

Europe's "Others" in the Polar Mediterranean

Philip E. Steinberg

Durham University

Philip.steinberg@durham.ac.uk

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ABSTRACT

A large body of literature problematizes the role of the Mediterranean, as both civilizational hearth and liminal frontier, in both ancient and modern Europe. However, much less attention has been directed to the inland sea at Europe's *northern* edge: the Arctic. Increasingly, as the Arctic becomes attractive to non-Arctic European capitals as a potential site of investment and (in)security, European states, and perhaps the EU as a whole, are seeking to construct the Arctic, like the Mediterranean, as a space that is both marginal and central to the continent's future. This paper seeks to investigate the extent to which the Arctic is, to paraphrase Viljalmur Stefansson, Europe's "Polar Mediterranean" and what this means for Europe as it constructs institutions and identities that, as in the Mediterranean, use the concept of the inland sea to both incorporate and differentiate its internal and external "others."

KEY WORDS: Arctic, Mediterranean, Orientalism, Polar Mediterranean, Postcolonialism, Viljalmur Stefansson

INTRODUCTION

The Mediterranean looms large in European identity-myths. From its long-held imagined role as the hearth of modern civilization to its contemporary (and equally imagined) function as a barrier that secures its borders and regulates immigration,

the Mediterranean has a crucial role in the narratives by which Europe constructs its unified identity and defines itself against, and in relation to, proximate yet subordinate “others” (Celata & Coletti 2012). Indeed, the Mediterranean is where Said’s (1978) “Orient” begins.

However, the Mediterranean is more than just an imagined barrier or culture hearth. It is also an *inland sea* and this gives it a specific role in facilitating both separation and connection. Just as the sea presents itself as a persistent, but also potentially crossable, divide for today’s African migrants, it provides a fertile environment for the combination of similitude and difference that characterizes orientalist tropes. The Mediterranean is both an inland sea and a border, and out of this spring a number of paradoxical functions: The Mediterranean affords Europe identity *and* differentiation, protection *and* vulnerability, opportunity *and* insularity.

As James Sidaway (2013) notes, although regional categorizations can provide false senses of closure and unity they also can direct attention to the differences and power relations that are reproduced amidst everyday commercial and cultural exchanges. The Mediterranean, or, more specifically, mediterraneanism – the concept of thinking with the Mediterranean – thus emerges as a multifaceted geopolitical trope that conveys a variety of meanings, all of which are produced within the tension-filled vortices of power, differentiation, separation, and integration that characterize the postcolonial condition. This article explores the complexities of the mediterraneanist trope, with special attention to how the concept of mediterraneanism has migrated from Europe’s southern border to the Arctic, adding a northern dimension to the means by which Europe defines itself and

its “others.” While Europe’s contemporary awakening to the opportunities for resource extraction, commerce, and social development (i.e. “modernization”) on its northern frontier suggests a radical change from earlier eras when polar ice was viewed as a barrier and a limit, the new (or, in fact, revived) construction of the Arctic as a “Polar Mediterranean” draws on long-held discursive constructions of borders, borderings, and regional essence.

THINKING WITH MEDITERRANEANS

While ocean basin regions have been promoted by some as alternatives to static and statist perspectives that valorize and naturalize terrestrial continents, in fact the designation of a maritime region, like the designation of a land region, carries with it a series of implicit meanings that promote some understandings and foreclose others (Lewis & Wigen 1999; Steinberg 2013). In particular, as Paolo Giaccaria and Claudio Minca (2011) discuss in their study of the Mediterranean, the idea of the maritime region reproduces and naturalizes the ideals of timeless unity amidst irreconcilable difference that lie at the center of postcolonial worldviews. Giaccaria and Minca discuss how the ocean at the center of the Mediterranean region links spaces and societies that are purported to be “naturally” different. The opposite sides of an inland sea exist in a regional unity, notwithstanding their division by a seemingly natural barrier. Because the ocean connects, even as it fails to homogenize, the societies within an ocean region appear to exist in a permanent universe of interchange that reproduces hierarchical relations. Continual interaction

and self-definition within an environment of inequality is thereby not only justified; it is seen as *natural*.

