when it happened in Greenland. In short, if the Danish administration did not care about it, there was no reason for the US to question this decision, given the pro-nuclear position of the US. The result of these two policies was a regulatory vacuum, which could be used by the US military. US regulations did not fully apply, as Camp Century was not in US territory, and while Danish regulations and parliamentary control would have theoretically been applicable, they were of no real relevance, as Camp Century was in Greenland and not on the Danish mainland. The US could state that it was a Danish responsibility and Denmark could simply state that it was a decision by the US military. The only ones never asked about their opinion in this context were the inhabitants of Greenland itself.

The situation becomes even more interesting when discussing the plans for the never-realized Project Iceworm. To date there is only little information about the project available, but the basic idea of Iceworm was to dig an enormous network of tunnels into the icecap and to use them as a base for Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles with nuclear warheads.<sup>54</sup> While some historians doubt that anybody in the US military ever thought that Iceworm could become a reality and place the whole

53 For a complete account of the forced resettlement compare:  
Per Walsøe, *Goodbye Thule: The Compulsory Relocation in 1953* (Copenhagen: Tiderne Skifter, 2003).

54 Compare the following publications for the little information available about Project Iceworm: Nikolaj Pedersen, *The Iceman That Didn't Come: "Project Iceworm" and the Search for a Nato Deterrent, 1960-1962* (Aarhus: Institut for Statskundskab, Aarhus Universitet, 2005) and Erik D. Weiss, "Cold War under the Ice: The Army's Bid for a Long-Range Nuclear Role, 1959-1963," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 3, no. 3 (2001).



project idea into the context of inner-service rivalries between the different branches of the US armed services, the information available again sheds light on the US-Greenland relations and the special role of Denmark within these relations.<sup>55</sup> According to Nikolaj Pedersen, Camp Century as the initial test project for Iceworm was announced to Denmark as a platform to test construction technologies under Arctic conditions, including the use of portable nuclear power plants, and to support scientific research related to the icecap.<sup>56</sup>

Given Iceworm's top-secret status, the ideas for this project were never publicly announced in the US or in Denmark. Greenland was once more a sandbox for futuristic projects of the US military about which US politics did not really care, as they happened outside US territory and Denmark was willing to accept the superficial and incomplete explanations provided by the US. Again, nobody cared about Greenland, which once more had become a place for projects developed in the military ivory tower and would have resulted in the island becoming a prime target for Soviet intercontinental ballistic missiles, if it would have ever become a reality. Such a project would never have found public approval if it were proposed to be established in the US or on the Danish mainland.

Ultimately, the decision not to purchase Greenland provided the US military with a unique chance to establish a sandbox for all

kind of military developments that provided even greater opportunities, as if Greenland were a part of the US. If Greenland had been purchased by the US making Greenlanders US citizens, it would at least theoretically have been impossible to simply neglect them when planning projects like Camp Century or Iceworm. Of course, the experiences of residents of the US-Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, Guam, Micronesia, and the District of Columbia, as well as indigenous Alaskans show that being part of the US does not necessarily result in equal and full representation in the political system of the US,<sup>57</sup> but at least the moral obligation for US politics to consider the interests of Greenlanders would have been higher than if the Greenlanders remained Danish citizens. With Greenland continuing with Denmark and Danish government mainly caring about the affairs of the Danish mainland, Greenlanders ended up in a de-facto political vacuum and without major recognition of their problems by US media and the public, a situation that might be described as convenient for any military planner.

The ultimate pinnacle of this situation became finally obvious in the context of the crash of a B-52 bomber at Thule airbase in 1968. As Danish and American historians have extensively discussed the history of the B-52 crash

55 Weiss.

56 Nikolaj Pedersen, "The Iceman That Never Came," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 33, no. 1 (2008). 78.

57 Abraham Holtzman, "Empire and Representation: The U. S. Congress," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (1986). 271.

and its wider ramifications,<sup>58</sup> there is no need to provide a detailed account. In short, a B-52 strategic bomber of the US Air Force crashed on January 21, 1968, near Thule. The bomber carried four hydrogen bombs that were destroyed during the crash, releasing substantial amounts of nuclear material into the environment. Following the accident, the USAF, in cooperation with Danish authorities, initiated a clean-up effort nicknamed Operation Crested Ice aiming to collect all radioactively contaminated debris as well as contaminated snow and ice. Crested Ice was officially terminated on September 13, 1968, with roughly 90 percent of the contaminated material removed from the island.<sup>59</sup>

The main reason why the Thule accident of 1968 is important for any history of the US-Greenland relations is neither the crash itself nor the following clean-up operation. It is the mere fact that there were four hydrogen bombs aboard the B-52 strategic bomber that makes it relevant. For the US it was obvious that strategic bombers operating in the context of the Chrome Dome program needed to carry nuclear weapons as a nuclear deterrent. Denmark, on the other hand, already

had decided in 1957 on a no-nuclear weapons policy on Danish territory and thus there should have been no such weapons onboard the B-52. Immediately after the accident the Danish and the US government stated that the plane was not on a nuclear-armed mission in Greenlandic airspace but had turned towards Greenland only because of an emergency, thus making the presence of the hydrogen bombs in Greenlandic airspace an acceptable consequence of a flight emergency.

When the US in 1990 finally declassified documents related to the accident, it became obvious that the Danish government could have been aware of the presence of nuclear weapons at Thule airbase, causing the so-called Thulegate scandal. The official report commissioned by the Danish government finally concluded that the Danish Prime Minister Hans Christian Hansen must have been aware of the US deploying nuclear weapons to Greenland but had chosen to ignore this knowledge.<sup>60</sup> Thus he contradicted the Danish no-nuclear weapons policy and resorted as early as 1957 to not mentioning the policy in negotiations with the US about Thule airbase. He followed up on the discussion with a letter, in which he replied to the US question of whether or not he wanted to be informed if the US would decide to deploy nuclear weapons to Thule. He responded that this question did not give cause to any comments on his part.<sup>61</sup> De facto the Danish government simply decided

58 Knud Juel, "The Thule Episode Epidemiological Follow up after the Crash of a B-52 Bomber in Greenland: Registry Linkage, Mortality, Hospital Admissions," *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 46, no. 4 (1992).  
G. E. Torres, ed., *Project Crested Ice* (Kirtland, New Mexico: U.S. Air Force, 1970).

59 For an assessment of the radiation doses resulting from the accident, see Kaare Ulbak, ed., *The Thule Accident: Assessment of Radiation Doses from Terrestrial Radioactive Contamination* (Copenhagen: National Board of Health, 2011).

60 Myers.

61 Jeroen van Dongen, *Cold War Science and the Transatlantic Circulation of Knowledge* (Leiden: Brill, 2015). 247.

already in 1957 to turn a blind eye towards the issue of US nuclear weapons in Greenland. Again, the situation was as follows: US policy towards Greenland was not a direct policy towards a sovereign nation, but a subset of US foreign policy towards Denmark. Thus, from an American perspective, Copenhagen was the only partner for any discussion regarding Greenland. For the Danish government, good relations with the US were important and if a request by the US did not affect the Danish mainland, there was little reason not to comply. Simplified, the US used the official channels for requesting permission to station nuclear weapons in Greenland with the request not being denied. Denmark was not directly responsible for bringing the weapons to Greenland and had not permitted another nation to do so. Again, nobody thought about Greenland and though being directly affected by the US bringing nuclear weapons to Greenland, ultimately resulting in the nuclear contamination of parts of the land after the B-52 crash in 1968, Greenland was not a part of any bilateral negotiations.

### **Towards a New Regime within US-Greenland Relations**

With the Danish approach towards Greenland changing substantially in the 1970s, the US approach changed too. In 1979 Greenland became a self-governing overseas administrative division of Denmark, and while self-governance was limited to domestic affairs during the early years, more and more areas

of administrative and political responsibility were transferred from Copenhagen to Nuuk in the following decades. In addition, the end of the Cold War limited the geo-strategic relevance of Greenland for the US and US military activities in Greenland were heavily reduced. At the same time, trade between Greenland and the US increased and Greenland became a destination for US based cruise ships.

However, the 'no one thinks of Greenland' pattern continued to a certain degree but now with a different twist. There is not a single freight shipping line providing direct services between the US and Greenland despite the comparatively short distance between the countries. Even the icons of American consumer culture that can be found in nearly every country on the globe that has no hostile relation with the US, McDonald's and Coca Cola, neglected Greenland until the early 2000s. For McDonald's, the reason for having no outlet in Greenland was and is simply that there is not a single place with enough population to fulfill the requirements for a franchise. For Coca Cola the situation was a little different, as the company could cooperate with a Danish/Greenlandic soft-drink company, but the fact that Coca Cola did not require the use of its iconic bottles but accepted Coca Cola to be bottled in 0.2l standard Greenlandic bottles, easily shows that the company considered Greenland different from other nations. Greenland was the only country on the globe where not using the iconic Coca Cola bottles was an acceptable option for

the Atlanta-based company that cared about its brand identity all over the globe, but not in Greenland.<sup>62</sup> When Air Greenland in 2008 decided to offer a direct service between Baltimore and Greenland, the service was ended after only a couple of round-trips as there were not enough passengers to sustain the new route. Not enough US residents were thinking about Greenland or, more precisely, were interested in going there to sustain even a once-a-week-only flight connection. There have been several visits of high-ranking US politicians to Greenland in recent years, and cooperation between the US and Greenland within the Arctic Council is today a diplomatic routine, but in the end, the main characteristic of the US-Greenland relations is still that they are surprisingly limited, in particular with Greenland being part of the North American continent and only a few hundred nautical miles from the US.

In a surprise statement, then US President Donald J. Trump proposed in the summer of 2019 to purchase Greenland from Denmark, causing an immediate rebuke by the Danish government. While Trump compared the idea to a real estate deal and suggested potential strategic benefits for the US, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen simply replied that Greenland was not for sale and that Greenland belonged to

Greenland.<sup>63</sup> The issue was dead on arrival but once again shed light on the perception of Greenland in the US. As President Trump stated himself, the issue was not a priority for the US,<sup>64</sup> and it is unclear if he was ever serious about the proposal, or if it was just another stunt during an already severely troubled presidency, to distract from domestic issues. While the idea of purchasing a country might have been acceptable in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, it was unacceptable in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The simple fact that a sitting US president could propose such an idea in 2019 showed again that Greenland was not accepted as an equal partner, or in other words, that nobody in the US really thought about Greenland. Consequently, it was no wonder that after some days of making the headlines in the US, the proposal simply vanished, with President Trump focusing on other aspects of his troubled presidency. The US-Greenland relations had returned to normal, with Greenland being the ice-covered island nobody really cared about.

Fortunately, this situation may have changed recently. When US Minister of State Anthony Blinken visited Greenland in Spring 2021, he not only confirmed that the US no longer wants to buy Greenland but spoke of his hope to strengthen commercial relationships.

62 "Coca-Cola Comes to Greenland," *Nunatsiaq News* (Iqaluit), Aug, 20, 2004, 2004, [https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/coca-cola\\_comes\\_to\\_greenland/](https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/coca-cola_comes_to_greenland/).

63 Scott Neuman, "No Joke: Trump Really Does Want to Buy Greenland," NPR, 2019, accessed 15 Nov. 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2019/08/19/752274659/no-joke-trump-really-does-want-to-buy-greenland>.

64 Neuman.

Furthermore, the US had already re-opened their consulate in Nuuk the previous year and pledged US\$ 12 Million in aid for civilian projects.<sup>65</sup> During his first visit to Washington, DC, in June 2022, Greenlandic Prime Minister Mute Egede called the US Greenland's most important strategic partner and courted investments from the US.<sup>66</sup> Whether this will be the beginning of a new era of Greenland-US relations remains to be seen, but direct exchange between high-ranking Greenland and US officials seems to be a signal that things might change and Greenland is considered a real partner for the US, instead of a military playground whose representatives and citizens simply could be ignored.

John Griesemer's novel *No One Thinks of Greenland* is a work of fiction and there is no indication that a US military hospital like the one described in the book ever existed. Nevertheless, what with the various US military projects in Greenland, such a secret hospital might have existed, and given the structures of the US-Greenland relations at this time, neither the US nor the Danish institutions and administrations would have intervened, while the Greenlandic administration and, more importantly, the Greenlandic people would not have been asked. Thus,

Griesemer's novel is the perfect parable for the US-Greenland relations or at least the perception of Greenland in the US until very recently, and it clearly shows why not purchasing Greenland made perfect sense for the US. Why should you purchase something if you can make nearly unlimited use of it for free? Fortunately, it seems that this logic no longer determines the US's Greenlandic relations, and that Greenland is no longer the large icy island nobody cares about in the US.

65 Helen Sullivan, "US No Longer Wants to Buy Greenland, Blinken Confirms," *The Guardian*, 2021, accessed 9.9.2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/may/21/us-no-longer-wants-to-buy-greenland-blinken-confirms>.

66 Melody Schreiber, "Greenland PM Calls for Closer Us Ties in Washington Visit," *ArcticToday*, 2022, accessed 9.9.2022, [https://www.arctictoday.com/greenland-pm-calls-for-closer-us-ties-in-washington-visit/?wallit\\_nosession=1](https://www.arctictoday.com/greenland-pm-calls-for-closer-us-ties-in-washington-visit/?wallit_nosession=1).

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# AN ODD ASSORTMENT OF FOREIGNERS IN GREENLAND:

Towards the Political Implications of Arctic  
Travel during the Late Interwar Years

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**Abstract:** The interwar years, 1918-1939, saw an increase in both the number and variety of travelers headed to the Arctic. Employing new technologies that allowed the region to become more accessible, knowable, and visible to the globe, these ventures to the North both reflected and contributed to the widespread geopolitical, social, and economic shifts occurring during this period, laying the foundation for how the Arctic is understood and framed today. However, many of these travelers remain marginal or completely overlooked in discussions of the region. This paper argues that greater attention to the increasingly odd assortment of foreigners traveling to the Arctic between World War I and World War II can offer a more nuanced understanding of both the geopolitical transitions underway in the region during this period and the broader political implications of travel. As an initial investigation of this ongoing research topic, this paper concentrates on three of the slowly increasing number of travelers with direct or close ties to the United States who ventured to Greenland in the late interwar years. It focuses on the travels of American artist Rockwell Kent, wealthy California socialite and amateur scientist Louise A. Boyd, and the Hollywood-sponsored filming expedition of German filmmaker Arnold Fanck, who all traveled to Greenland between 1931-1932. Approached not as singular endeavors but as part of the changing complex of Arctic expedition and travel, this paper argues that attention to these travelers provides greater insight into shifts in colonial policy, increasing cooperation between states, and the upsurge in global interest in the island, as well as the shifting relations between Denmark, the US, and Greenland. It also raises issues about the changing relationship between politics, science, and art.

**Key words:**  
Travel,  
Expedition,  
Sovereignty,  
Art,  
Greenland

The interwar years, 1918-1939, mark a period of transition in the history of the Arctic. The era of the North as a mysterious, uncharted, and perilous expanse traversed by heroic individual explorers was gradually coming to an end while new and more varied types of travelers were heading to the region. Utilizing novel technologies that would allow the Arctic to become increasingly knowable, visible, and accessible to the globe, these forays reflected and contributed to the widespread geopolitical, social, and economic shifts that laid the foundation for how the Arctic is understood and framed today. Yet, unlike their romanticized predecessors, many of those who ventured North during the waning years of the interwar period remain peripheral or entirely absent from discussions of the region, their exclusion obscuring our understanding of the rapid changes underway at the time as well as their role in shaping the contemporary Arctic. This paper examines what can be learned about the changing geopolitical terrain of the region by focusing greater attention on this odd assortment of travelers who ventured North during the years immediately preceding World War II and argues that such a perspective can provide a more nuanced understanding of the Arctic as well as the broader political implications of travel.

As an initial examination of this topic, this paper explores just three of the small but growing number of travelers with direct or close ties to the United States who ventured to Greenland during the heated territorial dispute surrounding the island's east coast. In

just a two-year period, 1931-1932, American artist Rockwell Kent, wealthy California socialite and amateur scientist Louise A. Boyd, and the Hollywood-sponsored filming expedition of the controversial German filmmaker Arnold Fanck were among the group of artists, scientists, amateur researchers, and others who voyaged to the ostensibly closed colony with the permission of the Danish government. Examined not as singular endeavors but as part of the changing complex of Arctic expedition and travel, this paper argues that attention to these travelers provides greater insight into shifts in colonial policy, increasing cooperation between states, and the upsurge in commercial, artistic, and scientific interest in Greenland. Focusing on the permissions granted to the Louise A. Boyd 1931 East Greenland Expedition, the Universal-Dr. Fanck Expedition, and to Rockwell Kent, as well as their activities, this paper also explores the nuances of the transforming relationship between Denmark, the US, and Greenland as a means of examining the role of travel in the changing geopolitics of the Arctic.

### **Understanding Arctic Expeditions**

When approaching the political implications of travels in the Arctic and of foreigners venturing to Greenland, specifically, it is necessary to examine the broader relationship between expeditions, colonization, and the state. Historically, the colonial state apparatus can be understood in terms of the establishment of juridical relations of property and the possession of land. Operating

as a “territorializing machine,” it transformed soils into discrete territories by means of violence, law, and cartography.<sup>1</sup> One of the most potent instruments through which this transformative process occurred was the outfit and the deployment of expeditions in order to lay hands on lands supposedly primordial and unclaimed.<sup>2</sup> Through the practice of “discovery,” which included gathering geographic knowledge of a particular region, identifying and exploiting resources, founding settlements and trading posts, crafting laws and regulations, and generally excluding Indigenous voices—which explorers, soldiers, missionaries, settlers, prospectors, and traders relied upon—from their records, expeditions served as a vehicle of the colonial state through which claims to territory could be formalized. Crucially, though, expeditions also served as a means to support the legitimacy of these colonial “possessions” at home and abroad, a role that would become increasingly significant throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. Through books, lectures, articles, drawings, and later in photographs and films, expeditions transmitted knowledge of regions far away, including their economic potential, to domestic and international audiences. This



Greenland Photo: Rockwell Kent #624  
Rights courtesy of Plattsburgh State Art Museum, State University of New York, USA, Rockwell Kent Collection, Bequest of Sally Kent Gorton. All rights reserved.

served to display expertise, bolster national pride, and to support further expeditions.<sup>3</sup>

In Greenland and other parts of the Arctic, the “discovery” of natural resources such as mineral deposits, furs, and fishing and whaling grounds through expeditions stimulated the interest of trading companies, scientific societies, and colonial administrators and led to a near constant stream of voyages northward, piecing together maps, making claims to land in the region while at the same time demonstrating the expertise of various

1 Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (Minneapolis & London: Minnesota University Press, 2015); Stuart Elden, “Land, Terrain, Territory,” *Progress in Human Geography* 34, no. 6 (2010): 808-812.

