Ocean and Society
2025 • Volume 2 • Article 9397
https://doi.org/10.17645/oas.9397

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Open Access Journal

Decolonising Ocean Matter

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Submitted: 12 October 2024 **Accepted:** 9 January 2025 **Published:** 17 April 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Seeing Oceans: How Artistic Research Contributes to New Ways of Looking at Ocean Life" edited by Helge Mooshammer (Goldsmiths, University of London/TU Wien) and Peter Mörtenböck (Goldsmiths, University of London/TU Wien), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/oas.i450

Abstract

Oceans occupy a central place in the centuries-long unfolding of European colonialism. They form the interstice between the base of the coloniser and the "overseas" territories of the colonised. As an unsettling body, a realm that cannot be settled in, oceans at once separate and connect the Earth's different continents. This simultaneity of separation and connection has become indicative of the contradictions shaping the pursuit of interests in oceanic and "overseas" territories up to the present day: from the competitive, speculation-driven race to stake claims to ocean resources to the ostensibly peaceful agendas driving the scientific exploration of oceans' final, unknown frontiers. This article examines the essential role of cultural storytelling in facilitating these processes by looking at how a growing wave of scientist settlements is encroaching on remaining unconquered spheres in the most remote parts of the oceans such as the polar regions. It highlights how an incessant spectacularisation of their futuristic architectures domesticises these endeavours to master a hostile environment as a matter of making oneself at home and settling in. In order to challenge such possessive, human-centric investments in oceanic territories, the article contrasts these developments with two examples of artistic research, *A World of Matter* (2014) and *Frontier Climates* (2017), which aim to offer a decolonial perspective through other forms of representation and knowledge production. Discussing the conceptual approach of these projects, it draws attention to more-than-human ecologies to reframe our understanding of marine life away from contested rights of access and towards global commons.

Keywords

artistic research; colonialism; decolonisation; polar architecture; polar research

1. Introduction

Ever since the much-mediatised race between the British expedition led by Robert Falcon Scott and the Norwegian one led by Roald Amundsen to the South Pole in 1911, remote areas of the oceans have been framed as territories "out there" waiting to be discovered and claimed by heroic adventurers. While the party of Robert Falcon Scott apparently lost this particular race to the Norwegians, this did not stop the British Empire and its successors from establishing a strong presence in the region and commanding a leading role in the division of control over the Antarctic. Initially, the British aimed for sovereignty over the entire territory. A 1920 memo by the then Under Secretary of State for the Colonies, Leopold Amery, states that "it is desirable that the whole of the Antarctic should ultimately be included in the British Empire" (Leeper, 1929, as cited in Beck, 2016, p. 328), adding:

> And that, while the time has not yet arrived that a claim to all the continental territories should be put forward publicly, a definite and consistent policy should be followed of extending and asserting British control with the object of ultimately making it complete. (Leeper, 1929, as cited in Beck, 2016, p. 328)

Although the subsequent Antarctic Treaty of 1959 is often hailed as the first international arms control agreement in the face of the Cold War, supposedly foregrounding a shared human interest in scientific exploration, it eventually consolidated the historical framework of dividing up the whole globe between the major European colonial powers, a legacy seamlessly appropriated by their successor states.

In this article, I want to shed light on the powerful impact visual culture has on laying the groundwork for and shoring up such geopolitical interests and strategic interventions. With this in mind, I draw, amongst other sources, on the work of popular media outlets and the self-representations of actors in the region in order to grasp the intentions of mainstream narratives. Providing compelling visions of progress and human triumph vis-à-vis mesmerising spectacles of nature, a diverse range of storytelling is continuously called upon to help camouflage the exploitative motives behind these concerted forays into the extreme frontiers of our planet. By the same token, visual culture can also launch meaningful opportunities for intervention by tapping into the strong ties between seeing and thinking, between images that surround us and the way we can imagine things. To this end, I will discuss in more detail the role of art, architecture, and design in "bringing home" a vision of remote ocean regions as both exciting and familiar orders of habitation. I will also reflect on two projects of artistic research I have been involved in over the last decade that seek to unleash the potentialities embedded in the connection between images and imagination: *A World of Matter* (2014) traces the complex and multiple entanglements of resource flows in times of globalised capital circuits that virtually implicate every corner of the world, with oceans forming the base threads in this web of interdependences; *Frontier Climates* (2017) takes this critical examination a step further by highlighting how the specific qualities of frontier zones (e.g., fringe locations in geographic, cultural, political, or other terms that render them sites of exception prone to colonial appropriation) are not inherent traits of specific spaces but the product of intentional framings. Together, these two projects provide multiple reference points for the argument that demands for decolonisation cannot be reduced to debates about the re-distribution of control over material assets but actually imply the dissolution of a hegemonial, Western-centric gaze into an infinite spectrum of multi-perspectivities. Drawing on these models of engagement with a diverse register of positionalities, I will subsequently argue that efforts to decolonise our interactions with oceans in the broader sense (including

ocean life, territorial regimes, resource extraction, ecological relations, etc.) involve not just a (pseudo) change of taxonomy but a shift in practice on numerous levels, from politics to academia to the everyday.

2. Unknown Territories

While in abstract terms the attribution of remoteness is inherently subjective, the prevailing discourse has largely been shaped by perspectives from the Global North. As a result, the Earth's poles are not only seen as the ends of the planet but have also begun to imaginatively merge with their surrounding oceans. Due to the long journey across the oceans required to reach them, the polar regions can seem like distant islands despite their substantial landmass, whether composed of rock or ice. Given the accelerating climate crisis, the blurring of the distinction between poles and oceans is occurring not only in a figurative but also an increasingly physical sense. At the time of writing, comparisons of the measurements of Arctic sea ice taken by the US government show that summer sea ice has shrunk by 12.2 percent per decade since 1979, triggering a cycle of warming oceans and diminishing ice regeneration (NASA, n.d.). In addition to shrinking, Arctic sea ice is also thinning: NASA scientists reported in 2018 that in that year Arctic sea ice had become the youngest and thinnest since observations began in 1958 ("With thick ice gone," 2018). Changes in the Antarctic sea ice are more variable, with strong fluctuations across the different regions of the continent. In its 2022 summary on Antarctic climate change and the environment, the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research, a member of the International Science Council, warned that the mass loss of the Antarctic Ice Sheet had accelerated and that by 2300 the West Antarctic Ice Sheet may be lost altogether (Chown et al., 2022). From a global perspective, the National Snow and Ice Data Center at the University of Colorado Boulder reported that in August 2024 global sea ice extent was at a "record low for that time of the year" ("The chill is gone," 2024).

