“A Sense of Seal” in Greenland: Kalaallit Seal Pluralities and Anti-Sealing Contentions
« Donner un sens au phoque » au Groenland : Pluralités des phoques kalaallit et contestations anti-chasse au phoque

Naja Dyrendom Graugaard

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Article abstract
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ABSTRACT
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KEYWORDS
Inuit knowledge, Kalaallit seal hunting, human–animal relations, EU seal regime, colonial narratives, decolonizing methodologies

RÉSUMÉ
« Donner un sens au phoque » au Groenland: Pluralités des phoques kalaallit et contestations anti-chasse au phoque

Cet article remet en question les termes conceptuels selon lesquels les pratiques de chasse inuit sont jugées acceptables dans les régimes internationaux actuels de chasse au phoque. Plus précisément, l’article examine la manière dont les relations entre les Kalaallit et les phoques au Groenland déstabilisent les régimes euro-américains de chasse au phoque. Il soutient que les récits actuels de la chasse au phoque inuit en tant que pratique « durable et de subsistance » (par exemple, la Commission européenne 2016) risquent de coopter les visions du monde autochtones pour les adapter aux interprétations occidentales. Si les récits de durabilité et de subsistance peuvent apaiser les sentiments européens anti-chasse aux phoques, ils peuvent ne pas résonner avec les connaissances et les pratiques...
inuit. En s’appuyant sur des entretiens menés sur le terrain avec des chasseurs au Groenland, cet article suggère que les manières Kalaallit de sentir, de connaître et de s’engager avec les phoques reflètent des relations réciproques, ainsi que des relations complexes, entre l’homme et l’animal. En utilisant le cadre analytique des « pluralités de poissons » de l’universitaire métisse/otipemisiw Zoe Todd (2014), l’article examine la façon dont les phoques peuvent exister au Groenland dans une « pluralité de manières » qui vont au-delà d’une simple utilisation d’une ressource naturelle basée sur les besoins.

**MOTS-CLÉS**
Savoirs inuit, chasse aux phoques des Kalaallit, relations homme-animal, régime européen des phoques, récits coloniaux, méthodologies de décolonisation

With the white-coated seal calf as a central emblem for animal rights groups, the call to “save the seals” has won global appeal since the beginning of the anti-sealing movement in the 1960s and 1970s. National governments and the European Union (EU) have followed suit and imposed major import bans on sealskin products. As more industrialized sealing activities are the primary targets of anti-sealing campaigns, the devastating effects of anti-sealing sentiments to Arctic hunting economies have often been overlooked (Wenzel 1991, 1996). In the event of an additional EU ban on all seal products in 2009, Inuit spokespeople and organizations called attention to the specificities of Inuit hunting practices and the social, economic, and cultural consequences of international sealskin trade bans in Arctic communities (Arnaquq-Baril 2016; Inuit Sila 2013; ICC, n.d.). In response, the EU and animal welfare organizations have, exceptionally, deemed Inuit sealing morally and legally acceptable by stressing its role as a traditional, subsistence practice (Canadian Press 2014; European Commission 2016; Humane Society 2017; IFAW 2017). While these exceptions have shown to have a very limited effect in supporting international sales in Inuit sealskins (Government of Greenland 2015; ICC Canada 2015), they have also brought forth definitions of Inuit seal hunting that are conditioned by the terms and standards of Euro-American animal welfare. Here, ambiguous concepts of “tradition,” “subsistence,” and “sustainability” have become key “criteria” especially, and paradoxically, for justifying the commercial aspect of sealskin trade in Inuit communities (European Commission 2016; European Union 2015). The debates on Inuit seal hunting are thus often

1. Examples of such bans include the American import ban on seal products (1972), the European ban on whitecoats (1983), and national bans on seal products in the Netherlands and Switzerland.
limited to disputing the extent to which it is sustainable or not, humane or inhumane, subsistence-based or commercial, traditional or “too modern.”

However, the dissonance between Eurocentric concepts and Inuit ways of relating to seals has largely been left unchallenged in the international sealing dispute. The conceptual terms upon which Inuit hunting practices are “accepted”—such as sustainability, subsistence, and tradition—risk co-opting Indigenous worldviews to suit Western interpretations. Here, Inuit sealing is quickly reduced to simplified narratives that may soothe European anti-sealing sentiments but may not resonate with Inuit knowledges and practices. Meanwhile, the external political imposition of definitions and sanctions on Indigenous ways of life reflect colonial Inuit–Qallunaat relations (Graugaard 2019). 2 Attentive to this problematic, this article examines how Inuit engagements with seals unsettle the criteria by which European and American organizations, governments, and institutions seek to validate and manage seal hunting in the Arctic. In this article, I therefore engage Inuit knowledges on human–seal relations and seal hunting as they are narrated and practiced by Kalaallit (Greenlandic Inuit) hunters. Drawing on fieldwork in western Greenland, I suggest that the popular and political framings of “acceptable” Inuit seal hunting center Western conceptualizations of human–seal relationships, but they disregard specific and place-based Indigenous relations with seals. Whereas dominant narratives often relate Inuit seal hunting with a simple needs-based use of a natural resource, Kalaallit ways of knowing and relating to seals reflect reciprocal, as well as complex, human–animal relations. Indeed, seals exist in Greenland in a “plurality of ways” (Todd 2014, 218). Thus, narrating seal hunting in terms of a traditional, subsistence practice not only appears reductive and ill-fit, but also risks re-inscribing invalidation and inferiority of non-Qallunaat epistemes within existing knowledge and political structures (Kuokkanen 2007). This article, therefore, pays attention to the ways in which the sea- and land-based engagements of those who hunt, eat, and process seal in Greenland may formulate narratives “grounded elsewhere” (Cameron 2015, 19) than in the logics of the existing “seal regime” (European Commission 2016).

