

Antarcticness (Book Review)

Paulo Rui Anciaes
UCL (University College London)
p.anciaes@ucl.ac.uk

Published in: *Polar Geography* 45, 240-241

Antarcticness – Inspirations and Imaginaries. Edited by I. Kelman. UCL Press, London, 2022, 297 pp.

Antarcticness is a collection of academic papers, essays, travelogues, poetry, and photography about Antarctica. It is the sister project of *Arcticness*, by the same editor (Kelman 2017). The book starts with premise that the three main uses of Antarctica are science, tourism, and exploitation (p.1-2), but then evolves to embrace a much wider scope, relating Antarctica with politics, history, and some unexpected themes such as culture, philosophy, and spirituality.

Some of the chapters are about places. For example, Chapter 8 describes various places of worship and burial in Antarctica, as a starting point to build a (rather epic) notion of “*Antarctica itself as simply a place of worship, a sacred site worthy of awe, praise and gratitude*” (p.123), a place that “*allows all of humankind to arrive at a glorious point of gratitude for everything: life, love, Antarctica, our planet Earth, and all the stars and glories of the universe*” (p.127).

One of the most interesting chapters (Chapter 3) is not even about places in Antarctica but in the countries from where explorers and tourists depart to Antarctica (Argentina, Chile, New Zealand, Australia, and South Africa). These places “*have their own stories to tell about*” (p.31) and “*lay claim to physical, logistical, geopolitical, historical, cultural and academic connections*” to Antarctica (p.34). The chapter describes how research facilities, visitor centres, official posters and banners, events, maps, statues, public art, and even penguins in souvenir shops, support a narrative of those places as a “gateway to Antarctica” and, in some cases, of the countries’ territorial claims to Antarctica.

Other chapters are about people. For example, Chapter 5 links Antarctica with “colonial masculinity”. To go to Antarctica in the late days of the British Empire was to pursue a heroic dream in a male-only environment where severing ties with the rest of the world, especially women, ensured men’s place within the all-male environment (p.92-93). This chapter is balanced with a women’s perspective in Chapter 10, a travelogue of a recent all-women expedition to Antarctica.

The growing tourism activity in Antarctica is mentioned several times, not always as an (environmental) threat to the continent. For example, Chapter 14 discusses the topic in the context of “slow tourism”, where visitors immerse themselves in the natural world, facilitating their awareness of the vulnerability of the continent but also of the whole planet’s environment.

Overarching themes on people’s perceptions of Antarctica are introduced in the photo essay in Chapter 2, including emptiness, immenseness, wilderness, closeness (of the human community), and the resignation of control to the environment. There is a sobering reference

in p.8 that flights to Antarctica do not carry enough fuel for a return trip so pilots must decide at the halfway point whether to continue no matter the weather conditions, or to go back. Death also appears often in literature about Antarctica, because is always near, “*in the crevasse of a glacier, swirling in a whiteout, or drowning in the sea*” (p.116). In Chapter 17, a painter talks about the feeling of awe and insignificance, of not belonging in Antarctica, and not having the warm feelings associated with cold winter scenes elsewhere.

Overall, the book describes a variety of places and peoples related to Antarctica and while perspectives change radically from chapter to chapter, several links are made across chapters. In the end, the reader is left with some idea about how everything fits together in a concept of "Antarcticness". This is an improvement compared with the sister book *Arcticness*, which remained at a general level trying to define "Arcticness" despite most chapter authors insisting no definition is possible.

Nevertheless, some of the photo essays in *Antarcticness* do feel a bit disconnected from the rest of the book, because of the scant contextual information provided. At the same time, key visual information is missing from the text chapters. For example, a map would have been useful in Chapter 3 with the locations of the gateways to Antarctica. A map and photos of places of worship and burial in Chapter 8 would also save readers a visit to Wikipedia. Another shortcoming is that, despite not being a purely academic book, the book is not jargon-free. Chapter 9, on expeditions to the Antarctica interior, is a tough read (“*more-than human*”, “*ethnomethodologically-informed ethnography*”, “*rhythmanalysis*”, “*spatio-temporal affective fields*”).

Being so eclectic, *Antarcticness* does not have a specific audience. Maybe readers with an interest in Antarctica who want more than a coffee table photo book, but less than a scholarly book. The book may appeal, for example, to (the many) people who enjoyed watching the *Antarctica: A Year on Ice* documentary (Powell 2013). The book is available for free as pdf and for a modest price (compared with other scholarly books) as paperback and hardback. I read the paperback. It is nicely designed and easy to read, with colour photos, wide margins, and crisp printing. Overall, the book provides a pleasant reading experience and some interesting perspectives on Antarctica.

References

- Kelman, I. (Editor) (2017) *Arcticness - Power and Voice from the North*. UCL Press, London.
- Powell, A. (Director) (2013) *Antarctica: A Year on Ice* [Film]. Antzworks.