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The North Within

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Abstract

To Canadians, “the north” is larger than a geographic space, but performs as an imaginary and imagined realm of idea and inspiration. As such, it transcends its own materiality and demonstrates the conundrum of belonging and estrangement; Canadians belong to the idea of north more than the north belongs to Canadians. The cultural influence of this all-encompassing idea and area goes far beyond its dimensions to measure Nordicity, intimacy, and directionality. Contrary to the idea of north as a direction or as the object of expedition and exploration, the north proves to be a world of stories more than charts. This paper seeks to address the language, depiction, and documentation of the north as practices of inscription and exclusion.

Keywords:

North; place theory; imagination; myth; landscape; exploration

Résumé

Pour les Canadiens, « le Nord » est plus vaste qu'un espace géographique : il constitue un domaine imaginaire et imaginé d'idées et d'inspiration. En tant que tel, le Nord transcende sa propre matérialité et démontre le dilemme de l'appartenance et de l'éloignement ; les Canadiens appartiennent à l'idée de « Nord » plus que le Nord n'appartient aux Canadiens. L'influence culturelle de cette idée et région englobante va bien au-delà de ses propres dimensions pour mesurer la nordicité, l'intimité, et la directionnalité. Contrairement à l'idée de « Nord » en tant que direction ou qu'objet d'expéditions et d'explorations, le Nord se révèle être un monde d'histoires plus que de graphiques. Cet article se propose d'aborder le langage, la représentation, et la documentation du Nord comme pratiques d'inscription et d'exclusion.

Mots-clés :

Nord; théorie des lieux; imagination; mythe; paysage; exploration



“North, in Western culture,
is *the* fundamental direction.”

Who can argue with the power of that assertion, its astonishing structural clarity? In an exhaustive and bewilderingly borderless space and time, the very idea of direction is almost obliterated, the prevalence of abstract orientation taking over the true bearings of destination. In a world of crypto-currency, algorithmic identity, and social disconnection pretending to be connection, the north seems a steady beacon, a declaratory point of disembarkation.

Where can a contemporary, largely western, and certainly urban Canadian writer living between the wavering parameters of changing inclinations and time, seek north? There are surely explanations for why the compass yearns north, for the trajectory of dreams and direction. Science, this planet's magnetic field, and that strange explanation that the North Pole is technically the South Pole of the earth's magnetic field, do not explain the attraction of the horizon encapsulated by the Canadian north. But north is the line along which this country lies, the position that extends toward the zenith or the nadir. North is our apex, hypothermic and gelid, poetic and provocative, fearsome, rumoured, a world of polarization and contrast. Except that like human inability to fathom that the North Pole is technically the South Pole, the north is a realm elusive as our myopic attempts to define, contain, or measure its reaches. There are arguments that the north is so fascinating it must be avoided, and avowals that seekers of north encounter only “secrets; enigmas; mysteries” (Wiebe:1989, 113), which renunciation strikes me as a means of quarantining that world from the imagination.

Discourse around the north reveals most fiercely the inadequacy of language or vocabulary available to encompass such a vast and intriguing space and place, although Canadians do narrativize and represent, deconstruct and examine, translate, metaphorize, and preach, read, and perspectivize north. This conjectured and conjured north arouses both wonder and wander, while never managing to summarize or capture the complexities of what Canadians live as a northern nation. To some extent, our sense of the north within has been inscribed by Gilles Vigneault's marvellous song, “Mon Pays,” written for Arthur Lamothe's 1965 National Board film, *La Neige a fondu sur la Manicouagan*. Its inimitable opening line, “Mon pays, ce n'est pas un pays, c'est l'hiver” – “my country is not a country, it's winter” – figures the combined frustration and tenderness of the Canadian search for a north within. Aside from the song being anointed a Quebec anthem, and covered by dozens of singers, it gestures toward the ineffable and enigmatic quality of this northern world, especially in the concluding lines, which riddle the other side of the north within:



*Mon pays ce n'est pas un pays, c'est l'envers
D'un pays qui n'était ni pays ni patrie
Ma chanson ce n'est pas une chanson, c'est ma vie
C'est pour toi que je veux posséder mes hivers*
(<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/mon-pays/>)

Translated as:

My country is not a country, it's the reverse
of a country that was neither country nor homeland.
My song is not a song, it's my life.
It is for you that I want to possess my winters. (Vigneault, web)

These enigmatic and yet crystalline phrases speak to an ongoing and insistent quest for definition and ownership but propose as well how to escape that same encompassing desire, the conundrum of a place beyond borders or politics or perimeters, vergeless and undefinable and intimate.

