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review essay

Northern cultures: myths, geographies and representational practices

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Northern experience and the myths of Canadian culture. By Renée Hulan. Montreal and Kingston, London and Ithaca, NY: McGill-Queen's University Press. 2002. 232 pp. £52.50 cloth; £18.95 paper. ISBN 0 7735 2227 1 cloth; 0 7735 2228 X paper.

Canada and the idea of north. By Sherrill E. Grace. Montreal and Kingston, London and Ithaca, NY: McGill-Queen's University Press. 2002. 368 pp. £37.95 cloth. ISBN 0 7735 2247 6.

It was a commonplace in Toronto publishing houses in the early 1990s that many submitted manuscripts were simply 'too Canadian' for British and American audiences.¹ It was thus a matter of some jubilation when no fewer than three 'Canadian' books reached the 2002 Man Booker Prize shortlist.² Across the diverse regional media in Canada, it was generally agreed that the protectionist approach to publishing pursued by the federal government was bearing results. Moreover, even British commentators, notwithstanding a couple of snide (and dispiritingly imperial) comments regarding Yann Martel's manner of acceptance of the prize for *Life of Pi*, argued for the arrival of a new location of production for Commonwealth literature.³ Although such praise could be couched as colonial nostalgia over the failure of metropolitan novelists to compete with the narratives of the erstwhile empire,⁴ a renewed statement of interest in Canadian culture was still evident.

However, although the three narratives all deal with families with Canadian associations, only Carol Shields's meditation on the process of writing in *Unless* actually circulates through Canadian landscapes. Moreover, not one of the three authors was

born in Canada, and that, according to critic Eva-Marie Kröller, tempered celebrations through the launch of 'an intense investigation of how to determine the "Canadianness" of a writer'.⁵ Perhaps Germaine Greer's cruel dismissal of Rohinton Mistry's *Family matters* on BBC Television was rather too representative of external opinion: 'It's a *Canadian* book – a *Canadian* book about India – what could be more boring!⁶ In Montreal, whilst much of the world press were concerned with accusations of plagiarism by Martel from the work of the Jewish Brazilian author Moacyr Scliar,⁷ despite his having been born in Spain, as the son of distinguished Québécois poet Emile Martel, Yann was attacked by *indépendantistes* as an *assimilé* for choosing to write in English.⁸

What was unfortunate, according to many Canadian critics, was that a national literature was beginning to abandon its idiom just as it was achieving international recognition for a 'distinctive literary voice'.⁹ Although some Canadian novelists were becoming widely successful, commentators feared that this was being achieved by linking Canada to broader stories of diaspora and migration. As Stephen Henighan put it, novelists should be instead presenting stories that engage local 'histories and realities', what he termed 'writing in Canadian'.¹⁰

This diversion into the politics of contemporary Canadian fiction highlights, of course, the problematic of postcolonial literatures in English and French. What are the consequences for 'national' literatures when limited degrees of indigenous self-determination occur concurrently with favourable immigration policies and official bilingualism, as they have in Canada? Under the Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1988, should Canadian literature be developing or maintaining its own national traditions, whatever they might be, or should proponents focus on achieving honours from metropolitan cultures?

I commence with this account of the events of October 2002, as the two books under review, both published by McGill-Queens University Press that same year, come into direct contact with these questions, by producing studies of (perhaps) the broadest theme in the Canadian national imaginary, that of *nordicity*.

It is very difficult to define what is meant by Canadian nordicity. It is best summarized as the perceived ways in which the climate, ecology and topology of northern Canada affect the habits of mind of the different cultures of the polity. A variegated number of Canadian scholars, including Harold Innis, Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood, have been concerned with the importance of the impact of Canadian northern landscapes in different ways.¹¹ For many Canadian intellectuals, *northernness* has been the torque to dissipate the torpor surrounding discussions of national unity. Indeed, the political philosopher John Ralston Saul, consort to the incumbent Governor-General Adrienne Clarkson, uses the northern environment as the keystone of his tripartite Canada formed from interactions between Anglophones, Francophones, and First Nations.¹²

