

HASTRUP, Kirsten B., 2015 *Thule på Tidens Rand*, photos by Carsten Egevang, Copenhagen, Lindhardt og Ringhof, 496 pages

Ulrik Pram Gad

Volume 40, numéro 1, 2016

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1040153ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1040153ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Inuksiutiit Katimajit Inc.  
Centre interuniversitaire d'études et de recherches autochtones (CIÉRA)

ISSN

0701-1008 (imprimé)

1708-5268 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Gad, U. P. (2016). Compte rendu de [HASTRUP, Kirsten B., 2015 *Thule på Tidens Rand*, photos by Carsten Egevang, Copenhagen, Lindhardt og Ringhof, 496 pages]. *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 40(1), 229–232.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1040153ar>

# Recensions/Book reviews

HASTRUP, Kirsten B.

2015 *Thule på Tidens Rand*, photos by Carsten Egevang, Copenhagen, Lindhardt og Ringhof, 496 pages.

Written by one of the leading figures in Danish anthropology, *Thule på Tidens Rand* ('Thule at the Edge of Time') presents a comprehensive account of the *Inughuit* of Avanersuaq, a.k.a. the Thule people of northwest Greenland. The point of departure for the book is that Thule is not a place at the edge of the world; for those who live there, it is the centre of the world. Moreover, ever since their ancestors migrated across Smith Sound from what is now Canada, they have repeatedly been involved in movements and structures of a global reach. Against this backdrop, the thesis is that Thule now finds itself at the edge of time: Inughuit have always been adaptive and have always welcomed useful technology, but climate change is eroding the material conditions of life as known for generations: a hunting-oriented life in a landscape shaped in and by ice. In Hastrup's conclusion, "time is not linear [...] It consists of specific densities [...] and empty stretches. [...]. Right now, it's quiet; not much happens, but it is building up to dramatic changes" (p. 458, all quotes my translation).

The book is kaleidoscopically organized into eight chapters on "The Place," "The People," "The Ice," "The Hunting," "The Technology," "The Colony," "The Invasion," and, finally, "Time." Hastrup bases this choice of "thematic pillars"—rather than a "chronological narrative"—on the observation that "The history of the Thule population is not a simple narrative of progress" (p. 462). Each of the chapters approaches its theme from different angles rather than presenting a linear argument. However, all of the chapters are about change: about a diversity of changes or perhaps rather about the diversity of changeability. The radical character of some changes is downplayed. Hence, contact with European modernity was more gradual than explorers (e.g., Ross, Peary, and Rasmussen) have told us. Other changes are rendered more monumental than they are in earlier interpretations. Thus, the post-World War II establishment of the huge American air base at Thule not only led to the forced relocation in 1953 of Inughuit

who had settled by the Danish trade station, but also made a central part of their landscape off-limits and severely restricted their ability to travel in the ways necessary to diversify hunting. Most instructive for this reader was Hastrup's explanation of the variety of ways in which climate change makes navigation difficult in a landscape that has always been characterized by changes (recurrent, recognizable) in weather and seasons, and in migration and behaviour of prey.

To a non-anthropologist, the main ambiguity of this book concerns the definition of its object of study. The book opens with a declaration that "Thule is the name of [1] a place in the world, but as we shall see, it is also the name of [2] a set of conceptions with a long history—and not the least [3 the name of] a community" (p. 12). Each of the chapters prioritizes one of these foci, sometimes to such a degree that the other two disappear from sight. By the end of the book, however, it becomes clear that the argument is that the three phenomena have indeed—over the course of time—become entangled to form a community subjectively self-identifying as distinct due to its relationship to a specific place in a way influenced in part by the way others have conceptualized it. This package deal is too neat—and Hastrup knows that well enough to insert the qualifiers necessary in her analyses. Nevertheless, her perspective produces distortions and blind spots—as would any alternative perspective.

The most important alternative perspectives one could have chosen concern the money economy and the welfare state. Hastrup mentions the fact that Inughuit "obviously live absolutely normal Greenlandic lives and utilize the technologies available" (p. 305). But the activities she concentrates on and organizes her writing around are those specifically useful for hunting. Discussing the rates and causes of death in the past, she says she is "relieved on behalf of the inhabitants that they—for better or for worse—are part of a welfare society" (p. 438). But when introducing "the people," she inserts a distinction between the hunters and the welfare state personnel consisting of "professionals, with their families, who all contribute to increase the natural [sic] population, if you will" (p. 121). An alternative perspective could have included a thematic chapter on the part of life in Qaanaaq (the main settlement in Avanersuaq) that would count as "absolutely normally Greenlandic"—or even absolutely normally modern. Hastrup describes how Thule has been "invaded, studied and described by one after another coming from outside [...] seeing them as more 'indigenous' than the rest of the Greenlandic population" (p. 370). As the book does not give equal status to their "less indigenous" sides, it risks contributing to this image. Moreover, the—gendered—tensions and conflicts involved in families being simultaneously part of a hunting community and part of a wage-based welfare state only pop up anecdotally (p. 450). Likewise regarding negotiations about who counts as part of the community: Welfare professionals from outside who chose to settle down rather than leave at the end of their contract? Outsiders who have integrated into the hunting culture? Only people with a local pedigree? Local people who went away to get an education but have come back? All of these questions are left out of focus.

