

# RETURNING TO NATURE

## Post-carbon Utopias in Svalbard, Norway

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**Abstract:** While industrial closures in past decades were legitimized through an emphasis on economic motives, current closures are often framed within an emphasis on 'green transition', that is, through prefigurative discourses about post-carbon futures. This article discusses how the prefigurative transition framework reshapes the industrialization narrative, seeking to bridge the anthropology of energy and theories of performance. By paying attention to how 'proclaimed transition' is envisioned, narrated, and performed, the article explores the ways in which transition in Svalbard is spectacularly dramatized by the dismantling of the Svea coal mines, accompanied by the 'returning to nature' of the area. The article analyzes this 'returning' as a social drama of our anthropogenic times, demonstrating how landscape and nature are made key entities in performances of post-carbon utopia(s).

**Keywords:** dramas of socio-nature, landscape, mining, performance, post-carbon transition, rewilding, social drama, Svalbard, temporalities

In 2017, the Norwegian government announced the closure of the coal mines in Svea, Svalbard, and that all mining infrastructure, including the Svea settlement itself, should be dismantled.<sup>1</sup> The stated goal was to restore the place to its original, 'natural' condition with the intention that the area should appear as uninfluenced by humans as possible, except for the older buildings and roads built before 1946, since all structures prior to that year are protected as cultural heritage in Svalbard. When explaining the closure, Monica Mæland, the minister of trade and industry at the time, stressed that the coal market was still lower than expected and a continuation of the mines could not be justified, hence emphasizing the economic motive behind the decision. In addition, Mæland stated that the activities connected to the clean-up and "returning to nature" would give time to adjust to "the transition," that is, the transition from mining



to other economic activities and energy sources. As a result, the mining settlement in Svea, located to the south of Longyearbyen, is now being dismantled.

Until the 1990s, settlements in Svalbard—like Svea, Longyearbyen, Barentsburg, and Pyramiden—had been inhabited mainly by mining personnel: miners, functionaries, and, increasingly so, their families. Tourism and research provided new work opportunities from the 1990s onwards, attracting people not just from the Norwegian (or Russian) mainland but from all around the world. Especially the administrative center Longyearbyen<sup>2</sup> has since then developed into a highly international location and is now home for people from many regions of the world, particularly from Sweden, Thailand, and the Philippines, often working in the tourist and service industry. The few remaining jobs in mining are held by Norwegian citizens, except for the mines in Barentsburg where miners are citizens from Russia and Ukraine. These days, inhabitants are attracted to Svalbard not because of well-paid mining work, but often due to the prospect of working and living with easy access to the archipelago's spectacular landscape. Characterized by a mountainous terrain, glaciers, rugged coastlines, and fjords, the archipelago is indeed stunning. The place can inspire feelings of pure and pristine wilderness, while the barracks and mining infrastructure bear witness to the significance of coal extraction since the beginning of the 1900s.

In Svea, up to 50 people have been working to remove the buildings and infrastructure of the mining settlement where miners used to work and live. The workers doing the dismantling adhere to a work schedule of 14 days on and 14 days off, as was typical when the Svea mines were operating. While on duty, they live on-site, going to Longyearbyen or the mainland during their 14 days off. The work of dismantling thus follows the temporal rhythms of mining work itself, although the purpose of the labor is different. Most of the workers doing the dismantling are former miners, many of whom used to mine in Svea and are known as “the workers who stay behind.” This phrasing has a double edge to it, as these workers are not only literally staying behind in Svea but are working to dismantle their previous workplace. Meanwhile, and as I will demonstrate, the dismantling and ‘turning back to nature’ are part of an environmentalist narrative about Svalbard—one that showcases the archipelago as a venue for environmentally friendly initiatives after mining.

At an estimated cost of 1.9 billion kroner, this is the first time that an entire mining community in Svalbard (or Norway) is being ‘returned to nature’ in this manner,<sup>3</sup> affecting approximately 350 miners. Currently, they are engaged in the dismantling or have sought relocation within the mining company or on the mainland. Other abandoned mining settlements in the archipelago have generally been maintained. For example, the mining settlement in Ny-Ålesund serves as a research station, and one of the old mines outside Longyearbyen, Gruve 3, is open to guided tours. Guided tours are also organized for viewing the Russian mining town Pyramiden. Left to decay after abrupt abandonment

in 1998, it has been transformed into what Kjartan Fløgstad (2007: 56; my translation) describes as “a stereotype of yesterday’s utopian thinking, now solidified into pure building mass.” The Svea settlement, on the other hand, will be dismantled and ‘returned to nature’, with some of the materials and structures sent for reuse in Longyearbyen.

Focusing on the project in Svea, this article discusses narratives of transition by exploring the dismantling and ‘returning’ as a striking dramatization of coal mining’s termination in the archipelago. In so doing, I emphasize the dismantling as a social drama of our Anthropogenic times. I examine the performative dimensions of the project and how it serves as a pivot point for the generation of new meanings and narratives—as a way of demarcating and bringing transition into being. More specifically, I demonstrate how the dismantling is made part of an environmentalist narrative about Svalbard, especially through the making of landscape and nature into central entities in the demarcation of mining’s closure. By emphasizing the narrative and performative dimensions of ‘proclaimed transition’, I discuss the dismantling as an attempt to bring transition into being, as a narrative insistence on the direction of history and a temporal demarcation of what belongs to the past and what belongs to the future. In this way, I explore the meanings of ‘nature’ that emerge with proclaimed transition(s), arguing that landscape and nature have been made part of narratives of the archipelago as a site of post-mining utopias, a place where nature can heal and innovative environmental solutions can be found.

