

Books & arts



Hunter Henrik Josvasson navigates through ice near Tasilaq, Greenland.

Lies of the land

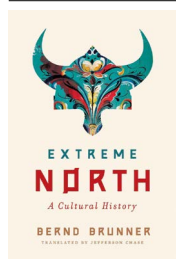
How eugenicists tried to hijack the north. By Josie Glausiusz

In *The Idea of North*, a 1967 radio documentary by pianist Glenn Gould, a series of interwoven voices muse on travels in the Canadian Arctic. To the clickety-clack of train wheels rolling over tracks, the speakers ruminate on solitude, shattered illusions, the improbability of future “gigantic plastic bubbles surrounding Arctic villages with a cloak of warm air”, and what Gould calls an “incredible tapestry of tundra and taiga”.

German historian of culture and science Bernd Brunner, in his book *Extreme North*, weaves a darker tapestry, layering legends over the science and history of the north to describe a place that is real, remote, inscrutable and cold. Indigenous peoples of the Arctic – including the Sámi of Finland, Norway and Sweden, the Chukchi and Nenets of Russia and the Inuit of Alaska, Canada and Greenland – have lived in the north for thousands of years.

For others, especially racist eugenicists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the north symbolized Utopia, the incubator of a ‘master race’. Brunner untangles the origin of these pseudoscientific ideas, from the veneration of the Vikings and Old Norse sagas to the doctrine of ‘Nordic’ superiority promoted by Nazi ideologues.

Where the north begins depends on the eye of the beholder. The volcanic, ice-covered Bouvet



Extreme North: A Cultural History
Bernd Brunner (transl. Jefferson Chase)
WW Norton (2022)

Island is claimed by Norway, but lies in the north “only from the perspective of the South Pole”, Brunner writes. Located between South Africa and Antarctica, it is a 49-square-kilometre nature reserve dominated by seals, along with penguins and other seabirds.

For Europeans of antiquity, “the North was a phantasmagoric dark spot beyond the border of the Greco-Roman universe”, Brunner explains. In the fourth century BC, Greek astronomer Pytheas of Massalia claimed he had discovered the legendary far-north island of Ultima Thule, later identified as Iceland, Greenland or the Faroe Islands, among other places.

Ultima Thule was also the nickname of a distant object in the Kuiper belt beyond Neptune – 6.5 billion kilometres from Earth – explored in 2019 by NASA’s New Horizons craft. It was eventually renamed Arrokoth, meaning ‘sky’ in the Powhatan/Algonquian language spoken by Native Americans of the Chesapeake Bay region, after it was pointed out that ‘Ultima Thule’ had been co-opted in the nineteenth century to refer to the mythological homeland of the supposed Aryan people. Brunner traces this malignant myth back to mid-eighteenth-century French, German and US thinkers, who began to classify humanity into ‘races’ and rethink the then-common idea that humans had emerged in the biblical lands of the Middle East.

Shameful history

Nineteenth-century French diplomat Joseph Arthur de Gobineau developed the idea of a superior race he called Aryans (from the Sanskrit *arya*); he claimed that the Baltic coast and the Scandinavian Peninsula were the “maternal lap of nations”. In 1922, German linguist Hans Friedrich Karl Günther published his study *Racial Science of the German People*. He classified Germans as one of six ‘Nordic’ peoples, alongside Danes, Icelanders, Norwegians, Swedes and Finns; Jews were to him “a thing of ferment and disturbance”. His writings provided the foundation of the Nazi Party’s racial theories.

In the United States, William Warren, first president of Boston University in Massachusetts, described how “man was created in an Arctic Paradise with the Tree of Life at the North Pole”, according to a *Nature* review of his 1885 book *Paradise Found* (*Nature* 32, 28; 1885). Brunner also tells how eugenicist Madison Grant’s *The Passing of the Great Race*, published in 1916, “promoted the ‘Nordic race’ as superior and responsible for Western civilization’s greatest achievements”. The book sold millions in the United States, and Grant

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became a key proponent of the US eugenics movement. His book, which was praised by both former president Theodore Roosevelt and Adolf Hitler, led US politicians to enact state laws that banned interracial marriage. These were finally overturned only in 1967, by the US Supreme Court in the case *Loving v. Virginia*.

The eugenicists' theories about northern superiority did not include Indigenous peoples of the Arctic. Nineteenth-century anthropologists considered Inuit to be living in Stone Age cultures, even as European, US and Russian explorers forced Inuit guides to assist in their forays into frozen climes. Explorers also kidnapped Indigenous people. In 1897, for example, polar researcher Robert Peary transported six Greenland Inuit, including a man named Qisuk and his young son Minik, to the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, where visitors were invited to ogle them. Four, including Qisuk, died of tuberculosis. Despite Minik's lifelong quest to retrieve his father's remains, the museum stored the bones of these four people until 1993, when they were returned for traditional burial in Qaanaaq, the northernmost town in Greenland.