These developments are justifiably spurring calls for intensified research into the changing conditions for life on our planet and broader cosmic interdependencies. However, this liquification of oceanic relations and a subsequent rise of the unknown also tie into a long history of mystifying oceans' volatile composition as a distant, intangible world. Attempting to comprehend these ever-shifting formations is thus framed as a heroic endeavour of scientific exploration rather than one driven by interests of national hegemony and capital gains. In the case of Antarctica, this approach is most markedly anchored in the Antarctic Treaty System, initiated by the Antarctic Treaty signed in Washington on 1 December 1959 during the International Geophysical Year of 1957/1958 and subsequently supplemented by further agreements such as the Madrid Protocol on Environmental Protection signed on 4 October 1991. The Antarctic Treaty ostensibly prioritises scientific research over national interests, and Article I begins with the resolution that "Antarctica shall be used for peaceful purposes only" (The Antarctic Treaty, 1959, Article I, para. 1). Article II then stipulates that "freedom of scientific investigation in Antarctica and cooperation toward that end…shall continue" (The Antarctic Treaty, 1959, Article II). Indeed, in many communications these two opening statements are often combined, as reflected in the headline "Peaceful use, freedom of scientific investigation and cooperation" posted on the landing page of the website of the Secretariat of the Antarctic Treaty (Secretary of the Antarctic Treaty, n.d.-a).

At the same time though, the Antarctic Treaty also helped to secure the territorial claims of the signatory parties, initially "the twelve countries whose scientists had been active in and around Antarctica during the International Geophysical Year (IGY) of 1957–58" (Secretary of the Antarctic Treaty, n.d.-b). Paragraph 2 of Article IV declares that "no acts or activities taking place while the present Treaty is in force shall constitute a

basis for asserting, supporting or denying a claim to territorial sovereignty in Antarctica or create any rights of sovereignty in Antarctica"; and most importantly, that "no new claim, or enlargement of an existing claim, to territorial sovereignty in Antarctica shall be asserted while the present Treaty is in force" (The Antarctic Treaty, 1959, Article IV, para. 2). Thus, while ostensibly enabling an environment for peaceful and cooperative scientific exploration, the treaty effectively "froze" the territorial claims in Antarctica by colonial empires' successor states indefinitely (see also Scott, 2011). In the case of the British Empire, today's sectorial claims by the UK (20°W–80°W), Australia (160°E–142°E, 136°E–44°38'E) and New Zealand (150°W–160°E) amount to a 56 percent share of the polar area south of 60°S.

The International Geophysical Year 1957/1958 was an enlarged version of the sporadically held International Polar Years organised by the International Council of Scientific Unions. This period saw several significant scientific milestones, including the launch of Sputnik I by the USSR on 4 October 1957 and the establishment of the Halley Research Station in Antarctica by the British Royal Society. In fact, research stations, their architecture, and the ways in which their occupants have transformed them into temporary homes have become a central trope in the narrative of Antarctica's rise as a beacon of peaceful scientific exploration for the benefit of all humankind. Before the opening of the first Halley Research Station in 1956, the British had already established a series of posts, including Base A, Port Lockroy, the first permanent base erected in 1944 as part of the wartime mission Operation Tabarin. Today, this historic site, along with other significant posts, is managed by the UK Antarctic Heritage Trust as their "flagship site." It features a museum, gift shop, and post office and welcomes up to 18,000 visitors each season (UK Antarctic Heritage Trust, n.d.).

Halley VI, the most recent incarnation of the primary British polar station, looks like something straight out of a 1970s James Bond movie. From the outside, it resembles a giant toy train with boxy octagonal carriages painted in an icy light blue, all neatly lined up with an oversized dining car in bright red at the centre (see Figure 1). The entire structure is elevated on four sturdy "legs on skis," allowing it to sit on a floating ice shelf and making it relocatable. In 2016/2017, the modules were uncoupled and towed to another site, 23 km upstream (British Antarctic Survey, n.d.-b). Although Halley VI serves as a technical facility, with five of its eight pods housing generators, plants, command, and scientific functions, it is the social spaces that stand out in the design by Faber Maunsell and Hugh Broughton Architects. The so-called Living Module (labelled "The Robert Falcon Scott Living Module" in the British Antarctic Survey's communication material, after the British explorer referred to in the introduction (British Antarctic Survey, n.d.-a) is distinguished by its vibrant red colour and a double-height panoramic window that fronts the communal areas for dining and relaxation.

A similar trend of "homification" is evident in the redesign of other nations' Antarctic research stations, such as India's Bharati Research Station with its "aesthetically designed living, dining, lounge and laboratory space" (National Centre for Polar Research and Ocean Research, n.d.). Though based on an industrial building concept that incorporates the shipping containers needed for transporting material to the site into its structure, publicity photographs of the living areas exude luxury, with soft lighting, a shaded floor-to-ceiling glass wall looking out onto the icy landscape, and swivelling wingback chairs with thick upholstery creating an ambient reminiscent of a first-class airport lounge (see Aland, 2015). In a similar vein, in its review of Brazil's new Comandante Ferraz Research Station opened in 2020, *The New York Times* praised the sleek design by Estudio 41 as something that "could be mistaken for an art museum or boutique hotel," quoting the claim of the firm's principal that they "set out to create a kind of atmosphere that would promote well-being" (Gendall, 2020). This increasingly prevailing combination of a futuristic exterior—

