

“SVALBARD’S DAUGHTERS”: PERSONAL ACCOUNTS BY SVALBARD’S FEMALE PIONEERS

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Da jeg fikk tilbud om å få være med som aktivt medlem av en fangstekspedisjon til Svalbard, tok jeg ingen betenkningstid. Det var levendegjørelsen av lengsler og drømmer gjennom mange år. I løpet av to-tre dager ble jeg forvandlet fra drosjesjåfør i Tromsø til «kvinnelig fangstmann» på vei til Svalbard, ombord i «Maiblomsten».

Det manglet ikke på advarsler fra alle kanter da det ryktedes at en kvinne ville våge seg ut på en slik ferd. Nordishavet var ikke å spøke med, aller minst så sent på høsten som i september... Den eventyrlige ferden til Svalbard var begynt. Jeg sto og stirret inn mot byen så lenge jeg kunne skimte lysene. Mange tanker strøk gjennom sinnet, lyse og glade, men også triste og vemodige. Men spenningen ved det nye jeg skulle få oppleve, ble snart den sterkeste.

–Wanny Wolstad, Første kvinne som fangstmann på Svalbard¹

When I was asked to be an active member of a hunting expedition to Svalbard, I didn’t need any time to make my decision. This trip was the realization of dreams and longings I had had for many years. During the course of two to three days I was transformed from a taxi driver in Tromsø to a “female male-hunter”² on her way to Svalbard aboard the “Mayflower”.

There was no shortage of warnings from all sides when people heard that a woman was willing to risk such a journey. The North Sea was nothing to fool around with, especially late in September... Soon my Svalbard adventure had begun. I stood at the ship’s railing and looked at the city as long as I could discern the lights. Many thoughts passed through my mind,

¹ Wanny Wolstad, *Første kvinne som fangstmann på Svalbard* (Oslo: Tanum, 1956), 8-9.

² In Norwegian there is a word for male hunter–*fangstmann*, a word for female hunter–*fangstkvinne*, and gender neutral terms–*jeger* and *fangstfolk*. Wolstad chose to use the male term in her book title and in this quote. In the title she uses *fangstmann* in conjunction with the noun for woman–*kvinne*. In this quote she modifies *fangstmann* with the adjective for female /woman–*kvinnelig*. It is my opinion that this choice of words emphasizes her unique status as a woman in this male-dominated profession. At times she uses another gender neutral term *fangstfolk*–in her works. For additional interpretations of the title, please refer to Marit Hauan, “Wanny har bakt... også har hun skudt 3 stormåser.” in *Kvinnfolk på Tvers*, ed. Elin Svenneby (Oslo: Emila, 1992), 29.

light and happy, but also sad and melancholy. However, my strongest emotion was the excitement I felt about the new things I was going to experience.³

The name Svalbard, to those who are familiar with this Arctic archipelago and its history, evokes images of darkness and light, extreme dangers and hardships, and isolation. Before the advent of modern air transportation and technology, hunters like Wanny Wolstad were cut off from the rest of the world by the sea ice for ten months of the year, and they were required to be totally self-sufficient. Svalbard was initially viewed as a place unfit for human habitation, and the seventeenth century annals of the English and Russian Muscovy Company provide a vivid illustration of this. Concerned about safeguarding its whaling stations, the company tried to entice prisoners who had been sentenced to death to spend the winter on Svalbard by promising them both wages and freedom. Once the prisoners arrived, however, they grew so fearful they refused the offer and begged to be taken home. For them death by hanging was preferable to spending a winter on Svalbard facing extreme cold, polar bears, and scurvy.⁴ Clearly this negative view has gradually been replaced over time, and today Svalbard is viewed by many people, particularly Norwegians, as a desirable place to spend a few years, and even as a favorable place to raise children. Tourism has become a thriving industry, and people from around the world visit Svalbard in both summer and winter for adventure in one of Europe’s last remaining wilderness areas. Global awareness of Svalbard also continues to rise with the current focus on climate change and the plight of the polar bear.

Svalbard has long been associated with adventure and challenge, a place in which hunters, miners, scientists, explorers, and researchers needed to be physically and mentally tough to survive. Those who stayed through the winter—*overvintrere* [overwinterers]—held and still hold a special place in the Norwegian popular imagination. Svalbard was also, until recently, an extremely male-dominated society in which men far outnumbered women and in which the primary occupations and activities—exploration, hunting and mining—were carried out predominantly by men, though throughout the twentieth

³ Translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

⁴ Helge Ingstad, *Landet med de kalde kyster* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1948), 57-58.

century women overwintered and spent extended periods of time on Svalbard as well. However, the women of Svalbard have remained relatively anonymous and have been frequently ignored in literature about this area, their contributions often taken for granted. The exclusive language used in the title of Arvid Moberg's 1959 account of hunters' everyday lives on Svalbard—*Fångstmäns land* [The Land of the Male Hunter] in the original Swedish and *Svalbards sønner* [Svalbard's Sons] in Odd Berset's Norwegian translation—provides but one example.⁵ This literary and historical exclusion and silencing of the voices of “Svalbard's daughters” appears to be, at least partially, due to the widespread acceptance of the myth that the Arctic was no place for women. Indeed, Svalbard was a place often deemed unfit for women, or perhaps it would be more correct to say a place for which women were deemed to be unfit, especially for life outside of the few settlements. However, as the passage from Wanny Wolstad's book reveals, women have not only traveled to Svalbard for adventure for quite some time, but they did so willingly, though Wolstad's and other accounts make it clear these women generally had to deal with strong resistance to their presence, particularly if they participated in male-dominated occupations and activities. Some had to resort to extreme measures for this opportunity.

Indeed the first woman purported to have set foot on Svalbard – Léoine d'Aunet—writes of how she negotiated her own passage on the (1838-40) *La Recherche* expedition. When Paul Gaimard, the expedition leader, asked d'Aunet for help in convincing her partner Francois Biard to accept a position as one of the expedition artists, she said she would do so on the strict condition that she be allowed to come along as well.⁶ Like Wolstad she viewed this as an opportunity for adventure. Though d'Aunet ended up traveling to Svalbard, she was frustrated and felt cheated at times by restrictions placed on her mobility.⁷ A much more recent example of resistance to the presence of women on Svalbard is seen in Monica Kristensen's 1989 narrative *Det*

⁵ Arvid Moberg, *Fångstmäns land* (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1959). Odd Berset's Norwegian translation was published in Bergen by J.W. Eide. This translation is undated.

⁶ Nils M. Knutsen and Per Posti, *Le Recherche: En ekspedisjon mot nord* (Tromsø: Angelica, 2002), 164.

