

INTRODUCTION  
TO SPECIAL ISSUE

# Arctic dreams

*Histories uncovering the imagined, the forgotten  
and the hidden Arctic*

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Imaginations are often formed on partial knowledge, which leaves room for speculation and fantasy. Familiar places and practices do not as easily lend themselves to that kind of activity. Over time, for most people, the Arctic has been an unfamiliar place and therefore Arctic dreams have become an ingredient in ideas of the North. The partial knowledge of the Arctic has increasingly been produced by scientific exploration, which relies heavily on technology. Couched in the language of science, this partial knowledge also became part of the dreams of the Arctic.

An old Arctic dream is to transcend the region and find a passage through the cold, shortcutting the longer routes of global trade. A recent climate-change version of this suggests that as sea ice melts around the North Pole, shipping will increase manyfold, building on the understanding that melting ice is straightforward to maneuver, and that shipping technology will prevail. Indeed, we have seen increased shipping, however, there is nothing inevitable in the use of the opening waters of the Arctic Sea. Free passages across the pole year-round is still a projection, a dream – or a nightmare. For some, it promises easier trade and increased possibility of fossil fuel extraction. For others, it means continued stress for the climate system and a higher risk of an environmental catastrophe, should an oil tanker sink in these cold waters.

A key component in this trope is that it pulls a perceived periphery to the center of attention. This also occurs in many introductions to academic Arctic histories. The Arctic's geographical location has inspired researchers to view it not merely as remote and distant, but as a pivotal junction for global developments in recent years. The Arctic readily emerges as a focal point where both social and environmental changes are more

pronounced than elsewhere, and recently this has been exacerbated by the observation that the pace of Arctic warming is accelerating.<sup>1</sup> This prominence of the Arctic viewed as the node of global developments arises from factors such as the impact of climate change, fragile supply chains, the limited availability of resources, and the heightened convergence of interests at this central global nexus.<sup>2</sup> Often history is left out.

However, perhaps an even more common academic introduction is when history is at the forefront, but in the shape of an anecdote or statement made by a historical Arctic explorer. The historical anecdotes often serve to capture the reader's attention, directing it towards the history of Arctic scientific exploration and the immediate sense of awe and trepidation associated with encountering the Arctic environment. For instance, the cultural historian Shane McCorristine opens his book *Spectral Arctic* on phantasms experienced during Arctic scientific expeditions with the impressions of Norwegian late-19<sup>th</sup> century explorer Fridtjof Nansen frozen aboard the ship *Fram* in 1893.<sup>3</sup> We are expected to feel their awe and also to feel astonishment before their suffering for science.<sup>4</sup>

There are many other entrance points to writings on the Arctic. And we should pay attention to them, because the way we approach the Arctic often includes our imaginations of it, which in turn shape our focus and determine what remains concealed from our view.<sup>5</sup> The geographer Klaus Dodds has argued that we should speak of "multiple Arctics", also implying that there are frictions between the ways Arctic people, environments, resources, and cultures are imaged and sought to be governed.<sup>6</sup> In this special issue, examining Arctic dreams, and the cosmos of worlds encompassed within the overarching "Arctic" label, perspectives from literature and history, history of science and technology, visual and cultural studies, as well as anthropology and geography come together. These diverse disciplines have coalesced around the central theme of dreams and imagination, core interests of the field of the history of ideas. Read in relation to history of ideas, the contributions remind us of the fluidity of concepts and even places, and of the continued importance of context.<sup>7</sup>

In the Arctic, the encounter between realities and imaginations bears the weight of a historical legacy characterized by asymmetrical power dynamics, and the contemporary stage for such encounters is shaped by the paths wrought by historical interactions. The Arctic has a historical legacy of colonialism and extractivism that shaped the aspirations and apprehensions associated with the region. The history of Arctic discovery and exploration, led by those from distant places, has imbued the Arctic with a "longstanding significance as a critical and exceptional space of modernity", according to the introduction to a recent edited volume.<sup>8</sup> This Arctic space has been predominantly envisioned through the perspec-

tives of exploration technologies, which enabled those from afar to map, evaluate, and study Arctic cultures and environments. Before we explore how the Arctic is and has been imagined, we need to reflect on understandings of the Arctic, and historical experiences that have molded the Arctic into a canvas for imaginations that still remains evident through the outsider's perspective today.