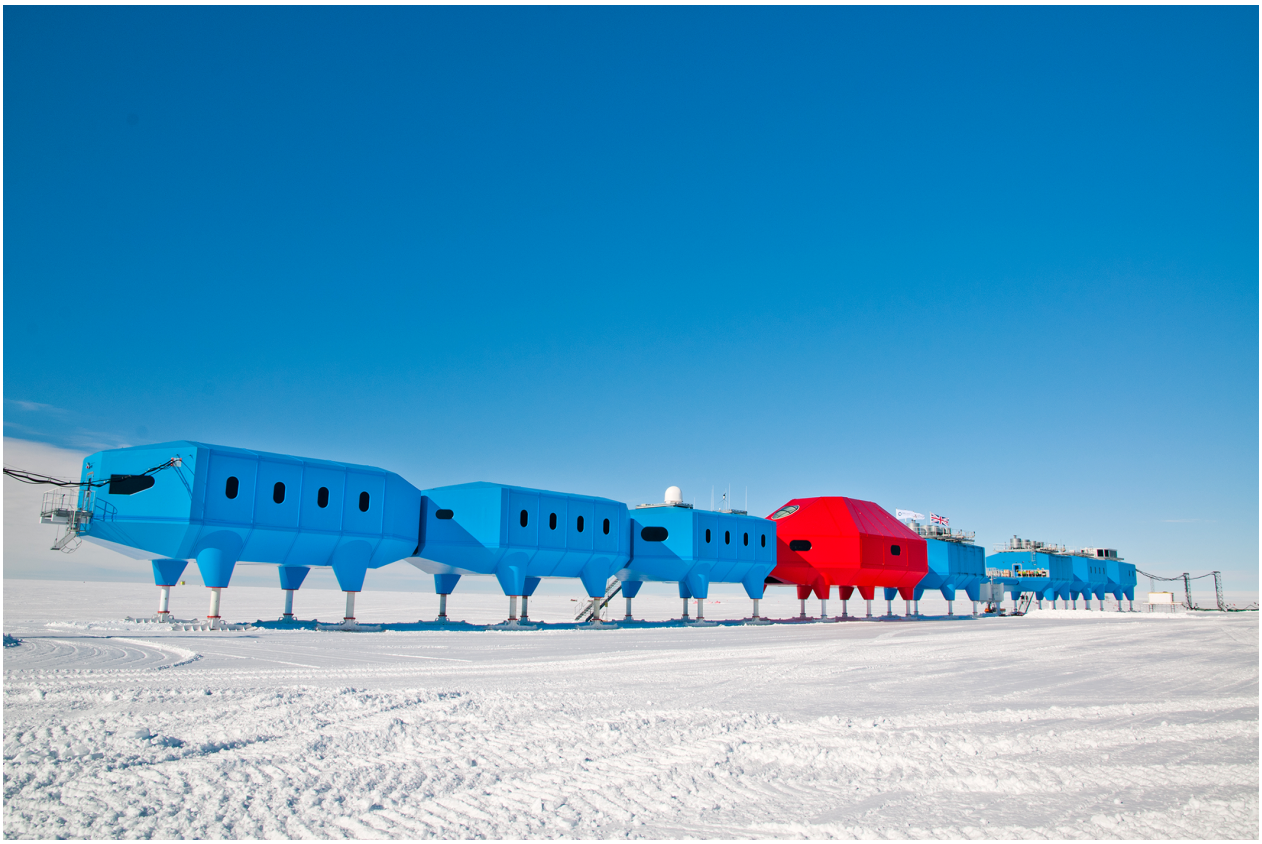

Figure 1. Halley VI Research Station at Brunt Ice Shelf, Antarctica, winter season 2011/2012. Source: British Antarctic Survey; photograph by Antony Dubber.

characterised by aerodynamic shapes elevated on stilts to avoid snow accumulation—with a cosier, more homelike interior billed as enhancing occupant comfort is also evident, for instance, in the new designs for South Korea's Jang Bogo Station (Korea Polar Research Institute, n.d.) and the redevelopment plans for New Zealand's Scott Base (Antarctica New Zealand, n.d.).

In the case of China's new Taishan Camp, completed in 2014 (Polar Research Institute of China, n.d.), the exterior design clearly reflects the space-age aesthetic that has firmly established itself in Antarctica. Similarly, Belgium's Princess Elisabeth Antarctic Research Station, viewed from one side, resembles a rocket launch platform. Inside, the living quarters evoke a sense of rustic mountain huts rather than boutique hotels. This station showcases the potential for permanent, independent settlement based on advanced technical autonomy that ensures zero-emission energy efficiency as opposed to the transformation of harsh environments into settings for leisurely living. The provision of mobile containers with labs and sleeping quarters further enhances this autonomous capability (Princess Elisabeth Antarctic Research Station, n.d.).

What connects these accounts of mastering hostile environments—characterised by temperatures below −50°C and up to four months of continuous darkness during the Antarctic winter—is the portrayal of state-sponsored efforts to install a permanent presence on the continent not only as stories of human ingenuity but above all as an opportunity for designers and architects to showcase contemporary achievements in the creation of high-value work-and-live spaces. In parallel with the arrival of mass tourism in the Antarctic propelled by five-star luxury cruise ships, polar stations have become objects of high-profile

design that infuses these outposts with a sense of glamour resonating with the lifestyle narratives found in glossy magazines. *The New York Times* highlighted this trend in January 2020 with its article "The Coolest Architecture on Earth is in Antarctica" (Gendall, 2020), while the popular *ArchDaily* blog followed up in February with the catchy headline "In Antarctica, Architecture is Heating Up" (Walsh, 2020). Efforts to frame Antarctica as a cultural space have proliferated over the last decade, as exemplified by the Antarctic Pavilion at the 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale, which *The Guardian*'s architecture critic Oliver Wainwright listed among the top 10 pavilions of that year (Wainwright, 2014). The preceding Antarctic Biennale, which, like the Antarctic Pavilion, was initiated by Russian artist Alexander Ponomarev and culminated in a 2,000 nautical-mile voyage around Antarctica involving 18 artists and a total of 12 landings to carry out various artistic projects, described itself as "an international sociocultural phenomenon that incorporates artistic, scientific, and philosophical methodologies to address 'shared spaces,' such as Antarctica, the Ocean, and Outer Space" (Biennial Foundation, n.d.), while heavily exploiting the mystification offered by the trope of an expedition never previously attempted (Adams, 2017). Another example is the art installation *Home, Memories* by balbek bureau at the Ukrainian Vernadsky Research Base, which was widely featured in popular media outlets, such as the influential *dezeen* and *designboom* digital magazines (balbek bureau, n.d.; Ravenscroft, 2023; Zeitoun, 2023). Such storytelling creates visual drama that anchors the question of life on ice firmly in the realms of contemporary lifestyle and light entertainment, on a par with the excitement surrounding the release of a new action thriller or the latest fashion news. Continuing the "legacy" of the first explorations (as in the case of Port Lockroy, now commodified as a well-managed landing point for paying tourists), this emphasis on "experience" foregrounds the "now" while turning a blind eye to how encroaching habitation has long served as an insidious form of colonisation, and still does so. Such narratives not only mask the geopolitical interests driving nations' presence and investment in the region but also obscure the historical trajectories that have shaped today's material-semiotic configuration of the polar regions—an amalgam of rocks, ice, and oceans on the one hand, and geophysical science, ice-conquering equipment, and population-engineering on the other.

3. The Subjects of Polar Regions

In recent years, intense debates have emerged about whether the term "colonialism" can be applied to Antarctica's history of "discovery" and occupation, or whether doing so risks depriving the term of any meaningful currency, or worse, might offend those subjected to colonial violence elsewhere. The debates primarily hinge on whether acts of colonialism are contingent on the subjugation of indigenous people by a non-indigenous group, or if non-human entities, such as animals and environments including the world's oceans, can also be exploited in a way that resembles colonial practices. This gives rise to the related issue regarding whether it can be justifiably argued that oceans, too, have been colonised. Ocean life might be crucial for many communities, but people have never permanently dwelled at sea. In other words, it might be difficult to identify who should be considered indigenous (human) inhabitants of the oceans. Yet oceans are clearly an inextricable component in the mechanisms of colonialism. Their natural obscurity, geographic barriers, predominantly extraterritorial status, and sparse "population" have all significantly influenced the development of the infrastructure that enabled colonial powers to reach nearly every corner of the globe. Oceans serve as sites, sources, and screens for political and military manoeuvring, economic exploitation, and legal deal-making, while also shaping cultural narratives about national achievements. To claim that "no people of the seas means no colonisation of the seas" (i.e., no victims means no crime) would thus be a reductive and flawed perspective. Such a view ignores the many acts of colonial violence that occurred at

sea and overlooks the multiple contemporary ramifications of oceans' intertwinement with colonialism, particularly the role of privatised colonial trade routes in paving the way for capitalist globalisation.

