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Traces of Culture, Traces of Nature: Hunters' Huts in Narratives of Svalbard

One of the most persistent discourses about the Arctic in the last two hundred years has been the image of it as a cold and empty region, a polar waste making every visitor into an explorer of virgin territory, often in blatant disregard of the existence of an indigenous population. However, even in narratives of expeditions to the High Arctic archipelago of Svalbard, which lacks permanent inhabitants, travellers paradoxically also describe a landscape full of archival traces of human culture. My presentation will focus on descriptions of such traces – mainly in the form of abandoned hunters' huts containing remains of precarious domesticity that are in the process of being eradicated by the workings of nature – in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Svalbard narratives. As hybrids in Bruno Latour's sense, they undermine the travellers' concomitant efforts at purifying the Arctic as nonhuman nature.