Notes on a caribou hearing: spatial marginalization through participatory democracy in western Nunavut

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Adaptation is integral to Inuit culture. In a rapidly changing Arctic beset by resource degradation and climate change, the 18-year-old Nunavut territory is experimenting with new norms of political engagement. How the Nunavummiut participate in decision-making – and their access to participation – will determine their environmental and cultural futures. Public hearings, as a key tool of community engagement, uphold the processes and tools of deliberative participation, but the power relations entwined in space are often unheeded. The spatiality of participation can serve to marginalize those publics most affected by environmental policy.

Decisions on participation time-space affect access materially because of who can be there in place to participate, and socially because of the place characteristics of participation. In June 2016, the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board held caribou hearings in the territory’s western political and economic hub of Cambridge Bay, just before the predicted seasonal sea ice melt. Inuit hunters and trappers wrestled with their roles as invited participants gathered in a central place. They stepped outside the agenda to voice grievances regarding the location, timing and participation constraints of the hearings; they expressed anger at being out of place, cleaved from the support of their communities. In situ observation of the hearings helped capture a thick description of aural and visual cues in environmental communication that were inevitably absent from the text of transcripts made publicly available on request afterward. At the caribou hearings, spatial marginalization emerged as a dark side to participatory democracy.