2 Felix Driver, *Geography Militant: Cultures of Exploration and Empire* (Malden & Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

3 Driver, *Geography Militant*; Russell Alan Potter, *Arctic Spectacles: The Frozen North in Visual Culture, 1818-1875* (Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 2007); Martin Thomas, “What Is an Expedition? An Introduction,” in *Expedition into Empire: Exploratory Journeys and the Making of the Modern World*, ed. Martin Thomas (New York and London: Routledge, 2015).

colonial states.<sup>4</sup> Yet by the first decades of the 20th century, what is commonly thought of as the age of “discovery” in the Arctic was slowly coming to an end with the practices and the technologies of expeditions changing. The aura of romance and adventure that had once given shape to ventures northward had already begun to fade during the 19th century with very public catastrophes such as the disappearance of the Franklin Expedition after 1845, the Lady Franklin Bay Expedition (1881-1884), or the disappearance of German scientist Alfred Wegener in Greenland in 1930. Combined with unrest in Europe and a shift in political attention to more southerly regions with greater accessibility, public interest and governmental sponsorship of large-scale Arctic expeditions in countries like the US and Britain had begun to wane, especially during World War I.<sup>5</sup>

The familiar trope of the white, male explorer endangered by the harsh, alien environments

of the North was also reaching its apogee by the turn of the century, embodied by larger-than-life figures such as US admiral Robert E. Peary, Knud Rasmussen, or Frederick Cook, explorers who were elevated to national heroes for their pursuits in the Arctic region. They served as proxies for their respective colonial states in international contests such as the famous race to the North Pole. Individuals, not the work of collective expeditionary groups or Indigenous Peoples, who often aided and participated in such efforts, were the focus of increased public attention. Carried by national presses, by lectures and travelogues, and in exhibitions and museums, these individuals and their adventures allowed for domestic audiences to experience the danger of expedition and partake in international competitions for territory, prestige, and economic expansion.<sup>6</sup> Explorers’ narratives served as key “technologies of travel” legitimizing the activities of these explorers and their respective states

4 Julie Cruikshank, *Do Glaciers Listen? Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters, and Social Imagination* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press & University of Washington Press, 2005); Stuart Elden, *The Birth of Territory* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013); Katja Göcke, *Indigene Landrechte im internationalen Vergleich* (Heidelberg: Springer, 2016), 282; Potter, *Arctic Spectacles*, 3-8; Andrew Stuhl, *Unfreezing the Arctic: Science, Colonialism, and the Transformation of Inuit Lands* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

5 Shelagh Grant, *Polar Imperative: A History of Arctic Sovereignty in North America* (Vancouver: Douglas & MacIntyre, 2010), 193-216; Nancy Fogelson, *Arctic Exploration & International Relations, 1900-1932: A Period of Expanding International Interest* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 1992), 29-38.

6 Lisa Bloom, *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Michael Bravo and Sverker Sörlin, “Narrative and Practice – an Introduction,” in *Narrating the Arctic: A Cultural History of Nordic Scientific Practices*, ed. Michael Bravo and Sverker Sörlin (Canton, MA: Science History Publications/USA, 2002), 3-32.; Alexander Kraus, “Scientists and Heroes: International Arctic Cooperation at the End of the Nineteenth Century,” *New Global Studies* 17, no. 2 (2013): 101-116; Robert Petersen, “Udforskningen af det lukkede land fortsætter.” in *Kalaallit Nunaat/Gyldendals Bog om Grønland*, ed. Bent Gynther and Aqigssiaq Møller (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, Nordisk Forlag A/S, 1999); Beau Riffenburgh, *The Myth of the Explorer: The Press, Sensationalism, and Geographic Discovery* (London and New York: Belhaven Press, 1993); Thomas, *Geography Militant*.



while at the same time excluding other members of expeditions and the Indigenous knowledge on which they heavily depended.<sup>7</sup> The activities of these Arctic travelers also contributed to an already heightened atmosphere of suspicion between colonial states during the early years of the 20th century as expeditions could be used to both support and legitimize territorial claims. However, the start of World War I put a halt to almost all expeditions in the Arctic, with the exception of those led by US naval officer Donald MacMillan and Vilhjalmur Stefansson.<sup>8</sup>

Expeditions to the Arctic that resumed after 1918 were largely supported by private funding from individuals, scientific societies, and universities requiring the cultivation of a new type of sensationalism to both secure and maintain attention and political support. As historian Nancy Fogelson has convincingly argued, over the first decades of the 20th century, colonial states were deliberately disengaging from direct funding of Arctic expeditions, generally confining their support to diplomatic assistance, in order to avoid direct conflict over polar regions. Scientific expeditions, like those that became increasingly common during the late interwar years, instead became an indirect means of

projecting geopolitical power and influence.<sup>9</sup> The expeditions North that resumed after 1918 were also more diverse than their prewar predecessors, reflecting the widespread use of once novel technologies that had been refined during the War, a greater scientific and commercial interest in the Arctic, and transformations in Arctic geopolitics. The use of aircraft, wireless communication, and cameras along with other once-marvelous technologies altered the speed of travelers and of information opening the region to entangled scientific, artistic, economic, and military interests. Once-slow processes like mapping the shape and contours of the landscape, for example, accelerated dramatically with flight and film, as did knowledge of the mineral potential of the Arctic, of its strategic importance for transatlantic air transportation, and its significance for meteorology, oceanography, geology, anthropology, and other disciplines.<sup>10</sup>

Voyages North during the late interwar years reflected and contributed to these broader transformations even as they began to appear less like the prototypical expeditions of previous eras. The character of the lone, hardened adventurer, which had exemplified Arctic expeditions in the past, was

7 Bravo and Sörlin, "Narrative and Practice," 4-5.

8 Grant, *Polar Imperative*, 193-246; Fogelson, *Arctic Exploration & International Relations*, 29-44.

9 Nancy Fogelson, "The Tip of the Iceberg: The United States and International Rivalry for the Arctic, 1900-25," *Diplomatic History* 9, no. 2 (Spring 1985): 131-148.

10 Fogelson, *Arctic Exploration & International Relations*, 4-5; Nancy Fogelson, "Greenland: Strategic Base on a Northern Defense Line," *Journal of Military History* 53 (January 1989): 51-63; Grant, *Polar Imperative*, 217.

supplanted by a more diverse set of figures headed towards the region.<sup>11</sup> As Christopher Ries points out, “in a massive endeavor like the Three-Year-Expedition [1931-1934], with teams of scientists from many different disciplines working in a co-ordinated effort, there was little room for individual achievement, let alone heroism.”<sup>12</sup> In addition to these larger groups of scientists, however, there was also a growing number of artists, photographers, and filmmakers who traveled to the region. While some were members of larger groups, others trekked alone producing rich visual, auditory, and written accounts that brought new sights, sounds, and understandings of the Arctic to audiences at home and abroad. Among these heterogenous groups were travelers who resided in Indigenous communities for months or, occasionally, even for years. The works they produced carried depictions of Indigenous Peoples as well as colonial practices that, while coded in personal or societal biases, began to demystify many aspects of life in the North and occasionally shed a critical light on colonial practices. The numbers of women traveling northward, although not common, were also increasing, including both female artists as well as female scientists.

11 Christopher Ries, “Lauge Koch and the Mapping of North East Greenland: Tradition and Modernity in Danish Arctic Research, 1920-1940,” in *Narrating the Arctic: A Cultural History of Nordic Scientific Practices*, ed. Michael Bravo and Sverker Sörlin (Canton, MA: Science History Publications/USA, 2002), 202-208; Fogelson, *Arctic Exploration & International Relations*, 39-40.

12 Ries, “Lauge Koch and the Mapping of North East Greenland,” 208.

While appearing less like earlier forays North, the groups and individuals who headed to the region during the late interwar years represented a continuation of many of the practices associated with past expedition. “Discovery” remained a key aspect of travel, though instead of land it was a mixture of scientific data, sources of wealth and commerce, and the sights and sounds of the Arctic that waited to be claimed. Expertise was established through these activities and reflected back not only on individuals, organizations, and institutions but also on their respective states. Travel to the North in the late interwar years continued to have very real political implications—marking, legitimizing, and displaying the claims of southern states to Arctic territory while also serving as a recognition of the slowly coalescing geopolitical shape of the Arctic. In Greenland, for instance, the Danish expedition headed by Dr. Lauge Koch (1931-1934) was more than a scientific venture; it also served to mark and display Danish authority over the disputed east coast of the island.<sup>13</sup> Yet analysis of expeditions during this period also display the nuances of these changes underway in the Arctic and the delicacy with which they were navigated as they took shape. This is particularly visible in areas of the North, where foreign entry was heavily restricted, such as Greenland. The increase in travelers to the country, such as those with ties to the US, highlighted not only shifts in the governance of the island but the changing relationship between states in the Arctic.

13 *ibid.*

### From Suspicion to Cautious Cooperation: The US, Greenland, and Denmark in the Early 20th Century

While the Danish colonial presence in Greenland had existed for almost 200 years by the beginning of the 20th century, its colonies remained primarily concentrated on the island's west coast, with the exception of the newly established colony of Angmagssalik (Tasiilaq). This lack of a formal presence in other regions of Greenland, combined with foreign travel and activity in these areas, contributed to a growing concern in Copenhagen of possible rival territorial claims.<sup>14</sup> On the east coast of Greenland, Norwegian activity was seen as posing the greatest possible threat to Danish sovereignty over the entirety of the island, but in northern Greenland, it was repeated American expeditions that prompted most concerns. Among the American explorers who traveled to the island at the turn of the 20th century, Peary was a particular source of consternation. His repeated expeditions to northwest Greenland and his prominent role in the international contest to reach the North Pole, a feat that was heavily published in the United States and abroad, could be used to support a possible American claim to a portion of Greenland. Peary himself was a vocal advocate for the American acquisition of the island. He cited Greenland's resources,

14 Erik Beukel, "Greenland and Denmark before 1945," in *Phasing Out the Colonial Status of Greenland, 1945-54: A Historical Study*, ed. Erik Beukel, Frede P. Jensen, and Jens Elo Rytter (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2010): 19-20; Janice Cavell, "Historical Evidence and the Eastern Greenland Case," *Arctic* 61, no. 4 (2008), 434.

including coal and cryolite, the potential of its glacial streams for hydroelectric production, and its future military value as vital to American interests. He also believed the US Monroe Doctrine should be applied to the island, finding Greenland should not be a European colony but an American possession.<sup>15</sup> In 1916 he wrote in the *New York Times*:

*The abundance of native coal and the numerous glacial streams which come tumbling into the southern fjords from the great interior ice sheet represent enormous potential energy which might be translated into nitrate and electrical energy, to make Greenland a powerhouse for the United States. Greenland represents ice, coal, and power in inexhaustible quantities. And stranger things have happened than that Greenland, in our hands, might furnish an important North Atlantic naval and aeronautical base.*<sup>16</sup>

However, Danish concerns regarding American interest in Greenland were not only the result of Peary's expeditions or advocacy. Since the second half of the 19th century, the notion of

15 Dawn Alexandria Berry, "The Monroe Doctrine and the Governance of Greenland's Security" in *Governing the North American Arctic: Sovereignty, Security, and Institutions*, ed. Dawn Alexandria Berry, Nigel Bowles, and Halbert Jones (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillian, 2016), 107-116; Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 113-116.

16 Robert E Peary, "Greenland as an American Naval Base," *New York Times*, September 11, 1916. New York Times Historical Database.

the US acquiring the island had been an intermittent topic of discussion in Washington. US Secretary of State William Seward, for instance, had considered purchasing the whole of Greenland along with Iceland in the 1860s for its resource potential as well as the possibility the island opened for the US's extension into territories claimed by Canada, an action advocated by some expansionists at the time.<sup>17</sup> The potential US acquisition of Greenland was also broached in 1910 by the American Ambassador to Denmark, Maurice Francis Egan, as part of a scheme that would see the US trade a portion of the Philippines to Denmark in exchange for Greenland, but this proposal, like other efforts to purchase Greenland, failed to gain much support.<sup>18</sup>

By 1915, however, any nascent American interest in acquiring Greenland had been eclipsed by the US's desire to obtain the Danish West Indies. American recognition of Danish claims to all of Greenland was a stipulation of the sale of Saint Croix, Saint Thomas, and Saint John, considered to be of strategic importance to the US given their proximity to the newly opened Panama Canal.<sup>19</sup> American negotiators did attempt to include a provision that would allow free trade for all nations in Greenland, which fell in line with the broader

shift in US policy toward commerce.<sup>20</sup> However, Denmark objected to this provision, as it would have undermined the existing trade monopoly in Greenland maintained by the colonial Royal Greenland Trade Company (*Kongelige Grønlandske Handel*). This opposition from Denmark, combined with the push for a quick resolution to the sale by US President Woodrow Wilson, resulted in the removal of the trade provision from the treaty. The purchase of what are today the US Virgin Islands was concluded in 1916 for USD 25 million. With the sale came an official statement by the US Secretary of State, Robert Lansing, announcing the US would not object to the extension of Danish political and economic interests to the entirety of Greenland.<sup>21</sup> Yet the word "sovereignty" was not used in the American declaration, and the US included an additional caveat stating it would not accept the sale or ceding of the island to any third party.<sup>22</sup> According to historian Bo Lidegaard, the speed with which the agreement regarding Greenland was reached and the flexibility of the US were due, in part, to the perceived benefits of the arrangement to both parties. Danish control over all of Greenland was likely the best option for the US in the absence of a full American take-over of the island, as it was unlikely that Denmark, a small and relatively weak European state

17 Berry, "The Monroe Doctrine and the Governance of Greenland's Security," 107; Brainerd Dyer, "Robert J. Walker on Acquiring Greenland and Iceland," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 27, no. 2 (1940).

18 Berry, "The Monroe Doctrine and the Governance of Greenland's Security," 107.

19 *ibid*, 108.

20 Bo Lidegaard, *Overleveren: 1914-1945* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal Leksikon, 2003), 178.

21 Berry, "The Monroe Doctrine and the Governance of Greenland's Security," 109.

22 Beukel, "Greenland and Denmark before 1945," 19-20; Lidegaard, *Overleveren: 1914-1945*, 177-178.

at the time, would interfere with US interests.<sup>23</sup> For Denmark, it was assumed that US acknowledgment of Danish claims to the entirety of Greenland would help sway the opinions of other states and could be leveraged to secure similar recognitions.<sup>24</sup>

In July of 1919, Denmark approached Norway to gain a sense of the latter's attitude on acknowledging Danish sovereignty over the entire island, citing the American statement. At the initial meeting between officials no response was received but during later discussions, on 22 July, Norwegian Foreign Minister Nils Ihlen stated there would be no issues raised by the Government of Norway in the resolution of the case. This statement was never delivered in writing and would become a matter of considerable contention in the future dispute over Norwegian claims to territory in east Greenland.<sup>25</sup> Diplomatic correspondence was also sent to Britain, Italy, France, and Japan between March and May 1920 regarding Denmark's sovereignty over all of Greenland, with all acknowledging Denmark's position by June of that year apart from the United Kingdom, which was concerned over the status of Greenland possibly influencing future foreign claims to lands

considered to be part of the Canadian Arctic.<sup>26</sup> The British raised the option of adding the right of first refusal to their acknowledgement, which would allow for their negation of any arrangement to sell Greenland to a third party. This demand, however, conflicted with the US acknowledgment and prompted further debate in Washington over the importance of Greenland for American national defense. After a series of meetings in which the US affirmed it would not accept the right of first refusal in the hand of any other country, the British finally issued their acknowledgment in September of 1920. With recognition of Danish control over all of Greenland, with the exception of Norway, the Danish Government began freely to exercise authority over the whole of the island, including new regulations for travel in and around Greenland.<sup>27</sup>

The overall Danish policy toward Greenland had been that of isolation throughout the colonial period. Travel to the colonies, even from Denmark, was highly restricted and trade was almost completely prohibited outside of activities conducted by the Royal Greenland Trading Company.<sup>28</sup> With the acknowledgment of Denmark's authority over the entirety of Greenland, many of these restrictions were

23 Lidegaard, *Overleveren: 1914-1945*, 178.

24 Beukel, "Greenland and Denmark before 1945," 19-20; Lidegaard, *Overleveren: 1914-1945*, 177-178.

25 Cavell, "Historical Evidence and the Eastern Greenland Case," 434; Oscar Svarlein, *The Eastern Greenland Case in Historical Perspective* (Gainesville, Florida: University of Florida Press, 1964), 29-30.

26 Beukel, "Greenland and Denmark before 1945," 19-20; Cavell, "Historical Evidence and the Eastern Greenland Case," 434.

27 Lidegaard, *Overleveren: 1914-1945*, 178-180.

28 Beukel, "Greenland and Denmark before 1945," 14-15; Daniel Thorleifsen, "Det lukkede land," in *Kalaallit Nunaat/Gyldendals Bog om Grønland*, ed. Bent Gynther and Aqigssiaq Møller (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, Nordisk Forlag A/S, 1999), 217-222.

officially extended to the whole of the island and additional regulations were formalized or crafted. In 1921, for instance, Denmark issued a decree restricting the navigation of foreign ships in all Greenlandic waters in line with regulations that had been in force in west Greenland since 1776.<sup>29</sup> Official regulations regarding travel and activities in Greenland followed. On 7 August, 1930, the Ministry of Shipping and Fisheries in Copenhagen under the direction of Danish Prime Minister Thorvald Stauning released "General Rules for Travel to and from Greenland."<sup>30</sup> They stipulated that travel to Greenland required special permission from the Danish Government and that such permissions were generally limited to those engaged in scientific or artistic study. The application for such travel was to be submitted through the government of the prospective travelers' home country to Denmark and include attestation of the applicants' qualifications as well as a recommendation from that government. Additionally, the dates of travel and other specifics, assurance of travelers' ability to support themselves and their activities, and medical certifications indicating the absence of contagious diseases that could be spread to the Greenlandic population were among the requirements.<sup>31</sup> The

formalization of these regulations did more than simply routinize rules about foreign travel or hint at a slight shift in Denmark's policy of isolation in regard to Greenland. They served as an assertion of Danish sovereignty over the entirety of Greenland and required the acknowledgement of Danish authority by other governments through the state-to-state application process. Yet they also opened the way for new and varied types of travelers to venture to the island.

### **An Odd Assortment of Foreigners in Greenland**

Scientists, painters, photographers, filmmakers, and aviators contributed to the increasing number of foreign travelers in Greenland in the late interwar years. While sometimes approached by historians as part of individual biographies or in regard to their contributions to a particular field of study, many of those who traveled in Greenland during this period receive little attention in discussions of Arctic expeditions or in histories of the island. Yet taken as part of the changing practice of travel, their activities illustrated not only a new and growing interest in Greenland and the Arctic or the porousness of boundaries between art, science, and commerce but also the nuances of the changing geopolitical shape of the region. The following section briefly examines the political implications of only a small segment of those foreigners traveling through Greenland in the late interwar years, focusing on Louise Boyd's 1931 East Greenland Expedition, the Universal-Dr. Fanck Expedition, and Rockwell Kent's first

29 Lidegaard, *Overleveren: 1914-1945*, 181-183.

30 Anthony K. Higgins, *Exploration history and place names in northern East Greenland* (Copenhagen: De Nationale Geologiske Undersøgelser for Danmark og Grønland (GEUS), 2010), 13.

31 Kongelige Grønlandske Handel, *Beretninger og Kundgørelser Vedrørende Kolonierne i Grønland For Aarene, 1928-1932* (Copenhagen: Trykt Hos J.H. Schultz A-S, 1933), 607-608.

prolonged stay on the island. Venturing to Greenland in 1931 and 1932, all three were relative novices to Arctic exploration with close or direct ties to the US that combined both art and science in their efforts. They were also permitted to enter the country at a time of increased tension with Norway over claims to a portion of Greenland's east coast. Their presence on the island was a marker of Danish authority in Greenland, US acceptance of this position, and more broadly the nascent cooperation beginning to coalesce in the region. However, their activities also illustrate the delicacy of the situation on the ground.

