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Wrangel Island as Actant in the Historical Geography of the Russian Arctic through a Mi'kmaw Lens*

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Abstract. Wrangel Island is the largest island in the Russian Eastern Arctic and is now a protected place with international recognition. One of only five UNESCO world heritage sites in the Arctic, Wrangel Island is uniquely varied in its flora and fauna for an Arctic island. In this reflection piece, I use an Indigenous Mi'kmaw cosmological approach to envision the much-storied Wrangel Island as a being and an actant in its long history, especially regarding human beings and anthropocenic activity. My approach asserts that, like plants, rocks, mountains, water, and landscapes, Wrangel Island has a unique and remarkable identity, personality, and spirit. For centuries, Wrangel Island has rebuffed human presence and it has been little affected by human activity. Today only scientists visit; no human collectivity has ever gained more than a slippery grip on the island. The tragedy is that, despite the island's inclinations, the warming of the Russian Arctic may change this.

Keywords: *Wrangel Island; ice; Arctic; Anthropocene; Mi'Kmaq.*

In 1923, a young Inupiat woman was found alone and half-mad on Wrangel Island in the Arctic [1, Niven J.], 300 miles north of the Arctic Circle. Ada Delutuk Blackjack posed for a picture at a gravesite. Despite her vulnerability, she was a solitary figure of strength and survival. Two years before, Blackjack had been part of a group of five people, the others all white men, but, starving and desperate, three of them tried to walk from Wrangel Island over the 700-mile icefield to Siberia to get help. They were never seen again. After Ada was rescued, it was as if she and her companions had never been on Wrangel Island.

This reflection piece discusses Wrangel Island as a singularly storied geographical, political, and cultural being in Arctic colonial history. As a scholar of Mi'kmaw¹ ancestry and a member of the Newfoundland Mi'kmaw community, I use an Indigenous lens, following the cosmology of the Mi'Kmaq, the original people of what is now eastern Canada, to reflect on Wrangel Island. Mi'Kmaq believe that every single entity on earth – plants, rocks, water, and islands – has sentient life and is alive [2, Robinson M.; 3, Hornborg A.]. Because everything is living, Mi'Kmaq see non-human beings as equivalent to persons, making them persons themselves (*Inu'k*). In contrast to dominant western cultures, and especially the capitalism that is imbued in them, such natural elements are not a resource to be exploited or a means to an end. As our fellow *Inu'k*, rocks, plants and, in this case, islands all have inherent worth [2, Robinson M.]. They deserve respect and we are always in relationship with them. Accordingly, having researched Wrangel Island as one of the settings in a recently

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¹ Mi'kmaw is an adjective or possessive while Mi'Kmaq is the noun.

published book focused on the Arctic exploration career of Robert Abram Bartlett [4, Hanrahan M.], I wanted to examine the relationship between the island and human beings, using available texts viewed through a Mi'Kmaq lens.

I recognize that this cosmology differs from that of the Indigenous people of Chuktoka and Alaska whose homelands are relatively close to Wrangel Island, but I am duty-bound to use philosophical frameworks with which I am familiar. My approach asserts that plants, rocks, mountains, and water each have “an identity, personality and spirit” [2, Robinson M., p. 4]. I take the position that Wrangel Island has a unique and remarkable identity, personality, and spirit, as do other islands, such as Herald Island nearby. Human beings are a tiny part of Wrangel Island's history; at best they pass through and, not infrequently, their intrusions led to their destruction. Their intermittent and sometimes chaotic interactions with Wrangel Island mean it has long a fringe part of the Anthropocene, although this is changing as the Russian as the Arctic warms and animal life on the island is impacted [5, Khruleva O.A., Stekolshchikov A.V.]. Fiercely independent, reliably rebuffing people, Wrangel Island has constantly reminded us of its own inherent value. It has long resisted being part of whatever entity human beings might try to define it as - colony, ecosystem, aquapelago and so on - with particularly obdurate ice as an effective buffer. Certainly, its entirety cannot be captured by the terms imposed by human beings, as I aim to demonstrate through my Mi'Kmaq-influenced reflection on Wrangel Island's history.

In one sense, Wrangel Island is a conventional island defined as a body of land bounded by water, located in the Arctic Ocean between the Chukchi Sea and the East Siberian Sea. Like other remote islands, it enjoys a continuing culture as J. Druett [6] conceived it, despite the absence of consistent human settlement. Wrangel Island is a social creation as well as a physical reality. Like other natural spaces, it is a “concrete abstraction,” in M. Fitzsimmons' words, with enduring power in our social and intellectual life [7, p. 106]. In this way, Wrangel Island as it sits in human culture reflects not just itself, its own characteristics and history, but the culmination of ideas about nature, land, islands, and Arctic landscapes. Yet these ideas are all in relation to human beings. Thus, these ideas tell us about ourselves while not necessarily recognizing the personality and spirit of the island without reference to human beings. At least this is the case with western cultures and, of course, it is true of other islands as well. Here I adopt a different perspective to help fill in this gap.

In the geography of the Arctic, Wrangel Island stands alone as the largest island in the eastern Russian Arctic (see Fig. 1). Straddling the 180 meridian, the island is 79 km wide. Also known as Ostrov Vrangelya, Wrangel Island has been called Kellett Land, Plover Land, and New Columbia, it has been indisputably part of Russia since 1924. The island is marked by mountain ridges with some peaks reaching as high as 2,500 feet [8, Barr W.; 9, Diubaldo R.J.]. Coastal lowlands lie at the south of the island while there is tundra to the north [10, Kos'ko M., Lopatin B., Ganelin V.]. One of only five UNESCO world heritage sites in the Arctic, Wrangel Island is uniquely varied in its flora and fauna for an Arctic island, its ecological diversity having developed because it was not glaciated during the Quaternary Ice Age. It hosts over 400 plant species, twice as many as any other Arctic tundra territo-

ry of similar size and more than any other Arctic island as well as hundreds of mosses and 310 lichen species [11, Kazmin V.D., Kholod S.S., Rozenfeld S.B., Abaturon, B.D.]. Accordingly, the island has been termed a “little-known hotspot for polar biodiversity”². The island’s plant species have various origins; some have developed from continental forms, others because of recent hybridization, and 23 are endemic to Wrangel Island³. Wrangel is home to about 24 bird species, incl. Asia’s only snow geese⁴, and acts as a northern nursery for more than 100 migratory bird species, incl. the Snowy Owl and the Peregrine Falcon⁵. Numerous polar bears live on Wrangel Island, constructing dens, especially near the coast and coastal lowlands [12, Howlin S., Stishov M., McDonald L., Schliebe S., p. 130]; Arctic foxes live here, too, molting their winter coats in June, eating birds’ eggs when they can⁶. On the shore live Pacific walruses while abundant gray whales feed nearby; it appears that the last remaining woolly mammoths lived on Wrangel Island well into the Holocene [13, Vartanyan S.L., Arslanov K.A., Karhu J.A., Possnert G., Sulerzhitsky L.D., p. 51]. Today about 900 muskoxen wander the island⁷.



Fig.1. Map Showing Wrangel Island. Source ⁸.

² Hoag H. High Stakes in the High North. *Cosmos*, 2017. URL: <https://cosmosmagazine.com/climate/high-stakes-in-the-high-north> (accessed 03 February 2020).

³ UNESCO. Natural System of Wrangel Island Reserve', World Heritage Convention. 2018. URL: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1023> (accessed 03 January 2020).

⁴ Taylor A. Studying the Arctic Wildlife of Russia's Wrangel Island. *The Atlantic*, October 18, 2017. URL: <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2017/10/studying-the-arctic-wildlife-of-russias-wrangel-island/543282/> (accessed 03 February 2020).

⁵ Bouglouan N. Wrangel Island Bird Species, Arctic Ocean, n.d. <http://www.oiseaux-birds.com/article-island-birds-endemic-wrangel-island.html> (accessed 18 March 2020).

⁶ Taylor A. Studying the Arctic Wildlife of Russia's Wrangel Island. *The Atlantic*, October 18, 2017. URL: <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2017/10/studying-the-arctic-wildlife-of-russias-wrangel-island/543282/> (accessed 03 February 2020).

⁷ Hoag H. High Stakes in the High North. *Cosmos*, 2017. URL: <https://cosmosmagazine.com/climate/high-stakes-in-the-high-north> (accessed 03 February 2020).

⁸ Source: esri.maps.arcgis.com (Modified 05 March 2020).

These large mammals had been here during the late Pleistocene⁹ and later died out in Asia but were brought back to Siberia in the mid-1970s through an American and Soviet initiative [14, Berger J.]. Like their neighbors, the reindeer, the muskoxen employ selective feeding. They prefer willows year-round for nutrition, largely eschewing the island's abundant mosses which make up 40% of the total forage biomass and completely avoiding lichen [11, Kazmin V.D., Kholod S.S., Rozenfeld S.B., Abaturov, B.D., pp. 748-749]. Yet they eat a wider range of plants during the seasons than do reindeer [15, Rozenfeld S.B., Gruzdev A.R., Sipko, T.P., Tikhonov, A.N.]. In addition, the muskoxen are hampered less by the island's snow cover than are reindeer, whose population on Wrangel Island is declining [16, Kazmin V.D., Abaturov B.D.]. In spite of the reindeers' difficulties, Wrangel Island is a rich and fertile landscape and, in the words of UNESCO, "a self-contained island ecosystem"¹⁰, which speaks to the intertwined relationships it features. Since 2004 Wrangel Island has been a protected nature sanctuary under the Russian Federation. Besides Wrangel Island itself, the Natural System of Wrangel Island Reserve encompasses the surrounding waters and tiny, much less fecund Herald Island, some 60 km away; the Reserve is divided into a land-based territory and an ocean-based aquatory. In this respect Wrangel Island is part of an aquapelago, "an assemblage of the marine and land spaces of a group of islands and their adjacent waters" [17, Hayward P., p. 5].

With such apparent fertility and impressive features, Wrangel Island might seem to qualify as part of what Icelandic-Canadian explorer V. Stefansson called the "friendly Arctic," meaning that the region could easily support human life, despite its reputation to the contrary [18]. Wrangel Island, however, seems to repel human beings and their ships and the flags they carry, as if deliberately and proudly guarding itself from intrusion. It has devoured human life in dramatic fashion. It was long contested — Stefansson wanted to claim it for Canada — yet it yielded to no one. Wrangel Island lay still and confident as conflicts raged around it and a succession of human beings tried to conquer it. Accordingly, the human presence on Wrangel Island has a long history but has been intermittent. The remains of dwellings were found at Devil's Gorge dating to 3000 BP [19, Krauss M., p. 179] and a 1726 account refers to people living there [19, Krauss M., p. 172]. As recorded in 1823, Indigenous oral history points to stories of human habitation on Wrangel Island from two centuries before [19, Krauss M., p. 177]. The Inupiat used the island as a stopping point on travel between Alaska and the Chukotka Peninsula and would likely have considered it part of their home territory. A 1726 account refers to people living there [19, Krauss M., p. 172]. By 1878, extensive trade networks at many points meant such distant travel was no longer necessary [19, Krauss M., p. 172, 178].

Colonial attempts to possess Wrangel Island were propelled by several ideas that shaped Europeans' relations with land and place. *Terra nullius* is one such idea; it presumes that lands from the Arctic to Australia were unoccupied, even if these lands were extensively used by Indigenous people [20, Connor M.; 21, Asch M.]. *Terra nullius* has long fashioned western states' relationship with the

⁹ Taylor A. Studying the Arctic Wildlife of Russia's Wrangel Island. The Atlantic, October 18, 2017. URL: <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2017/10/studying-the-arctic-wildlife-of-russias-wrangel-island/543282/> (accessed 03 February 2020).

¹⁰ UNESCO. Natural System of Wrangel Island Reserve. World Heritage Convention. 2018. URL: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1023> (accessed 03 January 2020).

Indigenous peoples within acquired borders and territories [21, Asch M.] and has provided motivation to seek and ‘discover’ unknown lands. Built on the assumption of European Christian superiority, the concept of discovery shaped and remains embedded in United States and Canadian law [22, Lindberg T.; 23, Miller R.]. John Quincy Adams, the 6th president of the United States, for instance, asserted that the law of nature dictated American dominion over the entire North American continent [24, Bolkhovitinov N., Dmytryshyn B., p. 103]. Animals, plants, rocks, mountain ranges, and islands, of course, were never considered and had the status of tools, useful to varying degrees for human beings, their enterprises, colonies, and states.

Russia, near which Wrangel Island lies, brought its own ideological baggage to the island. The west had viewed Russia as a threat since the first half of the 19th century [24, Bolkhovitinov N., Dmytryshyn B., p. 102] and relations became even frostier with the establishment of the USSR in 1922. The rigidly anti-capitalist Soviet Union was especially concerned about western capitalist and acquisitional activities in the Soviets’ “region of attraction,” which included Wrangel Island [25, Lakh-tine W., p. 707]. Thus, Wrangel Island was coveted by colonial forces from many sides. Yet, with its tough jagged ice acting as a shield, Wrangel Island stubbornly resisted human efforts to colonize it.

These efforts to establish a presence on the island were scattershot and mostly doomed. The 1923 disaster involving *Ada Blackjack* was not the first human tragedy on Wrangel Island (and nor was it the worst). It began in 1921 when Stefansson sent a small under-resourced group to the island to secure British sovereignty [26, Bockstoce J.]. Along with *Blackjack*, who, like most Indigenous women on Arctic expeditions, would serve as seamstress, four young white men – Canadian Allan Crawford and Americans Fred Maurer, Lorne Knight and Milton Galle – would live on the island for two years. In so doing, they would put in place the human foothold necessary for a claim under British colonial law, given *terra nullius* and its implications for “emptiness” [1, Niven J.]. The ice that surrounded Wrangel Island prevented the arrival of crucial supplies in 1922; later, it would block Russian fox pelt traders [26, Bockstoce J., p.138]. In 1923, Russia insisted that Red Guards accompany the would-be rescuers after trying to prevent them travelling to the island at all [26, Bockstoce J.]. Although a rescue of *Blackjack* was affected in 1923, Stefansson’s reputation was damaged by this episode and the Americans, British, and Canadians were reluctant to back his Arctic ambitions from then on; they began to shift their gaze away from Wrangel Island.

It was a place to which they had paid significant attention in the early part of the 20th century. Wrangel Island had featured in the fate of the *Karluk* in 1914. In 1913 the *Karluk* sailed out of Victoria, British Columbia, as part of the Canadian Arctic Expedition (CAE), the largest ever scientific mission to the Arctic with scientists and crew members from many countries [4, Hanrahan M.]. The Canadian government’s first foray into the Western Arctic¹¹, the CAE aimed to advance Canadian sovereignty in the region, as such sovereignty had been established in the Eastern Arctic. Canadian Prime Minister Robert Borden spoke of “protecting these northern lands and having the British flag

¹¹ Gray D., Gray S. Canadian Arctic Expedition 1913–1918: Commemorating the 100th Anniversary’, Canadian Arctic Expedition 1913–1918. 2013: URL: <http://canadianarcticexpedition.com/> (accessed 20 February 2020).

fly over them” before the U.S. could stake its claims [27, Smith G., p. 146]. Canada’s Minister of Naval Service gave Stefansson, the CAE leader, “authority to take possession of and annex to His Majesty’s Dominions any lands lying to the north of Canadian territory which are not within the jurisdiction of any civilized Power” [27, Smith G., pp. 175-176]. In terms of science, the CAE was successful but just a few months into the expedition, the *Karluk* carrying the Northern Party became jammed in ice, drifted, and eventually sank. The *Karluk*’s captain, Robert Abram Bartlett, and a young Inupiat hunter from Alaska, Claude Kataktovik, made for the Siberian coast, leaving the survivors on Wrangel Island, where they eked out an existence for almost six months. Not all of them survived. Bjarne Mamen, a 22-year-old topographer from Norway, died in late May 1914, writing in his diary: “My body looks horrible. It has swollen up now so that I am frightened about myself. Is it death for all of us?” and “I for my part cannot stand it staying here.”¹² Geologist George Malloch died a few days after Mamen [28, Bartlett R., p. 278] and firefighter George Breddy was mysteriously found dead in his tent followed an argument over dwindling rations [29, McKinley, p. 136; 30, Hadley J., p. 720]. Kataktovick, who later reached Siberia with Bartlett, had shouted “*Nuna! Nuna!*” (land) when the CAE survivors first spotted Wrangel Island after the *Karluk* sank [29, McKinley., p. 119]. He and Mamen had cheered when they discovered driftwood on the island’s Icy Spit [29, McKinley., p. 119]. But when rescue came in September 1914 the survivors were on the point of despair, defeated by the vagaries of Wrangel Island and terrified at the prospect of a second winter there. As McKinley wrote decades after the rescue, “I have never ceased thanking Him [God] for bringing me through the experience of the *Karluk* and Wrangel Island. I believe it was my faith in God that maintained me...” [29, p. 202].

Remarkably, one of the *Karluk* survivors, firefighter Fred Maurer, would return to Wrangel Island in 1921 for Stefansson and then die, aged 28, trekking to Siberia. For some, Wrangel Island had a sort of indescribable pull. Some of the first non-Indigenous people to stand on Wrangel Island were British seamen looking for the lost Franklin Expedition in 1849. The island existed in the colonial imagination since 1824 when the Russian explorer Ferdinand Von Wrangel, for whom the land was named, noted that the Chukchi knew of land north of the Chukchi Peninsula. Whalers occasionally visited Wrangel Island and, in 1881, the US revenue cutter *Corwin* and the USS *Rodgers* landed parties there [26, Bockstoce J., p. 138]. In 1916, Tsar Nicholas II claimed Wrangel Island and other Arctic lands for Russia [25, Lakhtine W., p. 708], two years after the *Karluk* survivors had raised the Canadian Red Ensign, reasoning that their desperate presence validated a British and Canadian claim.

Stefansson sold his presumed rights to Wrangel Island to American reindeer herd owner Carl Lomen, making the island an object of commerce. Russia halted Lomen’s attempt to colonize the island, using 12 Inuit from Port Hope, Alaska who were deported to China but not before two of their children had died [26, Bockstoce J., p. 139]. No one should have been surprised by the Soviet Union’s reaction to capitalist incursions [27, Smith G., p. 292]. Even scientists from the west, incl. the

¹² Mamen B. Diary of Bjarne Mamen, 1913-1914. Unpublished, Ottawa, Library and Archives Canada.

Danish-Greenlandic Knud Rasmussen, were not welcome on Wrangel [26, Bockstoce J., p. 140]. The USSR was stymied in its own colonization efforts, however. These began in 1926 with the settlement of 55 Yupik to trade in furs but, in 1927 and 1928, supply ships could not land; again, the island spurned human being. This practice continued. In 1931, the relief ship *Chukotka* was sunk by ice; 1932 and 1933 also saw failed efforts due to, again, the impenetrable ice surrounding Wrangel Island [26, Bockstoce J., pp. 131–140]. Wrangel Island used ice as a shield against human incursions. From a Mi'Kmaq perspective, this merits respect which, in turn, demands adherence.

The human history of Wrangel Island is marked by catastrophe. The last great human tragedy on Wrangel Island ended in 1934, brought about by human flaws. The Russian-sponsored Yupik who came to the island in the 1920s were, at first, successful with their hunting, trapping, and fishing. But in 1934, the station manager, Konstantin Semenchuk, would not allow them to hunt walrus, an important source of protein and a meat of cultural importance, in the fall; subsequently, they were forced to eat their dogs. The USSR tried Semenchuk and his accomplices and executed them, but one-third of the Yupik starved to death [26, Bockstoce J., p. 140].

What does Wrangel Island tell us? What do the political, geographical, and cultural aspects of its ongoing story mean? Viewed through a Mi'Kmaq lens, the island emerges as an active actant engaged in resistance. Firmly attached to its own solitariness, it resists being part of any larger entity, such as an aquapelago or any other assemblage. It dwarfs nearby Herald Island in terms of its size and its fecundity, its promise. But when human beings try to push through the ice surrounding it, Wrangel Island uses drastic means to repel ships, people, and anthropogenic activity. Today only scientists visit, on occasion; no human collectivity has ever gained more than a slippery grip on the island. In this way, Wrangel Island urges human beings to simply leave it alone, a sentiment that Mi'Kmaq can understand. There are places that Mi'Kmaq leave alone or tread carefully; such places are seen as more than *Inu'k* but as mirrors of the sacred. In this way, Wrangel Island represents many other islands and places across the world and echoes their wishes. The tragedy is that climate change, mainly unchecked, may finally overcome Wrangel Island's longstanding resistance, and cause the island the harm which it seeks to avoid.

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