

# Arctic masculinities

Configurations of masculine attributes, behaviors and roles  
within the Arctic as a symbolic, social and political place

Arctic Societies (M2AS303) — Pr. Jean-Michel HUCTIN

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## Introduction

In the 1990s, a new burgeoning field emerged in social sciences, enriching the complex thematic of gender studies<sup>1</sup> — that is, the study of the male/female and masculine/feminine elements (practices, values and objects) among social groups: that of masculinity studies<sup>2</sup>. Gender studies have been first conceptualized and led by feminist women as “women studies”,

<sup>1</sup>see for instance Messner 1992 [27] and Mosse 1996 [28] seminal works.

<sup>2</sup>sometimes also called “men studies”

and from this origin have long remained centered around the study the masculine – feminine social nexus, but mainly through a focus on women. The only studies of manhood were led by anthropologists among non-Western social groups, and studies on men and manhood in contemporary Western societies remained a work in progress. One can think of Margaret Mead’s work on Samoan teenagers, showing how the meaning of being a man is different in different societies (strong and violent among the Mundugumor group, rather soft and docile among the Chambulis) [26]; or of Maurice Godelier’s work on the Baruyas from New Guinea [17], showing how, to recall Simone de Beauvoir’s famous wording, “one is not born a man; one becomes a man” along a certain number of rites of passage. Thus, it was soon proved that masculinity is a social construct, and varies from a social group to another.

However, contemporary masculinity studies go beyond the description and analysis of masculine socialisation processes. To study masculinity is also to study how different ways of “being a man” may interlace in one social group, or in a more general context where different cultures meet: masculinity is not only about being a man in difference with being a woman, but also about what differentiates different men’s attitudes, often hierarchizing them and excluding some unlegitimate ways of being a man. This is why Connell, one of the most influential researcher in this field, favored the plural form of “masculinities” in her 1995 groundbreaking opus [11], defining masculinity as a set of practices which has to be understood in a wider gendered system, that is, in a certain social group and at a certain time.

As such, masculinity studies include not only the study of men and their practices, values and relations which each others and with women, but also the wider studies of the social meaning of manhood. In this sense, the Arctic plays a specific role in the construction on masculinity — not only in the Arctic regions but also in the so-called Western world (that of ancient colonial powers, mainly West Europe and Northern America). Indeed, talking about “Arctic masculinity” does not only refer the set of practices which make an Arctic man, a man — even though this is of course a question which has to be raised. Thus the Arctic is not only a geographical area, but also a mythical one, a discursive topic in Western societies, as Ryall [35] sums it up. And this discourse on the Arctic tells us a lot about masculinity: from the 1800s’ explorations until today tourism, the Arctic has been view in Western culture as a testing ground for masculinity, as a pristine and wild territory demanding exceptional — and actually, exemplary — masculine qualities to survive or at least enjoy.

However, as we will see, this “Arctic masculinity” is proper to Arctic *colonial* society, if not to *non-Arctic* Western societies. We will have to see how this mythical and perhaps imposed definition of manhood interacts with the proper Arctic ways of “doing manhood”<sup>3</sup>. To this extent, conceptualizing “Arctic masculinity” as to go through the understanding of Arctic indigenous definitions and experiences of manhood. It also has to deal with the way these “masculinities” meet the Western myths of Arctic masculinity.

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<sup>3</sup>As explained by Brandth and Haugen [7], p.15, this wording aims at recalling the famous and influential “doing gender” famous formula from West and Zimmerman (1987, [40]), defining gender as an active routine enforced in everyday interactions.

Both approaches of the mythical Western “Arctic masculinity” and its meeting with Arctic indigenous masculinities rely on “localized” definitions of the Arctic — a symbolic and a geographical *place*. But the Arctic is also a political space, which several bodies aim at governing, and which plays an important role in today’s world politics. Thus, one has to ask what the different and potentially conflicting configurations of masculinity which regard the Arctic *do* to the Arctic as an international stage.

To sum this up and to describe further the way I chose to deal with this subject, using another framing for the notion of masculinity might be useful. In their 2005 article, Connell and Messerschmidt [13] establish three different scales at which they hold the concept of “hegemonic masculinity”<sup>4</sup> to be relevant: (a) at the *local* level, as masculinity is built and “done” in face-to-face interactions and close communities; (b) at the *regional* level, relatively homogeneous ways of being men exist tied to regional culture, or to the State, and this can be seen through discourses and political projects; (c) at the *global* level, masculinities being built and exercised in international arenas, media and business. To a certain extent, this division pertains to my analysis of Arctic masculinities, but dealing with these levels in a different order seems more relevant.

- (i) First, I deal with the regional level — that of cultural schemes, and with what may be the most distinctive “Arctic masculinity”. Rather than a set of practices proper to the people indigenous to the Arctic, “Arctic masculinity” as a unique set of characteristics is Westernly-defined, and discursive: it is the mythified manhood that the Arctic regions were supposed to test and demand in exploring, exploiting and enjoying, from the 1800s on to this day.
- (ii) Second, and having dealt with what may be the closest view to that of a Western reader, I focus on contemporary Arctic local masculinities — and especially those of indigenous peoples. My point here is of course not to make an anthropological account of all the sets of behaviors, values and material objects which have been defining manhood among the many Arctic indigenous peoples — the very unity of such an “Arctic” gender system being highly dubitable. In order to distinguish some traits characteristic to the Arctic, my point is rather to question the contemporary experience of being a man in the Arctic, and especially being an *indigenous* man. I therefore focus on today’s masculinity in gender configurations in Arctic society, questioning the existence of a *masculinity crisis* among young indigenous people.
- (iii) Third point leads me to the global level, since masculinity may be seen as playing a core role in past, but also present and above all future governance of the Arctic at an international level. The context for it is that of a Western globalization — patterns of culture are being spread including Western gender relations — and that of growing concerns towards the Arctic. Because of current environmental, social, and governance changes, the role of masculinity as such in the Arctic governing bodies has to be assessed,