#### **Louise Arner Boyd Arctic Expedition, 1931**

Louise Arner Boyd led her first expedition to Greenland in 1931. Although the wealthy California-born socialite had already ventured to the Arctic in 1924 and 1926, visiting Franz Josef and Svalbard, and had been part of the effort to rescue Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen, this would be her first voyage to Greenland. With the aid of the American Geographical Society, which had supported previous Arctic expeditions, she planned the venture and recruited a group of friends and associates to take part in the effort. Participants included botanist and horticulturalist Robert Hewett Menzies and his wife, Swedish cartographer Carl-Julius Anrick and his wife, and American sportsman and big game hunter Harry Whitney, who had traveled to Greenland previously and had been connected to the controversy surrounding the race to the North Pole. The self-funded expedition was planned as a preliminary visit

to the island and a photographic reconnaissance.<sup>32</sup> Boyd was convinced of the utility of photography for the mapping and survey of geographical features, especially in regions where weather and other factors limited access, and she planned to test these ideas with her work on Greenland's east coast.<sup>33</sup>

Chartering the Norwegian sealing vessel the *Veslekari*, Boyd obtained the necessary permissions from Denmark as well as medical examinations for all passengers and crew and then her expedition set out.<sup>34</sup> Both the weather and the political situation of east Greenland in 1931 would take careful navigation. Norway had been the only state to fail to provide an official acknowledgement of Denmark's claim to all of Greenland, and tensions between the two countries over claims to portions of east Greenland had been on the rise throughout the 1920s and early 1930s. Public sentiment supporting a claim to part of the island had been on the rise in Norway, and while the Norwegian government was hesitant to take action, it did endow three of its citizens in east Greenland with police authority. The Danish government objected, declaring Norway had no rights to grant such powers on Danish territory, and informed the Norwegian government that the leader of a forthcoming Danish

32 Joanna Kafarowski, *The Polar Adventures of a Rich American Dame: A Life of Louise Arner Boyd* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2017), 125-136.

33 Louise A. Boyd, "The Louise A. Boyd Seven Arctic Expeditions," *Photogrammetric Engineering and Remote Sensing* (December 1950), 652-653.

34 Kafarowski, *The Polar Adventures of a Rich American Dame*, 132-136.



*The wireless stations at Myggbukta (East Greenland). Photograph taken by Louise A. Boyd on 18 July 1931. From the American Geographical Society Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries.*

expedition would be granted police authority over all persons in east Greenland.<sup>35</sup> By December of 1930, the situation heated further as news of the upcoming three-year Danish expedition by Lauge Koch had spread, with some in Norway viewing it as a covert means to subvert future Norwegian claims. The Norwegian government again rejected calls to formally occupy part of east Greenland, but on 27 June 1931 a group of Norwegians on the island raised the flag above Myggbukta Station and claimed the

coast between 71°30' and 75°40'N in the name of King Haakon VII. News of the event reached the Norwegian media two days later and resulted in a series of exchanges between the Norwegian and Danish governments, in which Denmark again asserted it would not compromise as to the issue of sovereignty. Faced with even greater public pressure, the Norwegian government officially claimed portions of east Greenland on 10 July 1931.<sup>36</sup> Boyd's expedition garnered some suspicion among those in Norway, as it

35 Svarlein, *The Eastern Greenland Case in Historical Perspective*, 37.

36 Cavell, "Historical Evidence and the Eastern Greenland Case"; Peter Schmidt Mikkelsen, *North-East Greenland 1908-60: The Trapper Era* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 2008), 59.



had departed Ålesund, just 9 days before this claim and was headed toward the epicenter of the unfolding international dispute.<sup>37</sup>

The *Veslekari* entered Greenlandic waters at the same time as ships carrying the Danish Three-Year Expedition led by Koch and the Norwegian expedition headed by Dr. Adolf Hoel. All three faced difficult ice and weather conditions and Boyd was in radio contact with both men. She was cognizant from the start of her position as an American and that of her government and made efforts to remain diplomatic and neutral in these communications, as the former was the representative of Danish authority in east Greenland and the latter was one of the main architects for the plan to force the Norwegian territorial claim.<sup>38</sup> Boyd was the first to reach the coast, entering what she described as the "zone of dispute."<sup>39</sup> Arriving at Myggbukta Station, Boyd was issued her visa by Hallvard Devold, who had been granted police authority by the Norwegian government, and during her short visit she managed to absent herself from any potentially heated political discussions. However, she was again reminded of the political situation when she later arrived at the Danish colony of Scoresbysund (Ittoqqortoormiit). Permission for the *Veslekari* to land was slow in

coming, and there was concern that her ship, being a Norwegian vessel with a Norwegian captain, crew, and flag, could be the cause, even though Boyd had obtained all appropriate Danish permissions. However, the delay turned out to be the result of engine issues experienced by the colony's boat, which arrived later. Boyd and her compatriots were then permitted on shore and greeted by the population as well as German pilot Wolfgang von Gronau, who had stopped at the colony as part of his attempt to find a commercial flight route between Europe and North America.<sup>40</sup> The Boyd expedition departed from Greenland in September 1931 carrying masses of photographs as well as botanical samples and other materials. Of the expedition, the *Christian Science Monitor* noted: "Just when the Danish-Norwegian dispute makes real Greenland information all important, the women produce it."<sup>41</sup>

The permission Boyd received to venture to the east coast was an act of Danish authority that hints at a broader understanding between the US and Denmark in relation to Greenland. Although Boyd was an amateur scientist and photographer traveling from Norway with a hired Norwegian vessel and crew at the time of rising tensions between the two Scandinavian countries, as an American endeavor her expedition was permitted

37 Kafarowski, *The Polar Adventures of a Rich American Dame*, 137.

38 *ibid*, 142-143; Frode Skarstein, "Erik the Red's Land: the land the never was." *Polar Research* 25, no.2 (2006): 174-175.

39 Louise A. Boyd and Robert H. Menzies, "Fiords of East Greenland: A Photographic Reconnaissance throughout the Franz Josef and King Oscar Fiords." *Geographic Review* 4, no. 2 (1932): 535.

40 Boyd and Menzies, "Fiords of East Greenland," 535-536, 557-559; Kafarowski, *The Polar Adventures of a Rich American Dame*, 145-153.

41 Quoted in Kafarowski, *The Polar Adventures of a Rich American Dame*, 153.

entrance. Yet her experience also indicates the delicacy of her position as an outsider amidst the dispute and the need to project neutrality as expeditions remained a means of establishing a presence and gaining expertise which, in turn, could be used to support territorial claims. The activities of Norwegian and Danish expeditions on the east coast, for instance, were used as evidence of each country's territorial claim during the dispute, and Boyd had to ensure her venture would not be misconstrued as favoring either claim or indicating any change in the American position regarding Greenland. Boyd's 1931 expedition, put in the context of other American ventures, including her own, also illustrates a growing US military interest in Greenland. The strategic importance of Greenland had already been the subject of discussion in Washington and with the advent of trans-continental aviation became even more pronounced. The Macmillan Expedition, for instance, carried US Admiral Robert Byrd along with an aircraft provided by the American Navy for reconnaissance in 1925, an effort that was granted permission and provided assistance by Danish authorities.<sup>42</sup> With the rumblings of war in Europe, Boyd's photographs, maps, and materials produced from her 1931 expedition, as well as subsequent privately funded ventures to Greenland in 1933, 1937, and in 1938, were turned over to the US Government. She was also requested to delay the publication of materials from the latter two expeditions by Washington in

the interest of national security.<sup>43</sup> In 1941, she was requested to lead an expedition to the west coast of Greenland by the US National Bureau of Standards. Details of the purpose of this final expedition were initially left vague in publicly released information, as the data being gathered was considered of interest to national defense during the War, relating to anomalies in radio communication in high altitudes.<sup>44</sup> Of her activities during the War, US Maj. Gen. Roscoe B. Woodruff remarked, "Miss Boyd's contributions and her exemplary service were highly beneficial to the cause of victory."<sup>45</sup> While Boyd's 1931 venture highlights the increase in US interest in Greenland as well as the security of Denmark's authority over the island, the Universal-Dr. Fanck Expedition, less than a year later, served to display that authority to the globe.

**The Universal-Dr. Fanck Greenland Expedition**  
Seeking to build upon the commercial success of the film, *Igloo* (1932), then-president of Universal Pictures Corporation, NY, Carl Laemmle, commissioned a cinematic

42 Fogelson, *Arctic Exploration & International Relations*, 91-98.

43 Kafarowski, *The Polar Adventures of a Rich American Dame*; Joanna Kafarowski, "'From Boots On 'til Boots Off': Collecting Greenland with Explorer Louise Arner Boyd (1887-1972)," *Collections: A Journal for Museum and Archives Professionals* 14, no. 4 (Fall 2018): 491-492.

44 Audrey Amidon, "Women of the Polar Archives." *Prologue Magazine* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2010): Online. <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2010/summer/polar-women.html>; New York Times, "Gains Data on Radio on Arctic Expedition," *New York Times*, November 29, 1941, 12. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times.

45 New York Times, "Woman Explorer Honored by Army," *New York Times*, March 19, 1949, 12. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times.

expedition to Greenland through Universal's Berlin branch, Die Deutsche Universal. In April 1932, Laemmle met with the German director Dr. Arnold Fanck, renowned as a pioneer of the Bergfilm genre, at Universal City in California and hired him to helm the project. Fanck traveled to Copenhagen afterward and secured permission from the Danish Government to travel and film in west Greenland. During this visit he also met with Danish explorer Knud Rasmussen, who agreed to act as a technical advisor for the film and aid the venture while in Greenland.<sup>46</sup> In exchange, Rasmussen would be paid for his stipulated maximum of 10 days with the Fanck contingent, funds that would go to support his future expedition.<sup>47</sup> The initial plans for the Universal-Dr. Fanck expedition called for three films to be shot during its time in Greenland: *SOS Eisberg* (a German-language version for the German market), *SOS Iceberg* (an English-language version for the US market), and a third film under the direction of Andrew Marton, which would become *Nord-Pol Ahoi!* (1934); unfortunately, no copies of the third film survive

today.<sup>48</sup> On 25 May 1932, the expedition departed Hamburg, Germany, aboard the English whaler *S.S. Borodino*, briefly stopped in Copenhagen, and then headed to Greenland. Noted simply in the colonial record as "travels to Greenland with the main task of filming footage in Greenland,"<sup>49</sup> the venture was the largest of its kind to be permitted in Greenland prior to World War II. Arriving in Uummannaq on 4 June, the *Borodino* carried Fanck with his crew, including World War I pilot Ernst Udet, actress and later infamous director Leni Riefenstahl, and scientists Dr. Ernst Sorge and Dr. Fritz Loewe, along with two motorboats, two biplanes, a stunt plane, three polar bears, and two seals. The films were shot simultaneously over the next five months based on a script by Edwin H. Knopf. The crew worked in various locations in and around the Uummannaq area, including the villages of Illorsuit and Nuugaatsiaq, while some of its members such as Dr. Ernst Sorge, a former member of the Wegener Expedition, carried out scientific research while on the island. Over 175,000 feet of film was shot

46 John Andrew Gallagher, "S.O.S. Iceberg: Arctic Wastes, Antic Adventures," *American Cinematographer* 73, no. 11 (1992), 86.

47 Niels Barfoed, *Manden Bag Helten: Knud Rasmussen på nært hold* (Gyldendal, Copenhagen, 2011), 363-367; Anders Jørgensen, "Primitiv film? Knud Rasmussens ekspeditionsfilm," *Kosmorama* 232 (2003), 203.

48 Gallagher, "S.O.S. Iceberg," 86-88; Lill-Ann Körber, "'See the Crashing Masses of White Death...': Greenland, Germany and the Sublime in the 'Bergfilm' *SOS Eisberg*," in *Films on Ice: Cinemas of the Arctic*, ed. Scott MacKenzie and Anna Westerståhl Stenport (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 148-155; Werner Sperschneider, "Landet bag isen. Grønland i 1920'ernes og 30'ernes kulturfilm," *Kosmorama: Tidsskrift for filmkunst og filmkultur* 232 (2003), 116-117.

49 Kongelige Grønlandske Handel, *Beretninger og Kundgørelser Vedrørende Kolonierne i Grønland for Aarene 1933-1937* (Copenhagen: Trykt Hos J.H. Schultz AS, 1933), 21. Translated by Vanek.

while the expedition was in Greenland, but could not be edited into a coherent feature as some scenes could not be shot as initially scripted and new scenes were added while on the island. To overcome these obstacles, American director Tay Garnett was hired to work on the film, and a new script, written by author Tom Reed, was composed around the already existing footage with additional scenes shot in Switzerland and the German Alps. Fanck completed his own German version of the film, *S.O.S. Eisberg*, while Garnett's work produced the English-language version, *S.O.S. Iceberg*. While differing in length and tone, both versions center on the harrowing search for a fictional scientific expedition lost in Greenland, based loosely on the actual death of Alfred Wegener, a German geophysicist who disappeared on his trip to Greenland in 1930. The Wegener Expedition is specifically referred to in the German film. *S.O.S. Eisberg* premiered in Berlin on 30 August 1933 and its English counterpart, *S.O.S. Iceberg*, opened in New York on 22 September 1933. Although the films received some initial praise by film critics, they were not commercially successful.<sup>50</sup>

For the purposes of this article, it is the permissions received by the Universal-Dr. Fanck Expedition to sail to and shoot in Greenland, the ways in which the films displayed these permissions, and the timing of the films' production that are of significance. Jens Daugaard-Jensen, Director of the colonial Greenland Administration, did not favor foreign film expeditions. He had already

rejected the German-Belgian 'Robinsonade'-project in 1923 and did not allow another large-scale film crew into Greenland after Fanck's endeavor.<sup>51</sup> But the Universal Dr. Fanck Expedition was permitted to venture to Greenland and was to be provided aid while there, "taking into account the service and the interests of the Greenlandic population."<sup>52</sup> The involvement of Knud Rasmussen and to a lesser degree scientists Sorge and Loewe, both former members of the Wegener expedition, contributed to the film crew being allowed into Greenland, as did the dispute with Norway over the east coast. As Anders Jørgensen notes, at the time "it was crucial to create good foreign relations through actions which could happen in relation to an international film production."<sup>53</sup> Connected to the US through the funding and support of Universal Studios and Carl Laemmle and filmed by the well-known German director, the aid and permissions granted to the expedition can be viewed as a demonstration of cooperation between states. Yet, it also served to display Danish sovereignty and benevolence to audiences abroad. At the start of both the English and the German versions, before the opening credits, viewers are reminded in bold letters

50 Gallagher, "S.O.S. Iceberg," 87-91.

51 Carl Nørrested, *Blandt eskimoer, eventyrere, kolonisatorer og etnografer – Grønlandsfilm/Amongst Eskimos, Adventurers, Colonisers and Ethnographers – Greenland on Film* (Copenhagen: Forlaget North, 2012), 39, 45.

52 Jens Daugaard-Jensen, Letter. 24 May 1932. Folder: Dr. Fancks Filmexpedition 1932, Landsfogeden i NordGrønland, Ekspeditioner og rejsende, Box A 01-02 19.50 15. Nunatta Katersugaasivia Allagaateqarfialu (Greenland National Museum & Archives), Nuuk, Greenland.

53 Jørgensen, "Primitiv film?," 203-204.

that the movie was produced with the support of the Danish Government and under the care of polar explorer Knud Rasmussen, thus associating the film with not only the Danish government but also with the famed national hero.<sup>54</sup> In doing so, Denmark's authority over all of Greenland was projected to the globe only months after the International Court at The Hague ruled in Denmark's favor against Norway's claims to east Greenland in April 1933.

### Rockwell Kent's 1931-1932 Stay in Greenland

If the permissions granted to Boyd's 1931 venture to Greenland and the Universal-Dr. Fanck Expedition highlight the shifting relationship between the US and Denmark regarding Greenland and sparks of what would become Arctic cooperation, Kent's time on the island highlights some of its limits. American artist and writer Rockwell Kent returned to Greenland in the summer of 1931. This was his second trip to the island and would be of a much longer duration than his initial visit, which was the result of a shipwreck in 1929.<sup>55</sup> Voyaging to Greenland aboard the colonial ship *M/S Disko*, Kent was permitted to reside for over a year in the settlement of Illorsuit, where he built a house, traveled by dog sled and boat, hunted, and became a part of the community's life. His wife Frances would later join him for a portion of this stay,

and both would return to the US in 1932. During his residence, supported in part by Pan American Airlines, Kent would produce some of his most iconic works as well as what would become two books about his time on the island. He would return to Illorsuit with his son from 1934-1935.<sup>56</sup>

Prior to Kent's 1931-1932 venture, he was described in the Danish press as "one of the great men of the United States in the field of culture" and his trip to Greenland, the plans for his wife's visit, as well as the potential of his proposed book to display Denmark's stewardship of its colonies sparking excitement. As Danish explorer Peter Freuchen wrote in *Politikens Ugeblad* in 1931, "Denmark should be happy with such a notable guest in Greenland. Through his books, America will learn what we do for the Eskimos, what his views are on our ability to colonize, and his praise of our culture will reach out to regions that still barely know us by name."<sup>57</sup> However, the praise and enthusiasm surrounding Kent would be short-lived. His book *Salamina* was released in English in 1935, with a Danish translation following in 1936.<sup>58</sup> The book, which recounted his visit in short vignettes,

54 *SOS Eisberg*, directed by Arnold Fanck (Deutsche Universal-Film/Universal Pictures, 1933); *SOS Iceberg*, directed by Tay Garnett (Universal Studios, 1933).

55 Frederick Lewis, "The Stormy Petrel of American Art," *Scandinavian Review* (Summer, 2012): 12-14; Rockwell Kent, *N by E* (Middletown, CT USA: Wesleyan University Press, 1996 [1930]).

56 Rockwell Kent, *Greenland Journal* (New York: Ivan Obolensky, Inc, 1962); Rockwell Kent, *Salamina* (Middletown, CT USA: Wesleyan University Press, 2003 [1935]); Scott R. Ferris, "Forward: In the Presence of Light," in *Salamina*, author Rockwell Kent (Middletown, CT USA: Wesleyan University Press 2003 [1935]).

57 Peter Freuchen, "Rockwell Kent overvintrer i Grønland." *Politikens Ugeblad*, June 10, 1931. Translated by Vanek.

58 Rockwell Kent, *Salamina*, trans. Estrid Bannister (Copenhagen: Berlingske Forlag, 1936).

was highly critical of the Danish colonial system, including discussion of what he saw as the economic exploitation of the Greenlandic population, the inequalities between Danes and Greenlanders, and the mismanagement of day-to-day operations of the colonies. Speaking of Danish employees in Greenland, he wrote, "For people, hired, put there, to remember things and to get them done they're dismally incompetent."<sup>59</sup> Kent's very public criticism was met with shock in Denmark both for its content and the ways in which that content was employed by certain Danish publications. For instance, Kent very briefly recounts the visit of the Universal-Dr. Fanck Expedition to Illorsuit, in relation to which the author described episodes of drunken parties. This was interpreted by some in the Danish media as referring to the activities of Danes in Greenland and was the source of outrage with accusations that Kent's account was being employed to mislead the Danish public and the world about Denmark's role in Greenland. It should also be noted that during World War II, Kent was also critical of a possible US presence in Greenland, finding that the island and its resources belonged to the Greenlandic people.<sup>60</sup> While the permission for Kent to reside in Greenland for such an extended period, like those of Boyd and Fanck, highlights a more comfortable relationship between the US and Denmark in regards to Greenland, the brief uproar

surrounding Kent's book demonstrates the limits of this early cooperation. Kent would not visit Greenland again after the Danish publication of *Salamina*.