In their introductory chapter to the insightful volume *Colonialism and Antarctica: Attitudes, Logics, and Practices*, editors Peder Roberts and Alejandra Mancilla provide a precise picture of what is currently at stake in the debate about the scope of colonialism, referencing key voices in the field such as Daniel Butt, Adrian Howkins, Margaret Kohn, Margaret Moore, Kavita Reddy, Anna Stilz, Eve Tuck, K. Wayne Yang, and Lea Ypi (Mancilla & Roberts, 2024). Importantly, they propose employing a "colonial lens" as a productive mode of research that allows for the acknowledgement of and engagement with the varied enmeshment of attitudes, logics, and practices activated in processes of colonisation and exploitation. They apply this argument to their territorial topic of Antarctica but I would argue that their perspective is also applicable to many other tropes, including the oceans. They write:

> It makes sense to analyse Antarctica through a colonial lens because doing so illuminates our understanding both of colonialism and Antarctica. Colonialism pushes us to ask questions not only about the practices of humans in Antarctica and the power relations established between them, but also about the overarching logics and attitudes that have governed both specific human activities in Antarctica and larger human schemes to govern Antarctica. At the same time, Antarctica pushes us to ask where the limits of colonialism as an analytical category might lie, and how far the concept's utility extends in providing insights that other frameworks may not. (Mancilla & Roberts, 2024, p. 3)

Such an operational understanding of the unfolding, encroachment, permeation, and pervasiveness of colonialism can open up a set of analytical perspectives and tools for examining, for instance, the linkages and cross-contaminations between colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism, and the myriad ways in which these dominant strands of global power have been constituent of each other without getting stuck in dead-end arguments about contingency. Peder Roberts' own contribution to the volume, together with Kati Lindström, on "Animals, Colonialism, and Antarctica" demonstrates the capacity of this approach to elicit insights into how capitalism and colonialism have intertwined in giving shape and form to "resource colonialism," or "extractive colonialism," as in the case of the violent whaling and sealing that ran in parallel to the exercise of territorial dominance over Antarctica (Roberts & Lindström, 2024). While not necessarily always being "in the same boat" as it were, capitalist interests and imperialist possessive politics benefit from and shore up each other's stake through knowledge, technology, and infrastructures as well as through ideologies of superiority, whether moral or otherwise.

With regard to oceans, centuries of executing and performing colonial politics and interests have produced a plethora of attitudes, logics, and practices that testify to the oceans' entanglement in the process of realising these politics and interests. A case in point is the slow-changing rhetoric of government bureaucracy which illuminates how colonialism's main orientation seems inherently tied to "*overseas* territories." As of 2024, many of the still existing "dependencies" of colonising states continue to be summarised under such terms, as exemplified by the British *Overseas* Territories and France *d'outre-mer*. While the bodies governing them (i.e., the actors) have ditched associations with colonialism in their names—the British Colonial Office has now been absorbed into the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office after undergoing a series of changes (War and Colonial Office, 1801–1854; Colonial Office, 1854–1966; Commonwealth Office, 1966–1968; Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 1968–2020; Foreign, Commonwealth and Development

Office, since 2020)—there has been less or slower change on the side of the acted upon (Crown Colonies, until 1983; British Dependent Territories, 1983–2002; British Overseas Territories, since 2002).

Notwithstanding increasing and very valid calls for decolonial critique to look beyond institutionalised procedures of domination in order to avoid reaffirmation and to focus on situated knowledges and experiences instead (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018), this example draws attention to the breadth of situations in which the legacies of colonialism take the form of small surface manifestations of structures shaped by a massive undercurrent of engrained histories feeding today's logics and attitudes. Importantly, such logics and attitudes can operate without their protagonists necessarily identifying with a colonial trajectory. In relation to the British Halley Research Station described earlier in this article, geographer Alice E. Oates argues in her article "Settler Colonial Mindsets at Halley Research Station, 1955–Present" that interviews conducted with winterers at Halley "reveal[ed] a 'Halley identity,' rooted in community, place and shared experience, demonstrating that Halley is specifically a *settled* colonial space, regardless of the presence or absence of colonial intentions among the winterers" (Oates, 2024, emphasis in original). I would suggest expanding the cognitive focus of the term "mindset" and applying the notion of "mentality"—something that Oates also hints at in her conclusion—as this allows for the inclusion of a whole repertoire of cultural sensibilities that become requisite when dealing with non-scripted situations prevalent in frontier environments.

Embracing a situated understanding of colonial mentalities allows us to synchronise our analyses across the multiple registers through which power is exercised today, in a manner that is both simultaneous and mutually reinforcing. These registers can be contradictory and involve hierarchies, but they should not be conceived as situated in a strict order. Rather, it is their speculative convergence that proves to be formative. For instance, oceans have for centuries been at the heart of simultaneous efforts of territorialisation and de-territorialisation for the purpose of political dominance and economic exploitation. The long history extending from mare clausum policies to Exclusive Economic Zones to global trading monopolies and from Hugo Grotius' 1609 *Mare Liberum* to the UN 1983 Convention on the Law of the Sea to the use of "flags of convenience" (whereby the country where the ship is registered differs from the country in which the ship's owners reside) illustrates these multi-facetted dynamics very clearly. Politics, economy, culture, science, and law are then all arenas in which the forces of colonialism do not just continue to have an effect, but where the learned logics and attitudes continue to be applied.

As historian Walter Johnson has pointed out, the above-mentioned usage of flags of convenience played an essential role in the continuation of the transatlantic slave trade *post* the 1807 Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, which banned trading in enslaved people in the British Empire, and the 1808 Act Prohibiting the Importation of Slaves into the US. As the latter negotiated a distinction between "slaveholding" and "slave trading," seeking to "align the limits of its economy with its polity, its slavery with its security, and its 'property' with its 'humanity,' " it paved the way for adapting flexible conventions such as "flag switching" (Johnson, 2008), which allowed for a virtually unhindered continuation of the trade, splitting legal text from political practice. The transatlantic slave trade reached a peak in the first half of the 19th century, with 1.8 million enslaved people transported from Africa to the Caribbean and South America between 1821 and 1850, out of an estimated total of 12.5 million Africans forced into the slave trade (SlaveVoyages, n.d.). In his ground-breaking book *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638–1870* published in 1896, the early African-American activist W. E. B. DuBois recounts:

> From 1830 to 1840 [slave-trading] began gradually to assume the United States flag; by 1845, a large part of the trade was under the stars and stripes; by 1850 fully one-half the trade, and in the decade 1850–1860 nearly all the traffic found this flag its best protection. (DuBois, 1896, p. 143)

Today, conditions on the gigantic vessels ploughing the global trading routes and sailing under "false flags" (i.e., flags of convenience) are repeatedly described as "states of modern slavery," referencing not just the question of legal status—such as full citizenship—but also living conditions, economic dependency, deprivation of mobility, and denial of human dignity. The 2022 report *Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage*, for instance, estimates that during the Covid-19 pandemic there were approximately 400,000 seafarers "unable to leave their ships for shore leave when they arrived at ports," becoming essentially trapped in "what many called 'floating prisons,'" further compounding the risk of forced labour (International Labour Organization et al., 2022). Using flags of convenience (i.e., flags of countries with low requirements in terms of tax, labour rights, etc.) plays a crucial role in facilitating these kinds of operations with minimal complications. This situation has been further exacerbated by the fact that this practice has not just become common but dominates global trade, with ships sailing under the flags of Liberia, Panama, and the Marshall Islands in 2022 accounting for 16.6 percent, 16.0 percent, and 13.1 percent respectively, which taken together amounts close to half of the world's maritime trade (UN Trade and Development, 2024).