There are many ways to define what and where the Arctic is. As historian John McCannon has pointed out, there are even multiple poles, such as the geographic and the magnetic, which illustrates how we want to define a central point of the Arctic as much as we feel the need to define its outer boundaries.<sup>9</sup> The Arctic is home to diverse indigenous communities that have been sustained for centuries by traversing Arctic landscapes and following mammals on land and sea that connect different Arctic regions. From the Chukchi and Nenets in Siberia, the Sámi people in northern Norway, Sweden, and the Kola Peninsula, the Inuit in Canada and Greenland, to the Inupiat in Alaska, there are many more peoples with distinctive ways of living in and with the Arctic environments, and their own ways of imagining the places they live in.<sup>10</sup>

This special issue, however, is mainly about the dreams and fears *from afar*, from those who visited the Arctic, from those who researched, explored, and illustrated the Arctic, and from those who tried to govern the Arctic. History of science and ideas focuses our attention on the historical and cultural contexts in which these ideas emerged and circulated, as well as the aspects of science and technology that enabled them to be elevated into national visions or contributed to challenging them. This lens also includes a focus on the ways in which knowledge is produced, legitimized, and mediated. The long history of these distant imaginings, characterized by the intersection of new ideas, technologies, and knowledge, is only touched upon in this special issue. It stretches back to Norwegian hunters and whalers in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the Basque whalers of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the Russian, European, and later American fur traders and merchants who developed a thriving maritime trade by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, extending the reach of the desires of others into the heart of Arctic environments.<sup>11</sup>

The formation of states and empires between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, fueled their will to project their power on peoples and resources in their peripheries, and their northern frontiers. Commenting on the history of global connections that have intersected in the Arctic, Jonathan D. Greenberg, scholar of international law, described this dream of the Arctic frontier, of Ultima Thule. Dating back to ancient Greece and being revived in early-modern Europe, Ultima Thule stood for imaginaries of an abundant, mystical place in the North: “European scientists, adventurers,

mercantilists, and mercenaries dreamed of navigating polar seas, exploring Northern geographies, reaching the North Pole itself, and conquering Arctic territories for their king or state”.<sup>12</sup> Explorations targeted peoples, their resources and land, but were also, as indicated above, about seeking routes *through* the Arctic. Attempts to find the Northwest and Northeast Passage date back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century and involved seafaring nations for centuries to come.<sup>13</sup> Again, it was the imagination of how one could traverse the Arctic, what obstacles and opportunities it presented, that served as the driving force behind these endeavors.

While this period was marked by the exploration and exploitation of resources that linked indigenous peoples to Western and European patterns of consumption, the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries saw the manifestation of imperial visions in the Arctic. What had once been accomplished by shipping routes and mission posts was now manifesting on land as railroads and mines. From northern Sweden to Siberia, the North was proclaimed to be the “land of the future”,<sup>14</sup> or the “land of tomorrow”.<sup>15</sup> During this critical period, distant dreams gave rise to production centers that catered to the desires of the imperial center, and all too often, they evolved into focal points of oppression for indigenous peoples. The Arctic was perceived as an empty space to be filled and a barren landscape to be developed through the means of modern technology. This development, however, was uneven, as only some resources were economically interesting. As a result, only few peoples, places and connections became highly visible in the imagination of statesmen, financiers, and traders. Other places, and connections between places like migration routes, and communities, were deemed expendable. Researchers have pointed to the striking similarities between these imaginaries of Arctic exploration and the present-day visions of a developed, high-technology and green-energy North.<sup>16</sup>

Against the backdrop of technological progress and industrialization at the turn to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Arctic environments revealed their vulnerability to the outside observer and visitor, and the allegedly “pristine” Arctic emerged as a sight to be preserved, either physically or in photographs and illustrations. This technology produced not only replications of what was found in the Arctic, but actively contributed to shaping imaginations, too. Art historian Marthe T. Fjellestad points out how late 19<sup>th</sup>-century expedition photography showed men in front of their exploration ships on a vast, barren coast. These motifs soon gave way to images of national flags in empty landscapes, emphasizing national claims to land and resources, and finally to the advent of aerial photography in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which depicted the vastness of mountain ranges and glaciers without visible human settlement.<sup>17</sup> These impressions remained

powerful frames in the imagination of outsiders throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They proved remarkably resistant.