The north occupies Canada as a placeless place, more than “geographic space” (Duncan: 2000, 582) and far more than landscape. It is a space “made meaningful” (Cresswell: 2004, 7) in ways that shatter materiality, and become placeless but alternatively place-full, replete with a rich temporality. Place theory insists that “insideness” measures the capacity to understand place and our attachment to or claim to a place. “To be inside a place is to belong to it and to identify with it, and the more profoundly inside you are the stronger is this identity with the place” (Relph: 1976, 49). Other critics argue that “the deepest forms of place attachment are expressed through *behavioral* insideness, which reflects a profound appreciation of the significance of a particular place and its identity, and *existential* insideness, which expresses an implicit knowledge that this is the place to which you belong” (Tomaney: 2016, 95). Place theory relates most directly to localities, communities and the built environments of human beings, but in this case, the application of “insideness” arguably measures the dimensions of how Canadians, even if they have never been north of Edmonton, regard the north as “theirs” because they belong to the idea of north, as critic Sherrill Grace has so aptly encapsulated. It is this elusive but resonant idea of north that becomes the congruent touchstone of identification for Canadian sensibility. Sensibility rather than “identity” is the means by which to examine the complexities of this belonging; and Canadians belong to the north more than the ubiquity of their claiming it as theirs. Just as consequence is more important than plot, the elusiveness of sensibility weathers the extent to which the north exerts its cultural influence.



This influence has little to do with Burke's theories, arguing that "sensibility and the imagination were more appropriate to the median climates of the south" (Sarafianos 2012: 85), producing a greater number of artists of every genre, than northern climes. Instead, we must understand that in the complex tissue of how place inhabits humans—and particularly Canadians, for whom the north is both placeless and eternally ensconced in the imagination—the north *becomes* the sensibility of Canadian inclination, both directional and abstract. This north "within" reaches far past the 49th parallel or north of sixty or beyond that circle of ice light. The hyper-cryptic north within inflects both cultural munificence and inadequacy. Canadians are dwarfed by their own real and imagined world.

The National Snow and Ice Data Centre offers a map with "three definitions of the Arctic: the tree line; the 10 degrees Celsius isotherm; and the Arctic Circle at 66° 34' North" (<http://nsidc.org/cryosphere/arctic-meteorology/arctic.html>). The region of the North Pole consists of an ocean surrounded by land, not land surrounded by ocean. This ocean, like no other deep on Earth, refuses to be what is expected of ocean and instead recites its thalassic difference by evading even its own scrutiny. Scientists define the Arctic as the region above the Arctic Circle, the imaginary line circling the globe at 66° 32' N. The Arctic Circle marks the latitude above which the sun does not set on the summer solstice, and does not rise on the winter solstice. At the North Pole, the sun rises once each year and sets once each year: there are six months of continuous daylight and six months of continuous night. Summarized in this way, as matter-of-fact scientists do, it is almost unfathomable to touch the heart of this North's extremity, this furthest outpost of the earth and yet no outpost at all, but a shimmering paradoxical centre, for at the pole, there is no "direction."

There are other designations of Arctic. Some say it is the area north of the tree line, where the landscape is frozen and dotted only with shrubs and lichens. Others demarcate it by warmth, where the average daily summer temperature does not rise above 10 degrees Celsius. The quarrel, it is evident, is with language, a persistent inability to designate or specify, to make the words enact their expression, some onomasiological ambush or quicksand, which still cannot capture North in any complete dimension. The *grand pere* of northern-ness, Louis-Edmond Hamelin, found a measurement for nordicity in degrees of intimacy, based on a continuum of geographical and human components. His index of *Valeurs polaires* (Polar values) took into consideration not just temperature and vegetation, latitude and economic activity and types of snow, but that nebulous element that we understand as "north" without pinning it to an ice floe or a fixed line (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nordicity>). He does propose measurable subdivisions that, despite their limited language, exert a magnetism with their drama of intimacy: the near north, middle north, far north and extreme north. Perhaps it is the simplicity and directness of adjectives, but these designations frame the



north as the imaginary destination of desire for most of us. Why dream of Venice or Florence, of Marrakech or Buenos Aires, Cusco or St. Petersburg or Kathmandu, when we can dream north, dream of north, and seek the north that resides within. But allowing north to be purely north, a real world, but also a world we encounter in dreams and imaginings, is not in the nature of humans. Too much, it is not enough for us to allow “the reverse of a country that was neither country nor homeland” (Vigneault), but a life that allows us to possess winters and to allow those winters to possess us.

