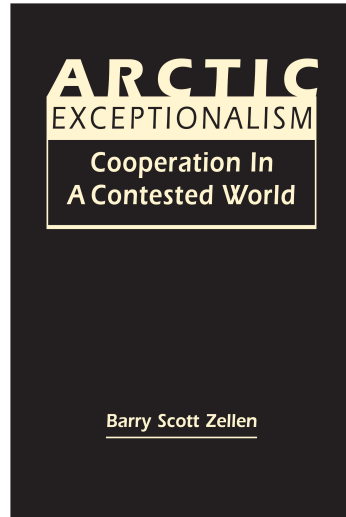


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Arctic
Exceptionalism:
Cooperation in a
Contested World

Barry Scott Zellen

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1

Arctic Exceptionalism

Arctic Exceptionalism: Cooperation in a Contested World is an examination of the collaborative foundations of Arctic diplomacy and security that have for centuries aligned the interests of the Arctic states, Indigenous peoples, and nonstate actors at the top of the world, even during periods of regional and global conflict and upheavals to the international order.

These foundations are being tested by the rise of new Arctic stakeholders such as China and other non-Arctic states with emerging economic, military, and diplomatic interests in the region as it opens up to increasing maritime commerce, resource development, and strategic mobility. Beijing, as part of its Polar Silk Road initiative, came under criticism from the United States and US allies for making opaque investments—particularly before Arctic stakeholders had become more familiar with the mechanisms of what came to be described as “debt-trap diplomacy.” Nationalism and its impact on Arctic diplomacy are intensifying, as became abundantly clear during the 2019 Arctic Council Ministerial meeting in Rovaniemi, Finland, when Secretary of State Mike Pompeo publicly scolded China as an Arctic interloper, creating diplomatic fireworks at the otherwise collegial gathering. For the first time since its formation in 1996, the council broke with its tradition of producing a consensus statement at the meeting’s end—not for Pompeo’s undiplomatic dustup with China but rather because of the US pivot away from the climate change consensus that had hitherto united all Arctic stakeholders.

In these long months since Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, this trend has only accelerated, beginning in March 2022 with the unprecedented boycott of council activities by seven of the eight Arctic Council members under Russia's second rotating term as council chair, in protest to the invasion. This pause on Arctic Council activity was remarkable for the unity of the seven boycotting Arctic states, which in the past had experienced their own significant disagreements (primarily between the coastal states abutting the Arctic basin versus the inland and sub-Arctic states). Notably, five of the boycotting states were NATO members, and the other two, Finland and Sweden, were in the process of joining the alliance (with both now fully accessioned)—which will alter the diplomatic dynamics of the Arctic Council. Some fear it will risk permanently exiling Russia from the council's circle of consensus.

However, the Arctic Council has long prided itself on its collaboration across vast gaps in demography, geography, and economy, with its innovative inclusion of six Indigenous Permanent Participants who enjoy unfettered access to the eight Arctic member states, integrating state and tribal interests in a distinctive and exemplary manner. Yet the united stance of the seven democratic council member states against fellow member and then council chair Russia came without consultation with the Arctic Council's Indigenous stakeholders, who were caught by surprise as much by the boycott as by their exclusion from its discussion, a breach therefore of not only the Arctic Council's interstate harmony but its multilevel state-tribe harmony as well.

The Permanent Participants have largely given their *ex post facto* approval of the boycott, with one notable exception being the Russian Association of Indigenous People of the Arctic (RAIPON), which is state controlled at present with much of its former leadership in exile. The others gave their approval under immense pressure at a time of global consensus against what is perceived as Russia's naked aggression toward an independent neighboring state. Candid observations by Arctic Athabaskan Council (AAC) chief Bill Erasmus and Inuit Circumpolar Council–Alaska president James Stotts about Indigenous exclusion, as well as the importance of Indigenous engagement to inclusive governance in the Arctic, cannot be overlooked. The long track record of inclusivity across the centuries-old East-West fault line and the millennia-old tribe-state fault line is at great risk. Many fear it will not recover and that the Arctic's long cooperative tradition known as Arctic exceptionalism will be forever altered. But as this book chronicles, the roots of Arctic exceptionalism are deep and have endured numerous tests and challenges before.

