

To Walk Diagonally: Arctic Circle Assembly 2023

By Alexandra Cronin



“You know what they say about the wind in Iceland?” Professor Rockford (Rocky) Weitz calls over his shoulder as he fords a path to the exit. My classmates and I trail a few steps behind him, leaning heavily on the handles of our suitcases. Beyond the windows of Arrivals, the sun hasn’t risen.

Other travelers file out ahead, and Rocky’s trench coat begins to snap at his heels. “It only blows in one direction: in your face!” He has timed the joke to perfection; as the first wave of students cross the threshold between airport and Arctic, we stagger under the combined influences of jet lag and a relentless wind that seems to defy the laws of physics.

This, I remember thinking, was an auspicious introduction to Iceland. Of all the myriad reasons I chose to attend the Arctic Circle Assembly, wind energy and the Arctic Council’s cooperative record were foremost among them. At Fletcher, I am researching various facets of the offshore wind industry in the broader context of a just transition as well as governance mechanisms that lend themselves to cooperation. I am particularly interested in environmental peacebuilding - a paradigm-shifting field of study that re-characterizes shared environments and resources as incentives to collaborate rather than compete (Dresse et al., 2019) - and I approached the Assembly as a potential site of such environmentally-oriented cooperation.

Of the international conferences that I have attended to date, this was by far the most informative, energized, and thoughtfully organized. So much of the language that emerges from global climate symposiums sacrifices granularity and meaning in favor of painting the crisis in broad-strokes, but the Arctic Circle Assembly managed to balance high-level plenary sessions with place-based, science-driven panels, ultimately delivering more compelling and optimistic visions of our possible climate futures. This was most evident in the opening plenaries, which framed the Assembly as a signpost

along the road to COP28. Despite warming at three times the global annual average, the Arctic is leading renewable energy expansion. The prospects for economic growth in renewables are a proven concept in the Arctic, elucidated across the Assembly's 200 panels and embodied by Iceland's own [energy mix](#), which derives nearly 73% of electricity from hydropower and 27% from geothermal power. The challenge would be to convince traditional energy producers that it is economically feasible to support a fossil fuel phase out while scaling up renewables, a tension evidenced during an opening plenary with Sultan Al-Jaber, President Designate of COP28 (head of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, as well as Chairman of its smaller, renewable counterpart, Masdar). The Sultan's perceived conflict of interest had been gaining significant media attention, and when a Scottish Member of Parliament asked what mandates the Sultan planned to introduce within the state oil company, he declined to answer.



While I do not believe a country must be a paragon of renewable energy deployment to host a climate conference (very, very few countries would be eligible to do so, were that the case), siting the Arctic Circle Assembly in Iceland did make other countries' Net Zero commitments feel more practicable than aspirational. The place-based nature of many panels also allowed discussion to move beyond a nation-centric discussion of adaptation planning, focusing on renewables' uptake at local levels. I attended two panels featuring representatives from Inuit communities in the Canadian territory, Nunavut. The first panel highlighted Nunavut's first, 100% Inuit-owned renewable energy developer, NNC, which partners with local communities throughout the territory. NNC is technology-agnostic and community-specific, with free, prior, and informed consent at the center of their development approach. A "decision gauge" is implemented between each project phase, offering the community opportunities to say "yes" four times throughout the process. The fact that the utility is Inuit-owned is also viewed as a path towards Reconciliation, which is inextricably linked to the fact

that the utility develops micro- rather than integrated macro-grids. Contrary to the (increasingly popular) view that nations will require macrogrids to meet their energy needs, microgrids offer indigenous communities pathways to energy sovereignty, satisfying social as well as environmental needs.

Indigenous representation at all levels of Arctic dialogues and governance is paramount to the Arctic Council's cooperative record. Much like indigenous-owned microgrids in Canada, Indigenous Permanent Members of the Arctic Council, as well as the Inuit Circumpolar Council, challenge the nation-centric organization of global governance (and many twenty-first century energy regimes) in ways that have allowed residents of the Arctic Circle to constructively transcend nationalism. Given that the Inuit live in Arctic regions of Canada, Greenland, Alaska, and Russia, their representative voices are not tied to any one nation state, and it is this transboundary, transcendent governance, for example, that enabled the Arctic Council to remain operational during the Cold War, despite other diplomatic channels connecting the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. having eroded. Of great concern at this Assembly was the fact that, for the first time in the Council's history, Inuit living in Russia had not been able to communicate with other members of the Council since the start of Russia's war in Ukraine, and the dismantling of communicative networks has led many to fear for the safety of Indigenous communities in Russia, while also disrupting flows of climate-related data that are being collected by Inuit across the Arctic Ocean.