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<sup>4</sup>That is, in short, the sole way of being a man which dominates the other masculinities in a certain social context and is able to perpetuate this domination.

for it frames the very conceptualization and prioritizing of Arctic policies and it influences the production and transmission of knowledge regarding the Arctic — and thus also the identity among Arctic societies. I show it drawing insight from a discussion with Gunn-Britt Retter, a Sami female leader in Arctic politics.

Along this outline, I try to focus on different conceptions of masculinities — from a singular and actually western-defined “Arctic masculinity” to the taking into consideration of diverse masculinities evading the strict male frame. This variation of focuses helps me considering different possible definitions of the Arctic as a place — a mythical one, therefore necessary quite indefinite; a geographical and demographic space within which inhabitants are said to be “Arctic populations”; and a political stage and stake on a global level.

## 1 “Go north, young man!”: Arctic masculinity as a modern Western construct

“Go North, young man!” is a saying borrowed from Ingólfssdóttir [20], recalling the famous “Yo West, young man” saying of Victorian colonial societies. Indeed, the Arctic has been constructed by Western societies as a testing ground for white Western colonial masculinity: exploring, exploiting and surviving the Arctic has been seen a shibboleth for Western “real males” for long.

### 1.1 The Arctic as a cultural object

One can wonder how comes such a well-known place as the Arctic has no unique and unequivocal definition. The geographical limits to the Arctic — either the 66°33’ Arctic circle, the tree line or the 10°C maximum isotherm — are somewhat partial, may be moving, and too plural to reach a consensus. Beyond those geographical definitions, political ones are debated: many countries want to join the Arctic governing bodies, and indigenous peoples ask for proper recognition in the decision-making processes. But if the Arctic can be at the same time so indefinite and apparently so commonly known — through its cortège of stereotypes and clichés — it is also because it is a *cultural object*, especially among modern Western cultures. In this respect, Ryall in 2011 [35] can say about the definition of the Arctic that “The question is not where the Arctic begins, but where it has been thought to begin”. The Arctic has been depicted and constructed in popular representations as “a cold, primitive and forbidding North that both promoted and demanded hardy masculine qualities” since the Enlightenment, and it carries with it “the idea of a cold, empty, dangerous region imbued with notions of heroic masculinity and frontier rhetoric” (*ibid.*).

Considering the Arctic as a myth and a fantasy among Western cultures is of great value not only to understand these Western cultures but also to understand the Arctic itself. Indeed, out of these depictions of the Arctic, Western men (and it was mainly men indeed) have been to the Arctic, explored it and exploited it. Thus to some extent they shaped the Arctic and

influenced the peoples they met, exchanged with and even colonized, all of this with the lenses of the mythical Arctic they had grown with. One of the prevalent feature of this cultural idea “the Arctic” is, is that of a certain masculinity. Therefore, studying Arctic masculinity in relation with Western cultural elements is important to begin with. Not only because it is one of the points that has been extensively studied, but also because it has influenced Arctic populations, activities and environment. This piece of cultural history is essential for the understanding of “Arctic societies”, whether indigenous or colonial.

## 1.2 Arctic exploration as a testing ground for (Western) masculinity

In her 1993 *Gender On Ice* book [4], Lisa Bloom offers a wide and in-depth view of polar expeditions and of the “Arctic” masculinity narrative which emerged in the 1800s. Arctic exploration then became a common literary subject, and it was seen among the Western societies as a testing ground for masculinity. Using literary excerpts, news articles and pictures as well as letters from explorers, Bloom shows how a masculine boast was built around the Arctic. It was depicted as a wild and huge, white and pristine immensity, as well as a hostile ground, dangerous and unpredictable — all these tropes being also used for characterizing women in literature of the time. The Arctic was thus seen as waiting for “manly” men, real men, since only the most masculine may be able to conquer (or at least survive) in such an environment — adhering to the in vogue metaphor of women conquests. Masculinity thus corresponds in its nature to the definition given by Mosse in 1996: masculinity is an *ideal* ([28], p.4), a normative set of stereotypes about men effectively shaping attitudes in societies.

The values put forward through confrontation to the Arctic correspond to what Connell ([11]) holds to be the “hegemonic masculinity” of Western societies: courage, ruthlessness, resistance to physical and psychological suffering, a taste for thriving for performance and challenge, individualism — those were the “virile” values, legitimate male values as opposed to those viewed as womanish, the former being put forward in the tales of Arctic exploration. They compose a prism through which Arctic explorers continue to be seen. They truly are representative of what Arnold and Brady [2] call *mythical masculinities*<sup>5</sup>.