Instead, north has been alienated, has become the object of an expedition. A wonderful quote from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Lost World*, a novel which concerns the expedition to a plateau in the South American Amazon basin, and which encompasses that desire to chart and map and claim. It involves dinosaurs and other prehistoric creatures, ape-men and diamonds and museums, all the accouterments of adventure. I will not recapitulate the unlikely plot but at one point, Professor Summerly and Professor Challenger are arguing:

“We have spent two long days in exploration,” said he, and we are no wiser as to the actual geography of the place than when we started [. . .] The farther we go the less likely it is that we will get any general view.”

. . . .

“You are all turning your brains toward getting into this country. I say that we should be scheming how to get out of it.”

“I am surprised, sir,” boomed Challenger, stroking his majestic beard, “that any man of science should commit himself to so ignoble a sentiment . . . I absolutely refuse to leave until we are able to take back with us something in the nature of a chart.” (Conan Doyle: 1912)

He could be speaking for every Arctic explorer. Expedition and its self-immolating desire to chart infects the north, its legacy and legends, that regard of “the north without.” Research offers an enormous list of voyages and explorations, all either bent on solving the question of the Northwest Passage, or intent on furthering knowledge about the Arctic reaches, their passability or impassibility. This preoccupation has found in Canada’s north occasion for such “men of science” to fulfill their ambitions, to alleviate their thirst for adventure, and to claim an authority or “discovery” that elevates them to heroes.

The formulaic motif repeats with variations: a tale of intrepid deeds and daring endeavors, seasoned by the frisson of danger. In this story, the main character, almost invariably male, sets out to discover some passage or mineral or precious light only accessible by going north. That character is confronted with difficult conditions and



physical challenges which he overcomes, proving his strength and resourcefulness. It is, as critic Sherrill Grace has claimed, “the narrative of courageous men battling a dangerous, hostile female *terra incognita* to prove their masculinity and the superior force of their technology, or to die nobly in the struggle, or to map, claim, name and control unstructured space” (Grace: 2007, 16). The discourse of heroism that surrounds these various tales is certainly reminiscent of boys’ own adventures, whether the outcome is survival or death.

This story can be charted, although it works best if set in Victorian times. Here are the plot lines. A man is given funding by a powerful political body. He collects a ship and supplies (at least three years’ worth) and other men, and sails toward the frozen seas. He determinedly chooses a passage choked with ice, “... a ploughing train of ice ... [that] does not always clear during the short summers...” (Beattie: 2014, 93), and unsurprisingly is locked in ice for a winter or two, in a ship ill-equipped for extreme temperatures, and without any means of overland travel. Cultural “factors”—meaning fear and prejudice—prevent the men from seeking help from or adopting an Inuit diet, hence, survival is optional. Most of the men die, from scurvy or discouragement or starvation, with sub-currents of murder and cannibalism and loneliness. They are so hungry that they boil their boots, and thus the leader becomes famous as “the man who ate his boots” (Brandt: 2010, 7). Eventually, they all die, although back in their colonial home, they are painted as heroes, surely still alive, somewhere. Various expeditions of similar character suit up as search parties and head for the Arctic, repeating the pattern, with more ships and men lost looking for the lost expedition than the expedition itself lost. Finally, one intrepid explorer takes the time and energy to talk with Inuit hunters, and “discovers” the real story: the ships were icebound, stranded, some of the men tried to reach land and safety on foot, but succumbed to a litany of bad weather, bad temper, botulism, starvation, and scurvy, along with a soupçon of lead poisoning.

Of course, that leaden tale does not erase such heroes from history. They are elevated and eulogized, various expeditions try to solve the mystery of their ends, and seek to discover new leads or new clues about their remains. Those expeditions in turn collect specimens and note currents, tides, and ice, are foiled by sudden mists and misled by mirages, some of them financed by gin-magnates and others by grieving widows. Some survive and some are frozen into the ice and walk out to “escape,” or saw through the ice to get to open water. Some have the good sense to take advice and food from the Inuit. They hope for open water; they hope for rescue by a whaler. They wait for the ice to melt, then give up, and pray that some ship will see them, rescue them, and take them home. Lives are dealt like cards, but not wisely. Ships’ surgeons perform amputations and operations, and prescribe remedies for illness. These follow-up expeditions claim to chart the “true” position of the magnetic pole,



that roaming dot that refuses to stay put and moves as elusively as the shimmering northern lights. Still, these intrepid men name islands after themselves, some real and some imaginary, and usually, if they return having lost a few toes to frostbite, receive gold medals and knighthoods. Their busts are cast in marble, and they are elevated in cathedrals above poems composed by Poets Laureate, like Alfred Lord Tennyson's ode to Franklin on the Cenotaph in Westminster Abbey:

NOT here! the white North has thy bones; and thou,
 Heroic sailor-soul,
 Art passing on thine happier voyage now
 Toward no earthly pole.