⁷ Anka Ryall, *Odyssens i skjørt: Kvinners erobring av reiselitteraturen* (Oslo: Pax, 2004), 32.

magiske landet: fortellinger om Svalbard [The Magical Land: Stories about Svalbard]. At the end of the 1970s, Kristensen was the first woman researcher to spend a winter at Ny-Ålesund, and she frequently refers to the exclusionary nature of the boys’ club at this research base. One of the first things she was told when she arrived at Ny Ålesund was that her reputation had preceded her. Not her reputation as a scientist, but as a woman, and she was sarcastically referred to as the “winter quota” in some circles. This term was used to refer to the tobacco and hard liquor that arrived on the last boat in the fall in the days before regular winter commercial flights were established between the mainland and Svalbard.

Herman Jakobsson addresses this resistance and skepticism in his book *Vardagsliv på Spetsbergen* [Everyday Life on Spitsbergen] published in 1988. After assuring the reader that women are fully accepted on Svalbard as equals to men in all areas today—a claim which leaves room for critical challenge—he examines the reasons for the longstanding resistance to their presence. After talking to the old timers, he concludes these attitudes had nothing to do with a lack of respect or contempt for women, but rather were tied to concern for their well being: concern that “*hela hennes tillvaro som kvinna, hustru och mor skulle bli utsatt för stora påfrestningar*” [“her whole existence as a woman, wife and mother would be subjected to overwhelming stresses”].⁸ In other words, women were considered to be unfit for dealing with the physical and mental challenges linked to an isolated life in the Arctic wilderness, a common attitude among non-indigenous groups. Jakobsson calls the women of Svalbard “*De, som vågade*” [“Those who dared”].⁹ When we listen to the voices of twentieth century women who dared to enter this male territory and examine their experiences, this perception of being unfit for the wilderness is challenged and refuted. A close reading of their accounts reveals that the wilderness functions as an overwhelmingly positive rather than negative force in their search for personal and professional

⁸ Herman Jakobsson, *Vardagsliv på Spetsbergen* (Vagnhärad: Axplock, 1988), 112. These words echo those of Liv Balstad in her 1955 account *Nord for det øde hav* (Bergen: J.W. Eide, 1955), 304-305. However, Balstad states that if a woman finds *Svalbardmelodien*—Svalbard’s melody—she develops a stronger tie to her surroundings and the land than a man.

⁹ Jakobsson, *Vardagsliv på Spetsbergen*, 117.

adventure and fulfillment, and their Svalbard experiences are often transformative in nature.

This study will provide an overview of the voices of twentieth century women who dared not only to enter but also to spend an extended period of time on Svalbard and record their impressions of and experiences in this “no woman’s land”. This overview is based on seven published (1940-1996) personal narratives and one unpublished account, and though a few of these texts, such as Wolstad’s *Første kvinne som fangstmann på Svalbard*, have received some critical attention, a number of the texts have received little or no critical attention, and they have never been looked at collectively.¹⁰ I have chosen to group these texts together for the purpose of, in the words of the American literary critic Tillie Olsen, illumination and discovery.¹¹ This method will provide a more nuanced look at the theme of gender resistance faced by women on Svalbard and add diversity to Svalbard’s literary and cultural landscape.

Though these narratives were published over the span of five decades, and their authors are from different countries, generations, and socio-economic backgrounds, they contain striking similarities including the aforementioned transformative nature of the authors’ Svalbard experiences, the theme of gender resistance and Arctic gender politics, and not least the use of gender by many of the authors to “authorize her claim to writing”—a phrase used by Sidonie Smith in her 1987 *Poetics of Women’s Autobiography*.¹² A fitting introduction to

¹⁰ The Norwegian anthropologist Marit Anne Hauan, currently the director of the Tromsø Museum, has published several articles in which she discusses personal accounts by female hunters in some depth, and I would like to thank her for the assistance she provided me when I embarked on my work with Svalbard narratives a number of years ago. The Canadian Carolyn Redl touches on several of the English language texts under consideration in her paper “Women Going North: Life-Writings by Women of the Circumpolar Region.” This paper can be accessed at www.skk.uit.no/ww99/papers/Redl_carolyn.pdf. Wanny Wolstad is also the subject of an exhibit at *Polarmuseet* (The Polar Museum) in Tromsø. Please note that this survey does not contain the perspectives or narratives of Svalbard’s Russian women.

¹¹ Tillie Olsen, *Silences* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1965), 187. Tillie Olsen uses these terms in her discussion of “legitimate reasons for grouping” women writers together. *Silences* also contains a detailed discussion of types of silencing and marginalization.

¹² Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, “Introduction: Situating Subjectivity in Women’s Autobiographical Practices,” in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 12. “How does she authorize her claim to writing?” is one of the questions Sidonie Smith posed in 1987 in *A Poetics*

these works is to look at the myriad ways in which these women directly and indirectly use their gender to provide such validation, and how, in the process, they address the resistance they faced on Svalbard and challenge Svalbard gender myths and narrative models. Sidonie Smith “also takes up the linkage of gender and genre in exploring how women engage autobiographical discourse to renegotiate their cultural marginality and enter into literary history,”¹³ and a similar method can be used to look at the Svalbard texts.

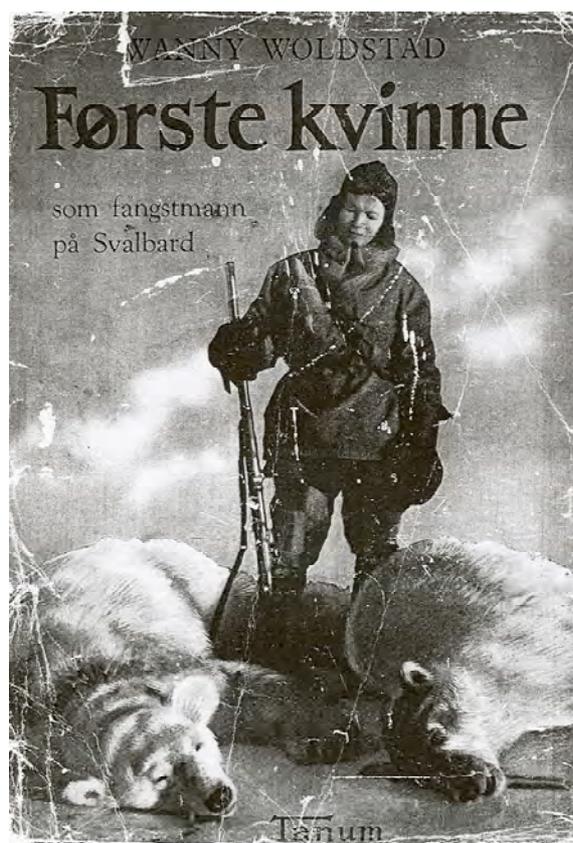
The most direct way in which these authors use gender to authorize their claim to writing is by emphasizing their pioneering status as women in Svalbard’s male dominated society, and Wanny Wolstad’s classic text provides a fine example of this. Wolstad (1893-1959) had a pioneering mentality and was proud of breaking into new areas. Not only was she the first woman taxi driver in Tromsø before she left for Svalbard in the 1930s, but she, as a working class woman, produced one of the best-known and widely-studied Svalbard narratives. The title of her 1956 account—*Første kvinne som fangstmann på Svalbard* [The First Woman as a Male Hunter on Svalbard]—as well as the book jacket photo in which she is standing over the bodies of two polar bears with rifle in hand, textually and visually emphasize her groundbreaking accomplishments as the first woman to participate in big game hunting on Svalbard on an equal basis with a male hunting partner. This text describes the five winters (1932-37) spent by Wolstad and her life and work partner Anders Sæterdal in the Hornsund area, with her two teenage sons and Sæterdal’s children joining them for extended periods of time.¹⁴ Wolstad’s book jacket also underlines a seeming contradiction if one buys into the Svalbard gender myth—a woman who is a hunter. Notably, Wolstad doesn’t explicitly state her uniqueness, but she leaves this to Helge Ingstad—a prominent Arctic figure who served as governor of Svalbard in the 1930s.¹⁵

