Verduyn, Christl

North and south of the 49th Parallel in Seth's The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists

In: *Beyond the 49th Parallel: many faces of the Canadian North.* Le Calvé Ivičević, Evaine (editor); Polić, Vanja (editor). 1st edition Brno: Masaryk University, 2018, pp. 125-132

ISBN 978-80-210-9192-4

Central European Association for Canadian Studies
Association d'Etudes Canadiennes en Europe Centrale

North and South of the 49th parallel in Seth's *The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists*

Christl Verduyn
Mount Allison University, Sackville, Canada

Abstract
In Seth's graphic novel *The G.N.B. Double C*, "north of the 49th parallel" Canadian representations of Canada's north comprise "south of the 49th parallel" American elements in an unsettling reminder of the influence of a southern outlook on the Canadian north.

Keywords: north, graphic novel, Seth

Résumé
Les représentations canadiennes du Nord dans le roman graphique *The G.N.B. Double C* de Seth comprennent des éléments américains, rappelant l'influence des perspectives du Sud sur le Nord.

Mots-clés : Nord, roman graphique, Seth

> I couldn't imagine *why* the 49th parallel would represent any kind of real division in North American comics as a whole. Wouldn't all of us (…) have had more or less the same comics?
> Matt Kuhn, "The Canadian Cartoonists," *Modern Ideas* 8 June 2014.

In a response to Matt Kuhn's query "*why* the 49th parallel would represent any kind of real division in North American comics as a whole,"[1] this essay considers depictions and perspectives from north and south of the 49th parallel in the graphic novel *The G.N.B. Double C: The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists* by Canadian author Seth. Following some brief contextual information about the graphic novel genre in general, about the author Seth, pen name for Gregory Gallant, and about the Montreal-based publisher Drawn and Quarterly, the essay turns to the representation of Canada's north in *The G.N.B. Double C*. with particular attention to the curious character of Kao-Kuk, an Inuit astronaut, and the equally curious igloo-shaped Northern Archives situated in Canada's far north. The novel's narrative includes numerous additional "north of the 49th parallel" elements, from voyageurs, canoes, *coureurs de bois*, and bears, to Canadian Mounted Police and Glen Gould's "Idea of North." Together these imprint *The G.N.B. Double C* as Canadian "north of the 49th parallel" in perspective. At the same time, the novel and Seth's distinct use of the visual-textual relationship of graphic novels bring in perspectives from "south of the 49th parallel" such that *The G.N.B. Double C* draws a line at and then over the 49th parallel. This inscribes a political dimension to the work, an aspect of graphic novels that critics have noted, in particular in relation to a "melancholic tone" shared by many 1990s autobiographical comics.[2] In this melancholy, evoked in Seth's work by the persistence of the past, Dee-

1) "The Canadian Cartoonists," *Modern Ideas* 8 June 2014. *Modern Ideas* is the online journal of Modern Alchemy LLC, a graphic design studio in Lakewood, Ohio. Modern Alchemy was founded in 2006 by Matt Kuhn. In his 8 June 2014 article, Kuhn writes: "I think I very easily assumed that nearly everyone in *GNBCC* was fanciful, not only because I had not heard of them but because *the whole idea* that a distinct cartooning community existed in Canada seemed, well, silly. I'm not sure how far to go into this because I think Canada is just great (excepting the present government, an exception that also goes for my own state and nation fwiw) and have no desire to belittle it… *and yet* I guess that even I still have some tendency to think of Canada, or at least Anglophone Canada, as a kind of Mini-Me America. I mean, Canada's population is not *tiny* and obviously some people have followed their muse into cartooning… but I couldn't imagine *why* the 49th parallel would represent any kind of real division in North American comics as whole. Wouldn't all of us (again, Quebec potentially excepted) have had more or less the same comics? Obviously in the days of the traditional "funny pages" you got a slightly different selection from one city to another, but I would have guessed that Toronto and Edmonton and Winnipeg were mostly drawing from the same overall pool of syndicated strips as Chicago and Boston and Dallas. Most strips are sufficiently generic in their cultural background that they would seem to "work" for just about any affluent urban society; I know that at least some of the biggies are even syndicated in translation. *Why* would Canada actually have an entire separate comics history that I've never even heard of?"