All ocean regions, in this sense, embody the reification of hierarchy amidst assertions of a greater civilizational unity that Sidaway, drawing on postcolonial theory, associates with regions in general. However, these dynamics are especially apparent in the Mediterranean, the historic point of intersection between Europe and its most pervasive “other”: the Arab “Orient” (Chambers 2008). As Giaccaria and Minca write:

[Amidst] a paradoxical interplay between different (and potentially conflictual) representations of this sea that alternate narratives of homogeneity and continuity with those of heterogeneity and discontinuity...[the rhetoric of mediterraneanism sustains] the belief in the existence of a *geographical object called the Mediterranean*, where different forms of proximity (morphological, climatic, cultural, religious, etc.) justify a specific rhetorical apparatus through the production of a simplified field of inquiry, otherwise irreducible to a single image. (Giaccaria & Minca 2011, p. 348, emphasis in original)

The Mediterranean thus comes to be seen as something that, although permanently divided, is also permanent in its wholeness: “The *mediteraneisme de la fracture* [is understood as]...something substantially immutable – a vision that resembles, in many ways, the cultural ‘containers’ imagined and celebrated in Orientalist colonial rhetoric and Romantic literature” (Giaccaria & Minca 2011, p. 353).

Giaccaria and Minca conclude their article at the Mediterranean's edge, but, in fact the ultimate power of mediterraneanism, like all forms of orientalism, lies not simply in reproducing an ideal of stabilized difference but in the designation of this unity as a *category* that can then be integrated into systems of language and meaning that, in turn, are used to "understand" (and thereby design futures for) other peoples (Mignolo 2003, 2005). Put another way, the power of mediterraneanism (the idea of there being a distinct mediterranean region-type wherein interaction amidst difference is naturalized by the presence of an inland sea that simultaneously connects and divides) flows not just from its purported ability to explain the (upper-case) Mediterranean but from its functionality as an epistemological perspective wherein the presence of an inner sea (a lower-case mediterranean) is used to explain a generalized condition of difference amidst connection (Steinberg 2014). In short, the power of the mediterranean idea derives not just from its representation of a divided but unified ocean basin as "something substantially immutable" but from the idea's existence as an "immutable mobile" (Latour 1987), an idea that travels. Employed as a geographic category, the idea of the mediterranean thus becomes, like other spatial metaphors, as notable for the options it forecloses as for those it opens up (Brown 2000; Smith & Katz 1993).

Yet as an idea travels it also undergoes translation (Clifford 1997), notwithstanding its claim to immutability. Indeed, although knowledge of the world emerges from one specific space and time, a spatial knowledge system's power lies in its ability to mutate as it both connects and divides, producing concepts of both difference and similitude across and within spaces (Livingstone 2003; Livingstone &

Withers 2011). The remainder of this article thereby turns not just to the travel, but also the translation of mediterraneanism in the construction of Europe's northern "other."

THE ARCTIC AS POLAR MEDITERRANEAN

The travel and translation of geographic imaginaries between the Mediterranean and the Arctic has a long and complex history, in which abjection over the Arctic's apparent desolation is tinged with a degree of romanticism and longing. As Barry Lopez notes,

The Old World regarded the Arctic as an inaccessible place. Beyond a certain gloomy and hostile border country, however, they did not imagine it as inhospitable. Indeed, in Greek myths this most distant part of the Arctic was a country of rich, lacustrine soils, soft azure skies, gentle breezes (zephyrs), fecund animals, and trees that bore fruit even in winter, a region farther north than the birthplace of the North Wind (Boreas). The inhabitants of Hyperborea, as it was called, were thought to be the oldest of the human races, and to be comparable themselves with the land – compassionate in temperament, knowing no want, of a contemplative bent. (Lopez 2001, pp. 16-17; see also McGhee 2007)

The modern application of mediterraneanism to the Arctic dates to the writings of Canadian-American anthropologist Vilhjalmur Stefansson, who, in the 1920s, distanced himself from Arctic explorers of the era who boasted of their ability to sustain themselves in a harsh and hostile environment. Instead, Stefansson

aligned himself more with the Ancient Greeks, writing of a “friendly Arctic” (Stefansson 1921) in which the local culture was harmonized with climatic conditions, which, he argued, were in fact not as miserable as often portrayed by outsiders. An ardent advocate of high-protein, animal-fat-based diets, Stefansson (1946) dismissed skeptics who felt that the low productivity of Arctic soils and minimal carbohydrate production might form a barrier to the rise of an agricultural surplus and urban-based modernization there. For the carnivorous Stefansson, the Arctic was not only friendly; it was fertile.

