

# Rethinking Margins in the Anthropocene

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**Thorsteinsson, Björn, Katrín Anna Lund, Gunnar Thór Jóhannesson, and Guðbjörg R. Jóhannesdóttir, eds. 2024. *Mobilities on the margins: creative processes of place-making. of Arctic Encounters*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, ISBN 978-3-031-41343-8, ISBN 978-3-031-41344-5 (eBook), 280pp.**

The book *Mobilities on the Margins* is a work which emerges out of the intersection of various global crises to call on social scientists to rethink the philosophies underpinning their work during the pressing moments we face today. For the authors, the broad and accelerating trends of anthropogenic environmental change intersect with acute crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, demanding that social scientists consider again the theoretical, practical and ethical aspects of their field. These crises, unfolding along the axes of integration and mobility characteristic of globalization, have contracted and reconfigured the margins of our lifeworlds and broader societies. In the vein of the tradition in anthropology of studying borders and boundaries, this volume directly engages with margins and the concept of marginality in both the spatial sense, and the sense of those places that exist on the imagined Nature/Culture threshold. It puts forward analyses on the material realities, the networks of agency, and the imaginaries which produce marginality, and questions how these come about in moments of global, anthropogenic crisis.

In this book, the arctic margin – those corners of Iceland, Greenland and Finland (with also a section concerning Scotland during the COVID-19 pandemic) which border on the uninhabitable, and therefore typically imagined as distant and desolate – becomes the stage for research and theory into the ways in which such places are experienced, produced, conceptualized and performed as marginal. This arctic research and theory is brought into the context of global

crises, using a normative framework drawn especially from Joanna Zylińska's *Minimal Ethics for the Anthropocene* (2014). Under Zylińska's guidance, the authors call on social scientists to bring their work into the changing ethical and material realities of the 'Anthropocene'.

This book is a volume of twelve collected essays, research reports, meditations and reflections from various authors, grounded in ethnographic and qualitative fieldwork. The diverse contributions engage with notions, experiences and performances of place and margin, and so sit at a productive intersection of cultural geography, anthropology and economic development. The authors are mostly scholars in Tourism Studies, but their work is certainly of interest to any social scientist considering margins, cultural geography, mobility, cultural ecology, etc. in their own work. Through poetic reflexivity, historic narratives of the landscape and personal memory, various embodied and (auto-) ethnographic methods inspired by the approach of Michael Jackson's *Excursions* (2007), the authors tie together the relational-processual philosophies of space developed by the likes of Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1991), and Massey's *For Space* (2005), with a phenomenology drawn from the writings of Merleau-Ponty. The sub-arctic landscapes, as well as the experiences and meanings they are imbued with, thereby unfold for the authors, showing how threads of agency, sense, memory and meaning weave together to produce the arctic margin and its marginality as social phenomena. It is not only the work of humans the authors in the volume consider, but, drawing on the likes of Tim Ingold (2000) and a largely post-Actor-Network-Theory framework, the interacting agencies of people, non-humans and the landscape itself, their histories, memories, aspirations, flows and designs.

Ultimately, this is not a theoretical oeuvre, but it draws on and develops theory. It is not purely an account of fieldwork, but it uses these as powerful illustrations of the writers' intentions. The collective ambition of the various authors through this work is rather, firstly, to study how the marginality of places is constructed, and the role of mobility, subjectivity and material culture in this process. Secondly it is to study how mobility and creativity can reduce the marginality of places in economic and regional development. But a third intention is also to bring the theorization and study of places into the normative framework of the 'Anthropocene' discourse. Working under Zylińska's ethical framework, the authors bring their various methods, analyses, reflections and meditations to bear on the questions of geographic and imaginary marginality as this phenomenon emerges out of anthropogenic crises. As such, the book is a discursive development on the normative guides, the innovative paths in methods and inquiry we as social scientists ought to follow. It offers a broad collection of methods and perspectives to provoke

innovative, speculative and associative approaches to analysis and to reconsider the ethics of social science research in our day and age.

While it can be difficult to review collected volumes, this book is the result of the closely-coordinated work of a well-integrated team of researchers focusing on similar sites and theoretical frameworks. Through the voices of its various authors, the volume moves between reflections with quite different character and content, ranging from the role of social theory and engaged research in the Anthropocene, to reflexivity and ruminations of personal experiences and encounters, to discussions reaching across various theoretical discourses to re-imagine marginality at a philosophical level.

The volume begins with two theory-oriented chapters, discussing the role of sense (in the whole associational constellation of this term, inclusive of sensation, meaning-making, common wisdom, and directionality) in the production of space, and unpacking the concept of nothingness, which is taken as a definitive aspect of marginality. These flow into two essays which are more focused on speculation and innovation in research methods. The first of these discusses narratives as an analytical tool, especially those narratives of non-human agents involved in the production of a place. Non-human narratives become a tool for developing both multispecies analyses, but also for developing the reflexivity of the analyst. The next work traces the material-cultural histories of an unexpected monument in the subarctic landscape. A steel-hulled fishing boat, grounded dramatically and unexpectedly on an Icelandic beach, becomes the locus of encounters and historical processes, which transform the boat from a curious, but bounded, object into a material-cultural, mobile *thing* with real agency in producing space and place. Through *things* – a philosophical category elaborated upon in the chapter – like this boat, the mobilities of people and *things* intersect and interact, to produce sensibilities, imaginaries, and experiences of marginal place. The fifth article is an ethnographic case study of a far-north community in Greenland, and the various projects stakeholders there undertook to draw people, resources, and attention in order to reinvigorate this marginal place. It discusses the ‘dressing’ of places, the role of presences and absences (especially of humans) in place-making processes, and the production of ‘marginal imaginaries’, which is to say the positioning of peripheral areas and inhabitants in the imaginaries of their relative cores. The sixth essay theorizes the centrality of movement, in the senses both of mobility and emotional experience, to the multi-species processes which produce landscapes. It focuses especially on phenomenology and aesthetic experiences to develop theories of spatial production. In this chapter, aesthetics or meaningful sensation is the bridge between social-mental space and physical space. The aesthetic dimension of place, which collapses subject and physical space, highlights

how subjects participate in the production of space, and how spaces shape subjects even when their interactions are fleeting. The seventh essay presents a research report on multispecies networks and mobilities in producing the affect of place, particularly when it comes to tourism development in Iceland's arctic margin. It focuses heavily on reflexivity, on personal memory and experience in the place, and how these shape both the affective aspect of a place and its imaginary, as well as the analysis of the researcher. The eighth essay discusses paths on the Earth and lines on maps, as ways to study embodied and practiced knowledge of places through tools of wayfinding and mobility. The author traces lines by walking and by consulting maps to study the changing histories of mobility in a marginal corner of Iceland. They discuss various tools for wayfinding and assisting mobility, such as cairn-monuments in the landscape, place names, and maps, and they discuss how these tools encode knowledge, valuations, meanings and histories associated with the places they constellate together. The ninth essay develops this by focusing on two key pieces of road infrastructure in Iceland, and the experience of driving there. Roads are shown as complex material culture, which pave the way (literally) for further transformations and integrations of marginal land, and for new relations, encounters and experiences to emerge. The tenth essay is another extreme-northerly case study, this time of Qaanaaq, Greenland. It focuses on infrastructures such as a hotel, a satellite ground station, and the imaginary of territory further south as having more developed infrastructure. In this chapter it is everyday encounters with these infrastructural systems which produce an imaginary of marginality through a sense of absence. The eleventh essay looks at how mobility practices (and those associated, such as skiing, fishing, foraging, etc.) shape a particular Finnish national park, and how these are negotiated with ownership claims to land in the context of the customary, Finnish legal rights of access and travel. They show that as mobility practices in spaces change, conflicts and tensions can occur between different stakeholders, practices, imaginaries, and interests in spaces. The final, twelfth essay focuses on mobility practices as enabled by laws and access rights in Scotland, and how these transformed during the COVID-19 response in the country. It discusses how changing rules can lead to perceived and enacted changes in borders or margins in daily experience—in this case contracting inwards towards domestic spheres.

This overview highlights the breadth of perspectives on and approaches to studying the production of marginal space this volume offers, which coalesce around the aspects of mobility, movement, experience, and the agency of non-human participants. As can be imagined, this approach has its strengths and its weaknesses. The wide scope of the contributions, the different points of emphasis and underlying philosophical angles which are brought adjacent to one another,

offers many insights which any social scientist conducting research with a significant component of space and site (especially with an eye to borders, boundaries, margins, etc.) ought to take into consideration. The various perspectives brought together here make this book inspiring from both a methodological point of view as well as theoretical. It demonstrates innovative, reflexive tools for social scientists to understand their sites as dynamic processes involving various actors and meanings, and for accessing and interpreting the meanings and experiences which position a place as marginal in the social imaginary. It highlights the interacting roles of landscape and subject in embodying and producing social and more-than-human relations. The strong normative aspect to these writings also propels the volume and the discourse it contributes to into an 'Anthropocene' ethics, an increasingly inescapable context for contemporary social research.

However, the tourism perspective is at times overbearing, and must occasionally be bracketed to generalize the findings presented in the book. This touristic slant to the volume makes it lean towards an implicit, philosophical individualism, which means too little analysis is spared for critically-considering the position of marginal places (borderlands, wastelands, etc.) in social formations, in relations of power or production, etc. While making reference to authors like Lefebvre and Massey, the phenomenological bias leads many of the authors to not fully engage with key aspects of their theories, especially regarding the position of space and place in societies. The reliance on reflexive methods and autoethnographic approaches, while useful for elaborating narratives, memories and other phenomenological aspects pertaining to landscape and the perception of space, is limiting with respect to the sociological concern of the book to deal with the construction of marginality itself in its broader, social context. And the calls to softly discipline frontiers to integrate them into the capitalist space, into the relations of the tourism economy, using an ethos which listens to the voices of animals, plants and childhood memories, recalls the protagonist of *Venus in Furs* idolizing the non-modern goddess in his dreamy encounter. Did this avatar of Venus herself, Sacher-Masoch's manifestation of a non-modern cosmos in its vivacity, beauty and bare cruelty, not warn us of the risks of worshiping her while remaining rooted in modernist worldview?

All-in-all, the volume offers many intriguing jumping-off points for the analysis of marginal places and the imaginary of marginality in the normative and pressing context of the 'Anthropocene'. While limited by its breadth to go into real depth into the social theory of marginal place, and limited by its philosophical individualism to sharpen its critical angle, it offers a compelling call-to-action for social scientists to innovate in their methods, and to focus again on the role of place, margins, imaginaries and non-humans in the processes they study.

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