Structural Foundations of Arctic Exceptionalism

The many complex governing and administrative structures—constitutional rights, legislative mandates, and judicial decisions—that have emerged in the modern Arctic, and their alignment with policies and principles embraced by the member state and Indigenous stakeholders on the Arctic Council, have helped to enshrine Arctic exceptionalism. This has established Arctic exceptionalism not as a normative aspiration but as an enduring dimension of Arctic international relations. It survived not only the bipolar global conflict of the Cold War but also post-Cold War efforts to protect and restore the fragile Arctic environment and post-thaw efforts to combat the unprecedented threats of climate change to the stability of the Arctic system.

How the intensification of state rivalry and renewed nationalism in the Arctic are affecting Arctic exceptionalism, and they in turn are affected by it, will be the focus of this book. Rooted in history and international relations (IR) theory, readers will see how realism in a world of anarchy is systemically impacted by the region's unique extremes, fostering alignments of interests among a diverse coalition of states, Indigenous peoples, and organizations who jointly govern the region and share a common experience of seeking order and survival in the remote, harsh, and ever-challenging Arctic. This was as true during World War II and the alignment of the Western Allies with Stalin's Russia as it was during more peaceful times. The Arctic, with its remote geography, harsh climate, and historic state weakness, has functioned better as an incubator of cooperation than of conflict. In today's contested world, with Europe aflame, it can and should continue to do so.

Indeed, the story of Arctic exceptionalism began long before the Arctic Council's formation a quarter century ago. I trace the roots of the region's continued, underlying commitment to consensus back to the centuries-long experience of collaboratively managing Arctic lands and resources between tribal peoples and the states that would come to assert sovereignty over their homelands. First the chartered companies of the colonial-era fur trade, with minimal numbers of settlers, integrated the vast subarctic and much of the Arctic region into the global political economy—leaving Indigenous polities largely intact (relative to other colonized regions). Then, as the newly formed modern states that now govern the Arctic expanded north in the nineteenth century, they by and large adopted this collaborative approach of asserting sovereignty by partnership with native proxies. This resulted in today's complex Arctic institutional environment defined by a patchwork of co-management systems

enshrined by treaty, legislation, and constitutional mandate. The seeds were planted for an enduring, multigenerational commitment to work together despite obvious asymmetries in power, wealth, and demography.

This collaborative governing framework took international diplomatic form with the creation of the Arctic Council; the same players who learned to work together on domestic issues extended their cooperation into the international realm. New interests are managed largely by welcoming observer technical expertise into Arctic Council working groups while limiting their formal decisionmaking influence, which carries forth the spirit of collaboration from earlier eras. What defines this book, and my research on the Arctic, is this synthesis of deep history with IR theory. Thus we do not start with contemporary structures but rather come to understand their emergence over time, and we see in the collaborative sentiment expressed by so many Arctic stakeholders of great variety (large, small, weak, and strong states; stateless tribal peoples; cross-border Indigenous nations; multinational corporations and newly empowered native corporations, among others) not an idealist aspiration but rather the pragmatism born of realism, a balancing of interests amid anarchical pressures that are enhanced by geographical extremes.

So, when we look to today's diplomatic and strategic challenges, we see each rival state leveraging the perception of an intensifying Arctic race for domestic audiences and stakeholders, even though the region in fact has remained relatively stable. Its borders were mutually respected as the Great Game played out largely in headlines, a staged show to maximize budgets and modernize infrastructure, not unlike the earlier balance of power era when small wars were waged and alliances rebalanced to prevent a recurrence of great war.

While I accept and defend the premise of Arctic exceptionalism, I recontextualize it here for the real world of geopolitics and military conflict and find persuasive evidence for its continuation amid recent challenges and tensions. Embedded firmly in a realist framework, I present a sober look at the domestic dynamics and components of the Arctic order, each seeking to maximize its own gains, and how these competing interests align at the top of the world to establish a peaceful and stable region in an otherwise anarchic world where peace is in every stakeholder's interest and war itself is, on a large scale, a logistical impossibility.