In this article, I have found inspiration in Métis/otipemisiw scholar Zoe Todd’s (2014) approach to researching Paulatuuqmiut engagements with fish, and I employ a similar framework. In the first section, I situate my fieldwork and relay my methodological considerations. Second, I discuss some of the different theories of seal currently forwarded in the sealing dispute, and how “particular local formulations” (Cruikshank 1998, 69) and “seal pluralities” (Todd 2014, 219) inform the theoretical framework of the

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2. Qallunaat is the (plural) term for white foreigners, including Danes, in Kalaallisut and other Inuit languages.
The following sections discuss approaches to *puisit* (seals) and hunting *puisit*, as they are narrated and engaged in the lives of Kalaallit hunters. The last two sections of the article discuss the concepts of subsistence and sustainability as sites of contentions in Kalaallit–seal relations. Altogether, the article seeks to provide a reassessment of the conditions and terms of the current sealing dispute, informed by Inuit lives with seals.

**Situating and Locating the Research: Methodological Considerations**

This article is based on eight months of fieldwork on the Greenlandic west coast in 2017. My fieldwork consisted of different research activities, including interviews with full-time and leisure-time hunters, archival research, and visits to organizations, institutions, and companies. It was carried out in Nuuk, Aasiaat, Qasigiannguit, Sisimiut, Arsuk, and Qaqortoq, towns and villages located within a vast area between Disko Bay and Cape Farewell. The specific trail of my travels was primarily based on the locations of my maternal family relations. Therefore, the research stays were often planned together with family members, who were also helpful in setting up interviews. This was an intentional methodological choice: it was a way to challenge the recurrent “hit-and-run” patterns in Arctic research by which external researchers enter and exit Greenlandic communities without correspondence, exchange, or report with locals (Hauptmann 2016). By working through relational networks, I was continuously required to check my researcher accountability as well as the relevance and appropriateness of my work (Graugaard 2020).

In different ways, my methodological approach is attentive to how concepts of data collection and fieldwork echo colonial research practices through which Inuit lives and stories have often been reduced to a mining field of data to be “discovered,” observed, collected, and processed in the name of Arctic research (Graugaard 2021; Krupnik 2016). To counter the risks of reproducing the colonial legacies of participant observation, for example, I employed self-reflexive tools in my fieldwork to reflect on how my own assumptions—including my positional privileges as a mixed Danish-Kalaaleq, Danish-speaking, white-coding researcher—condition the research process, its knowledge productions and representations. Intending to destabilize the researcher/researched dichotomy further, I drew on collaborative methods to align my research agenda with research participants (and associated Kalaallit knowledge holders) through co-creating, sharing, and editing interview questions as well as the results (e.g., this article). Admittedly, this article does not reflect successfully decolonized research encounters but, more so, an ongoing process towards unsettling colonial
knowledge inquisitions on Kalaallit–seal relations (Graugaard 2020, 2021). Here, it is worth mentioning that I do not speak Kalaallisut (West Greenlandic) and many of the interviews were interpreted by a local interpreter. My inability to speak Kalaallisut is a considerable trouble and weakness when working with localized, Kalaallit knowledge systems. Yet, working through translations and “untranslatabilities,” the academic urge for omnipotent knowledge representation has been humbled, and the partiality, particularity, and situatedness of the knowledge productions were accentuated (Cameron 2015; Haraway 1988).

In sum, this methodological approach frames an analytical ethics that intends to bring attention to lived, practiced, and place-based Kalaallit ways to story with seals (Graugaard 2020), while acknowledging that “not all stories are to be told and enacted anywhere” (Kramvig and Flemmen 2018, 80) for the sake of academic analysis. This article thus entails an analytics that refrains from extensive exposure of intimate stories of informants and resists appropriation and making claims on their knowledges. Rather, this analytics intends to acknowledge that they are there and that they, in their presence, suggest other-than-Eurocentric seal narratives and lifeworlds.

**Theories of Seal**

The international sealing dispute has presented various perspectives on human–seal relationships. Anti-sealers (e.g., PETA, IFAW, Humane Society) have claimed that seals are an endangered species and that seals, as sentient beings, have the right to life and to avoid suffering. Marine biologists claim that Arctic seal populations are generally abundant and that the current number of seal catches are even lower than sustainable yield levels (Garde 2013; Rosing-Asvid 2011). Inuit spokespeople state that seals and seal hunting are deeply related to various aspects of Arctic livelihoods and well-being (e.g., Arnaquq-Baril 2016; Inuit Sila 2013; Lynge 1992; Peter et al. 2002). In such ways, the debate on sealing reflects multiple ways of knowing—or theories of—seals that both contrast and relate to each other. It is, however, anti-sealing perspectives that have gained clout in international political approaches to sealing, while the accounts by natural scientists and seal hunters have often been neglected.

At first, anti-sealing activism drew its theoretical inspirations from utilitarian philosophical explorations of animal liberation, which sought to transport individual rights to (sentient) nonhuman creatures. Later, the movement endorsed environmental perspectives of deep ecology, as a critique to the anthropocentrism in the existing animal rights scheme, and sought an environmental ethics built on the terms of nonhuman nature. Paradoxically, deep ecology’s attempt for a non-anthropocentric constituency has also been criticized for continuing to subsume the nonhuman world into
the compass of human being (Wenzel 1991; Whatmore 2002). The struggle to save the “baby seal” and globally condemn seal hunting as “inhumane” has been perceived by Inuit as a particularly Eurocentric version of anthropocentrism in Western animal ethics (CBC News 2017; Lynge 1992; Wenzel 1991). Arguably, these dilemmas in the anti-sealing cause reflect some of the conceptual struggles in contemporary environmental debates that discuss the consequences of differentiating nature from culture and stress the variation of cultural meanings in relation to the environment (Cruikshank 2005). Global discussions about natural resource management are thus increasingly focusing on the importance of incorporating different forms of knowledge, such as local, Indigenous, and users’ knowledges (Roepstorff 2003). Under pressure from Inuit advocates, anti-sealing schemes have similarly acknowledged Inuit sealing as a particular way of life and attempted to incorporate Inuit perspectives on human–seal relationships into their frameworks and policies, which otherwise condemn seal hunting (as is exemplified by the “Inuit Exception,” which I discuss below) (European Union 2015).