of Women’s Autobiography for reading a woman’s autobiography. Additional questions tied to gender and sexuality such as “How is her literary authority marked by the presence or absence of her sexuality as subject in her story?” are also useful in a close reading of the texts.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁴ Marit Hauan, “Wanny har bakt... også har hun skudt 3 stormåser.”, 26.

¹⁵ Helge Ingstad (1899-2001) was educated as a lawyer in Norway, but he spent most of his adult life as an adventurer and writer. He is best known for the discovery and excavation of the the Viking ruins at L’Anse aux Meadows on the



Ingstad wrote the preface to Wolstad's account, and in it he describes her as

[en] av de meget få kvinner som valgte jeger- og fangstlivet langt mot nord. Hun er en merkverdighet på et felt som har vært mannens enemerker siden stenalder tid... I denne mannfolkverden er det da at Wanny Wolstad er kommet inn. Og ikke som en der gjester nordlandet under et flyktig besøk i kvinnelig nyfikenhet, nei, hun blir der i hele fem år.¹⁶

[Wanny Wolstad is] among the very few women who have chosen the life of a hunter and trapper in the far north. She is a curiosity in a field which has been the domain of men since the Stone Age... This is the man's world that Wanny Wolstad entered. And she did not just make a cursory visit to this

northern coast of Newfoundland in the 1960s, along with his wife Anne Stine Ingstad. This work proved that Vikings were in North America 500 years before Columbus. Helge Ingstad's Arctic experiences included living as a hunter and trapper among the Inuit in Alaska and Canada, and he served as the governor of Greenland and then Svalbard in the 1930s. Ingstad was a prolific writer, and in 1948 he published a work about Svalbard entitled *Landet med de kalde kyster* [The Land of the Cold Coasts].

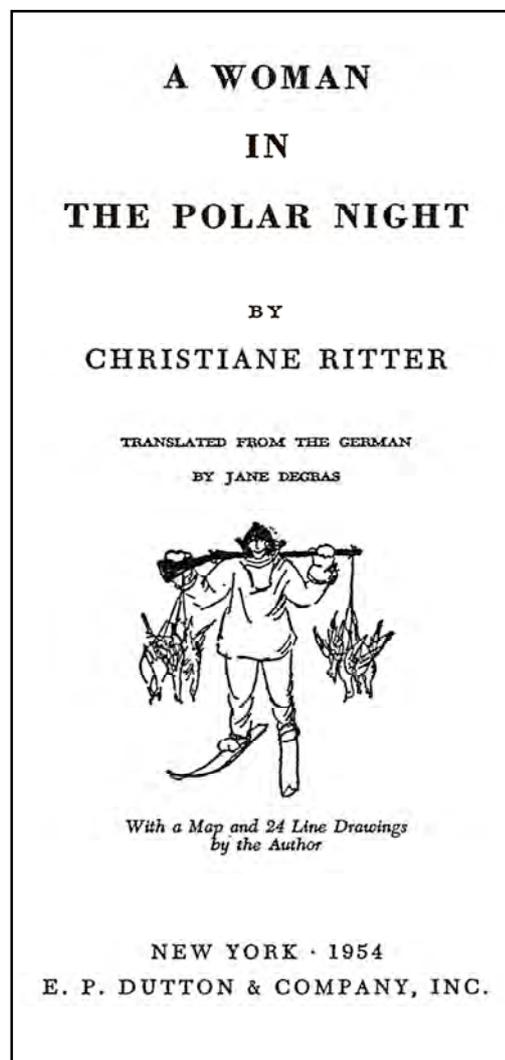
¹⁶ Wolstad, *Første kvinne som fangstmann på Svalbard*, 4, 5.

northern land as a result of female inquisitiveness. No, she remained for five whole years.

It appears that Wolstad and her publisher recognized where authority lay, and she justified her writing by getting a stamp of approval from the Svalbard establishment. This preface draws readers, including those who are part of and support the status quo, into the text. Though Wolstad appears to be deferring to authority, it will become clear that her narrative ultimately challenges it.

The Austrian woman Christine Ritter (1897-2000) also lived on Svalbard in the 1930s. She traveled to the northernmost tip of Spitsbergen in the late 1930s to join her husband Hermann Ritter who was a scientist and hunter at Gråhuken on Wijdefjorden. She is remembered as the first European woman to spend a winter so far north, and her 1938 account of her experiences has appeared in a number of languages, including English (1954) and Norwegian (2002).¹⁷ Like Wolstad, she chose to emphasize gender in the title of her 1938 account, *Eine Frau erlebt die*

Polarnacht [*A Woman in the Polar Night*], highlighting a paradox or contradiction to those buying into the Arctic gender myth—a woman in a polar region in the winter. The illustration by the author that appears on the title page of the English translation shows Ritter in a joyful, even celebratory pose, standing on her skis and communing with the



¹⁷ The Ritter quotations are taken from Jane Degras’ 1954 translation *A Woman in the Polar Night* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1954). The title of Karen Ragna Nesson’s Norwegian translation is *Kvinne i polarnatten* (Tromsø: Polar Forlag, 2002). This work was originally published as *Eine Frau erlebt die Polarnacht* (Munich: Propyläen Verlag, 1938). According to the preface in the Norwegian translation, over half a million copies of Ritter’s book have been sold in, among other languages, Norwegian, English, Spanish, Hungarian and Swedish.

