Edited by
Ilan Kelman

ARCTICNESS

Power and Voice
from the North

UCLPRESS

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Preface – ‘Arcticness and change’

Ingrid A. Medby, UCL Department of Geography

Like a teacher’s red pen, the jagged line underneath my writing gave me an uneasy feeling. I tried to ignore it, but the overly conscientious primary school pupil in me would not let it rest: The word processor indicates a spelling error; it’s unacceptable to continue, my own internal voice nagged.

‘Arcticness’ is a term, though; and a highly useful one – as I told my word processor with the click of the mouse, ‘Add to Dictionary’. Adding the suffix ‘-ness’ denotes a state or quality – in this case, the quality of being Arctic.

For those of us interested in the Arctic and, in particular, how people relate to it, a word for the ‘quality of being Arctic’ is a potential cause for agonisingly many jagged red lines. Although my software clearly disagreed, I am, of course, not the first to see the need for it – something to which this book bears testament. As the world is increasingly looking northwards to a region undergoing rapid change, identifying *what*, *who* or *where* has the ‘quality of being Arctic’ is high on the agenda; for actors from both near and far, their ‘Arcticness’ becomes a potential asset as they position themselves for Arctic futures.

But what does it really mean, ‘Arcticness’; what are Arctic ‘qualities’? Unlike placating a spell-checker, defining what ‘is’ Arctic (or feeling, believing, thinking, imagining that someone/something/somewhere is) is not as straightforward as it may seem. The region itself is defined in numerous ways depending on topic, context and even interest; and so, determining the *qualities* of a region that cannot itself be fully determined provides a challenge.

Given that claiming an Arctic identity may serve an instrumental purpose – for example adding to political actors’ or private stakeholders’ credibility – the ambiguity of Arcticness is also in part why the concept is so fascinating, not to mention so *important* to explore. In relations between the Arctic and non-Arctic, the claim to Arcticness potentially

becomes a political one; indeed, it may decide who falls on either side of Arctic and the prefixed '*non-*'. In turn, Arcticness becomes a question of who holds rights, who holds responsibilities, and who holds 'true' knowledge of a space in rapid flux ...

Arcticness does not only matter for political decisions and resource extraction; it seems to have become exotic, interesting – it *sells*. With northern lights tours and midnight sun cruises, Arcticness is increasingly commodified. With 'Arctic' labels on anything from bottled drinks to cleaning companies, it has become a brand so ubiquitous that it is now simply part of the everyday.

This has not always been the case. Having grown up in Northern Norway, the change is clear – not *just* climatic or economic change in the region, but a change of label. What was only a decade ago Northern Norway is now frequently referred to as 'the High North' [*nordområdene* in Norwegian, translating literally as 'the northern areas'] or the Arctic. A northern identity may now be an Arctic identity – just like our tap water is now 'Arctic water'.

Rebranding the north as 'Arctic' is not for those *in* the Arctic, however, but rather for the outside spectator – tourist, visitor, investor or politician. Speaking of what is Arctic or not, who is Arctic or not, is hardly consequential when you are *there* – it is simply less relevant, less interesting, less exotic. Nevertheless, it is primarily northern communities who face the challenging consequences as the 'frozen' Arctic thaws. What is important to remember here is that these communities have never themselves been 'frozen' (in time), but have always been evolving, moving, changing. Saying that voices from the Arctic are important is not enough – they must also be *listened* to, and finally, engaged in conversation. That is, voices (and ears!) from north and south, east and west, are *all* important in this process of change. Just like a 'new' label, an identification as or with something comes about through negation; and so, Arcticness too takes on meaning through relations and encounters with the constitutive other.

Perhaps then this is more than simply an exercise of marketing or rhetoric; perhaps our concept of 'Arcticness' itself is undergoing change? Could it be that a region which has historically been seen as far away – peripheral to the centre of society – is now being 'drawn closer' due to its accelerating importance to questions of climate change and globalisation?

Interrogating *why* something is now considered 'Arctic' is highly important; as is attention to *who* claims so, or who is now themselves considered Arctic: these are questions of power – as noted, power both

to speak and to act. But more than this, Arcticness under change may point to a more profound change in our relations to a region, to ourselves and to each other. It may be symptomatic of ever more people feeling that the Arctic *matters* – also to those living far south of the Arctic Circle. As the adage goes, what happens in the Arctic does not stay in the Arctic; and vice versa, Arctic change does not have its origins in the Arctic either. In other words, it points to a realisation of our interconnectedness – one that has always been there, of course, but which is now far more visible and *felt* thanks to satellites, the internet, travelling and globalisation writ large.

In the end, Arcticness *cannot* be easily defined; no more than the region itself can be neatly placed within latitudinal lines. It is as much about relationality – both at the level of diplomatic negotiations and that of daily life. And indeed, Arcticness perhaps *should not* be limited to semantic boundaries, should not be rendered static on the pages of a dictionary. Rather, it should be kept open – open to interpretation by those to whom it feels relevant.

The above ‘challenge’ of determining Arctic qualities is also an opportunity: An opportunity to think beyond boundaries – or *without* them altogether; to think and imagine anew for alternative ways of understanding. The Arctic is, as the following chapters will discuss, undergoing profound change due to climate change, globalisation and many other influences – and so is, and should, our concept of Arcticness. It is through interaction, through relating to each other, that the ‘ness’ – the quality of *being* anything at all – takes on meaning.