However, the call by non-Indigenous actors to include Indigenous knowledges is not always without complications. As Todd (2014) argues, it can be difficult for non-Indigenous actors to understand the full breadth and complexity of Northern peoples’ human–animal relations—and sometimes Indigenous knowledge concepts are massaged to fit the discourses of wildlife management. Paul Nadasdy (2003) furthermore demonstrates that the terms used at the heart of wildlife management debates and environmental conflicts in the Canadian North—such as “land,” “hunting,” “resources”—are fundamentally contested and can mean very different things for the different stakeholders (see Cruikshank 2005, 11; Laugrand and Oosten 2014, 4). In relation to the international sealing dispute, this particular problematic is reflected in the descriptions of Inuit seal hunting that primarily relate to a “subsistence purpose” and by way of being “traditional” (European Commission 2016; European Union 2015). While these terms may be conceptualized differently between the involved actors, they are also primarily located in a Euro-American environmentalist and animal welfare conceptual vocabulary. Hence, Inuit seal hunting is primarily associated with utilitarian procurement of food, and in opposition to the economic interests of commercial sealing. These narratives have in some ways served Inuit counter-responses to anti-sealing sentiments by stressing Inuit seal hunting as a sustainable practice (Graugaard 2019). However, they may simultaneously skew or undermine the cultural- and local-specific complexities in Inuit–seal relationships. Arguably, Inuit seal hunting originates in Indigenous knowledge systems to which concepts of sustainability, for example, do not (easily) translate (Sejersen 2002; Thisted 2019). Roepstorff (2003) thus
underlines that disputes over natural resources conceal not only underlying conceptual differences but also their varying cosmologies.

A range of Arctic anthropological works have investigated human–animal relationships in Inuit cosmologies (e.g., Fienup-Riordan 1990, 1995, 2020; Laugrand and Oosten 2014; Sejersen 2003; Sonne 2017). The changing, political, and particular role of Inuit–seal relationships in colonial Greenland have also received attention in both classical ethnographies (e.g., Rink 1862) and historical analyses (Marquardt 1999a, 1999b; Petterson 2014; Rud 2006; Thomsen 1998). I have argued elsewhere that Danish colonial policies have discursively placed Kalaallit seal hunting practices as a “past,” “pre-modern,” “pre-colonial” tradition that was either to be preserved or abandoned. These discursive efforts to crop seal hunting out of the Greenlandic present have had repercussions for contemporary political and academic discourses on sealing in Greenland (Graugaard 2019, 2020). As a challenge to this discursive tendency and inspired by Zoe Todd, I approach present Kalaallit–seal relations as encompassing “cosmologies that place humans and animals in ongoing and reciprocal relationships” (Todd 2014, 222). In this perspective, Kalaallit engage with and relate to seal in a plurality of ways, which include hunting, preparation, eating, sharing, tanning, storytelling, songs, art making, ways of respecting, theorizing. By treating these engagements and their ontological assumptions as “literal” rather than “symbolic” (Todd 2014), the dynamic relationships between Kalaallit, seals, sea, and land appear to inform and ground Kalaallit knowledge systems.

This approach widens my theoretical framework to account for “particular local formulations” that “continue to complicate—and to surprise—universalizing, common-sense, expectations about what we mean by knowledge” (Cruikshank 1998, 69). Through my fieldwork, Kalaallit formulations have also emerged as seal pluralities (Todd 2014, 219, “fish pluralities”), which embrace multiple, complementary, and sometimes contradictory ways of knowing seal. These ways of knowing are not merely representative but encompass “material, relational practices through which we order our relations with each other and with the land” (Cameron 2015, 11). This points to a relational ecology in which Kalaallit and seals are entwined as active agents in political, colonial, and decolonial processes in Greenland, in particular and in the Arctic, at large (Todd 2014; O’Connor, Drum, and Metuq 2017). O’Connor, Drum, and Metuq (2017) push these relational boundaries to a matter of becoming seal: “Seals become Inuit and Inuit become seals” (20) through the various corporeal, embodied engagements, which not only entangle Inuit and seals’ lifeworlds; they also conjoin the Arctic and the rest of the globe, for example, when global bioaccumulated pollutants travel from the industrial south through seals into Inuit bodies. In this sense, “the global industrial world is (also) in the seal” (O’Connor, Drum, and Metuq 2017, 25). Thus, Kalaallit–seal relations are also sites of
encounters in which larger historical, social, and political processes collide, interweave, and intersect. Recognizing the dynamic relationships in Kalaallit engagements with other-than-humans (here, seals), I seek to point to the ways in which their specific formulations unsettle current (anti-)sealing regimes and make way for alternative narratives.

Who Is Puisi?

In her work on fish–human relations in Paulatuuq, Todd (2014) attempts to answer the fundamental question, “What is a fish?” (222–23). Inspired by her approach, I ask, What is a seal? Rather than seeking scientific descriptions of seal species, this question is directed towards Kalaallit formulations of puisi in Greenland.

Etymologically, puisi derives from the verbal stem, pugi-, to emerge or surface. In this sense, seals are “the emerging ones” because their heads surface from underneath the water when they come up to breathe (Sonne 2017, 344). While seals are puisi in Greenland, they also carry specific names in Kalaallisut that relate to the different species and sometimes their ages. In West Greenland, seals also carry other, specific names such as aataaq (harp seal), aataarsuaq (fully grown harp seal), allattooq (young harp seal), natseq (ringed seal), natsersuaq (hooded seal), and ussuk (bearded seal). Similar to Todd’s notes on fish in Paulatuuq, seals are also characterized in multiple ways in Greenland, depending on the location and situation. In my fieldwork on the Greenlandic west coast, seals surfaced as tasty meat, as one who appears or hides, a sense of joy and longing, a connection point, a piece of sewing work, a metaphor for Indigenous survival, a trail to follow. Most frequently, seals in Greenland were connected with the statement “We can’t do without it” (fieldwork interviews). Thus, the occasional and seasonal periods of physical absence of seals, at sea and in homes, are associated with longing—longing for seal meat and seal hunting. Specifically, hunters reported to me that they freeze when they are out at sea if they have not consumed enough country foods, including seal fat. In other narrations, seals were directly connected to the very survival and existence of people, land, and nation.