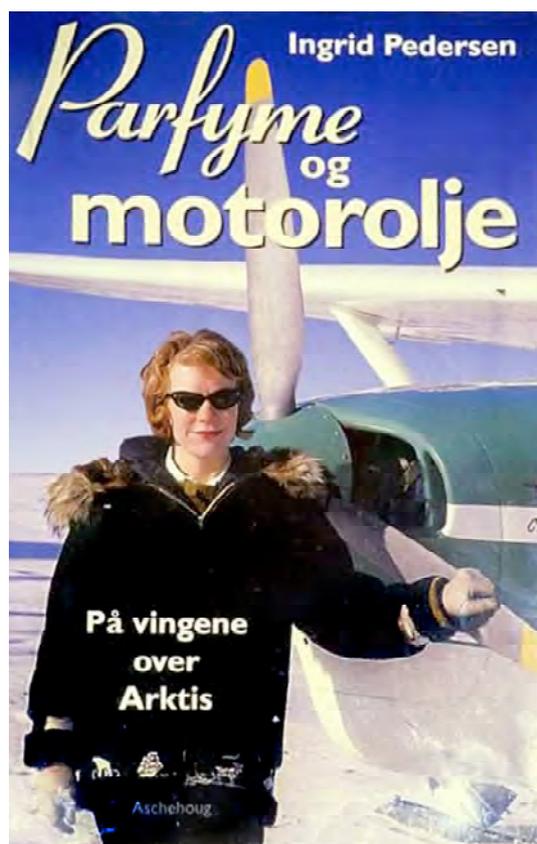
land, visually emphasizing this paradox. The entrenched social attitude that women are unsuited for life in the polar regions is vividly described in the opening of Ritter's account in which she details the outrage and even horror expressed first by her family and then by the crew and passengers of her ship upon learning that she is going to spend a winter in this desolate place. Clearly Ritter, as a woman, was thought to lack the physical and emotional strength and the technical skills to cope in such an isolated, wild setting.

Ritter's family and friends call her trip harebrained idiocy, and they refer to Svalbard as a godforsaken place. The Captain refuses to drop Ritter off until he is told that Ritter's husband would be waiting for her, and even her husband's hunting partner Karl is initially skeptical, telling her later that he was sure "the lady from Central Europe [would] go off her head" sooner or later.¹⁸ Like Wolstad, Ritter relies on the authority of a third party to explicitly state her pioneering accomplishments. She recounts sitting one evening in her isolated hut with her companions, reading an old newspaper from Trøsmø that contains an article about Svalbard in which they are mentioned. Ritter is described as a woman who has traveled to this remote place "from central Europe in order to find out about the *fortryllelse* [enchancements] of the polar night... This makes the lady the first European woman to spend the winter so far north."¹⁹ Whether Ritter and her companions actually had access to this newspaper may be debated, and it is inconsequential in terms of the effectiveness of the use of the article as a narrative device.

Ingrid Pedersen lived on Svalbard in the 1970s and represents a different generation of overwinterers. However, her narrative is, in terms of the use of gender, remarkably similar to those of Ritter and Wolstad, and she points to her gender as well as a seeming contradiction between her gender and profession in the title of her 1996 account—*Parfyme og motorolje: På vingene over Arktis* [Perfume and Motor Oil: In flight over the Arctic]—underscored by variations in the typesetting and the book jacket photo. While *Parfyme* is written in a flowery, cursive style, *Motorolje* is written in bold, standard print, and the photo of Pedersen shows her cheerfully posing in the brilliant Arctic sun by her small plane.

¹⁸ Christine Ritter, *A Woman in the Polar Night*, 23.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 118.



Pedersen, a Swede, was a pioneer in the area of aviation, being the first woman to fly a single engine plane over the North Pole in 1963. She had extensive flying experience as the chief pilot in *Svalbardfly* in the 1970s, and she spent at least one entire winter on Svalbard, occasionally crossing paths with the researcher Monica Kristensen. Though *Parfyme og motorolje* is an autobiography, describing her life from childhood to retirement, Pedersen’s Svalbard experiences occupy a central place in this work. She opens her account with a description of the Svalbard landscape from the air, sprinkles poetic descriptions of this Arctic archipelago throughout her text, and ends by briefly relating a final work stint on Svalbard in 1986. Pedersen authorized her claim to writing by including a preface by Helge Ingstad—written fifty years after the Wolstad preface—in which he places her groundbreaking accomplishments in context.²⁰ Ingstad states:

Ingrid Pedersen er en sjelden fugl. I ca. 39 år har hun vært på vingene over Alaskas villmark, polarisen og Svalbard. Det er rimelig å tro at det

²⁰ Helge Ingstad also wrote the prefaces to numerous Svalbard personal narratives written by men.

er få kvinner som har en så lang og grundig erfaring i flyvning over arktisk område.²¹

Ingrid Pedersen is a rare bird. For 39 years she has flown over the Alaskan wilderness, the polar ice and Svalbard. It is reasonable to believe that there are few women who have such exhaustive and lengthy experience flying in the Arctic.

In addition, Pedersen, unlike Wolstad and Ritter, explicitly states her exploits in her text, choosing to do so early in the narrative. She does so in connection with the resistance she faces from Svalbard's Governor Eldring. Though Eldring routinely flew with male pilots, he refused to fly with Pedersen, opting to take the boat whenever she was in the cockpit. Pedersen's response to the situation reveals its absurdity.

Allerede tolv år tidligere var jeg blitt kjent som «polarflyversken.» Da fløy jeg, som første kvinne i verden, over Nordpolen i et enmotorsfly. Slikt vekker gjerne en del oppsikt. I alle fall den gang.²²

Already twelve years before I had become known as the female polar pilot. At that time I became the first woman in the world to fly over the North Pole in a single engine plane. Such feats create quite a stir. At any rate at that time.

Pedersen is not alone either in directly stating her pioneering status in her narrative or in using this to directly address the gender resistance and skepticism she faced. In her 1989 account *Det magiske landet*,²³ Monica Kristensen describes herself as the best qualified person for a two-year position at the research station in Ny-Ålesund during a meeting with a skeptical Svalbard old timer in Tromsø. Kristensen attributes her hire by *Polarinstituttet* [The Norwegian Polar Institute] to her advanced degree in physics and the new Norwegian

²¹ Ingrid Pedersen, *Parfyme og motorolje* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1996), 7. Pedersen published the short account "Från Anchorage til Tromsø" which appeared in *Polårboken* (Oslo: Norsk Polarklubb, 1968), 82-94.

²² Pedersen, *Parfyme og motorolje*, 15.

