

Ilan Kelman (ed), *Arcticness: Power and Voice from the North*, London: UCL Press, 2017. ISBN: 9781787350151 (cloth); ISBN: 9781787350144 (paper); ISBN: 9781787350137 (open access pdf)¹

The Arctic is changing—physically, politically, and socially. That much seems certain. Change has been the order of the day for decades now, and with change comes anticipation. An ever growing list of interested parties within and beyond the region are wanting to position themselves as “Arctic” or to mobilise Arctic imaginaries to argue that they have the region’s best interest at heart. As such, there is critical purchase to thinking through the situational politics of geographical imaginaries which are formed with reference to material, cultural, and emotional “qualities” positioned as uniquely “Arctic”. How such imaginaries and identities come into being, how they are mobilised, and to what effect remain key to making sense of the North. Resting somewhere between a popular and an academic account, this edited volume promises an interrogation of “Arcticness” as an idea, a concept, an identity, and a mode of being. Following some thoughtful reflections in the foreword by Ingrid Medby, the editor, Ilan Kelman, opens up the structuring question which is meant to guide the interventions in this volume, namely whether there is “anything special, specific, exceptional, or unique about the Arctic” (p.1). Is the term “Arcticness” meaningful and, if so, what are its defining characteristics? The answer to this question is sought from across disciplinary divides and literary genres in an attempt to include the many colours of what Kelman refers to as the “Arctic rainbow” (p.2).

The book is divided into three sections: “Arcticness Emerging”; “Arcticness Living”; and “Arcticness Futures”. The first section is opened by Heather Sauyaq Jean Gordon’s brief reflection on her personal experience negotiating her own Arctic identity as an Iñupiaq woman and academic through the craft of beading. This is followed by Larissa Diakiw’s graphic novel-format essay on the topic of the horrors revealed by Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Chapter 2) and Funsho Martin Parrott’s Haiku poem which

¹ Available online here: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/ucl-press/browse-books/arcticness> (last accessed 29 March 2018).

raises the topic of a fragile, yet unforgiving Arctic environment scarred by a warming climate (Chapter 3). Breaking from these artistic interventions, Chapter 4, by Rachel Tilling and colleagues, offers a review of different radar technologies used to document climate change through the observation of changes in ice cover. The section is closed by Patrizia Isabelle Duda's critical reflection on the politics of representation—one of the more explicit engagements with the term Arcticness, here presented as a politically potent spatial discourse.

The five chapters of the second section—"Arcticness Living"—are no less wide-spanning. Anne Merrild Hansen uses her own social network to gauge the terms and ideas that people who identify as "Arctic" use to frame their Arcticness (Chapter 6). Marius Warg Næss offers a comparative anthropology of reindeer herding in Norway and Tibet—and a cautionary word on essentialising spatial identities (Chapter 7). After a poetic interlude by Kelman, Chapter 8, by Darren McCauley and colleagues, proposes an Arctic energy justice framework rooted in cosmopolitan philosophy and the conviction that non-human voices should not be omitted from such debates. James Van Alstine and William Davies conduct a comparative analysis of resource frontier narratives in Greenland and Uganda (Chapter 9), and, finally, Nikolas Sellheim examines international legal constructions of Arcticness in relation to the hunting of marine mammals.

The third and final thematic section—"Arcticness Futures"—comprises only two chapters followed by Kelman's editorial conclusion and an afterword by retired scientist Vladimir Vasiliev. In Chapter 11 Nadia French and colleagues examine cultural, social, and political changes happening across the Russian and Canadian Arctics. Chapter 12, by Emma Wilson and colleagues, offers an intriguing discussion of the anticipatory logics which often guide how the region and its futures are perceived, and examine the very real material effects of promises which fail to materialise.

Because of an expressed desire to explore, and thus to retain a sense of openness as to what might emerge, each individual author is left with the task of making sense of the term Arcticness and to draw out what it means to them—both personally and from a professional or academic standpoint. Most of the chapters are centred around specific empirical content

derived from the authors' research or lives. Across reflections by writers with emotional and cultural ties to places in the Arctic, Arcticness is framed as an identity defined by shared experiences of living in a Northern environment. Here, Arcticness is a feeling of belonging embodied in practices such as eating local foods or in traditional crafts and the materiality of cultural artefacts as they travel and emerge as points of connectivity and markers of meaning within and beyond the region. A markedly different rendition is offered by authors who position themselves as "external" to the region and who, amongst other things, offer a scientist's perspective. Here, Arcticness has to do with the materiality of landscape and the methods that scientists use to observe and quantify an environment in flux. Other chapters directly critique the notion, pointing to the deep-seated political connotations of any conception of Arcticness. Arctic imaginaries have, as several chapters point out, been mobilised as concepts of "exotification" (p.73) which carry tendencies to romanticise the Arctic region in manners that are potentially problematic from a postcolonial standpoint.

As a collection, this volume offers an eclectic mix of chapters spanning artistic renditions, personal narratives, and socio-political analyses, as well as scientists' takes on what it means to "know" Northern environments. Hence, one could argue that the book attempts to represent a sort of "microcosm" of the many different ways in which the Arctic is encountered, approached, and made sense of by scholars from different disciplinary, social, and national backgrounds. The book could, as such, be seen as indicative of what has become an oft cited truism repeated across Arctic literatures, namely that "the Arctic" is inherently multiple. Nonetheless, one edited volume cannot cover everything connected to its theme, nor is this the purpose of the book despite its wide-reaching scope. An aspect which could have received more attention in a collection aiming to explore the "essence of being Arctic" is the historical-geographical dimension of how the region has been rendered known and knowable. Current narratives of what constitutes "Arcticness" are arguably entangled in longer historical trajectories—even if some contemporary orientations seem to rest on an assumption that the region has only recently become a site of geopolitical interest and contestation due to the melting of polar ice.

Inviting readers to think across a set of narratives which are perhaps not commonly read in conjunction or as a collective is an interesting experiment. Certainly, inter- and cross-disciplinarity is key to making sense of the Arctic. Yet I was left with the feeling that for this experiment to work, a stronger sense of what is gained from bringing all these ideas together needed to be articulated. For example, it struck me as peculiar to have a review of radar technologies follow on from three artistic interventions without an explicit attempt at establishing synergy between them. In terms of the book's objective of exploring what might constitute "Arcticness", such provocation to consider the personal, the scientific, the political, and the cultural as constituent parts of the same whole could be potentially productive. Indeed, I share the opinion that if such a thing as a "quality of being Arctic" could ever be drawn out, it might emerge in part from the tensions between such diverse narratives. That being said, it is also my opinion that addressing these tensions in a more explicit manner would have been beneficial in terms of making the overall logic and critical purchase of the collection stand out more clearly. The overarching point that the Arctic is inherently multiple and complex might otherwise come across as somewhat banal. Indeed, the editor himself points out, in the book's conclusion, that this statement is likely shared by all regions. Furthermore, as Kelman goes on to note, a "danger coalesces of Arcticness being everything and nothing" (p.151). In the end, the question of the power of Arcticness as an idea or a concept is left open. Embracing the impossibility of pinning down the complexities of an "Arctic essence", the concluding chapter encourages the reader to draw their own lines of connectivity across and between the seemingly disparate narratives presented in this book.

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