Kalaallit conceptualizations of puisi arguably connect and engage Inuit cosmologies. In Arctic anthropological works, animals are described as inhabiting a role of “nonhuman persons” in traditional circumpolar worldviews. Here, humans and animals share personhood. They are distinguished as human and nonhuman persons, and they are co-inhabitants of sentient and knowing Arctic landscapes (Cruikshank 2005; Fienup-Riordan

3. Thanks to Kennet Pedersen (associate professor at Ilisimatusarfik) for pointing this out in our History of the Seal class, spring 2017, Ilisimatusarfik, Nuuk.
Ann Fienup-Riordan notes that Yu’pik in Alaska view animals as nonhuman persons who are responsive to human persons’ thoughts, words, and deeds. Here, animals on land and in the sea have “ears through the ground” and they will stay away if a hunter is too self-confident and certain about getting a catch (Fienup-Riordan 2020, 12). Similarly, an animal is *uumasoq* in Kalaallisut, which translates to “a living being.” Meanwhile, Kalaallit hunters in West Greenland seem to connect with traditional cosmologies in more subtle ways than in Fienup-Riordan’s anthropological work in Alaska. In my fieldwork conversations with hunters, seals did not appear explicitly as nonhuman persons, but they were described as active agents with different personalities that are both individualized and socialized. Hunters relayed intimate and specific knowledge regarding the behaviour of different seals, learned through long-term experience and countless encounters. As I was told several times by many hunters, to trace a seal one must know its preferred paths and ways of swimming. Seals are hereby known as respondent beings who appear and draw close if Kalaallit hunters manage to awaken their curiosity, for example, with specific sounds and movements. As my mum’s cousin, Einar Jakobsen, explained to me, a hunt can be a playful encounter between hunter and seal (interview). Successful engagement with a seal in such encounter—often defined by a catch—is thus not dependent on knowing what a seal is but on who this seal is.

**Hunting Seals: Sensing Seals**

During the decades of campaigning, the anti-sealing movement has been occupied with certain depictions of how seals are hunted in Inuit communities. Particularly, the movement has argued that seal hunting in the Arctic is no longer a “traditional” or “Indigenous” practice because hunters today use modern equipment such as motorized boats and rifles. While these arguments reflect stereotypical understandings of tradition and Indigeneity, they also do not account for the various, changing roles and meanings of seal hunting in everyday lived experiences of those who hunt for seals (Graugaard 2020; Wenzel 1991). In this light, it seems pertinent to widen Todd’s question to *What is Kalaallit seal hunting as it is engaged and narrated in Greenland?*

My inquiry into this question has primarily been through hunting stories from West Greenland about open-water seal hunting or seal hunting on the winter ice. In light of my own inexperience (I have never caught a seal myself), I asked hunters about the “hows” and “doings” of seal hunting—and I received sympathetic, humble, and technical descriptions of aiming at the

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4. Thanks to Regine-Ellen Møller, PhD fellow at Ilisimatusarfik (University of Greenland)/ Aalborg University, who pointed this out for me.
head of a seal with a rifle and hitting it, before it dives again. As one hunter explained to me, “Sometimes you hit everything you aim at, sometimes nothing at all.” The how of catching a seal—from the rocking bottom of a dinghy and within a considerable distance from the seal—is here narrowed down to a fortunate moment of hitting the surfaced head of a seal. Nonetheless, in longer conversations, seal hunting was also relayed as a complicated and intricate practice that engages life-long experiences and in-depth understandings of Kalaallit–seal relationships. In this sense, hunting and catching seals extends beyond the act of merely shooting and striking. It involves knowing specific *puisi* behaviours, predicting their tracks of flight, attracting them by imitation sounds, and using ancestral guideposts to locate where they may surface. In this perspective, Kalaallit seal hunting is deeply embedded in place-based, Indigenous knowledge systems that make a catch possible. As hunters often expressed during my fieldwork, seal hunting in Greenland is known as “the inheritance from our ancestors.”

In Arctic anthropological works on Inuit societies, hunting has been described as an act that involves a moral and social relationship between animals (as nonhuman persons) and people (as human persons). In the precolonial Arctic especially, animals were approached as having a sense of awareness and control over their destiny. Thus, animals decided whether to be caught or not—and their decision depended on the behaviour of the hunter and his intimate relations, and whether they complied with certain rules and taboos (Laugrand and Oosten 2014; Fienup-Riordan 1990, 1995, 2020; Sejersen 2003; Roepstorff 2003). The Kalaallit narratives of catching seals that were shared with me neither contradict nor directly comply with anthropological descriptions of precolonial Inuit hunting ecologies. In Kalaallit narrations, the ability to catch a seal seems to draw on multifaceted yet intimate ways of relating to the seal and its doings as *uumasoq* (a living being). As Paviaaraq Jakobsen explained to me, “In order to catch a seal, you have to have a sense of it.” Having—or gaining—a “sense of seal” seems grounded in and allowed by learned and inherited knowledges. In this perspective, catching a seal is a way of *sensing* a seal—which may not be presently prescribed by specific rules and rituals but by the ability to endorse a sensible, empathetic relationship to seals as active, respondent beings.