Historic hot wars in the Arctic, such as the Japanese lightning conquest of the outer Aleutians, and earlier the Confederacy's final naval assault upon Yankee commerce in the Arctic Ocean in the summer of

1865, and before that the Battle of Hudson's Bay that brought the Seven Years' War into the Arctic region with the bombardment of the Hudson's Bay Company post at York Factory, were intense but brief battles that were part of wider conflicts whose centers of gravity lay far from the region and had modest local impacts at most. The Arctic, for a variety of reasons that will be explored in the book in detail, is inhospitable to many of the realist pillars of world order, including war, and this contributes to the region's tendency toward cooperative outcomes. But the Arctic is not entirely immune from the power-political pathologies of international relations, or completely insulated from their ravages.

This argument is important as it grounds Arctic exceptionalism in both realism and history. Much of the literature on Arctic IR overstates the emergence of a new Arctic cold war or great game and the competitive dynamics of Arctic international relations, overlooking the remarkable capacity of the region to resist the perils of international anarchy and its divisiveness. Its distinct geopolitics, born of isolation, remoteness, and cold, may be transitioning from what Mackinder called "Lena-land" into a more Spykmanian "Rimland," but this transition is not instant, nor does it completely offset the region's underlying harshness.

Because of the Arctic's unique political geography, the regional and domestic forces that shape Arctic diplomacy remain intact, even as new Arctic stakeholders arise on the world stage. Lacking their own territory, these emerging stakeholders (including rising imperial powers like China and long-declined imperial powers like Japan) are really just interlopers who may increasingly pass through and interact with the Arctic states and their structures, but they will always remain subordinate to the Arctic states and their empowered Indigenous peoples who jointly govern the region. All eight Arctic states, including Russia, have shown a remarkably durable commitment to collaboration, even as regional crises erupted around the world, up until the present collapse in circumpolar unity precipitated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Indeed, should Russia and its fellow Arctic states go to war—whether in the Baltics, Scandinavia, or the high North Atlantic—as a result of a collapse in international order, the Arctic will face a challenge unseen since World War II. Today's crisis thus threatens Arctic exceptionalism itself. Though not necessarily likely, scenarios of interstate war in the Arctic are no longer viewed to be entirely implausible, and these will be considered in the pages ahead, as will other "internal" scenarios of disruption to the Arctic system including the potential for a secessionary cascade starting with Greenland and expanding across the Inuit homeland of Arctic North America.

Arctic Exceptionalism Takes Root

As Canadian Arctic scholars Whitney Lackenbauer and Ryan Dean explain in their thoughtful and comprehensive overview, “Arctic Exceptionalisms” in *The Arctic and World Order*, “In its conventional application since the 1990s, the idea of ‘Arctic exceptionalism’ anticipates and promotes the building of a peaceable regime across the circumpolar north,” where “either different norms or rules are or should be followed in the Arctic region, or that the region is exempt from ‘normal’ drivers of international affairs.”¹ But at the same time, they note,

Critics argue that Arctic exceptionalism (in its conventional conceptualization) perpetuates naïve, utopian faith in regional cooperation that cannot override global strategic competition, while simultaneously advancing the view that Arctic states must undertake extraordinary responses to protect their sovereignty and provide security in the Arctic because the region is exceptionally vulnerable. . . . Accordingly, while Arctic exceptionalism was originally used to advance the cause of peace across the region, our analysis illustrates how Arctic exceptionalist logic is also used to support narratives that portend future conflict and thus call for extraordinary action to defend the Arctic as a region apart.²

The authors trace the concept back to Gail Osherenko and Oran Young’s *The Age of the Arctic: Hot Conflicts and Cold Realities*, where they observe that “‘Arctic exceptionalism’ had already emerged ‘as a powerful force in the world’ by 1989 when the Cold War was thawing,”³ as reflected by the last Soviet premier, Mikhail Gorbachev, in his famed 1987 Murmansk Speech in which he called upon the example of Arctic exceptionalism to guide the world out of the Cold War. While the Cold War ended on its own accord with the collapse of the Berlin Wall, and not the Ice Curtain as Gorbachev had hoped, Lackenbauer and Dean point out that “Young and Osherenko observe that the Murmansk Speech encouraged the Arctic states, which had ‘developed policies regarding their own part of the Arctic with little regard for other parts of the Arctic region,’ to conceptualize a common region where they had ‘much in common with each other.’”⁴ Indeed, Lackenbauer and Dean further note, “The prospect of de-militarizing the Arctic agenda opened space to consider political, economic, and environmental issues previously subordinated to military security interests. In Canada, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney’s Conservative government