The dismantling and ‘returning’ are taking place in a context of environmental instabilities in Svalbard. Rising temperatures, higher snowfall levels, and permafrost thaw increasingly jeopardize the foundation of housing and infrastructure, while making some settlements more exposed to avalanche risk. Climate change is indeed high on the agenda for both politicians and inhabitants of the archipelago and Longyearbyen. Measures are taken not only for securing settlements but also for the abandonment of certain areas as a means of risk management and damage reduction. More generally in the Arctic, authorities are now dealing with questions about climate adaptation, risk, and the societal consequences of climate change (Stephen 2018). Meanwhile, increasingly unstable sea ice conditions open up new opportunities within shipping, mineral extraction, and other forms of resource exploitation, making the region a hotspot of geopolitical interest and raising concerns about sovereignty, ownership, and national presence. The frames for negotiation over civilization’s ‘frontiers’ are thus recast due to increased environmental instabilities. Discourses on climate mitigation raise other questions about the foundation for settlements under challenging Arctic conditions, such as sources of energy and Svalbard’s long-standing reliance on coal. In this regard, several changes are already under way. Gruve 7, close to Longyearbyen, is the only Norwegian mine still operating in addition to the mining in Russian Barentsburg. The mining in Gruve 7 is soon

to end, and in 2021 the Norwegian government announced that the coal power plant in Longyearbyen will be phased out and replaced by a diesel-driven power plant that will facilitate transition by being more compatible with non-carbon energy sources (Urke 2021).<sup>4</sup> But how to imagine Svalbard without coal?

The government's goal of bringing Svea back to its 'original, natural' state has been followed by the incorporation of the area into the Nordenskjöld Land National Park, renamed in 2021 as Van Mijenfjord National Park. Similar initiatives for returning areas to 'original states of wilderness' are being taken elsewhere: the UN recently decided to dedicate the next decade to the restoration of nature.<sup>5</sup> Such initiatives are often referred to as 'rewilding', although I prefer to use the term 'returning' because it is truer to the Norwegian term *tilbakeføring*, used in reference to Svea. How is the restoration of nature made part of the 'unmaking' of coal as a resource in Svalbard? And what notions about nature and society are played out in processes of dismantling and 'returning'?

At first glance, the 'returning' can appear as a multifaceted performance of separating matter associated with 'nature' from the human-made, hence reflecting the nature-culture dichotomy indicative of our 'modern Constitution' (Latour 1993). Bruno Latour has pinpointed modern society's need to separate 'nature' from 'culture', which entails what he considers a distanced scientific gaze on 'nature'. By exploring how nature(s) are being imagined and performed in and through the 'returning', however, I suggest that the project in Svea can be seen to go beyond acts of separation between nature and culture as elaborated by Latour, since the project aims to 'heal'—that is, to help nature recover from—human mining operations. The 'returning', I propose, is also more than simply a reproduction of the aesthetic gaze on nature in frontier places as 'pristine wilderness'. Nature restoration in Svea can be seen to entail various elements of healing by aiming to heal wounds in the landscape, so to speak. These performances of nature are central to the narrative of Svalbard as a site of post-mining utopia and can serve to illustrate the value of broadening the study of energy transition through a focus on the ways in which transition is performed and narrated.

## Performing Transition

In many parts of the world, coal mining plants are closing down as a result of reduced profitability and environmental concerns, and coal mining towns have become key sites for studies of post-industrial decline and transition (Charlesworth 2000; Kideckel 2008; Rakowski 2016). Whereas studies of coal mining societies often took the form of critiques of corporate and state power central to theories of class and capitalism (Gibson-Graham [1996] 2006; Long 1989), studies of post-industrial decline, or deindustrialization, turned toward analyzing the implications of and responses to plant closures among

workers, politicians, and unions. Highlighting economic shifts from manufacturing to services (Harvey 1989), studies of deindustrialization have importantly explored the constitutive role of mining work in forming communities and identities. According to Tim Strangleman and James Rhodes (2014: 414), however, this focus has framed deindustrialization as a question primarily about economic loss and socio-psychological challenges for displaced workers. Deindustrialization should be studied in wider terms, they argue, as an irrevocable restructuring of social life itself that influences the very nature of urban dwellers' worldview (see also Newman 1985). Recent studies have therefore explored deindustrialization as a general social, political, and cultural phenomenon that affects spatial and community relations and the politics of memory (Cowie and Heathcott 2003), emphasizing, for example, the phenomenology of change, loss, and existential crisis (Charlesworth 2000; Rakowski 2016); the significance of the body and the dis-/re-embodiment of work (Kideckel 2008); or the potentialities of new human/non-human entanglements in processes of Anthropogenic ruination (e.g., Tsing 2015).

Against the backdrop of climate crisis, current processes of industrial dismantling are often framed by emphasizing the transition to more environmentally friendly energy sources. While deindustrialization in past decades was mainly based on economic motives, frequently entailing the relocation of industrial production to other countries, the Svea case shows emergent narratives that appeal to the 'green transition' by reframing industrial closures within prefigurative narratives about post-carbon futures, or post-carbon utopia. Studies dealing with energy transition often do so on the basis of facilitating and promoting a 'green shift' (Hughes 2017; Szeman and Boyer 2017), by exploring the ethical questions and dilemmas of transition (High and Smith 2019), or by bringing an explicitly critical perspective to 'green capitalism' and revealing dimensions of marginalization and dispossession (Franquesa 2018; Rajković 2020; Zografos and Robbins 2020). For instance, while wind energy is portrayed as a solution to the environmental ills caused by fossil fuels, Jaume Franquesa (2018) explores the uneven allocation of risks and benefits in the relationship between Spanish regions that produce this energy and those that consume it. Projects in pursuit of renewable energy are thus not spatially neutral but produce differentiated worlds of proclaimed transition: the one of high energy modernity that treats energy as an abstract entity detached from social relations, and the other of those who seek to reproduce their livelihood and autonomy, striving to counter the imposed devaluation of their landscape and the relegation of their people and way of life to the past. This critical emphasis on the production of differentiated spaces and subjectivities through energy shifts is reflected in several related studies, sometimes deploying terms like 'green sacrifice zones' (Zografos and Robbins 2020) to characterize areas prioritized for green energy production at the expense of indigenous and marginalized communities' use of land.