Meanwhile, Kalaallit seal hunting is not only characterized by bilateral relations between hunter and seal. In my fieldwork conversations with hunters, we mostly talked about everything but the actual process of hunting seals. We talked about the land- and seascapes, the fjord systems and the currents, all other animals and their migrations, and observations of climate change. Through these conversations, I learned that seal hunting encompasses intimate interactions with the waters, skies, mountains, weather systems, and other animals. I learned that Kalaallit sealing interacts with the feet of mountains under the water, where the seals tend to surface. It
interacts with the migration of killer whales, when seals flee inwards into the bottom of fjord systems. And it interacts with the changes in the offshore sea ice that affect the inshore presence of certain seals. And so on. In such ways, seal hunting is also defined by multiple interactions in and around the locality of hunting, which require a multi-relational orientation of sorts. In my fieldwork interviews, this orientation related not only to a local-specific perception of space but also time. While seal hunting is officially allowed any time of the year (except when female seals are nursing and calves still carry lanugo hair) (Government of Greenland 2010b), hunting seals, and all other animals, also follows an annual cycle that is determined by the migration patterns of animals in the sea, sky, and on land. For example, hunters know the specific time of the year (and sometimes the specific date) when natsiiit (ringed seals) will appear in their local seas. Hunting activities in Greenland are, therefore, oriented towards these annual and seasonal cycles, which are learned through generations and adjusted through experience. In this light, I suggest that Kalaallit seal hunting is characterized by reciprocal relationships with sentient animals and landscapes (Cruikshank 2005) and by multiple, reciprocal relations with time and space. Here, catching a seal requires a specific presence and being in the process of hunting, which influences whether the hunter succeeds in “sensing the seal” and, thereby, in catching it.

Moreover, the process of seal hunting is not restricted to the actual act of hunting and catching (or attempting a catch) (Todd 2014, 223). Extending beyond the hunt itself, Kalaallit sealing encompasses a constellation of activities, which include waiting at sea or waiting for the right weather, a friendly request for seal meat, reports from other hunters, preparing hunting equipment and sighting-in the rifle. Additionally, seal hunting also implies all the post-catch processing. In this perspective, seal hunting spans a diversity of engagements in Greenland, and the Arctic at large (similar to Todd’s [2014] experiences of fish pluralities in Paulatuuq) that may involve a rite of passage to adulthood or an oral teaching tool, entertainment at social gatherings or a #sealfie campaign to raise awareness about the injustices of international sealskin bans (Rodgers and Scobie 2015). In this light, definitions of Inuit seal hunting that hinge on prescribed, reductive ideas of tradition appear too simplistic.

Kalaallit–Seal Relationships as a Site of Contention

Besides the simplified narrative of tradition in the existing anti-sealing frameworks, narratives of subsistence and sustainability also appear as specific sites of contention. The following section unfolds this discussion on the dissonance between Euro-American and Kalaallit (and other Inuit) ways of conceptualizing seal hunting.
Contention 1: Commercial or Subsistence Sealing

In the past few years, animal welfare groups have asserted in their official policies that they do not oppose Inuit subsistence hunting (e.g., Canadian Press 2014; Humane Society 2017; IFAW 2017). Similarly, the European Union (2015) exempts Inuit sealskins from its general import ban on seal products, provided that they stem “from hunts traditionally conducted by Inuit...for their subsistence and which contribute to such subsistence” (2). This EU regulation, titled the “Inuit Exception,” accepts Indigenous seal hunting if it “is not conducted primarily for commercial reasons” (European Commission 2016). Notably, the 2009 EU seal ban was implemented as a response to major anti-sealing campaigns between 2006 and 2009 and the moral concerns of European citizens. The paradox of implementing a regulation that allows trade with certain sealskins while it simultaneously demands the trade to be non-commercial is left unarticulated (Sellheim 2015). The discursive distinction between subsistence and commercial seal hunting is, however, not unproblematic nor without consequences.

The insistence on describing Inuit seal hunting as subsistence has been critiqued as a denial of the right of Indigenous hunters to partake in international trade, and as upholding racialized stereotypes of Inuit as noble savages (Arnaquq-Baril 2016; EURACTIV 2017; Kalland 2009; Sellheim 2015). Omitting to mention the colonial processes through which Arctic seal hunting has been integrated into the global market, the subsistence narrative may not actually reflect current practices. As it is underlined in the documentary film Angry Inuk, by Alethea Arnaquq-Baril (2016), the subsistence narrative is perceived by Canadian Inuit as mistaken and erroneous. Even though seal meat plays an important role in sharing economies, in households, and in ensuring food security in the Arctic, the incomes from selling the sealskins are equally important for supporting the lives and families of hunters, tailors, and seamstresses. Canadian Inuit hunters, therefore, hold that Inuit seal hunting cannot be separated from its commercial purpose (Arnaquq-Baril 2016). Seal hunting practices in Greenland also contest Euro-American definitions of Inuit seal hunting. In international fora, Greenlandic seal hunting has been described as “subsistence hunting” in some narratives, while it has been described as “commercial hunting” in others (Sellheim 2015). For example, Canada and Norway filed a complaint to the World Trade Organization following the EU seal ban in 2009 and requested the same EU market access advantages as Greenland. They held that the scale of seal hunting in Greenland is tantamount to commercial sealing (Straits Times 2014). Evidently, the line between subsistence and commercial hunting seem particularly ambiguous. It thus seems relevant to discuss how these distinctions and terms correlate with or are challenged by the different roles, meanings, and definitions of Kalaallit seal hunting in its everyday workings.
Seals occupy a central role in both informal and formal economies in Greenland. In other words, seal hunting (together with other harvesting activities) carries importance to meet Greenlandic household needs, both in terms of food and income. An analysis by economist Rasmus Ole Rasmussen from 2005 shows that hunted meat (excluding fish) intended for human consumption amounts to 3.5 to 7 million kilograms annually (Rasmussen 2005, 9). Thus, the informal hunting sector—which consists of the meat consumed by hunters and their families, redistributed in relational networks, or sold at kalaaliaraq (the local meat market)—plays a considerable role in Greenlandic food supply (Rasmussen 2005). Furthermore, sealskin sales often make up an important addition to full-time hunters’ incomes, which are often low and dependent on the income of another household member. The ability to sell sealskins is particularly important to communities in East and North Greenland, and villages in the south, where the hunting profession is more prevalent (Rasmussen 2005; Government of Greenland 2012, 5). Usually about half of the sealskins from aataat (harp seals) and natsitit (ringed seals) caught in Greenland are sold to the Self-Government-owned company Great Greenland, which is also Greenland’s only tannery (Statistics Greenland 2016). The central role of Great Greenland to Greenlandic sealskin sales further complicates the discursive opposition between concepts of commercial and subsistence.