2) Dan Mazur and Alexander Danner, *Comics: A Global History, 1968 to Present*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2014. Qtd in Rifkind and Warley, 4.

na Rhyms identifies a "specifically Canadian political position" (Rifkind and Warley, 5). For Rhyms this stems from "a strong interest in marginal identities and the social values that engender difference" (Rhyms, 75). A key marker of political difference, the 49th parallel between Canada and the United States also marks social and cultural difference – at least officially. In reality, there has been a historical upward flow of social and cultural impact from below the 49th parallel, and a struggle from above to stem the flow in an effort to preserve Canadian rather than an American identity and values. Seth's work traces this effort with respect to Canadian cartoons and cartoonists. Kathleen Dunley discusses how in *The G.N.B. Double C* Seth reclaims from the past Canadian cartoons/ists who have been mistaken for American or forgotten altogether. Just as his work presents a cartoon practice that is distinctly Canadian -- including in its American influence – Seth's depiction of Canada's north in *The G.N.B. Double C* shows that "north of the 49th parallel" Canadian representations comprise "south of the 49th parallel" American elements, a somewhat sobering contribution to growing awareness and understanding of realities versus myths about Canada's north that are the result of burgeoning scholarship on the subject today.

As Sherrill Grace points out in *Canada and the Idea of North* (2011), there is a great deal of research and scholarship on Canada's north available today, including her own impressive addition to this body of work. In an extensive interdisciplinary investigation of the "idea of north," Grace explores a wide range of representations, expressions, and experiences of Canada's north, from well before Confederation to the turn of the twenty-first century. Explorers, settlers, and before them Indigenous peoples; writers, painters, musicians, and film-makers; historians, geographers, economists, and politicians are among the many whose conceptualizations of the north are part of Grace's sweeping study. She identifies myths and realities about the north and prominent spokespersons on both. The names will be familiar: Margaret Atwood, Glen Gould (whose 1967 sound-recording of his trip to Canada's north inspired Grace's title), the Group of Seven (Canada's famous school of painters), Louis-Edmond Hamelin (the Canadian geographer who articulated the notion of nordicity), Harold Innis, Stephen Leacock, Lester B. Pearson, R. Murray Schafer, Vilhjalmur Stefansson, and Rudy Wiebe. These and many others have turned their attention to Canada's north and to the "themes" associated with it, which are also broadly familiar: the north as "deadly, cold, empty, barren, isolated, mysterious … a dangerous, hostile, female *terra incognita*" (Grace 16) or the north as "friendly," spiritual, sublime, full of promise and resources – the north as future.

Within this extensive research and commentary on the north, Grace's preferred lens is the arts. "When all is said and done," she suggests, "it is probably the novelist who has had the greatest impact on the Canadian imagination [about the north] …

Novels, especially popular novels, stay in print or are turned into movies, and novels, especially by major writers, are translated, put on school and university syllabi, and studied at home and abroad" (xv). Canadian novelist Aritha van Herk's works are compelling examples of this, with novels such as *The Tent Peg* (1981) and *Places Far from Ellesmere* (1990), or creative non-fiction works such as *A Frozen Tongue* (1992). Van Herk contributes to what is for Grace – and for other "southerners" – "one of the most important aspects of North: North as a '*mental* background'," -- a "mentality" or an "idea" (15). The north as idea is Grace's focus -- and the focus here: "the creation in words, sounds, images, signs, and symbols of a northern *mentality*" (Grace, 15). Of this, Seth's *The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists* is a prime example. Published a decade after Grace's study, *The G.N.B. Double C* adds to the catalogue of representations of the north a form of narrative increasingly prominent on the Canadian reading and publishing scene: the graphic novel. Seth is among forerunners of the form in Canada and the Montreal publishing company Drawn and Quarterly is pre-eminent in the field -- both north and south of the 49th parallel.