4. A World of Matter

While the Antarctic Treaty of 1959 supposedly put a hold on military interests in Antarctica, and the Madrid Protocol of 1991 sought to curb commercial mining in the region, the presence of certain parties, both in the physical space and in the arena of political power and diplomacy, privileges some over others. In light of significant ecological changes on the horizon, having a decisive voice in this region is more important than ever. Moreover, it is hard to dispute that such a privileged "front-row seat at the table" is a direct legacy of centuries of expansionist imperialism. The issue of positioning within today's theatre of global politics highlights the performance of power, for which the demonstration of knowledge possession (e.g., through high-profile scientific expeditions) is becoming an increasingly decisive factor.

The inherently performative nature of politics also opens up possibilities for intervention. Performativity not only addresses audiences but enlists them in the production of affirmation. Whether this participation is active or passive, voluntary or involuntary—performativity engenders states of implicatedness. This is most evident in the realms of media and communication, particularly today's social media, but it also applies to areas such as the economy and education. Interventions in the "distribution of the sensible" can evoke the efficacies of *dissensus*, which philosopher Jacques Rancière describes as "residing at the heart of politics" (Rancière, 2010, p. 139). In this reading, dissensus stems from a conflict between how we *sense* something and how we *make sense* of it. Politics, as "an activity that breaks with the 'natural order,'" therefore "re-frames the given by inventing new ways of making sense of the sensible, new configurations between the visible and the in-visible, the audible and the inaudible, new distributions of space and time—in short, new bodily capacities" (Rancière, 2010, p. 139). In a similar vein, artistic re-framings (i.e., interventions in the distribution of the sensible that allow us to *sense* things differently) can participate in the performative process of politics—not in a deterministic way but in the sense of potentialities.

It is within this connection between representation and discourse that the collaborative art project *World of Matter*, to which I contributed over several years, anchors its work. Reflecting on the project's 2014 exhibition at the City University of New York's Graduate Center, the philosopher-activist Brian Holmes notes that such radical imagery aims to foster a relation between "the capacity to make images of worldly things and the capacity to remake an inhabitable world" (Holmes, 2015). Resource extraction is fundamental to global capitalism, yet the reality of these activities remains largely invisible. Most related events occur at locations that are either remote, inaccessible to the public, or absent from our collective consciousness. *World of Matter* seeks to counteract the policing of the affective regime of late capitalism and its expansion of commodity space by responding "to the urgent need for new forms of representation that shift resource-related debates from a market-driven domain to open platforms for engaged public discourse" (World of Matter, n.d., para. 1). Our focus was therefore on "visual source material as a valuable instrument for education, activist work, research, and raising general public awareness, particularly in light of the ever more privatised nature of both actual resources and knowledge about the powers that control them" (World of Matter, n.d.; see also Arns, 2015; Demos, 2016, Chapter 6).

Launched in Brussels in 2013, the project's multimedia platform is at the core of this mission to provide alternative accounts of what is happening in the "world of matter." Its content is derived from extensive field research and media production focussing on primary resources (fossil, mineral, agrarian, and maritime) and the complex ecologies of which they are a part. Organised as an open-access archive, it suggests connections between different *files* (i.e., visual material from numerous fieldwork sites) and highlights the relationships between different actors, territories, and ideas. Rather than being edited into a polished and conclusive "final" narrative, the different media—video clips, photographs, and texts—are broken down into a sort of "raw material," transforming the project itself into a "resource" that can be utilised to stimulate "a variety of possible readings about the global connectivity among these sites" (World of Matter, n.d., para. 4). Themed clusters provide orientation amongst these supply lines, highlighting emerging trajectories that enmesh resource ecologies within the logics of contemporary commodity capitalism. For example, "Resource Cities" points to the linkage between sites of resource exploitation and resource consumption, while "Conflict Matter" examines the spread of elastic border regimes that shape and regulate flows of goods, people, and capital by means of a complex overlapping of flexible citizenship arrangements, extra-territorial spaces, and other engineered states of exception. In exhibition contexts, clusters are combined in multimedia groupings, such as the full-height wall print *A World of Matter* (a contribution by myself, together with Peter Mörtenböck), which incorporates the sites and trajectories from the aforementioned clusters into a dymaxion map, emphasising the overlapping global dimensions of modern resource economies, cultural framings, and political discourse (see Figure 2). The dymaxion map projects the surface of the Earth onto an icosahedron, which can be unfolded into a two-dimensional sequence of segments. The great advantage of this type of cartography—in contrast to cylindrical or pseudo-cylindrical projections such as the Mercator and Robinson maps—is that it more accurately represents the relative surface size of the Earth and its continents. This avoids the so-called Greenland problem of the Mercator map, where Greenland is shown covering an equivalent area to Africa, which is actually 14 times its size. Such distortions can contribute to a general undervaluation of Africa's significance.

By employing such a methodology of co-narration—both in the sense of site visitors acting as narrators themselves in accordance with their navigation of the content and of the creation of tangible resonances between different sites of resource extraction spread across the globe—we sought to develop "a planetary