According to Stefansson, the potential of the Arctic was about to be realized by emergent transport technologies. Tapping into an emergent Canadian northern aviation aesthetic, in which the Arctic was coming to be understood as a sublime space that was both challenging and attainable in its awesome harshness and beauty (Cronin forthcoming), Stefansson (1922b) felt that with the advent of the airplane the Arctic was finally going to blossom as a mediterranean region in which interaction and trade among diverse neighboring cultures would lead to civilizational development. As he wrote in *National Geographic Magazine*:

The map of the Northern Hemisphere shows that the Arctic Ocean is a huge Mediterranean. It lies between the continents somewhat as the Mediterranean lies between Europe and Africa. In the past it has been an impassable Mediterranean. In the near future, it will not only become passable, but will become a favorite air route between the continents, at least at certain seasons – safer, more comfortable, and consisting of shorter “hops”

than any other air route that lies across the oceans that separate the present-day centers of population. (Stefansson 1922a, p. 205)

Stefansson expands on these remarks elsewhere, connecting the increased use of the Arctic as a transit hub with its development as a civilizational center:

We would do well to go back to an Elizabethan custom and call it not the Arctic Ocean but the Polar Sea or Polar Mediterranean. The map shows that most of the land in the world is in the Northern Hemisphere, that the Polar Sea is like a hub from which the continents radiate like the spokes of a wheel. The white patch shows that the part of the Polar Sea never yet navigated by ships is small when compared to the surrounding land masses. In the coming air age, the...Arctic will be like an open park in the center of the uninhabited city of the world, and the air voyagers will cross it like taxi riders crossing a park. Then will the Arctic islands become valuable, first as way stations and later because of their intrinsic value — minerals, grazing, fisheries. (cited in Weigert et al. 1957, p. 247)

Mediterraneans as culture hearths – Stefansson was a prominent explorer and promoter of Arctic colonization – he headed the 1913-1916 Canadian Arctic Expedition – whose writings and life have been analyzed extensively (Diubaldo 1978; Hunt 1986; Gisli Pálsson 2003; Sawchuck 2008; Stuhl 2013). Of particular relevance for this article, though, is how, in pointing to the potential for civilizational development in the “Polar Mediterranean,” he references long-held beliefs about the (southern) Mediterranean as the heart of Western civilization, and then projects

them northward to a new arena of mediterranean commerce and cultural exchange. Indeed, Stefansson makes this point explicitly in *The Northward Course of Empire* (Stefansson 1922b), in which he maps how, through the progression of time, the center of civilization has moved ever northwards, from a starting point in Upper Egypt (ca. 3400 BCE) on through Phoenicia, Athens, Rome, Florence/Venice, and London/Paris/New York, with the trend line pointing to Winnipeg as the next global metropole.

Leaving aside the methodological naïveté underlying Stefansson's socio-climatic model, *The Northward Course of Empire* is a highly racialized narrative (Gisli Pálsson 2003). Although Stefansson does consider historic non-Western civilizations, they drop out as the leading edge of progress advances northward. Instead, Stefansson relies on a long tradition of scholars who identify the roots of Western civilization in Europe's Greco-Roman heritage, a history that has subsequently been problematized both by those who stress that this tradition is actually a Euro-African-Asian hybrid (e.g. Bernal 1991) and by those who stress that the European roots of "Western Civilization" are themselves diverse and not strictly Mediterranean (e.g. Gress 1998).