As Blooms explain, the masculinization of the attempts to reach the North Pole for instance meant a celebration of certain precise masculine qualities — that of Western white upper-class of the time. This selection among the different types of masculinity which might have been put forward is made clear in the selection among the tales which were told along the XIX<sup>th</sup> but also the XX<sup>th</sup> century. A paramount example of this is the systematic erasing of people not corresponding to this stereotypes in the literature, that is, women, indigenous people, people of color, and any people not corresponding to the rugged-individualistic pattern thought to suit grand explorers. About women, Rosner sums it up in an excerpt worth quoting in long: “*women have lived in the Arctic for thousands of years. Yet the grand heroic tradition of polar exploration defines the polar regions as all-male spaces of bonding, conquest, and noble*

<sup>5</sup>As is the title of the 3<sup>th</sup> section of they 2011 opus.

suffering. The poles have served as a kind of proving ground for colonial masculinity, places considered by men to be far too dangerous to bring women” (Rosner, 2009 [33], p.490). About colored people, the example of Matthew Henson is quite telling. Matthew Henson was an Afro-American explorer who accompanied Peary on his attempt to reach the North Pole, and he was never given any credits for that, while Peary gets them all. Last, but not least example, is the systematic forgetting of the indigenous helpers (guides, maintenance workers, etc.) who helped Western explorers in their quests. These men and women were never put forward in spite of their crucial roles in the exploration of the Arctic. Thus Bloom can state that though “polar exploration had not always been the exclusive preserve of ‘white’ male explorers”, the exclusive celebration of these heroes is telling on how much the Arctic masculinity is a socially selected one, suited white Western favored ways of being men. In this dimension, the Arctic is a cultural tool for enhancing certain values in Western societies.

### 1.3 The permanence of “frontier masculinities” among colonial Arctic societies

Arctic exploration and “conquest” was only done by a certain number of individuals, but it impregnated the whole of several Western societies through cultural productions — literary and newspapers’ accounts, photographs, films, etc. After the 1800s rush for exploration, there is another way through which Arctic masculinity has pervaded and was perpetuated in the whole of Western imagination, and that is through its echoing with “frontier masculinity” (a concept coined by Connell in 1993 [10]). According to Anahita and Mix ([1], p.333), frontier masculinity is “built on the myths of the frontier” which impregnate the whole of the American masculine culture, and it “centers on cultural myths about real and imagined heroic frontiersmen and cowboys”, “an ideal [built] on romanticized understandings of wilderness”. Anahita and Mix’s article is about Alaska and shows how the war on wolves, and more generally the whole hunting and trapping imagination, is based upon the same form of masculinity which was put forward through Arctic exploration. To this extent, the myth of the frontier to conquer can be considered as a perpetuation of the Arctic conquering masculinity, and has been renewed through sportsmanship and more generally outdoor activities in the “wild” Arctic. Anahita and Mix highlight the construction of masculinity through hunting wolves in the Arctic — and even through defending hunter’s prerogatives — by assessing the discourses linked to it. The rhetorical tools used by sportsmen relies on vilifying their opponents through feminizing them, and valorizing what are perceived to be virile “male” values in regard.

What has to be noted here is how close with colonizing imagination this frontier masculinity expressed in hunting is. As with exploration, it relies on the idea that the territory is hostile to human beings, and that the hunter is alone in a wild and pristine environment. The validation of frontier masculinity in the Arctic for Western men implies an erasing of the existence of indigenous peoples and their own ways of living. However, the plurality of these “Arctic masculinities” has to be stressed. It may differ, for instance, from a national context to another.

The rhetoric of the frontier and the attached frontier masculinity is particularly relevant in the American context (Anahita and Mix [1] working on Alaska), since nation-building and national identity there have been built upon the myth of the frontier. In other countries, for instance in mainland Norway, the relationship to nature may be less entrenched in rugged opposition to nature and hunting less favored, while contemplative hiking is preferred.

Arctic virile masculinity is enhanced not only among Arctic “visitors” such as occasional explorers or hunters, but also in permanently living non-indigenous communities. A first example of this is the Norwegian mining communities on Svalbard, as exposed by Evjen [16]. Until the end of the 1970s, only men were allowed to go on Svalbard, and only in order to work the mine or secure Norwegian effective sovereignty on the land. The bar to women entering the island was justified by Norwegian authorities invoking the harsh Arctic living conditions which would have made it impossible for women to survive there. The biased aspect of this argument is made visible in the fact that the governor and a few other administrative personnel were allowed to make their wives and children come inhabiting Longyearbyen with them. However, the archipelago — which is to a great extent what makes Norway consider itself an “Arctic nation” — retains the image of a virile and masculine environment, sailing to it and furthermore living on it being considered as a most-manly prowess (and this is emphasized by tourism advertisement about the archipelago).

A second example of how the virile masculinity put forward by explorers of the 1800s continue to shape the experience of men being men in the Arctic is that of oil exploitation. Miller in 2004 explicitly states that in Arctic Alaska, “the oil industry is masculine, not only in the historical and contemporary, demographic composition of its employees, but in its assumptions, values and everyday practices” ([29], p.48). Going to drill oil in the Arctic is considered paramountly masculine, and there is a social pressure among the oil-drillers (just as among the miners of Svalbard) to display patterns of virile masculinity — through subordinating nature, exercising masculine bodily strength, and proving one’s autonomous individualism.

#### **1.4 Today’s Arctic masculinity as a cultural and commercial phenomenon**

This “Arctic masculinity” image is still pervading today, especially through commercial trends of Arctic branding, and notably in tourism which has been a booming economic sector in the last decade. To a certain extent, it is a validation of their most virile masculinity that today certain tourists may search when travelling to the Arctic — and of course, this may be true whether these tourists are men or women: the male domination in Western societies implies that male values are favored over female ones, and the virilism displayed through the Arctic masculinity I have tried to characterized so far may thus appeal to women as well as men.

