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**POSTCOLONIAL
PERSPECTIVES ON
THE EUROPEAN
HIGH NORTH**

Unscrambling the Arctic

**Edited by
Graham Huggan and
Lars Jensen**



Postcolonial Perspectives on the European High North

Graham Huggan • Lars Jensen
Editors

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European High
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Unscrambling the Arctic

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Introduction: Unscrambling the Arctic

Graham Huggan

Abstract While “scramble” is a useful term to describe the ravaging effects of contemporary neoliberal, political, and economic agendas on a rapidly changing Arctic, it is also reductive, overlooking the fact that the Arctic region—one of the most geographically and culturally diverse on the planet—is the uneven product of multiple, often highly disparate, colonial pasts. This chapter situates the contemporary European Arctic in the context of various scrambles for resources across the circumpolar High North and their reworking of colonial relations. However, it also argues the need for an “unscrambling” of the region and an appropriately critical re-reading of the discourses of alarmism and opportunism that underlie popular, often media-driven configurations of the “New North.”

Keywords Arctic • Colonialism • Geopolitics • New North • Reindigenisation

The scramble for the Arctic will not be settled by a single act.
Charles Emmerson, *The Future History of the Arctic*

G. Huggan (✉)
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unscramble *v.t.* **1.** Reverse the process of scrambling. **2.** Put into or restore to order; make sense of, render intelligible (anything muddled or intricate); disentangle (*lit. & fig.*); separate into constituent parts; *spec.* restore (a scrambled signal), interpret (a scrambled message).

Shorter Oxford English Dictionary

It is not easy to make love in a cold climate when you have no money.

George Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*

INTRODUCTION: A TALE OF TWO ISLANDS

Consider two isolated islands, one little more than a speck, separated by thousands of miles of sparsely inhabited space in the High Arctic. The smaller of the two, Hans Island, can be found almost exactly halfway across the Nares Strait that divides Greenland from Ellesmere Island; the larger, Wrangel Island, lies 85 miles north of the Russian mainland, surrounded by a shifting layer of seaice that cuts it off from the Siberian coast.¹ Neither is a prepossessing place: Hans Island, viewed from above, has all the charm and consistency of a petrified cowpat, while Wrangel Island—an appropriate name, as will soon become apparent—can often barely be seen at all, being subject for much of the year to violent storms and blanketing fog.

Still, the two islands have both assumed a historical and political importance that transcends their uninspiring physical geography. Wrangel Island, Russian territory today, is most readily associated with the controversial twentieth-century Canadian polar explorer Vilhjálmur Stefánsson, whose characteristically vainglorious attempts to colonise the island would eventually propel it into “a diplomatic tug of war” involving Russia, Canada, Great Britain, and the USA.² Most readily associated outside Russia that is: for Stefánsson’s would-be colonists, incorporating Americans as well as Canadians, several of whom would lose their lives as a result of his three catastrophically misguided colonisation experiments, went unrecognised by Russia, which promptly pronounced them trespassers, confiscated their property, and repeatedly—definitively—declared the island to be Soviet domain.³ Then as now, Russians connected Wrangel Island to one of their own, the no less self-aggrandising nineteenth-century explorer Ferdinand von Wrangel (alternatively transliterated as “Wrangell”). Wrangel is often credited with having discovered the island, though his own expeditions in the area had led him no further than deducing its existence. Probably

he is better known today for his expansionist exploits on behalf of the Russian-American company (RAC) in Alaska prior to its 1867 sale—which he himself bitterly contested—to the USA.⁴

As the American historian Melody Webb asserts, it would be difficult to find a more implausible object of imperial rivalry—in the Arctic or elsewhere—than the now largely forgotten Wrangel Island. Yet for a few decades in the early part of the twentieth century it was subject to competing claims of sovereignty and an unfortunate sequence of at best temporarily successful, at worst hopelessly hare-brained colonisation schemes.⁵ Webb concludes that the fulsome tributes given to Stefánsson on returning to Canada from his first major Arctic expedition in 1913 “obscured the poor planning, mismanagement, egotism, and death that marked the enterprise”⁶—a tragicomic scenario all too familiar to chroniclers and readers of polar exploration, north and south alike (McCannon 2012; Moss 2009; Spufford 1996).

Scarcely less edifying, though in their own way just as entertaining, are the multiple stories that surround the still-unresolved sovereignty of Hans Island. Most versions return to 1973, when—in Michael Byers’ suitably breezy account—“Canada and Denmark agreed to divide the ocean floor between Canada and Greenland down the middle, using an equidistance line defined by 127 turning points.”⁷ The issue of where Hans Island fell along this line was notionally cleared up by fixing the boundary at the low-water mark on one side of the island and then continuing it from its corresponding mark on the other, only for subsequent calculations to reveal that the island was slightly closer to Greenland than Canada.⁸