In identifying the Polar Mediterranean as the next center of Western (or global) civilization, Stefansson fuses the classicist identification of the Mediterranean as Europe's culture hearth with fin-de-siècle racialist theories that exalt the achievements and strength of Europe's Nordic race (e.g. Grant 1921; Günther 1992 [1927]; Ripley 1899). In the process of transposing the Mediterranean vision of Europe's essence to the continent's northern limits,

Stefansson reproduces a problem that inevitably emerges when one locates a region's essence at its borders: Borders are places where cultures mix and, if regional essences exist in pure form anywhere, they are least likely to be found at the border.

Intellectual historians who have sought to locate Europe's essence in the Mediterranean border region have accommodated this conundrum by erasing African and Asian influences on Greco-Roman (and hence European) thought (Bernal 1991) and by casting the Mediterranean Sea itself as a seemingly impenetrable, continent-defining barrier of metaphysical proportions (Lewis & Wigen 1997). More broadly, these efforts reflect a modern-era trend of constructing a one-to-one, mutually inclusive equivalence between Whiteness and European heritage (Bonnett 1998). In the Arctic, Stefansson constructed the North as a European space by inventing the racial category of the "Blonde Eskimo," the mixed offspring of Inuit and early Norse settlers (Stefansson 1928). This Whitening (or Europeanization) of the North complemented the contemporaneous effort to recast Vikings not as frontier barbarians but as essential Europeans, a discursive move that brought Iceland as well into the European fold (Oslund 2011). Today, this myth of a northern mediterranean Euro-American (and White) circumpolar region continues in Canadian efforts to define the nation as a North American extension of Nordic Europe, a Great White North that is imagined to ground the identity of the nation's (overwhelmingly non-Arctic) citizens (Baldwin, Cameron, & Kobayashi 2011; Grace 2007; Shields 1992).

Mediterraneans as zones of (dis)unity – Scholars of Europe’s Mediterranean strategy note that efforts by Europe to link with its southern neighbors do more than simply establish norms for external relations. They also serve to define what (and where) Europe is. Policy preferences toward the Mediterranean inevitably reflect ideas about, for instance, whether one can be European *without* being Mediterranean as well as whether individual countries on the other side of the Mediterranean should have the same role as the EU in determining Mediterranean policy (Celata & Coletti 2012; Jones 2006; Jones & Clark 2008). In other words, in defining its Mediterranean character, Europe defines not just its external others but also its very identity and, in the process, the relationship between the whole of the European project and its constituent parts.

In the European (and North American) Arctic, as in the European Mediterranean, this leads to a second problem with defining a region’s essence through a peripheral zone of connection: How does one situate the individual who resides distant from the periphery that gives the region its iconic status? This creates an ideological dilemma for the Canadian official who seeks to build a sense of nationhood among individual Canadians who have never been to, and have no desire to make a pilgrimage to, the country’s Arctic north; the Nazi official who realizes that, according to dominant racial classifications of the time, the majority of ethnic Germans are not Nordic but Alpine; or, more contemporaneously, the EU official in Brussels who would like to dismiss the fiscally profligate Greeks and Italians as not upholding the ideal of European restraint but who can only go so far in questioning the European character of the lands of Socrates and Cicero. Much the

same has occurred as Europe has developed its Arctic policy. As Europe defines its essence in its *borders* (or in specific border regions), questions emerge regarding what this alleged essence means to actors located far from the border region but who think of themselves as *part* of Europe. Practically, these questions are reflected in a debate over whether non-Arctic European states should have a voice in determining the EU's Arctic policy.

Individuals from both Arctic and non-Arctic European states have pointed to the Mediterranean when making their respective arguments for exclusion or inclusion of non-Arctic states from the EU's Arctic policy-making process. Arguing for exclusion, a Greenlandic government official referenced the Mediterranean to make the case that the Arctic lay at Europe's margin, and thus it was an inappropriate arena for intervention by non-Arctic European states:

Of course we would like to hear what others have to say. But this region is no more different than the Mediterranean, right? In principle. What can we actually say ... we have nothing to say about what happens within the Mediterranean. Or with [relations with] Africa. Because that's their area, and they have a say-so there. In the Mediterranean, the countries around the Mediterranean decide what happens there. They will not, absolutely not accept us coming there saying you should do this and that. And it's the same up here, in principle. (Author's interview, Nuuk, July 2010)¹

Conversely, a non-Arctic member of the European Union's delegation to the European Parliament's Standing Committee of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region

referenced the Mediterranean to justify why non-Arctic countries *should* be involved in Arctic policy making:

The EU is partly Arctic in a way, and I mean you can also compare it to the Mediterranean policy of the EU. I mean, not all EU member states are Mediterranean, obviously. Maybe it is more obvious that the EU should have an interest in the Mediterranean region, but I mean you could also use the same argument and say that all the European states are Mediterranean states.