The touristic sectors favors the perpetuation of such images of the Arctic as a testing ground for masculinity. This is one of the subjects of the PhD thesis of Vander Kloet (“Cataloguing

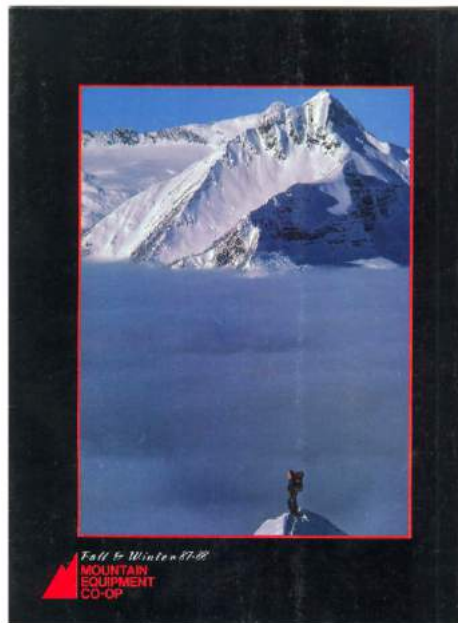


Figure 1: An image from Vander Kloet’s thesis, showing how advertisement promotes a certain form of masculine solitary conquest of pristine Arctic.

Source: Vander Kloet [39], annexes

wilderness”, [39]), in which she demonstrates how Canadian outdoor equipment companies as well as national nature and wildlife management company catalogue their clients by favoring the masculine white clientele. One of the clearest examples of this is her displaying of advertisement and signaling in which it is often white virile males (beardy, muscular, etc.) who are depicted validating a virile masculinity through climbing, ascending, camping and experiencing the “wild Arctic” (see [39], pp 317-327)

## Conclusion

There is something like an “Arctic masculinity” which has existed and pervades until now in Western society. It is a social and historical construct which has made the Arctic a testing ground for white male virile masculinity, and it has shaped in return the activities performed in the Arctic, the institutions (facilities as well as ways of life) that non-indigenous people perform there, and in the end, not only the Arctic image, but also the Arctic environment.

## 2 Arctic local masculinities and the crisis among indigenous male youths

### 2.1 Masculinity and modernity in the Arctic

So far, Arctic masculinity has been taken into account as a Western discourse, and a “modern” one, in the sense of historical *modernity* period starting with the industrial revolution.



Not incidentally, this modern discourse on Arctic modernity is tied to colonialism. In the Arctic as well as in other regions, colonization has been associating with a vilifying feminization of the indigenous peoples, and the masculine conquering pride was validated at the expense of the indigenous — especially the indigenous masculinity, although it is worth noting that interplay between masculinities in the Arctic is not necessarily pathologic. The encounter between the “Arctic masculinity” fantasied by Western males and the effective ways of manly life in the Arctic may provided ground for intercultural exchange, as Bravo highlights it with the example of technological exchange. He states that along the XIX<sup>th</sup> and XX<sup>th</sup> centuries, technological “skills like kayaking [...] served as a common currency for men to build relationships across cultural boundaries” — explorers and ethnographers willingly practicing and exchanging with indigenous hunters when it comes to build a kayak or repair an engine (Bravo, [8], p.17; and cf. fig. 2). Some traits and artifacts of masculine Arctic hunters’ culture have been retaken by tourist hunters with a change in meaning. This is obvious in the reindeer antlers, which may nowadays be a goal as such in the hunt, chased as trophies of virility by Western sportsmen abandoning the meat, whereas for indigenous hunters antlers were primarily byproducts of subsistence hunting – as highlighted in Brandth and Haugen, 2005, out of the works of Sko-geieren: “for many hunters it is more prestigious to return home with antlers, whatever size, than with the bag full of meat” ([7], p.19). However, as Bravo underlines it, the other edge of this masculine connivance sword is the categorization and reification of Arctic cultures and masculinities as “behind” Western ones.



Figure 2: Connivance at play between Western men and Inuit, on the basis of their common taste for technological DIY and “autonomous” culture. Source: Bravo [8], p.41

In normative terms, the Arctic and its indigenous peoples has thus been at the same time rejected towards the double-negative sides of counter-modernity and femininity. This is expressed in Ryall’s “Arctic modernity” project summary [36], p.4: “the Arctic often appears as

a counter-modernity, embodying mythic or romantic dimension existing beyond the modern everyday world”. Quoting from Anthony Giddens, Ryall highlights that modernity is “distinctively a Western project”, applied at the expense of indigenous people considered as benighted and feminine (and this invites us to be careful of ethnocentrism and not to use the modern/traditional dichotomy to characterize Western/ indigenous peoples, in order not to re-enact of the “great partake”). This colonial masculinity is sexually expressed in the consideration of Arctic indigenous women as sexually available to any white man — a prejudice present among explorers’ teams as well as whaling crews, as Saladin d’Anglure [38] recalls it, p.13.

Western negation of indigenous masculinity is a product of ethnocentrism and neglects the forms of masculinities proper to indigenous peoples. My point here is not to list all types of masculinities present in each Arctic indigenous population — a whole dissertation would probably not be sufficient for this. To picture the variety of masculinities existing in only one Arctic culture, and the lack of studies not focusing only on the hegemonic form of masculinity in each culture, one can have a look at Torjer Olsen’s “ ‘Masculinities’ in Sami studies” 2015 article [31]. Every social group has a certain gendered structure within which several configurations for male attributes, behaviors and roles exist, and are hierarchized (*see* Connell, 1995 [11]); “hegemonic masculinity” is the most legitimate one, and often even social scientists are led to describe only this normative form of masculinity.

Adopting a wider look and trying not to reify Arctic cultures into “traditional” social organization, I rather focus here on a few characteristics of contemporary indigenous Arctic masculinities within wider gender structures — characteristics which disrupt the Western “Arctic masculinity” principles exposed above. This allows understanding not only which “masculine” principle are present in the Arctic, but rather what “masculinities” do to Arctic populations. For this I focus on a tragic but central element to understand contemporary Arctic masculinity: masculine suicide in the Arctic, which sadly seems to be a defining trait of Arctic indigenous masculine subcultures. I will question whether this overrepresentation of males among deaths by suicide is the sign of a “masculinity crisis”, and to what extent the characteristics it puts forward characterize Arctic as the epitome of rural societies contemporary changes.

## 2.2 Suicide among Arctic indigenous male youth


In demographic studies of Arctic societies, a lot of attention has been brought to mortality gender gap. In their 1952 paper, Malaurie, Tabah and Sutter note that among the Inuit of Thule, there is a male superior mortality rate due to accidents. This may be explained, as Roy and Tremblay note it, by the fact that hegemonic masculinity favors resistance to suffering — whether physical or psychological suffering ([34], p.70) — and taking of risks, inciting men to risk their lives only in order to display a masculinity which follows the hegemonic standards, and thus to affirm a high social status among men. Therefore, the mortality gap may be explained by the effort made by men to comply to normative masculine standards.

A further explanation may help understanding why this gap is especially high among Arctic

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Figure 3: A typical example of Arctic “frontier masculinity” branding. A company offering hunting tours relies on the desirability of masculine hunter status for advertising. Pictures promote the accumulation of antlers as a trophy validating the masculinity of “manly men” and the posing next to the dead body of big animals recently shot. Men pictured here are displayed in fraternal groups, bearing facial virile pilosity, and wearing outfits and guns similar to those worn in the Army (which may represent the quintessence of a certain form of virile masculinity).

Source: [http://alaskabushadventures.com/alaska\\_caribou\\_hunts.html](http://alaskabushadventures.com/alaska_caribou_hunts.html)

indigenous populations: the competition for masculine status following the hegemonic standard does not concern all men on the same footage — masculinities being always embedded in wider social systems. Indeed, men most likely to pursue the achievement of hegemonic masculinity standards are men who lack other spaces to affirm their social status, and this is typically the case for indigenous men who live out of a context in which the skills transmitted to them are valuable and sufficient to guarantee them a fair engagement in social competition for a favored status in a globalized society.

Bjerregaard and Lyng in their 2006 article on suicide in modern Greenland [3] quote several possible factors for suicide, backed upon the “bonding theory”. They state that “loneliness”, whether personal, social, cultural or cosmogenic, may be a factor for youth suicide. This can also be read in gendered terms: hegemonic masculinity, as it pervades in today’s globalized culture, and as is imposed by Western ideals, promotes men’s independence and autonomy, which can account for *personal* and *social* loneliness. In the case of youth Greenlandic males, it combines with *cultural* and *cosmic* loneliness, which are due to the rapid changes which happened in the last decades in Greenland and to the “anomic” gap, to quote from Durkheim’s *Le Suicide* (1897), between expectations carried by the globalized Western media and the near-impossibility to meet these expectations for Greenlandic youth males. Kaiser in his 2011 dissertation [21] insists on the masculine injunction he found among Sami reindeer herders: “ ‘You shouldn’t show weakness if you are a real reindeer-herding man’ is the commonly shared

norm expressed by the young men” he states (p.45).

Those elements may be re-inscribed in a more general understanding of social change in the Arctic. Collignon in 2001 [9] depicts the changes happening in Canadian Inuit societies in terms of housing and community space. She explains that contemporary forms of housing, even though providing obvious advantages compared to traditional igloos (especially in terms of heating) also have the negative byproduct of disrupting the gender roles into which Inuit were socialized. The concrete houses incite men to spend more time inside than they would have spent in an igloo, while one of the paramount masculine trait in this Inuit culture was being outside, especially for hunting. P.137, Collignon recalls that when men spent time inside igloos, they would say that they were becoming “women”. Therefore, Collignon concludes, the Western inside culture imposed by material facilities entails a double identity crisis: a cultural crisis (an inactive men could not be a true Inuk) and a masculinity crisis — spending more time inside being incompatible with the male status among the Inuit of Igloodik.

### 2.3 Social change in rural Arctic and the “masculinity crisis”

Rural/ urban masculinities is a quite common subject in masculinity studies; from these one may derive conclusions for the Arctic as a representative of changing rural societies. A distinction between rural and urban masculinity in contemporary Greenland and Faroe Islands is made by Gaini [19] in order to understand the potential distress among rural male youth (among which the suicide rate is maximal). His explanation backs upon conflicting models of masculinity. He states that “in urban discourses the so-called heroes of the past are often labeled, implicitly or explicitly, as lost or self-destructive men who need to change their masculinity in order to adapt to contemporary realities. Conversely, they are also described as role models for troubled youth. In both cases they represent the ‘other’ in the context of modern society.” ([19], p.51). This calls for more reflection on the role models presented to youth males in Arctic societies, as “heroes of the past” models — still transmitted through socialization — may be disconnected to contemporary reality and widen the gap between youth hegemonic masculine expectations (reinforced by the clich e of “Arctic masculinity” entrenched in Western media) and more gender-balanced contemporary favored values.