What, then, happens when the lived reality of humans and non-humans intersects with the imagination of others in the multiple arenas of the Arctic, and when contrasting dreams are enacted in opposition to one another, and when they come into contact? In her reflections on learning, Marie Louise Pratt originally defined the notion of a contact zone as the “social space where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical power relations”.<sup>18</sup> More importantly, Pratt reflected on the contact zone as a space where long-established, learned ways of imagining a coherent and homogenous community disintegrated, and instead, everything, even imaginations were “received in radically heterogeneous ways”.<sup>19</sup> A contact zone is a space where the boundaries separating holders of power from those suppressed, and observers from those being observed, erode. The writing about Arctic nature, societies and cultures, most poignantly illustrated in Barry Lopez’s *Arctic Dreams* of 1986, establishes its own contact zone that invites its readers to rethink their own imaginations of the Arctic.<sup>20</sup> In *Arctic Dreams*, Lopez reflected on his experiences as a biologist in the Canadian Arctic in the 1980s, weaving together descriptions of the landscape with his contemplations on people’s desires and dreams tied to the Arctic.<sup>21</sup> In many ways, one can assume, Lopez’s *Arctic Dreams* gained recognition because it profoundly challenged the prevailing outsiders’ vision of the North during the late 1980s as a desolate and uninhabited expanse, characterized as simple, motionless, and frigid. Instead, Lopez emphasized the movements, rhythms, and nearly imperceptible sensitivities of life, soil, and plants in response to the gradual rhythms of darkness and light, freezing and thawing.

Since then, multiple disciplines engaged with Arctic issues have shifted their focus towards human activities and cultures. With growing awareness of the complex, multi-layered, and multifaceted nature of Arctic regions, societies, and cultures, and the many hidden histories obscured by common Western and European historical labeling and past historiography of the Arctic, many scholars today are conscious of the importance of carefully naming the Arctic region, moving away from the notion of a singular “North” or a unified Arctic. However, there still persists a grand narrative influenced by natural scientific language, frequently situated within the context of envisioning the development of Arctic resources and societies in the future.<sup>22</sup>

In this context, the value of approaches relating to history of science and ideas lies in their capacity to engage in critical reflection upon underlying assumptions, values and ways of knowing the world. Therefore, this special issue aims to bring together various perspectives on the Arctic,

encompassing the imaginations of the region and the Arctic dreams being both forged, marketed, and shattered. As evident from the contributions in this issue, the imaginations pertaining to the Arctic, the imaginations of Arctic people, spaces, and environments themselves constitute a contact zone, because the dreams and imaginations studied in the articles tell of a reciprocal influence between those envisioning and those being envisioned, including human and animal.

The collection starts off with a special piece in which Julie Michelle Klinger, Mia Bennett, Ria-Maria Adams, and Eleanor S. Armstrong take their own research experience as a point of departure, moving from the old center to this new focus and back, and reflecting upon the very act of being a visiting researcher to the Arctic. Highlighting the processes of assigning meaning to space and spatial boundaries, Klinger et al. discuss contemporary experiences of spatial imaginaries and infrastructures in Kiruna, the northern Swedish town that is being moved as the city's center is located, literally, on top of the world's largest underground iron ore mine. Images crafted by tourism agencies, which largely continue to rely on the wilderness trope and homogenize the experience of an untouched and pristine Arctic, are placed side by side with the conceptualization of the Arctic by scholars, who regard the Arctic as a "crystal ball" for natural and social science research, where developments are intensified and amplified. Critically scrutinizing the researchers' gaze, Klinger et al. urge researchers to introspect regarding their own role and responsibility in contributing to the concentration of activity, and "crowding" in Arctic centers that are conveniently accessible via transportation infrastructures and ask if it can be done differently.

In her article on imaginations of the reindeer in Sweden, Corinna Röver explores the many ways in which the animals were imagined. For long viewed as just a *Sàmi* animal, it gradually also became unruly and remained so. But in parallel it shifted from something to modernize, from something vulnerable to toxic, only to come full circle and again become a *Sàmi* animal. The reindeer are animals traversing the cultural domain of *Sàpmi*, spanning across the state boundaries of Norway, northern Sweden, Finland, and the Russian Kola Peninsula. This article serves as an important reminder of how not only Arctic landscapes and Arctic peoples but also Arctic animals function as canvases for imagination. It also underscores how the visions of the Arctic, or in this instance, of Arctic animals, tend to overlook the fluid boundaries of Arctic existence and culture, transcending and traversing state borders that frequently serve as the foundation for delineating the conceptualized Arctic realm.