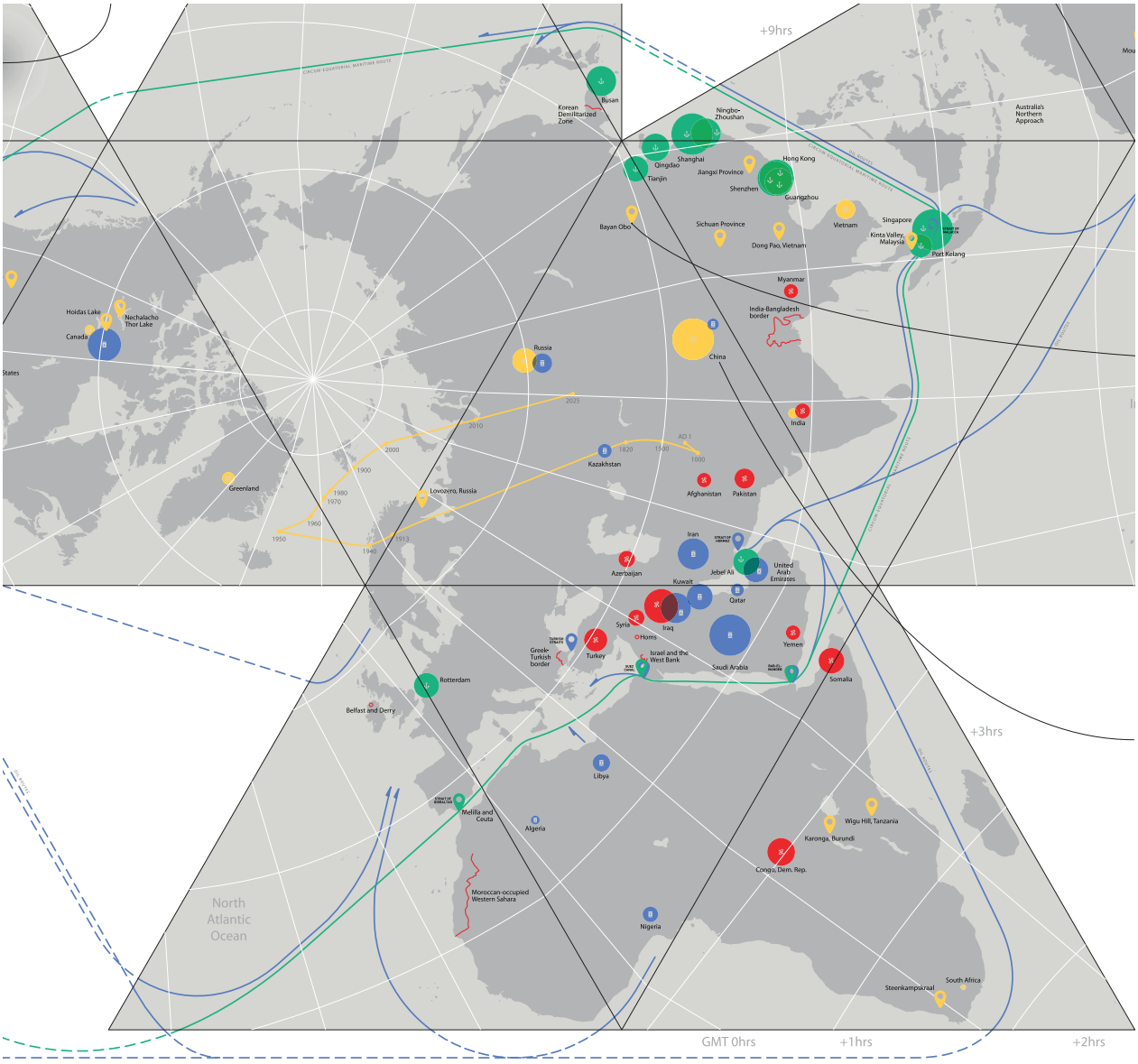

Figure 2. Peter Mörtenböck and Helge Mooshammer, *A World of Matter*, detail of digital wall print, 2014.

perspective on a world that matters" (World of Matter, n.d.) without denying the complex singularities involved in each specific event. Through this emphasis on enabling ways of *seeing and knowing otherwise* in both particular and general terms, *World of Matter* aims to contribute to processes of decolonisation that go beyond what is often perceived as a mere token act, or worse, as yet another example of appropriative acquisition that provides "shelf space" for documents and artefacts of foreign cultures in the archive of human history. Here, decolonisation is understood as needing to actively challenge the workings, genealogy, and legitimacy of hegemonic knowledge systems and their integration in and cooperation with current regimes of institutionalised power (see Banivanua Mar, 2016). Expanding on a critique of the twin projects of colonialism and capitalism's modelling of the world as an infinitely exploitable resource, media theorist Krista Lynes echoes this shift in focus by highlighting how *World of Matter*'s "concerns with enframing, with the constitution of authority…inflect and inform the mediating strategies at play in and across the project: an

attempt to make present the various constitution of subjects-in-process in thick overlapping histories, contradictory social contexts, and material processes" (Lynes, 2016, p. 111).

Over the past two decades, a substantial body of scholarship has emerged that explores the interconnections between resource exploitation and colonialism while emphasising the need for critical modes of decolonisation (see, for instance, Demos, 2016; Lynes, 2016). This work has helped to generate an analytical framework for understanding how extractive capitalism and colonialism have often been related drivers of possessive activities by both state and private actors. While it does not claim that capitalism and colonialism are contingent in every instance, it recognises their mutual reinforcement in many contexts. Colonial empires have pursued capitalist interests in their territorial claims, while capitalist agents have often adopted colonial mindsets when active in colonial theatres (in relation to Antarctica, see Roberts & Lindström, 2024). Central to this approach is Cedric Robinson's introduction of the term "racial capitalism" in the 1980s in order to address the capitalist underpinnings of colonial slavery and the racist foundation of capitalism's development over the centuries (Robinson, 1983). Key to this concept is the recognition of how the development of slavery has been shaped by agendas of resource exploitation in which forced labour is treated as just another category of expendable commodities. This is evident in the adoption of capitalist practices such as categorisation and abstraction (for a recent elaboration of the term, see Johnson, 2017).

5. Performing Ocean Knowledge

In this era of human-induced ecological crises, we are witnessing another cycle in the relationship between colonialism and capitalism. Efforts to address climate change by creating a more "resilient" world have triggered a new scramble for rare resources, such as the minerals needed for innovative "green" technologies. At first glance, embarking on yet another series of expansionist ventures may seem paradoxical, given that the growth paradigm has significantly contributed to the existential threat facing our planet. However, it aligns with the speculative logic of capitalism, which externalises risks by accumulating and securing access to potentials. Influencing public discourse and shaping meaning is crucial in this process. International law scholar Shirley Scott has noted that different waves of imperialism in Antarctica have evolved, with the current wave manifesting as informal empires that exercise dominance through scientific research and multilateral negotiations (Scott, 2017).

As highlighted earlier in this article, performativity plays a crucial role in this context. The assertion of superiority in the production of knowledge is used to legitimise claims to access to exploration and exploitation, often in a monopolistic manner. The ways in which the Antarctic Treaty System merges territorial claims rooted in centuries of imperialism with scientific endeavours is a stark case in point. Another example of the push to merge science with government goals and economic interests is the establishment of the UK's Geospatial Commission in 2018. This expert committee sets the UK's geospatial strategy and "advises government on the most productive and economically valuable uses of geospatial data" (UK Government Digital Service, n.d.). Its aim is to "unlock the significant economic, social and environmental opportunities offered by location data and to boost the UK's global geospatial expertise" (UK Government Digital Service, n.d.). In recent years, many such agencies have increased their investment in maritime research as the search radius for exploitable resources, in terms of both materials and sites, has extended significantly from the solid land mass of the continents to the vast expanses of the world's oceans. This appetite for what geographer Mark Monmonier has called "marginal imperialism" has unleashed a rush

for seabed mapping, which is at once a race for concrete spatial knowledge and a performative demonstration of expertise acquisition and environmental stewardship, which can then be leveraged to legitimise acts of control and possession (Monmonier, 2010, p. 71). Performing lengthy processes of seabed mapping lays the groundwork for resource exploitation in both technical and discursive terms. This dualism is particularly evident in arguments supporting new territorial claims based on the concept of the extended continental shelf. Under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, coastal states can extend the area over which they exercise sovereign rights for the exploitation of natural resources if they can prove that their continental shelf extends more than 200 nautical miles from the coast—hence the importance of technical and scientific data (Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf, 2024). On 19 December 2023, the US government announced that the US continental shelf in areas beyond 200 nautical miles from the coast covered an area of more than 1 million square kilometres—more than 1/10 of the land area of the US—and that this determination was "the product of [a] two-decade collaboration among the Department of State, NOAA and the U.S. Geological Survey" ("U.S. government announces size," 2023).