Drawing inspiration from this critical emphasis on the production of differentiated spaces and subjectivities while seeking to develop further the anthropology of energy transition, this article addresses the contradictory processes of the ongoing decarbonization of the economy by discussing the intersection of deindustrialization and ‘energy transition’, and how the transition framework is reshaping the industrialization narrative. I propose that, in order to develop our understanding of ethnographic and analytical dimensions of energy transition, we need to pay more attention to the prefigurative discourses about post-carbon futures by examining how transition is envisioned, narrated, and performed; in other words, how it is ‘brought into being’. Thus, seeking to bridge the anthropology of energy with frameworks that emphasize the narrative and performative dimensions of social life, the article proposes an approach to proclaimed transition that pays attention to negotiations over meanings and matters in ways that go beyond the question of energy as an object of production and consumption, and that facilitates explorations of the various categories, entities, and materials that are (re)produced or (re)defined in energy system shifts.

An emphasis on narrative and performative dimensions may give insight into the prefiguration and transformation of particular categories, entities, and materials, as they are given new importance in attempts to accelerate a proclaimed energy shift or transition. This allows for an exploration of how the dispossession(s), disentanglements, and disembeddedness resulting from proclaimed transition are placed within the more hopeful narrative framings and creations of new connections and possibilities. A focus on such narrative and performative dimensions draws attention to spatial demarcations as well as temporal shifts and delineations of past and future. In this regard, Elizabeth Ferry and Mandana Limbert (2008) analyze how the act of making (and unmaking) a resource produces certain temporal effects, as the products and values created through such ideational systems (or resource imaginations) also frame the past, present, and future in particular ways. I suggest that attention to the narrative and performative dimensions of proclaimed transition can facilitate our understanding of how the prefigurative transition framework is reshaping both temporal and spatial dimensions of the industrialization narrative.

An emphasis on the narrative and performative dimensions of social life has long-ranging antecedents in anthropology and beyond. This relates to the recognition that both material things and social relations gain value and significance from performative acts, not in their existence alone (Malinowski 1922): cultural understandings are constituted by and through everyday practices as well as ritual events (Bourdieu 1996; Turner 1980). A focus on performative aspects of social life emphasizes the social realities that emerge through material-discursive practices or doings, rather than separating models and practices a priori (Butler 2004). For instance, in focusing on how nature is enacted and

performed, Simone Abram and Marianne Lien (2011: 3) suggest an emphasis not simply on how ideas about ‘nature’ are culturally constructed, but on how they are *enacted* and given meaning through intentional performative acts. Approaches to linguistics and discourse have similarly observed how utterances can be more than statements, including verbal acts that are performed and, in their performance, affect change (Austin [1962] 2009). In this regard, performance is key to an understanding of special or ‘critical events’ (Das 1995), that is, events that are not routinized and are publicly staged as “non-reducible emergent” phenomena (Hobart and Kapferer 2005: 11).

Studies of the performative aspects of societal transition and critical events often draw inspiration from the work of Victor Turner. In expanding his interest in rituals of transition, Turner (1980: 150) generalized the notion of ‘ritual process’ through the idea of ‘social drama’, which he conceptualized as predicated on measures taken to heal a breach in the normal affairs of a society. By seeking to draw parallels between rituals of transition and critical events more generally, including in modern societies, he used social drama to explore the use of symbols in situations especially of crisis or conflict, drawing inspiration from performative drama and experimental theater to understand how transition or change is dealt with, staged, and experienced. In his theory about social drama, Turner identified four main phases of public action that characterize societal change: breach, crisis, redress, and reintegration (or, alternatively, permanent separation). Often imbued with a state of liminality, anti-structure, or ambiguity and negotiation over meaning, these phases are followed by the transformation of established norms, roles, and symbols. In the social dramas of modern societies, Turner argued, there are also underlying rhetorical (and aesthetic) models. Understanding such models as cultural schemas, he maintained that they create the backdrop for narratives of social drama and its—in many cases—brutal facts (ibid.: 157). Given current environmental instabilities and green transitions, it is worth examining the narrative forms of our time’s social drama—or, perhaps more precisely—our time’s (often multiple and variegated) dramas of socio-nature, commonly referred to as the Anthropocene.<sup>6</sup>

In the context of climate crisis, the modern narrative of perpetual growth and progress appears to be losing much of its rhetorical conviction, creating the backdrop for Anna Tsing’s (2015) call for ethnographic studies of life and narratives ‘after progress’. Investigating narratives of crisis related to the 2007–2008 financial meltdown, Roitman (2013) proposes, in a similar vein, that an effect of such narrative claims is the imposition of a normative and moral judgment of time. This comes about by displaying a paradox, that is, a disjuncture between what is or what ought or could be, diagnosing the present, and establishing a certain teleology and telos, a new ultimate aim or objective. Such narratives produce meaning, stories, knowledge, and forms of organization at the same time that they contribute to silencing other stories. Now, what

characterizes the narratives of coal mining's closure in Svalbard? And how is nature made central to the drama of transition?