While I attended numerous panels pertaining to Indigenous representation and efforts to accelerate renewable energy deployment, critical minerals emerged as a common thread in my panel selection. Part of my interest in the just transition relates to the earliest level of renewables' supply chains: mineral processing, which is euphemistic for mining. Terrestrial mining of critical minerals is known to convey a range of environmentally deleterious side effects, including freshwater contamination and public health crises, while also supplying "necessary" materials for energy storage, photovoltaic panels, and wind turbines, among other renewable technologies. In humanities' efforts to continue extracting minerals, we attempt to "offshore" mining activities, first to more remote terrestrial regions (e.g. the contentious Ambler project currently under development in Alaska), then to the deep-sea bed, and given that neither of these locations are far enough to prevent the recirculation of environmental impacts, we are even entertaining "offshoring" mineral extraction to space, in the form of asteroid mining (MIT New Space Age Conference, 2022). Today's debate over minerals is rarely over whether or not we should mine, but where we can tap the greatest deposits of ore, and who can mine with the fewest infringements upon human health and local labor laws. In the Arctic, some view glacial retreat and the melting of sea ice as exposing new land (or seabed) for potential mineral extraction.

I only identified one panel at the Assembly that dealt with mining critically, though I was grateful to find even that one. Helmed by a handful of dissenters, "Beyond Deep-Sea Mining" had been sunk to the depths of Harpa Concert Hall, where it was manned by one very confused security guard who tried to redirect me upstairs because "This is just a garage." In fact, this was the garage *under* the

garage, and after some circular wanderings under the guard's skeptical eye, I followed an exit sign into what can only be described as a glorified storage closet. In terms of professional backgrounds, this was an exceptionally diverse panel, including a poet/Environmental Justice professor, a former official from the International Seabed Authority (ISA), a marine sociology PhD student, and an information designer/social cartographer. Each panelist sought to recharacterize the questions that we ask about mining, as well as the reasons we supply to justify it. Are minerals' criticality a question of science or of politics? What does it say about our species if the Arctic opens and instead of exploring it, we exploit it? If we "need minerals to avoid a scarcity of minerals," then mineral scarcity is artificially constructed. Can we have a subsistence future predicated on degrowth instead? Panelists proceeded to address the lack of information regarding the environmental impacts of mining, given that we know more about the moon than we do about the deep sea bed. Franck Leperowicz, formerly of the ISA, concluded that "science is a formidable vehicle for peace."

So too, I would argue, is art. As evidenced by the poet on the previous panel, the Assembly cleverly inflected science-based panels with speakers who were able to linguistically load data with meaning and put alternative spins on ideas that are accepted as factual. Imagination is an overarching instrument for course-correcting intervention. Too often, we find refuge in self-defeating language that traps ideas at ideation (e.g. it is not realistic to expect that nations will seek alternatives to mineral extraction). Progress is driven by the capacity to imagine alternatives and by a bizarre circularity that characterizes some human discoveries. A few centuries ago, for instance, salt was the world's "white gold": locked in the planet's oceans, extracted and traded as geopolitical currency. Today's white gold is lithium, a mineral that is "critical" to facilitate the green energy transition via stored energy. If we deem lithium critical, then the environmental degradation and public health crises that emerge from mineral extraction are not "avoidable"; rather, they are "collateral damage". A market predicated on scarcity (minerals are finite) is established to meet this need, engendering a race to stockpile the resource. Meanwhile, a startup, Malta, has found that salt - our original "white gold" - is capable of long-duration energy storage. Critical thought surrounding energy storage has complicated the prevailing narrative that lithium and other extractives are the single viable solution.

Lacking in our current conceptualizations of the transition is an epochal culture. We need data to take effective steps towards mitigation and adaptation, of course, but we also need artists to "escalate understanding" of that data. Icelandic science fiction author, Andri Snær Magnason, has described the twenty-first century as belonging to a mythical rather than historical timescale. While speaking as the self-proclaimed "wild card" in a panel on Arctic space research, Magnason suggested that, if ancient floods and the human-orchestrated movement of seas once inspired faith traditions, there may be value in wondering what knowledge we could encode in our books and institutions to inspire new patterns of behavior.

I am reminded of something the UAE's Climate Minister said as she seated herself on stage during opening plenaries, amid the scattered applause that marked Sultan Al-Jaber's departure via Zoom link. Leaning towards her audience, she asked us how we were doing, and - as one does, in the face

of a skeptical audience - remarked on the weather. Of the ferocious Arctic wind, she said that she had been “learning to walk diagonally.” This phrase encapsulates my central takeaways from the Assembly, from the windswept walks into Harpa each morning, to the collective efforts to find a new sociological center of gravity in a rapidly evolving landscape.

My sincerest thanks to CIERP for supporting a career-defining experience. I can earnestly say that I hope my career leads me back to the Arctic Circle Assembly, and the resources, contacts, and lingering questions I gained from the conference have already been invaluable as I develop my capstone and begin my post-Fletcher job search.