Amid the crowded race to advance ocean knowledge is Seabed 2030, a "pioneering initiative" seeking to accelerate ocean mapping efforts and to deliver a complete map of the entire seabed by 2030, an undertaking framed in its publicity material as a "mission to inspire ocean mapping and deliver a complete seabed map for the benefit of people and the planet" (Seabed 2030, n.d.). This joint venture by the Nippon Foundation (funded by Japanese motorboat racing revenue) and GEBCO (General Bathymetric Chart of the Oceans) has been adopted as a flagship programme of the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021–2030). On 21 June 2023, Seabed 2030 issued a statement declaring that so far 26.1 percent of the world's seabed had been mapped, with the latest increase of 4.34 million square kilometres covering an area the size of the European Union ("Seabed 2030 announces latest progress," 2024). The announcement celebrates "the remarkable discoveries made possible through this global effort to uncover Earth's final frontier" and points to the important role of advanced sonar and imaging techniques in revealing previously unknown features of the ocean, including stunning eco-systems and an immense wealth of bio-diversity ("Seabed 2030 announces latest progress," 2024).

Foregrounding natural sciences in tandem with technological advances creates a specific lens that promotes a specific reading of the relevant subject matter. Presenting the world as a mesmerising spectacle waiting to be discovered camouflages the ways in which this kind of political cartography determines, on the one hand, which aspects are visualised and integrated in manageable and governable taxonomies, and, on the other, which occurrences are disavowed, go unrecorded (i.e., not visualised nor narrated), and are thus dismissed as insignificant. This orchestration of hegemonic narratives echoes the processes of humanising, domesticating, and aestheticising exploration referred to above when discussing the current trends in the design of new polar research stations. The relentless insistence on how gaining knowledge through exploratory operations is for the benefit of contemporary societies, i.e., by shoring up the resilience of our capitalist world order, simultaneously and proactively excludes many other realities on the ground.

The seabed is not merely a matter of resources but also a "matter of concern" (Latour, 2004). It is not without reason that the sea has often been described as spurring an "archival impulse." Not least in post- and decolonial research, cultural and artistic work, the notion of oceans as archive has helped engender multi-stranded dialogues about the present and the past as well as visionary conceptualisations of more equitable futures that extend beyond materialistic views of the world. The plethora of concerns presented at

the Oceans as Archives conferences in 2021 and 2022 demonstrates the surging interest in such approaches, particularly amongst young scholars and practitioners (see https://www.oceansasarchives.org). The fate of the 1.5 million people who did not survive the infamous Middle Passage across the Atlantic serves as a powerful reminder of the urgent need to recognise that there is more to the seabed than mapping its topography and so-called natural features. Inspired by the Black Atlantic discourse (see Eshun, 2003; Gilroy, 1993), there is a growing will and desire across a variety of disciplines, including history, geography, architecture, and art, to decolonise ocean research which is beginning to amplify the call "to connect what cannot be connected" in other forms of archive (Foster, 2004).

6. Frontier Climates

Experimental seabed mining in the Pacific is one of many critical forms of resource exploitation that are governed by frontier climates. The frontier combines characteristics of the periphery—geographical remoteness, demographic marginalization, ideological oblivion—and thereby fosters the emergence of phenomena that might not otherwise arise. Its inherently expansionary character makes the frontier a site of interaction and confrontation. It is not a given space, but is rather created through a series of advances aiming to structure a field of options. In other words, the frontier is shaped by the ongoing presence of what can be understood as a frontier mentality. In the artistic research project *Frontier Climates* (in collaboration with Peter Mörtenböck) we traced the forces, ideologies, material realities, and representations that allow this mentality to crystallise into action. Through a collection of sites that engender distinct frontier operations, we sought to address the making of politico-material frontier climates as an active force in neoliberal globalisation. The visual interface of *Frontier Climates*, presented in exhibitions such as *World of Matter: Mobilizing Materialities* at the University of Minnesota's Katherine E. Nash Gallery in 2017 and featured in various print and online publications, offers a polar-centric view of the world. It juxtaposes circular projections of the Northern and the Southern hemispheres such that the polar regions are positioned at the centre of the maps (see Figure 3). This arrangement highlights their embeddedness within a globally interconnected web of relations, one that conventional maps often obscure by positioning these regions at their margins. Mapped onto this perspective are the multiple frontiers currently emerging in global politics, such as seabed mining and the occupation of the low Earth orbits by telecommunications technologies.

The UN Environment Programme's Law Divison, an entity committed to the progressive development of international environmental law, identifies four global commons: the High Seas, the Atmosphere, Antarctica, and Outer Space—resource domains guided by the principle of the common heritage of mankind. In recent years, advances in technology and science have enabled regional economic and military alliances to gain greater access to and control of these domains, highlighting the need for international treaties and conventions to govern global commons. In the absence of robust institutional and regulatory frameworks, terrestrial, marine, and celestial matter has become the battleground for a small set of large players spearheading encroachments on and the destruction of global commons for the purpose of trade, resource, and security advantages. In *Frontier Climates* we explored the decline of these four global commons as defined by international law, tracing the unfolding processes as well as the historical, cultural, scientific, and representational genealogies that have facilitated current dynamics. While we are currently seeing a surge in narratives framing the polar regions as crucial frontiers for maintaining the current standards of human wealth and privileges, such mythologising views are rooted in a lineage dating back hundreds of years. In his