My interest in the narrative and performative dimensions of 'transition' (or what might be called 'post-carbon narratives') is not primarily or specifically related to the transition to a new energy source, but to the ways in which the attempts to initiate such a transition (i.e., away from coal reliance) entail setting in motion various performances and doings intended to facilitate and legitimize transition. Interesting to note in this regard is that there is not yet a decision about the energy source to replace coal in Svalbard. The article emphasizes some of the variegated and multi-layered performative acts through which certain actors attempt to bring 'transition' into being, while seeking to keep in mind energy's role in constituting the experience of modernity and how people view and understand the world (Boyer 2015). My emphasis on how energy transition is narrated, envisioned, and brought into motion through entangled decisions and performative acts is thus intended not only to acknowledge the foundational role of energy to modern society and its entanglements with mindsets, labor, and environmental conditions, but also to give insight into narrative envisionings of resource temporalities, past and future. Based especially on interviews conducted in 2019–2021 with employees—both functionaries and miners—in the coal company Store Norske, the article also draws on fieldwork and interviews with a range of other stakeholders in Longyearbyen, including bureaucrats, entrepreneurs, academics, and journalists.

## **Breaking with Coal—and Creating a Past**

Since the whale and fur animal catch expeditions in the late 1600s, human presence in Svalbard has been part of the Arctic 'scrambles' (Dodds and Nuttall 2016), characterized by the search for resources and scientific discovery. With the location of coal in the early 1900s, mining became central to the establishment of several dispersed settlements in Svalbard. Reminiscent of this early coal mining, the Svea field was established in 1917 by a Swedish company and later bought by the Norwegian company Store Norske Spitsbergen Kullkompani (here referred to as Store Norske or SN)<sup>7</sup> in 1934, two years after the Soviet Union bought Barentsburg. There was no production in Svea between 1949 and 1970, but production started up again and activities were intensified with the initiation of a new mine, Svea Nord, in 2001. The establishment of this new mine carried particular significance for long-term inhabitants in Svalbard because it represented an important Norwegian commitment to the mining industries in the archipelago, providing job opportunities that employed modern mining technologies. From then on, Svea was the major coal production site in Svalbard. In 2014, another new mine was finalized in Svea by Store Norske,



the Lunckefjell mine, with significant investments (1.2 billion kroner) and the most recent technology. This mine, like Svea Nord, came with promises of further work opportunities and growth in Svalbard. Soon after, however, came the fall in oil prices (which also affected coal prices), and production was put on temporary hold. Then in 2017, the Norwegians decided to stop production in Svea for good, despite the recent investments. The closure was accompanied by the government's decision to dismantle and remove the Lunckefjell mine as well as older mining infrastructure. This included the removal of the Svea settlement itself (its roads, buildings, and an airport), except for a few structures built before 1946.<sup>8</sup> The ongoing activities in Svea can be considered a turning point for narratives about Svalbard's transition from a mining community to a showcase for the future. It marks the end of one era and the beginning of another and is part of the official narrative of Svalbard as a site for innovative environmentalist initiatives and solutions. Norwegian authorities not only aim to make Svalbard the world's best-managed wilderness area, but also plan to develop climate-friendly energy solutions for exportation to other Arctic areas.

Not surprisingly, the announcement that the Svea mines would be closed and dismantled created strong reactions among miners. Although Svea was inhabited by miners and not their families, one of the men who used to work there stressed that he and many other miners considered Svea as more than just a workplace, having worked there for many years and feeling attached to the place.<sup>9</sup> In an interview, he recounted his own reactions to seeing the buildings in Svea with all the lights turned off in January 2021, when the dismantling was under way: "It made me envision the life and experiences of all the people who once used to work here." Some miners even compared their reaction to the heartbreak after a love affair: first shock, followed by gradual habituation. For them, dismantling turns Svea from a promise of income and progress into a remnant of the past. One of Store Norske's coordinators in Svea noted that the strong reactions among miners were to be expected, also given uncertainties regarding future jobs. She emphasized that "their work positions have been redefined. Even if their salaries have not been reduced, they receive less dirt surcharge than they did as miners."<sup>10</sup> Nobody will lose their jobs, SN has announced, but for some it has not been clear what this means. It is not necessarily that miners are placed in an economically precarious situation, but that their work had been a source of symbolic and social capital—and that they are losing their place in the constitutive narrative of the archipelago and its future. Miners also describe the loss not just of a workplace and job opportunities but of a place of memories and lived connections. Indeed, the dismantling quite spectacularly marks coal mining as a remnant of history, making the miner a historical figure and bringing into reconsideration various ideas and expectations related to Svalbard as a mining society, mining as highly valued labor, and the miners' central role in the archipelago.

Interestingly, the long-standing coal company SN plays a key role in this transition by redefining its role in the archipelago toward an emphasis on managing properties, logistics, tourism, and testing out new, environmentally friendly solutions in an Arctic climate, such as wind and solar power as well as thermal energy storage. SN is central to the management of mining history in Svalbard and the maintenance of abandoned mining structures and is also responsible for the clean-up in Svea. Mining work itself is thus remade from lived life to memory, and nature in the area is at one and the same time remade as an object of human design, recreated as ‘wild, pristine nature’. The dismantling gives rise to other questions too, for example, how will Norwegian authorities mark national presence now that the mines are closing down?