It should be obvious from the outset, therefore, that to discuss the north is to consider the heart of Canadian cultures. Is the idea of the Canadian north a founding tradition to be rehabilitated, or is it a myth that has facilitated discrimination towards Canadians from non-European backgrounds? As Sherrill Grace puts it in her Preface to *Canada and the idea of north*, her 'book is about Canada' and results from her 'love for and desire to understand this stubborn, complex, infuriating place'.¹³

More interestingly, in fundamentally conflicting ways, these books provide sophisticated accounts that turn on issues of national myth, representational practices and performances, and geography and environment. In doing so, both authors have much to say about Canadian imaginations of geographical interest.

Myths of north

Sherrill Grace presents a wide-ranging and purposefully interdisciplinary account of the role of nordicity in Canadian imaginations. Her 'fundamental premise' is that Canadians 'are constantly imagining and constructing Canada-as-North'.¹⁴ The approach adopted is broadly Foucauldian, and involves the analysis of ideas of north in constant flux across broad fields of endeavour, resulting in what she terms the '*discursive formation of North*'.¹⁵ As Distinguished University Scholar and Professor of English at the University of British Columbia, Grace provides succinct accounts of the roles of fiction, poetry, stage and theatre, as well as cartographic practices and indigenous *oratures* (performances of oral traditions), in constructing her argument.

The result is impressive and lavishly illustrated. The book is obviously the result of at least a decade of scholarship. Moreover, Grace marshals this diverse material in order to argue for the need for fundamental unity of the diverse cultures of the Canadian polity. Korean-born artists, Québécois fiction and Inuit elders all come in for favourable commentary when they illustrate how the north is a common theme for *all* Canadians.

For Grace, the imagining of Canada-as-North includes all attempts at repudiation of or resistance to the perception of Canadian nordicity. Renée Hulan's *Northern experience and the myths of Canadian culture* is very much an attempt at disavowal. As Hulan puts it, starkly, 'I believe, on the contrary, that the north has little if anything to do with being Canadian today.'¹⁶ Hulan is antagonistic to the accounts of nordicity by Canadian intellectuals, of which Grace is the most recent. For Hulan, any articulation of an idea of north as the basis for a 'national culture . . . is a myth both in the sense of an untruth, or false notion, and in the sense of a story that articulates a specific worldview'.¹⁷

The notion of the north, Hulan argues, has acted as an exclusionary force to both 'new Canadians' (recent immigrants, often from non-European origins) and the very oldest Canadians (indigenous peoples or 'First Nations'). As such, the 'focus on the nordicity of national identity is part of a broader tendency in Canadian cultural history that seeks to unify and to shape collective experience and, in so doing, to smooth over differences'.¹⁸

Northern geographies

The idea of Canada-as-North is based on geography. The post-Confederation nationalists of the last three decades of the nineteenth century, such as the Canada First movement, placed the overcoming of northern environments at the centre of a

modern national identity. Ever since, Hulan argues, both 'the preoccupation with national unity and the relationship between national identity and the environment' have been perennial in Canadian history.¹⁹ In a settler dominion inhabited by diverse aboriginal groups, Canadian nationalists were never able to make a successful argument for an organic connection with the land that is endemic to Romantic nationalism. Climate and ecology, Hulan argues, were all that Canadians could hold in common. For Canadian nationalists therefore, 'the environment holds the transformative potential to condition and form a distinct cultural identity, to facilitate acculturation, and thus to bring political unity'.²⁰ This 'geographical determinism', as Hulan puts it, is a common theme in Canadian scholarship.²¹

Grace takes a different tack with 'the equally important domain of geography'.²² As well as devoting significant space to the critical histories of cartography initiated by Brian Harley, Grace draws on Wreford Watson's geographies of mind, and stresses that the geography of North 'is a fascinating site for competing, shifting, ideologically invested rhetorics and cartographies'.²³