Additionally, of course, such memorials are embellished by grieving widows, who after elevating those explorers as beloved chiefs of gallant crews, perishing in the search for passage, perish themselves, to become additional lines on the cenotaph: "AFTER LONG WAITING, AND SENDING MANY IN SEARCH OF HIM, HERSELF DEPARTED, TO SEEK AND FIND HIM IN THE REALMS OF LIGHT" (Potter: 2016, 12).

But is that terminal conclusion the end of boys' adventures? Others now follow in the quest for completion, for the navigable Passage, now capitalized and even more powerfully mythologized by scientists and historians, forensic anthropologists and toxicologists. Culture too is mesmerized; witness Canada's most iconic song, Stan Rogers' "Northwest Passage" which describes the urge "to find the hand of Franklin reaching for the Beaufort Sea" (Gudgeon 2008). Graves are "discovered" and exhumed and theories promulgated, and the Inuit tilt their heads to the side and look puzzled, for they always knew there were graves on that island, and for them, nothing new has been "discovered." But the Inuit believe in stories, while boys' adventures rely on inaccurate charts. Eventually, a contemporary expedition, with the assistance of Twin Otters and government funding and underwater technology, drags sonar equipment across the ocean floor and locates a ghostly shape on the Arctic seabed, which is declared to be the "doomed" ship, with Prime Ministers and presidents of various Royal Societies celebrating its "discovery," incentive for political furtherance and further expeditions and speeches and various proud backslappings. Books entitled *Lost Beneath the Ice: The Story of HMS Investigator* (Cohen: 2013) proliferate. All contribute to Margaret Atwood's contention that Franklin's expedition is an example of an iconic Canadian obsession: "In every culture many stories are told, (but) only some are told and retold, and these stories bear examining" (Atwood: 1995, 11). Many scholars have addressed the transition from science to thrill, from thrill to science, and from event to political expedience. This Arctic is a circle that loops around politics and sovereignty and visuality and obsession. It rides on the shoulders of the designation "Arctic,"



but resists the idea of north (once again, see Sherrill Grace and her brilliant *Canada and the Idea of North*), and fails to investigate or understand the difference between expedition outward and those seeking the north within, that fundamental if elusive direction that enables the imagination to read snowflakes and to travel mirages. The adventuresome exercise of the Arctic evades the way that it is employed as what the German philosopher Simmel calls an “exclave from life’s coherence” (Simmel 1983, 33); he addresses the conception of adventure as a “holiday” from life with additional piquancy of stepping out of time. It is in this space that Eglinger says, “the polar explorer turns into an adventurous hero of mythopoetical imagination” (2010, 16). And the consumable Arctic overrides the pneuma of “north.” That is what is arguably missing from this “obsession” with expeditions and outcomes.

Most artists and writers are invested in a north less scientific than imagistic, less male than ungendered, less factual than fictional. There exists the Canadian Arctic, real and imagined, with its prevailing images, whether of environment, people, landscape, animals, or adventure. There is Arcticism (pace Said’s *Orientalism*) with its reliance on masculinity, sizeism, exploration, remoteness, science, indigeneity, and the romance of the unknown and unknowable. It is difficult to see past such heavily inscribed depictions, which have not only shaped the discourses of the north but immobilized the language that we bring to those discourses, whether exploration accounts, travel-writing, political texts, diaries, or historical examinations, along with novels and songs. The documents with which we measure or seek to understand the north must be scrutinized as cultural practices of inscription and exclusion. As Eglinger argues, “the documentation of achievements becomes the actual achievement” (7, emphasis in text), and the experience of north, the north itself, must remain elusive. Even critiques of how expeditions and adventures have perpetuated themselves, take on their cultural orientation. Those who are not trapped in the ice, who do not die, who survive their northern sojourns, are stylized as better or more competent explorers than those who fail. The unforgiving judgment that “adventure is a sign of incompetence” a saying ascribed to Vilhjalmur Stefannson (Plimpton, 135) underscores this topos; Frank argues that the best explorer is the scientist “who does not blunder into adventures because he systematically has planned every nut, bolt, and screw” (Frank, 125). These are stories that rely on accepted tropes: travel, adventure, and a quest for escape from the contemporary world and its high-tech demands. Nothing has changed. The already-traced Eurocentric construction of the people of the north and of the north itself is now part of our neo-colonial and neo-ecological desire for the north to remain a kingdom of the imagination, as untouchable as it is desirable. That goes hand in hand with the romantic image of the Arctic as hidden paradise, an El Dorado of mysterious and luxuriant vegetation where the most intrepid find a trap door to a different world, the reward for this arduous journey discovery of the universe’s hidden secrets.



