

THE PARADOXICAL DISCOURSE OF LANGUAGE AND SILENCE IN SOME CONTEMPORARY NORTH-AMERICAN TEXTS ON THE ARCTIC

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Between actuality and the imagined Arctic landscape lies a gap, an estuary, through which flow currents of ignorance and presumption. It is important to the well-being of our environment and to the understanding of ourselves as creatures in a living world that this gap be explored, that the distance between real and imagined landscape be apprehended and assessed.

John Moss, "The Imagined Landscape" (1993)

Remote and unknown lands have been the objects of both physical appropriation (for instance through exploration, scientific field work, and the like) and symbolic appropriation (for instance by the means of language, by translating what is initially unknown into one's own familiar terms). With regard to the Euro-western exploration of the Arctic as well as other exotic regions of the world, material and symbolic appropriation went hand in hand and functioned as two sides of the same coin, although the linguistic "acquisition" of the land was usually far more unconscious, unreflective and habitual than its actual physical investigation. In contemporary North-American writing, however – no doubt influenced by post-modernist and post-colonial discourse – the problematic function of language itself in our constructions of the Arctic is felt to be an issue in need of urgent debate.

1. Silence and Language: Some Principal Observations

Nowhere is the problem of language more obvious than when its subject is that of silence, which many writers regarded as a characteristic feature of the arctic regions that they were trying to describe. Face to face with what they felt to be a desolate void, they ended up filling it with their own voice. To the outsider the Arctic landscape seemed frightening not only for the self-evident reason that it was a dangerous and harsh environment in which death by accident, cold and starvation always lurked; it was terrifying also because it appeared to be a godforsaken and voiceless wilderness. Xavier Marmier, writer-poet on the French Recherche-expedition to the Nordic countries, Spitsbergen and the White Sea 1838-40, tries to give expression to his mixture of rapture and fear at the sight of the Magdalene Fjord on Spitsbergen, facing what he perceives to be a scene of pure desolation:

I was alone in the midst of the great Arctic solitude, where no sound and no voice disturbed my dream. The noise of the city and people was far away. I stood on one of the outermost extremities of the world, and before me was nothing but the flooding sea and the polar ice. No, I should have been able to express all the bleakness, all the solemnity of such a place, all that the soul finds of ardent ideas and indelible impressions at the very moment when it is delivered onto itself and floats in space. [...] In my sense of

powerlessness I bowed my head, and my lips only mumbled a humble, Christian invocation.¹

Confronted with the bleak but also solemn landscape of the Magdalene Fjord, Marmier's reaction is that of pure awe. Facing the Arctic wilderness is to him, to use a modern expression, a mind-blowing experience. The sublimity of the landscape fills his soul with ideas so intense that his language fails him; overpowered by this wild scenery, his impotence renders him unable to utter anything but a humble supplication. The emphasis on the Christian nature of his invocation demonstrates his sense of having travelled into wilderness far beyond the borders of civilization; his cultural reaction in this respect could even be said to spring from remnants of 7th century European myths of the North as a icy world of evil, of Antichrist.

The idea of the silent Arctic was the offshoot of a landscape devoid of people or a land with peoples whose language and outlook the Western writer did not have access to (with the rare exception of explorers such as Knud Rasmussen or Vilhjalmur Stefansson). Generally speaking these arctic regions were to the Western mind, for all intents and purposes, a voiceless environment. An additional reason, however, as to why explorers perceived "the silent Arctic" to be such an appropriate trope was its status as an *unknown* territory. In his introduction to *Farthest North [Fram over Polhavet]* (1897), Fridtjof Nansen describes the polar regions as "Nature's great Ice Temple [...] with their endless silence" (3) – silent, first of all, because hitherto unexplored. Herein lies, however, the great paradox of narratives of journeys to previously unexplored places in the Arctic: Once they gave voice to some unknown territory, once they put it into words, it was certainly no longer mute but infused with the explorer's own language whose discourse in turn filtered out – silenced – aspects of the landscape and of the Inuit culture that it was not predisposed to perceive.