## **Competing Narratives**

In contrast to other Arctic areas, there is no indigenous population in Svalbard. This and the Svalbard Treaty’s significance for political decision making in the archipelago make questions of inhabitation, presence, and entitlement play out in different ways compared to Arctic areas where indigenous people’s connection to place entails a particular vulnerability yet also specific rights connected to place. Longyearbyen is and has been characterized by high population turnover. There is great variation in how long people remain: some for shorter periods in relation to specific work opportunities, others for several years. Access to housing in Longyearbyen represents a challenge, however, especially for those employed in the private sector, which includes many inhabitants who are not Norwegian citizens. The term *Svalbardianere* (or ‘Svalbardians’) is commonly used when referring to people living in Svalbard. Among both short- and long-term residents—of Norwegian and other citizenship—there are often strong emotions and engagement related to questions of change, community development, and the management of natural areas in the archipelago.

Indeed, miners are not the only inhabitants critical of the decisions about Svea. When the minister of trade and industry visited Longyearbyen in October 2017, both miners and other inhabitants joined in a torchlight procession against the closure. Especially long-term residents express concern that the need to ‘build community’ in Svalbard is not being recognized and that Norwegian authorities are trying to remake the archipelago into some kind of ‘climate model’ at the cost of inhabitants’ need for closely knit relations and other possibilities for use of the landscape. Critics have hence raised questions about the consequences that the closure may have for Longyearbyen, including a potential rise in the already high turnover in the town. There is concern that social bonds in Longyearbyen will be dismantled along with the dismantling in Svea. Ongoing initiatives to expand environmental law and regulation in

Svalbard, illustrated by the inclusion of Svea in the National Park as well as other regulations, suggest an intention to limit movement in Svalbard's grandiose landscape. A widespread opinion—among miners, academics, bureaucrats, and entrepreneurs alike—is that the official narrative about the dismantling in Svea is a 'greenwash' project that serves as a cover-up to conceal other strategic political motives. In other words, it is a way of marking 'Norwegian presence' and keeping other nations from extracting resources in the area.

The clean-up in Svea can thus be considered a pivot point for different narratives about Svalbard. What I term 'the official environmentalist narrative' is certainly contested and criticized, although we should be careful about interpreting this criticism as an expression of 'climate skepticism' among inhabitants, for example, due to a lack of knowledge or awareness concerning the challenges of climate change. In this regard, the lethal avalanche from Sukkertoppen in 2015, which took two lives, was in many ways a watershed moment in Longyearbyen in terms of climate change awareness, and it has since made a clear mark on local agendas. With the social drama playing out in Svea and the narratives created in its wake, different conflict lines come to the surface: between central governance and expressed community needs; between protection of the landscape and options for its use; between Svalbard's identity as a company town and as a tourist attraction. While these conflict lines partly mirror those of the ongoing climate crisis more generally, where different interests and concerns (climate and nature, community, and labor) are often pitted against each other, there are certain factors laid down by the Svalbard Treaty that make the situation in Svalbard unique.

Signed in 1920, the Svalbard Treaty establishes the sovereignty of Norway over the archipelago and gives Norway particular rights and responsibilities in Svalbard as a territory under Norwegian jurisdiction, while a principle of equal treatment provides that all signatory countries have equal rights to live and entertain commercial interests in the archipelago. In principle, then, all such countries can exploit the natural resources. Since the signing of the treaty, human activity in Svalbard has centered around coal mining, with mainly Norway and Russia co-existing as bilateral parties. While at first mining was a goal in itself, it later became part of strategic demarcations of national presence and visibility: first due to the archipelago's significance as an Eastern/Western outpost during the Cold War, and later related to the increased geopolitical significance of the territory. With the phasing out of mining, the strategic goal of marking national presence in Svalbard is at a crossroads—dramatized by the closure in Svea.

Especially since the 1990s, environmental regulation in Svalbard has become increasingly important. It appears to represent not only a protection of the natural environment but also a means of governance (see also Saville 2019). The Svalbard Environmental Law was introduced in 2001 as a commitment to a central principle in the Svalbard Treaty: Norway has a particular responsibility to protect the archipelago's natural environment. This responsibility allows

Norway to mark its national presence by the historically established means of inhabitation and extraction (settlement, mining) and also by environmental management—in other words, it can mark its *presence* by human *absence* (Ødegaard 2021). Tsing (2005) comments on how the protection of nature in areas apparently peripheral to political centers produces particular center-versus-periphery mechanisms. In the so-called global frontiers, the preservation of nature can contribute to maintaining an image of political centers as cosmopolitan. Hence, Tsing argues, political centers are often produced in contrast to the “local people” who are “imagined as objects of scientific inquiry” (ibid.: 140), and forms of governance are considered appropriate for peripheral places or areas that appear to be the frontiers of civilization.

In Svalbard, as ‘nature’ is made into a central entity, both in the demarcation of national presence and in narratives about Svalbard as an environmental showcase, certain expectations are produced of the Svalbardian as a particular kind of person: not an industrial worker or miner, but an environmentalist expert, governable and cosmopolitan, preferably with ties to Norway. In 2021, the government proposed not only an expansion of the environmental law in Svalbard, but also other controversial restrictions that aim to limit political representation and the right to vote for inhabitants without Norwegian citizenship. These initiatives can be seen to align with a particular politics of presence, another kind of settler colonialism—not in the form of a displacement of indigenous populations (Wolfe 2006) but a recolonization of place through environmental management and the accommodation of a particular kind of inhabitant. With the current emphasis on energy transition and climate adaptation, governance in the archipelago is directed toward the promotion of innovation and climate-friendly energy and technologies. Indeed, some of Norway’s biggest companies (Equinor, Telenor, Hydro) and environmental organizations (World Wildlife Fund, Zero) have joined a network to make Svalbard a model society for low-carbon emissions, supported by government policies and implemented partly through SN’s reorientation. So while mining used to be a way to mark ‘Norwegian presence’, that presence is increasingly secured by implementing an environmentally creative and innovative approach: replacing miners and certain forms of labor with work opportunities oriented toward the ‘green shift’. In the following I explore more closely the drama of the dismantling in Svea and more specifically the narratives about nature and landscape that are developed by and through ‘returning to nature’.