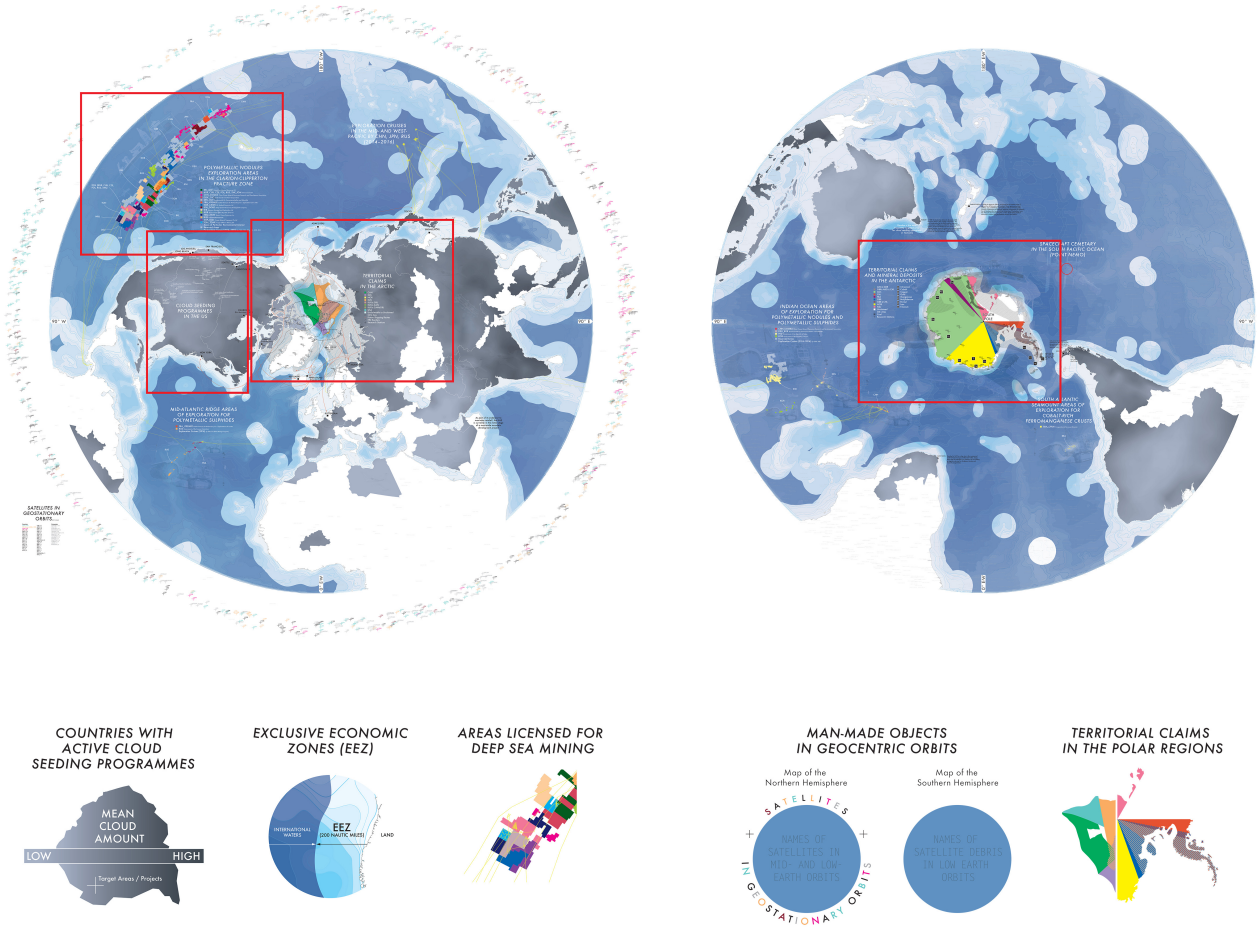

Figure 3. Peter Mörtenböck and Helge Mooshammer, *Frontier Climates*, digital wallprint, 2017.

analysis of US engagement in the Antarctic, polar historian Adrian Howkins highlights the formative role a frontier-oriented mentality has played in shaping attitudes towards exploration, land annexation, and the promotion of scientific research (Hawkins, 2013).

7. Conclusion

After centuries of blatantly imperialist voyages into the unknown commissioned to stake new sovereign claims, today's enlightened world expects of exploration of the remaining frontiers that such ventures serve the production of knowledge for the benefit of all. However, the production of knowledge in itself is not a value-free enterprise. Particularly in our time, scientific interests in "frontier research" have often been co-opted to support various economic and political agendas, whether sponsored as national expeditions or through international collaboration. Oceans, with their vastness, inherent inaccessibility, and invisibility, have come to occupy a central place in this race for the "last frontier."

The constructed remoteness is linked to a corresponding lack of understanding. Efforts to bridge this gap in human control require the generation not only of data that facilitates navigation but also of representations that allow these discoveries to be integrated into established orders of knowledge, such as academic disciplines, taxonomies, and value systems. Since representation involves communication, the use of textual

and visual languages to convey knowledge raises questions of culture and belonging. To illustrate the linkages between politics, science, and the logics of communication, I have examined the recent wave of "futuristic" yet comfort-oriented design in the establishment of new polar research stations in order to address the ways in which the embodiment of knowledge production, and the popular narration thereof, serves to imaginatively tame and domesticate savage environments, transforming the frontier into habitable and harvestable space and perpetuating an essentially colonial mentality.

As debates around colonialism have gained prominence and demands for decolonisation have increasingly entered discourse, questions have emerged around the applicability of terms and the legitimacy of claims. These questions extend beyond decolonisation itself to more fundamental assumptions about colonialism, its constituents, and its contingencies. With regard to oceans, much of the scholarly discourse has focussed on the idea that oceans lack indigenous populations. However, colonialism does not only impact specific people and their livelihoods. In this context, I would like to emphasise that shifts in perspective can be both crucial and particularly productive. Not only do such shifts lead to changes in representation, but they also open up possibilities for broader participation in processes of decolonisation pointing to possible scenarios of an equitable future. Such an orientation towards an arena of dialogical engagement seems particularly pertinent given that symbolic acts of correction can potentially reinforce uneven power relations in terms of who exercises authority over the definition of what is right and wrong, the exploitation and allocation of resources, and the shift from direct control to indirect manipulation.

With climate change no longer a distant threat but a lived reality, oceans are increasingly being seen not as barriers but as vital connections, as a crucial element inextricably linking all of us and our futures together. In this context, it is essential that we acknowledge the legacies of and engagement with colonialism as a connective force as well. Embracing these shared implications provides a future-oriented perspective that can generate productive engagement with strategies and practices of decolonisation beneficial to a multitude of different positionalities.

In terms of art and its interaction with knowledge production, the implications of such an approach are twofold. First, it points to an enhanced comprehension of the requirement for contextualisation beyond the immediate confines of space and time and the need for artistic and cultural production, such as architecture and design, to promote awareness of and research into what lies "beyond." Second, artistic works serve as records that document and analyse change over time, affecting both content and framing. To illustrate productive engagement, I have examined two recent art projects aiming to decolonise knowledge systems by shifting the focus from epistemological disciplines to ontological practices. *A World of Matter* and *Frontier Climates* are part of a wider movement within artistic research seeking to address the contemporary dynamics of colonial logics and attitudes by narrating the complex stories of the habitation and interconnectedness of sites across the world, and in doing so to reframe not just the present but also the future of our planet. Specifically, these projects emphasise the importance of changing both content and practice to foster counter-knowledge. Challenging entrenched perspectives requires not only alternative images but also new ways of viewing them. Since our perspectives are shaped by structures of power, regimes of ownership, and issues of sociality, visual art initiatives like *World of Matter* strive to render the invisible visible and to position art as a common resource.

While narratives of exploration, whether of oceans or other "frontiers," often celebrate human achievement, ongoing expansionist activities such as the rush for seabed mapping are based on not only the spirit but also the colonial practice of establishing infrastructures for exploitation (in this context, for example, for deep sea mining). It is essential to consider these infrastructural perspectives on colonialism in order to understand our contemporary complicity in these systems. We are all implicated in both colonial legacies and neo-colonial practices in numerous ways today. If anything, the urgency of decolonisation is increasing rather than receding into the dark depths of history. This dynamic is particularly evident in the context of platform capitalism, which is driving ever more pervasive modes of deterritorialisation, fragmenting even the most mundane task into countless atomised processes dispersed around the world, as exemplified by the simple act of ordering a small commodity online which then needs to be shipped via container from overseas. The political, economic, and social fabric of global shipping routes, which transport billions of tons of goods every year (see International Chamber of Shipping, n.d.; UN Trade and Development, 2023), continuously evoke and exploit the infrastructural legacies of colonial empires. The complex question of decolonising ocean matter is thus not a distant concern, but an issue that impacts us every day right on our doorstep.

Funding

This article draws on research funded by the German Federal Cultural Foundation.

Conflict of Interests

In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Peter Mörtenböck (Goldsmiths, University of London/ TU Wien).

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