Some of these aspects of northern geographies might be familiar to some cultural geographers from the work of Rob Shields.²⁴ But Hulan's debt to Shields notwithstanding, what is most striking from both accounts is the degree of geographical sophistication and awareness of Canadian literary and cultural critics. Perhaps due to the work of geographer Louis-Edmond Hamelin, whose attempts at quantifying nordicity and instituting nordology (the study of the north) at the centre of Canadian institutional geographies are widely cited in the academy, cultural criticism in Canada is suffused with geographical metaphors.²⁵ The accounts of High Arctic *geografictiones* by Calgary's itinerant novelist Aritha Van Herk, and John Moss's notion of geography as the imposition of knowledge over landscape, for example, are only the most recent manifestations of the geographical preoccupation in Canadian thought.²⁶

Representations and practices

Moreover, both accounts discuss the roles of representational practices and performances in myths of nordicity. Sherrill Grace stresses the important intertextuality of representations of the Canadian north. By developing a dense argument that juxtaposes Foucault with Bakhtin and Bourdieu, Grace regards the 'social semiotics' of texts as functioning in a 'dynamic, interactive semiosis that is constantly experiencing constraint and resistance over time'.²⁷ Representations of the Canadian north, like those of Edward Said's Orient, are *read*, and for Grace this practice entails 'working with signs, [and] manipulating codes', that is, 'the process of *social* semiotics'.²⁸ This is illustrated through detailed discussion of Charles Shanly's poem 'The walker of the snow' (1867), and Blair Bruce's famous painting *The phantom hunter* (1888), both of which rely on the northern Ojibwa and Cree mythology of the Windigo.²⁹

The theme of ghosts of the north surfaces more forcefully in Grace's discussion of 'Performing north'.³⁰ This encompasses musical composition, including Glenn Gould's innovative CBC radio play *The idea of north* (1967), which forms the inspiration for

Grace's study, as well as stagings of the north in theatre and indigenous oral traditions. All these performances rely on the presence and circulation of ghosts, including, for Grace, 'the most pervasive ghost of them all: the ghost of Canada itself'.³¹

Hulan argues that myths of the north have developed from the collecting of aboriginal stories. It would appear from Hulan, therefore, that the notion of nordicity is in many ways reliant on a yearning for the *internal* colonies of northern Canada. It is not that Grace is unaware of what she terms the 'destructive and repugnant' aspects of representations of North.³² On the contrary, following Bhabha and McClintock, she sees the north as having to be colonized by story in order to be captured for the Canadian nation. She therefore devotes a chapter to Inuit representations of the north, in order to demonstrate spaces of resistance.³³ However, the analysis here contains a large quotient of theoretical discussion relative to textual examination. Despite Grace's honesty in discussing only Inuit work written in English, one still wonders whether she is merely re-articulating the 'project of colonization through narration',³⁴ albeit in a more sensitive and sophisticated register.

The analysis of northern representations offered by Renée Hulan is different, and cleaves very close to critical studies of gender and nationalism. For Hulan, narratives of north affirm an imagined 'rugged, individualistic national character', which elevates 'a masculinist, engendered north to the position of "national consciousness"'.³⁵ As Hulan persuasively argues, in art by the Group of Seven (for example) the northern landscape becomes 'the blank page from which the presence of all people has been erased'.³⁶

However, the most interesting and novel element of Hulan's account is based on the importance of ethnography, and thus of practices of mobility, social interaction and dwelling, for representations of the north. For Hulan, there is 'an ethnographic impulse in Canadian literary criticism', by which Canadian literature is treated 'as a body of texts that has something to say about Canadian people'.³⁷ This has resulted in the spatialization of difference between north and south in Canada. In turn, 'this has led to the assumption that only real first-hand experience in the geographical north authorizes one to speak about the discursive or imagined north'.³⁸ Hulan argues, therefore, that this has allowed *experience* (of the north) to become the mainstay of epistemic privilege in discussions of northern spaces. This is much more than Mary Louise Pratt's notion of 'autoethnography',³⁹ as Hulan argues that the practices of ethnography themselves have influenced future accounts of, say, interactions between indigenous peoples and southern Canadians by novelists, and especially by those who write about the north without ever having travelled there.