The proper characteristics of a rural society are underlined by Brandth and Haugen in their 2005 article [7]. While standard masculinity is defined among many rural societies through the controlling of the land and the environment, the mastering of the forces of nature, the potential ability to survive in the wilderness and the ability to pursue arduous physical work ([7], p.13), recent economic changes have called for a replacement of rural economies, from primary sector (agriculture) to tertiary sector (services). This is especially true in the Arctic where hunting and fishing for a living as the countries’ main indigenous activity has been rapidly replaced by tourism as the major development opportunity. Such changes may affect the whole gender system, since in some — if not all — Arctic societies, the gender system balances upon a differentiation of tasks which revolve around hunting particularly (see Bodenhorn, 1990 [6]

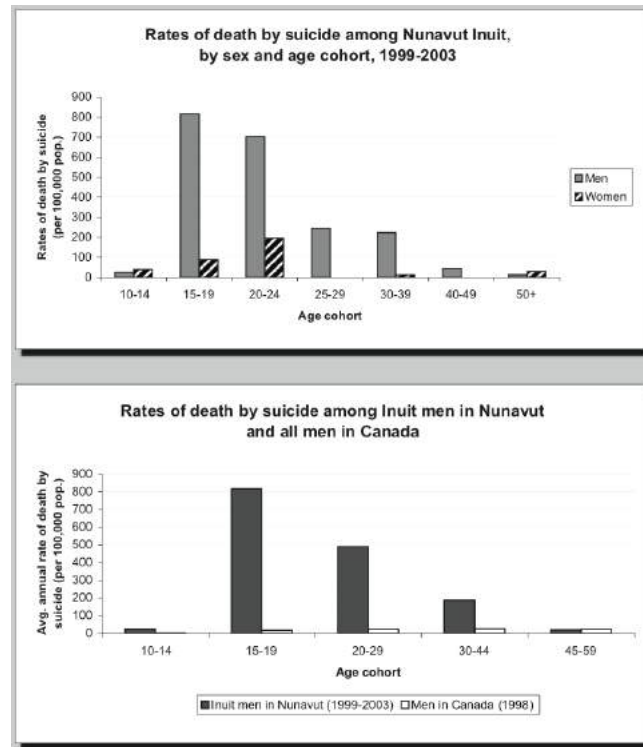


Figure 4: Rates of death by suicide in Canada show a clear over-representation of men and Nunavut Inuit

Source: Jack HICKS, 2007, "The Social Determinants Of Elevate Rates Of Suicide Among Inuit Youth", *Indigenous Affairs* 4/07, p.32

for an account of hunting gender roles among Iñupiat Inuit). But within this gender system imbalance, as Bodenhorn says it, "men have had a harder time with the recent change" (p.67). In their article on rural masculinity, Brandth and Haugen state "the free and independent work and rugged masculinity of the logger is replaced by a groomed tourist host whose task it is to answer to the demands of others", p.19. This requires new abilities, the acquisition of which may leave many men behind. Rural masculinities present in the Arctic are thus rapidly changing, and the transitional inadequacy of many men left without the means of assuming a proper socially favored masculinity is what may truly be labeled as a masculinity crisis.

This crisis and its negative consequences are analyzed in-depth in the specific Greenlandic context by Poppel in a 2005 article [32]. In a wider societal view, she insists that "not all men experience a share of the male power"; changes in the labour market have deprived men of the possibility to achieve positive social roles (becoming the breadwinner of the family and be seen as an attractive partner). Thus social change affects masculinity on the labour market but also in relationships: the furthering of studies, emigration and/ or marriage with Danish people of Greenlandic women have led to structural forced celibacy of numerous Greenlandic men, a form of loneliness which contributes a lot to male youth suicides. Poppel concludes that "A consequence of changing gender roles and relations in families, house-holds, and the labour market is crises among that part of the male population who have not benefited from the changes", p.310, a crisis which concerns masculinity. Trying to integrate all those factors for indigenous youth masculinity trouble among the Sami, Torjer [?] suggests the term of

“marginalization” which points at their progressive but often ineluctable rejection out of the most well-viewed masculine social positions in all spheres: education, work, family life, but also politics.

## Conclusion

The Western notion of Arctic masculinity is a colonial one and does not reflect effective Arctic indigenous plural ways of being a man, which are embedded in local gendered systems. However, combined with contemporary massive social changes which set into question the established gender roles, this Western-imposed ideal of masculinity might be a disturbing element contributing to distress among Arctic male youths. This general “masculinity trouble” (to recall J. Butler’s 1990 seminal work *Gender Trouble*) among Arctic indigenous youths tragically ends up in high masculine suicide rates.

## 3 Disruptions and reconfigurations of Arctic masculinities on a global level

In a recalling of her *Gender on ice* work in 2010, Bloom states that “almost one hundred years later, the Arctic is no longer the site of a privileged white masculinity, and the region is understood not just as a remote area but, rather, as a space closely if complexly connected to globalized and political forces.” [5], p.31. This statement pleads for the taking into account of the third level highlighted by Connell and Messerschmidt [13]: the international level, considering the Arctic not as a symbolic place defined in cultural myths, nor its geographical and hence demographico-social dimension, but rather as a political stage, at the nexus of several institutions embodied by men and women from the Arctic and elsewhere.