(1984–93) shifted from a strong sovereignty and military emphasis in the mid-1980s to propose an Arctic Council of circumpolar cooperation that would foster peace and normalize political engagement on issues of common concern.”⁵

The highly innovative Arctic Council, conceived near the end of the Cold War, would transform Arctic international relations, and would be defined as much by fostering a united, circumpolar Arctic international cooperation inclusive of the Soviet Union (and, after that state collapsed, post-Soviet Russia) as it was by fostering inclusive cooperation between the Arctic states and the region’s Indigenous peoples, and it is this distinctive synthesis of tribe and state that reflects my own understanding of Arctic exceptionalism, not just after the Cold War but across the ages, dating much further back in time than the late Cold War thaw of the Ice Curtain that divided West from East. As I will demonstrate in the pages ahead, Arctic exceptionalism dates back at least three centuries and can be rooted even further back in time to prehistory and deep geological time where its underlying geographical context first emerged. Central to Arctic exceptionalism’s meaning and relevance for North America is Franklyn Griffiths’s prescription (as cited by Lackenbauer and Dean) for the newly proposed Arctic Council to exhibit for “civilized behaviour in relations between Arctic states, between these states and their aboriginal peoples, and in the way southern majorities treat their vulnerable northern environment,” with relations “between these states and their aboriginal peoples” serving as a bidirectional causal bridge affecting the former (“relations between Arctic states”) and the latter (“the way southern majorities treat their vulnerable northern environment,” with environment being not just the geographical environment but also the sociocultural environment of the Indigenous Arctic majority). While this central proposition and its resultant collaboration has long been the hallmark of Arctic North America, it is less the case in many parts of the Eurasian Arctic, and so it is not yet a universal axiom of the whole Arctic, despite its importance as an aspirational value for the Arctic. Recognizing this limit, I focus primarily on Arctic North America in the pages below, and view Arctic exceptionalism primarily through a North American lens, even as I consider regions of the Arctic outside of North America, as well as non-Arctic states and interests, whose interests would continue to at times collide, straining Arctic exceptionalism time and again, but without dooming it.

Indeed, Oran Young (as cited by Lackenbauer and Dean, who are in turn citing Clive Thomas):

conceptualized “the Arctic as a testing ground,” where novel approaches to managing political issues and developing regional governance could yield important lessons and insights for other parts of the world. This concerned “indigenous peoples, the resolution of conflicts between the values of development and environmental protection, and international cooperation on such topics as fishing rights, animal migration and the preservation of cross-border ecosystems in general.” While the region had distinctive hallmarks that allowed it to serve as a “testing ground,” its “exceptionalism” had to be tempered for regional dynamics or experiments to offer broader lessons.⁶

But it’s certainly no coincidence that these issues for which the Arctic could serve as a testing ground and model for the world were also the new, salient post–Cold War Arctic security concepts often described broadly as “soft security,” including human security, in particular relating to Indigenous peoples, as well as environmental, ecological, and climate security. Nor is it a coincidence that during the next great era of international bifurcation to follow the Cold War, the two-decade-long global war on terror, Arctic exceptionalism proved to be not only a test bed for new relations between Arctic states and tribal peoples but a model that at least indirectly informed and inspired the coalition of states leading the war on terror that sought to understand the complex, localized conflicts along the periphery of the Westphalian world, and to introduce new institutions of governance to better integrate what was described by Thomas P. M. Barnett as “the Functioning Core” and the “Non-Integrating Gap.” Arctic exceptionalism thus becomes a model for much of the world to emulate, relevant to all of those regions at the edge of the Westphalian world system where tribal peoples and remote geography combine to insulate their tribal homelands from the reach of the modern state. Arctic exceptionalism’s relevance to the generational conflict that followed the Cold War—even if not fully appreciated by the stakeholders of that conflict who did not make a conscious connection between their state-building efforts in the remote periphery of the world system and the experiment already underway in the Arctic—cannot be overstated. This book is, in a nutshell, my effort to connect these dots.

