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(Un)inhabiting Svalbard: Stories of makings from a transient place in the High Arctic

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Abstract: The Svalbard archipelago, as well as the Arctic in general, have long been portrayed as pristine nature, harsh and hostile environment, an uninhabitable space for human beings. In reality the Arctic is home to four million people whose everyday lives have been fast-changing and have been impacted by not only the physical changes but also other broader discourses such as geopolitics, scientific research, sustainability and not to forget global crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic. All these myths, representations, and entangled histories and realities lead to the following questions: How have some places, not others, come to be inhabited? What makes a place inhabitable, and for whom? Who has the right to define that? And how do we view different approaches of inhabiting on different scales?
Drawing on both conceptual and empirical materials, this article is a joint effort of us as a group of social scientists who are conducting or have conducted research on Svalbard.[1] By telling stories from our respective experiences and backgrounds, we wish to illustrate a more nuanced picture of how economic, geopolitical, scientific, sociocultural, and environmental concerns are always interconnected, and more importantly, how different forms of (in)voluntary inhabiting and uninhabiting in Svalbard, in particular in Longyearbyen and Svea, an possibly lead to or have led to various makings and becomings.

Keywords: Svalbard, inhabitability, uninhabiting, social science, storytelling

Introduction

The Svalbard archipelago, as well as the Arctic in general, have long been portrayed as pristine nature, harsh and hostile environment, an uninhabitable space for human beings. In reality the Arctic is home to four million people whose everyday lives have been

[1] svalbardsocialscience.com/

fasthanging and have been impacted by not only the physical changes but also other broader discourses such as geopolitics, scientific research, sustainability and not to forget global crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic. All these myths, representations, and entangled histories and realities lead to the following questions: How have some places, not others, come to be inhabited? What makes a place inhabitable, and for whom? Who has the right to define that? And how do we view different approaches of inhabiting on different scales? People in Svalbard have certainly had some thoughts on these questions, as shown in one performance artwork (Figure 1) made in relation to the original polar bear warning sign (Figure 2) that often appears in tourists' photographs of Svalbard.

Figure 1: "Applies only to Longyearbyen" (Photo: Zdenka Sokolíčková)

Figure 2: "Applies to the whole of Svalbard" (Photo: Lisbeth Iversen)

Svalbard and its settlements, however, are different from settlements elsewhere in the Arctic where indigenous peoples have co-existed with other non-human species for a long time before the colonial power seized control. The common story presents Svalbard as the 'no man's land', and all humans there are visitors. Situated in a geopolitically strategic position, Svalbard has been objected to what Dodds and Nuttall describe as the 'Arctic scrambles' since the late 16th century, where "contemporary actors scramble to acquire a greater understanding of navigation potential, ecosystem vulnerabilities and resource availability" (DODDS and NUTTALL, 2016: 57) and thus consequently for stronger power over the Arctic resources. As a result, the current main settlements on Svalbard, for instance Longyearbyen, Barentsburg and Ny-Ålesund, serve a 'politics of presence' (PEDERSEN, 2017) where the respective states (i.e. Norway and Russian) continue to negotiate and develop their strategies of Svalbard, not least in terms of the sovereignty over the archipelago (GRYDEHØJ *et al.*, 2012). The stories of inhabitants in Svalbard, on the other hand, are often buried under the stories of industrial and political interests, from the early days' mining industries to the current scientific research and tourism industry, alongside the stories of global warming. Drawing on both conceptual and empirical materials, this article is a joint effort of us as a group of social scientists who are conducting or have conducted research on Svalbard (svalbardsocialscience.com/). By telling stories from our respective experiences and backgrounds, we wish to illustrate a more nuanced picture of how economic, geopolitical, scientific, sociocultural, and environmental concerns are always interconnected, and more importantly, how different forms of (in)voluntary inhabiting and uninhabiting in Svalbard, in particular in Longyearbyen and Svea, and possibly lead to or have led to various makings and becomings.

Inhabitability, science, and cultural politics

As both emerging from and contributing to the discourse of the Anthropocene, the narrative that our planet earth has become increasingly uninhabitable (for example in WALLACE-WELLS, 2017) is ever pervading. Inhabitability has thus become a topic of discussion, beyond the original domains such as architecture or product development where it has been mostly used (POLO, 2012). An inherent paradox is present here in both the narrative of presenting the earth as uninhabitable and the concept of inhabitability. On one hand, a strong emphasis is put on the capacity of objects or 'earth' as separate and independent entities to provide suitable conditions for its inhabitants and are now in need

of rescue. And on the other hand, those living in these spaces are too often ignored or labeled as issues to be dealt with, e.g. climate refugees. Simone (2016) argues that such paradox and the distinctions made between the habitable and uninhabitable may lead to that spaces are seen as incapable of generating new capacities and that those living in these supposedly uninhabitable spaces become normalized under a certain mode of habitation and a certain standardized version of humanity. Furthermore, Woods (2019) suggests that scientific indices are at times misused to demonstrate un/inhabitability while containing a tacit discussion of cultural politics. In searching for different angles and perspectives, Simone (2016) asks "how can we operate somewhere between the tightening standardization of habitation – with all its pretenses of producing and regulating new types of individuals – and making the uninhabitable a new norm, where value rests in what can be constantly converted, remade, or readapted?" (SIMONE, 2016: 145).

While Simone's (2016) critiques are based on his long-term work in urban Africa and Southeast Asia, his line of arguments provides us with a useful departing point to approach some of the discussions going on in the main settlements in Svalbard. For instance, discussions regarding the precarious situations faced by the transient, non-indigenous population that are economically dependent on mining, science and tourism industries are central. The general establishment of but also increasingly stricter environmental regulations around Svalbard, and the haunting memories left by industrial heritage and the impacts of their remaining legacies to the inhabitants of Svalbard represent other important and relevant discussions. Rather than repeating the stories of how "those that inhabit the supposedly uninhabitable are subject to seemingly endless lists of deprivation" (SIMONE, 2015:16), in the following sections we will instead tell some stories that partly highlight the cultural politics of being an inhabitant in Svalbard, and partly question the very concept of un/inhabitability as well as the normalized mode of habitation in the context of Svalbard.

Should I stay or should I go? – stories of community-making and the trouble with indigeneity

During the last decades Svalbard has to a larger extent been regulated according to western planning practices, and Longyearbyen, in particular, is planned to become a more family based and prosperous local society, with a clear presence of Norwegian population. The settlement of Longyearbyen has always been fluid when it comes to people who

inhabit it. But why do people come to Svalbard? Why do they stay and why do they leave? Who is allowed to claim that Longyearbyen/Svalbard is their home?

Given the size of Longyearbyen's population (about 2300 people), its complexity and diversity are astounding. Many have come here and stayed for various reasons. Some interlinked driving forces behind migration and settling down in Longyearbyen are identified: 1) Economic reasons; availability of jobs that are well-paid (though worth asking well-paid compared to what?), salaries that are low-taxed, and the visa and work permit free zone. 2) Desire to "meet the Arctic"; a genuine interest in nature, landscape, history, life close to "wilderness". 3) "The Opportunity"; or a challenge, be it an exciting job offer, the climate, or the pure exoticness of the destination. The two latter motivations are often combined with some sort of escape strategy from big cities, stressful jobs, dysfunctional relationships, etc.. 4) Family; reunions with family members and comebacks of people whose relatives used to live on the island in the past. 5) Pragmatism and randomness; a mixture of economic, private and professional reasons. Fascinating stories of randomness also show that not all decisions are made out of rationality, but people's home searching is no less valid because of that.

The everyday reality in Svalbard and Longyearbyen, however, will quickly make the people who are captured by the place realize that to stay is not the same thing as to come. While most people are easily captured by the rich cultural and social life, and the constant interaction with a more-than-human world (compare HEIENE, 2009), some indeed find out that the circumstances do not allow them to stay. The turnover of the population is extremely high, and "*å reise på slutt*", leaving for good, is inevitable. Although open to all nations behind the Svalbard Treaty, planning and urban development on Svalbard are challenged by the imbalance between the living conditions and housing provided for the Norwegian populations, and those of the people of other nationalities. This makes Longyearbyen less inhabitable for non-Norwegians, as has become particularly clear during the pandemic.

Ethnographic fieldwork documents the wide spectrum of personal bonds and connections that people develop in relation to Svalbard, both as a biophysical space and as an imagined microcosm. The inhabitability of Svalbard is thus not only communicated through polar bear or avalanche warning, but also the social-political preconditions and signals. Social identities that people construct, reconstruct and deconstruct through living in Svalbard, are often parallel, plural, transgressive and ironic (AMIT-TALAI & RAPPORT, 2002), and they contest "modernity's geographical imagination, [where] indigeneity is naturalized by its association with a telluric (almost magnetic) attachment to locale, a once

pristine place." (RADCLIFFE, 2017: 223). Interestingly enough, the concept of indigeneity is not being explored in Svalbard, with the simplistic statement that "there has never been an Indigenous population". This premise at the same time facilitates the Norwegians State's governing over Svalbard and impedes community-making. Following Woods (2019), we may ask if the rootless vision of the Svalbardian is in fact rooted in a specific ethnoclass vision of being human? And what does it take to discuss, form and/or acknowledge a relation to the inhabited Svalbard, a relation that goes beyond the submissive discourse of "we are all here for a reason", accepting the geopolitical narrative of power?

Inhabiting the "uninhabitable": use of nature and outdoor life in Svalbard

The seemingly uninhabitable environment of Svalbard is very much peopled, even beyond the settlements. Historically performed by trappers and more or less professional expeditionists, the use of nature and outdoor life have constituted important parts of life for many residents in Longyearbyen. As mentioned before, the vast and splendid nature, the endless possibilities for outdoor life and activities, and experiencing the Arctic environment today constitute important motivations for moving to, and a central factor for the desire to settle down (*bolyst*), in Svalbard. That the Svalbardian is an outdoors person is thus a widespread notion, however there are segments of the population that due to personal preferences, cultural reasons and/or lack of resources – the Arctic environment requires extremely well-equipped users – do not engage in outdoor activities.

Outdoor life on Svalbard includes a variety of activities such as skiing and hiking, but also hunting, trapping and fishing are popular in Longyearbyen. In 2019, almost 200 reindeer and more than 800 ptarmigans where hunted on the island,[2] and Longyearbyen hunter and fishers' association has almost 800 members, making it a central institution in a town with approx. 2300 inhabitants (although not all members hunt). Similar to the Norwegian mainland, many of these activities are concentrated around cabins (more than 170 in total). Many of these cabins are owned by organizations or employers, making them accessible to their members and employees. To go on trips – be it for hunting, skiing or simply hanging out at a cabin – is very much a social act (Image 3). These trips are important spaces for social integration and cultural syncretism as the typical Norwegian

[2] https://www.ssb.no/svalbard/faktaside/svalbard

friluftsliv (e.g. GELTER, 2000) is adopted by international groups who in turn bring their own traditions, preferences and activities into Svalbard's outdoors (Image 4).

Figure 3: "Friends hanging outside of a cabin. Photo: Alexandra Meyer

Figure 4: Family hanging in a cabin. Photo: Zdenka Sokolíčková

Svalbard outdoor life is characterized by a combination of motorized and non-motorized activities. There are only around 40 km of roads on Spitsbergen, which

makes many non-motorized outdoor activities dependent on transport by boat or snowmobile, and for some, snowmobiling and boating are also an end in itself. While the "*nære friluftsliv*" – the use of the local environment – is practiced by most, the ability to roam and explore the island is what many residents emphasize as special about outdoor life on Svalbard. However, environmental regulations limit the access to certain areas and restrict the use of motorized transport. Currently, the environmental regulations for Svalbard are being revised and new management plans are underway. These processes have stirred engagement and concern in Longyearbyen, as many fear that their mobility and access to certain areas will be curtailed. A common argument by those engaging in outdoor life is that environmental protection should be achieved through cautious and knowledge-based use, not by closing off entire areas. It is also emphasized that regulations should distinguish between large tourist groups, and locals' use of nature. Here the issue of Svalbard as largely uninhabitable and the Svalbardian as a rootless people surfaces again: the management plans and regulations do not acknowledge a local population with specific rights to the land, as in other parts of the Arctic with indigenous populations. These documents are furthermore based on a broad knowledge base about natural conditions without taking peoples' relations with the environment into consideration, leaving the impression of Svalbard as an uninhabited wilderness devoid of humans – and hence easy to control and regulate (SAVILLE, 2019).

Historical inhabiting and uninhabiting – stories of place-making

As Simone (2016) points out, the concept of un/inhabitability has been used in response to the discourse of the Anthropocene or anthropogenic impacts. In the context of Svalbard, the narrative of uninhabitability is actualized in various measurements as part of risk management, mitigation, biodiversity control, and the like. The dismantling of Svea as both a site for coal mines and a settlement on Svalbard tells stories of naturalizing or uninhabiting place, while the remains from previous industrial heritage remind us that the roots can take different forms.

In 2017, the Norwegian government announced that the coal mines in Svea would close and later that the mining infrastructure should be dismantled. Up to 350 persons used to work, live, and commute to the Svea settlement, and upon losing their jobs in mining, many of these workers were hired to dismantle their previous workplace. The dismantling is realized with the aim of removing as many traces of human activity as possible and bring the place back to its original, 'natural' state (Image 5 and 6). When

explaining the decisions first to close the mines and later to dismantle, the government stressed the economic motive behind: the coal market was still lower than expected and a continuation of the mines could therefore not be justified. It was further stated that the clean-up would give Svalbard communities time to adjust to 'the transition'[3]; i.e. the transition from coal mining to other economic activities and energy sources. The project in Svea is presented as Norway's most expansive environmental clean-up project to date, with a cost of 1,9 billion NOK. The dismantling is in many ways a spectacular dramatization of coal mining's termination in Svalbard. It marks the end of an era and the beginning of a new one and is part of the official narrative of Svalbard as a site of innovative initiatives and solutions informed by environmentalism: a showcase scenario for the future. But what does it mean to 'uninhabit' a place? And what kind(s) of place(s) does uninhabitation produce?

Figure 5: Dismantling of Svea 1. Photo: Ranghild Utne Bekkeheien.

Figure 6: Dismantling of Svea 2. Photo: Ingvild Sæbu Vatn.

[3] https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/vil-avvikle-kolverksemda-i-svea-og-lunckefjell/id2574295/ .

As Svea slowly becomes 'uninhabited', other industrial and cultural heritage sites around Svalbard have shown some other stories of identity-making and place-making through tangible and intangible heritage (GERLACH and KINOSSIAN, 2016). Though lacking indigenous people, Svalbard has groups of population with strong place-based connections and exemplifies an uninherited heritage landscape (GRYDEHOJ, 2010). In Svalbard tangible heritage is recognized and strictly protected (Svalbard Environmental Protection Act 2011), but heritage goes beyond physical remains and that which is officially recognized. Heritage, now recognised as broad and intertwined with various elements and selection criteria (VECCO, 2010), encompasses the unique ethos of a place and is constantly being redefined by the inhabitants of that place.

One could argue that the current recognition of cultural heritage on Svalbard follows a similar logic as environmental conservation as well as the dismantling of Svea, showing that once human disturbance and exploitation end, everything is again supposed to be or regarded as 'nature'. Yet a heritage that is 'naturalized' and only valued for its tangible values becomes reduced to an object and can be easily commercialized or commodified in various channels, for instance through tourism place-branding. Framing Svalbard's cultural heritage as the remnants of intrepid pioneers in an Arctic wilderness, tourism narratives perpetuate the romanticised mythical vision of the Arctic rather than acknowledge it as a living landscape. If communities are not included as key actors in the process of defining and selecting heritage there is a risk the dominant or even only narratives that remain will be those with economic value. This results in the threat not only of heritage loss, but also of 'Disneyfication' (KENNEDY and KINGCOME, 1998) and Svalbard being regarded as a vast open-air museum.

The people of Svalbard develop and define their local heritage in relation to their connections to the past, their present and their perceived needs of the future. It is important to encapsulate the social meanings surrounding Svalbard's heritage, rooted in the landscape, spirit of past residents/visitors, and reflective of local industry, traditions and values, in order to develop heritage that represents and benefits local communities and to counter the commercialisation of heritage.

The dismantling makes Svea a settlement of the past, by making coal mining into a historical remnant and the miner a figure of history. Indeed, inhabitants have sometimes referred to the dismantling in terms of loss, not just of job opportunities, but as loss of a place of memory and connection. On the initiative of Store Norske, Svea is simultaneously re-constructed by use of photo documentation to make a digital representation of the

settlement. Meanwhile, the dismantling also makes Svea into an opportunity to test out new solutions for the future, i.e. through re-use and re-sale of the material structures, machinery and infrastructures. Efforts are further made to 'return' the place to nature through detailed work to re-create the place as 'how it was', i.e. as "pristine nature", in line with the plans to include the area in the Nordenskjøld-Land National Park – and simultaneously echoing the dominant notion of "pristine nature" as a masculinist discourse. These different efforts of place-making partly overlap and partly compete in the making of Svalbard into a place of expertise, innovation, and environmentalism. Meanwhile, the official environmentalist narrative about the dismantling appears to facilitate not only wildlife protection but simultaneously the marking of Norwegian presence. It is a way of marking national presence not by the historically established means of inhabitation and extraction (settlement, labor, mining) but by environmental management: i.e. the marking of *presence by human absence*. In this manner, (un)inhabitation is a social and (geo)political drama that actualizes different visions of Svalbard as *place*, its present, past, and future. Again, inhabitability is not just a question of scientific measurement, physical or technical dimensions, but of well-being and co-existence. And the manifold and sometimes conflictive responses to the dismantling in Svea illustrate the contested nature of the near and distant future in Svalbard.

Sustaining heritage without the typical process of inheritance can be challenging, particularly in Svalbard where a double disjoint in perspectives of 'uninherited' and 'uninhabited' persists. It must be a conscious choice that may require more active commitment from citizens than if they had a native connection, and in Svalbard, unlike most places, this applies to the whole population rather than a minority proportion of it. Yet the case of Svea may have shown some possibilities to create more forms of connections and thus counterbalance to the narrative of uninhabitability and uninherited. More so now than ever, as Svalbard is in a period of change, environmentally through climate change and socio-economically through the decline in the mining industry and rapid expansion of the tourism industry, deliberative participatory processes are vital to include citizens in determining the historical continuity that underpins the archipelago's identity.

Looking forward – what kind of knowledge do we need to reform the inhabitability of Svalbard?

So looking forwards, how can we possibly challenge the cultural politics underneath the logic of un/inhabitability that normalize a certain kind of habitation? How can we find "practices that take nothing for granted, that lend stability and possibilities of transformation to the precarious, or that undermine the pretensions of all that is considered secure?" (SIMONE, 2016:137) A golden thread in the Svalbard context might be 'knowledge-making'.

As discussed above, Svalbard's un/inhabitability is partially materialized in its protected areas – nature reserves and seven national parks cover 65,7% of the land (STATISTICS NORWAY, 2019). The current Svalbard Environmental Protection Act (2002), the later released the East Svalbard Management Plan in 2014, as well as other environmental regulations, are at this stage largely relying on the scientific assessment of the fauna and flora of the archipelago, which in turn are based on various environmental monitoring systems in operation around Svalbard (SAVILLE, 2019). While traditional scientific research continues to be seen as the authoritarian base for the machinery of decision-making, planning, resource allocating and service provision, growing awareness and attempts have emerged in recent years to integrate more diversified ways of making knowledge into this machinery. Some in-between stories will be presented here from research projects that aspire a balance between the more traditional planning in the Arctic based on the precautionary principle and a more bottom-up oriented broad knowledge-approach, hinting towards more open-ended and participatory ways of knowledge making that may suit the un/inhabitability of the transient society of Svalbard.

Researchers in the work of the INTAROS project have been in search for the linking of top-down and bottom-up knowledge.[4] Aiming for developing an integrated Arctic Observation System (iAOS), the project works with methods like citizen science and Community Based Monitoring (CBM) programs. Researchers have been involving local stakeholders from the University Center in Svalbard, The Safety Center, the Local Council, business actors, the Governor's Office, cruise operators, the local school, residents, and tourist operators and guides, to get a broader picture of Svalbard than the more conservative views of the place being untouchable. One example of INTAROS is about Longyearbyen. As the village is located in an area with permafrost, and most buildings are

[4] http://www.intaros.eu/ .

built on wooden piles to avoid settlement damage, steep slopes along the sides of Longyeardalen and Adventsdalen/Adventsfjorden make the area exposed to avalanches and landslides. Researchers have tried out citizen science methods to map earthquakes and other natural hazards in the Arctic. Seismological measuring instruments are installed in buildings that were founded on wooden poles in Longyearbyen. The results will then be presented to local actors to help them understand such incidents, and what can be done by authorities and contractors to adapt new buildings and roads to these conditions. Another example is about involving expedition cruises guides and guests in monitoring Svalbard's environment and cultural heritage. After a workshop in Longyearbyen in March 2019, cruise expedition vessels will be equipped with tablets with easily accessible apps. Results will be presented to environmental management planners and decision-makers. These examples provide interesting cases to examine and explore how co-creation of knowledge might look like in reality and how different actors may position their own ways of knowing to the others and then contribute to a future Svalbard whose inhabitability can be construed more collectively.

In a similar vein yet more explorative, another project, SVALUR,[5] looks at how to combine the experiential knowledge of people who live, work and visit Svalbard, which is often in more qualitative and narrative forms, into the current environmental monitoring systems on Svalbard. While also aiming for a more nuanced understanding of how the monitoring data is generated, researchers in SVALUR wish to build a possible platform that facilitates the generation of and expression of an "environmental memory" that is continuous but also everchanging.

These projects on 'co-creation' mentioned here, and there are certainly more, in a way reflect how wider society has come to criticize and respond to the long-time domination and legacy of natural science in the broader environmental discourses such as the Anthropocene, both as knowledge producer and governmental instrument. At the same time, we may also be careful with whether co-creation of knowledge can provide the solutions and decisions (TORFING et al., 2016; PEDERSEN-ULRICH, 2016; HOLDT et al., 2014), or rather merely serving as a buzz word for matching the UN SD Goals, as it will be very much about how exactly one does the 'co-creating'. The underlying epistemological challenge and attempt here is to generate a somewhat organic and symbiotic system of both top-down and bottom-up ways of knowledge-making, as neither of the two can or should live on their own. The challenge has to do with the ability and possibility given to

[5] https://www.slu.se/svalur

co-create knowledge on common arenas, and take part in placemaking activities, citizen science programs, and monitoring efforts.

Conclusion

The above stories all seem to echo what Achille Mbembe (2013) indicates that "inhabitants situated in the cross fires of trajectories of sense and subjugation take and do what they can to create fugitive, slippery spaces" (*apud* SIMONE, 2016: 137). And importantly, such creativity and ability to generate new relations and new spaces must be viewed alongside a more critical understanding of "rootedness" and "inhabitability". That there are multiple ways of interacting with landscapes that are not only based on a rooted and historical relationship with a place, and that there are multiple ways of knowing how a place is un/inhabitable beyond the scientific indices. Following Simone (2016) and Woods (2019), we have in this article illustrated how inhabitability has been used and presented as fixed in one mode of habitation, often the romantic and idealistic picture of people living comfortably and harmoniously at a certain location, stable and secure. In reality, however, and certainly in many High Arctic areas and in this case Svalbard, inhabitability requires a process of negotiating among different conditions. We thus suggest a shift away from the rigid use of inhabitability to pay more attention to the contention and tensions that always emerge in the complex and dynamic process of inhabiting and uninhabiting. In particular the often-neglected process of uninhabiting may address some of the inherent power structures of transient places like Svalbard. Such an approach of viewing places and their inhabitants will hopefully open up more space for discussing questions raised in the beginning of this paper, on what it means to inhabit a place and who has the right to decide that. A more reflective politics of living and envisioning hopefully will then be a possible outcome of such an effort.

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