²³ Kristensen indicates in her preface that her book is not intended to be an autobiographical account of her time in Ny-Ålesund, but that it is "built on things that have actually happened." The primary focus of the book is, according to Kristensen, "the Arctic landscape as it is reflected in people's experiences and understanding." Monica Kristensen, *Det magiske landet: fortellinger om Svalbard* (Oslo: Grøndahl, 1989), 8.

likestillingsloven [Gender Equality Law], but her credentials do not convince Toralf who responds "Det er ikke riktig at kvinnfolk skal være på Svalbard vinteren over." ["It isn't proper that women spend the winter on Svalbard."]²⁴ Kristensen must deal with similar attitudes once she is in place at the research station in Ny-Ålesund with seven male colleagues, conducting research on the northern lights in the late 1970s. While her treatment of this resistance is like Pedersen's generally light-hearted, it is also fraught with tension and is problematic and contradictory at times. Kristensen, however, wrote her own preface, revealing a degree of self-confidence in her pioneering status and literary abilities.²⁵

Wolstad and Ritter, in contrast to Pedersen and Kristensen, do not directly address the resistance they faced as women on Svalbard, and indeed, references to resistance virtually disappear from their descriptions of the time they actually spent on Svalbard. Several factors appear to account for this difference in focus. One possible explanation is the extreme isolation that Wolstad and Ritter experienced before the advent of modern methods of communication and transportation. They saw and spoke to only a handful of people during their stays on Svalbard, and the men with whom they spent the winter were supportive partners. Kristensen, on the other hand, spoke frequently with others and occasionally saw outsiders, while Pedersen, due to the nature of her job, had regular contact with a wide circle of people.

Era also plays a role in this noticeable difference in resistance in the narratives. Kristensen and Pedersen lived on Svalbard in the 1970s, during the time when feminism became a major political force. As a result, they benefited from the language and vocabulary that was developed to define and describe gender inequity. In addition, and of equal significance, is the fact that the presence of women on Svalbard was not a novelty anymore during the seventies. They were still a minority, but a minority with a noticeable presence and a voice; a

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁵ Kristensen (b. 1950) and Pedersen have both established names for themselves internationally. Kristensen is best known for her two expeditions to Antarctica and her work as a glaciologist and meteorologist. She has been at the center of several controversies over the years, most notably for her second Antarctic expedition in 1993 in which one of the expedition members was killed. She has authored several books in addition to *Det magiske landet*, including *Mot 90° Syd* (Oslo: Grøndahl, 1987).

minority which was perceived to be a threat to the well established male order and to the image of the typical overwinterer. Kristensen, in particular, refers to the exclusionary nature of the boy's club at her research station. According to the narratives it appears that Kristensen faced the most intense resistance of the four while on Svalbard, and she provides several examples of verbal sexual harassment in her narrative. In one incident, she is told she is unwomanly after informing a male visitor to the research station that she is not interested in having a sexual encounter with him or any of his shipmates.

There appears to be a third factor at play in the negative reception that Kristensen received, and this is tied to her status as a single woman. Wolstad and Ritter came to join men with whom they were romantically involved, and Pedersen shared many of her experiences with her husband Einar Pedersen, a well known pilot and navigator in his own right. However, Kristensen came to Svalbard, lived on Svalbard and left Svalbard as a single woman. She carried out her work and daily life without the support or company of a male life partner, thus posing a greater perceived threat to the traditional and established order. This interpretation is supported by Marit Anne Hauan in her 1989 article "*Og jeg husker mang en kvinne*" ["And I remember many a woman"]. Hauan explores the connection between long-held myths about manliness and resistance to the presence of women overwinterers, particularly women hunters, on Svalbard. Hauan convincingly argues that the hunting life allowed men to live up to the classic ideals of manliness because it required them to exercise daring and to act bravely and quickly in physically demanding and often life threatening situations. She also points out that accounts by and/or about these men, portray these manly ideals as being central to the life of the hunters in the Arctic. According to Hauan, if women were allowed to be a part of this world and profession, the myth that only tough men could survive in the Arctic far from civilization could be weakened or even invalidated. One way in which men attempted to perpetuate this myth, however, while still enjoying the companionship and help of females, was to classify women in the Arctic as helpmates. Another way to propagate this

myth was to classify women as unusual,²⁶ as illustrated by Ingstad’s prefaces. Recall that he refers to Pedersen as a rare bird and calls Wolstad a curiosity or oddity. This is also illustrated by the application of the term unwomanly to Kristensen. Clearly, successful single women like Kristensen, a woman who enlisted the help of her male colleagues for her research project, threatened and perhaps, in some cases, still threaten such myths.²⁷

Though Wolstad and Ritter don’t directly address issues of gender inequity in their works, they effectively challenge Svalbard gender myths, but in a roundabout fashion. Wolstad and Ritter play a narrative game, and one could argue that they assume the role of tricksters by appearing to adhere to and accept narrative and societal norms in their accounts, but then go on to challenge and critique them. While their tone is light and non-threatening, they actually produce subversive texts.

Both Wolstad and Ritter start out by supporting societal norms and the myth of Svalbard as being an exclusive place for tough men. Wolstad does so by emphasizing her otherness and uniqueness, indeed she is able to do “man’s work.” Wolstad painstakingly describes her hunting feats and physical stamina, and the photo on the book jacket in which she is standing over the results of a successful hunt provides a strong visual impression of her hunting prowess.²⁸

Ritter supports these norms through describing her initial reservations about coming to Svalbard. She writes that fortunately as a housewife she will not have to accompany her husband on his dangerous hunting expeditions, and she spends her early days at Bock Bay doing her best to transform a primitive hunting cabin into a home. However, Ritter’s attitude towards being a housewife changes as she

²⁶ Marit Anne Hauan, “Og jeg husker mang en kvinne,” in *Svalbardboka 3*, ed. Birger Amundsen (Tromsø: Ursus, 1989), 66.

²⁷ Hauan also points out two additional causes of the historical resistance to the presence of women on Svalbard. One was the belief that women were physically and emotionally too fragile to survive a winter in the Arctic (see Herman Jakobsson’s comments), and the other was tied to the northern Norwegian superstition that the presence of women on fishing and hunting expeditions often resulted in bad luck.

²⁸ In her account “Fangstkvinnen beretter” in *Polar-Årboken* Wolstad stated: “Å jage og felle den [isbjørnen] er virkelig mannfolkarbeide.” [“Hunting and killing the polar bear is truly men’s work.”] (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1939), 37. The photo of Wolstad which appears on the book jacket is also reproduced here. The entire article can be found on pages 33-40.

experiences Svalbard. She starts to share in the hunters' work, and the men take over some of the housework – something that is, by necessity, part of the everyday routine of most Svalbard hunters.

I have lost all desire to do housework, and the men bake heart-shaped waffles and all kinds of cake. They put sugar and raisins and other dried fruit in the ordinary bread, for Christmas will soon be on us. All the hunters in Spitsbergen are baking now, even those who have for years lived alone. Our neighbor, old Sven Ohlson, in Biscay Hook, is said to bake so much that even in the spring he can still entertain his guests with frozen cakes. Arctic ships, seeking shelter from the storm, often come to his part of the coast. And when no ships come, Sven still bakes for his imaginary guests, pickles reindeer tongues and preserves the best parts of his bears.²⁹

A few pages later she states: "Gradually all our thoughts revolve around the pack ice. Strangely enough, my fear of the pack ice has vanished. I am beginning to think in exactly the same terms as the hunters."³⁰ After spending nine harrowing days alone in a primitive hunting cabin during a snowstorm, Ritter has been transformed. During the storm she is required to draw upon her ingenuity and physical and mental powers, and in the process discovers she has hidden and previously untapped strengths and abilities:

I go at the work with all my bodily strength in the insane tumult of the storm. For the first time in my life I experience the joy of struggling with something stronger than myself...I go on working day after day, during the hours when there is still some dusky light out of doors in the storm, with a strength which I did not think I possessed, with a kind of savage recklessness which seizes me afresh everyday.³¹

This episode ends not with Ritter being rescued by her male companions, but by Ritter managing herself. She does not provide the fairytale ending that popular culture and imagination may have been expecting. By the end of her story, Ritter's self-confidence is so great that she initiates physically challenging and dangerous activities, and she asks her husband to take her along on such trips as well. She also

²⁹ Ritter, *A Woman in the Polar Night*, 134.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 145.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 97.

refuses to leave Svalbard when planned and extends her stay. Through her descriptions, Ritter debunks the myth that Svalbard is exclusively a place for men, for she has survived and thrived as a housewife in this desolate place, surprising even herself. She also paints a picture of a place in which women can think and act in ways and initiate and carry out activities traditionally ascribed to men, and where men can and clearly often must assume more traditional female duties. However, these aren’t usually emphasized in the more numerous Svalbard accounts written by men. Ritter is then not only challenging societal but also narrative norms.

Wolstad also challenges the Svalbard myth. It has been outlined how she demonstrates her “manly” competence as a hunter, but her narrative is also sprinkled with references to bread baking and her assumption of traditional women’s duties, including her duties as a mother. These references increase in frequency near the end of her account, and she provides tips on food preparation in the Arctic and talks about her love for her children and concern for her partner, elements which are generally lacking in the highly formulaic traditional hunters’ journals.³² Once again the narrative offers a variation on and challenge to both societal and narrative norms.

One could argue that a motivation for Wolstad’s inclusion of this material was to show that though she was unlike the average woman, she was still womanly and feminine. It can also be argued that Wolstad’s and Ritter’s primary motivation in including such material, and thereby challenging narrative norms, was to offer an alternative to the exclusivity fostered by the pervasive Svalbard gender myth found in and supported by popular culture as well as in numerous firsthand accounts by men.³³ A myth that promoted the idea that only a certain type of man could thrive on Svalbard, especially in the winter. Wolstad and Ritter, as well as Pedersen and Kristensen and a number of the authors yet to be mentioned, present much more inclusive

³² For more detail of Wolstad’s descriptions of her domestic activities as well as of the ways in which her account was similar to and different from accounts by male hunters, refer to Marit Hauan “Wanny har bakt... også har hun skudt 3 stormåser”, 25-41, and Marit Anne Hauan “Og jeg husker mang en kvinne, 63-72. See also, Marit Anne Hauan, “Det sterke, frie liv i villmarken,” i *Norsk Polarhistorie: III-Rikdommene*, ed. Einar-Arne Drivenes and Harald Dag Jølle (Oslo: Gyldendal, 2004), 177-217. Hauan discusses Arctic gender myths in these articles as well.

³³ Marit Anne Hauan’s articles about women hunters support both of these interpretations.

visions of life on Svalbard, and their accounts are subversive in this inclusivity. Their Svalbard is not just a place for real, tough men, but also women, whether they are pilots, scientists, hunters, or housewives—a place for women who come alone or who are accompanied by a partner or children.

These authors find their Svalbard experiences to be transforming and liberating, and they want others, particularly women, to share in this. They employ a variety of narrative devices to draw readers into their stories. Wolstad, for example, begins a section of her account with “*Kjære husmødre og alle som leser dette*” [“Dear housewives and everyone else who is interested”],³⁴ and Pedersen, upon leaving Svalbard in 1986, states that she is “*takknemlig for at eventyret fremdeles ventet for den som søkte det*” [“thankful that adventure still exists for the person who looks for it”].³⁵ Ritter writes, “We find ourselves pitying all the people in the towns of Europe, particularly the housewives, who besides being worn out by the unending struggle against soot and dust, moths and mice, also feel themselves obliged to keep up appearances.”³⁶ Thus Wolstad, Ritter, Pedersen, and Kristensen not only use their pioneering status as women on Svalbard to authorize their claim to write, but they use it to encourage their readers, particularly female readers, to question their life choices, embark on their own quests, and test their own limits.

This inclusivity is more directly stated in Berntine Johansen’s short account “*Som fangstkvinnne på Svalbard*” [As a female hunter on Svalbard], which was published posthumously in the 1940 edition of *Polar-Årboken* [The Polar Yearbook].³⁷ While Wolstad, Johansen’s contemporary, chose to emphasize her uniqueness by using the term *fangstmann* [male hunter] in her title, Johansen uses the term *fangskvinnne* [female hunter], and Johansen incorporates gender in her rationale for writing in a markedly different way than the authors discussed thus far. Rather than initially emphasizing her otherness and the way in which she stands out from other women, she identifies

³⁴ Wolstad, *Første kvinne som fangstmann på Svalbard*, 31.

³⁵ Pedersen, *Parfyme og Motorolje*, 192.

³⁶ Ritter, *A Woman in the Polar Night*, 184.

³⁷ Johansen spent several winters on Svalbard. Johansen’s heroic water rescue of her husband, teenage son, and a third hunter during the winter of 1937-38 was likely a cause of her premature death at the age of 55 (Berntine Johansen’s Obituary, *Aftenposten*, 05 Dec. 1939).

herself visually and textually as representative of the overlooked Svalbard woman. Johansen opens her account by stating “*Da det alltid har vært mennene som har fått berette fra Svalbard, må sannelig tiden være inne til at en kvinne får lov å fortelle noe derfra.*” [“Since it is always the men who have had the opportunity to relate their experiences from Svalbard, it is certainly time that a woman should be allowed to tell something about this place.”]³⁸ The accompanying photo of the author with her family underscores Johansen’s ordinariness, and Johansen’s choice of a title –*fangstkvinne* rather than *kvinnelig fangstmann* or *kvinne som fangstmann*–has a similar effect.



Fangstkvinnen Berntine Johansen sammen med mannen og sønnen sin. I forgrunnen har hun plantet to graner ved fangsthytta.

Here it should be noted that the title of Wolstad’s 1939 contribution to *Polar-Årboken* “*Fangstkvinnen beretter*” [The Woman Hunter Tells Her

³⁸ Berntine Johansen, “*Som fangstkvinne på Svalbard,*” in *Polar-Årboken 1940* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1940), 34.

Story] also contained the word *fangstkvinnen* or female hunter, a marked contrast to her book, which was published seventeen years later. In her account, Johansen writes of preparing food and clothing for the men on the hunting expedition she has outfitted, and of caring for and hunting small game with her young son and niece. Wolstad also brought her two teenage sons to Svalbard for extended periods of time, and they assisted her in a variety of hunting-related tasks. These working class mothers' Svalbard experience involved carrying out household and parenting tasks—work traditionally shouldered by women—as well as hunting.

While Wolstad and Johansen's descriptions of parenting are low key, Myrtle Simpson's *Home is a Tent*, published in 1964, contains a highly dramatic account of mothering, and through it another challenge to Svalbard gender myths. Simpson, a Scottish woman who later gained attention for being the first woman to cross Greenland on skis, accompanies her physician husband Hugh to Svalbard on a research trip. An accomplished skier, climber, and canoeist, she brings her infant son Robin along with her almost everywhere. One day while alone at the base camp, Simpson decides to take Robin on a canoe trip to explore. While taking a break on shore, she and her son, strapped in his Sami *komse*, are surrounded by a pack of wild huskies.

Now they were fanning out into an arc, working as a team.... I backed again, clutching my stick. "Don't run, don't run," I kept saying to myself. They were snarling now and showing big yellow teeth. My feet slithered on the shingle, then one boot touched the komse. I panicked. I grabbed the komse and threw it into the canoe, then heaved the boat into the water, wading up to my thighs before throwing myself in. The dogs closed in with a rush, but we were off! I paddled feverishly into the teeth of the wind. Robin was screaming, and out of the corner of my eye I saw that the komse was upside-down. Waves were breaking into the boat, but I didn't think of anything except to put the glacier between me and those dogs. They were running up and down on the beach, snarling and yelping. I seemed to be making no headway. They were still parallel with me, now and then darting into the water, biting it, and then retreating. Thank heavens they didn't seem to be able to swim.... I could hardly make the distance back to Brucebyen. I was too tired to realise how rough

the fjord was, and be alarmed at the roll on the canoe, but thinking back I don’t know why we didn’t overturn.³⁹

Simpson and her son make it safely back to camp, though she is exhausted. Simpson’s account makes it clear that she is extremely capable of managing in difficult and dangerous situations, contrary to the opinion of Svalbard’s governor. When he saw Simpson and her baby arrive, he angrily exclaimed, “I have had enough trouble rescuing expeditions off the ice-cap and bird cliffs, but women and children are too much!”⁴⁰ Successful negotiation of such challenges, particularly alone with children, is highly threatening to the mythic construction of Svalbard as a place primarily for males, supported in Simpson’s case by the establishment figure of the governor.

A look at the most widely distributed narrative by a long term resident of Svalbard, as well as brief mention of a more obscure narrative by a Svalbard overwinterer will complete this survey.⁴¹ Liv Balstad’s narrative—*Nord for det øde hav* (1955) [*North of the Desolate Sea*—is notable for a number of reasons, not least the way in which the overlooked Svalbard woman is profiled. Balstad moved to Svalbard in the post-war years to be with her husband Håkon who was serving as *sysselemand* [governor], and she stayed for the better part of nine years. Balstad’s book was the lengthiest and most popular of the Norwegian personal narratives by women who have lived on Svalbard, appearing as a book of the month selection in a Norwegian book club. It was translated into Danish and several other languages, with the Danish edition once again visually and textually—with its complete title of *Nabo til Nordpolen-Sysselemandskone på Svalbard, ni år i en verden af mænd* [Neighbor to the Northpole—The Governor’s Wife on

³⁹ Myrtle Simpson, *Home is a Tent* (London: The Travel Book Club, 1964), 60-61.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴¹ I have not included a discussion of Hanna Resvoll-Dieset’s account “*Til Spitsbergen*” found in *Sommerliv på Spitsbergen 1908/Svalbardminner nr. 12* (Vågemot Miniforlag, 1998) in this survey. Hanna Marie Resvoll-Holmsen is well known for her botanical work, and her life and work has been widely studied. I plan on including material from her “letters” in “*Til Spitsbergen*” in my study of the gendering of landscape in Svalbard narratives by women. Another narrative of note is Bolette Petri-Sutermeister’s *Isroser: Opplevelser på Svalbard* (Oslo: Solum, 1991) [*Ice Roses: Adventures on Svalbard*]. Petri-Sutermeister, a native of Switzerland, managed the Svalbard Museum in Longyearbyen for years. *Isroser* is a rich source of popular legends, lore, and history about Svalbard, and it also contains some personal reminiscences of Petri-Sutermeister, who spent her summers in Longyearbyen.

Svalbard, Nine Years in a World of Men]—emphasizing gender.⁴² Balstad’s narrative reveals an awareness of and respect for the women on Svalbard, and she appears to feel a sense of responsibility as a civil servant representative to chronicle not only her time on Svalbard, but parts of Svalbard’s history and contemporary society, including contributions by women. She devotes a special section to women’s stories and voices, outlining their abilities to deal with the challenges and skepticism they faced on Svalbard. Balstad relates the stories of the wives of mine captains and engineers, and she mentions Svalbard’s female hunters, including Wanny Wolstad, Berntine Johansen and Ada Håkstad, noting that a few female hunters have even overwintered alone. She underscores the presence of women and children by her inclusion of photographs of her own sons, as well as of Russian children in Barentsburg and Norwegian women and children in Longyearbyen.⁴³ The picture that accompanies the title page is of school children in Longyearbyen locating Svalbard on a globe, and the caption under the last photo in the book is “*rødmussede barn—også det er Svalbard*” [ruddy-cheeked children—that is also Svalbard].⁴⁴



⁴² The publication information for three translations of Balstad’s work follow: Danish: *Nabo til Nordpolen* (Copenhagen: Aschehoug, 1957), Swedish: *Kvinnor på Svalbard* (Stockholm: Forum, 1956), English: *North of the Desolate Sea* (London: Souvenir Press, 1958). Note that I have used the title of the English translation.

⁴³ For information about the presence and role of women and children in Longyearbyen and in Barentsburg, see Bjørg Evjen, “Bergverksamfunn i Arktis” in *Norsk Polarhistorie: III-Rikdommene*, ed. Einar-Arne Drivenes and Harald Dag Jølle (Oslo: Gyldendal, 2004), 158-164.

⁴⁴ Liv Balstad, *Nord for det øde hav*, 321.

The most obscure as well as the earliest text included in this survey is Martha Gilson’s unpublished manuscript *Martha P. Gilson—An Arctic Prologue to Life*, which lies tucked away in the archives at *Norsk Polarinstitutt*, and it is representative of voices which have been recorded but remain unexamined or uncovered. In 1984 when Gilson was an elderly woman living in Fortuna, California, Store Norske Spitsbergen Kulkompani sent an account of her time as a young American woman in Longyearbyen in 1916-17 to the Polar Institute, with the intent of having it published. Susan Barr’s letter of response provides suggestions for revisions, but there is no indication these were ever made. Gilson’s subtitle—*An Arctic Prologue to Life*—indicates that her experiences on Svalbard were pivotal in preparing her for post-Svalbard life, and this theme of transformation runs throughout the narratives and will be the topic of a future publication.

It is striking how the authors’ Svalbard experiences, particularly their interactions and bonding with landscape, are often life changing and defining events and are associated with feelings of self-confidence, self-awareness, and at times joy. Myrtle Simpson writes of the exhilaration she feels strapping on her skis and speeding down the mountain slopes of Svalbard, and Wolstad writes of feeling joyful while interacting with the landscape, and she describes the experiences of being one with the land and one’s work. The most striking example of landscape serving as a catalyst in self-discovery and transformation is in Christine Ritter’s account, and her solitary struggle for survival in the snowstorm has already been mentioned. Once the storm has subsided she goes skiing, and while interacting with the land she makes a discovery.

I am conscious of the immense solitude around me. There is nothing that is like me, no creature in whose appearance I might retain a consciousness of my own self; I feel that the limits of my being are being lost in this all too powerful nature, and for the first time I have a sense of the divine gift of companionship... I have a better understanding now of what my husband meant when he said, “You have to be alone in the Arctic to know what living in the Arctic really means.” Perhaps in centuries to come

men will go to the Arctic as in Biblical times they withdrew to the desert, to find the truth again.⁴⁵

Fifty years later Monica Kristensen describes the potential of a similar bonding experience.

Den arktiske natten er lang på Svalbard, den varer i over fire måneder. I løpet av denne tiden er sollyset ikke å se. Den tilsynelatende evige vinteren er som en avgrunn av mørke. Tankene stilner og sinnet blir fylt av taushet. Timene strekker seg mot en morgen som ikke kommer. Det er en uendelighet av tid til å stirre inn i den indre avgrunnen, til en til slutt kan skimte trekkene av et ansikt. Er en heldig, er det ens eget anskit en ser.⁴⁶

The Arctic night is long on Svalbard. It lasts for over four months. During that time the sun doesn't appear. The seemingly eternal winter is like a well of darkness. Thoughts are quieted and one's mind is filled with silence. The hours stretch towards a morning which doesn't come. One has endless time to look into one's inner self until one can glimpse the features of a face. If one is lucky, it is one's own face one sees.

A look at Wolstad's assessment of her five year journey provides another striking example:

Farene ved en slik tur tenker en mindre på, det er naturligvis godt å vite om dem, men var ikke livet her oppe litt farefullt og strabasiøst iblant, så var det en god del mindre spenning og interesse ved det... Ja, de fem årene jeg hadde gleden av å oppleve i isødet med fangst og jakt, i vær og uvær, mangen gang i livsfare på hav og land, de kan ikke betales med penger, og minnene kan ingen ta fra meg.⁴⁷

One doesn't lose any sleep over the dangers of such trips. Of course, it is good to be aware of the dangers, but if our life up here wasn't a little dangerous now and then, it would be much less exciting and less interesting... The five years I had the pleasure of experiencing in this wilderness of ice – hunting and trapping in life threatening situations on the land and sea – are priceless. No one can take these memories from me.

⁴⁵ Ritter, *A Woman in the Polar Night*, 99-100, 101-102.

⁴⁶ Kristensen, *Det magiske landet*, 30.

⁴⁷ Wolstad, *Første kvinne som fangstmann på Svalbard*, 44, 147.

There are other examples of how intimate interaction with Svalbard's physical isolation and features creates challenges and opportunities for these Svalbard women, and this will be the topic of a future study and publication. These descriptions make it clear that the isolation of the landscape and their intimate interactions with it provide each of these women with—in the language of Virginia Woolf—a room of her own, in which she has the space and solitude to explore and reflect on her own identity and development. Though these women find themselves when they are alone in their own private space, it is a room they share with and encourage the reader to enter, by using the narrative strategies outlined earlier. While one can wonder if some of the experiences are exaggerated, one can also argue that they are included—whether they are genuine, narrative devices, or both—in order to encourage readers, particularly female readers, to embark on their own adventures.

Svalbard continued, and in some cases continues, to serve as a physical and spiritual magnet for the women introduced in this survey. Ingrid Pedersen and Monica Kristensen have returned to Svalbard for visits and to work after the events they describe in their narratives. In addition, Kristensen has recently published a favorably reviewed detective novel—*Hollendergraven* (2007)—set on Svalbard.⁴⁸ At the age of ninety, Ritter said that she had always wanted her text to be translated into Norwegian,⁴⁹ and Gilson's consent to have her manuscript published in the 1980s indicates a revisiting of the early Svalbard phase of her life as it drew to an end. Wanny Wolstad's later years were filled not only with her duties as a *husmorvikar*,⁵⁰ but also with speaking engagements and slide shows about her years on Svalbard. While on such a speaking tour in 1959, Wolstad was hit by a car and died. Twenty years after her hunting stint on Svalbard ended, Wolstad was still sharing her experiences and promoting her narrative, a narrative that ends with a poetic description of Svalbard's landscape and the words "*De som har levd der oppe og forstår landet, føler en uforklarlig lengsel i sjelen, de drages tilbake.*" [They who have lived up

⁴⁸ Monica Kristensen, *Hollendergraven* (Oslo: Forlaget Press, 2007).

⁴⁹ Ritter, *Kvinne i polarnatten*, 5. This information is found in the preface to the Norwegian translation.

⁵⁰ A *husmorvikar* was hired by the municipality to assist families that needed help with household work when the "housewife" was incapacitated or absent.

there and understand the land, feel an inexplicable longing in their souls. They are drawn back.]⁵¹

It is my hope that the introduction of these voices collectively will draw readers to these specific texts, raise the profile of Svalbard women in general, and encourage continued critical examination of Arctic gender myths and attitudes. I am continuing my work with these Svalbard narratives, and I will be addressing the transformative nature of the authors' Svalbard experiences, the theme of gender resistance and Arctic gender politics, and the gendering of landscape in future publications.

⁵¹ Wolstad, *Første kvinne som fangstmann på Svalbard*, 154.