As Lackenbauer and Dean observe,

For most commentators, however, the idea of “Arctic exceptionalism” became inextricably linked to the twin assumptions that the region was a cohesive and cooperative space insulated from geopolitical tensions elsewhere, and that it was “exceptional” when compared to other regions. Heather Exner-Pirot and Robert Murray define the concept as

“the successful effort” both “to maintain cooperation in the region despite internal competition for resources and territory,” and “to compartmentalize Arctic relations from external geopolitical tensions.” They argue that the Arctic regional order is exceptional insofar as Arctic states and those states with involvement in the area have worked “to negotiate an order and balance of power predicated on norms such as cooperation and multilateralism.” . . . While “the Arctic is not immune from the possibility of war and conflict,” [it requires] “conscious steps to maintain a strong institutional framework that protects Arctic internationalism.”⁷

Such “conscious steps” have been the norm for much of the post–Cold War era. However, with the rise of China and its increasing assertion of interests in the Arctic region, combined (and for the most part aligned) with the resurgence of Russia in recent years, there have been new tensions and retreats from what had only recently emerged as a new and welcome circumpolar commitment to Arctic exceptionalism.

But even amid these retreats, there have been renewed intra-alliance and intra-bloc efforts to foster regional unity to offset the erosion of universal Arctic unity. Arctic exceptionalism thus does not transcend geopolitics, but rather geopolitics and its underlying geographical systems provide the context for and impose limits upon the extent of Arctic exceptionalism. The amazing thing is how malleable and durable Arctic exceptionalism has proven, even in the post–Cold War period. And if we extend Arctic exceptionalism back further in time, it’s all the more impressive for its staying power, enduring tectonic changes in global geopolitics, the rise and fall of numerous powers, the recurrence of imperial expansion and war, and even now, the dynamic consequences of climate change. Arctic exceptionalism is thus not an exception from geopolitics but the product of geopolitics: a fusion of realism in international politics and geography, which constrains realism by buffering international anarchy and limiting the reach of the state in the Arctic.

With such deep and enduring geopolitical roots, we thus find the condition of Arctic exceptionalism predates its conceptualization. This interpretation at first seems to disagree fundamentally with what Lackenbauer and Dean describe as “conventional Arctic exceptionalist thinking,” as exemplified by the prolific research of University of Lapland scholar Lassi Heininen, who explains, “The globalized Arctic is an exceptional political space in world politics and international relations, based on intensive international, functional cooperation and high geopolitical stability. . . . This stability does not result from either the

classical approach of Great-Game geopolitics or the Hobbesian zero-sum approach. It results from applying a critical and constructivist approach to geopolitics.”⁸

But as my earlier work on realism in IR theory⁹ has observed, realism is very much misunderstood to be antithetical to constructivism and critical theory, when in fact, realism may be more fairly viewed as a two-millennia-long tradition of constructivism in action, what I call “constructive-realism,” an ideational response to the ubiquity of anarchy in world politics that dates at least as far back to the ancient Greek polis. Thus Arctic exceptionalism emerges from the very same “Great-Game” and “Hobbesian” dynamics that define international politics worldwide, with both imperial expansion into the Arctic and the arrival of the Westphalian state (with its “Hobbesian zero-sum approach”) driving the emergence and endurance of Arctic exceptionalism. States aspire to order everywhere but find the world greatly lacking and insecurity the regrettable result. In the Arctic, however, geography, climate, and the human response to the region’s remote austerity have more kindly cooperated, enabling a convergence of interests that is distinct from what we find elsewhere in the world—positioning the Arctic as not only a testing ground for new international relations but a model for application, with appropriate refinement and customization, to other parts of the world, particularly the “Non-Integrating Gap,” where NATO was embroiled for two decades of asymmetrical warfare.

Much of what we think we understand about realism in world politics breaks down increasingly with distance from the Westphalian core, as states themselves increasingly diverge from the Westphalian model with this distance. Thus my view of Arctic exceptionalism, as consistent with and the by-product of Arctic geopolitics and realism in international relations, aligns with the view of Juha Kämpylä and Harri Mikkola, also cited by Lackenbauer and Dean, “that the geographical and political distance between the Arctic and the southern metropolises that governed it facilitated the characterization of ‘a unique region detached, and encapsulated, from global political dynamics, and thus characterized primarily as an apolitical space of regional governance, functional cooperation, and peaceful co-existence.’”¹⁰ In fact, what we witness in the Arctic is less a separation from world politics than a reflection of the interplay of world politics with Arctic geography, yielding distinct regional dynamics no more detached from international relations than other regions, of which there are many beyond the Westphalian core.