### Conclusion

Taken individually, the Louise Boyd Expedition, the Universal-Dr. Fanck Expedition, and the long-term stay of Rockwell Kent appear unusual. Boyd, a California-based heiress and amateur scientist, was one of the few women traversing the Arctic at the time; she led her own privately funded expeditions to east Greenland and would later travel to the west coast in the service of the US Government during World War II. The Universal-Dr. Fanck Expedition was the largest international filming effort permitted in Greenland; it carried a crew that included renowned and later infamous individuals and would produce two of the last Arctic adventure-melodramas.<sup>61</sup> Finally Kent, already a famous and outspoken writer and artist in the US, was allowed to reside in Greenland for almost two years in a small northern community. Individually, they appear to be an odd assortment of foreigners to be in Greenland. Yet positioned within the shifting practices of Arctic expeditions and within the context of broader changes unfolding in the region, they appear less unusual and shed light on the reshaping geopolitical landscape of the North as it moved from a region of rivalry and dispute to one of increased cooperation.

59 Kent, *Salamina*, 2003[1935], 43.

60 Inge Kleivan, "Rockwell Kent – en engageret amerikansk kunstner i Grønland i 30'erne," *Tidsskriftet Grønland* 35, no. 6-7, (1987): 178-183.

61 Scott MacKenzie and Anna Westerståhl Stenport, "Introduction: What Are Arctic Cinemas?," (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2014), 6-7.

Attention to this history seems particularly important today, as the potential for rivalry in the region appears to be on the rise again. The examination of the Louise A. Boyd 1931 East Greenland Expedition, the Universal-Dr. Fanck Expedition, and Rockwell Kent's time in Greenland presented in this article is cursory, at best. This discussion illustrates only brief aspects of how travel in the North reflected and influenced aspects of the changing relationship between Denmark and the US, shifts in American interest in the region, and the broader cooperation that was only beginning to take shape in the Arctic. Much more can be gleaned from analysis of the travels of Boyd, Fanck, and Kent, as well as the other foreigners traveling in Greenland in the years between World War I and II. For instance, Scottish geologist and filmmaker Isobel W. Hutchison, Romanian naturalist and geologist Dr. Constantin Dumbravă, and English doctor and mountaineer Dr. T. G. Longstaff,<sup>62</sup> as well as numerous aviators and others, were among the various unusual foreigners permitted to travel to Greenland in the interwar year. Further explorations of these ventures within the broader context of travel, their intersections with each other, the Greenlandic population, and the colonial administration can provide a depth to our understanding of the often-overlooked years between the World Wars and illuminate how the shifting political, economic, and social

landscape of the Arctic was negotiated on the ground at a time of nascent cooperation.

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62 Kongelige Grønlandske Handel, *Beretninger og Kundgørelser Vedrørende Kolonierne i Grønland for Aarene 1928-1932*, 16-17, 229.

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# RACE TO THE POLE:

## Matthew Henson, Arctic Explorer

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**Key words:** Matthew Alexander Henson, *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* (1912), Robert E. Peary, 1908-09 North Pole Expedition, Racial Alliances

**Abstract:** In his memoir, *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* (1912), Matthew Henson describes the toll of his and Peary's race to the Pole. This record of the 1908-09 Arctic expedition complicates established understandings of the "Dash to the Pole" and his own role as Peary's assistant. Donald B. Macmillan declared in *How Peary Reached the Pole: The Personal Story of His Assistant* (2008) that Peary could not have done it without Henson (275), whose text uncovers an accomplished writer and explorer at work. The complicated character of Robert E. Peary figures prominently in his pages, though in a less independent version than in other accounts. Henson details the highly skilled labor he performs in the Arctic, and his own personality and perceptions. He shares, to a degree, the value systems of his Commander and the white members of the expedition, including the emphasis on heroic masculinity. But he also inscribes his racial heritage into his memoir, and his close, if complex, relation to the Inughuit. The result of intricate balancing acts, Henson's silences echo in his text, revealing what could not be articulated by an African American member of Peary's legendary expeditions. Henson's contemporaries paid little attention to his accomplishments, since white American and European explorers dominated the field of Arctic travel, but his contribution received more attention as the 20th Century progressed. His experience suggests the costs and the crises—personal, national, and international—of a contested icescape increasingly visible and accessible in the 21st Century.

## Introduction

In a photo taken immediately after Matthew Henson had returned from the race across the Arctic Ocean to the North Pole, the wear and tear of Commander Robert E. Peary's last expedition shows. Used as an illustration in Henson's *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* (1912), the photo and its caption invite readers to study "the effect of excessive strain" (40) and to compare this photo to others taken before and after Henson's exploration in the Arctic.<sup>1</sup> In his memoir, Henson describes the toll of his and Peary's race to the Pole: "When I reached the ship again and gazed into my little mirror, it was the pinched and wrinkled visage of an old man that peered out at me, but the eyes still twinkled and life was still entrancing" (46). Both the strain of his appearance and his zest continue in his record of the 1908-09 expedition, in which he complicates established understandings of the "Dash to the Pole" and his own role as Peary's assistant. Initially, Henson was marginalized due to the racial systems of his time, but his contribution to Peary's expeditions has subsequently received increased attention. Donald B. Macmillan writes about Henson in *How Peary Reached the Pole: The Personal Story of His Assistant*, republished in 2008, that Peary could not have done it without him (275).

Henson's contemporaries paid little attention to his accomplishments, since white American and European explorers dominated the

field of Arctic travel. Henson was not given membership to the Explorers Club till 1937, but he gradually became more visible as the twentieth century progressed. Biographies of Matthew Henson include Bradley Robinson, *Dark Companion* (1947), Floyd Miller, *Ahdoolo! The Biography of Matthew A. Henson* (1963), Edward F. Dolan, *Matthew Henson, Black Explorer* (1979), Michael Gilman, *Matthew Henson: Explorer* (1988), Dolores Johnson, *Onward: A Photobiography of African-American Polar Explorer Matthew Henson* (2006), as well as articles on various aspects of his contribution to Arctic explorations.

Children's and young adult books about Henson, such as Baron Bedesky's *Peary and Henson: The Race to the North Pole* (2006), have now appeared. Gilman's illustrated book on Henson came out in the "Black Americans of Achievement Series," with an introductory essay by Coretta Scott King. *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* became *A Black Explorer at the North Pole*, published in 1989 with an added introduction by Susan A. Kaplan, then Director of the Peary-Macmillan Arctic Museum (which now hosts a virtual Henson exhibition). Even with new and old controversies, she notes, "Henson was a remarkable individual who overcame prejudice and a disadvantaged childhood and became an accomplished Arctic explorer, and a key individual in one of the most famous expeditions of all time" (xxiii). In 1996 an oceanic survey ship was baptized U.S.N.S. Henson in his honor, and in 2000 he received posthumously the Hubbard Medal from the National Geographic Society, first awarded to

1 Page numbers refer to the Project Gutenberg eBook of *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole*, by Matthew A. Henson.

Peary in 1906. Admirers now follow Henson's trail, as Chris Blade documents in his *Callaloo* article "In the Footsteps of Matthew Henson: Photographs of Terry Adkins on His Final Trip to the Arctic Circle, July 2013" (2017). The National Geographic Adventure Blog uploaded in 2014 "The Legacy of Arctic Explorer Matthew Henson" by James Mills in honor of Black History Month.

In 1912, however, Henson had to fight with words for recognition. While most Henson scholarship has focused on Henson's contribution to Arctic exploration, two articles deal more closely with his autobiographical endeavors. In "Matthew Henson and the Antinomies of Racial Uplift" (2012) Anthony S. Foy links Henson's "discourse of work, merit and recognition" (21) to Booker T. Washington's ideas of racial uplift, which proved inadequate for the complexities of race and citizenship in the world Henson inhabited, also outside US borders. In "'To Return and Tell the Tale of the Doing': Matthew Henson and the African American Explorer's Identity" (2015), Gary Totten analyzes the genre fluctuations in Henson's memoir between the travel narrative and the slave narrative. The present article details the tribulations of Commander Robert E. Peary's skilled assistant and draws attention to his complicated racial position as a member of the 1908-09 North Pole expedition, as well as its erasure of Inughuit identity and expertise.<sup>2</sup> Henson's

memoir demonstrates the skills with which he constructs himself as a writer and an explorer in a group of white, Arctic travelers, who often demanded not just his talents, but also his invisibility, loyalty, and silence.

Henson's text uncovers an accomplished author and adventurer at work. The imposing character of Robert E. Peary figures prominently in his pages, but in a "less autonomous" version than in other accounts (Bloom 99). Henson details the highly specialized labor he performs in the Arctic, and he also unveils his own personality and experiences. He shares, to a degree, the value systems of his Commander and the white members of the expedition, including the emphasis on heroic masculinity. But this "son of the tropics," in Peary's phrase (Henson 4), also inscribed his racial heritage into his text, and his close, if complex, relation to the Inughuit. The result of intricate balancing acts, Henson's silences echo in his text, revealing what could not be articulated by an African American member of Peary's legendary expeditions. In short, Henson straddles a floe of white heroic masculinity and one of racial pride and respect for the native Arctic population. He operated under the supervision of "the Great Peary," who masterminded the lives of all expedition members in his quest to secure the Arctic—and the North Pole—for himself and the United States. Henson divulges in his memoir the challenges he overcame and those he did not. Overall, *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* suggests the costs and the crises in an increasingly accessible but still contested Arctic icescape.

2 "Inughuit" indicates the Polar population of north-western Greenland. The terms of primary and secondary materials, which mostly use the terms "Eskimo," "Esquimo" or "Inuit," have been retained in quotations.



### Who is Matthew Alexander Henson? And Robert Edwin Peary?

Born on August 8, 1866, into a community of tenant farmers, Henson had fled Maryland with his family, who faced Ku Klux Klan violence in the wake of emancipation (Dolan 4f). After the death of both parents, thirteen-year-old Henson became a dishwasher and a waiter in a restaurant, where he heard stories of life on the seas. In 1879, he walked forty miles to Baltimore harbor, where the captain of *Katie Hines* took him aboard as a cabin attendant. Over the next five years, Henson sailed with Captain Childs and his crew to ports in China, Japan, Africa, France, the Russian Arctic, and other destinations. When the Captain died in 1883, Henson met with a bigoted crew aboard the *White Seal* and disembarked in Saint John's, Newfoundland. From the age of eighteen, Henson traveled on the US East Coast, working jobs such as night guard, chauffeur, messenger, dockworker, and bellhop. Upon his return to DC, he became a clerk at Steinmetz's hat store, where his famed encounter with Peary, about to depart for Nicaragua, took place (Gilman 19-22). With skills acquired during his global adventures, Henson became in Nicaragua more than a servant to Peary, who invited him on all subsequent Arctic expeditions, until the two reached—or claimed to reach—the North Pole on April 6, 1909.

Henson begins Chapter X, "Forward March," of his 1912 publication with a photo, "Robert E. Peary in his North Pole Furs" (27). On a black background, Peary stares at the camera with an unsmiling, grave face, his signature



GS02: Robert E. Peary

moustache and stern demeanor creating an impression of a man not given to kindness and empathy. In Henson's words, "the chief characteristic of Commander Peary is persistency, which, coupled with fortitude, is the secret of his success" (10).

Following his father's early death, Peary grew up with his mother in Portland, Maine, and attended Bowdoin College before becoming a draftsman at the US Geodetic Survey. In 1881 he enlisted as a civil engineer in the Navy, thus his assignment for a planned Nicaragua



GS05: Matthew Henson upon his return from the North Pole expedition.

Canal. His first visit to the Arctic took place in 1886, before he met Henson, when he failed to cross Greenland by dog sledge. In the 1891-92 expedition, he reached Independence Fjord and proved Greenland to be an island. His 1898-1902 expedition set a record by reaching the farthest northern point of Greenland, which he named Cape Morris Jessup after his most affluent financial benefactor. He tried unsuccessfully to reach the North Pole with

the 1905-06 expedition but claimed to have succeeded on April 6, 1909. Dr. Frederick Cook, his physician and surgeon in the 1891 expedition, soon took the wind out of his sails. Cook alleged that he had reached the Pole one year ahead of Peary, on April 21, 1908, a claim supported by the University of Copenhagen but later retracted. Thus began the acrid Cook-Peary controversy, which Henson addresses at the end of his autobiography. Peary died in 1920 and was buried in the Arlington National Cemetery, while Henson found a simple grave in Woodlawn Cemetery in 1955. Thanks to the efforts of S. Allen Counter, who describes the process in *North Pole Legacy: Black, White & Eskimo* (1991), his remains were later moved to a site in Arlington not far from Peary's monument raised by the National Geographical Society (Peterson 42).

### Vouching for Henson

Henson's memoir reaches his audience only after two authenticating voices have spoken for him. By 1912, the two explorers who had struggled across the Arctic Ocean to the Pole had parted ways, but Peary, introduced as Rear Admiral, U. S. Navy, Retired, authored the Foreword, despite his reluctance to grant other members of his expeditions the right to lecture or write about their shared experiences (Miller 194). He aims to satisfy the curiosity of "friends of Arctic exploration and discovery," who "have been greatly interested in the fact of a colored man being an effective member of a serious Arctic expedition" (3). Peary states that "race, or color, or

bringing-up, or environment, count nothing against a determined heart, if it is backed and aided by intelligence." In the next lines, he stresses Henson's "long and thorough apprenticeship" (3). Given the ongoing Cook controversy, Peary wants to stress the success of his own expedition, with Henson's "participation in the final victory which planted the Stars and Stripes at the North Pole, and won for this country the international prize of nearly four centuries," an accomplishment Peary labels "a distinct credit and feather in the cap of his race" (3).

With no explanation, however, Peary regrets that he cannot be present at the dinner given by the Colored Citizens of New York and Vicinity in 1909, when Henson received a gold watch for his efforts, a meager recognition compared to Peary's many honors and awards. This attention to racial difference permeates Peary's praise for Henson, "son of the tropics" (4), and his awe that "not alone individuals, but *races* . . . stood side by side at the apex of the earth, in the harmonious companionship resulting from hard work, exposure, danger, and a common object" (4). Ultimately, Peary's Foreword praises Henson, wonders at his ability to operate both in tropical and Arctic settings, invents a harmony that others have questioned, and ignores that the "common object"—the wish to reach the Pole—was Peary's own ambition.

Booker T. Washington, the Principal of Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, authenticates Henson as well. He begins by explaining why Henson, and not a white

explorer, received the honor of accompanying Peary on the final dash to the Pole. Washington mentions first Henson's "adaptability and fitness for the work" as well as his loyalty, qualities that promoted him from servant to "companion and assistant" to Peary. Washington praises Peary's willingness to see beyond skin color, which gave Henson the chance to prove himself. The Principal of Tuskegee, who promoted vocational training, stresses that Henson combined "knowledge of the books" with "good practical knowledge of everything that was a necessary part of the daily life in the ice-bound wilderness of polar exploration" (6). Washington reminds readers of the contributions of his race to opening the western continent: "Even in the day when the Negro had little or no opportunity to show his ability as a leader, he proved himself at least a splendid follower" (7). Washington mentions the contribution of enslaved Africans to Spanish exploration, but he believes that his race, "which has come up from slavery" (7), has more of a future than a history. To this end, Henson provides a record of achievements that "such a race in such conditions needs for its own encouragement, as well as to justify the hopes of its friends" (7). In short, Washington promotes Henson as an African American role model that might prove to later generations that "courage, fidelity, and ability are honored and awarded under a black skin as well as under a white" (7). As in his Atlanta Exposition Address (1895), Washington blends into his vision of racial equality the qualities—loyalty, fidelity, and practical skills—that might appeal to white audiences.

### Writing on Ice

Henson published his book for financial reasons. Later in 1912, at age forty-six, he would become a messenger at the US Customs House in New York City, aided by a letter to President Taft from African American politician Charley Anderson, who had also organized the 1909 dinner in Henson's honor (Dolan 175). To spark public interest, Henson focuses in his book on the 1908-09 race to the Pole, with only perfunctory attention to his many earlier Arctic explorations. Nonetheless, the publication "died quietly" (Miller 202), as Henson states to Charley Anderson: "I got a check for a few hundred dollars from the publisher and that's the last I ever heard of it" (Robinson, *Dark Companion* 226).

But Henson wanted as well to highlight his own contribution to Peary's expedition to the Pole: "To-day there is a more general knowledge of Commander Peary, his work and his success, and a vague understanding of the fact that Commander Peary's sole companion from the realm of civilization, when he stood at the North Pole, was Matthew A. Henson, a Colored man" (Henson 8). The statement solidifies Henson's accomplishment, his name, and his racial identity, and it sets the tone for his record, which blends diary entries from the expedition with later accounts and reflections. This form combines a certain anxiety of authorship with pride and talent. Henson lets readers know that he writes under difficult circumstances, as when he takes out his journal on the ice of the Arctic Ocean: "While we were waiting for the rest of the expedition to gather in, I slumped down – behind a peak

of land or paleocrystic ice, and made the entry in my diary" (32). His communicative skills contradict the anxiety of a non-traditional author and allow Henson to take control of his narrative and the expedition.

His audience awareness manifests itself in efforts to engage his readers, which presumably follow Arctic adventures from the comforts of home. Henson brings them on to the Arctic ice and presents them with a How-to-Survive manual, including sledge repair: "The fingers freeze. Stop work, pull the hand through the sleeve, and take your icy fingers to your heart; that is, put your hand under your armpit, and when you feel it burning you know it has thawed out. Then start to work again" (28-29). He further uses rhetorical questions to connect with his readership: "You have undoubtedly taken into consideration the pangs of hunger and of cold that you know assailed us, going Poleward, but have you ever considered that we were thirsty for water to drink or hungry for fat?" (38). These questions also help him create suspense, which he uses at the beginning of Chapter XX with a hook: "It was shortly before noon of this day that we barely escaped another fateful calamity" (52). His parallel and climactic constructions serve a similar purpose as he recreates the drama of the *Roosevelt* leaving harbor in August 1908, "with all dogs a-howling, the whistle tooting, and the crew and members cheering" (16). Henson's humor testifies to his renowned kind disposition and keeps his audience entertained (Johnson 38). When an Inughuit assistant scrubs himself in the

water intended for cooking, Henson notes that at least “the water is not wasted and our stew is all the more savory” (17). He adds poetic descriptions of the northern-most Grant Land, despite disclaimers of writerly incompetence: “Imagine gorgeous bleakness, beautiful blankness. . . . Early in February, at noon, a thin band of light appears far to the southward, heralding the approach of the sun, and daily the twilight lengthens, until early in March, the sun, a flaming disk of fiery crimson, shows his distorted image above the horizon” (25). Henson grabs the attention of his audience, but his writing served as well his own agenda.

To counter racial stereotypes, he presents himself as an avid reader, with considerable knowledge of history. During the long dreary midnights of the Arctic, he writes, “I spent many a pleasant hour with my books” (18). His cabin library included titles such as Dickens’s *Bleak House*, Kipling’s *Barrack Room Ballads*, the poetry of Thomas Hood, and the Bible. Henson also mentions Peary’s books *Northward over the Great Ice* and *Nearest the Pole*. In sorting out the traces of unruly dogs with mittens instead of gloves, Henson admits that “unlike Alexander the Great, we dared not cut the ‘Gordian knots,’ but we did get them untangled” (39). He frequently mentions Shakespeare, as when witnessing a brutal dog fight: “I feel justified in using the language of the fairy Ariel, in Shakespeare’s ‘Tempest’: ‘Now is Hell empty, and all the devils are here’” (52). At the close of his text, Henson writes that “Now is Othello’s occupation gone” (57). Given the themes

of jealousy, thwarted ambition, and race in Shakespeare’s tragedy, Henson might here comment on Peary’s successes and his own failure to achieve a similar recognition—and employment.