The definition and scope of the graphic novel, a relatively recent term from the 1960s, remain under debate but broadly speaking they refer to stories – fictional and non-fictional -- presented in comic-strip format and book form as opposed to periodical form. It is in the relationship between the visual and the textual that the graphic novel offers unique possibilities for insight and understanding, with the visual and the textual sometimes expanding, sometimes contradicting each other. Seth makes good use of this feature of the graphic novel. His work is known for its depiction of small-town southern Ontario, particularly in the early-to-mid 20th century. This lends a frequently nostalgic even melancholic tone to his texts.

The author's career launched with *Palookaville*, a semi-autobiographical story written in the early 1990s, then collected under the title *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken* and published in 1996 by Drawn and Quarterly. Established in 1990 as an alternative to the alternative comics scene of the day, Drawn and Quarterly has published the "who's who" of Canadian cartoonists and graphic novelists, including such notables as Chester Brown, Julie Doucet, and Seth. *The G.N.B. Double C: The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists* constitutes somewhat of a departure in Seth's work given his interest in depicting small-town Ontario settings. The title flags the more "northerly" outlook of the narrative and its connection to the topic of Canada's north. The most northern components of the narrative include the character Kao-Kuk, an Inuit astronaut, and the Arctic-based, igloo-like Northern Archives. Kao-Kuk is among the first figures to which Seth's unnamed narrator – and stand-in -- draws readers' attention as he enters and tours the local branch of The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists, an aging building in the fictional Ontario town of Dominion. Kao-Kuk is paneled between Nipper and Chopper, the former a famous creation of

Canadian cartoon icon Doug Wright; the latter a lay on the infamous Canadian beaver. Should these not be familiar enough as "north of the 49th parallel" figures, the figures of Constable Henderson of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the voyageur Lacombe in a canoe on a Lawren Harris-like lake surely are. Joining these "north of the 49th" references as the narrator makes his way through the G.N.B.C.C. club and on to the G.N.B.C.C. archives are further references: Pierre Elliott Trudeau, expressing regret that he never succeeded as a cartoonist; Johnny Canuck**;** moose and bears; portraits of the Founding Fathers and of the Death of General Wolf on the Plains of Abraham**;** and the trapper Trepanier who, together with the voyageur Lacombe, brings in Quebec content via references to folk-tales like the flying canoe**,** place-names such as Trois-Rivières, and traditional Quebecois family names like Tremblay.

Among these "north of the 49th" references Kao-Kuk occupies a significant place and portion of the narrative. Created by Seth's fictional cartoonist Bartley Munn, Kao-Kuk of "the Royal Canadian Astro-Men" is a striking departure from stereotype. The latter traces back to *Nanook of the North,* Robert Flaherty's 1922 film in which "Eskimos" are represented as "child-like, fur-clad, smiling primitives" (Grace 4) in a land of eternal winter, ice, and snow. The film also presents Nanook as representative of all Inuit people (Grace 5), undercutting both the individual humanity and the complex multiplicity of Canada's northern peoples. By contrast, Munn's/Seth's Kao-Kuk is identified as Inuit, presented as an individual, and, as an astronaut, is definitely unbound from the stereotypical "land of ice and snow." Depicted orbiting his space capsule among the stars over planet earth, Kao-Kuk seems to offer a new non-*Nanook of the North* Inuit image. In the trademark visual-textual combination of the graphic novel, however, the accompanying text recalls the "Eskimo stereotype" of *Nanook of the North*'s origin south of the 49th parallel. Kao-Kuk's name, the text reads, was merely pulled out of the air by his creator Munn because "'it sounded Eskimo'" (47). Moreover, Munn felt that the "Eskimo"'s "unique understanding of isolation and his experience with vast emptiness made him the perfect choice for space exploration" (46). Obvious here is the familiar trope of north as empty and isolated along with the "touch of exoticism" ascribed to the north and its peoples. Kao-Kuk's "'legendary tracking skills' were often called upon" (47), the narrator observes, "but essentially he fit the whitebread, silent, square-jawed type" (47) – the stereoytype of the Hollywood hero -- facing the usual "parade of evil Americans, Russians, and space aliens" (47). Kao-Kuk's story takes a familiar Hollywood-like turn as the Inuit astronaut finds himself "utterly alone" (50) in a world destroyed by atomic war. Kao-Kuk's narrative ends "disappointingly, back at status quo" (52) in a return to the influence of *Nanook of the North* / south of the 49th parallel representations of Canada's north and its peoples.