Classical geopolitical theorist Halford J. Mackinder recognized this when he organized world politics into the geographical regions of

Heartland, Inner Crescent, and Outer Crescent, along with his lesser known Lenaland, a distinctly Arctic subregion of the world geopolitical system. And similarly, Michael Bravo's "tidy explanation" (as described by Lackenbauer and Dean) of Arctic exceptionalism "as a regional security complex with its own, independent, political calculus that is poorly explained by conventional realist theories of international relations"¹¹ suggests that Arctic exceptionalism is itself an exception from realist principles, when in fact, as I have argued here, it is more aptly understood as a reflection of realism as filtered through an Arctic lens. Lackenbauer and Dean point out how such efforts to define Arctic exceptionalism as separate from realism and its many power-political features have rendered the concept vulnerable by divorcing it unnecessarily from military history and the reality of political power, which is as real in the Arctic as it is at the Westphalian core, albeit in less centralized form and often more salient at the tribal than the nation-state level. As they note,

By marginalizing traditional military and security issues, the Arctic exceptionalism embedded in these articulations of an Arctic security complex also creates vulnerability in suggesting that the reintroduction of defence considerations inherently undermines them. Furthermore, by prescribing that the logic of exceptionalism points to a certain type of regime predicated on liberal institutionalism, we might overlook different ways that other commentators—rooted in other schools of thought—also identify "exceptional" characteristics to justify or explain national behaviour and regional dynamics.¹²

In this volume, rooted in a realist understanding of world politics and a classical (albeit updated for our warming world) approach to geopolitics, I find a very close and intimate connection between the Arctic's exceptional qualities and its foundation in imperial expansion and state consolidation, shaped by such forces but reflecting local, regional, national, international, and transnational responses to them. Thus as Lackenbauer and Dean point out, those who worry about the dangers of new conflicts in the Arctic arising from the collision of interests by Arctic and non-Arctic states and non-, sub-, and trans-state actors are no less a part of the Arctic exceptionalism family. Their views and concerns, and cautious approaches to the Arctic future, are with equal merit and essential for us to understand the limits of Arctic exceptionalism in a less unified world. These "exceptional dangers" described by Lackenbauer and Dean, so acutely perceived and in many cases proselytized by what they equally elegantly call the "purveyors of polar peril," have indeed "projected a logic of 'Arctic exceptionalism' rather different from that

advanced by the liberal internationalist school,” one that is “inherently predicated on a form of exceptionalism positing that the Arctic Ocean was different than every other ocean—a narrative that inherently questioned Arctic state rights and control under established rules.”¹³ In short, Arctic exceptionalism has its darker side, but one no less exceptional, even if ultimately less cooperative in nature. And this too is rooted in Arctic exceptionalism’s intimate connection to the realist world.

Notes

1. Lackenbauer and Dean, “Arctic Exceptionalisms,” in *The Arctic and World Order*, edited by Spohr and Hamilton, 327.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, 328, citing Gail Osherenko and Oran R. Young, *The Age of the Arctic: Hot Conflicts and Cold Realities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 12.

5. *Ibid.*, 328, citing Franklyn Griffiths, “Let’s Invite Yeltsin to Join Our Club,” *Toronto Star*, November 6, 1991.

6. *Ibid.*, 329, citing Thomas, “Intergovernmental Relations in Alaska,” 17.

7. *Ibid.*, 329, citing Exner-Pirot and Murray, “Regional Order,” 47–48.

8. *Ibid.*, 330, citing Heininen, “Special Features,” in *Global Arctic Handbook*, edited by Finger and Heininen, 216–217.

9. See Zellen, *Realist Tradition*.

10. Lackenbauer and Dean, “Arctic Exceptionalisms,” 330, citing Juha Käpylä and Harri Mikkola, “On Arctic Exceptionalism,” FIIA Working Paper 85, Finnish Institute of International Affairs, April 2015, chap. 4.4.

11. *Ibid.*, 331, citing Michael Bravo, “The Postcolonial Arctic,” 2015, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/35279618.pdf>.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, 332–333, attributing the “purveyors of polar peril” phrase to Franklyn Griffiths, and citing Griffiths, Huebert, and Lackenbauer, *Canada and the Changing Arctic*.