In view of most explorers' vision of the Arctic as an unknown and above all silent and desolate entity, it seems appropriate to point to the idea of silence that became an important theoretical concept in the last decades of the 20th century in the discourse of the humanities as well as the social sciences, particularly in women studies and in ethnicity and class studies. A pioneer feminist writer like Tillie Olsen, for instance, chose the title *Silences* for her renowned 1978 collection of essays about the voicelessness of women and the poor, objects to be defined and hence dominated by others, i.e. by the male and/or bourgeois hegemony. Other writers found the trope of silence useful also in their discussion of the sociocultural invisibility and powerlessness of many racial and ethnic groups. In recent decades, the idea of silence has also come to the fore in the field of ecocriticism with reference to the status of the natural environment. As a voiceless entity, nature is unable to assert

¹ J'étais seul alors au milieu de la solitude immense; nul bruit ne frappait mon oreille, nulle voix ne venait m'interrompre dans mon rêve. Les rumeurs de la cité, les passions du monde, étaient bien loin. Mon pied foulait une des extrémités de la terre, et devant moi il n'y avait plus que les flots de l'Océan et les glaces du pôle. No, je ne saurais exprimer toute la tristesse, toute la solennité de l'isolement dans un tel lieu, tout ce que l'âme, ainsi livrée à elle-même et planant dans l'espace, conçoit en un instant d'idées ardentes et d'impressions ineffaçables. [...] J'ai courbé le front sous le sentiment de mon impuissance, et ma bouche n'a murmuré que l'humble invocation du chrétien" (Knutsen and Posti 185-86).

itself as a subject on the arena of human discourse. As Christopher Manes notes, “Nature *is* silent in our [Western] culture (and in literate societies generally) in the sense that the status of being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative [...]” (15). Both nature and disadvantaged social groups thus became objects to be molded and construed according to the worldview of the hegemonic human subject that confronted them.

2. The Voiceless Arctic and Eurocentric Monologic Narratives

The idea of a voiceless Arctic appears triply pertinent in this context; it has appeared silent and/or been silenced both environmentally, ethnically, and in terms of gender. Although regions of the circumpolar north, exclusive of Spitsbergen and Franz Joseph Land, were in fact populated by various indigenous groups, explorers tended to regard the arctic landscape as well as its peoples as a *terra incognita* whose silence was finally to be broken by the language of Western culture and science. The classical explorers of the Arctic felt such symbolic appropriation to be perfectly legitimate. In the introduction to his book *In Northern Mists* [*Nord i tåkeheimen*] (1911), Fridtjof Nansen declares that “from first to last the history of polar exploration is a single mighty manifestation of the power of the unknown over the mind of man” (vol. 1, 4). The problem, however, is of course that “the mind of man” in this context meant the minds of Western *men*, and that the Arctic was not considered properly known (its indigenous populations notwithstanding) until explored by the West. The expedition narratives by Nansen, Amundsen and others proceeded to describe the “unknown” Arctic in terms of their own cultural grammar – their own ideas, aspirations and values. When the introduction to *In Northern Mists* ends with the proclamation that in “every part of the world and in every age” the adventurous desire to explore the unknown “has driven man forward on the path of evolution” (vol. 1, 6), Nansen is first and foremost giving expression to his present-day Western Enlightenment ideology of intellectual, scientific and social progress which, combined with the masculine ethos of physical prowess, daring and competitiveness, has in fact served to mold the narrative worlds of the Arctic all the way up to our own times. In the words of Barry Lopez in *Arctic Dreams*, the land was made “to fill a certain role, often that of an adversary, the *bête noire* of one’s dreams”:

In the most extreme forms of disassociation, the landscape functions as little more than a stage for the exposition of a personality or for scientific or economic theories, or for national or personal competitions. [...] Encounters with the land in the nineteenth century are more brutal than tender. And are shaped by Victorian sentiment: a desire to exert oneself against formidable odds; to cast one’s character in the light of ennobling ideals; to sojourn among exotic things; to make collections and erect monuments. (320)

And, as Sherrill E. Grace succinctly puts it with reference to the masculine ethos of most polar narratives, “the north is figured as the place of male adventure, the space for testing and proving masculine identities, where sissies and wimps will be turned

into real men or be destroyed, or be sent home/south to the women or the bottle” (166-67).

In his careful examination of the narratives of Norwegian polar expeditions in the last four decades of the 20th century, Matti Goksøyr shows that they are still predominantly marked by a discourse of athletic prowess, endurance, and expeditionary competence, and still tinged with nationalistic ideas of Norwegian superiority in matters of snow and ice. In this manner, even contemporary Norwegian expeditionary chronicles tend to be stories of Western individual conquest rather than narratives about the arctic environments themselves. In his comments on recent Norwegian expeditions that have followed Nansen’s footsteps across the Greenland icecap, Henning Howlid Wærp has similarly observed that the majority of these Greenland narratives (even those penned by women) tend to be celebrations of Norwegian athletic achievements, narratives of personal victories over the forces of a tough and brutal arctic world, with relatively little focus on the nature of arctic Greenland itself or the encounter with indigenous Greenlanders. Although one would assume that contemporary explorers would be equipped with a far greater knowledge of the many-faceted characteristics of the natural and cultural environment of the Arctic than their 19th and early 20th century predecessors, many of their narratives make use of it to a surprisingly small degree and are rarely inclined to problematize the rhetoric of expeditionary conquest even in our own day and age.

3. Alternative Strategies in Three North-American Texts about the Arctic

To contravene this type of Eurocentric bias is a main objective of the three contemporary North-American texts about the Arctic that I will be examining in this article: Barry Lopez’ *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape* (1987), Aritha van Herk’s *Places Far from Ellesmere* (1990), and John Moss’ *Enduring Dreams: An Exploration of Arctic Landscape* (1996). The crucial issue that these contemporary authors are faced with, and which embodies the central subject of this paper, is the following: How may it be possible for language to take cognizance of that which seemingly lacks a voice? How is it possible to make the wordless landscape and its peoples speak from under, as it were, the enormous compilation of centuries of Euro-western text? To pitch these works against the above-mentioned Norwegian expedition chronicles, past and present, might, however, in one sense be said to be unfair, since my contemporary American and Canadian examples are not so much expeditionary accounts as narratives (by writers and academics) of personal and relatively safe trips and sojourns in the Arctic combined with discursive critiques of previous writings of arctic exploration. Nonetheless the contrast is instructive. In these North-American narratives, the idea of defining the Arctic in the tradition of previous explorers is continuously questioned.

Part of the effectiveness of Barry Lopez’ *Arctic Dreams* as a critique of traditional arctic narratives is due to its polyphony of genres. Part travel narrative, part documentary, part autobiography, part memoir, part history, part natural history, and part nature writing, it gives a multifaceted and complex picture of the North American Arctic and describes the arctic landscape, vegetation, animals, and peoples

in great detail and with encyclopedic knowledge. There are separate chapters of natural history on for instance muskoxen, polar bears, and narwhals; other chapters provide a wealth of information about the nature of light and ice, the cultural history of the indigenous peoples of the region, the exploitation of its natural resources; and the final two chapters examines the age-old history of European and American expeditionary explorations to the Arctic. It is Lopez' many-faceted approaches to the portrayal of the Arctic environment, both of the past and the present, that turn his book into an alternative arctic discourse.