### 3.1 Disruptive Arctic masculinities in a Westernized world

In the last decades, the Arctic has emerged on the international stage not only as an object — which it has long been, for instance an object of rivalry and negotiation between the two “blocs” during the Cold war — but also a subject in itself. This was linked with the emergence of indigenous claims for their rights, as well as national claims for recognition — for instance on the part of Greenland. This process has had institutional consequences, for instance in the creation of the Arctic Council, which to a certain extent marks the recognition of the Arctic as a subject *per se* in international relations, with its own logics (even if of course dependent on the outer context) and some actors relatively independent from traditional states (that is, the Arctic indigenous organizations which are Permanent participants).

One might hope that this emergence of the Arctic as a pluri-vocal actor in the spheres of international governance may change the ways of doing international politics, for they are, to a certain extent, shaped by certain forms of masculinity — often a white, neoliberal hegemonic

one, according to Connell (2005, [12]). Institutional masculinities, that is, normative configurations of masculine attributes favored by established institutions such as national states, may tend towards the conservation or re-enactment of hegemonic masculinity defined in opposition to both women and nature (as explained by Ingólfssdóttir [20]). This can be seen in the case of Alaska “retrofitting frontier masculinity” in its war against wolves, to recall Anahita and Mix above-mentioned article [1]; this is also the case in the advertisement for Iceland as a touristic destination, studied by Loftsdóttir ([24]), for instance Icelandair ads, in which Iceland is shown as a desirable exotic woman typically embodying a white male fantasy.

However, Nordic societies have distinguished themselves among others by promoting gender equality early and strongly. This is related to masculinities in the sense that for gender-balancing policies to be accepted, hegemonic masculinity at the state — or regional — level has to be quite progressive and not harshly virile, while this is the type of masculinity which pervades in the bigger traditional States and institutions (*connell05a*). According to some scholars and politicians, for instance Bodenhorn [6] or Gunn-Britt Retter ([19] and personal discussion), this gender equality agenda echoes the prevalent influence of the traditional balance of gender roles among indigenous Arctic peoples. Arctic indigenous masculinities, if not rendered uncertain and thus radicalized against any element of womanhood, might therefore offer alternative ways of doing politics, which might prove essential in a global environmental crisis context — as I will focus on next. They rely on complementarity with the feminine sphere rather than separation and opposition; the very title of Bodenhorn’s article on Iñupiat, “I’m Not the Great Hunter, My Wife Is”, echoes this Arctic masculinity more open to cooperation and proximity of gender roles. This saying of a male Iñupiat hunter shows recognition of the fact that masculine and feminine roles here are not as definitely separated as their strict association with male and female on a biological basis in the Western world suggests.

To end these suggestions on the disruptive potential of Arctic masculinities, one may recall Saladin d’Anglure’s works on the “third sex” among the Inuit ([37]). He calls for a better taking into account of the potential fluidity of gender among certain populations, which might actually help overcome the dead-ends encountered by a binary hegemonic masculinity built against femininity. One of the major dead-ends met in the recent years is that of unsustainability: as seen above, the Western masculinity exercised in the Arctic in part takes the form of extractive industry, which is currently exhausting fossil fuel resources and changing the climate, precipitating global crises. Arctic societies might therefore have an important role to play in the promotion of alternative models of masculinities.

## 3.2 The necessity to account for masculinities in an uncertain Arctic future

### 3.2.1 The role of masculinities regarding climate and social change

In her 2009 article, Rosner [33] shows that the Western construction of Arctic masculinity pervades today’s analysis of climate change. P.493, she states that “in common references to

the poles as pure, pristine, or untouched, we hear echoes of the old talk about the seventh, virgin continent, so chilly and remote yet so sought after by men”, which imply that the area has to be protected in a patriarchal way — that is, only by the legitimate representative of the masculinity sought in the Arctic, in clear: by Western males. In a subject as complex as that of climate change, with the challenge of global trends having to be seized by everyone to make democratic decisions, wording matters — and the point of view in which issues are presented matters as well. If is it the hegemonic masculinity embodied in the fantasied Arctic representations which monopolizes the statements about climate change, then there is a risk that all populations excluded from this hegemonic masculinity will also be evicted from the decision-making processes about it — that is, women, but also indigenous men, and all men which do not fit in this specific masculinity configuration. This is why accounting for plural masculinities is important, that is to say, to know and take into account these different masculinities in order to avoid the predominance of Western hegemonic masculinity and its reverse side, a reified notion of “femininity” as uniquely a blank opposition of this masculinity, thus reified and static — both erasing internal differences between the plural ways of being men and being women.

In Ingólfssdóttir 2011 article [20], the promotion of a “second discourse” towards the Arctic, that of cooperation rather than competition, may also be seen as coherent with the taking into account of other Arctic masculinities than the western hegemonic one — which is fundamentally built upon an opposition to femininity. A more gender-balanced view may be promoted by the taking into account of Arctic indigenous masculinities, as I have explained it with Retter’s and Bodenhorn’s analyses on gender roles in Arctic societies.

### 3.2.2 The role of masculinities in the production and sharing of knowledge

One of the major issues revolving around the current question of climate change is that of “traditional ecological knowledge”, that is, knowledge about the environment and environmental change which has been accumulated and built upon generations among a social group. This knowledge is often in danger today, while keeping and reviving it could prove crucial to cope with climate change on local, regional and global levels. This is what Nakashima et al. explain in their *Weathering uncertainty* report [30]. The authors insist that this knowledge is often gendered: men may possess certain knowledge and women a complementary part of it. But Dowsley et al. in their 2010 article highlight an Arctic example which put forward the importance of accounting for plural masculinities in order to save this knowledge as an active one. They explain that among certain Inuit populations, fishermen made reports to their wives of the state of the sea ice; and Inuit wives were in charge of collecting this information, sharing it, and drawing conclusion in a truly social process. Thus, it is not only a point of shared knowledge: men and women have different roles in the process of collecting, building, sharing and vivifying the ecological knowledge. This once more asserts the importance of opposing the Western hegemonic forms of masculinity with may rather consider women as potential opponents.