Great Greenland was established as a sealskin tannery and company in 1977, and became part of a sealskin program led by the Greenlandic Home Rule in the 1980s. The program was launched to remedy the effects of anti-sealing campaigns and international trade bans, which had devastated Inuit hunting economies across the Arctic. The aspiration was to increase the value of and demand for Greenlandic sealskins by modernizing the tannery and creating new international sealskin coat designs. To some, this signalled an intensified commercialization of Kalaallit seal hunting. Yet Inuit sealskins have never managed to become profitable due to the plummeting of prices after the sealskin market crash in the 1980s. Thus, Great Greenland’s sealskins have been heavily subsidized from the outset, making up for three-quarters of the price that a hunter received per skin already in 1985 (Graugaard 2019; Skydsbjerg 1999). Great Greenland receives about 25 to 26.7 million DKK annually from the Self-Government to buy and subsidize sealskins from hunters (Statistics Greenland 2016). As part of the agreement, Great Greenland provides the coastal trading services that allow hunters to sell their sealskins (Government of Greenland 2010a). Crudely said, the current commercial sales of Greenlandic sealskins are based on a deficit enterprise that is run by Self-Government finances but simultaneously provides a socioeconomic role in supporting hunters’ livelihoods. In the perspective of Great Greenland, the subsistence criteria in the EU framework seem ambiguous and worrisome: “If you really want to interpret [it], you can
say that the minute a hunter sells the skin to us rather than just give it to us, isn’t it a commercial situation?” asked Ditte Sorknæs, CEO of Great Greenland from 2016 to 2018 (EURACTIVE 2017, 7). Sorknæs has also questioned whether Great Greenland, in the EU framework, would be considered commercial and “illegal” if Greenlandic sealskins did better in the marketplace (EURACTIVE 2017).

It is not only the business of sealskin, however, that seems to contest the commercial/subsistence dichotomy. The daily strategies employed by Kalaallit hunters also contest the external attempts to place Greenlandic sealskins on either side of the binary. According to my fieldwork interviews, hunting for seal seems driven by various, dynamic, and changing aspects that entangle individual, communal, social, and environmental considerations. Sometimes seals are hunted for their meat, sometimes to earn extra money for a family celebration, sometimes because other options fail, and sometimes these reasons are interrelated. Hunters, furthermore, navigate these activities according to the seasonal cycles, weather conditions, local demand, and occupational options that are available in the local community. Currently, hunters’ activities seem particularly steered by better income opportunities from fishing halibut or cod. Meanwhile, as a hunter-fisherman shared with me, “When the ice is good, I become a hunter” (interview, my translation). In this sense, Kalaallit hunters’ activities bend and flex, and they are not necessarily focused on seals for their skin and meat. However, the international focus on seals seems to have centralized Inuit hunters as primarily seal hunters. I have argued elsewhere that the narrative of “the Greenlandic seal hunter” who has a singular purpose of hunting seals is also a colonial residue; Danish colonial strategies encouraged monoculturalization of Kalaallit seal hunting due to colonial trading interests (Graugaard 2019). Yet the word and concept of “seal-hunter” is usually not operated in Kalaallisut because a piniartoq (hunter)—which literally means “someone who wants something” (Nuttall 2016, 302)—is someone who engages in a diverse range of activities, including hunting for reindeer, musk ox, whales, seals, birds, fish, and collecting eggs and berries (Graugaard 2019, 80). The different ways of engaging (seal) hunting are thus navigated in reciprocity with other animals, locality, time, and space. Defining whether a seal hunt has been conducted with a subsistence, non-commercial purpose thus seems an impossible task because the concepts appear to be ill-fit for Kalaallit ways of hunting, which are dynamic, flexible, and multi-relational. Recognizing such seal hunting pluralities—the multiple ways of defining and engaging seal hunting (Todd 2014)—Kalaallit–seal relationships extend beyond a simple needs-based use of a natural resource.

Curiously, I also learned during my fieldwork that local sealskin trade stations had recently closed in Nuuk, Aasiaat, and Qasigiannguit. This meant that hunters who live in and around these towns cannot sell their sealskins
to Great Greenland. Some hunters are sometimes able to sell or process the sealskins locally, as fur or dog food. Nonetheless, the lack of a local trading station often renders the sealskins disposable, while the meat is distributed, sold, and consumed in various ways. This additionally suggests that when seals circulate in communities with primarily a subsistence-related purpose, it does not necessarily ensure that more of the animal is used, as it is insinuated in the anti-sealing frameworks.

Contestation 2: Is Kalaallit Seal Hunting Sustainable?

As a dominant construct in environmental discourse in recent decades, sustainability has become a central concept for theorizing, strategizing, and managing the long-term challenges of natural resource depletion and exploitation. In the Arctic, sustainability has entered the center of politics and become an almost obligatory concept (Gad, Jacobsen, and Strandsbjerg 2019). It is thus not surprising that Inuit seal hunting is increasingly being described as a sustainable practice. Since the resurgence of the anti-sealing movement and the resulting EU seal import ban in 2009, Inuit advocates have underlined in international public fora that Inuit relationships with seals and seal hunting are sustainable (Graugaard 2019). In this way, the sustainability concept has served Inuit counter-narratives to animal welfare organizations’ accusations of sealing as “atrocious,” “inhumane,” “mass slaughter,” and a “cruel, unnecessary waste” (IFAW 2016; Rodgers and Scobie 2015). A Greenlandic-led counter-campaign, which was created primarily to inform European citizens about Inuit sealing, suggested that the Greenlandic seal hunt is “100% sustainable” (Inuit Sila 2013). Arguably, these sustainability narratives have destabilized anti-sealing propositions and put Inuit seal hunting on the agenda in international sealskin disputes. While these narratives challenge anti-sealing sentiments among European audiences with some effect, they may also disguise that the very terms and concepts of the dispute are founded in European sustainability logics that do not easily translate into Inuit worldviews.