Disappointed though they may be, the fictional Munn's readers manage to content themselves with Kao-Kuk's story. As Seth's readers we may see ourselves in their

satisfaction with status quo, even as we perceive the power of the "south of the 49th" perspective on Kao-Kuk's story, and by extension on Canada's north. Seth's *The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists* becomes an unsettling reminder of the impact of a southern outlook on the Canadian north.

Similarly unsettling, however tongue-in-cheek, is *The G.N.B. Double C*'s segment about the Northern Archives, home of the Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists archives. The panel sequence is again rich in "north of 49th" references. For example, the idea for the northern archive building is launched during Canada's Centennial in 1967, with plans for the building the centerpiece of a futuristic Canadian Expo pavilion. Construction is underway by late 1967 and, despite an "impractical", "even nonsensical" location, "so far north in such a remote spot" as to be "ridiculously out of the way" (81), the novel's narrator admits, it is completed in 1969. In a series of panels reminiscent of Glen Gould's "Idea of North" expedition, Seth's narrator recounts his trek to the Northern Archives, starting at Toronto's Union Station and continuing by train, boat, bus, and finally dog sled. However gruelling the travel, the trek to the Northern Archives is "entirely worth it," the narrator assures us, "to study the treasure trove of cartooning housed there" (84).

The treasures in question further inscribe Canadian content -- and further tongue-in-cheek. They include a 1760 comic about General Wolf as General Fox; cartoon efforts by members of the Group of Seven, Lismer, Harris, Casson; and a superhero series called *Canada Jack* by a "mysterious" Sol Gertzman, an echo of Canadian writer Mordecai Richler's 1989 novel *Solomon Gursky Was Here*.[3] As before with Kao-Kuk, the "north of 49th" Canadian content of the archival treasures again encompasses "south of 49th" dimensions, as the graphic novel's text and image work with and against each other. The *Canada Jack* sequence is an excellent illustration of this.

"An odd mish-mash of disparate elements" (98), this "very rare" (45) 1960s series focuses on "strangely Canadian" topics such as radio broadcasting, highway construction, city planning, and Expo 67. Moreover the series does not follow "the usual hero vs villain formula" (47) nor does it present the usual "south of the 49th" superhero. Canada Jack has the trappings of a Hollywood-style superhero (costume, secret identity, a love interest) but his preference for walking rather than flying and his patriotic enthusiasm for Canada's Expo 67 mark him as Canadian. This is only "natural," the narrator observes, "since Canada Jack is essentially a Mountie" (99). What is not "natural," however, the narrator notes, is the appearance of Snoopy, the popular pet dog of the American cartoonist Charles Schulz's beloved series *Peanuts*. How to account for Snoopy's appearance if not for the popularity of the American cartoon in Canada?

3) The multi-generation story of a fictionalized Canadian family, held by some to be the Bronfmans, in the context of such historical events as the Arctic Franklin Expedition, another "north of the 49th" allusion.

As the text asks "Why use Snoopy is you're not a Peanuts fan?"(101). Notable, however, is how American "Snoopy" is "Canadianized" in his "out of character" smiling enthusiasm. Indeed, "Snoopy is all wrong!" the text reads; "He talks aloud and smiles constantly" (100). The sequence is brought to a close with musings about the identity of Canada Jack's creator, the elusive Sol Gertzman: "a born and bred Canadian? A new immigrant? It's anyone's guess," the text proposes (102) in what essentially confirms the allusion to Solomon Gursky of Mordecai Richler's novel.

