Janice Cavell has spent a career thinking deeply about events in history concerning the Arctic. Her collected documents on Canadian External Relations dedicated to the Arctic from 1874–1949 is a case in point.¹ In her writing Cavell unpacks mainly primary documents, helping readers understand the context in which they were written. Understanding context is the goal of her new, article, “Dividing the Northern World.”

Cavell notes that the standard questions about the Alaskan Purchase by the United States from Russia in 1867 are: why did Russia want to rid itself of the territory, and why did the United States decide to acquire it (304)? The usual answers are that the Crimean War had bled Russia financially,² or that Russia’s defeat required it to retrench,³ or that it could not fathom negotiating with Britain, Russia’s enemy, for the territory’s sale.⁴ But Cavell instead wants to understand Article I, which specified the western and northern boundaries of the purchase. It is the northern section “without limitation” that is particularly noteworthy for Cavell (305). Many of us would not give it a second thought; the lines on today’s map are surely what they were back then, and the reasons for the phrasing “without limitation” are not likely to change the maps. Cavell notes, however, that no one in the literature has studied this unusual clause in particular.

The reference to the western boundary that ran due north without limitation is the genesis of her investigation. As Cavell suggests, the lack of clarity meant that the fate of newly discovered islands could belong to either the United States or to Russia (305). The boundaries were also interpreted differently by the United States, which eschewed the sector principle, versus Russia and later Canada, which subscribed to the

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theory. The sector principle divided the lands and seas in the Arctic up to the North Pole using meridian lines as boundaries creating pie shaped wedges of territory and seas that "belonged" to the state. Any undiscovered islands found within the sector would belong to the state in question. A useful article on the topic is Leonid Timtchenko’s “The Russian Arctic Sectoral Concept: Past and Present,” which has several references to the Russian thinking that are pertinent to this review. Of particular note is the reference to a US position on the sector principle. He writes, “The American jurist D.H. Miller thought that the sectoral division of the Arctic between the three great northern states, Canada, the United States, and the Soviet Union, would be very convenient. According to him, the legal basis for it could be found in the 1825 Russian-British Treaty about the Bering Sea and the 1867 Russian-American Treaty about the sale of Alaska. Miller…referred to the ‘hinterland’ theory or ‘territorial propinquity’.” In the end, however, the US position in 1867 resembled the sector argument even though the official position was to reject it.

Cavell maintains that a review of the primary sources, and especially the scientific literature of the time, suggests that US Secretary of State William Seward “indeed wished to extend the allocation line as far as might be necessary to secure any unknown islands north of Alaska” (307). Support for an open polar sea policy is the only explanation for Seward’s position. He, of course, was not alone. Cavell cites several scientific voyages, the searches for the ill-fated Franklin expedition, the discovery of Spitsbergen, the power of wealthy men, and even family connections as contributions to the validity of the open polar sea theory—he idea that the Arctic Ocean, at its centre, was ice-free and therefore, navigable. Indeed, the former editor of the Westminster Review argued that transpolar voyages to British Colombia could become “commonplace” (318).

For me, however, it is this northern boundary that is the ‘folly’ for which Seward is so famous. Of course, his reasons for purchasing Alaska were myriad and beneficial for the United States, but the lack of considered debate in either the Cabinet or the Senate concerning the boundary line was not the norm, and the language in the treaty has complicated US diplomatic efforts ever since.

Cavell notes that Russian leaders’ understanding of the boundaries was based more on a concern with ensuring that northern outposts off the American shore should be ceded to the United States along with Alaska to avoid future conflicts (321). But Russia too was keen to leave the northern point ambiguous, without an end point. Among Russian motives for promoting the northward extension was the belief that unknown islands existed north of Siberia. US whalers were active in this area, and Cavell explains that the evidence suggests that the Russians were worried that an American ship would find new land, leading to a US claim. Just months after the treaty was signed, in the summer of 1867, an American captain sighted Wrangel Island (305-306, 315, 326-327), thus confirming the prescience of the Russian leaders’ interpretation. Additionally, and mutually beneficially, an agreement between the United States and Russia would cut out Great Britain (322). Indeed, Cavell argues that the ambiguity and lack of a northern limit likely came from Russia, but “the language was provided by the U.S. side” (322).

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7 Timtchenko “The Russian Arctic Sectoral Concept,” 32.
The ultimate, intended effect of the 1867 line was to separate Asia from America. In other words, any new Arctic islands that lay north of Asia would become Russian, and the others would belong to the United States. In this way, the Northern World would be divided, its future no less than a “destiny between two eagles” (326). If there was indeed an open polar sea, any future islands discovered would be strategically valuable, as future generations of leaders mused.

Cavell is careful and diligent not to ascribe more to the context than the documents will allow. At the end of the essay, she notes that the scientific theorizing at the time had much more of a role to play in the terms of the treaty than has otherwise been appreciated. The circumpolar north “had a place in geopolitical imaginaries of the Great Powers,” she argues (328).

As Cavell rightly points out, history matters, and it can have long-lasting influence. I am not convinced, however, with the argument that “ownership of the Arctic basin’s resources is under dispute and a transpolar route may become reality” (328). Of course it all depends on what one means by “dispute.” There is certainly a lack universal interpretation of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, (UNCLOS), but there are international processes underway (the UN’s Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf, for example) that may or may not result in future diplomatic spats. Similar to the Alaska Purchase, agreements and the context in which they are negotiated can help to buffer competition. As for the transpolar route, should that come to pass, low-lying states like the Netherlands and Singapore are unlikely to see it come to fruition before their climatic destruction—hence their keen participation in the Arctic Council.

Cavell has once again brought new evidence to a historical event because of her indefatigable curiosity. She is a foremost authority on Arctic historical texts. Who among us would launch into such an exhaustive study based on the phrase “without limitation” which is mentioned in a treaty? I would certainly not have done so, but that might be my bias as a political scientist whose scholarship is rooted in the now, and who clearly needs to ask “why” more often, as Cavell does.

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