Originating in the eighteenth-century German concept of nachhaltigkeit in forestry (Grober 2007), sustainability has become aligned with “development” and has been implemented as a global political target to ensure the continuous use of natural resources by avoiding their depletion (WCED 1987). While sustainability is often associated with concerns for the natural environment and the current state of the globe, the concept of sustainability has also been critiqued as Eurocentric and neocolonial. Based in Western economic rationality, sustainability has been criticized for implying a conceptual shift from “plural nature” to a singular “environment” and for gradually subordinating the natural world to the realm of the market (Banerjee 2003; Prudham 2009). I have discussed elsewhere how such workings of the sustainability concept are also reflected in Greenland’s
colonial history. As Denmark depended on Kalaallit seal hunting as a central source of income, Danish colonial narratives of sustainability and Kalaallit seal hunting have been pivotal in sustaining Denmark’s colonization of Greenland. As colonial sustainability narratives aspired to produce monoculturalism, they also compromised the diversity of Inuit ways of life and hunting. By tracing these dominant sustainability narratives on sealing in Greenland, I have argued that Greenlandic postcolonial narratives both depend on and seek to escape the coloniality of the sustainability concept (Graugaard 2019).

Considering the recent counter-narratives proposed by Inuit advocates, it appears that Inuit sealing is defined as sustainable by referring to scientific and cultural perspectives. By referencing scientific wildlife management schemes, the narratives vouch for the sustainability of Inuit seal hunting based on responsible harvest levels, the use of an abundant local resource, and the limited impact on the environment (EURACTIVE 2017; Inuit Sila 2013). Simultaneously, Inuit relationships with seals are also upheld as sustainable by referring to the cultural role of seals in Inuit livelihoods. Sustainable relationships with seals particularly seem to insinuate a non-wasteful use of seals. For example, the campaign Inuit Sila (2013) states that “everything from the seal is used.” While these narratives successfully counter the reasons to condemn Inuit sealing within the European moral animal welfare framework, they may also risk discursively surrendering the importance of Inuit–seal relationships to a simplified economics of use, be it cultural, traditional, ecological, or economic. Inclined to justify Inuit seal hunting in a grammar of sustainable exploitation, the sustainability concept may not necessarily exchange with the specific, practiced Indigenous ways of knowing and hunting seals.

Responding to this problematic, my fieldwork aspired to explore how specific, place-based Inuit knowledges articulate alternative narratives on sustainable sealing. Therefore, I had imagined and planned that a considerable part of my conversations with hunters in Greenland would revolve around Kalaallit formulations of the concept of sustainability. However, I quickly learned that my questions about sustainability were causing major translations issues. Often, the term itself was new to the interviewee or interpreter. Often, there were no conceptual references to help find appropriate translations. Sometimes, the term itself was conceived and interpreted in ways that referred more to a literal translation of the Danish word *bæredygtighed* (which literally refers to the ability to carry or yield something), and instead, it ended up instigating parallel conversation around the question, “What are you good at?” As I wrote in my fieldwork diary, the talk about sustainability did not seem to have any ground in our conversations about seal hunting. It was like it did not belong, and our conversations simply stalled when we got around to it. My ambition to
recognize and discuss particular Kalaallit formulations of sustainability was thus severely challenged, as I found that there were actually none. Similarly, Thisted (2019) notes the difficulties with translating sustainability, as a foreign term, into Kalaallisut. Becoming a floating signifier (which can carry a web of different meanings), the sustainability concept has been subject to different translation attempts that sometimes leave it close to meaningless in Kalaallisut (Thisted 2019). In this sense, seal hunting can be said to originate in Indigenous knowledge systems to which “sustainability” does not translate (Sejersen 2002).

Yet Sejersen (2002) holds that there are aspects of traditional Inuit ways of hunting that can be considered sustainable in a contemporary sense. As he argues, precolonial Inuit hunters have ensured that their relationships to animals would continue into future generations and can therefore be understood as sustainable (Sejersen 2003, 158). Meanwhile, insisting on the application of sustainability may also risk co-opting traditional worldviews to suit Western interpretations. In contrast to contemporary sustainability logics, animals are approached as “infinitely renewable” in Inuit cosmologies (Fienup-Riordan 1990, 167). In this view, animals appear and are available to a hunter if the hunter has complied with the specific rules of behaviour that determine the relationship between animal (as nonhuman person) and people (as human persons). When the hunter complies and pleases the animal, it will let itself be caught and return to be caught again. When the hunter has not treated his prey accordingly, the animal will not give itself to the hunter and stop appearing to him or her (Fienup-Riordan 1990; Laugrand and Oosten 2014, 9; Thisted 2019; Sejersen 2003). As Fienup-Riordan (1990) notes, these Inuit perceptions of cycles of reincarnation are discrepant with scientific wildlife management. In Inuit worldviews, it is the availability of animals that is at stake, rather than their existence (Thisted 2019; Roepstorff 2003). In this perspective, if an animal is not visible to the hunter, it is not because it has disappeared but because it is not showing itself. However, if it does show itself, it can be an offense to the animal not to kill it (Fienup-Riordan 1990). Arguably, these traditional conceptualizations of animal–human relations sit uneasy with Western conceptualizations of sustainable use of natural resources—and thus, Inuit and Western approaches to nature and wildlife stocks sometimes clash (Roepstorff 2003).

In my conversations with Kalaallit hunters, seals neither appeared as infinitely renewable nor as a finite resource. We did not talk about the existence of seals or the possibility of depleting seal stocks. However, we talked to some extent about the availability of seals. The availability of seals was not explained as depending on complying with traditional rules and taboos, as has been pointed out in Arctic anthropologies. Rather, it was explained as depending on a hunter’s ability of “sensing the seal” through multi-relational orientation. Catching a seal, furthermore, is not undertaken
with cultural or ecological circumspections on the seal’s return, but rather premised by “We do not kill [animals] for fun,” as Nikolaj Jeremiassen explained to me (interview, my translation). Yet a seal catch does not signify a death that reduces seals to living resources. Instead, as Lars Matthæussen articulated in a conversation, “Blood is part of life, it is not part of death,” and catching seals is thus approached as an essential part of life cycles (interview, my translation). Arguably, Kalaallit relations with seals (and other animals) formulate a localized hunting ethics that does not depend on abstracts of sustainability, but concretely relates to lived (hunting) life. Here, the new sustainability narrative that “all of the seal is used,” as forwarded by the Inuit Sila (2013) campaign, can seem redundant. While Kalaallit hunters do not articulate ideals of efficient and economical use of seals, the extents of catching and “using” seal are determined by immense physical and practical limitations. Even on a fortuitous day where all things align and many seals are available, “I catch what I need and can manage to prepare, skin, and process,” as Jeremiassen puts it (interview, my translation).