### Traveling with the Pearys

A list of character sketches in Chapter II helps Henson introduce the members of the 1908-09 expedition as he sees fit: John W. Goodsell, Donald B. Macmillan, George Borup, all so-called “tenderfeet,” i.e. new to the Arctic, and the members of the first *Roosevelt* trip: “Commander Peary, Captain Bartlett, Professor Marvin, Chief Engineer Wardwell, Charles Percy the steward and myself” (12). In his Peary sketch, Henson moves past the Commander’s red hair and bushy eyebrows to his “sharp-shooter’s eyes’ of steel gray” and his “peculiar slide-like stride,” caused by the previous loss of eight toes to frostbite. “He has a voice clear and loud,” Henson notes, “and words never fail him” (12). He resorts to passive voice in describing Peary’s order not to hibernate at Cape Sheridan, as is common during Arctic winters: “Constant activity and travel were insisted on” (19). Yet he changes constantly between “I” and “we” in recording all Arctic activities, his pronouns suggesting a certain ambivalence towards the Commander and his plans.

From his place in the polar hierarchy, Henson keeps an eye on Peary, given to humming when all is well (17) but often in the grips of darker moods. Henson comments especially on Peary’s stern leadership, which sends Henson picking up punctured tins of alcohol-cases in Chapter VII: “I wish you

could have seen me soldering those tins, under the condition of darkness, intense cold, and insufficient furnace arrangements I had to endure. If ever there was a job for a demon in Hades, that was it" (21). Peary pushes forward at any cost: "He immediately began to shout and issue orders, and, by the time he had calmed down," Henson writes, "both Captain Bartlett and George Borup had loaded up and pushed forward on to the ice of the Arctic Ocean, bound for the trophy of over four hundred years of effort." He concludes that "The Peary discipline is the iron hand ungloved" (26). On board the *Roosevelt*, Peary's cabin is a *state* room (Henson's emphasis), or "the Holy of Holies," with a "No Admittance" sign nailed over the door, blocking the way to the Commander's piano, a photograph of Teddy Roosevelt, and a private bathroom with a tub (17). But admiration hides in Henson's portrait of Peary. He states on one occasion that "no other than a Peary party would have attempted to travel in such weather" (29), and he seems as determined as the Commander himself. In Chapter XV, "The Pole," Henson writes that day and night were one: "My thoughts were on the going and getting forward and nothing else." With no words exchanged, Peary and Henson understood "that we were the men who, it had been ordained, should unlock the door which held the mystery of the Arctic" (41). This understanding—and Henson's admiration—would not last.

Josephine Diebitsch-Peary appears only briefly in Henson's text, though the two knew each other well. Both participated in the Peary

Expedition to Greenland in 1891-92, when Peary broke his leg aboard the *Kite* and was carried to the expedition headquarters near the mouth of MacCormick Fjord strapped to a board. Diebitsch-Peary and Henson lived together in Red Cliff house, along with mineralogist John Verhoeff and a neighboring Inughuit family, after Peary, Eivind Astrup, a Norwegian explorer, and others set out for Independence Fjord (Weems 112-23). In her account of this second Peary expedition, *My Arctic Journey: A Year among Ice-Fields and Eskimos* (1894), Diebitsch-Peary deprives Henson—and the Inughuit—of individual agency. While she calls white expedition members by full names, Henson remains "Matt" and surfaces in her text only as he carries out the work she assigns him. "I decided to have Matt sleep on shore to-night, should the others go on board the 'Kite,'" she writes soon after arrival (July 29, n. p.). "Matt got supper to-night, and will from now until May 1 prepare all meals under my supervision. This gives me more time to myself. Besides not confining me to the house" (November 17, n. p.). In his own record, Henson refers to Peary's wife with some reservations. He mentions her in the context of the 1893 expedition, when she had given birth at Anniversary Lodge to Marie Ahnighito Peary, the famed "Snow Baby," who had returned to the US with her mother on September 12, 1893: "Mrs. Peary also took a young Eskimo girl, well known among us as 'Miss Bill' along with her, and kept her for nearly a year, when she gladly permitted her to return to Greenland and her own people" (9). He remembers his twenty-fifth birthday at Red Cliff house, when Peary had decided

to throw him a party. Henson acknowledges grudgingly Diebitsch-Peary's hand in the celebration: "I suppose that it was due to her that the occasion was made a memorable one for me" (15). Finally, Henson spots her on a white steam yacht meeting the *Roosevelt* upon its return from the North Pole expedition. The whiteness and the distance determined Henson's relation to Peary's wife, both in their lives and their texts (57). One paragraph later, he compares himself to Othello, thus foregrounding the racial component in his life with the Commander's wife.

### The Indispensable Henson

Though Henson carried out numerous tasks in Diebitsch-Peary's account of the second Peary expedition, she does not recognize his potential or his contribution. His own memoir foregrounds the work that made him indispensable to her husband. He begins on August 8-9, 1908, by shifting loads from the accompanying *Erik* to the *Roosevelt*, and he adds that he has been walrus-hunting and taxidermizing (15). He lists his tasks in the following chapter: "I have a steady job carpentering, also interpreting, barbering, tailoring, dog-training, and chasing Eskimos out of my quarters" (17). To this impressive set of skills, he adds the building and repairing of sledges (18), cooking (22), igloo-building (23), navigating (22), survival lessons (24), medical advice and assistance (31), gauging distances (41), breaking ice, and repairing whaleboats (50), with only one example of many given in parentheses. Henson's work was grounded in endurance and persistence, qualities that

also the Commander boasted. Henson often mentions his heavy workload: "I know it; the same old story, a man's work and a dog's life, and what does it amount to? What good is to be done? I am tired, sick, sore, and discouraged" (18). A few pages later, he writes: "There was something in the way of work going on all of the time. I was away from the ship on two hunting trips of about ten days each, and while at headquarters, I shaped and built over two dozen sledges, besides doing lots of other work" (20). Henson's labor highlights his multifaceted skills, way beyond Diebitsch-Peary's horizon. Einar-Arne Drivenes explains in "Polarmannen" ([The Polar Man] 2007) that Arctic survival demanded both certain innate qualities and a general knowledge, acquired through indigenous mentorship (77). Henson writes himself into equality by stressing his vital contribution in the Arctic, and he justifies Peary's choosing him for the final dash, while white men such as Marvin, Bartlett and MacDonald had to return to the *Roosevelt* without getting as close to the Pole.

In *The North Pole*, Peary offers a less flattering explanation. He did not think Henson capable of returning to land alone, and his race prevented Peary from sending him back: "He had not, as a racial inheritance, the daring and initiative of Bartlett, or Marvin, or Macmillan, or Borup. I owed it to him not to subject him to dangers and responsibilities which he was temperamentally unfit to face" (116). In a *Phylon* article, "The Travails of Matthew Henson" (1975), Ward McAfee exposes the racist response to Henson by Peary and others, and he adds another reason

for Henson's coming to the Pole. Perhaps Peary "chose Henson so that he would not have to share honors with a white man" (409). In short, Henson was no rival to Peary because of his race. McAfee mentions as well that racist skeptics used Henson's presumed submission to question Peary's success: "Peary, they speculated, never reached the Pole, but commanded Henson to support him in his lie" (407). His article sees the North Pole episode and its aftermath as "a lightning rod of white supremacist thought patterns in early twentieth-century America" (410).

### Racial Alliances

Henson's title suggests the racial awareness that prompted his insistence on inclusion and equality, however muted. Foy argues that the "memoir attempts to depict the North Pole as a frontier where work, rather than race, determines the black explorer's worth" (28). Henson inscribes his blackness with allusions to the blues, and to keep warm, he "frequently did the double-shuffle and an old Virginia break-down" (24). He mentions the advantage of a flat nose in freezing weather and pokes fun of Goodsell's "greenish-yellow complexion," while the long darkness has made his own resemble "a ginger cake with too much saleratus in it" (24). Henson walks a tightrope here, between racial caricature and assertion. His dance may, as Foy points out, suggest the minstrel show's nostalgia for antebellum plantation life and the "shuffling darky." Yet Henson places this racial representation into an Arctic setting that betrays its absurdity. Foy notes that, as with the

nose and complexion references, "Henson's double-voiced 'double-shuffle' acts as a strategic racial allusion. In each of these cases, he acknowledges his blackness while trying to elude the difference that this difference may hold for his readers" (29). In *Gender on Ice* (1993), Lisa Bloom commends Henson for construing blackness as a presence, not an absence, given the historical context. She agrees that Henson's racial allegiance shows up in his approach to the Inughuit population (98). The famous meeting between members of the 1891-92 Arctic explorers and the inhabitants of Northern Greenland appear in most accounts of Henson's travels. Gilman describes their reaction to Henson in some detail:

*One of the Eskimos, a man named Ikwah, spotted Henson and ran over to him, speaking excitedly in the Eskimo language. The man held his arm next to Henson's for comparison, and Henson saw that their skin color was similar. Ikwah grinned and said 'Innuit, Innuit,' repeating the Eskimo word for his people. Because Henson was not a kabloona (a white person), Ikwah believed that Henson must be an Eskimo who had been lost from his tribe and had forgotten his true language. Ikwah and his family decided to adopt Henson. (34)*

If Peary could not have done it without Henson, Henson could not have done it without the Inughuit. They taught him their language, dog-handling, sledge construction, igloo-building, and survival skills that benefited all members of Peary's Arctic expeditions. Henson places his native assistants at the



center of his text, where he himself resides, and he adds supplemental narrative energy to the Inughuit in Appendix I, "Notes on the Esquimos," and in Appendix II, which he calls "List of Smith Sound Esquimos," beginning with Ac-com-o-ding'-wah and ending several pages later with We-shark'-oup-si and two unnamed female babies. Henson's long list indicates both his desire to give the Inughuit visibility and a wish for control, a tension also apparent in his descriptions of his native assistants and their families.

He groups himself with the Inughuit in an ethnic enclave cast against a white background. A photograph of a young Henson amidst Arctic inhabitants resembles a family group picture, with a caption in Dolores Johnson's photo biography in Henson's own words: "for periods covering more than twelve months, I have been for all intents an Esquimo, with Esquimos for companions, speaking their language, dressing in the same kind of clothes, living in the same kind of dens, eating the same food, enjoying their pleasures, and frequently sharing their griefs" (photo following Johnson 25). In his memoir, Henson learns the names of individual tribe members and describes them in character sketches. Readers get acquainted with Merktoshah, the oldest member of the tribe, and with Mene or Minik, the young boy Peary brought to the States with his family

and then abandoned to his tragic life.<sup>3</sup> Henson worries about the "innocent" (31) Inughuit and the consequences of their meeting with whalers and explorers. He considers them "the best-natured people on earth, with no bad habits of their own, but a ready ability to assimilate the vices of civilization" (20). He regrets that Danish missionaries and sailors distribute tobacco even to toddlers, and his view of the Inughuit future is gloomy: "It is my conviction that the life of this little tribe is doomed, and that extinction is nearly due" (20). He cites decreasing population numbers and blames "the commercial hunter" for transforming a "land of plenty" (20) into a "land of desolation" (21), with seals, walrus, reindeer, and muskoxen gone from the coasts and forcing the native hunters inland. Frederick E. Nelson summarizes in "Ice Follies" (2012) the motivation for polar exploration in four words: "Commerce," "sovereignty," "adventure," and "knowledge" (547). In a 2002 *Polar Geography* article, Russell W. Gibbons and Raimund E. Goerler find that a true account of "deception, subjection, and in many instances extermination of native peoples in the Western Hemisphere between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries remains as a sordid and inglorious, if less frequently told, chapter of exploration and expansion" (1). Henson wants to protect the Inughuit — perhaps, as Totten argues, because he sees them as "noble

3 This story is narrated more fully by Kenn Harper in *Give Me My Father's Body: The Life of Minik, The New York Eskimo* (1986) and "The Minik Affair: The Role of the American Museum of Natural History" (2002). The Peary-Macmillan Arctic Museum commemorates him with the virtual exhibition "Caught in the Middle: The Tragic Life of Minik Wallace."

savages corrupted through contact with outsiders" (65). He dislikes Peary's instructions to remove Nipsangwah and Myah from the *Roosevelt* but to keep their seven curs aboard. He obeys the Commander, but "it was not a pleasant task" (15). He explains his resistance with uncharacteristic directness: "I have known men who needed dogs less to pay a great deal more for one pup than was paid to Nipsangwah for his pack of seven. The dogs are a valuable asset to these people and these two men were dependent on their little teams to a greater extent than on the plates and cups of tin which they received in exchange of them" (15). In short, Peary cheats the native men, and not only on this occasion.

### The Meteorites

Henson recalls Peary's removal of three meteorites the Inughuit depended upon for iron, discovered during the winter of 1894-95 with the help of native guides, to the American Museum of Natural History: "The Woman," "The Dog," and, in 1897, the seventy-ton "The Tent." Henson does not outright criticize, but he mentions Peary's "persistency" in securing the meteorites. He writes about "The Tent": "my back still aches when I think of the hard work I did to help load that monster aboard the *Hope*" (10). In "Robert E. Peary and the Cape York Meteorites," Patricia A. M. Huntington writes that "what is uncontroversial about the meteorites is that they allowed the Inuit to live in the Iron Age rather than the Stone Age" (56). She also shares Henson's masked criticism: "Given the Inuit's reliance on the meteorites, one can understand their

reluctance to lead European explorers to them, and until a very determined Robert E. Peary decided to find them, their location was concealed" (57). In 1909, Josephine Diebitsch-Peary claimed the meteorites as a gift to herself and argued for using the money they brought in for her children's education. She received a check for \$40,000, an amount sufficient "to pay for room, board, tuition, books, and pocket money for 19 years at a private college" (Huntington 62). Henson disliked the meteorite removal, which secured Peary an exhibition at the American Museum of Natural History and funding for new Arctic ventures. The Museum caption now concedes that "The Tent" remains the biggest meteorite "in captivity" (Huntington 64). Henson refers to The Tent as Peary's "prize" and reports that he brought it "safely" to New York, where it now "reposes" in the museum (10). After all, he did assist Peary in bringing the meteorites aboard ship, though presumably refusing to do so was not an option.

### Imperial Eyes

Henson's own interactions with the Inughuit had elements of white explorers' prejudice. Like Peary, Henson often uses the possessive in writing about "my Esquimos" or "my boys" (28), and his assistants go unnamed until he gets closer to the Pole. His perspective resembles the colonial gaze Marie Louise Pratt identifies in *Imperial Eyes* (1992), for ex. in his tendency, shared with Peary, of seeing the Inghuits in swarms, as when he complains of their presence everywhere on the *Roosevelt*, where they hamper his work

(15). Like Diebitsch-Peary, he calls them “huskies” (15), and like Peary in *The North Pole*, he refers to the Inughuit as children (48), perhaps to suggest their innocence. Henson’s tension-filled representation of the indigenous population suggests his adoption of dominant-culture values, or his support of them for his own benefit. These shared value systems include Henson’s view of the North, his patriotism, and his faith in heroic masculinity, with a certain derogation of women in its wake.

Henson employs the standard war metaphors in describing the “fight with nature” in the Arctic that results in final “conquest,” though one he ascribes to Peary’s “fighting-power” and “deathless ambition” (45). Before departure, he writes: “I am waiting for the command to attack the savage ice-and rock-bound fortress of the North” (10). He bids “farewell to all the world” when he travels North (14), where he recalls episodes from “down in civilization” (35). Like other members of the expedition, he fails to recognize the culture and customs of the Arctic, a project the Danish explorer Knud Rasmussen took on with *The People of the Polar North* (1908). Instead, Henson uses the US as a measuring stick, as when he finds the midnight light at Disco Island “almost as bright as early evening twilight in New York on the Fourth of July” (13), or when he compares the odor of the native families aboard the *Roosevelt* to the “aroma of an East Side lunch-room” (20). Like Peary and the others, he speaks of the “irresistible influence that beckoned us on” (26), suggesting the “wild,

misgiving mystery of the North Pole” (11) that drew himself, Peary, and earlier expeditions northward. Sherrill E. Grace argues in *Canada and the Idea of North* (2007) that the North is an idea as much as a mappable and measurable physical region (xii). In this vein, Henson participates in the Foucauldian discursive formation of the North to which Peary and others subscribed (Grace xiii).

### Heroic (American) Masculinity

Henson sides with Peary in seeing their polar expedition as a patriotic, manly enterprise. Peary writes in *The North Pole*: “This expedition went north in an American-built ship, by the American route, in command of an American, to secure if possible an American trophy” (18). When Peary takes out the silk flag his wife had sewn years earlier and plants the Stars and Stripes on top of his igloo in Camp Morris K. Jesup, named after the Peary Arctic Club president, Henson realizes the importance of the site: the end of their race to the Pole. “A thrill of patriotism ran through me,” he recalls, “and I raised my voice to cheer the starry emblem.” He identifies with their shared colonial project, their right to claim the Pole for North America, symbolized by the flag, which he identifies with nation and masculine virtues—and with Peary: “this badge of honor and courage was also blood-stained and battlescarred, for at several places there were blank squares marking the spots where pieces had been cut out of the ‘Farthest’ of the brave bearer, and left with it the records in the cairns, as mute but as eloquent witnesses of his achievement” (42-43). Henson’s patriotism

allows him to enter a symbolic relation with power and masculinity, which the Commander and his flag in this passage represent. Bloom explains: "The official public discourse available to Henson allows him to participate in the discovery of the North Pole, but not to claim an individual identity in relation to his success" (52). If Peary in the Arctic embodies a Super-Deluxe whiteness, Henson can only hope for the marginal position of the racial other, as he well knows. "I felt a savage joy and exaltation," he writes. "As in the past, from the beginning of history, wherever the world's work was done by a white man, he had been accompanied by a colored man" (43). The repetition of "man" suggests what is Henson's prize at the Pole. In "Manliness and Exploration" (2015), Michael Robinson explains: "To stand at the North Pole was to achieve an almost impossible feat, one that, in the doing, might express something rare, perhaps lost, in the industrial age of the Western world: The essential, elemental qualities of manliness itself" (90). Arctic explorers embodied "the strenuous life," with their Arctic struggles countering the "emasculating effects" of modern American culture (94). Peary had named his ship the *Roosevelt* in honor of Theodore Roosevelt, who by the early twentieth century had become "the patron saint of manly physical culture" (96). On July 7, 1908, Roosevelt went on board the vessel and bade his host a spirited good-bye (Weems 235).

Rather than distancing himself from this muscular nationalism, Henson cherishes the male comradery in the Arctic that racism prevented at home. His many first-person plural pronouns inscribe him in the masculine

community of Polar explorers, evident when he bids Marvin goodbye on March 26, 1908, having himself been selected to continue on to the Pole: "he congratulated me and we gave each other the strong, fraternal grip of our honored fraternity" (37). He condemns the Inughuit who had turned back at the "Big Lead," an open stretch of water preventing onward movement, as cowards (44-45), while he praises others, Peary especially, as heroic in looks and accomplishments. Back at the *Roosevelt*, "his steel-gray eyes flashed forth the light of glorious victory, and though he always carried himself proudly, there had come about him an air of erect assurance that was exhilarating" (48). Dr. Goodsell returns to the ship on June 15, with a heavy load of botanical samples, meat, and skins, and he too looks the role: "His physical equipment was the finest; a giant in stature and strength" (49). As Lena Aarekol argues in "Arctic Trophy Hunters, Tourism, and Masculinities, 1827-1914" (2016), "trophy hunting made possible performances of different forms of masculinity, not only the conquest and mastery of nature but also the interest in and care for nature" (123, cp. 137). This different kind of masculinity might explain Henson's fondness for Goodsell, "withal the gentlest of men having an even, mellow disposition that never was ruffled" (49). Goodsell, in short, resembles Henson and validates his own masculine performance.