"South of the 49th" references in Seth's *The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists* -- in the first instance with respect to the depiction of Canada's North but also with regard to Canadian cartooning in general -- are subtle but meaningful. The examples of Kao-Kuk and the Northern Archives introduce intriguing new visions of the Canadian north and its peoples, even as they present lingering aspects of "south of the 49th" concepts of "north of the 49th" people and places. Seth's fictional characters, Kathleen Dunley observes, "all have a Canadian flavour, but remain fictions – Seth's dream vision of what Canadian cartooning *could* have been, or perhaps *should* have been" were it not for "how Canadian popular culture struggled to complete with American influences"(141). In *The G.N.B. Double C*, however, Seth's recuperation of Canadian cartoonists, whether fictional like Bartley Munn or non-fictional like Doug Wright, and Canadianization of the American superhero icon and of *Peanuts'* Snoopy character, trace a line – and the breaks in it - at the 49th parallel. The overall unsettling effect of the novel and of the closing images of a headless statue in a garbage-strewn fountain is an important "on guard" about Canada, its culture and its north. That a contemporary work and popular genre such as Seth's graphic novel *The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists* should capture the political and cultural complexities and realities the 49th parallel today makes it a valuable resource in Canadian Studies, effective in teaching for its simultaneously amusing and insightful presentation of stereotypes and realities about Canada from north and south of the 49th parallel alike.

Works cited

Dunley, Kathleen. 2016. "Personal, Vernacular, Canadian: Seth's *The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists* as Life Writing." In Rifkind and Warley 2016: 129–152.

Gallant, Gregory (Seth). 1996. *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken*. Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly.

————. 2011. *The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists*. Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly.

Grace, Sherrill. 2009. *The Art of Being Canadian*. Vancouver: UBC Press.

Kuhn, Matt. 2014. "The Canadian Cartoonists," *Modern Ideas* (8 June 2014).
Nanook of the North. Dir. Robert Flaherty. Pathé Exchange.1922. Film.
Rhyms, Deena. 2007. "David Collier's *Surviving Saskatoon* and New Comics," *Canadian Literature* 194 (Autumn): 75–92.
Rifkind, Candida and Linda Warley, eds. 2016. *Canadian Graphic: Picturing Life Narratives*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
Van Herk, Aritha. 1981. *The Tent Peg: A Novel*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart.
————. 1990. *Places Far from Ellesmere. A Geografictione: Explorations on Site*. Red Deer: Red Deer College Press.
————. 1992. *A Frozen Tongue*. Sydney, Australia: Dangaroo Press.

CHRISTL VERDUYN is the Edgar and Dorothy Davidson Chair in Canadian Studies at Mount Allison and Research Professor in the Department of English and the Canadian Studies program. She joined the Mount Allison faculty in 2006 and was cross-appointed to the Department of English. From 2010–2018 she served as director of the Centre for Canadian Studies. Her areas of teaching and publication focus on Canadian literature and Canadian studies, in particular Canadian and Québécois literatures; women's writing and literary criticism; multiculturalism and minority writing; life writing and archival approaches to literature. Before joining the faculty at Mount Allison in 2006, Christl Verduyn taught at Wilfrid Laurier University (2000–2006), where she was Director of Canadian Studies; at Trent University (1980–2000), where she was Chair of Canadian Studies (1993–1999) as well as founding Chair of Women's Studies (1987–1990); and at Queen's University (1979–1980), following the completion of her Ph.D. at the University of Ottawa (1976–1979). A former president of the national Association for Canadian Studies (2000–2002), Dr. Verduyn is a recipient of the Governor General's International Award for Canadian Studies (2006) and a past Editor of the Journal of Canadian Studies (2008–2012). She was elected to the Royal Society of Canada in 1996 and served as President of Academy of Arts and Humanities from 2007–2009. She was named Member of the Order of Canada in 2017 and a 3M National Teaching Fellow in 2018.