(Author's interview, Oslo, June 2010)²

Despite their opposing views, both individuals quoted here constructed their arguments in similar ways, referencing the position of Europe in the Mediterranean to argue for the legitimacy (or illegitimacy) of non-Arctic states playing a role in determining Europe's Arctic policy. In the northern mediterranean, as in the southern, the specification of processes for defining Europe's relations with its external "other" have intersected with European attempts at defining itself.

Mediterraneans as sites of commercial opportunity – Just as references to the Mediterranean are employed to construct a notion of the Arctic as a space of continental (or racial) essence that, to a greater or lesser extent, has internal as well as external borders and hierarchies, these references also are employed to identify the Arctic as a space of commercial opportunity. In this respect, promoters of Arctic development reach back to the Greek ideal of the *emporion*, the port city that, through its location at a maritime crossroads, first emerges as a trade hub and later becomes a point where the free flow of ideas leads to civilizational cultural, social,

and political innovations. This is what Stefansson was referring to when discussing the economic dynamism that will accrue to Arctic islands once they emerge as cosmopolitan nodes on heavily trafficked trade routes. Today, it is an image most frequently promoted by Iceland, where officials' speak of the potential for becoming an "Arctic Singapore." As Icelandic Ambassador Gunnar Pálsson stated in a 2006 speech titled "The Polar Mediterranean: Change and Opportunities for the Countries of the Arctic Rim":

We may now find ourselves on the threshold of a new epoch, where changes in the patterns of climate, settlements, energy consumption, trade and transportation will begin to converge in a way that could transform the world we live in. In effect, we could be moving towards the activation of the Arctic in a manner that would radically alter, if not reverse, our conceptions of the world's periphery and center. We could, in effect, be moving towards a world with the pole in the middle; the Polar Mediterranean. (Gunnar Pálsson 2006)

Although explicit and implicit references to the Arctic as a mediterranean zone of opportunity, where trade links can lead to cultural exchange and economic development, are especially prevalent in Iceland, they appear throughout the region, and they are the culmination of a pattern that prevailed throughout the twentieth century whereby pundits and promoters celebrated the emergence of a "New North" (Stuhl 2013). Mikhail Gorbachev did not specifically reference the Mediterranean in his landmark 1987 Murmansk speech, in which he announced, "The Arctic is not only the Arctic Ocean but also....the place where the Eurasian, North American, and

Asia Pacific regions meet, where the frontiers come close to one another and the interests of states...cross (cited in Keskitalo 2004, p. 43),” but his vision, which is often credited with laying the groundwork for the formation of the Arctic Council ten years later, effectively reproduced Stefansson’s image of a Polar Mediterranean.

A similar theme of proximity across an inland sea fostering shared interests, and thus opportunity, was voiced by former Alaska governor and US Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin in her much-lampooned “You can see Russia from Alaska” comment (ABC News 2009).³ This comment was expanded upon by another Alaskan elected official:

The first geography teacher I ever had suggested that civilizations come about because of interaction and accessibility, and you know, that’s what classic geography says, “Look at rivers, ports, how does this all happen?”[With climate change] I’d be fascinated to kind of take the classical geographic thinking and say, “Okay, what will be the ties that will endure, that will ultimately change this?” And I don’t know what they are; there’s a lot of potential right now and there are some things that [will] work and things that won’t work, but now, you take a look at the vision of the Arctic, where the unified Arctic is kind of a Mediterranean play and so forth....And that is the question that I’d ask if I had a National Science Foundation grant to look at cooperation in the Arctic. Because in the end, all the meetings we do, they’re fun meetings. But what endures is what people are going to do with Arctic regular commerce. (Author’s interview, Anchorage, June 2010)

Mediterraneans as geostrategic zones of conflict – Notwithstanding this dream of free and peaceful commerce across a tamed inland sea, whenever there is interaction there is also the potential for hostility. As such, just as the designation of the Arctic as a “Polar Mediterranean” is used to promote a vision of Europe (and North America) peacefully extending its frontiers, it is also used to suggest a vision of the inland sea as an arena of conflict.