In Janicke S. Kaasa's article, it is instead the photographer's gaze that undergoes examination. In the study of Richard Harrington's photographs

capturing the famine of the Ahlarmiut in Padlei, in today's Nunavut, Canada, during the 1950s, Kaasa takes a step back from the assumption that capturing someone through photography is inherently “violating and objectifying,” as the American philosopher Susan Sontag famously stated. Instead, Kaasa challenges earlier scholarship and underscores Harrington's engagement with the individuals he photographed. As this article emphasizes, it is through Harrington's sparse notes and image annotations that the conventional portrayal of the photographer as taking on an objective, impartial perspective is challenged. Amidst the tragic failure of Canadian policies and the harsh resettlement of indigenous Inuit communities, the meaning of the photographs comes to light through the interplay between the image and text and reveal Harrington's empathy and speechlessness in the face of the suffering he witnessed.

With a similar emphasis on visualized imaginations, JoAnn Conrad analyzes illustrations depicting visions of Sweden's northern region of Lapland in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Visualizations are intricately linked to the technologies responsible for their creation and dissemination. Conrad's study focuses on three prominent publications: *Lappland, det Stora Svenska Framtidslandet* from 1908, *Nils Holgerssons underbara resa genom Sverige* from 1907, and *Muittalus Sámid Birra* from 1910. She underscores how the printing press technology facilitated the distribution of illustrations portraying the envisioned North and its inhabitants, in staged and carefully curated ways, to audiences far away. What remained concealed within these illustrations were real experiences. In their pursuit of appearing authentic, these illustrations, featured prominently in significant works depicting the Swedish North during this time period, propagated a collage of hopes and fears and stereotypes projected onto Lapland.

Alexandre Simon-Ekeland's article explores the unsuccessful attempts of French aeronauts to journey to the North Pole using balloons during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This article reminds us to also take into account the stories that are often concealed within historiographical narratives tending to emphasize achievements and successes. Simon-Ekeland focuses on the aeronauts' failure of marketing the vision of the Arctic as a destination worth of exploration via hot-air balloons to a broader audience, in this case, the scientific community of geographers. While there exists a long-standing history of scientific Arctic expeditions, typically land-based and following the geographical tradition of mapping and studying the terrain, Simon-Ekeland instead underscores that dreams of exploration, as advocated by the aeronauts he investigates, were also about reaching a specific objective, such as the North Pole or a particular altitude. In essence, the Arctic dream, in this context, emerges as a tangible and measurable finish line.

Finally, the article by Cecilia Rosengren centers on a tangible aspect of the Arctic. In her article “Touching the cold”, Rosengren examines experiences of the cold, and the characteristic of coldness as described by early modern natural philosophers Robert Boyle and Margaret Cavendish. Rosengren focuses on the interpretation of the cold experience, which was notably severe during the English winters of the early and mid-17th century, by Boyle and Cavendish within the framework of their existing worldviews. Rosengren underscores that the shaping of not only descriptions but also the imaginative aspects of perceiving and experiencing cold was deeply influenced by the subject’s worldview. Both Boyle and Cavendish engaged in a scientific debate concerning the epistemological foundations of generating knowledge about the cold. Rosengren places this debate within the broader context of the tensions that emerged during the Enlightenment. Boyle’s mechanist views on life dominating natural philosophy is contrasted with Cavendish’s emphasis on the cold as a sensual feeling and an experiential phenomenon.

The six contributions to this special issue touch upon a few Arctic states, regions, and cultures from a geographical perspective. Moreover, owing to its context within *Lychmos* and Swedish history of science and ideas, there is a discernable inclination towards European and Western perspectives on the Arctic. Nonetheless, these contributions analyze the processes of constructing, shaping, and maintaining outlooks on Arctic people, animals, and environments. They provide insight into how we can explore and challenge the question of whose Arctic dreams and aspirations are elevated into broader, collective imaginaries. Just as we should acknowledge the existence of multiple Arctics,<sup>23</sup> we should also recognize the diversity of Arctic dreams. And nightmares. Because a dream is not solely a desire, and the imagination can also lead us into unwanted and frightening territory.

Most importantly, this contact zone brings knowledge and values from the Arctic to other places. Learning about other ways of harvesting or hunting, about different ways of cultivating or meaning making, about systems of organizing and maintaining is continuously rewarding. It is from these encounters that new guidelines of research take their energy and issues of rights and justice are also brought into the center of scholarly activity. When dreams of the Arctic come true and result in real and respectful encounters, it is hopeful for both the center and the periphery.



## Noters

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