At the end of Mary Shelley's novel, *Frankenstein*, the "hero" and his monster wander the earth, Frankenstein tracing the steps of his fiendish invention. Cursed by the devil and motivated by revenge, he follows his creation, who taunts him by saying, "Follow me; I seek the everlasting ices of the north, where you will feel the misery of cold and frost to which I am impassive" (Shelley, 162). The two move deeper and deeper into a world where the snows thicken and the cold increases. By dog sled, Frankenstein follows the monster to the edge of the frozen ocean, where ill and suffering from exposure, he ends up in the cabin of a ship immured in mountains of ice, in a ship that had been on an expedition "full of dangers and terror" (Shelley, 170) to the north. There he slowly succumbs to death, and the novel ends with the dreadful creature finding the ship, mourning over his creator's body, and confessing his misery and remorse for killing Frankenstein's family and love. Then, he leaps out of a window and the last we see of that poor entity is on an ice-raft being borne away by the waves, until he is lost in darkness and distance. Dante too reserves the ninth circle of hell for those who have committed treachery; they are frozen in a lake of ice. The connection? Perhaps the greatest treachery possible is man's delusion that he can uncover the secrets of the earth. That Frankenstein's monster vanishes in the farthest reaches of north suggests that it is there the greatest secrets lie, monsters and men and the retributions of gods. But the Inuk writer Rachel Attituq Qitsualik says, "The Inuit cosmos is ruled by no one. There are no divine mother and father figures . . . There are no eternal punishments in the hereafter, as there are no punishments for children or adults in the here and now" (web)

It is up to the imagination to solve or transcend almost any problem and it is the imaginary universe of north that possesses the greatest and most unimaginable riches and diversity. And so, the search continues, an expedition to find the north within, a topography of yearning for a country of the imagination that belies its own mystery, but that resides within, and inscribes on every Canadian the curious punctuation mark of a Nordic people.

Occasionally, science manages to be delicious. "In the Arctic, people can sometimes see and hear things that they cannot see or hear most other places on Earth. These phenomena are caused by special atmospheric conditions. Microscopic ice crystals are suspended in the air, changing how light and sound travel over distances. Layers of hot and cold air refract, or bend, light rays. Light bounces off the surfaces of clouds, water, and ice to create optical illusions. People also sometimes report that they can hear noises from much further away in the Arctic. As with optical phenomena, this phenomenon occurs because cold atmospheric conditions bend sound waves differently than the air at lower latitudes" (<https://nsidc.org/cryosphere/arctic-meteorology/phenomena.html>). While such physical phenomena can stretch the imagination, they cannot match the effect of the north on the north within, the Aurora over



the city of Iqaluit in Nunavut, hanging like a shaken curtain of light, the corona that forms a luminous disc around the sun when light is diffracted by water vapor, water sky and ice blink when light reflects from sea ice, and not least, optical illusions that bend the light towards the eye of the beholder. If this is not magic, then magic does not exist. And that is why Canadians seek to find the north within.

North and south are more than directions. As a contemporary, largely western, and certainly urban Canadian writer living in southern Canada, my north is contingent: I live 259 kilometers north of the 49th parallel and the border crossing into Montana at Carway, Alberta. Only the three prairie provinces rest entirely north of the 49th parallel – the others dip below that line, stagger toward and incorporate the geographical and cultural boundary between Canada’s northern-ness and America’s westerly drive. Only the Territories of Canada’s Arctic evade the border’s southbound touch, which is their magical distinction.

And so I dream of escaping, of returning to Ellesmere or to little Cornwallis Island, or to the any Arctic Island, or perhaps even to Beechey, which buries a few explorers’ graves. But whatever my own yearning for “expedition,” I know that north is north and to find the north within I must possess the winters that possess me.

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