Thus, during the height of the Second Cold War, U.S. sociologist Joseph Roucek drew directly on Stefansson’s writings about aerospace technology uniting the Arctic to assert a new age of integration brought about by the intercontinental ballistic missile:

The “Arctic Mediterranean” is a perfect example of an area in which technological advances, especially in aviation, have caused far-reaching changes which force a new evaluation of locational factors in the region.

(Roucek 1983, p. 463)

The key “locational factor” for Roucek was that the Soviet Union was now much closer to the United States than most Americans realized, and that strategic resources should therefore be deployed northward. A similar perspective was taken in 2010 by the Standing Committee on National Defence in Canada’s House of Commons when it issued a report on “Canada’s Arctic Sovereignty” (Government of Canada 2010), which begins with a reference to Stefansson’s concept of the Polar Mediterranean. The authors of the report associate the rise of the Polar Mediterranean not with the emergent air transport sector identified by Stefansson nor with the missiles identified by Roucek but with climate change and the end of

the Cold War. Notwithstanding this shift in proximate cause, however, the authors of the Senate report, much like Roucek, assert that the rise of the Polar Mediterranean requires a muscular response, and thus Canada is urged to adopt a policy that integrates national development with national defense so that the Polar Mediterranean can be a site of opportunity and not insecurity. Similar themes appear in Norway's Arctic strategy (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2011).

In the past decade a number of geopolitical scholars and journalists have sought to use the Mediterranean to understand the security issues at stake in the Arctic. Writing in *Foreign Affairs*, former US Coast Guard officer Scott Borgerson wrote:

The Mediterranean Sea is somewhat similar to the Arctic Ocean, but its littoral states have always had clearer historical claims. (Borgerson 2008, p. 73)

Borgerson's point is highly contestable, not least because it is difficult to find factual support for his core premise about historical claims being weaker in the Arctic than in the Mediterranean. But for purposes of this article Borgerson's statement is interesting because he sees the similarity between the two mediterraneans as so strong that he can go on to specify a unique point of difference (clarity of historical claims).

Borgerson is not alone in using a comparison of mediterraneans to highlight the unique conditions of instability faced by the *Polar* Mediterranean. According to military affairs journalist Barry Zellen, the only factor that to date has prevented the Arctic from emerging as a mediterranean region of exchange and investment is its

climate. Now, however, with climate change the Arctic has the potential to emerge as a “new Mediterranean.” Up to this point, Zellen’s argument resembles the Canadian Parliament’s reinterpretation of Stefansson, but then Zellen reaches past Stefansson to Sir Halford Mackinder, presenting a much darker view of the coming Arctic thaw, as rising opportunity is paired with rising insecurity:

In terms popularized by Sir Halford John Mackinder, the famed theorist of geopolitics, the long isolated “Lenaland” along the Arctic basin will transform into a highly productive and strategically important “Rimland,” transforming the Arctic into tomorrow’s equivalent of the Mediterranean, a true strategic, economic and military crossroads of the world. (Zellen 2008)

An even darker view of the Polar Mediterranean is held by naval strategist James Holmes, who asserts in the subtitle of his contribution to *Foreign Policy*, “The Arctic is the Mediterranean of the 21st Century” (Holmes 2012). Through a detailed reapplication of classic works of geopolitics by the likes Mahan, Mackinder, and Spykman to the physical geographic and geoeconomic conditions of the 21st century, Holmes concludes that the Arctic is set to emerge as a mediterranean sea of increasing significance. Geophysically, the Arctic may not be that different than other mediterraneans like the Caribbean Sea, the South China Sea, or the Mediterranean. However, for Holmes the Arctic and the Mediterranean have a further defining feature that distinguishes them from the other two: multipolarity:

The logic that drove great-power competition in the Mediterranean Sea for many centuries could well take hold in the polar Mediterranean. Like the Mediterranean, the Arctic Ocean is ringed by strong seafaring nations,

including Russia and five NATO allies. This stands in stark contrast to the Caribbean Sea and...the South China Sea [in which] a single strong power overshadows many lesser ones. (Holmes 2012)

As with Borgerson, many of Holmes' facts are disputable. Arguably, for instance, the South China Sea has two "strong powers," not one (the United States as well as China) and it is difficult to accept Holmes' implication that Iceland, one of the five NATO allies that rings the Arctic, is a "strong seafaring nation." These questionable assertions aside, Holmes, like Borgerson elevates the mediterranean to the level of a fixed category, stable enough that he can differentiate the category into two sub-categories: multipolar mediterraneans (the Arctic and the Mediterranean) and unipolar mediterraneans (the Caribbean and the South China Sea).

The "other" side of the Polar Mediterranean – In addition to assuming the existence (and significance) of the mediterranean category, Holmes also assumes a binary division of the Polar Mediterranean inherited from the Cold War: the division between "Russia" and "five NATO allies." While tensions between Russia and NATO certainly exist, especially since Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, and some of these tensions have been played out in the Arctic, the scripting of Arctic geopolitics as a binary competition between Russia and "The West" is an oversimplification. Russia generally has joined with other Arctic nations in following established norms of international diplomacy and rules of international law and Russia has a record of forging common cause with specific Western nations on areas of shared common interest (e.g. first Soviet and later Russian shared interest with Canada on

minimizing limits on sovereign rights to control access to the Northern Sea Route and the Northwest Passage) (Anderson 2009; Knecht & Keil 2013). Notwithstanding these complexities and nuances that characterize great power politics in the Arctic, when one views the region through the spatial lens of mediterraneanism one carries forth the binary ideal of an “other” that lies on the far side of the inland sea, inexorably connected, but also profoundly “different.” In the Polar Mediterranean, this “other” is invariably Russia, a country whose role in Arctic geopolitics narratives parallels that of the Arab “Orient” in the Mediterranean or, as Michael Bravo (2009) notes, that of Africa in the modernization narratives that drive the global development industry.

This construction of an external but proximate “other” is multifaceted because, as scholars of postcolonialism note, wherever there is difference across an integrative divide there is also the possibility of redemption, an attitude that informs initiatives to foster economic (and social and political) development as well as the general principle of liberal interventionism. And this, in turn, circles back to Giaccaria and Minca, who identify in the Mediterranean (and, I would argue, other mediterraneans, including the Arctic) “[a] paradoxical interplay...that alternate[s] narratives of homogeneity and continuity with those of heterogeneity and discontinuity” (Giaccaria & Minca 2011, p. 348). The flexibility of the mediterranean image – in which the maritime center both erases and magnifies difference – and the intensity of the resultant “paradoxical interplay” allows individuals to use the image to support very different political diagnoses. For Gorbachev, Palin, Gunnar Pálsson, and the interviewed Alaskan official, the paradoxical qualities of the Polar

Mediterranean are used to highlight its potential as a space of peace wherein differences may be overcome through commerce and exchange. For Roucek, Borgerson, Zellen, and Holmes, by contrast, these same qualities are used to highlight its potential as a space of conflict wherein encounters between naturally separated nations are likely to breed distrust, acrimony, and, for Holmes in particular, armed conflict. The perspective of mediterraneanism thus carries with it ideals of both hope and fear in relations with the “other,” and this is as true on Europe’s northern frontier as it is on its southern.