The melting north

Today, Qaanaaq is succumbing to the effects of climate change as the permafrost melts, causing houses to crack and sink. That's a key part of the Arctic story, to which Brunner gives scant attention. Likewise, he expends little space on Indigenous people's own knowledge and adaptation to their environment, their myriad languages (at least 20 in Alaska alone) or their sacred traditions.

Northern Indigenous peoples might be forced to adapt to their changing environment. According to the 2021 Arctic Report Card published by the US National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, the Arctic is warming more than twice as fast as the rest of the planet. On 14 August 14 2021, rain – rather than snow – was observed at Greenland's 3,200-metre-altitude Summit Station for the first time. In June 2021, snow cover in the Eurasian Arctic was its third-lowest since records began in 1967. The Arctic, says the report, “is disappearing before our eyes” due to “unrelenting human-caused climate change”.

As the North warms and microplastics contaminate Arctic snow, sea ice, sea water and beaches, it seems that those “giant plastic bubbles surrounding Arctic villages with a cloak of warm air”, are no longer mere fantasy. As one speaker notes in *The Idea of North*: “Our number one enemy, instead of being Mother Nature, is, of course, human nature.”

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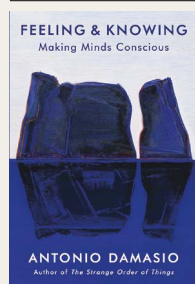
Books in brief



Back to Earth

Nicole Stott *Seal* (2021)

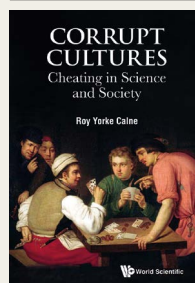
NASA astronaut Nicole Stott says that “you are grounded” are “the worst and the best three words” an astronaut can hear — signifying either that the astronaut is forbidden to fly, or that they have an attribute crucial for success. The words also suggest her book's down-to-earth purpose: to explain how space flight enriches life on Earth. She recalls her own “Earthrise moment” on first looking out of the Space Shuttle — the sudden realization that we live on a planet that must be preserved from human destruction.



Feeling & Knowing

Antonio Damasio *Pantheon* (2021)

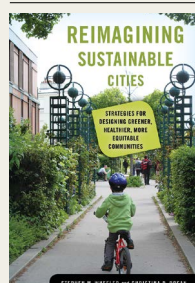
According to neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, the origin of consciousness — “the intriguing pirouette that allows the physical body to harbour mental experiences” — is often considered impossible to explain, despite the efforts of brilliant minds ranging from Sigmund Freud to Francis Crick. This intentionally short book for the general reader provides no explanation of consciousness as such, but much elegant prose to provoke thought, including ideas from biology, neuroscience, philosophy and psychology.



Corrupt Cultures

Roy Yorke Calne *World Scientific* (2021)

Organ-transplant pioneer Roy Calne draws on a long career in his brief, straightforward reflection on how to reduce cheating in science. It focuses on three accepted cases of fraud — by dermatologist William Summerlin, biologist Haruko Obokata and surgeon Paolo Macchiarini — implicating major institutions. He suggests ways to minimize misconduct, and admits that it is “immensely difficult”. He ends with advice from the Buddha: “Believe nothing, even if I have said it, unless it agrees with your own reason and common sense.”



Reimagining Sustainable Cities

Stephen M. Wheeler & Christina D. Rosan *Univ. California Press* (2021)

“Go to the city/See the crazy people there./Like lambs to the slaughter,/They're drinking the water,/And breathing [cough] the air!” sang Tom Lehrer in ‘Pollution’ in 1965. The concept of sustainable development was pioneered in a 1972 report. Half a century on, drastic change is still needed, warn urban ecologists Stephen Wheeler and Christina Rosen in their enlightening survey of today's cities. They offer practical, if challenging, strategies for promoting “ecological health, social equity, quality of life, cooperation and compassion”.



Media Hot & Cold

Nicole Starosielski *Duke Univ. Press* (2021)

The intense media focus on climate change makes this meditation on the cultural significance of temperature coolly topical. Nicole Starosielski's background is in media, culture and communication; despite references to science and technologies such as thermostats and infrared cameras, she mainly considers heat's social effects. She cites the Ford Motor Company's history of giving the hot, dangerous jobs in its foundry to Black workers, which reinforced racial stereotypes about suitability for certain types of labour. **Andrew Robinson**