Vigorous Danish claims to the island ensued, accompanied by an alternating pattern of increasingly bizarre diplomatic stand-offs. The Danes argued that Hans Island had been used for centuries by Greenland Inuit as an integral part of their ancestral hunting grounds and was therefore “theirs” (i.e., the Danes’) as a result of continuous use and occupation. This does not appear to be a particularly convincing argument insofar as the same Inuit would frequently travel across to Ellesmere Island, now generally accepted as falling under Canadian sovereign control.⁹ Canada’s territorial claim, meanwhile, revolved around the original transfer of the North American Arctic Archipelago (which excluded Greenland) from Britain in 1880; it also shakily cited “use and occupation” insofar as Canadian scientists had deployed the island as a research station, if only for a brief period during the Second World War.¹⁰

Tempers frayed after it was discovered that a Canadian oil company had been using the island to sound out the possibility of setting up drilling rigs

in the area.¹¹ “Threatening” appearances were staged involving Danish military jets, backed up by a semi-regular series of officially attended flag plantings. Not to be outdone, the Canadian government sent jet fighters of its own, while the rhetoric of Danish interference (“Viking hordes,” etc.) was crudely ratcheted up in the Canadian national press, which conflated the Hans Island dispute—a minor maritime border controversy—with larger Arctic sovereignty issues and land-based territorial claims.¹²

Byers suggests that one way of resolving the dispute might be to declare Hans Island a condominium, with Canada and Denmark sharing sovereignty over it.¹³ A more recent, also more interesting, suggestion of Byers’ is that should the Greenland Inuit pursue native title, this would effectively invalidate both sets of national claims, operating on the principle that since the island has never been formally colonised, it is they, the Inuit, who “retain pre-existing, pre-colonial rights.”¹⁴ This conundrum raises larger questions about what constitutes colonialism in the Arctic. It seems pointless to dispute that the Arctic—however defined—has not been, and to some extent still is, a colonised region, but it is equally obvious that not all areas of the Arctic have been formally colonised, and that those which have, have not been colonised *in the same way*.

A comparison between Wrangel Island and Hans Island is instructive in this context. The recent history of Wrangel Island would certainly fit most current definitions of colonialism, notably James Mahoney’s to the effect that “in modern world history, colonialism is marked by a state’s successful claim to sovereignty over a foreign land.”¹⁵ Much more tenuous, however, are the legal criteria for sovereignty, for example, those founded on “use and occupation,” and their instrumentality as a basis for colonisation. Even the most systematic accounts of colonialism, such as Jürgen Osterhammel’s, have difficulty forging precise links between colonialism and sovereignty and between both of these and occupation. These accounts prefer to distinguish broadly between *types* of colony (“settlement colonies,” “exploitation colonies,” etc.) that require a greater or lesser colonial presence; and between *colonialism* as a system of domination, *colonisation* as a process of territorial acquisition, and *colony* as a particular kind of sociopolitical formation, usually if not always subject to metropolitan control.¹⁶

As Osterhammel admits, colonialism can exist without the formal existence of colonies, just as colonies can exist without the full apparatus of colonialism, but exceptions of these kinds tend to complicate rather than confirm the rule.¹⁷ Similarly, colonisation can take place without the for-

mal process of colony building, while some colony building does not rely on colonisation, but on other more obviously violent forms of incursion that are based “on the sword rather than the [plough].”¹⁸ Colonisation, indeed, is a singularly amorphous entity despite the routine brutalities it engenders, just as “the multiformity of colonial situations continues to confound efforts to define colonialism [itself].”¹⁹

Where does Hans Island fit into this template? Clearly the island has not been *colonised* in any formal sense, nor has any colonial presence, whether temporary or lasting, been established there. Yet it has still arguably been subject to *colonialism*: to sovereignty struggles in which rival powers look to benefit strategically—politically and, at least indirectly, economically—from the object of their claims. Hans Island, to put this in a different way, has been an object of disproportionate concern to people who have no intention of ever living there. In this respect, it is a microcosm of one particular version of the High Arctic, which revolves around *geopolitical advantage* rather than *cultural domination*. The two are inextricably connected, however, with both forming part of that hierarchical system of real and imaginary relations—one important historical manifestation of which is colonialism—that sustains all kinds of dominating activities in the nominally postcolonial era of today.^{20,21}

For some time now, geopolitics has been the predominant lens through which an ongoing history of colonial relations has been looked at in the Arctic, an area which, seen in broad geopolitical terms, remains one of the most consistently exploited on Earth. At one level, it makes perfect sense to see the Arctic this way insofar as it constitutes a “region of peripheries [that] comprises more or less remote portions of seven countries: Canada, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States.”²² “The Arctic” is generally defined from without; indeed, much like “Asia” the term may make little sense to those who actually live there other than as a strategic means of asserting regional solidarity or leveraging central government support (Huggan 2015). The language of geopolitics constructs the Arctic as an object of national and international concern, often centring on global security issues. It therefore seems worth asking to what extent geopolitics contributes to the colonial scenarios—both past and present—it dissects, even if more recent, critically reflexive geopolitical perspectives on the Arctic have shifted to considering the security, environmental and otherwise, of Arctic peoples themselves.

The work of the Cambridge-based polar researchers Michael Bravo and Gareth Rees is exemplary for this particular kind of critical geopoly-