The focus of Hulan's study is thus experience and, compared with Grace, she emphasizes ethnographic rather than literary encounters with north. She discusses classical Arctic ethnographies by Franz Boas and Diamond Jenness, and makes a number of criticisms of recent, reflexive travel accounts by authors such as John Moss. According to Hulan, as Arctic travel is 'obscure to most [Canadian] citizens', arguments about the north are 'political escapism'.⁴⁰ Even in such accounts where 'non-Inuit tend to depict Inuit as ideal Canadians', for Hulan epistemic violence is still committed on aboriginal peoples by disrupting opportunities for self-articulation.⁴¹

Much of Hulan's critique is persuasive. At the same time, she herself has not only not undertaken any ethnography; she appears never to have travelled north.⁴² Her accounts of the difficulties writers have in struggling to represent personal experiences and social interactions ring hollow at times. Whilst the appropriation of voice and authority of personal ordeal are always problematic in ethnography, it is important not to neglect the analytic power that can result from the concomitant reflexive anxieties and physical hardships of such practices.

Conclusions

It is difficult to find much at fault in these accounts. At times Grace struggles to integrate discussions of discourse theory or semiotics with those of specific texts. A more significant structural problem with Grace is that reliance upon discursive formations means that every mention of north is grist for the critic's mill. Thus the study is absolutely comprehensive but occasionally a little staid. In contrast to this discussion of every representational practice associated with northern Canada, Hulan's account still bears the hallmarks of the PhD dissertation from which it is derived.⁴³ At times breathless, at times leaving the reader wanting more development of points, and certainly less erudite than Grace, Hulan is able to argue forcefully for iconoclasm in respect of Canada's supposed national traditions. Not only is she cynical about 'the cult of nordicity',⁴⁴ she argues that all "'Canadian culture'" is a collection of myths'.⁴⁵ This is very much—to adapt a joke once made by philosopher Susan Haack—a young person's book, but it is all the better for it.⁴⁶

It is interesting that Hulan argues that the 'focus of Canadian attention seems to turn northward specifically at moments of intense nationalist feeling', as the reconfiguration of the polity occurred with the creation of the new territory of Nunavut on 1 April 1999.⁴⁷ Grace concludes that Nunavut provides an opportunity for returning the north to Canada and thus for bringing Canadians back together. For Grace, 'now, more than ever before',⁴⁸ Canadians must acknowledge their economic dependence on northern resources and the present and potential impacts of climatic and environmental change in the circumpolar Arctic. As Grace argues, Canadians 'will not change Canada by jettisoning the idea of north but by interpolating new voices into the dialogue'.⁴⁹ Thus she proposes 'the Magnetic North thesis', which endorses ideas of nordicity as 'practical, exigent realities', but which allows that 'the magnetism of North can attract (is irresistible to) everyone who lives, or comes to live, in Canada'.⁵⁰

Ultimately, the tensions between these two accounts of Canada and nordicity come down to competing national imaginations. The myth of North is reliant on the question of Canada. If diasporic novelists can be accepted as successful Canadians, then new Canadian voices can be intercalated into ideas of North. This is not only an issue for Canadian literary imaginations. It is imperative for the sustenance of numerous Canadian environments and livelihoods.