With *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole*, Henson creates a gender-segregated text, which few women enter. The authors of "Living on the Edge: Inughuit Women and Geography of Contact" (2016) examine archival and archaeological

evidence of women's work for the 1905-06 and 1908-09 Peary expeditions and find that female labor "was a crucial element and essential to the safety of everyone involved." Nevertheless, they continue, "women and their experience have been essentially written out of the literature of Arctic exploration" (1). Significantly, in Henson's memoir, Ahlikahsingwah has made a suit for Professor Marvin of reindeer skin and polar bearskin (26), and Henson also mentions "Miss Bill," the young indigenous woman Diebitsch-Peary brought to the US and then returned. "She is known as a 'Holy Terror,'" Henson writes after mentioning her three marriages and subsequent desertions. "I do not know why, but I have my suspicions" (9). His suspicions do not include *piblokto* or Arctic hysteria, a catch-all term for various anxiety-induced illnesses, now explained by the strain of contact between Euro-American explorers and the Inughuit between 1890 and 1920 (Dick). Henson respects the leader of a dog team, "the King," but notes that "it is always the females who start the trouble" (19). Mrs. Peary appears briefly in his memoir, but his own (second) wife, Lucy Ross Henson, does not. To uphold his claim to manhood, Henson—who would upon return hold a job as messenger "boy" (Bloom 97)—dismisses or puts down women. In "Gendering Arctic Memory" (2021), Silke Reeploeg states: "Arctic expeditions, particularly those led by Robert Peary and others trained in military or naval traditions, produced a homogenized, 'hypermasculine region' . . . with a scientific and cultural history that created solid patterns of homosocial environments" (1063).

### Henson's Silences

Henson treads carefully across the Arctic Ocean to get to the Pole, and cracks in his text suggest missing or silenced information. Peary wrote the Foreword to *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* and saw to its publication, and other readers might not appreciate an overly frank approach to difficult or tabooed topics either. Henson performs what post-colonial scholars have called "a haunted and depressed" writing back from the Center (Reeploeg 1063). The cost of Henson's adherence to white Arctic masculinity appears in asides only: "With the coming of daylight a man gets more cheerful, but it was still twilight when we left Cape Columbia, and melancholy would sometimes grip, as it often did during the darkness of midwinter" (26). Gazing out at the Arctic Ocean, Henson has at his back "the land of sadness" (26). Upon his return to the *Roosevelt*, he grieves over the death of Ross Marvin, who had accompanied Peary to 86° 38' north before the Commander ordered his return to Cape Columbia. Henson gives Marvin's death considerable narrative energy in his Chapter XVII, "Safe on the Roosevelt—Poor Marvin," but the circumstances of Marvin's death seem hazy.

In Henson's account, Marvin had traveled ahead of three Inughuit assistants and had disappeared through the thin ice. The Inughuit had found the ice newly formed around him, with only his fur clothes showing underneath. Instead of trying to rescue Marvin, they had unloaded all his belongings onto the ice to prevent his spirit from following them. Henson does not question what happened, but he

seems aware of alternative narratives: “I feel that had he been with civilized companions the sad story of Marvin’s death would not have to be told” (48). Had the Inughuit attempted to rescue the Professor, he writes, they could not have kept him alive, because of the freezing temperature and because “they knew nothing of restoring life to the drowned.” Henson calls the assistants “foolish boys” and concludes about Marvin’s death: “No blame can be laid on his childish companions” (48). The Danish explorer Peter Freuchen promotes a different version of Marvin’s death in *Min Grønlandske Ungdom* [My Greenlandic Youth] (1936):

*Inukitsork was quite exhausted, and Marvin believed that he was too heavy a burden on their sledge teams. It was when they hurried home after having placed cairns for Peary’s North Pole camp. Therefore, Marvin ordered Inukitsork to be left behind in an igloo and move forward without him. But the two others—one was Inukitsork’s cousin Qidlugtoq—refused to abandon him. A quarrel ensued and Qidlugtoq shot the professor. (233, my translation)*

In 2005, Kenn Harper offered a fuller version of the event and explained that the truth came out when “Qilluttooq” had been converted to Christianity and confessed to the missionary in Thule, where Freuchen ran the trade station, that he had shot Marvin, whose behavior had grown increasingly irrational. Because Henson repeatedly excuses the Inughuit by stressing their innocence, he may have wished to silence this different narrative.

Henson’s account of the final Poleward journey has its own gaps. Peary rides a sledge in the rear for parts of the exhausting marches, weakened by insomnia and impatience: “I do not think that he slept for one hour from April 2 until after he had loaded us up and ordered us to go back over our old trail, and I often think that from the instant when the order to return was given until the land was again sighted, he was in a continuous daze” (42). When Henson believes their journey has ended at the Pole, he ungloves his right hand and extends it “to congratulate him on the success of their eighteen years of effort.” Peary does not take his hand, in Henson’s explanation perhaps because something got into his eyes, or the sun had caused him pain (43). After the first two marches back, Peary is “practically a dead weight” (45). Back on the *Roosevelt*, Peary shuts himself up in his cabin, to Henson’s surprise and chagrin: “I wondered when the Commander would want to see me” (47). In the following chapter, Henson wonders again about Peary’s behavior over the next three weeks: “I would catch a fleeting glimpse of Commander Peary, but not once in all of that time did he speak to me” (48). Henson gives no further explanation in his text, but at the age of eighty-eight, he disclosed in an interview with Robert H. Fowler of the National Historical Society what had occurred. Peary had stayed in the back while Henson broke the trail, and he then “overran the Pole by two miles” (Fowler 48). When he had built his igloo, he confessed to Peary: “I think I’m the first man to sit on top of the world” (Fowler 49). Peary got so angry that Henson emptied his rifle, the only

one in the party, of all cartridges, to avoid being murdered in his sleep. Henson had not stopped short before the Pole, which Peary had planned to reach without him, and Peary never forgave him. But he ordered Henson to stay behind at Camp Columbia a few days before heading back to the *Roosevelt*. Henson explains: "He wanted to be the first to take the news back. I didn't care" (Fowler 50). Bloom finds that with this alternative narrative, "Henson presents himself as not only the true discoverer of the North Pole but also cleverer than Peary by showing how he was able to outwit Peary at his own game" (100).

Upon his return to the *Roosevelt*, Peary was informed that Dr. Frederick Cook claimed to have reached the Pole on April 21, 1908—a year earlier. Peary refuted his claim in the *New York Times* by stating that Cook had "simply handed the public a gold brick" (MacMillan 268). This statement cost Peary considerable good-will, but the Cook controversy raged on. Henson devotes most of Chapter XX to the story, which he and others at Etah, including Etookahshoo and Ahpellaah, the men who had been with Cook for a year, found "so ridiculous and absurd that we simply laughed at it" (54). He knew Cook well from a stay with his relatives during a bout of eye sickness and from two previous Peary expeditions: "Aside from his medical ability, we had no faith in him whatever. He was not even good for a day's work, and the idea of his making such an astounding claim as having reached the Pole was so ludicrous that, after our laugh, we dropped the matter altogether" (54). Henson sides wholeheartedly with Peary, but

his chapter suggests that he is not as silent in this matter as he claims to be: "I feel that all of the debts of gratitude have been liquidated by my silence in this controversy, and I will have nothing more to say in regard to him and his claims" (55). But another significant silence resounds in Henson's memoir.

Both Henson and Peary had fathered sons with Inughuit women in the Arctic, Peary two and Henson one. Readers of *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* will know that Henson adopted an orphaned boy, Kudlooktoo, while on Red Cliff and converted him into a "presentable Young American" (9), but he fades out of Henson's life and text after this presentation. For Peary, sexual relations with Inughuit women were part of his plan: "Is it asking too much of masculine human nature to expect it to remain in an Arctic climate enduring constant hardship, without one relieving feature. Feminine companionship not only causes greater contentment, but as a matter of both mental and physical health and the retention of the top notch of Manhood it is a necessity" (Weems 72). In a book review essay for *Inuit Studies*, "Sex, Lies, and Northern Explorations" (2008), Murielle Nagy warns against explaining Peary's behavior with a "so-called 'traditional practice' of exchange of wives between Inuit partners," since he did not include his own wife in the arrangement. In 1900, when Mrs. Peary met Ahlikasingwah, who told her Peary had fathered her infant, Peary remained unapologetic (172). Danish explorer Knud Rasmussen engaged liberally in this sort of feminine companionship (Bown xxi), rooted in white

explorers' power and privilege. Niels Barfoed reveals in his Rasmussen biography that a former Inughuit mistress of Rasmussen's, Arnarulunguak, was married off to one of Peary's sons (398). Barfoed also states that Rasmussen travelled in the Arctic for the sake of white men only (408).

In *North Pole Promise: Black, White, and Inuit Friends* (2017), S. Allen Counter provides details in his chapter "The Secret Sons." Peary had two sons with Ahlikasingwah, one in 1906, when Henson's son with Akatingwah was also born. Counter writes that all participants of the Arctic expeditions knew this "fiercely kept secret," which would have ruined Peary's reputation in the US and dimmed his achievement with Henson at the Pole. They subscribed, as did Henson, to the "code of silence" surrounding the sexual relations of white men with women of color in this era. Counter notes that both Peary and Henson left the Arctic forever in 1909: "It was the last time the boys saw their fathers" (34-35). Counter invited the two surviving, eighty-year-old sons, Kali Peary and Anaukaq Henson, to the US in the summer of 1987 and found the American Hensons eager to meet their new relatives, while the Pearys kept their distance, except for Kali's brief visit to Robert Peary Jr. and his wife's home in Maine. Jean Craighead George, who reviewed Counter's work in "Written in the Ice" (1991), notes especially that Kali found it hard to talk about his father, who "did not help me or my mother in any way" (33). Henson remains in his text as quiet as the grave in Woodlawn Cemetery his son visited, but the trip resulted

in Henson's removal to Arlington and new interest in Polar exploration.

Henson ends his memoir with what Foy calls "a homosocial fantasy": "I long to see them all again! The brave, cheery companions of the trail in the North. I long to see again the lithe figure of my Commander! and to hear again his clear, ringing voice urging and encouraging me onward, with his 'Well done, my boy'" (189). The fantasy demands that Henson retreat to a position of subservience, signaled by "my Commander" and "my boy," positions contradicting Henson's wish for comradeship and equality. This tension also persists in his final literary reference to himself as Othello, followed by two lines from Kipling's "L'Envoi," which conclude his memoir: "The Old Trail!/ The Trail that is always New!" (57). Caught between ideologies of race and imperialism, Henson attempts to inscribe himself into the masculine community of Arctic exploration and the ideology of racial uplift that Washington introduced. Instead, he remains "a mere shadow in the heart of whiteness" (Foy 39), a "son of the tropics" displaced in Arctic discovery and often ignored, except in his own text.

### **The Great Peary?**

Peary moved on to honors and awards, the Thanks of Congress, a promotion to Rear Admiral and two terms as the president of The Explorers Club before he retired in 1911. He embodied the muscular American manhood promoted by President Roosevelt, who sent the 1908-09 expedition off on the ship named

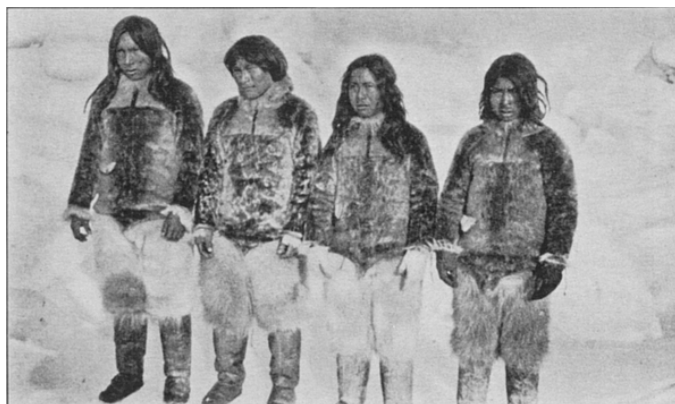


after him. Recalling his youth in Greenland, Freuchen expresses his admiration for Peary on behalf of Arctic explorers as he follows in his footsteps near Navy Cliff, where Peary in 1892 had incorrectly mapped a canal:

*We can thank Peary for much of what we now know of Arctic conditions. I felt deeply honored to stand here in his famous spot. The few matches, here for twenty years, his footsteps, still visible in the gravel, and the rocks his hands had touched and used for cairns became for me holy relics; they meant much more to me than the many stories I had heard about him, and the books written about and by him. (146, my translation)*

Peary looms large in the scholarship on Arctic exploration, which traditionally focuses on the tenacity and courage of individual explorers. In the translated study *Polarforskningens Helte* [The Heroes of Polar Research] (1963), which features Peary on the cover, Ralph K. Andrist structures his book around individual explores and gives Peary alone credit for reaching the North Pole. Focusing on Peary's dogged Polar ambition, scholars have individualized the quest for the Pole as one man's stubborn, even maniacal polar quest, at the cost of his African American fellow traveler, the Inughuit, and the capitalist and nationalist interests that funded Peary's expeditions. But Peary's reputation has waned, due first to the Cook controversy and later because of the stolen meteorites, the unflattering Minik affair, the abandonment of his mixed-race sons, his hegemonic masculinity, and the colonial

project sponsored by Teddy Roosevelt, whose statue in front of the American Museum of Natural History, where Minik's father's bones were exhibited, was dismantled in January 2022 (Reuters). Peary's claim to have reached the Pole has also been disproved. In *Peary at the North Pole: Fact or Fiction?* (1973), Dennis Rawlins doubted both Cook's and Peary's results. In May 1984, the Danish newspaper *Berlingske Tidende* published an article with a title that in English would read: "Neither Cook nor Peary Reached the North Pole: The former Revealed to be a Hoax while he was celebrated in Copenhagen" (Thomsen II:3). On August 22, 1984, John Noble Wilford's "Doubts Cast on Peary's Claim to Pole" appeared in *The New York Times* (Section B, 7). Finally, in 1988, British explorer Wally Herbert concluded in a *National Geographic* article "Commander Robert E. Peary: Did He Reach the Pole?" that he did not, though his expedition might have come as close as 30 to 60 miles from the Pole (404). John E. Weems took on the Peary myth in *Peary: The Explorer and the Man* (1988). Nonetheless, William E. Molett fiercely defended the 1908-09 expedition and its claim to the Pole in *Robert Peary and Matthew Henson at the North Pole* (1996). And Herbert still praised the "driving force, purpose, commitment, motivation of the man, this giant of a man, for he is the man in all of us" (413), thus consolidating Peary's status as a masculine role model. Cook supporter Farley Fowatt agreed in *The Polar Passion* (1967) (12). In "a throw-back to Peary's days," Will Steger and Paul Schurke headed a seven-man, one-woman expedition to reach the Pole, "solely by our own power and



GS03: "Ooqueah, Odaq, Egingwah and Sigluk at the North Pole."

perseverance and that of our forty-nine sled dogs" (4). Their successful journey, which the leaders describe in *North to the Pole* (1987), was intended as an exercise in "faith to the indomitable power of the human spirit" (4). But they dedicated their book to "the spirit of Matthew Henson, the greatest unsung hero in the history of Arctic exploration" (n. p.).

### Conclusion

If Peary's reputation has sunk, Henson's has risen. In a century when Black Lives Matter, he has in *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* (1912) created a space that destabilizes the 1908-09 Peary narrative by producing a counter-discourse. Heidi Hansson writes in "Staging the Arctic 1819-1909 and 2014" (2015) that "the official discourse of Arctic heroism is in dialogue with alternative discourses where the value of both the Arctic project and heroic masculinity is less stable" (51). Like earlier African American autobiographers, Henson uses writing and reading to establish his claim for equality and agency, a strategy Totten ties to the slave narrative (53-54). He uses words

as tools to connect with his readership, and his various rhetorical strategies—questions to the audience, suspenseful drama, climactic constructions, humor, and a whiff of poetry—establish him as a credible and gifted narrator and eyewitness. Like Frederick Douglass, he also controls the people around him through his pen. He evaluates members of the expedition, including the Commander and his wife, both through character sketches, subtle criticism, and omissions, and he credits his own multifaceted work for the expedition as a source of its success. He maneuvers across racial terrain with inscriptions of his own race and with a promotion of the Inughuit, without whom the American explorers would literally have died, as Lile Dick argues in "Aboriginal-European Relations During the Great Ages of North Polar Exploration" (2002). Henson recognizes the individuality and names of the native laborers, and he poses with all the four Inughuit men who helped Peary claim the Pole: Ooqueah, Ootah, Egingwah, and Seegloo. His navigation across the Arctic and social terrain entailed, however, his recognition, and even acceptance, of dominant value systems such as nationalism, colonialism, and hegemonic masculinity. Henson participated in the conspiracy of silence involving Marvin's death, the race to the Pole and back, and the sons both he and Peary abandoned to their fate in the Arctic. The result, as *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* demonstrates, is a series of dilemmas, or contradictions, which Henson's participation in Arctic adventures necessitated and required. Many roles compete in his recollection of the North Pole expedition, where he found the community, the sense of

belonging, and the racial intermingling the US did not offer. Together the Commander and his fellow explorer had caught the “Arctic fever” (Peary 20), and together they raced to the Pole, which only for Peary made possible the fame he had dreamed of—and predicted—as a boy. For Henson, the journey North did not follow the path to liberty that Douglass and others had mapped, and his memoir did not become the “narrative of ascent” that would extend the “geography of freedom” into Arctic terrain (Foy 35). With *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole*, Henson broke the icy road to full recognition and came closer to this goal, if still not close enough.

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# CHINA AND THE 21ST CENTURY ARCTIC: Opportunities and Limitations

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**Abstract:** In 2018 The People’s Republic of China (PRC) released its Arctic policy and articulated its position, principles, and goals as a “near-Arctic state.” In the years since, China has become a central focus of the growing academic and professional discourse surrounding the emerging Arctic and has positioned itself as a consequential actor in regional affairs. This article examines the opportunities and limitations for China in the High North by focusing on its four key drivers for Arctic engagement: resource extraction, international shipping, scientific pursuits, and international prestige. This article finds that while China’s involvement in Arctic affairs is growing, there are still significant roadblocks to its ambitions, which it will need to overcome in order to reach its goal of being recognized as an Arctic power.

**Key words:** China, Arctic,  
Shipping, Energy, Polar Silk Road



## Introduction

In 2018 The People's Republic of China (PRC) released its Arctic policy and articulated its position, principles, and goals as a "near-Arctic state."<sup>1</sup> According to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this policy was written "to guide relevant Chinese government departments and institutions in Arctic-related activities and cooperation, to encourage relevant parties to get better involved in Arctic governance, and to work with the international community to safeguard and promote peace and stability in, and the sustainable development of, the Arctic."<sup>2</sup> Since then, China has become a central focus of the growing academic and professional discourse surrounding the emerging Arctic and has positioned itself as a consequential actor in regional affairs.

The PRC's growing presence in the region since the beginning of the 21st century has been met with widespread suspicion regarding Beijing's intentions in the region. The Arctic Eight (The USA, Canada, Russia, Denmark, Norway, Iceland, Sweden, and Finland) reject China's self-affixed near-Arctic label, with former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo going as far as to call it "communist fiction."<sup>3</sup>

1 This publication was created within the implementation of the project START/SOC/034 Western Preparedness for the 21st Century Realities of a Great Power China: A Scenario Based Evaluation that was supported by the project Grant schemes at CU No. CZ.02.2.69/0.0/0.0/19\_073/0016935.

2 (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China 2018)

3 (Langley 2021)

The Chinese application for permanent observer status on the Arctic Council, which has no authority or privilege outside being able to observe Council meetings in an official capacity, took seven years before it was approved after considerable internal deliberation. Even China's closest geopolitical ally, Russia, has met Beijing's Arctic ambitions with a cold shoulder despite the latter extensively financing Russia's infrastructure and hydro-carbon projects in Siberia.

What then drives China to further invest economic and political capital in a distant region where both the environment and the states which inhabit it are hostile to outside influence? This paper examines four key factors which draw China to the Arctic: resource extraction, international shipping, scientific pursuits, and international prestige. Furthermore, it will highlight the limitations China faces to its Arctic ambitions coming from both the environment and from Arctic states. These are approached within a near to mid-term time frame, focusing on recent developments and those which are likely to take place by the 100th anniversary of the PRC in 2049.

This article will first briefly outline China's history in the Arctic from its beginnings in the early 20th century, then as the Republic of China, to the present day, highlighting key events which have led to China's current positioning in the High North. Following this overview is a detailing of how Chinese interests in resource extraction, international shipping,

prestige building, and scientific pursuits have drawn China into the region, noting specific examples of ongoing and future projects as well as related geopolitical maneuvers. Finally, a conclusion will project into the future and hypothesize likely developments in the Arctic involving China up to 2030 in light of both environmental and geopolitical realities in the present day.

### A Brief History of China in the Arctic

China's present-day forays into Arctic affairs are not the first instance of Chinese interest in the High North; in fact, China has been a participant in Arctic geopolitics to varying degrees since the days of the Republic of China (ROC) after the collapse of the Qing Empire.<sup>4</sup> On July 1, 1925 the ROC signed the Spitsbergen Treaty (later renamed the Svalbard Treaty), which recognizes Norwegian sovereignty of the Svalbard archipelago in return for signatory states being allowed to pursue peaceful economic interests on the islands.<sup>5</sup> The Spitsbergen Treaty was one of many international agreements in the midst of the post-World War One treaty frenzy, which looked to settle the post-war order and establish new paradigms of influence around the world. France invited the ROC to join the treaty as a signatory with the aim of recovering the influence in China it was losing

to the rising power of the United States. The ROC, in turn, was interested in participating in any international agreements where it could be perceived as an equal nation and quickly worked to ratify the treaty. However, as is noted by Nengye Liu (2021), the ROC had no real interest in Arctic affairs at the time of signing the treaty and was possibly not even aware of the discussions and issues surrounding the archipelago: "As a weak nation who was struggling with its survival from domestic chaos and foreign invasions, China had no capacity to exercise its rights and pursue its interests in a remote part of the world like the Svalbard archipelago. The Treaty was forgotten, as if it never existed, for more than 65 years."<sup>6</sup>

The PRC, founded in 1949, had in its early years no more interest in Arctic affairs than the ROC had before it. Its first decades were spent rebuilding after the prolonged civil and international conflict China had experienced since the collapse of the Qing Empire. Furthermore, disastrous central planning, exemplified by the Great Leap Forward, and internal discord by way of numerous political purges and the Cultural Revolution, drained resources and expertise which might have otherwise been directed toward geographical pursuits such as polar exploration. After the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, the PRC began to stabilize internally to the point where extra-territorial expeditions were viable and considered worthwhile pursuits by the central party. The first polar expedition was

4 It is important to note that the ROC of 1925 and the modern ROC (Taiwan) are not the same geopolitical actor, although Taiwan, as does the PRC, claims successorship to the dealings of the ROC of 1912-1949

5 (*Svalbard Treaty* 1920)

6 (Liu 2021, 2)

sent south to Antarctica in 1984 and met with great success, constructing the Great Wall research station, which continues to function to this day. It took more than a decade, until 1999, for China to conduct its first Arctic expedition with intent to research phenomena related to climate change to project meteorological shifts further south in China.<sup>7</sup> This was followed by nine subsequent scientific expeditions to the High North, the most recent of which occurred in 2020, each with broadened scientific goals with often more than 100 researchers taking part in each trip.<sup>8</sup> During this period as well, China began constructing polar research stations in Norway, Iceland, and Sweden to further its research on climate change and a number of other fields. These stations continue to host scientists year-round and have contributed to the ever-increasing flow of Arctic-related scientific research now being published out of China.<sup>9</sup>

China's interest in the Arctic remained primarily scientific until the end of the first decade of the 21st century. Alexeeva and Lasserre (2012) found that no major Chinese academic works centered on Arctic political issues before 2007 out of 680 works they examined sourced from Wanfang Data, China's largest search engine at the time.<sup>10</sup> In April 2007 China applied for permanent observer status on the Arctic Council, the region's premiere

governance and diplomacy forum, and afterwards numerous Chinese research articles were published on topics such as Arctic governance, inter-region relations, Arctic legal and political regimes, and China's engagement in the region.<sup>11</sup> In May 2013 the Arctic Council granted China permanent observer status alongside Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and India, its largest expansion of observers to-date. Though permanent observers have few rights outside of attending Council meetings and working groups, China's successful bid was a significant step forward for their Arctic ambitions, as it legitimized, at least to some degree, the validity of a growing internal belief that China was an Arctic power with an inherent claim to participation in the region's governance.<sup>12</sup> The same year the cargo ship *Yong Sheng* operated by COSCO Group sailed from Dalian, China, to Rotterdam, The Netherlands, along the Northern Sea Route, which hugs Russia's northern coast, the first such voyage of its kind, highlighting not only the fundamentally shifting climate of the High North, but also China's new presence in Arctic affairs.<sup>13</sup>

In January 2018 China released its first white paper on Arctic policy, outlining its official position on several Arctic issues and emphasizing its own legitimacy in Arctic affairs as a 'near-Arctic state', including references to its status as a signatory to the 1925 Spitsbergen

7 (Sun July, 46-47)

8 (Doshi, Dale-Huang, and Zhang 2021)

9 (The Arctic Institute 2020)

10 (Alexeeva and Lasserre 2012, 81)

11 (Sun 2014, 47)

12 (Sun 2018, 4)

13 (Bryant 2013)

treaty.<sup>14</sup> A key take-away from the white paper is China's desire for a more internationalized Arctic, which would have non-Arctic states take on a larger role in the region's governance and affairs, though throughout the paper China reiterates that littoral states do have sovereign rights over the region in line with those laid out in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which non-Arctic states are obliged to respect. However, this respect is intended to be reciprocal, with Arctic states allowing extra-regional actors the freedom to conduct activities in the region so long as they are in accordance with the law and in the interests of the international community.<sup>15</sup>

Another important facet of this white paper was its outline of an expansion to their Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) northward, a "Polar Silk Road"(PSR), which Beijing claims will "facilitate connectivity and sustainable economic and social development of the Arctic."<sup>16</sup> The PSR takes its shape in three sea routes emerging in the High North due to climate change: The Northern Sea Route, Northwest Passage, and the Trans-Polar route, which are explained in greater detail in a subsequent section of this paper. The PSR aims to bring 'win-win' results to China's participation in Arctic affairs, with the white paper stating "[all] stakeholders

in this area should pursue mutual benefit and common progress in all fields and activities. Such cooperation should ensure that the benefits are shared by both Arctic and non-Arctic states...."<sup>17</sup> As Greiger (2018) accurately notes, one of the primary goals of the white paper was to deflect Western concerns about China's growing Arctic ambitions and present China as a 'responsible major country' committed to international law and cooperation.<sup>18</sup> Their courting efforts appear to have missed the mark, as much of the subsequent non-Chinese literature released after the white paper by both Arctic actors and civil society meets China's Arctic enthusiasm with a cold shoulder at best, and more often than not with suspicion.<sup>19</sup>

### **Detailing China's Arctic Interests**

China's interests in the Arctic stem from four key drivers: diversifying trade routes, securing raw materials and resources, advancing their scientific understanding of climate change, and garnering international prestige; these interrelate and synergize to create a catalyst which pushes China towards greater Arctic engagement. Within China multiple entities are involved in Arctic policy-making and execution, most obviously national institutions such as the Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party and the Ministry of Foreign

14 (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China 2018, II) The PRC is recognized as the inheritor of the ROC's signatory status

15 (Grieger 2018)

16 (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China 2018, II)

17 (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China 2018, III)

18 (Grieger 2018, 2-3)

19 (Wishnick 2017, 59-65) (Adam 2018) (Grieger 2018)

Affairs, but also sub-national institutions such as provincial governments, state-owned enterprises (SOEs) such as the shipping conglomerate COSCO, and different research institutes and think-tanks from civil society.<sup>20</sup> This section takes into account the plurality of different agendas and goals these entities have set for themselves in the High North, but also the wider implications they have for China as an Arctic actor and the other Arctic states with which China interacts on the international stage.

### Resource Extraction

Resource extraction has long been a cornerstone of Arctic economics and is its primary contribution to the world economy. Many of the modern settlements in the Arctic exist solely to support the countless oil rigs, gas fields, mining operations, lumber mills, and fisheries, which dot the region's coast and interior. The receding ice and warming temperatures brought about by climate change have created new opportunities for extraction enterprises to expand into areas previously too inhospitable for profitable ventures, generating an economic boon for Arctic states and territories.<sup>21</sup>

The most important of these resources for China are hydrocarbons (liquid natural gas (LNG) and petroleum), and mineral resources, specifically rare earth elements.

20 (Kossa 2019, 20-21, 25-26)

21 (Lavengood 2021, 473)



*Arctic drilling platforms are technologically sophisticated infrastructure which extract hydrocarbons from far below the seabed and drive the High North's economy.*

These resources are the lifeblood of China's economy and even a limited disruption in their supply ripples throughout their economy with consequences valued in billions of yuan. Securing a diverse portfolio of suppliers for these vital resources is paramount for China to avert economic disaster and assure continued, predictable growth. Within Chinese domestic discourse, resources in the evolving Arctic present an opportunity to both pursue new extraction ventures as well as promote "energy cooperation and achieve joint economic development" with other Arctic actors.<sup>22</sup>

### Hydrocarbon Extraction

China is the world's largest consumer of energy and its internal demands for power grow in-step with its expanding economy. Hydrocarbons are an existential resource for China and in 2020 accounted for nearly a third of all energy produced in the country, a figure which will only grow as China increasingly

22 (Andersson, Zeuthen, and Kalvig 2021, 118)

shuns domestic coal consumption.<sup>23</sup> Securing a diverse portfolio of suppliers is a key priority for Beijing, as the supply chains which lead to China are fraught with hazards such as pirates along the Strait of Malacca as well as geopolitical tensions in areas like the South China Sea, where foreign navies could harass or even blockade shipments, should the flashpoint turn into a conflict. The abundance of hydrocarbons in the Arctic has been a key driver of Chinese interest in the region.<sup>24</sup>

China's primary partner in this endeavor is Russia, which has received billions of dollars' worth of Chinese investments in the last decade. The flagship project of this partnership is the Yamal LNG project in Sabetta, Siberia, on the coast of the Gulf of Ob, which is 29.9% Chinese-owned through the Chinese National Petroleum Corporation (20% stake) and the Silk Road Fund (9.9% stake). Additionally, two Chinese financial firms have loaned substantial sums to the Yamal project on 15-year-terms; the Export-Import Bank of China provided a loan for \$10.7 billion USD while the China Development Bank loaned the project \$1.5 billion USD.<sup>25</sup> These loans covered two-thirds of the project's external lending needs and were a lifeline to Yamal LNG after financial sanctions from the West limited Russia's borrowing capabilities after its invasion of Crimea in 2014.<sup>26</sup> In return,

China receives a steady supply of LNG, 94 billion cubic meters in 2020 through the 'Power of Siberia' pipeline, as well as technical experience working in extraction operations in the Arctic.<sup>27</sup>

Despite initial enthusiasm for the project and wider joint hydrocarbon ventures in the Arctic, Sino-Russian cooperation has not met the high expectations seen in government communiques and releases, as well as in earlier academic research on the topic.<sup>28</sup> This discrepancy stems first from a mutual misunderstanding of expectations regarding the partnership. Russia has a keen interest in maintaining full control over Arctic projects due to the region's importance in the national economy; this is especially true in light of the fact that hydrocarbon assets now make up a significant portion of the Russian economy.<sup>29</sup> China meanwhile expects involvement in project management and decision-making when making high-value investments like Yamal LNG, and expects as well the capacity to build its own expertise in Arctic economics and technology in exchange for its investments and lines of credit, which Russia is reluctant to provide or facilitate, again out of concern for its own economic interests.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, Beijing is wary of both the implications of further cooperation with Russia in light of increasing sanctions from the West

23 (Center for Strategic and International Studies 2022)

24 (Stronski and Ng 2018, 25)

25 (Kossa 2019, 29)

26 (Stronski and Ng 2018, 28)

27 (Downs 2022)

28 (Alexeeva and Lasserre 2018, 274)

29 (Warsaw Institute 2020) (Stronski and Ng 2018, 25-31)

30 (Pincus 2019, 5)

due to the war in Crimea, and what one Chinese scholar called an “unfriendly” environment for investment with a legal system which “functions poorly and corruption is rampant.”<sup>31</sup>

In spite of these issues, China and Russia will doubtlessly continue joint hydrocarbon ventures in the near future. The planned ‘Power of Siberia 2’ pipeline will double Russian gas exports to China and connect the existing Russia-China pipeline network with the same network that supplies Europe.<sup>32</sup> This would allow Russia to sell to China gas originally intended for customers in Central and Eastern Europe, who are now looking to wean themselves from their traditional energy supplier, as well as answer a demand in China for LNG, which is expected to double by 2035.<sup>33</sup>

#### ***Mineral Extraction - Rare Earth Elements (REEs)***

Mineral extraction has emerged as one of the most anticipated industries in the evolving Arctic, as large deposits are becoming more accessible as the perennial ice melts due to climate change. It is one of the oldest industries in the High North, with ore-producing mines existing for hundreds of years in northern Scandinavia and gold rushes shaping the North American Arctic at the end of the 19th century. In the present day this incipient resource cornucopia has drawn investments

from state, subnational, and private actors from around the world-system; this potential has even garnered the attention from the wealthiest individuals on the planet, demonstrated by Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates’ backing of an extraction operation in Greenland worth hundreds of millions of dollars and covering an area the size of Luxembourg.<sup>34</sup>

REEs are a group of 15 elements found in a multitude of modern technologies and products ranging from consumer items like cell-phones and computer processors to medical and industrial goods such as MRI contrast agent and the high-powered magnets found in electric-generating windmills. The ‘rare’ in rare earth element is a misnomer, as these elements and the minerals they are found in are among those most common in the Earth’s crust; however, finding them in deposits sufficient for economic exploitation is indeed a rare geological phenomenon. China has held a near-monopoly on REEs since the 1990s, producing 85-95% of the world’s supply, and has had a policy of reduced raw REE export since 2010.<sup>35</sup> REEs are a strategic asset for China and the regulation of their extraction, use, and trade is subject to five-year plans from the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, which are directly approved by the State Council.<sup>36</sup>

31 (Pincus 2019, 5) (Downs 2022)

32 (Ridgewell 2022)

33 (Iden 2022)

34 (Bluejay Mining PLC 2022) (Bykova 2022)

35 (Van Gosen et al. 2014)

36 (Andersson, Zeuthen, and Kalvig 2021, 6-7)

In recent years Beijing has shown an increasing interest in mineral extraction in the Arctic to diversify its supply of REEs and to maintain its near-monopoly on value chains. It is currently invested in six Arctic REE projects in an advanced stage of development: one in Alaska, three in Northern Canada, and two in Greenland; the latter two projects in Greenland are the focus of this section due to their disproportionately higher geopolitical impact than those in Alaska or Canada.<sup>37</sup>

Greenland achieved self-government in 2009 and maintains a high degree of autonomy within the Kingdom of Denmark on all matters save foreign relations and security. Since then, the public discourse on full independence from Denmark has been ongoing; however, a significant roadblock is the island's dependence on subsidies from Copenhagen. An annual 'block grant' from the Danish government of roughly 3.9 billion DKK (\$614 million USD) makes up nearly half of the Greenlandic public budget, which runs the infrastructure, schools, and other public services of the island's 56,000 inhabitants.<sup>38</sup> For independence-minded Greenlandic politicians the necessity to wean the island from Danish subsidies is an existential task, which could be possible with recent discoveries of REE deposits emerging from ice-lock and known deposit sites becoming increasingly accessible for extraction.<sup>39</sup>

China is looking not only to secure REE supplies but also to gain influence in the region. The country has increasingly invested in Greenlandic projects through SOEs and poised itself as a potential benefactor and ally to an independent Greenland.<sup>40</sup> However, similarly to hydrocarbon extraction, mineral extraction in the Arctic is a technologically and financially intensive task due to the local climate and the remote location of extraction sites. China's two REE projects in Greenland, Kanefjeld and Kringlerne (also known as Tanbreez), located in the far south of the island, are speculated to have some of the largest deposits of REEs in the world, though the profitability of these mines has yet to be proven and are vulnerable to market fluctuations as well as increased attempts by other global actors such as the US, EU, and Australia to wrest the REE monopoly from China.<sup>41</sup>

There is also the risk of public and political opinion in Greenland turning against the mines, though not necessarily for reasons of international intrigue. REE extraction generates large amounts of waste during the initial crushing and refining processes, and in the case of the Kvanefjeld mine this waste would have radioactive properties tied to local deposits of uranium found in the same ore as the REEs.<sup>42</sup> Plans to store the waste in a nearby lake caused public outrage and sparked parliamentary elections in 2021

37 (Andersson, Zeuthen, and Kalvig 2021, 5,9)

38 (International Trade Administration 2021)

39 (Conley and Rahbek-Clemmensen 2018)

40 (Jiang 2018) (Wishnick 2017, 47-49)

41 (Kalvig and Lucht 2021)

42 (Gronholt-Pedersen and Onstad 2021)



which saw the left-wing opposition party Inuit Aaqatigiit come to power, a party which is publicly against the mining project and has vowed to block further development of the project. The company Greenland Minerals and Energy, which heads the project and whose largest investor is Shenghe Resources, a majority state-owned Chinese company, has entered into negotiations with the new Greenlandic government in an attempt to save the project, which could collapse should proposed legislation pass through the Greenlandic parliament. This legislation would ban mining exploration of deposits with uranium concentrations higher than 100 parts per million, which is labeled as 'very low-grade' by the World Nuclear Association.<sup>43</sup>

Despite the present lack of profitability of these REE ventures and their vulnerability to the changing winds of Greenlandic public opinion, Chinese investments in Greenland should be viewed not only through an economic lens. The island is strategically positioned in the Arctic for shipping and scientific research (detailed in the following sections), as well as for military purposes, and could act as a foothold for China in the Arctic in the coming decades. This is of course tentative based on China's relations with Denmark, but also possibly a future independent Greenland. China has also looked to divest from 'conflict minerals' sourced from less-than-reputable suppliers in the global south, which, though financially inexpensive, have a steep cost in its international prestige.

43 (Jiang 2021, 23-27)

Sourcing REEs in Greenland could be an alternative to conflict minerals as the island does not have the litany of societal and economic problems associated with mineral extraction in the global south. However, the steep start-up costs to running these mines and their aforementioned questionable profitability forecasts could leave this alternative shelved for the time being.<sup>44</sup>

### Arctic Shipping

Shipping in the High North has long been a dream tarnished by the harsh realities of an ice-locked sea. Many distinguished exploration expeditions such as the Hudson voyages (1609-11) and the Russian Great Northern Expedition (1733-43) aspired to and failed to find navigable sea routes that would facilitate travel between Europe, Asia, and the North American east coast. With the onset of global climate change, the ice-pack, which for the breadth of human history was considered permanent, has rapidly shrunk, and in many areas become seasonal.<sup>45</sup> This has created a growing shipping season in the Arctic, which permits east-west travel along the top of the planet following emerging sea routes, which could save weeks of shipping time and hundreds of thousands of dollars in operating costs per transit— a potential boon for a global economy hinged on just-in-time (JIT) logistics.

