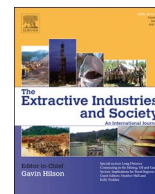




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Timely rubies. Temporality and Greenlandic gems

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ABSTRACT

Based on anthropological fieldwork in Greenland, I explore how rubies as a natural resource create and organise forms of temporality in order for the stones to appear as a valuable good. I suggest that a circular argument is at play with regard to the Greenlandic rubies, namely that time creates valuable rubies and rubies create time. I further argue that this interdependence is an important self-fulfilling driver in creating a viable mining industry for gemstones in Greenland. A focus on temporality enables me to engage in this circularity and thereby explore one component in the work of making valuable rubies. Rubies, then, come to work for me as a lens through which to think about ways of creating and organizing time and vice versa. The underlying premise for this contribution is that time is thus not a universal measure that externally orders events, but rather a fieldwork feature deeply embedded in and generated through social practices. Accordingly, time in relation to mining does not so much present a philosophical challenge, but is rather just a “thing” that happens to be good to think a Greenlandic resource landscape through – as are rubies.

1. Introduction. Mobilizing time

It was in my interview with a person from the Ministry of Mineral Resources in Greenland's capital Nuuk in the autumn of 2015, that I was first alerted to the expression “historical stones” in relation to Greenlandic rubies.³ During the interview, our dialogue went far: from reflections on a study trip to Burma to legal paragraphs in the various national Mineral Acts and to some of the conflicts spurred by this law complex. In my notes, I hastily wrote “‘historical stones’ before 2009”, indicating that historical stones are stones collected before 2009. As such, they are an indirect product of a juridical and political timing – namely the *Standard terms for small scale mining*⁴ made by the administration of the mineral resources in the spring 2009 and anticipating the first Greenlandic Mineral Act that came into force in 2010. In amazement, I thought about the fact that the word ‘historical’ here could both entail Greenlandic rubies, occasionally launched as the oldest rubies ever found on earth, and signify a rather new juridical invention to refer to precious stones – including these ancient rubies – collected quite recently. I was immediately intrigued by this curious term invented by the authorities that focuses on a geological materiality and manages the act of collecting precious stones in Greenland.

Foregrounding a particular human-stone relation, the notion of ‘historical stones’ was indeed a fieldwork gem for an anthropologist as me questioning the rawness of natural resources by studying what it takes to make valuable natural goods – in my case rubies.

By focussing on how temporality is created and mobilized in my fieldwork on rubies, this article taps into research that investigates the role of time in social analyses (Dalsgaard and Nielsen, 2015; Guyer, 2007; Miyazaki, 2003; Fabian, 1983), as does this special issue. A so-called “temporal turn” (Bear, 2016) in the social sciences has long questioned time understood as a uniform temporal progressive given (Jordheim, 2014) for instance by paying attention to how such a man-made universal perspective has eclipsed other forms of temporalities (Tsing, 2015; Gan, 2016). As Ferry and Limbert have shown in their edited volume (2008) (Ferry and Limbert, 2008) there is great potential in analyzing the role of time in the extractive industry; a potential that similarly animates this special issue. My contribution to this body of research is to explore how the extraction of mineral resources in Greenland is a mobilization of temporal resources that make particular ‘time-pieces’. These time-pieces are to be understood as analytical units, assembled for the occasion, through which to think about ways of creating and organizing Greenlandic rubies. By working with the idea

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¹ <http://anthropocene.au.dk/da/>.

² <http://naturalgoods.saxo.ku.dk/>.

³ Due to the colonial history between Greenland and Denmark one of the two official languages is, apart from Greenlandic, Danish. Many public employees come from Denmark and the Danish term used for historical stones in the interview was “historiske sten”.

⁴ Råstofdirektoratet. Grønlands Hjemmestyre (2009) “Standardvilkår for tilladelser til småskala efterforskning efter mineraler” https://govmin.gl/images/stories/minerals/Standard_terms_small_scale_exploration_dk.pdf (Accessed 25 September 2017).

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of ‘time-pieces’ I seek to explore other ways of mobilizing time than as a detached phenomenon for example as a universal progressive time line. Accordingly, time does not so much present an abstract philosophical challenge, but is rather mobilized as an empirical ‘piece’ (as are rubies) that via fieldwork encounters gets substantiated and happen to be good to think a Greenlandic resource landscape through. Thus, I suggest to study time empirically as it emerges in field encounters, whereby both time and rubies appear as collaboratively made analytical units; heterogeneous, awkward, instant, incomplete, and indeed relative to each other. As an attempt to mobilize time and substantiate it through encounters in the field the following analysis is a suggestion of how to attend to important political aspects of time and extraction as addressed by [Ángelo and Pijpers \(this issue\)](#). My approach, then, engages what philosopher of science Helen Verran has termed an “infra-”⁵; analytic, implying that collective action generates the entities we study, be it rubies, time, resources, numbers or all of them at once ([Verran, 2014](#); cf. [Bricchet and Hastrup, in press](#)). The underlying premise is that even time (and space and numbers for that matter) is not to be seen as a pre-given universal measure that externally organizes events, but as a result of analytical work deeply embedded in social practices, generated and encountered through anthropological fieldwork. When engaging with time as an accomplishment of generative encounters – a product of material-semiotic perspectives ([Haraway, 1988](#)) – anthropological fieldwork becomes more than decoding and harvesting of data. Therefore I engage with the continuous collective making and un-making of Greenlandic rubies and their shifting temporal qualifications through a fieldwork which is equally generative, letting all kinds of unpredictable relations and inventions become analytical resources that take place *and* time (cf. [Hastrup, 2011, 2014](#)).