Notes

- ¹ S. Henighan, *When words deny the world: the reshaping of Canadian writing* (Erin, Ontario, Porcupine's Quill, 2002), p. 177.
- ² The successful authors were Carol Shields (*Unless*), Rohinton Mistry (*Family Matters*) and the eventual winner, Yann Martel (*Life of Pi*).
- ³ F. Gibbons, 'Magical realist triumphs – but behind the scenes it's the same story', *Guardian* (23 Oct. 2002). It was widely suggested amongst the London media that Martel's reaction to the announcement of the prize, involving 'high fives', was inappropriate.
- ⁴ R. McCrum, 'The Booker revolution', *Observer* (27 Oct. 2002).
- ⁵ E.-M. Kröller, 'Introduction', in E.-M. Kröller, ed., *The Cambridge companion to Canadian literature* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 1.
- ⁶ Quoted in Henighan, *When words deny the world*, p. 170 (emphasis original).
- ⁷ This itself raises interesting questions about Canada's 'ambivalent position between colonizer and colonized'. Kröller, 'Introduction', p. 2.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ Henighan, *When words deny the world*, p. 33.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 40, 39.
- ¹¹ H. Innis, *The fur trade in Canada: an introduction to Canadian economic history* (New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1930); N. Frye, *The bush garden: essays on the Canadian imagination* (Toronto, Anansi Press, 1971); M. Atwood, *Strange things: the malevolent north in Canadian literature* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995).
- ¹² J.R. Saul, *Reflections of a Siamese twin: Canada at the end of the twentieth century* (Toronto, Viking, 1997).
- ¹³ S. Grace, *Canada and the idea of north* (Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002) [hereafter *CIN*], p. xi.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xii.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xiii (emphasis original).
- ¹⁶ R. Hulan, *Northern experience and the myths of Canadian culture* (Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002) [hereafter *NE*], p. 27.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.10.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² *CIN*, p. 22.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- ²⁴ R. Shields, *Places on the margin: alternative geographies of modernity* (London, Routledge, 1991).
- ²⁵ L.-E. Hamelin, *Nordicité canadienne* (Montreal, Hurtubise HMH, 1975); L.-E. Hamelin, *Canadian nordicity: it's your north too*, trans. W. Barr (Montreal, Harvest House, 1979). It is important to note that the political economist Harold Innis argued in his history of the fur trade that owing to interactions of environment, society and economy, Canada was created as a polity *because* of its geography.
- ²⁶ A. Van Herk, *Places far from Ellesmere: a geografictione: explorations on site* (Red Deer, Alberta, Red Deer College Press, 1991); J. Moss, *Enduring dreams: an exploration of Arctic landscape* (Don Mills, Ontario, Anansi Press, 1997). Indeed, Anne Michaels's recent novel

Fugitive pieces has the narrative turn on the invitation of a character from Europe to help found the Department of Geography at the University of Toronto.

²⁷ *CIN*, p. 106.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 105 (emphasis added).

²⁹ The Windigo is a mythical figure, usually a lone hunter or trapper, who has been driven mad by the north. Often in the process of becoming Windigo, the hunter will have been driven to cannibalism. The Windigo story thus circulates through numerous indigenous and European narratives of the north, including tales of the Franklin expeditions and Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*.

³⁰ *CIN*, p. 124.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

³³ It is unfortunate that Zacharias Kunuk's *Atanarjuat: the fast runner* (Igloodik, Isuma Igloodik Productions, 2001), an epochal moment of Inuit self-representation and rewriting of the north, could only be granted the briefest mention in a note apparently added very late to the text by Grace (*CIN*, p.164).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

³⁵ *NE*, p. 12.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³⁹ For Pratt, autoethnography describes the process by which subjugated peoples choose to represent themselves in ways that engage with colonizing cultures. M.L. Pratt, *Imperial eyes: travel writing and transculturation* (London, Routledge, 1992), p. 7.

⁴⁰ *NE*, p. 163.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁴² In her Epilogue, Grace acknowledges that she made four Arctic journeys in the 1990s.

⁴³ R. Hulan, 'Representing the Canadian north: stories of gender, race, and nation' (PhD dissertation, McGill University, 1996).

⁴⁴ *NE*, p. 181.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 187. Hulan tends to stress these differences at the expense of certain commonalities, and admits to ignoring the north in Québécois nationalism. For a geographical approach to Quebec nationalism, see C. Desbiens, 'Something straight in our landscapes: looking at the "Lemieux effect" in Quebec nationalism', *Ecumene* 7 (2000), pp. 211–32.

⁴⁶ S. Haack, *Deviant logic, fuzzy logic: beyond the formalism* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁴⁷ *NE*, p. 11.

⁴⁸ *CIN*, p. xii.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23. For Grace, Jin-Me Yoon's *A group of sixty-seven* (1996) is exemplary as a redeployment of the idea of north.

⁵⁰ *CIN*, p. 268.