

Discussion Article

The Arctic Fable and the Unbearable Question

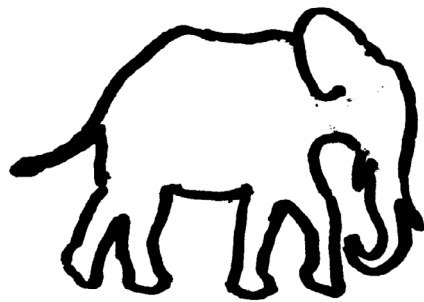
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Abstract

This discussion article addresses the means and matters that constitute a claimed entity known as ‘the Arctic’. A polemic, poetic and problematising reading of the Arctic is conducted by using different parables, metaphors and literature displaying elephant as their centrepiece. They enable to illustrate the Arctic as a subjective aspect, disciplinary practice, product of power and knowledge, and imaginary lost object. These conditions are finally addressed with the unbearable question, formulated to either liberate or burden the ones who are the practitioners of Arctic studies.

Keywords

The Arctic, science, discipline, knowledge, power

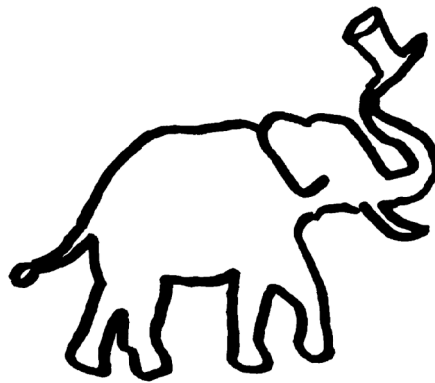


“If we lose the Arctic, we lose the whole world” (Office of the President of the Republic of Finland, 2017). President Sauli Niinistö gave this statement at the Arctic Forum in Arkhangelsk on 30th March 2017 against a backdrop of disastrous outcomes of climatic and environmental changes, first perceived and experienced in the Arctic region yet will inevitably negatively influence the rest of the world. In 2023, due to Russian military aggression and the counteractions taken by the Western world, we have ruled out, and therefore arguably now lost, half of the Arctic while scientific cooperation in Russian territory is mainly suspended. It could then be claimed that we have also already lost half of the world.

Burdened by this humanitarian and environmental crisis, what if I were to say that the Arctic is already lost? To be more precise, the Arctic has always been beyond our reach, rather serving as a bearing than a real place to reign over – that the Arctic is actually, by its very nature, a lost object in the Lacanian sense. This means that there is nothing to lose since there was nothing to be lost in the first place. Not a whole nor a half. What we perceive or imagine to be the Arctic is rather a fable. What strange fruit does this kind of claim bear? Bear with me while I try to address the elephant in the room.

Let us begin by pointing out the weight of this nonexistence with another reading of the “if” sentence. As mentioned, the quote of losing the Arctic may be read through the environmental policy discourse, but there is also at least one other possible political reading of the sentence. This emerges if we address the question of who the “we” is in this sentence, and therefore, what exactly does losing the world mean? Is it to be read as in humanity and its shared world, or something different? Markku Heikkilä (2019) used the “what if” quote in the title of a book that addresses the development of the Finnish arctic thinking (or policy) from the 1980s to the current (or 2019) day, including the announcement that Finland is an entirely arctic country, contrasting with one of the common definitions of the Arctic that only includes north of the Arctic Circle.

As the presented examples are different facets of political and policy discourses, they play a significant role in how, for example, Finland positions or announces itself in relation to this given entity. If Finland is entirely Arctic, losing the Arctic would mean that Finland loses its political significance. Therefore, if we (read as Finland) lose the Arctic, we lose the whole world (our place and significance in it). The Arctic is important for ‘us’ because we ought to be important and exceptional, possessing arctic know-how that others cannot do without. All the knowledge generated through that position of Arctic exceptionalism is, in a Foucauldian sense, producing power as well. That leads to the question: How does the Arctic become a body of knowledge and power intertwined? Let us ask the elephant.

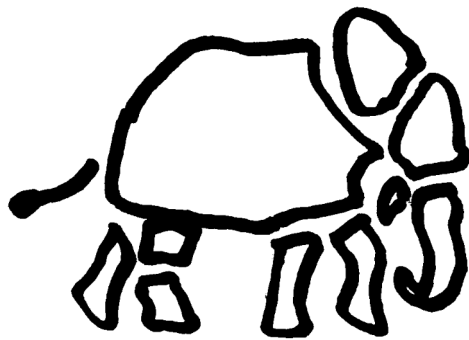


In the book *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1943), the narrator says that his drawing did not represent a hat, but a boa constrictor digesting an elephant. This reveals how adults perceive the drawing of a child, giving it a defined meaning and addressing it as a familiar object. When the narrator, as a child, draws a dissection of the hat to prove that the bump is actually an elephant being digested, the adults find this revelation unpleasant and direct the child's attention towards such subjects as geography, history, arithmetic, and grammar. The child, who by addressing questions tries to make sense of the problematic world, is in reverse subjected to discipline(s). Looking back to one's own education, school first divided the world into different subjects. The further education proceeded, subjects began to share more common ground and appeared to address the same entities in different ways and forms. This division is best illustrated by another elephant in a parable with blind men.

In the story, a group of blind men, who have never come across an elephant, are trying to discover its nature by touching it. Each of the men gives a different account of what they have encountered based on their limited reach to a specific part of the elephant's body. Descriptions vary from tree trunk to fan, wall, rope and spear, whether they have touched a leg, a side, an ear, a tail or a tusk. Besides illustrating the meaning of a limited subjective experience grounded in one's position related to the encountered phenomenon, this also depicts the ways in which Arctic studies are conducted from various scholarly standpoints.

The Arctic is not a science, or at least there is no unified Nordic or Scandinavian science for the Arctic (Bravo and Sörlin, 2002a, p. vii). Rather, it is a field of study, in touch with a multiplicity of sciences and disciplines. This only makes sense if we look at the given characteristics of the Arctic which is neither a fixed geographical, hydrological, biological, historical nor politically coherent geopolitical, socio-cultural or geophysical unit (see Sale, 2008, pp. 15–21), consisting of land, sea and ice, covering areas from eight states and three continents. Therefore, it becomes evident that the “elephant” is too large to grasp and be held by a single branch of study. It is a phenomenon approached from different angles and only joint efforts provide a fuller image of its being and characteristics, whether one depicts it in terms of tree lines, drainage basins, polar nights, celestial bodies, indigenous habitation or political discourse.

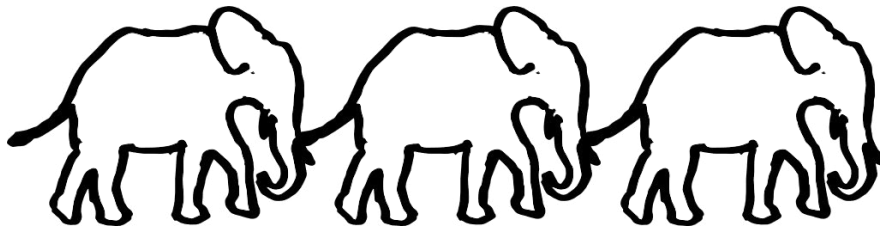
In the parable, the men assume that they are describing the same phenomenal entity, even though their understanding of it drastically differs. In other words, it is presumed that the elephant exists as one articulated whole. Even though there are changing definitions emerging from different bodies of knowledge investigating the Arctic, and they may drastically differ with their sources of evidence, all of them rely on its existence. How authentic then is the constitution and coherence of this entity?



Another elephant appears in Haruki Murakami's (1993) short story *The Dancing Dwarf*. It presents an elephant factory that constructs elephants in a Fordian fashion, assembling them from separate body parts. The manufacturing of the elephant is a very complex process due to the sheer size of the end product and therefore requires several departments to make the different parts, such as ears, heads, trunks and toenails. If personnel only work in one of the departments, the impression of manufacturing an elephant is comparable to the conception of the blind men. In the factory, it becomes obvious that the elephants produced there are not made from parts taken from one entity, but rather different characteristic objects are brought together and articulated as an elephant, where articulation literally means a joining of parts.

What adds to the complexity of the matter is that rather than being assembled, the elephant is reconstituted. This is because the factory elephants are only one-fifth genuine and four-fifths imitation. The people who view the elephant or the elephant itself are not aware of, or interested in, which parts are authentic as long as the whole functions properly. The need to add on the imitated parts, or to split the genuine into different functioning bodies, is a response to the want of the people. Therefore, answering this growing demand for elephants leads to authenticity and imitation not only becoming mixed but also indifferent. It does not matter what they are as long as they fulfil the material function of an elephant.

If the Arctic (the elephant) is considered first as a studied entity, and the scientists who try to get a hold of it as the blind men, what is the factory which produces and assembles it? In short, it may be called scientific practice. In written histories, science has been central in the formation of the Arctic region, applying and developing specific vocabulary to cover it, draw its boundaries and explain its nature. The 'manufacturing' happens in the field studies and academic departments through "collecting, sketching, measuring, recording, classifying" (Bravo and Sörlin, 2002b, p. 18) as the means of knowing and describing, or with a more radical post-modern, post-structural and new materialistic reading as the means of being made to be known. If the Arctic is the product of scientific practice, what function is it produced for? It possibly bears the same meanings as the elephant: a behemothian state of nature and the symbol of the Orient(alism).



Historically, the Arctic has functioned as a vast natural laboratory for field sciences (Bravo and Sörlin, 2002a, vii). There are a variety of possible reasons for this. For the so-called Western perception and intellectual history, the Arctic emerges as Ultima Thule (see Lainemaa and Nurminen, 2001), the unknown northern periphery of the known world, a behemoth-like primeval chaos to be subjected to godly order. Additionally, due to a lack of knowledge on the past of the human lives lived in the area before the explorations of Western seafarers, it may appear as ahistorical and being more about nature than culture. The naturalness of this part of the world is partially highlighted due to the sparse population and natural resource subsistence economies. Perceiving the indigenous peoples of the region strongly in the context of nature is derived from early historical accounts of Western perceptions and relatively recent applied scientific discourses and terminology, such as adaptation and resilience, which are commonly used in the area of natural sciences. Studies on ingenious ontologies and cosmologies sometimes address closer kinship to entities or phenomena that in the Western sciences are categorised as belonging to nature rather than human relations.

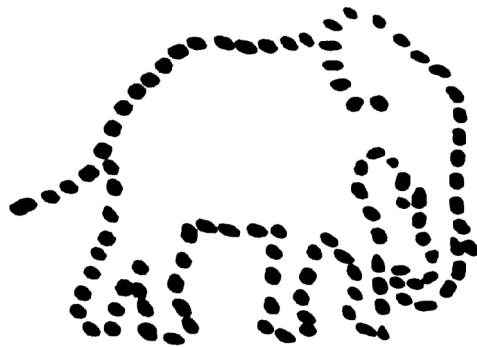
Another characteristic brought by indigeneity is the idea of originating from that place, the origins of tradition, sustaining and permanence. This permanence also emerges in terms such as permafrost, which among the glaciers contains even the remains of prehistorical life forms such as mammoths. This picture of the origins and permanence is only half of an arc. The second half, keeping the arc standing, is what the permanence is decoupled with, that is the change and development. While these terms of change challenge stability, this relational comparison is what gives meaning to both. Therefore, the Arctic in a way exists in this tension, between these polar oppositions. Therefore, the experimental field lab is capable of studying the influences of changing climate, permafrost that melts, treeless tundra that becomes greener, different dimensions of sustainable development, and indigenous resilience, to mention a few.

As the given example on the experimentation already indicates, the so-called authentic and imitated parts are at play, many of which are arguably derived from the authenticity of the Arctic and some which are presented as foreign concepts introduced to it. It therefore functions as a playfield for a cultural imagination (see Bravo and Sörlin, 2002a, p. vii). Here, the elephant marches in as an exotic beast of the Orient. Where the Arctic experimentation consists of two opposing elements, stability and change, Europe or the West owes its meaning to its counterpart. The West defined the Orient as its opposite without any ontological stability, besides the imaginary one based on this identity deriving from difference (Nordin and Ojala, 2018, p. 88). Sometimes this line of difference is not drawn by longitude but by latitude. For example, the claim of a Nordic state to become a civilised European nation required an “internal Other” (Hiltunen, 2019, p. 87), to place and displace those features that the national project wanted to close outside of its essence, to say what I am based on what I am not. “Exotic” used to stand for flora and fauna (Schaper et al., 2020, p. 118). In racist discourse, exotic became a constructed counterpart to the conceited centre (Nordin and Ojala, 2018, p. 63). When combining exoticising orientalism with scientific field experiment, the ‘foreign’ elements may lead to another type of internalised Other in the attempt to include indigenous knowledge in Arctic studies (Bravo and Sörlin, 2002b, p. 5). In these processes of including the traditional in the

modern, the authentic and imitations get profoundly mixed, forming a functional whole. Despite how asymmetric the “division of power between the describer and the described” is, it is still “a form of representation” (Thisted, 2002, pp. 328–329).

The scientific field experiment is a material practice for identity-making for the Arctic (Bravo and Sörlin, 2002a, p. vii), or as the Arctic by articulating different and differentiated parts together and establishing the means of knowing and describing the colonial frontier (ibid., 2002b, p. 18). The same goes trunk-to-tail with geopolitics, where the Arctic is perceived as a homogenous periphery (ibid., 2002a, p. vii) for the centre. Contents might change, but the overall structure remains the same (Harbsmeier, 2002, p. 66).

Knowledge, in the Arctic context, is bound to the history and practice of colonialism, making ‘knowing the Arctic’ arguably a colonial practice deriving from the interest to capture this free-roaming unruly and wild beast. Perhaps capturing is the wrong word. Rather, this knowledge-in-making casts the Arctic – it produces rather than subordinates. This knowledge cuts, attaches and formulates, instead of capturing something that is already out there. In terms of Arctic studies, is there a “desire that lies behind modern science” (Lacan, 1973, p. 160) or rather “the drive not to know” (Miller, 1986, p. VI) how a humane desire and the nature of the Arctic are closing in such that it is impossible to tell them apart?

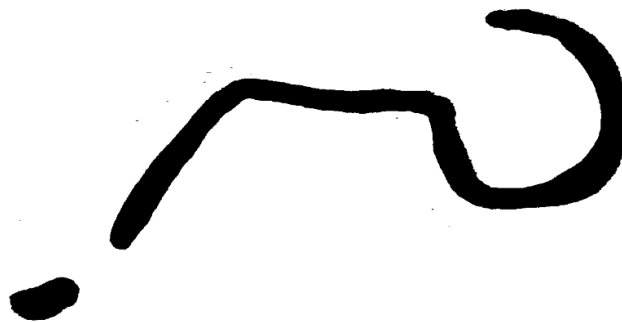


To weigh up this question, we have to meet the last elephant and its keeper. In Murakami's (1993) short story *The Elephant Vanishes*, both the elephant and its keeper suddenly disappear from a zoo. The disappearance cannot go unnoticed since the community and authorities need to react to a situation where a local icon has disappeared, a potentially dangerous natural force is let loose, or someone's property has been taken. The presence of the elephant and its keeper is only apparent in those material bindings from which they are now absent. The elephant is therefore not articulated as a whole but as a hole, a lack in the picture that is emphasised only by the empty frame.

What has kept the elephant in the zoo thus far is the chain that is now left empty. If the elephant is the unruly phenomenon disciplined and displayed for the audience, the chain is then evidently what discipline does to it. Following Frank Herbert (1984), most of the discipline is designed to limit, not to liberate. As mentioned previously, there is no single science of the Arctic, yet there is a collection of disciplines to discipline it. If they do not give full control, at least they give means to manage it. So, the chain does not capture the elephant from some preceding reality but the chain casts the leg, holding it together, and displaying it for the audience.

The only witness before the disappearance claimed that the difference in size between the keeper and the elephant had shrunk. It seems as if the touching by the hands of the blind men, that brought the Arctic into the sphere of subjective knowledge, and the elephant factory that turned the elephant into a manufactured and multiplied product, has left so many fingerprints and handholds to the elephant that even in its elephant shape, it carries the shape of human imprints. Our interests, our reasoning, and our goals, whether scientific, economic or political, have become so significant in shaping the Arctic that we can no longer tell them apart from what they have touched upon.

What's more, when the elephant disappears, so does its keeper. What would be the reasoning behind that? Well, if the elephant disappears, what is left of the elephant keeper? The elephant is the kept object, and the keeper is the active restraining subject that comes into being, or is defined through, the act of keeping the named object. If there is no elephant, there is no keeping and vice versa, an unkept elephant may freely vanish. So, when the elephant vanishes, so does its keeper, who is defined only by the act and the objective of such an act. Science and scientists make one another, and identities and agency are established in the enactment. What is left are the material artefacts of this co-existence. While the Arctic is the studied, displayed and managed object of science, it is shaped and kept in the artefacts of science, disciplines and academic practice, whether as painted on canvas, measurements on a chart, a photograph taken, or words written on paper. These representations convince us that there was something to present in the first place.



So, after the elephant and its keeper have vanished leaving only bareness behind, anyone touching upon the subject of “the Arctic” must come to terms with a question that I address as *the unbearable question*. For scientific inquiry, a question fills one with meaning. It provides motivation, legitimacy and orientation towards a concluding answer, or a set of new questions to proceed towards. Questions give what is known in navigation as a bearing, that expresses the relation between where one is heading and what the set target is. Questions are the reason to continue in the vastness of the undefined world of phenomena, as every academic work is supposed to begin with one, forming the basis for each trial. Questions to be answered are the aim of disciplinary practice, where every discipline works in relation to specific questions, burdening the inquirer with specific methods, meanings and traditions. Answering a question solidifies the grounds for each discipline and science.

Responding to an unbearable question is the undoing of meaning, rudiments, and direction. It questions not only the basic assumptions of a discipline, but furthermore, the very reasons for the existence of such a discipline, scientific reason, legitimacy, ethics and truthfulness of science. If such questioning would reveal the fabricated parts amongst the fragments of authenticity, these would prove to be borrowed, stolen, illegal or damaging, proof of abuse of power, violence, dominance,

hypocrisy and ignorance. Facing an unbearable question will lead to existential crises and uneased feelings of exposure, loss, shame and guilt. There are two ways to meet the question: either one dismisses and evades it, remaining in the fabrication, or embraces it, leading to disciplinary self-annihilation. The unbearable question, if responded to, can liberate from the discipline, its histories of violence, and from the reasons for scientific inquiry. An unbearable question unburdens you from all reason, beyond reasonable doubt. You don't have to bear it anymore.

The unbearable question concerning the Arctic, by imitating Murakami's (1993) words, is: *What if the Arctic reality is not something to convey to people but something to make, where it is not a question of make believe that it is out there but simply forgetting that there isn't one?* Therefore, the answer to the unbearable question of the Arctic, the elephant in the room, is that the Arctic, to be preserved, as such, does not exist, and there is no return to that which never was. This means that there is no Arctic to be lost, no Arctic to be found, no Arctic to be saved, not a whole nor a half. The Arctic does not matter, and therefore, those who bear the Arctic, *do not matter* either.

Is this an unbearable answer? Perhaps this is not wrong but a rather merciless and gruesome reading of the answer. Can we read the response not through a nihilist account but a new materialistic one? Even if one strives towards nothingness by undoing connections and relations, deconstructing them "ad infinitum [...] they are knitting together again in response" (Derrida, 1967, p. 287). If the contents of the Arctic are bare in the light of evidence, we literally *do matter* through the discursive material practices conducting the Arctic. Nothingness echoes to be fulfilled. It does not unburden but makes one its bearer. The bare truth about the Arctic comes down to humans. We, you and me, as authors, readers, leaders, lecturers or the audience, as the people and representatives, witness, withstand, and participate in the making of the Arctic and comprehending its (im)possibilities. That burdens us with responsibility, yet, also with the danger of carrying it on with unbearable lightness. While the unbearable question addresses academics as the exercisers of disciplinary power through their scientific practice, articulating the Arctic goes beyond scholarly works to anyone who dares to pronounce any truths about it.

This deconstruction and new materialistic articulation of the Arctic obviously does not concern only the Arctic. The Arctic, however exceptional, is not exceptional in its exceptionality compared to any other region or entity. It is not different or indifferent when it comes to power politics, nations, race, gender or colonialism. In other words, the "Arctic is not only global but – precisely because it is global – no different from any other region in terms of being increasingly subject to politico-strategic (or other kinds of) dynamics" (Käpylä and Mikkola, 2015, p. 4). Thereafter, this manufactured Arctic is a picture of the powers that invest in it, shaped by scientific practice and based on outsiders' views of those who are on the inside. Following Oscar Wilde (1890), it is not the sitter who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who reveals himself in the painting. And here we are, already at work addressing the republican elephant in a china shop to maintain a small Nordic state's foothold on our slippery globe.

Acknowledgements. This discussion article is based on the doctoral dissertation *Homunculus: Bearing incorporeal articulations* (Vola, 2022a), related academic lectio praecursoria, and the book chapter *Aesthetics* (Vola, 2022b). Between 2013–2022, the author received funding from The Arctic in a Changing World - doctoral programme (University of Lapland), The Finnish Cultural Foundation's regional fund of Lapland, the Oscar Öflund Foundation, The Foundation for Economic Education, and the Esko Riepula Grant from the University of Lapland.

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