## **Reinventing the Narrative—and Nature**

The dismantling of the mining infrastructure in Svea started up in spring 2019 after the miners had left, and the dismantling of the settlement itself began in 2021. The clean-up entails the removal of buildings, furniture, and equipment,

along with various forms of waste material surrounding the settlement, such as chemicals used in mining, fiber residues, plastic pipes, copper wires, and so forth. This requires a systematic effort at identifying, categorizing, and separating various materials as well as the management of machines and building materials for reuse or resale. In this and other ways, Svea is quite literally unmade as a site of coal extraction and thus made part of the narrative of post-carbon transition in Svalbard.

While the dismantling evokes sorrow and disappointment for many, others see it as an opportunity to test out new solutions for the future. For example, Mari Langehaug, the person in charge of resale and recirculation of materials from Svea, said she has tried to use the project as a way of exploring new ways of doing things: “After all, the dismantling is the result of a decision taken higher up in the system and is something we cannot change.” Mari and her colleagues in SN have therefore tried to turn things around from feelings of nostalgia to anticipation about possibilities, as she formulated it. This is facilitated by the emphasis on reuse of materials and equipment from Svea—an initiative undertaken by SN and not a directive from the government. SN has also begun a digital reconstruction of the Svea settlement using extensive photographic material to recreate as much as possible everyday life as it played out. Through these and similar initiatives, different actors seek to compensate for the experience of loss and turn the dismantling into something positive—for example, by emphasizing environmental solutions—while honoring the memory of the mining community. Through the emphasis on reuse and ‘returning’, dismantling is thus connected at manifold levels to the environmentalist narrative about Svalbard in ways that may potentially produce other senses of meaning by ascribing new value to the material masses as well as to the landscape in the area. These initiatives can be seen to constitute a means to establish new meaning in the attempt to legitimize the dismantling by drawing upon central symbols of landscape and nature. In this sense, the emphasis on reuse, resale, and ‘returning’ can be seen as taking the form of a public ritual aimed toward a redefinition of narratives about loss in the move away from coal. Similarly, Anna Storm (2014) has noted that the recovery of post-industrial sites can be conceptualized as a ‘scabbing’ process, an intermediate stage where hierarchies are negotiated, values are defined, and perceptions of waste and future land uses are addressed. Below I explore in more detail how nature and landscape are made into central entities in the public ritual of marking coal mining’s termination. In so doing, I consider how the ‘returning’, as a performative ritual, may entail certain transformative capacities or potentials for generating new relations and meaning and, hence, may represent a pivot point for notions of nature.

The ‘returning’ in Svea is in keeping with the government’s narrative about the dismantling as an environmental project, with the goal of removing traces of human activity to recreate the landscape as it was before mining. According to

Gudmund Løvli, who is responsible for the dismantling on behalf of SN, he and his team have a relatively good overview of how to proceed because they have good photographic documentation from early mining periods, provided by SN and the Norwegian Polar Institute. Against the background of these visual materials, they have made profiles to envision “how things were before,” a kind of stereotype of a historical landscape that provides the reference for the ‘returning’. In this way, they are able to uncover places in the landscape with visible ‘lacks’ as a result of previous removals of land masses (e.g., mountain masses). Thus, ‘returning’ entails not only the identification and separation of different categories of materials and masses but also the mimicry of an imagined landscape as it existed before mining. The idea is to restore the landscape to a previous form from which it can reconstitute itself. Beyond the restoration of material mass (and the removal of human-made structures), they seek to imitate the surrounding landscape and restore the place so that “natural processes may take over.” For instance, the mined caves themselves will be left as they are, for “nature itself to take care of,” as Gudmund formulated it. While the mine entrances have been closed off and covered over, the caves are expected to finally collapse on themselves. The restoration work is thus characterized by a certain continuum, from active intervention to the facilitation of natural processes.

The intention of ‘returning’ can, on the one hand, be seen to reflect the nature-culture dichotomy in modern thinking, that is, the understanding of ‘nature’ as defined by its separation from human activity. For example, now that the Svea area is no longer to be used for resource extraction, it should instead be ‘turned back to nature’. On the other hand, ‘returning’ involves significant human intervention and investment with the intention of actively hiding traces of previous landscape interventions by drawing on visual materials and machine work. The work of ‘returning’ thus entails a level of ecosystem engineering by remaking ‘nature’ as an object of human design—an idea that is reinforced by our time’s discourse of the Anthropocene (Chakrabarty 2009).<sup>11</sup> In this respect, while Latour’s notion of the ‘modern Constitution’ is useful for understanding the distanced scientific view that sees nature as a ‘passive object’, the question about the dismantling and ‘returning’ is somewhat more complex. For instance, the process of ‘returning’ also emphasizes a notion of ‘pristine wilderness’, hence reinvigorating an emphasis in the area on nature’s aesthetics, which has been central to self-identity and self-presentation in Norway and beyond since the 1800s (Slagstad 2018). In this sense, it is not simply ‘nature’ as a static and dualistic cultural scheme that is actualized through the dismantling, but—as underlined by Abram and Lien (2011: 3)—a process by which ‘nature’ is given meaning through active, performative practice. Indeed, through the work of ‘returning’, nature is invigorated not only as ‘pristine wilderness’, in ways recognizable from national romanticism in Norway, but also as a living being to be protected, healed, and revived,

hence affirming the environmentalist narrative about the dismantling—and about Svalbard.