Something similar can be said to characterize van Herk's *Places far for Ellesmere* and Moss' *Enduring Dreams* as well, although they lack Lopez' encyclopedic approach. Van Herk's text is a curious blend of travel narrative, autobiography, nature writing, fiction, and literary criticism. The main (and concluding) chapter of her book, entitled "Ellesmere, woman as island," deals particularly with the gender bias of conventional arctic narratives, and uses specific linguistic and stylistic techniques to undermine the prevalent masculine ideology of the genre. Moss also tries to counteract the monologism of previous Arctic narratives by employing a mixture of multiple types of writing: geography, history, literary criticism, nature writing, field notes, diary, creative non-fiction, and poetry. By weaving together portrayals from traditional Arctic narratives, reflections by a host of contemporary writers, indigenous points of view, and Moss' own thoughts and landscape descriptions, *Enduring Dreams* creates a multifarious narrative that breaks with Eurocentric cultural appropriations of the Arctic.

In this manner, generic polyphony is combined with other means of diversification in these books, stylistic as well as thematic ones. In my view, these North-American authors attempt to create more open, dialogic and multifaceted readings of the Arctic by way of four specific strategies: the inclusion of feminine and indigenous voices; the legitimation of the sensuous life-world of the Arctic itself; the subversion of the authority of the language of their own texts; and the use of a style of paradox and contradiction. Each of these four strategies will be discussed below.

4. The Inclusion of Feminine and Indigenous Voices

As John Moss repeatedly accentuates in his book *Enduring Dreams*, the Arctic has traditionally appeared silent both in terms of its landscape and in terms of the disregard of the voices of women as well as indigenous groups:

How do you tell the silence of women from the stories of their lives?
Why is the Arctic a landscape ineffable, except as the expression of manhood,
in metaphors that tell of trials,
encounters, that mutter by rote the catechism of gender and race? (57)

When it comes to the gender bias of former Arctic narratives, the most incisive critique among my three books is launched by Van Herk's *Places Far from Ellesmere*. Her last chapter describes her hiking trip on Ellesmere Island from Lake Hazen along the Abbé River up toward Glacier Pass. The chapter opens with a single sentence: "Anna Karenina should have escaped to Ellesmere." The subsequent

paragraph develops van Herk's central project, her critique of hegemonic masculine discourse:

If Tolstoy had suffered her, if she hadn't been a woman created and governed by a blind and obstinate man. This is a remedy you want to propose to her, Ellesmere, as if it were a nectar she could swallow or inhale. A consummate escape from Vronsky and Karenin, Ellesmere, that most northerly of extreme Arctic islands, probably un/named when Tolstoy invented her, probably unheard of, like Anna herself. A lost heroine. Lost in Russian, lost in love, lost in the nineteenth century. The especial lostness of an invented character whose inventor revenged himself on her through the failings he invented for her. (77)

In van Herk's reading, Anna is unsuited for "the trappings of bourgeois respectability that first Karenin, then Vronsky, and above all Tolstoy, wish to impose her. Her real sin is that she will not serve, and so old Tolstoy, he who claimed that she should be pitied rather than despised, is merciless and pitiless. He shadows her unto her death" (107). Van Herk's essay repeatedly uses her descriptions of the arctic environment of Ellesmere as contrapuntal critiques of the gender ideology of Tolstoy's novel, the only reading matter she allows herself to bring along on her hiking trip. The Eurocentric meaning imposed on Canadian Arctic landscapes and the male ideology imposed on Anna Karenina become closely interconnected in van Herk's book as she looks at the land- and seascape stretched out below her during her plane ride to Ellesmere:

But now above the northern point of Devon Island, Grinnell Peninsula and Arthur Fjord, Devon on the map shaped like a seal sticking its head out of water, and then over the huge gap of Norwegian Bay.

These names, every mapped configuration male/lineated. Is this the answer to Tolstoy's question, "What then, can we do?" Name, name, leave names on everything, on every physical abutment, leave behind one's father's name, the names of other men, then names of absent and abstracted/ideal women. