

# LANDSCAPE AND VISION IN GRETEL EHRlich'S *THIS COLD HEAVEN: SEVEN SEASONS IN GREENLAND*

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“So much in the Arctic has to do with blindness and seeing.”<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Gretel Ehrlich's *This Cold Heaven: Seven Seasons in Greenland* (2001) is the narrative of the author's "seven years of Arctic peregrinations" to the coast of northwestern Greenland (Ehrlich 2001, xi). Part nature writing, part modern travel writing, and overtly signaling the influence and legacy of Arctic geographer and ethnographer Knud Rasmussen, the text can be read as an extension of traditional Arctic exploration narratives, but one which includes an inner quest motif that is characteristic of travel writing and central to nature writing (Youngs 2013, 47, 60; Scheese 2002, 6). In *This Cold Heaven*, as in most nature writing, this inner quest motif involves a search for an understanding of one's place within the natural world. Accordingly, human relationships with the natural world play a vital part in the personal, cultural and geographical explorations the text offers.

"I am nothing. I see all." Like the quotation introducing this article, the epigraph to Ehrlich's text signals a preoccupation with vision; a sense central to our relationship with the natural world. By quoting Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Nature," Ehrlich emphasizes her text's adherence to a Romantic transcendentalist tradition in which the seeing eye is understood to be an instrument of the mind that enables metaphysical reflection. Yet paying homage to the literary tradition of which her text is part does not blind Ehrlich to the realization that every (human) act of seeing carries ideological constraints or "frames." In traveling to Greenland to view its landscapes Ehrlich is herself guilty of framing it according to modern Western conceptions of vision and of landscapes. However, the way these landscapes are presented in the text allows for a reading of them that expose the shortcomings of geographical modes of knowledge and conceptions of space.

As theoreticians from geography and feminism have in the past decades asserted, the very idea of landscape implies a way of seeing the world that is associated with a kind of "visual ideology" (Cosgrove 1985, 46, 47; Rose 1993, 91). Denis Cosgrove has traced this aspect of the idea of landscape back to early Renaissance theories of space, and in particular to Leon Battista Alberti's influential work on linear perspective. With the linear perspective, Cosgrove argues, forms in space come to vary with the angle and distance of vision, and "[v]isual space [becomes] the property of the individual detached observer" (Cosgrove 1985, 49). Historically, this theoretical power over space has been closely associated with "the appropriation of real space as property, or territory" (Cosgrove 1985, 55). Landscape therefore represents a visual

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<sup>1</sup> Significantly, this statement occurs twice in *This Cold Heaven* (Ehrlich 2001, 41, 194).

ideology insofar as it represents only a partial view of the world (Rose 1993, 91): the partial view of a distanced and ordering power.

Ehrlich aims to portray the landscapes of Greenland in a way that frees them from the constraints of the visual ideology associated with Western culture's idea of landscape. This, however, is no easy task in a natural environment dominated by "wide and grand views" that, according to Rose, invite the "grand sweep" of the detached observer's ordering vision (Rose 1993, 112). To prevent her depictions from becoming mere reproductions of former geographically oriented exploration narratives, Ehrlich uses Knud Rasmussen's descriptions of Inuit culture and mythology as points of departure for her own investigations into the nature of relationship with this natural environment. Due to his partly Inuit heritage and upbringing in Greenland, Danish Rasmussen was a hybrid figure familiar with both the language and the "cultural grammar" of the Inuit (Brøgger 2011, 181). He performed three Thule expeditions in which he explored both the geography and the cultures of Greenland, but is perhaps most famous for his Fifth Thule Expedition across Arctic America (1921–1924). Ehrlich makes extensive references to the expedition reports from Rasmussen's Second and Fifth Thule expeditions, as well as to his earlier report from the Danish Literary Expedition of 1902–1904.<sup>2</sup> The references serve to accentuate Rasmussen's implicit understanding of the Inuit as the first inhabitants and explorers of the Arctic. Accordingly, such indigenous explorers' narratives of the land – in forms written down by Rasmussen at the beginning of the twentieth century and related to Ehrlich by contemporary (Inuit, part Inuit and Danish) Greenlanders – become of vital importance to Ehrlich's project of depicting the Greenlandic landscapes in ways less distanced and controlling than that of former Western explorer narratives. In this manner the text sets out to explore what Kirsten Thisted describes as "a special sense of geography" identifiable in Rasmussen's Fifth Thule Expedition: a sense of geography "not only to do with landscape, but first and foremost with the subjective relation" between specific landscapes and the humans who dwell in them (Thisted 2010, 59–60).<sup>3</sup>

While Rasmussen's sense of geography involved a subjective relation between landscapes and their indigenous inhabitants, Ehrlich's text uses indigenous narratives and ways of interacting with the landscape as means through which the narrator's own subjective relationship with the landscape can be developed. The narrator's aim seems to be to create a context-specific and culturally informed narrative in which the vision of the landscape is brought closer to the local (and indigenous) without

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<sup>2</sup> Most references to Rasmussen's published reports from the Fifth Thule Expedition as well as the English published account of this journey, *Across Arctic America* (Rasmussen [1927] 1999), are clearly identified in Ehrlich's text. So are references to *Greenland by the Polar Sea* (Rasmussen 1921), the English published account of the Second Thule Expedition, most of which contain landscape depictions or accounts of Rasmussen and his party's experiences. Incorporated as a kind of background ethnographic knowledge and largely left unidentified are references to Polar Eskimo myths and narratives published in Rasmussen's account of the Danish Literary Expedition, *The People of the Polar North* (Rasmussen [1908] 1975).

<sup>3</sup> A similar sense of geography is arguably also present in the other of Rasmussen's texts referred to in this article.

claiming to represent this view or negating the narrator's own relative cultural positioning. With this article I hope to show how Ehrlich's text uses Inuit narratives and ontologies that share perspectives with feminist theories on space and subjectivity to challenge our Western modern culture's conceptions of vision and landscape. I will explore how the narrator's experiences of landscapes determined by weather, ice and light conditions create novel sensations that display and disrupt the boundaries through which Western naturalized categories of the physical environment as well as of the subject are defined. In bringing the boundaries, the embodied affinities and in-between identities at play within Ehrlich's landscape depictions to the fore, I hope to show how her travel narrative gradually develops away from a rationalist and objectifying form of geography towards a different and more embodied perception of landscape that acknowledges rather than hides the otherness inherent in Greenland's landscapes.

### **Geography from a Feminist Perspective**

In *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, Donna Haraway points out how "[t]he Western eye [seeking knowledge] has fundamentally been a wandering eye, a travelling lens. These peregrinations have often been violent and insistent on mirrors for a conquering self" (Haraway 1991, 192). Pointing to how Descartes defined rational knowledge in terms of "independence from the social position of the knower" (Rose 1993, 6), feminist theories of the past decades have developed the notion that

[m]asculinist rationality is a form of knowledge which assumes a knower who believes he can separate himself from his body, emotion, values, past and so on, so that he and his thought are autonomous, context-free and objective. [...] [T]he assumption of an objectivity untainted by any particular social position allows this kind of rationality to claim itself as universal. (Rose 1993, 7)

By making such claims to universality, the masculinist rational subject achieves two things. It can claim the knowledge it produces to be exhaustive, hence denying the possibility of other forms of knowledge. It can further limit its conception of difference to differences *between* masculine rational subjects, thereby "underpinning [difference with] the Same-ness of the masculine subject position" (Rose 1993, 7). In this way the rational masculine subject recognizes difference only in terms of "mirror images" of the self, while denying the existence of other forms of knowledge and subjectivity.

In their discussions of feminism and geography, Gillian Rose, Liz Bondi and Mona Domosh point to connections between geographical exploration and a masculinist conception of rationality. Even in "early ventures of discovery and exploration," Bondi and Domosh write, "the ability of the explorer to remain detached from new and unfamiliar landscapes was essential" to the production of the kind of transcendent visions representing neutral and valuable knowledge (Bondi and Domosh 1992, 203). The production of these detached and universal "claims to know" in turn involved tacit "claim[s] to territory" (Rose 1993, 148). Great territories: because no specificities contaminate the masculine subject's position, he

can claim to see – and hence indirectly claim – “everywhere from nowhere” (Rose 1993, 149). But the masculine subject’s territories possess the peculiar characteristic that whatever is seen – and thereby known – is seen and known in relation to the Same. This is why, Rose claims, Others of all kinds experience space conceptualized by the masculinist rational subject to be oppressive (149). Not only does this master subject believe itself to be detached and independent of its Others; the spaces claimed by it also obliterates their existence.

As Rose points out, “[t]he project of the subject of feminism is to comprehend the ‘positivity of otherness’” (Rose 1993, 150). This is done by exposing the master subject’s unacknowledged fragmentation and “dependence on his Others” (Rose 1993, 149). Otherness is recognized as part of the *spaces* conceptualized by the self, and indeed of the very *nature* of the self. In Haraway’s formulation, the self is “partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and *therefore* able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another” (Haraway 1991, 193). By recognizing the self to be a relationally constituted entity, feminist theory denies the possibility of the autonomous, *context-free and therefore objective* position of the master subject. Instead it reveals the power relations involved in this position, and in the associated “claims to see space transparently” (Rose 1993, 160).

This has profound consequences for our conceptions of vision, and by extension for what counts as objectivity. After having exposed the “unmarked gaze” from “nowhere” to be a fictional construct, feminist theory re-contextualizes vision within the perceiving subject’s body. In this manner it works to reclaim vision, “the sensory system that has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body” (Haraway 1991, 188). Rather than serving to “distance the knowing subject from everybody and everything,” vision now comes to depend upon particular and specific embodied positioning within contexts (Haraway 1991, 188). The “*situated knowledges*” produced through these particular and embodied forms of vision represent a new form of “feminist objectivity” (Haraway 1991, 188). Implicit in this feminist form of objectivity lies a new responsibility for knowledge production – an accountability for “what we learn how to see” – largely missing in rationalist and transcendental notions of objectivity (Haraway 1991, 190). Learning to see from specific and embodied positions within a larger field of vision, which is as multi-dimensional as subjectivity itself, is also a way of learning to “see together [with others] without claiming to be another” (Haraway 1991, 193). As we shall see, Ehrlich’s experiences of traveling the northwestern part of Greenland by dogsled can be read as a learning process towards a similar embodied way seeing – and seeing with – others.

### **Polar Night: Rationalist Frustrations**

As described in *This Cold Heaven* (hereafter *CH*) Ehrlich’s first journey to Greenland takes her to Uummannaq in January, when the Arctic polar night shrouds this world in darkness. The sources of light and darkness seem at this time of year reversed: the “sky [is] dark blue, but the snow [gives] off its own diffused light, as if the sun had been buried beneath the ground and was trying to get out” (*CH* 18). On a helicopter journey northwards from Ilulissat to Uummannaq, Ehrlich imagines “Greenland’s light” in the form of “a ladder of suns which, like candles, had been

blown out one by one” (CH 19). Indeed, “[t]he island of Greenland itself was a ladder reaching for the North Pole, each step bringing progressively colder weather and darker skies” (CH 18). Through this reversal of religious imagery associated with Jacob’s dream (Genesis 28:10–22) the text introduces Western Christian symbolic associations between light, enlightenment and rationality and allows these full play in the polar night. The moon’s irrationality is emphasized both in its shape, which is that of “a severed head with its brow chipped off,” and in its behavior in falling from the sky and into the arms of our traveler (CH 10). In its subdued light, the landscape similarly gets a touch of the irrational. “[T]he land [becomes] an ocean that [breaks] against bodies of water, shattering into islands big and small,” and icebergs floating southwards towards their own destruction “collaps[e] in sudden heat as if from a fit of laughter” (CH 8).

However, the Christian imagery that renders this landscape irrational is not the only one at play within the text. Ehrlich reports how Uummanaq Mountain “jut[s] up behind the town like a harpoon” and catches “light like the poisoned tip of an arrow” (CH 35). Similarly, on an earlier ferry ride to Uummanaq, Ehrlich watches “[a] pod of ringed seals burst[] out of the water, then d[ive], leaving in their place a piece of green ice shaped like a harpoon” (CH 9). The presence of this imagery originating in indigenous hunting practices hints towards the way Western rational conceptions of landscape will in this text be challenged by more relational conceptions implicit in the ontology of Inuit hunter cultures. At this opening part of the text, however, the traditional Inuit hunters’ world is figured in terms of a pre-modern world “beyond” the visible and rational. This is exemplified in the way Ehrlich’s journey to Greenland is described both in terms of a movement beyond time (CH 8) and a passing between realms. On her initial journey from Arctic Canada to Greenland, Ehrlich’s plane was followed by a sundog; “a rainbowlike ring around the sun” forming “a bright porthole into an Arctic winter’s permanent night” (CH 4). This natural phenomenon is associated with worlds available to Inuit shamans beyond the immediately visible. In this sense the Greenlandic landscapes presented in Ehrlich’s text from the very onset represent a boundary challenging conceptions of light and darkness, the rational and the irrational, new and old ways of knowing. Their portrayal activates questions regarding forms of knowledge in relation to cultural and physical context. At first it does so in a manner that furthers the image of northern Greenland as a pre-modern land of myth. However, as the text progresses, this image gradually changes.

Ehrlich makes extensive use of Greenlandic myths to give her readers an initial sense of the otherworldliness, irrationality and instability of Greenlandic landscapes. For in Greenlandic mythology boundaries – be they physical or biological – were never stable.

In the dark months, stories were told about how earth, humans, dogs and death came to be. [...] A man could become an iceberg; a shaman could live as a bear, suckle two cubs, then return to being a shaman again. The outward forms differed, but not the essential nature. People and animals talked to each other, shared a common language, and changed skins on a whim. Interspecies erotics thrived. (CH 32)

Incredible and irrational from a Western point of view, the stories here alluded to (and to which the text makes repeated references) serve to introduce the notion of porosity of subject boundaries that gradually becomes important to the text's understanding of landscape. They reflect the traditional Inuit belief that humans are part of "an originally undifferentiated universe in which the boundaries between the human and nonhuman, the spiritual and the material, [are] shifting and permeable" (Fienup-Riordan 1994, 46). This ontology shares with the feminist theories discussed above an understanding of subjectivity in terms of a relational "positioning *in* the world, [a] reaching out into the environment – and connecting with other selves" (Ingold 2011, 103). However, whereas feminist theories (with the exception of Haraway's; see below) generally deal with relationships between humans, subjectivity and the concept of sociality is in Inuit ontology not restricted to the human. This accounts for the centrality of the activity of hunting in Inuit ontology. Hunting is perceived as that through which the hunter sustains a relationship with animal others and the surrounding environment; as a world-renewing activity in which both hunter and prey "enfold[] into its inner constitution the principle of relationship to the other" (Ingold 2011, 143).

The opening passages of Ehrlich's text express the Western rational subject's frustration with a world that is too dark to be clearly seen, and whose physical qualities defy stable categorization. The icy Greenlandic landscapes hint at possibilities of passages between worlds, and associates the activity of hunting with these boundary transgressions. However, due to her still distinctly Western mindset and inability to grasp the ontological implications of Greenlandic mythology and ways of life, the characteristics of the landscape confuses and disorients Ehrlich. Its darkness offers no remedy in the form of "daylight and [the] comprehension that [comes] with light," and represent to her things and "events whose presences are only known by their invisibility" (*CH* 36). Because of the way seeing is in Western cultures associated with knowing, and "the desire for full knowledge is indicated by transparency, visibility and perception" (Rose 1993, 87), the darkness obscuring the landscape signals its resistance to inclusion into this foreign traveler's categories of knowledge. In a symbolically significant scene, the darkness outside blocks the view of the landscape from Ehrlich's candle-lit room in Uummannaq by making the windowpane act like a mirror. Thus even the transparent window offers Ehrlich no view of the world she has come to observe (*CH* 37). Obscuring vision, the Greenlandic landscape hides its otherness from this Western, "wandering eye."

The window in Ehrlich's room, which merely reflects her own image back at her, signals that she still possesses Western rationalist notions about subjectivity. These notions prevent her from truly seeing the Greenlandic landscape in its otherness. The fact that she consciously recognizes this visual blockage enhances her sense of isolation. Accordingly, at the end of the polar night we find Ehrlich lonely, "naked, careless, not quite destitute" in the darkness of a world bordering on the mythical, and highly sexualized (*CH* 40). She longs for sunlight and for vision's clear definitions of things.

Change comes the day the sun returns to Uummannaq. As sunlight hits her body, and she can see herself defined in the shape of her shadow on the snow, Ehrlich for a brief moment feels her existence in this landscape confirmed. However, the sunlight

soon fades and “shadows dwindle to nothingness” again (CH 43). The exultant “I am” brought on by the glimpse of light lasts a moment only, and Ehrlich finds herself slipping into an undefined “I am not I” (CH 43). From this point onwards, the text challenges the Western rationalist conception of the subject by exploring an alternative form of subjectivity in which the boundaries of the “I am” are less distinct, and in which otherness is recognized – as part of the self and as part of the landscape. Her desire for true knowledge of the Greenlandic landscape frustrated by the rational subject’s self-reflections, Ehrlich chooses a more feminist and local (Inuit) approach to learning to know this land in its otherness.

### **Light: Developing Bodily Sensibility**

As evident in the window scene discussed above, Ehrlich’s sense of detachment from the environment is coupled with a longing for bodily attachment. Such an attachment gradually develops during the course of her later journeys up the northwestern coast of Greenland, the next of which takes her to Illorsuit in summertime. In the continuous sunlight of Arctic summer there are no more allusions to Eskimo myths, and the text shifts mode towards the modern anthropological report. Yet even in this sunlit and rationalized narrative, there is a sense that the self is not entirely autonomous and stable. The different light regime influences Ehrlich physically. Deprived of darkness and the rest it offers to the senses, Ehrlich finds that her head begins to “turn[] with the sun, tropistically” (CH 96). Her breathing changes rhythm to “long slow pants, cougarlike” (CH 102). Short on melatonin, she feels “lit up, translucent,” unable to go against the rhythm of the light, even as it overturns her own bodily rhythm. Light seeps imperceptibly into her body and intoxicates it, attuning it to its pulse, which is also the pulse of the Illorsuit ocean strait and of village life (CH 110, 95). This rhythm of light and of the land governs all activity in Illorsuit. People can be seen taking off for fishing trips or flensing seals on the beach in the middle of the night, and only when cloudy weather momentarily blocks the incessant sunlight do all the town’s inhabitants suddenly seem inclined to sleep. The fact that her host’s clock has been broken for ten years signals how the everyday tasks in which people of Illorsuit engage are governed by rhythms intrinsic to the land rather than by the “uniform [and] homogenous” “astronomical” time measured by the clock (Ingold 2011, 195; CH 83). These rhythms take precedence because light is here not an outside phenomenon, but a bodily experience. The body, in turn, responds in (plant and) animal ways to these new environmental conditions.

Ehrlich’s new bodily sensibility has two important conditions, both of which are subtly introduced as she travels northwards from Uummannaq to Illorsuit. The first is an attunement to the perspective of the animal, a condition practically and symbolically met as Ehrlich switches mode of transportation from ferry to fishing boat. “Now,” she writes, “I found myself at the sea-birds’ and seals’ level and my perspective changed” (CH 78). Because the airline has lost her luggage, she travels in the chilly Greenlandic summer without proper clothing. Standing in the hull of the boat, she uses her books as shield against the weather. Among these books are those of Rockwell Kent and Knud Rasmussen, famous travelers to these lands before her. The former ended up in Illorsuit following a shipwreck, and like his, Ehrlich’s experiences in the north are conditioned by the state of being “shorn of property,

stripped of clothes, wandering” (*CH* 86). This scene (among several others) signals the way material dispossession is in Ehrlich’s text inscribed as a second condition of her growing bodily sensitivity and understanding of landscape. At the same time, however, this particular scene also reveals Ehrlich’s intellectual and intertextual reading of the landscape. Seemingly counteractive to her project of depicting her own embodied approach to the natural environment, her use of textual sources can be justified on the grounds that the major sources on which Ehrlich relies originate with authors who – like Ehrlich – in their own ways sought a more profound understanding of the Greenlandic landscapes (Kent through his artworks and Rasmussen through his ethnographic investigations).

The theme of dispossession takes on a more profound and bodily meaning in the accounts of the hardships Rasmussen and his fellow travelers suffered on their second Thule hunting-based anthropological excursion to the northwestern coast of Greenland. These hardships are reported in quite some detail in Ehrlich’s text (*CH* 63-65). In a state of extreme starvation (and the death of two of their colleagues), Rasmussen’s party eventually had to leave all their belongings behind in order to save their lives. “It was this experience [of the subsistence hunter’s life],” Ehrlich writes, “that gave [Rasmussen] the breadth of mind to understand the life of all polar people” and that made him, “in spirit and experience, one of them” (*CH* 64). That this change in understanding was coupled with bodily change is reflected in the words of Peter Freuchen, close friend and member of several of Rasmussen’s Thule expeditions, who upon his friend’s return wrote that “[t]he look of the icecap was upon him, months of starvation and hardship was written on his face” (qtd. in *CH* 74).

### **Dogs: New Bodily Affinities**

Kirsten Thisted has made the similar point that Rasmussen’s “slow and strenuous” travel by dogsled was vital to his ability to “understand the Inuit on their own premises” (Thisted 2010, 60). Sharing this mode of travel with the Inuit signals a certain cultural competence and practical skill in dealing with a challenging environment. If undertaken with an Inuit conception of sociality in mind, this mode of travel also has implications for human conceptions of subjectivity. This is what Ehrlich gradually discovers on her several dogsled hunting trips to the north.

Beyond the hope that they will sometime soon take her further north and into the landscapes of ice she longs to see, Greenlandic sled dogs seem to Ehrlich at first merely part of the general “Arctic clutter” present in, yet separate from, human society (*CH* 21). A closer inspection of the text, however, reveals that the sled dogs are most often found on the border between human society and the natural world; in hundreds or thousands eagerly awaiting the commencement of hunting trips on the sea ice just below seaside villages, or camped on the sea ice just beyond their owner’s tents (*CH* 186). This signals the way dogs are in this text, like in Inuit ontology, beings in-between categories. Traditionally considered animal members of human society, Inuit sled dogs are endowed with personal names and social identities

(Laugrand and Oosten 2002, 91, 94).<sup>4</sup> In addition to serving humans in terms of travel, tracking of prey, and warning and warding off danger, dogs are in Inuit mythology associated both with the beginning of life, and with its end (Rasmussen [1908] 1975, 81, 104–5; Laugrand and Oosten 2002, 91, 96). They take on significance for the way they form and preserve the boundaries between different forms or worlds of being. Through conversations with her local Inuit hunter guide, Jens Danielsen, Ehrlich comes to understand the close relationship between the hunters and their dogs as an expression of long cultural ties and contemporary dependence<sup>5</sup>. The importance ascribed to these relationships is illustrated by the way an old hunter insists that he looks for the same qualities in both the dogs and the humans he associates himself with (*CH* 105).

Both humans and dogs depend on seal meat for sustenance (*CH* 170). On her second longer hunting trip, Ehrlich reports how hunger becomes a kind of “group ache” affecting all members of the hunting party, including the dogs (*CH* 315). Unlike (most) other animal companions, however, Greenlandic dogs are vital in the acquisition of the very food being shared. In acknowledgement of this, dogs are served first when food is scarce; a practice common in the Arctic (Laugrand and Oosten 2002, 90) but surprising to Ehrlich because it represents an overturning of traditional Western hierarchies of being. The shared bodily experience of hunger, combined in the text with the bodily presence of the dogs’ “love affairs and stomach problems, [...] the females’ menstrual blood or their quick squat to pee,” ignites in Ehrlich a renewed interest in the dogs (*CH* 166). Thus she gradually develops an understanding of dogs as a form of “companion species” (Haraway 2008, 17). According to Haraway, *companions* are “messmates at table,” involved what Vinciane Despret might call ‘co-experiences of the gut’ (Haraway 2008, 17; Despret 2013, 62). *Companion species* are non-human others with whom we engage in a

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<sup>4</sup> Laugrand and Oosten’s work draws mainly on sources from the North-American Arctic, but includes anthropological sources from Greenland. Despite their detailed account of differences in healing practices in which dogs are involved, they make no formal distinction between the relationship between dogs in the North-American and Greenlandic Arctic. Several of the dog treatment practices on which they base their analysis are also reported by Bent Jensen (1961) in Greenland. Laugrand and Oosten report that dogs are often named after human friends or relatives, but according to Jensen only “[a] few dogs are given human names” in Greenland (Jensen 1961, 51).

<sup>5</sup> Ehrlich generally describes her indigenous dogsled travel companions as Inuit hunters. The majority, but not all, of Ehrlich’s dogsled travels take place around and north of the village of Qaanaaq, in the region of the Polar Eskimos, or Inughuit. As several of the myths the text alludes to can be traced back to Knud Rasmussen’s descriptions of Polar Eskimos in *The People of the Polar North*, there is every reason to believe that Polar Eskimo culture strongly influences Ehrlich’s narrative of these travels, as well as of her overall depictions of Greenland. However, Ehrlich does not always distinguish between her use of north Greenlandic and North American Inuit narratives. The fact that several of these narratives are taken from Rasmussen’s Fifth Thule Expedition signals that Ehrlich shares Rasmussen’s conception of a common pan-Arctic Eskimo culture, of which the Greenlandic and North American Inuit cultures are part. My use of the term Inuit follows Ehrlich’s, thus signifying indigenous people of Greenland or the North American Arctic, but representing a view of this culture predominantly influenced by Polar Eskimo/Inughuit culture.

“*dance of relating*” that shape “*who and what [we] are*” (Haraway 2008, 25, 19). A fundamental prerequisite for this “dance of relating” is *curiosity*, manifested in human recognition of animals as individuals and in a willingness to responsively engage with their gaze (Haraway 2008, 22). Through the experience of hunger and shared anticipation connected to the hunt, Ehrlich develops precisely such a sense of bodily affinity with the sled dogs. Her growing curiosity and interest in them is reflected in the way she gradually learns their names, and begins to comment on their individual actions and their histories of development and disease. The sound of the dogs at night, which at first disturbs her, gradually gives a sense of protection and comfort, and she learns to interpret it in terms of expressions of communication (*CH* 291). This *being with* dogs leads her toward a more affective perspective on subjectivity, and dogs and other animals gradually become of increasing importance to Ehrlich’s understanding of herself within this Arctic environment.

The Inuit hunters’ dependency on dogs results from their dependency on movement. Claudio Aporta argues that “Inuit identities and environmental knowledge” have been shaped by, and therefore cannot properly be understood apart from, the context of mobility – of “life on the move” (Aporta 2010, 164). But a hunting trip does not involve the traveler’s passive movement between pre-defined points across the uniform surface of the earth. On the contrary, it signals his/her active, purposeful and continuous engagement with a heterogeneous and multifaceted environment through tasks vital to the sustaining of life, his/her *wayfinding* (Ingold 2011, 155). Even the visually uniform landscapes of sea ice constitute to the hunting traveler a challenging matrix in which dynamic components (such as ice and open sea, floe edges, leads and polynyas, and the movement of winds, ocean currents and animals) must be identified and responded to (Aporta 2010, 172–75). Within this context vision *cannot* be conceived of in terms of a distanced and objective view from nowhere (or anywhere), but forms part of “a total system of bodily orientation” through which the hunting traveler interacts with the environment along paths that are simultaneously paths of movement *and* of observation (Ingold 2011, 261). In *This Cold Heaven* the first indication that the concepts of travel and visual observation are about to change comes with Ehrlich’s realization that on these hunting trips she must give up her hope of going to specific places, and instead adapt to a route dictated by ice and weather conditions, and the availability of game.

Ehrlich learns, too, that dogsled transportation is neither passive nor able to offer protection from the surrounding environment. Instead, the weather and the dogs determine her passage through it. When the weather is clear, the dogtrot determines both the rhythm and the sound of life. When the dogs stop, and their panting ceases, all is silence (*CH* 327). The unities of the dogsled change Ehrlich, both physically and psychologically, and facilitate a new bodily awareness that has implications for her conception of vision. Caught within the rhythm of collectively moving bodies, in the otherwise silent Arctic landscape, she becomes aware of her own physical body in the form of a “hum” communicating its presence (*CH* 326). This leads to a heightened physical sensitivity, poetically translated into the visual: “My whole body,” she writes, “worked like an eye, watching the world scroll under us” (*CH* 289). Her dogsled experiences cause her to abandon the centrality of *the eye itself* in vision, on which Alberti’s and later theories on perspective rest (Cosgrove 1985, 48).

Vision instead becomes one facet of her overall bodily orientation, determined not merely by her contextualized *situatedness* in this specific landscape (Haraway 1991, 188) but by her contextualized and situated *movements of engagement* within it. The extent to which these “movements of engagement” change Ehrlich are signaled when she, upon return to village life, compares her unrecognizably sunburned face with that of Rasmussen: “It’s not that I had ‘the look of the ice cap or starvation’ on my face, [...] but I did look as if I was wearing a mask” (CH 221). Though less extreme than Rasmussen’s, her bodily transformation is undeniable, and suggests a shift in understanding toward the Inuit.

### **The Weather: Boundaries and Slippages**

In the Greenlandic wilderness, as Ehrlich learns, humans and dogs are at the mercy of the weather, which unites them in a common and very physical effort for continual movement and survival. Attuning the body to the weather in the first, and most obvious sense, means dressing properly. Dressing to meet the demands of the environment in Inuit cultures involves something beyond protecting oneself from cold. As a result of the belief in the basic unity of existence, animals are defined by their characteristic actions, rather than by physiological characteristics. Their skin, or “bodily covering” is, according to Ingold, “understood as so much equipment which enables them to lead the kinds of lives they do” (Ingold 2011, 124). Skin may thus be interpreted in terms of a boundary defining the individual subject’s way of being in the world. This is why dressing in an animal’s skin is in Inuit culture thought to help the hunter to open up the world of the animal he hunts (Ingold, 2011, 94; 125). Dressing in sealskin becomes a way for the hunter to challenge the boundaries between the subjectivity of the seal and that of the human. Similarly to the way the seal negotiates the ice boundaries between different physical worlds, the hunter in this manner negotiates the boundaries between subjectivities.

On a spring hunting trip, in which seals are the sought-for prey, both Ehrlich and her hunter companion Aliberti are dressed in all sealskin: “sealskin pants, sealskin anoraks with fox-fur ruffs around the hood, sealskin kamiks, and sealskin mittens with dog-hair ruffs at the wrist” (CH 292). The precariousness of the boundary between human and seal is highlighted as Ehrlich comments on how “dressed like seals we slid over seals: thousands of pinnipeds, with only a thin sheaf of ice separating us” (CH 299). Stopping for a quick pee, Ehrlich unexpectedly menstruates on the ice. Her hunter companion immediately comments that “[t]his is good! It looks like we killed a seal! They will think I am a very good hunter to find a seal in this fog. And also, they will be able to find us” (CH 292). The comment implies how easily the blood from Ehrlich’s body can be mistaken for that of a seal. This ties Ehrlich to the environment in a very physical sense, and changes her position from predator to prey. As her body becomes entangled in the physical world of wild animals, we can observe how her relationship with them becomes more direct and communicative. This is exemplified in later a polar bear hunt, in which the bear, at close range, gives Ehrlich “the same hard stare she would give a seal”; a stare Ehrlich has no problem interpreting the meaning of (CH 318). The scene highlights the important reciprocal aspect of vision that this sense’s association with the analytic and reflective has diminished: the fact that you do not only look at inert

objects, but also into the eyes of other active subjects (Ingold 2011, 253). Using Ingold's terms, Ehrlich's situation can be described as one in which the direct gaze of the polar bear confirms her "visibility" and "existence as a person" within the bear's world and network of relationships (Ingold 2011, 272).

Holding the power to destabilize even the most basic physical categories through various forms of blinding, the weather in a very concrete manner determines what is sensible; what – if anything – can be seen, how, and when. It can seemingly obliterate the world or make it "overflow[] its outlines" (CH 293). Already traveling in what text describes as a "chastely intimate [...] bond of blood, snow, and fur," a passing wave of mist dissolves what boundaries are left between the human and the animal, and Ehrlich and Aliberti find themselves "turned into seals" (CH 303). That this slippage between subjectivities also represents a passage between different worlds of being becomes evident as Aliberti points towards the sky and "a ring around the sun" – the text's second sundog (CH 304).

The perspective of the seal is one to which the text returns. In the scene above, the momentary slippage is immediately followed by the seemingly gratuitous anthropological fact that the "Copper Eskimos treated cataracts by fastening a louse to a hair and letting it walk to and fro across the bad eye" (CH 303). Far from random, this observation implies how in another Inuit culture close and remedying contact with other (even negligible) creatures was associated with the idea of curing defective vision. In this manner Ehrlich's narrative underscores what her dogsled experiences have already intimated: that close contact with animal others – what Despret (2013) might describe in terms of animal-human embodied affinities – and a relaxation of the boundaries of the self can create a new range of bodily sensibilities and ways of seeing. By providing this example *This Cold Heaven* further echoes pan-Arctic Eskimo narratives in which the seal (like the polar bear) is a creature of liminality that serves to "instruct one in the crossing of boundaries," and "function[s] as an archetype [...] that marks what is at stake when one encounters difference, otherness, and ambiguity" (Athens 2013, 90). Ehrlich's bodily experiences in this manner highlight the environment's instability of boundaries – physical as well as subjective – and make the weather a force that contributes to the creation of boundary creatures.

Ehrlich's new bodily sensibilities emerge on the ice as part of the dogsled experience, and last only while out on the land. Once their journey brings them into the vicinity of Ummannaq, Ehrlich and Aliberti find themselves transformed again. However, this time the transformation does not turn them into the boundary figures of seals, but rather into "lounge lizards, fake seals enacting gestures of intimacy" (CH 304). The true "intimacies of the sled" necessitated by the journey will be abandoned once they arrive in town (CH 305). On another hunting trip with Jens Danielsen, Ehrlich describes the return to the town of Qaanaaq in terms of a return to "the opaque cataract of civilization" (CH 196). Although the text provides many possibilities of interpreting "the cataract of civilization" in terms of a willful blindness towards the social atrocities concealed within these Greenlandic small-town societies, it can also be understood in terms of a romanticist feeling of loneliness and poverty resulting from modern society's disassociation between movement and vision, human and animal. As Ehrlich specifies, her "bout of

loneliness” has “less to do with the absence of company than with the cessation of movement. ... Out on the ice I was conjoined with ice, dog, wind, sled, and snow. Everything else was superfluous, and anything less was poverty” (227).

Rather than allowing its narrator aesthetic entrance into the *landscapes* of Greenland through a detached, ordering and eye-focused linear perspective, *This Cold Heaven* presents us with Ehrlich’s active and embodied engagement with a “space that has its own life” (Cosgrove 1985, 55) and a form of vision that is not solely dependent on the eye. After suffering bouts of snow-blindness, sun-blindness and fog-blindness, Ehrlich suddenly has the epiphany that the word “blind” does not only describe an experience, but also “a place to hide, a place from which to see” (CH 275). Through this recognition of Ehrlich’s physical involvement and need for momentary protection in an environment in which she exists in relationship with other animals, the text hints toward the possible existence *other* seeing subjects within this landscape. Undetected by the disembodied, rational subject’s “sovereign eye,” these subjects possess other and challenging perspectives on the land. Significantly, it is Ehrlich’s environmentally contextualized and culturally informed embodied experiences that bring these possible viewpoints to our attention, and serve to exemplify them by allowing momentary slippages into other forms of subjectivity. The literal blindness suffered on hunting trips hence does not prohibit seeing, but leads toward other and more embodied forms of perception open to other points of view.

### **Ice: Creative Instabilities**

Ehrlich’s text establishes a parallel between the instabilities of the subject and the instabilities of the landscape, whose main constituent is ice. But ice is a highly transformative medium which makes the Greenlandic landscapes difficult to grasp for a traveler from the south accustomed to solid landforms. In *This Cold Heaven*, the weather and the ice exist as two inseparable forces that generate and shape each other. Given agency by the weather, ice both creates barriers between beings and brings them together. This is revealed in Ehrlich’s description of the fjord stretching along the east side of the island of Kiatak. Here a line of icebergs “served both as gathering point and as barrier between the end of the fjord and the beginning of the frozen ocean; it was both confluence and obstruction. Ice came to seem like a source, the see-through crockpot where life first brewed” (CH 335). The creative potential of ice is further highlighted in a beautiful parallel established in the text between the way the ice itself forms and reforms a “puzzle” of “floating pieces ... knocked apart by sun and sea currents and welded back together by wet snow” (CH 331) and the way the human members of Ehrlich’s hunting party huddle together in tents or on sleds, seeking momentary refuge from the weather in fur-clad embodied proximity. At times, the bringing together of bodies creates new affinities and empathic responsibilities; at other times (as the children born on longer hunting trips attest to) it creates new life.

This parallel between bodies of ice and bodies of flesh is reinstated in the descriptions of a glacier that takes the shape of a seal, with “fins and flippers of ice [...] bent up by canyon walls” and touching sea water with its snout in summer to “calve[] enormous icebergs – its life almost human” (CH 315). When read as an

extension of the text's earlier use of the figure of the seal, this depiction implies that the potential for physical or perspectival boundary crossings or in-between identities resides in the landscape as well as in its living beings. The simultaneous use of anthropomorphism and zoomorphism suggests that in this transformative landscape the human self may meet the animal other because the human body, like the ice, is capable of regeneration, transformation, and in blocking or aiding vision.

With this acknowledgement of the relational and creative potential of ice, the landscape imagery shifts from that of vengery to that of sexuality. Snow takes the form of a giant penis (*CH* 341), whereas the inland ice is described in terms of a womb with an umbilical chord (*CH* 276), giving slow and continuous birth down a multiplicity of birth channels. Presented in this way, the icescapes of Greenland cannot be read in terms of a mirror reflecting back images of a clearly defined Western self (*CH* 314). As Ehrlich's use of imagery repeatedly reveals, the ice is "part mirror," "part window," and it is impossible for her to predict its changes in form (*CH* xv). Her journeys present us with an exploration of the instabilities and complexities of ice, as well as of the human self. The direction this exploration takes is revealed in the fact that the choice between "the window and the mirror, enlightenment or narcissism" offered by the medium of ice at the beginning of her text, no longer exists at its conclusion (*CH* 335). Ehrlich's dogsled experiences have broken the mirror – she herself has passed over its shattered pieces; broken "platelets [of ice that] looked like mirrors that had been tossed down and broken, their uneven edges making the sled tip this way and that" (*CH* 335).

The text ends by offering a thinning and unstable glass pane through which insights into other and different forms of being is possible. The setting is a walrus hunt in October, just at the beginning of the polar night. What Ehrlich's hunting party travel on is newly formed sea ice "[a]t times [...] translucent – a window to another world"; at times "a mirror that ha[s] gone blind" (*CH* 346). This ice is so thin that it "buckle[s] and roll[s]" as they travel across it, revealing its transformative nature by taking the shape of "a wave of water that ha[s] changed molecules and become solid" (*CH* 346). At this particular time and place, the boundaries between worlds and forms of being are more fragile and precarious than ever. The walrus they hunt for is a boundary creature that literally enforces its own passage between physical worlds by breaking through the ice with its head (*CH* 345). This physical boundary transgression is for the animal associated with the danger of death: of having its vital force transgress the boundaries of the subject. As Ehrlich again finds herself "pulled by the trance of the dogtrot," she dozes off and dreams that their animal clothing dissolves the boundaries between the human and the animal (*CH* 344). "I'd had a dream about fox fur – the lining of Niels's and Jens's anoraks puffing out around their faces, wrists, and waists as if they were humans trapped inside animals' bodies" (*CH* 347). Accordingly, when her shadow again disappears in the polar night, Ehrlich reiterates the idea that "I am not I" (*CH* 349).

Hidden by darkness and the peculiar ice conditions on which Ehrlich and her companions travel are polynyas, "dark hands [of open water] lying palms up, waiting to hand [the travelers] down to a watery underworld" (*CH* 350). Unable to spot the one in front of them, the party's speedy flight across the ice would have ended in another world, had not the dogs sensed its presence and come to a sudden halt. And

so it happens that the trail lines that connect Ehrlich to her dog companions end up being what ties her to the world of the living. The narrative again incorporates ideas from old Inuit narratives, in which dogs are creatures who at a critical point of possible transgression serve to reinforce the boundary between different states of being by keeping their human companions alive (cf. Laugrand and Oosten 2002, 96). Accordingly, Jens' closing assertion, that "[a]t this time of year, the ice comes to teach us how to see," carries meaning beyond the visual (*CH* 351). It highlights the absolute necessity, within this environment, of applying more than the eye in the task of seeing. Perhaps more importantly, it further asks us to recognize the value of embodied affinities – of opening ourselves up to the influence of other perspectives and forms of being. Within this context, the speciesism symbolized by Ehrlich's blind window reflecting back an only-human world becomes apparent, as does its poverty and its dangers.

The ice, the weather and the polar night are in Ehrlich's text what bring out the presence of other perspectives. The weather and the polar night paradoxically do this by obstructing vision, thereby bringing attention to the physical body and what is most immediately present, and necessitating inter-species and boundary-blurring forms of collaboration (and – in case of the weather – forms of clothing). In this sense the very darkness that frustrates Ehrlich's view of the Greenlandic landscape at the commencement of her journeys becomes part of what allows a different and more inclusive view to emerge toward their conclusion. The absence of light at this point in the text no longer hints towards the 'irrationality' of Greenlandic myths, but rather towards a relaxation of the boundaries of the self the modern enlightened subject finds to be substantiated by the "actually existing boundaries" of the visible (Simmel 1997, 146).

### **Conclusion**

*This Cold Heaven* deliberately inscribes local cultural knowledge into its depictions of Greenlandic landscapes. Ehrlich's account of the Greenlandic north resembles Rasmussen's in combining descriptions of the landscape with information about Inuit culture – traditional as well as contemporary. Yet it differs from that of her predecessor in its attempt to incorporate some of the different possible ontologies found in Inuit narratives into her understanding of the landscape. In this sense *This Cold Heaven* represents a modern reinterpretation – or exploration – of Greenlandic myths that have much in common with feminist theories of geography and ways of *being with*. The narrator's embodied affinities with other subjects (be they human or non-human) serve as tools through which this text represents the relational and dynamic nature of Greenland's icescapes. The wide and grand prospects experienced on her dogsled trips exist together with descriptions of the intra- and inter-species relationships on which her travels into these landscapes depend. This juxtaposition undermines the conception of the autonomous subject's controlling prospect of the landscape, highlighting instead the relational nature of subjectivity and the contextualized and embodied nature of vision. In this manner the text re-works the "grand views" associated with the modern explorer/traveler by placing them within the framework of the context-specific and constantly changing vistas of the traveling (*wayfinding*) indigenous hunter (Aporta 2010, 173).

Ehrlich's rewriting of the Greenlandic landscape implies a re-definition of vision; a sense both Ingold and Haraway agree have been "co-opt[ed] in the service of a peculiarly modern project of objectification" and "reduced to a faculty of pure, disinterested reflection" (Ingold 2011, 253). While at first signaling its adherence to this conception of vision, there is in Ehrlich's text a gradual movement towards the understanding of vision as an integral part of the active engagement of a bodily whole, in constant interaction – or even co-constitution – with the environment. Because this form of vision is dependent on activity it cannot be objective in the sense of distanced from the experiencing subject and its world. Instead seeing becomes a way of opening up to the world and engaging with it. Based on its presentation of this participatory and culturally contextualized notion of vision, I would argue that *This Cold Heaven* renegotiates the visual ideology of traditional landscape depictions by foregrounding perspectives other than our rational Western one from within the seemingly desolate and visually controllable Greenland's landscapes. Although confused and disoriented in the beginning, the text's later portrayals of this natural environment serve to highlight rather than mask its complexity and otherness – and its Others.

However, learning to see the landscape from an embodied and culturally contextualized position, and together with its indigenous Others (be they human or animal), is not an easy task. The episodes in *This Cold Heaven* that I have highlighted represent only momentary glimpses into this kind of togetherness. For Ehrlich's experiences of the Arctic are not merely of dogsled hunting trips in the far north. The modern modes of transportation that permit her Arctic peregrinations allow grand and swiping views from planes and helicopters to intersect and introduce into her narrative distinctly distanced and disembodied perspectives of the landscape. Similarly, knowledge that her representation of traditional Inuit culture relies heavily on one hundred year old textual accounts, and at times tends to reinstates an idealized and second-hand image of an uncontaminated and "original" culture, opens her text up for the criticism that it maintains an image of the northernmost regions of Greenland as still beyond the coeval. Hence Ehrlich's text must be read as an exercise in, rather than an achievement of, a new feminist or "Harawayan" form of objectivity. Seen in relation to past texts exploring the landscapes of Greenland, however, Ehrlich's exercise is as useful as it is poetic and beautiful.

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**Summary**

Depicting the narrator’s repeated travels to the northwestern coast of Greenland, Gretel Ehrlich’s *This Cold Heaven* aims to portray the landscapes of Greenland in a way that frees them from the constraints of the visual ideology associated with Western culture’s idea of landscape. This, however, is no easy task in a natural environment dominated by wide and grand views that seem to invite the detached observer’s ordering vision. This article shows how Ehrlich’s text uses Inuit narratives and ontologies that share perspectives with feminist theories on space and subjectivity in order to challenge our Western modern culture’s conceptions of vision and landscape. The narrator’s experiences of dogsled travel in landscapes determined by weather, ice and light conditions create novel sensations that display and disrupt the boundaries of the physical environment as well as of Western conception of the subject. In this manner Ehrlich’s travel narrative gradually develops away from a rationalist and objectifying form of geography towards a different and more embodied perception of landscape that acknowledges the relational and dynamic nature of Greenland’s icescapes. This rewriting of landscape implies an understanding of vision as an integral part of a bodily whole, in constant interaction – or even co-constitution – with the environment.

**Keywords**

Greenland, Arctic landscape, geography, vision, the subject, embodied affinities.