In retrospect, one may question whether some aspects of current Inuit counter-narratives to anti-sealing propositions imply new, unintended consequences to current seal hunting practices in the Arctic. The claims that “Inuit seal hunting is 100% sustainable” and “all of the seal is used” also establish harsh criteria on Inuit hunting practices that may be impossible to fulfill. The claims associate pre- and early colonial conditions in which seals provided a range of the daily necessities in terms of food, clothing, kayaks, tools, light, and heat (Marquardt 1999b; Peter et al. 2002). Yet the present outcome is conspicuous: In what other cases is it a criterion that all of the animal is “used” (by humans) in order to be considered “sustainable,” “earth conscious,” “eco-friendly,” and “ethical” when it is also wild and hunted meat, locally sourced, and biodegradable—and its earthly remains are left as a source of food for other animals? In one way, the new sustainability narrative silences the colonial processes by which seal hunting was integrated into the global market and relegates Inuit hunters to racialized images of Indigenous Peoples as ecological conservationists. In another way, it feeds modern industrial thinking in which all parts of living and material resources become products for human purposes.

Conclusion

Exempting Inuit seal hunting from anti-sealing condemnations, in the moral and legal frameworks of the EU and animal welfare organizations, has not improved Inuit sealskin trade. Furthermore, this “exceptional” acceptance of Inuit sealing is sanctioned by simplified narratives of “traditional, subsistence hunts” that contribute to “sustainable” Arctic communities. Paradoxically, this scheme allows commercial trade in Inuit sealskins on the condition that the
hunts do not have a primary commercial purpose (European Commission 2016). While this relegates Inuit hunting to racialized stereotypes of “noble savages,” the seal regime also disregards that Inuit seal products have long been part of global commercial markets due to processes of colonization (Graugaard 2019, 2020). Confined to the conceptual vocabulary of Euro-American animal welfare, these popular framings of Inuit sealing may soothe anti-sealing sentiments but they also ignore specific, place-based Inuit hunting knowledges and practices.

In this article, I have argued that Kalaallit–seal relationships are not captured in narratives of “subsistence-based” or “sustainable” use of a natural resource, and these narratives appear as sites of contention. Notably, hunting for seals in Greenland is not defined by oppositions between hunting for subsistence or for income. Seal hunting carries importance to meet Greenlandic household needs, both in terms of food and income. Furthermore, the daily workings of hunting seals are driven by various and changing aspects that span: local demand for meat, a friendly request, a food staple, need for monetary income, or because other options fail. It is thus not possible to place Kalaallit hunting in a binary of subsistence vs. commercial. While concepts of sustainable hunting have served Inuit counter-responses in the anti-sealing dispute (e.g., Inuit Sila 2013), I have also argued that sustainability contends with Kalaallit–seal relationships. As a Western concept that tends to render “plural nature” to calculations of using and replenishing a “single environment” (Banerjee 2003; Prudham 2009), sustainability does not easily translate into Inuit worldviews. As my interviews with Kalaallit hunters relay, catching seals is not pursued by an equation of economical use in relation to an ecological stock. Instead, hunting seals is firmly premised against “killing for fun.” Determined by the immense physical and practical limitations of a hunt, a hunter—on a fortuitous day—catches what he needs and can manage to prepare, skin, and process (for food or for selling). Capturing Inuit hunting in a narrative that “everything from the seal is used” (Inuit Sila 2013) risks discursively surrendering the importance of Kalaallit–seal relationships to an economics of use. While it implies harsh criteria on an otherwise “eco-friendly” practice, it also feeds modern industrial thinking in which living and material entities are primarily related as resources and products in human lives.

Through engagement with my fieldwork interviews in Greenland, I have argued that Kalaallit engage with seals in a plurality of ways that unsettle the logics of the existing seal regime. Kalaallit seal pluralities—the multiple ways of knowing and defining seals (Todd 2014)—denote complex and dynamic human–seal relationships. As beings who are “the emerging ones” (Sonne 2017, 344), seals appeared in my fieldwork in various ways and forms: as a feeling of joy and longing, as sewing work, as a story of Indigenous survival, as a delicious meal, as a trace to follow. Most frequently,
puisit are recognized and related as beings that Kalaallit “cannot do without.” In the hunters’ narrations, seals emerge as active agents who respond to and with the “inherited knowledges” and long-term experiences of hunters. These encompass specific understandings of the individualized and socialized behaviours and ways of seals. As it was explained to me, catching a seal corresponds with having, or gaining, a sense of seal. Sensing seals is not merely limited to the hunting encounter. It also orients and interacts with the waters, skies, mountains, weather systems, and other animals, and it entangles the historical, social, and political landscapes. While sensing seals may not directly reflect a practice towards “becoming seals” (O’Connor, Drum, and Metuq 2017, 20), Kalaallit hunting unfolds through continuous and complex processes of reciprocating with human and nonhuman entities. Arguably, Kalaallit–seal relations complicate the current attempts to capture Inuit seal hunting in simplified narratives, conditioned by criteria of sustainable, subsistence, traditional, humane hunts. The article is thus a call to reassess the terms of the present seal regime and to move towards sensing Inuit seal hunting with narratives that are grounded in Inuit lives.

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CAMERON, Emilie
GOVERNMENT OF GREENLAND


GRAUGAARD, Naja


GROBER, Ulrich


HARAWAY, Donna


HAUPTMANN, Aviaja L.


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