A third perspective on the Arctic as a mediterranean where the West meets its “others” was articulated by a U.S. State Department official who effectively combined the Roucek/Borgerson/Zellen/Holmes position (that, as a divided space, the Arctic is a natural arena of discord and potential military conflict) with the Gorbachev/Palin/Pálsson/Alaskan position (that, as a maritime space, it is fundamentally a cosmopolitan arena of connection and potential commercial and cultural exchange):

A difficulty for the Russians is learning how to be part of the community. The old Soviet ways of doing things still seem to be ingrained in them....I think part of it is the Russian mindset, and getting past that....In some ways, it’s like [the Russians] have to learn to play nice with others, and the Arctic may be the place to do that. (Author’s interview, Washington, DC, June 2010)

For this official, the inland sea at the center of the Arctic, like the Mediterranean, creates divisions: In this instance, it divides the North between those who have the social skills and communitarian ethos to participate in the diplomatic community

and those who lack these skills and ethos. However, it also creates the connections that could lead to transcendence of these divisions (the possibility that the Russians will “learn to play nice with others”). Interaction between these disparate neighbors is therefore seen as potentially productive, and increasingly likely due to connections brought about by the inland sea. However, such connections are also recognized as inevitably fraught with tension due to superorganic cultural differences that result from the geographic division mediated by that same intervening ocean and due to the power relations projected across it. Russia is understood as having the potential to be a cooperative party to negotiations, but only if the Russians learn to act like the NATO allies.

CONCLUSION

Giaccaria and Minca call Mediterranean geographies “the source and the mirror of many European postcolonial geographies” (Giaccaria & Minca 2011, p. 346).

Although they are referring to Europe’s relations with its more distant “others,” similar parallels exist with the adjacent lands (and waters) on Europe’s proximate northern fringe. As I have suggested in this article, the Polar Mediterranean, like the Mediterranean itself, constructs relations and ideals of proximity and distance, difference and unity, and power and cooperation. Thus it is not surprising that the Mediterranean is often consciously deployed as a referent to reproduce similar imaginaries in the North.

As in the Mediterranean, however, this linking of so many disparate images and desires to the trope of the inland sea produces a degree of tension within the

Polar Mediterranean image. Duncan Depledge and Klaus Dodds allude to this tension when they write,

The analogy with the Mediterranean is striking, highlighting on the one hand an area of common concern for neighbouring states (with the potential for both conflict and co-operation) but on the other, a space of transit (Depledge & Dodds 2011, p. 72).

I agree with Depledge and Dodds that the use of the analogy is “striking” in the ways in that it conjures up the potential for both conflict and cooperation in the region. However, I have argued here that the analogy is also potentially pernicious, for many of the same reasons that have been noted by others with reference to Europe’s southern maritime border. Through references to both the (upper-case) Mediterranean and the (lower-case) mediterranean socio-spatial ideal-type, the trope of the Polar Mediterranean naturalizes and dehistoricizes the idea of the Polar region as one of progressive modernization, unbroachable difference, and timeless binary oppositions. These understandings of the North, in turn, set the stage for future conflict, both between states on opposite sides of the Polar Mediterranean and, within each state, between inhabitants of its Polar Mediterranean region and those without significant regional roots. Mediterraneanization is as much an “othering” process on Europe’s northern border as it is on its southern border.

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¹ Greenland is not a part of the European Union, but that has no bearing on the government official’s remark. His point was not that EU countries (or the EU itself) should not have a role in Arctic governance. Rather, his point was that decisions about the Arctic should be made by state parties that are proximate to the Arctic

Ocean, just as Mediterranean policy should be made by state parties that are proximate to the Mediterranean Sea.

² All interviews referenced in this article were carried out as part of the US National Science Foundation-funded project on “Territorial Imaginaries and Arctic Sovereignty Claims” (grant number BCS-0921436). The Nuuk and Oslo interviews referenced here were conducted by Hannes Gerhardt, a collaborating researcher in the “Territorial Imaginaries” project, and I am grateful to him for making transcripts available for use in this article. Complete findings from the “Territorial Imaginaries” and the subsequent European Commission-funded project on “Global Alternatives for an Interconnected Arctic (Marie Curie action IIF-GA-2010-275846) can be found in Steinberg et al. 2015).

³ Palin’s actual statement – which did *not* include the assertion that she could see Russia from her home or anywhere else on mainland Alaska – simply stressed that Russia was an important and proximate neighbor and that during her tenure as Alaska’s governor Russia had commanded her attention.