Another, related perspective is not systematically pursued: the repercussions of having centralized the governance of the Greenlandic nation-state and having merged its municipalities. Hastrup notes how survival in Qaanaaq now depends on “the authorities” (p. 117). Incidents described in the book illustrate how these authorities are no longer in Copenhagen but instead in Nuuk (pp. 302, 359). Although this shift of governance might be difficult to study during fieldwork in Qaanaaq, it is disappointing that all the chapters are informed on this point only by archival studies and secondary literature. Nonetheless, the book does report the consequences of Nuuk’s efforts to carve out a national scale of governance and facilitate a competitive national economy. First, Hastrup notes about the airstrip established in 2001 that “people have become mentally dependent on having that way out. They will not willingly be isolated again” (p. 278). The airstrip was jointly funded by the Danish state as partial compensation for the 1953 injustices—but the demand first and foremost came from the Home Rule authorities in Nuuk. Even today, some voices in Qaanaaq continue to prefer the old route via the Thule air base, which they see as being more affordable and flexible. Second, Hastrup occasionally mentions (pp. 133, 231, 366) the feeling in Qaanaaq of being downgraded from being a centre of Avanersuup Municipality to existing on the periphery of Qaasuitsup Municipality. The whole point of the 2009 municipal reform was to organize public services—and instigate a structure of settlements—more conducive to a competitive national economy. A few days of fieldwork in the municipal branch office in Qaanaaq or in one of the municipal institutions would have made the implications of having the political and bureaucratic decision makers more than 1000 km away stand out even clearer. Third, one of the most important reforms by the Home Rule authorities when taking over local services and areas of jurisdiction from Copenhagen was to split up the monolithic organizations of colonial administration into smaller parts to allow political control. However, such “sectorization” is not necessarily wise for a small, isolated community—and might result in specific tasks not being done (Hendriksen and Hoffmann 2014): e.g., neither the municipality nor any of the government-controlled enterprises has enough work for a full-time mechanic in Qaanaaq—so there is none.

Hastrup bases her book on a series of month-long fieldwork visits over the last decade together with time spent in archives and libraries re-reading earlier accounts by polar explorers, ethnographers, scientists, historians, and people combining these roles. Most of the chapters quote historical sources at length in order to tell us about the past but often also to describe a phenomenon observed in the present. On the one hand, it is commendable that Hastrup credits classic accounts in this way, even if doing so involves some repetition, both across chapters (pp. 116, 208) and from Hastrup’s (2010) monograph on Knud Rasmussen. On the other hand, this method deprives the reader of the opportunity to compare past and present practices. In effect, this writing style risks harmonizing the present to fit the image of the past. Moreover, while one is reading, this style sometimes gives the impression that ethnographer Hastrup

had arrived at her fieldwork with her attention focused on a checklist produced by historian Hastrup in the archives. In other chapters, fine-grained perceptive observations—such as how body and ice interact when travelling and hunting—leave no doubt about the value of her fieldwork.

When referring to her fieldwork, Hastrup quotes no “informants”—only “friends,” “hosts,” and “hunters.” Moreover, none of them are mentioned by name. Kirsten Thisted (2015) suggests that these choices might be the result of cautiously avoiding objectification of others as part of ethnographic writing. Hastrup only hints at the reasons behind this choice (p. 431) but mentions (p. 15) fatigue in Qaanaaq when faced with *yet* another journalist, documentarian, explorer, tourist, or researcher out to document or experience the “canary in the coal mine” of climate change. Hastrup mentions both time and timing as means to overcome reluctance. Nevertheless, the anonymized text comes across as somewhat peculiar for a reader familiar with the stories—and names!—of the informants’ immediate ancestors from the canonical writings by Hastrup’s predecessors. A basic ethical question—which must haunt anyone doing fieldwork in a very small community (including this reviewer)—appears when an anonymized character remains recognizable to their neighbours due to the tone of a quote, the elements of a life story, or an explicated relationship to a character named in the extant literature.

Regardless of my remarks and objections, both Inughuit and the rest of us are served well by Hastrup’s book as the new standard ethnography of Thule. If new to Thule, you should begin here. If well read on the subject, you will inevitably find both new and old perspectives worth learning from and discussing with. If from Thule, you will most likely recognize yourself in the mirror that Hastrup is holding up for you and be satisfied with the image. The book will not challenge the self-perception of the Inughuit—but, as the book shows us, Thule faces ample challenges without social scientists adding more.

## References

---

HASTRUP, Kirsten B.

2010 *Vinterens Hjerter. Knud Rasmussen og hans tid*, Copenhagen, Gads Forlag.

HENDRIKSEN, Kåre and Birgitte HOFFMANN

2014 *Qaanaaq Distrikt—infrastruktur og erhvervsgrundlag. Sammenfatning af empiriindsamling i Qaanaaq*, Copenhagen, DTU Byg.

THISTED, Kirsten

2015 Det ultimative Thule: Anmeldelse af Kirsten Hastrup: ‘Thule ved Tidens Rand’, *Sermitsiaq* 41: 30-31.

Ulrik Pram Gad

Department of Political Science  
University of Copenhagen  
Øster Farimagsgade 5A  
DK-1353 Copenhagen K, Denmark  
upg@ifs.ku.dk