### 3.2.3 Masculinities in Arctic governance

These arguments for the widening of the masculinities spectrum when dealing with the Arctic at an international level imply empowerment of Arctic peoples, who would thus be able to certain extent to manage their environment and take decisions out of Arctic proper characteristics.



Figure 5: Third from the left, G.-B. Retter in a Sami international leader who could be an example of new Arctic governance. Being a young and strong woman calling for less taking into account of hegemonic Western masculinity priorities, and symbolically through wearing traditional Sami outfit and displaying a short “masculine” haircut, she displays how other odels of gender relations are possible, and disrupts usual gender roles.

Source: Gender Equality in the Arctic, [19], p.17

Gunn-Britt Retter<sup>6</sup>, in a personal discussion, regrets that “the Arctic agenda is promoting masculine values [...] like mining, oil and gas, and coal [...] So indigenous peoples’ participation in the Arctic discussion [...] might add a human face to it, and also may give softer values to the discussion”. Through this excerpt, it is quite clear that what she deplores is a prevalent Western hegemonic masculinity, extractive and colonial, which pervades even among indigenous representatives. Ingimundarson (cf. [19], p.62) thus warns against “haunting” or “spectrality” of (not-so-)“past colonial discourses of Arctic exploration, science and exploitation, and Cold War militarism” which still “linger on and can be revived” even though officially dismissed. Retter thus makes a case for the taking into account of diverse forms of masculinities — especially non-hegemonic ones, as well as femininities, which seems to be a necessary premise for better self-determination, and for avoiding doing too much sacrifices to extractive industry at the expense of social stability and environmental sustainability. This demands a recognition of the plurality of masculinities, in societies, but perhaps first in science: the main point of Bodenhorn’s article [6], “Inūpiat and anthropological models of gender”, is to show that Arctic particular forms of masculinity have often been misunderstood because of the ethnocentrism of the traditional “Anthropological [Western] model”, at the expense of the proper “Inūpiat models of gender”.

<sup>6</sup>G.-B. Retter is a Saami from North-East Norway, chair of the local Saami association, active spokesperson for indigenous rights, former advisor to the Arctic Council’s Indigenous Peoples Secretariat, and since 2005 she has been the head of the Arctic and Environmental Unit of the Saami Council

## Conclusion

When taking the Arctic into account as a political stage, a new look on masculinities is worth casting since the potentially conflicting gendered configurations shown above gain here some concrete consequences. The taking into account and respect for a diversity of masculinities, and not only the expression of an hegemonic Western manhood opposed to idealized femininity, might serve the advancement of indigenous traditional knowledge as well as voice and agency. However, the road ahead is steep, since Western hegemonic masculinity, which tend to favor colonial versions of exploration and exploitation, are pervasive at all levels, in all Arctic governance-related bodies.

## Conclusion

In this essay I tried to highlight how the taking into consideration of masculinities — as sets of attributes (material and symbolic), behaviors and roles proper to certain men — may help understand Arctic societies. It even helps understanding the differentiated shaping of the Arctic from indigenous societies and colonial Western societies — the latter having invented a distinctive form of “Arctic masculinity” as a testing ground for hegemonic masculinity, as highlighted in first section. Plural masculinity are hierarchized within social groups, from the most dominant and favored ones to the least considerate, denying to the men embodying the latter a proper male status. As it encloses a set of values, masculinity always have an idealistic dimension, which may have concrete effects in reality through diverse channels.

Masculinities may have shaped the relationship between colonial and indigenous individuals, either under the form of collaboration and connivence or rivalry and conflict. It has also shaped the environment the Arctic is, Western hegemonic masculinity implying a stress on high-scale natural resources extraction and exploitation and wild game hunting. Masculinities are also evolutive and are closely tied to more general social change; thus, second section focuses on the masculinities among indigenous Arctic societies and what may be labelled as a form of “masculinity crisis”, revealing tensions among Arctic male youth and between them and the outside. This crisis is seeable in the high male suicide rates among Arctic youth which can be interpreted as a reaction to the impossibility to achieve a masculine high social status due to rapid and structural social changes.

In third section, international effects of masculinities discourses and views are assessed to the extent they may *do* something to Arctic politics, policies and societies. Masculinity is one of the factors framing the discussions as the Arctic becomes a subject for international politics, and not taking it into account may lead to the perpetuation of Western hegemonic masculinity domination. Other forms of masculinities are offered by Arctic societies, and they seem to correspond better to the current global crises which regard the Arctic.

On the whole, this essay puts forward the plurality of masculinity regarding the Arctic;

and the necessity to take them into account, which implies knowing them better through studying them more — in this I am fully consistent with Olsen's [31] conclusion about Sami masculinities. To a certain extent, models of masculinities may shape the Arctic, and discussing it has led me to distinguish between the Arctic as a symbolic and mythical place, a socio-demographic region inhabited by a certain number of populations, and a stage for international politics. No doubt masculinities will continue to play a role in the framing of Arctic questions and policy answers, and their taking into account might be one of the steps which may lead to a brighter future for Arctic societies.

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