In their work of ‘returning’, spokespersons of SN underline a wish to return material mass to its ‘original’ place in the landscape. They will use stones and other ‘natural mass’ from the place itself to close and cover the mines. This dimension of ‘returning’ is made possible by the fact that all the material mass, also for roads and a landing strip, were taken from the place itself. This material mass can now be ‘returned’, “if not exactly stone by stone, then at least similar to where and how things were before,” Gudmund explained. In this manner, the ‘returning’ is not just a question of mimicking and adjusting to the aesthetics of the original landscape, as there is also an aim to return the very same masses to their original place in the landscape. Material mass is thus enacted as place-specific through a remodeling of ‘place-ly’ masses and structures. It entails a healing of the wounds, so to speak, that have been inflicted on the landscape through mining. In this sense, healing is a central element in the process of ‘returning’. It is a form of healing that acknowledges nature as a living, animate being, appearing to ascribe to nature a sacred power that in the post-industrial Anthropocene—‘after progress’—is to be protected, healed, and revived.

The element of healing is also noted by Caitlynn Becket and Arn Keeling (2019) in their review of mine remediation studies. They argue that mine remediation cannot simply be considered a technical issue: it involves social, political, and temporal dimensions of healing landscape and, they emphasize, community relations. To say that the ‘returning’ in Svea constitutes a public ritual or form of healing does not, however, reflect the choice of words among the actors themselves. Rather, it is my own attempt to understand the dismantling and ‘returning’ as a way of demarcating transition, of showcasing the intention, will, and ability to end coal mining. It is a public ritual, in my understanding, initiated by public actors and performed primarily by employees and former miners of SN, and is made publicly visible through restorations of the landscape, the reuse of infrastructural materials, and, eventually, the digitalization of photographic material. By evoking nature as pristine, vulnerable wilderness, the ‘returning’ entails an attempt—and a potential—to legitimize the closure and dismantling of mines, although the project is still highly contested and opinions are varied. The ‘returning’ nonetheless works as a public ritual by setting in motion various narratives, visions, and expectations, as the Svea settlement is removed and its former workers are forced to abandon the place and reorient their working identities, confirming the new official narrative about Svalbard as a place for environmental solutions, not coal. Conceptualizing the ‘returning’ as public ritual is thus not meant to imply a unifying or all-encompassing understanding or acceptance of its meaningfulness, as I consider this a *public* ritual, initiated by public actors. As noted, there are indeed too many contradictory opinions, processes, scales, actors, and conflicts at work for this to take place as a unified

or unifying transitory narrative. I consider the ‘returning’ as a public ritual in the sense that it points beyond itself and its mere technical dimensions of nature restoration, producing generative capacities and imaginations of prefigurative action and working to demarcate change—a new time/place of possibilities, a post-carbon utopia. As I seek to illustrate, nature and landscape are performed in particular ways in the envisioning of such a transition.

The clean-up work and ‘returning’ can be considered a form of ‘temporal labor’ in that it assigns a particular temporality to the place through the goal of preserving the area for the future by returning it to what it once was. This raises the question about the period of time that the ‘original state’ of the landscape actually refers to, considering that the landscape in Svalbard is not static but in continual change. SN has decided on the period from early mining to 1946. According to Gudmund, this was determined by the stipulation that some of the old roads and buildings from before 1946 be preserved for cultural heritage. At least to a certain extent, SN thus seeks to frame its work according to a particular time reference in an enactment of ‘nature’ as more than just a ‘passive object’, central in Latour’s critique of the modern idea of nature as a universal and place-independent entity. Instead, the ‘returning’ entails an acknowledgment of nature and landscape as place-specific, temporal, and living entities in an attempt to recreate the landscape ‘as it was’. Considering the constantly changing landscape, fjord levels, and erosion in Svalbard, however, critics claim that the ‘returning’ is an impossible task. Despite such limitations, the attempt to recreate a particular landscape temporality of the past is meant to facilitate nature’s own restitution in a long-term perspective, to help it achieve its proper capacity for equilibrium and preservation, so to speak. By the emphasis on ‘turning back to nature’, Svea becomes a site of post-mining utopia and imaginaries of and for a future without coal—while also aiming to restore the place ‘as it was’. As post-mining utopia, the ‘returning’ envisions a desired place that (still) does not exist. It indicates a progressive project and temporality that co-exist in a contradictory relationship with the regressive project of restoring the landscape. The ‘returning’ brings these (apparently) contradictory temporalities together, as environmental solutions are sought by and through dealings with the ruins of progress. It is perhaps this seemingly contradictory co-existence that defines post-carbon utopia and the drama of Anthropogenic socio-natures in Svalbard—that is, human attempts to reconnect with, or recreate, natural wilderness while simultaneously seeking imaginary solutions to continue life as we (or, some of us) know it.

## **Conclusions**

While ‘returning to nature’ in Svea is part of the environmentalist narrative about Svalbard as a site of pristine wilderness, it is also a narrative that may distract



from others. Emphasizing Norway's environmentally responsible closure of mining in the archipelago, this narrative stands in contrast to other examples of Norwegian industrial history and contemporary resource management—such as the 'oil adventure', the Alta controversy<sup>12</sup>—and today's controversial wind power projects that are prompting protests against the downsizing of nature. Not least, it stands in contrast to Equinor's fracking in the United States and the Norwegian authorities' opening of oil and gas explorations in the Barents Sea. Svalbard, envisioned as the outskirts of Norway, is being made into an environmental showcase, and the 'return' in Svea gives new meaning to Norwegian coal mining history after its closure. It may, however, also represent a turning point for a concept of nature—central to Norwegian self-understanding, self-presentation, and outdoor traditions—as a proper living being, which therefore can be healed. This enactment of 'nature' in many ways reinvents nature's role and significance beyond both the distanced scientific view (Latour 1993) and the aesthetic gaze (Slagstad 2018). It is part of a narrative about Svalbard as 'nature's sacred place', one that reflects tendencies elsewhere in the world where related narratives 'after progress' entail similar redefinitions of entities of nature and their status, both juridically and as sacred beings (Ødegaard and Andía 2019).