In the following, I explore the mutual generation of time and rubies in three fieldwork situations where this complex become foregrounded. The first situation discusses how strategies to market the Greenlandic underground are closely related to an impatient and ardent wish of becoming independent from Denmark, Greenland’s former colonizer. The second situation explores how the Greenlandic rubies officially came into being and were first even identified as Greenlandic rubies; the third situation explores how these stones were made illegal (and possibly legal again) according to a timeline, which is still debated. Taken together, these intensified situations show how temporal practices and images can be seen to play a vital part in producing and processing Greenlandic rubies which, in turn, appear as valuable time pieces.

2. Planning independence through geology

When I set out studying the creation of mineral resources and the mining industry in Greenland in 2013, I started engaging with the country’s then only active mine – a gold mine operating on and off from 2004. But despite notoriously high gold prices due to the lack of trust in other currencies on account of the financial crisis beginning in 2007 that extended well beyond the United States from where it spread like wildfire, the mine ran out of money (not gold) and closed the same year that I initiated my project. Unintentionally, I had approached the mining industry in turbulent times, and many of the Greenlandic mining (and hydro-carbon) projects that had been in the pipeline were put on hold awaiting better times (cf. [Ángelo and Pijpers, 2018](#); [Lanzano, both this issue](#)). But the ruby project somehow pulled through, and I had the opportunity of following the critical process of realizing the underground potential of rubies. As the first mining project to materialize after the gold mine, it was invested with high hopes; both as an income generator and as a showcase for the potentials of a

Greenlandic mining industry, which has eventually only partly and slowly developed.

Since the 1990s, the mineral resources of Greenland have been marketed internationally through various strategies.⁶ With a history of circa 20 closed down mining projects in the 20th century ([Secher and Sørensen, 2014](#)) people in Greenland have experienced that within the mining industry projects pop up, die off and disappear, only passing through after all. The frightening scenarios of other former colonies’ experiences with the so-called ‘resource curse’ are indeed luring, and many Greenlanders are concerned with creating an industry that is “to the benefit of Greenland” – to paraphrase the title of a much discussed scientific report about the Greenlandic subsoil ([Rosing and Knudsen, 2014](#)). As a former colony of Denmark but still part of the Danish Kingdom through a complicated construction of Greenlandic self-government in 2009 ([Adler-Nissen and Gad, 2017](#)) the country is heavily dependent on Danish subsidies to sponsor the Arctic welfare state. The Greenlandic politicians, looking mainly to fishing for income, have long been eager to find additional resources of their own, that could boost the slender Treasury and eventually ensure independence. Ambivalent feelings have long pertained to the economic dependency of Denmark, and the promising valuables of the underground have been mobilized as just what is needed to make profit and gain independence (see e.g. [Nuttall, 2012](#); [Hansen et al., 2015](#); [Wilson, 2015](#); [Bjørst, 2016](#)). An impatience with this independency-process has emerged in the political climate in Greenland and culminated in 2013 when head of Government, Aleqa Hammond, aired that she wanted to see the day when the Greenlandic flag was hoisted in the UN ([Søndergaard, 2013](#)). For her and many others in the labor party that she represented the step from potential resource to a surplus generating mine or actual oil production was seen as minor and time was ripe for harvesting the resources of the land.⁷ Together with her party colleague, the minister of mineral resources, she introduced a royalty to all mining projects in order to generate revenues from day one, even though this change of rules would weaken Greenland’s credibility as a mining friendly country.⁸

In Danish newspapers, headlines such as “The hunt for Greenlandic minerals is exploding” ([Bech, 2011](#)) and “Race for the Greenlandic minerals has begun” ([Sørensen, 2012](#)) have presented the Greenlandic underground as an up-for-grabs frontier and scene for a race. These Danish writings have curiously mimicked an old colonial dream dating back to when the king of Denmark and Norway in 1605 sponsored three ships to explore the Greenlandic coast as a reaction to rumours of mountains of silver and gold ([Ball, 1922, 13ff](#)). However, despite this invigorated optimism and intensified exploration activities the global recession has resulted in a downgrading of mining related activities and even more so, of the dreams of wealth produced by hydro-carbon as licenses are not renewed. The report quoted above, “To the benefit of Greenland”, qualified and pointed to the unrealistic number and size of mines necessary for Greenland to gain independency from the Danish block grant. Nevertheless, Greenlandic politicians have not given up marketing Greenland as a mining friendly country. Altogether these pro-mining strategies have attracted a conglomerate of adventurous geologists, often posing at mining conferences next to investors, bureaucrats and a few politicians all asserting the potential richness of the unexplored country through alluring numbers, figures and photos of a vast pristine nature (cf. [Tsing, 2000](#), see also [Luning, this issue](#)). If,

⁶ See for instance the newsletters made as an effort to promote exploration and mining in Greenland prepared by the Mineral Resource Administration and the Geological Survey of Greenland, *Minex News* 1992, No 1 and 1993, No 2. <https://www.govmin.gl/publications/2-minerals/minerals/152-minex>. (Accessed 25 September 2017).

⁷ *Netredaktionen*, 2010. “Siumut ser hurtige gevinster i undergrunden” *Sermitsiaq* 4. May 2010. <http://sermitsiaq.ag/siumut-ser-hurtige-gevinster-undergrunden> (Accessed 14 December 2017).

⁸ This change immediately resulted in a drop on the annual Fraser Survey of mining companies (2014) that is followed closely by the Greenlandic Authorities: <https://www.fraserinstitute.org/sites/default/files/survey-of-mining-companies-2014.pdf> (accessed 25. January 2018).

⁵ As opposed (incommensurably) to a meta-analytic that presupposes a distant observer whose analysis of the world is perceived from an external position and based on pre-given entities.

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