44 (Bhumann 2018)

45 (National Snow & Ice Data Center 2022)

China is an international shipping Goliath, controlling the second largest global commercial fleet and hosting seven of the world's ten busiest ports on its coast. Additionally, China holds ownership of over 100 ports across 63 different countries and is speculated to control nearly 10% of Europe's port capacity.<sup>46</sup> Shipping is an integral part of BRI and has played a key role in Beijing's economic planning domestically and internationally. China's massive manufacturing sector relies on JIT logistics not only to supply factories with raw materials and resources, but also to ensure the timely shipping of finished goods to global markets. Haunting China's JIT stability are two geopolitical issues: piracy, most prevalent in the Gulf of Aden, and the number of choke points Chinese ships destined for European ports must pass through, principally the Strait of Malacca.<sup>47</sup>

The evolving Arctic has revealed three Arctic sea routes: the Northern Sea Route (NSR), which hugs the Russian coast connecting East Asia and Europe, the Northwest Passage (NWP), which snakes through the Canadian Archipelago and exits near the southern tip of Greenland, and the Transpolar Sea Route (TSR), which crosses the North Pole from the Bering Strait to the North Sea. Presently, the TSR's shipping season remains short, erratic, and unsuitable for economic exploitation in the short term until climate change in the Arctic becomes more pronounced, thus

making the route more navigable with 'ice-free' summers,<sup>48</sup> speculated to begin in the early 2030s.<sup>49</sup> Meanwhile, the NWP remains underdeveloped by its custodial power, Canada, and is comparatively time-consuming to navigate compared to the NSR and TSR, thus lowering its economic utility. Therefore, only the NSR remains relatively feasible for China, whose primary shipping destinations via Arctic routes are located in Europe.<sup>50</sup> The focus for the remainder of this section therefore will be China's present and future involvement in Arctic shipping by way of the NSR.

As with hydrocarbon extraction, China's use of the NSR is intertwined with its relationship with Russia, which is an active, protective steward of the emerging sea route. The NSR is a 40% shorter journey to European markets than the Suez Canal Route and bypasses the aforementioned hazards of Malacca and the Gulf of Aden, offering China an alternative trade route which is not only time-saving, but also saves in fuel, personnel, and insurance costs.<sup>51</sup> Those benefits, however, are mitigated by several tempering factors which lower Chinese enthusiasm for the NSR compared to traditional shipping routes, key of which are: shipping season length and Arctic climate, Russian stewardship, and emerging land-based alternatives.

46 (Rochat and Strangio 2021)

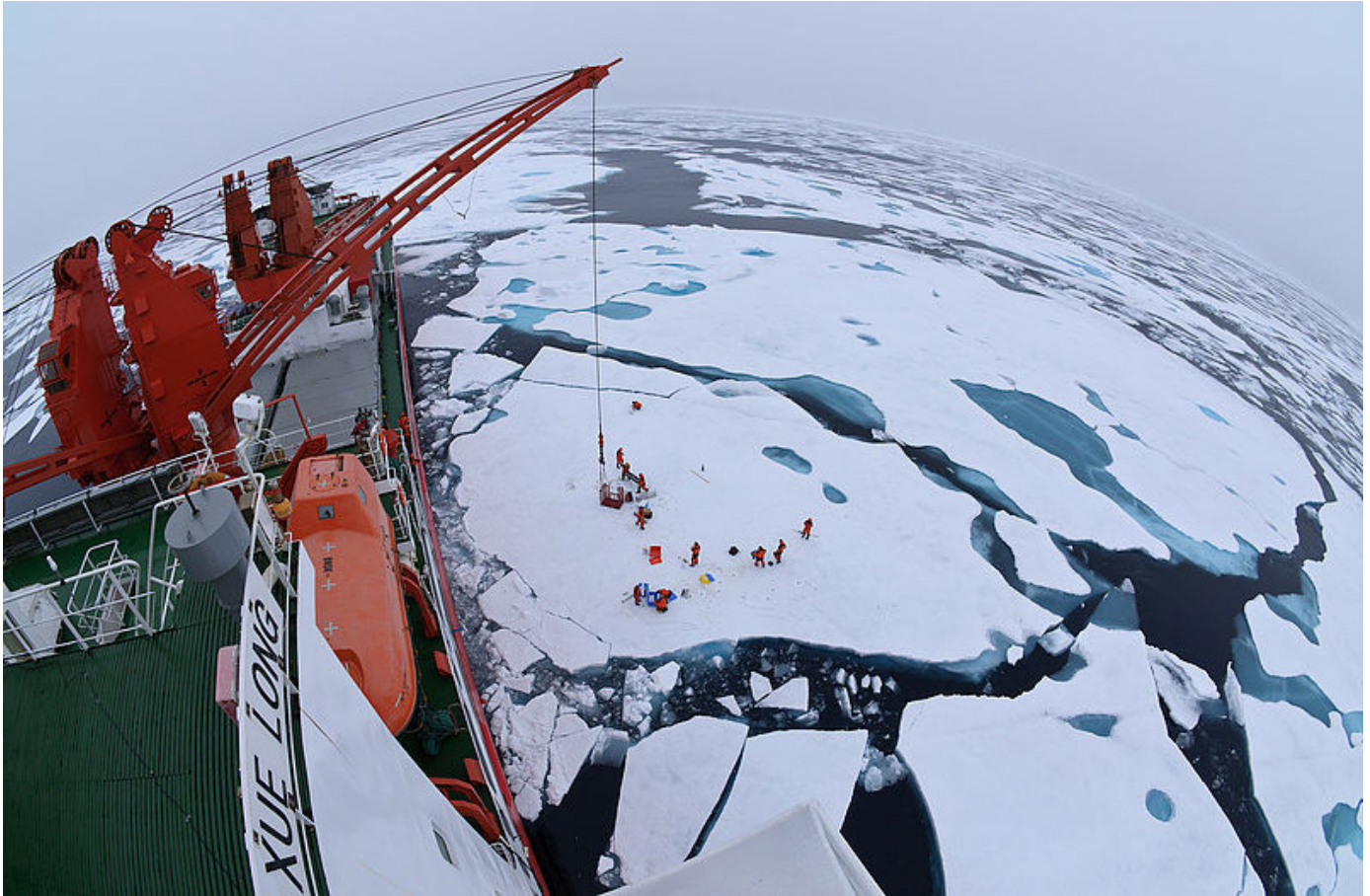
47 (Kobzeva 2020, 341)

48 Ice-free in this case meaning sea ice concentrations low enough not to present a navigation hazard

49 (Aksenov et al. 2017, 307-308)

50 (Melia, Haines, and Hawkins 2016, 9725-9727)

51 (Zheng et al. 2019, 34)



*The XueLong is a Chinese icebreaking research vessel which conducts lengthy expeditions to both the Arctic and Antarctic.*

Beginning with the NSR's shipping season, which is directly correlated with the Arctic climate, the route's operability, though growing, still remains erratic and unpredictable. Late/early season cold snaps and changes in prevailing winds can form or shift ice floes into sea lanes, which can trap ships that do not have ice-breaking capabilities or are not escorted by dedicated icebreakers. Such a case occurred in November 2021 at the end of the shipping season when 24 ships were stranded along the NSR for nearly a month as they waited for assistance from a single nuclear icebreaker from the Russian

NSR administration (NSRA).<sup>52</sup> Month-long disruptions in transit are detrimental to JIT economics and shipping companies wary of planning routes which could freeze (literally and figuratively) overnight; guaranteeing avoidance of such phenomena further shrinks the shipping season by roughly one month, cumulatively making the utility of the NSR that much less. Ice-classed ships which could weather floes or have ice-breaking capabilities are significant investments for shipping companies, possibly unwilling to

52 (Humpert 2021)

take on such costs for the comparatively modest savings that can come from Arctic shipping. Besides, ice-classed ships sail at slower speeds and burn more fuel than ships designed for temperate waters, further mitigating the benefits of the NSR for Chinese shipping companies.<sup>53</sup>

Next, the NSRA's stewardship over the length of the NSR could stifle China's use of the NSR in the short to mid-term future. Russia does not view the NSR as an international waterway, but rather as a route within internal waters, which, along with its hydrocarbon reserves, will reignite the Russian economy for the 21st century. Russia maintains strict, protectionist control over the NSR requiring pre-registration for transit, the contracting of Russian ice-breakers, as well as the contracting of Russian ship pilots along the route.<sup>54</sup> In addition to these requirements, many key economic activities, such as transporting hydrocarbons and coal, have been allotted exclusively to Russian-flagged vessels.<sup>55</sup> For China, which prefers to maintain as many mechanics of economic activity in-house as possible, these requirements and restrictions sour advantages that the NSR might bring as, again similar to hydrocarbon extraction, China maintains a cautious suspicion of opaque Russian regulatory and government organizations such as the NSRA.<sup>56</sup>

Finally, emerging land-based alternatives evolving out of BRI could limit future Chinese interest in the NSR, namely rail transportation. In a competitive scenario-based analysis between Arctic shipping, the Suez Canal route, and the China-Europe railway, Zheng et. al. (2020) found the NSR to be non-competitive with the rail alternatives that will become available as BRI expands throughout the decade and beyond.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, investments in well-established technologies such as rail transportation, which offer not only more reliability than climate-sensitive Arctic shipping but also lower overall costs and flexibility, are likely to be easier sells than the still unproven value in committing the necessary resources to transit shipping along the NSR.

These hurdles should not be seen as insurmountable, nor do they deter Chinese interest in shipping along the NSR; however, they do present realities which muffle ambition for the near future. Meanwhile, NSR partnership projects between Russian and Chinese entities such as *Arctic Maritime Transport*, a partnership between Novatek, Sovcomflot, and COSCO specializing in LNG transportation, show possible niche investments from China in Arctic shipping which could prove to be profitable as the route becomes more developed.<sup>58</sup>

53 (Congressional Research Service 2021, 55-56)

54 (DeGeorge 2019)

55 (Moe 2020, 212-213)

56 (Kobzeva 2020 (Moe 2020, 224)

57 (Zheng et al. 2019, 43)

58 (Moe 2020, 217)

### Scientific Research

Scientific pursuits in the Arctic are perhaps Beijing's most touted contribution to the region and are one of its primary means of engaging with Arctic actors. As China first began to look north in the 1990s, its motivations were centered on climate research and understanding how meteorological shifts in the Arctic could impact weather systems within China in the near future. In the 21st century these endeavors have become multi-faceted, focusing not only on climate, but also on the flora and fauna of the Arctic, atmospheric phenomena such as the aurora borealis, geology, and outer space research.

China maintains active participation in a number of track 1 (government to government) and track 2 (NGO, academia, etc.) Arctic research organizations and initiatives, which furthers not only its scientific goals, but also provides formal venues where China is able to present itself as a cooperative, *Arctic* actor. These multilateral organizations, such as the International Arctic Science Committee, the Pacific Forum on Polar Sciences, and the China-Nordic Arctic Research Center, offer Beijing opportunities to engage with Arctic states in a non-political setting and create working relationships which, when matured, can act as catalysts for future cooperation in the business or policy sphere.<sup>59</sup> Unlike diplomats and civil servants, who serve in multiple postings for at times as briefly as one to two years throughout their careers, scientists will very often remain at the same faculty

or research institution for decades, further increasing their value as tools of public diplomacy as their influence and reputations compound over time.<sup>60</sup>

These efforts of scientific public diplomacy have been successful with many Arctic actors, especially those in Scandinavia, where China now runs three research stations: Yellow River Station (Norway, Svalbard), the China-Iceland Arctic Science Observatory (Kárhóll, Iceland), and the China Remote Sensing Satellite North Polar Ground Station (Kiruna, Sweden).<sup>61</sup> One planned research station in Finland, however, never came to light despite years of negotiations and planning due to security concerns from the Finnish military, a not unheard-of worry from defense forces that Chinese research stations could be dual-use intelligence gathering installations.<sup>62</sup>

In the coming years, as climate change becomes more pronounced and effective research becomes paramount, China is likely to capitalize on its now decades-long Arctic science programs and present itself as an attractive collaborative partner for both Arctic states and non-Arctic states. This 'back door' to recognition and involvement in the High North highlights Beijing's increasing finesse in public diplomacy, especially around sensitive topics regarding regions which traditionally have seen little or no Chinese involvement.

59 (Bowman and Xu 2020, 11-13)

60 (Su and Mayer 2018, 25-26)

61 (Kopra 2020)

62 (YLE 2021)

Additionally, the technical experience they gain during their extended periods above the Arctic Circle provides an excellent opportunity to shed the necessity of reliance on others for future Arctic endeavors. However, as has been seen in the fallout from Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the boycotting of many Russian-hosted events in the field of Arctic research, participation in international scientific collaboration can be stifled, or outright halted, due to state-level actions in geopolitics.<sup>63</sup> China's involvement in a number of international flashpoints, such as the South China Sea dispute and its decades of cross-strait tensions with Taiwan, could present significant roadblocks to its public diplomacy ambitions in Arctic science, should these flashpoints ignite.

### International Prestige

Despite China's meteoric rise to the heights of many traditional metrics of state power since the beginning of the 21st century, such as GDP, military size, and scientific output, its permanent representation on the UN security council, and its significant clout in international relations, China is still frequently referred to as a 'rising' or 'aspiring' power in the media and in academic literature, diminishing what is empirically a leading state in the world system. China, of course, does not refer to itself as 'rising' or 'aspiring', but rather views itself as already having achieved a status of equality among leading states. This highlights a facet of international dynamics where

China's deep pockets and influence-garnering can only go so far: making itself prestigious on the international stage and in the minds of other leading states.

In his book *War and Change in World Politics*, Robert Gilpin defines prestige as "the perceptions of other states with respect to a state's capacities and its ability and willingness to exercise its power," further elaborating that "Prestige, rather than power, is the everyday currency of international relations, much as authority is the central ordering feature of domestic society."<sup>64</sup> States with high prestige among their peers are afforded a respect or even deference in international affairs, which separates 'great' powers from the wider global community. Great powers use this prestige as a tool of soft power to influence others with the weight of their reputation substituting the weight (and cost) of hard power options. China is cognizant of its prestige deficiency; its economic immensity, growing power projection, and advancing technological capacity have indeed bestowed significant international renown; however, its authoritarian governance, coercive diplomacy, internal repression of minorities, and mercantilist business practices have fomented more animus than esteem. Addressing this issue, Xi Jinping announced in 2014: "We should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's messages to the world."<sup>65</sup>

63 (Dickie and Afanasieva 2022)

64 (Gilpin 1981, 31)

65 (Shambaugh 2015, 99)

The Arctic presents China with an opportunity to showcase itself in an emerging region as a leader on equal footing with other great powers, not only in regards to its political stature, but also to highlight its growth technologically and diplomatically.<sup>66</sup> This is in line with China's 'striving for achievement' (奋发有为) international strategy, which was adopted by the CCP in 2013, emphasizing foreign policy serving the needs of national rejuvenation and shaping external affairs in a favorable direction.<sup>67</sup> Important within this strategy as well is consolidating a 'friendly neighborhood' for China to thrive in; considering that China sees itself a near-Arctic state, it can be assumed that the Arctic will be included in its neighborhood strategizing in the near and mid-term future. In 2019 the 'Arctic Circle China Forum' was hosted in Shanghai with more than 500 participants from 30 countries and was the largest event ever held in China with an exclusively Arctic focus. The fact that many of the same North American and European ministers, who had just attended the Arctic Council Ministerial meeting in Finland, arrived in Shanghai directly following the former's adjourning shows that China's prestige pursuits might be bearing fruit.<sup>68</sup>

This particular driver of Chinese involvement in the Arctic synergizes with its aforementioned scientific pursuits. As China is unable to participate in Arctic governance outside of

its limited role as a permanent observer at the Arctic Council and is constrained economically in the theater by geographic realities and the sovereignty of other states, science remains an avenue for gaining prestige not only in the Arctic, but internationally as well.<sup>69</sup> China intends to develop its scientific and technological capabilities over the course of the decade to the point where it no longer needs to rely on foreign technology for polar activities; should this come to fruition, it will allow China not only to stand independently from Arctic states in its ambitions, but also to use this indigenous technology to offer Arctic access (ice breakers, extraction equipment, etc.) to states outside of the traditional dynamic set forth by Arctic states.<sup>70</sup>

### China's Arctic Future - Conclusion

China's role in the future of the Arctic is as inevitable as the disappearance of polar sea ice. Beijing will seek to expand its influence politically, economically, and scientifically in the High North over the next decade, presenting itself, and possibly becoming, an Arctic actor with sufficient prestige in the theater to be respected and deferred to similarly to Arctic states. Over the next decade many of the Arctic projects and initiatives China has begun or involved itself in over the previous decade will have matured and solidified its legitimacy in the region.

66 (Kopra 2018, 133, 135)

67 (Yan 2014, 165-166)

68 (Nilsen 2019)

69 (Kossa 2019, 22-23)

70 (Nikulin 2020, 5-8)

China's capacity to implement massive economic resources in long-term projects is a key tool for this geopolitical endeavor. Its investments and partnership with Russia in hydrocarbon extraction, exploratory mineral extraction projects in Greenland, and the establishment of multiple research stations across the Arctic, are providing Beijing with the know-how to develop its own Arctic capacities and reduce its dependence on others to achieve its goals. By 2030 when ice-free summers are projected to begin, China will have the means to produce its own ice-class cargo vessels to move goods, and most importantly resources, along the NSR and TSR to its ports and has already begun constructing the nuclear powered ice-breakers which will escort them along the route.<sup>71</sup> These ships will also carry Chinese-made extraction equipment and crews to remote mines and hydrocarbon wells across the Arctic, potentially allowing for the entire resource chain 'from ground to factory' to be executed entirely in-house for China, a significant achievement which will further diversify its resource and energy portfolio providing both economic and security benefits. China's Arctic research meanwhile will have established and ingrained itself within the Arctic science community on-par with many Arctic states. Beijing will use this platform to both bolster its image as an Arctic actor among Arctic states as well as to present itself as a gateway and model for other aspiring 'near-Arctic states,' boosting its international prestige as an enviable actor with significant reach across the world-system.

71 (Zhen 2021)

These are not guarantees, however. The Arctic states are well aware of China's intentions in the High North and are divided as a group and internally as to how to approach this newcomer to what has historically been an exclusive area of state participation. A cautious approval and chilly reception are likely to continue throughout the decade, especially as the NATO Arctic states (which soon may include Sweden and Finland) coalesce as a bloc in the region and are likely to tie extra-regional affairs involving China, such as Taiwan and the South China Sea, to their relations with China in the Arctic in a similar fashion to their boycotting cooperation with Russia in many Arctic forums after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.<sup>72</sup> China's closest ally in the region, Russia, can also be expected to keep Beijing at arms-length for the foreseeable future, apprehensive of the prospect of an economic and political giant gaining a potentially controlling sway in an area of critical economic and strategic importance for its national prosperity. This could change considering the fallout of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which is likely disastrously to affect its economic futures for the next decade. China could remain the only international actor of significance willing to invest in projects in the Russian Arctic; should this be the case, China may push Moscow for concessions in the Arctic, which it will have no other choice than to accept in light of its own economic restraints.

72 (DeGeorge 2022)



The evolving Arctic presents many opportunities for China in the 21st century which would not have been possible without climate change and China's own rise to international prominence. The next decade will determine if China can secure a seat at the table of Arctic leaders and hinges on its ability to maneuver carefully in a sensitive and exclusive geopolitical region.

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