Slavoj Žižek (2015) has attacked this version of ongoing strategies in the contemporary battlefield over ecology, arguing that the dream "to restore 'natural' balance" is an ideological dead end. Rather, he argues, we should dismiss "Nature as the last figure of the big Other," because the "fiction of a stable nature disturbed by human intervention" is based on a notion of nature's equilibrium that is simply wrong.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the battlefield over ecology and nature continues, not least in the contestations of narratives of green transition. As a study of these narratives reveals, the sanctification of nature or entities of the landscape is a highly uneven tendency in that it includes specifically selected natural areas with particular symbolic, political, and ecological significance. The case of Svea and Svalbard illustrates how these are often selected areas with a potential to generate new meanings in narratives of transition.

The article is proposing an ethnographic-analytical approach to proclaimed energy transition by drawing on anthropological frameworks that emphasize how transition is narrated and performed, bringing the anthropology of energy and transition into dialogue with theories of performance. This emphasis is a way of opening up proclaimed energy transition to an ethnographic exploration and analysis of the narratives, performances, and public rituals through which transition is envisioned, contested, and brought into being. Hence, I have discussed the dismantling in Svea as a social drama of our times, marking a breach in industrial history and a point of departure for narratives about Svalbard as a special place concerning both environmentalism and questions of 'Norwegian presence'.

Several actors, among them Store Norske, have taken initiatives to compensate for the experience of loss by turning the focus toward an emphasis on reuse

and environmental solutions. By analyzing narrative and performative aspects of the dismantling and conceptualizing it as a social drama, I have explored these and other initiatives as a way of mediating between different positions in a critical situation through attempts to give new meanings to the closure, thereby creating new narratives. ‘Nature’ is drawn upon as a central symbol in the attempts to redefine narratives about Svalbard. Against this backdrop, I have argued that the ‘return to nature’ can be considered a public ritual where nature is made into a central entity in the narrative about, and the legitimization of, the mine closures. These enactments of ‘nature’—as an entity to be protected and healed—are part of the remaking of Svalbard into a showcase for environmental solutions. In a mining settlement, in one of the world’s most inhospitable areas, nature is to be ‘returned’ and ecological balance recreated through human design. It is a public ritual marking the transition to a proclaimed post-mining era in which Svalbard is cast not just as a site for innovation and expert knowledge, but as a place for the healing of nature.

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## Notes

1. The government's announcement can be found at <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/vil-avvikle-kolverksemda-i-svea-og-lunckefjell/id2574295/>.
2. Longyearbyen was established by and named after a mine owner and mayor from the US, John Longyear, who started coal mining in Longyearbyen in 1906.
3. Other instances include the restoration of the Hjerkins military firing range in the Dovre Mountains and the leveling to the ground of mining structures in Svalbard by British-Canadian forces in 1938–1939 to prevent exploitation by Hitler (Fløgstad 2007: 90). According to the Svalbard Environmental Law, all installations shall be removed after an industrial venture has ceased with its activities, and the area shall be returned to its “original appearance” (paragraph 64). The authorities involved interpreted these laws in the strictest sense in their decisions about Svea. See <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/2001-06-15-79>.
4. Further, in the 2022 state budget the government outlined the framework for a new energy plan for Longyearbyen, with the premise that renewable energy sources will be introduced as soon as possible and become the main energy supply. See the announcement by the Longyearbyen Local Board at <https://www.lokalstyre.no/energiomstilling.509607.no.html>.
5. More details about the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration can be found at <https://www.decadeonrestoration.org/>.
6. Povinelli (2017: 172) suggests that the Anthropocene might be usefully considered a ‘geontological’ drama, not for its disclosure of the intimacy of bios to geos but by virtue of its redramatization of this interface in terms of the looming threat of human extinction.
7. Coal mining has been the core activity of Store Norske since its inception, in addition to the management of state land and buildings. The company is owned by the Norwegian state.
8. For cultural heritage purposes, it was decided to preserve ruins and structures from World War II as well as from early mining and overwintering catch expeditions. In Svea, SN has therefore had to adjust the restoration of nature to accommodate the preservation of a few pre-1946 structures.
9. As Svea is accessible from Longyearbyen only by plane, boat, or scooter, miners used to live in Svea during the working weeks, with some commuting between Svea and Longyearbyen, and others to the mainland.
10. Dirt surcharge refers to an addition to the salary meant to compensate for the inconvenience of having to remove dirt and wash (hands, face, clothes) both during and after work hours due to dirt exposure while working. In everyday usage, though, the term is used to refer to all categories of addition to salary meant to remunerate for inconvenient aspects of (physical) work in the Norwegian system (e.g., transport of work equipment, exposure to substances like oil and grease, etc.).
11. In this discourse, humans are placed at the center of a new geological period as result of human influence on ecosystems, that is, as a new ‘force of nature’ (Caro et al. 2012).

12. The Alta controversy refers to massive protests in the 1970s–1980s against the construction of a hydroelectric power plant in the Alta River, which would inundate Sami villages.
13. This is not the place for a discussion of Žižek’s point, but it is worth noting that while politicians in South America—and beyond—may well emphasize a holy equilibrium of Mother Nature in the simplified way he suggests, such an emphasis nonetheless misses the complex ways in which local populations in South America relate to natural surroundings as sentient beings (see Ødegaard and Andia 2019).

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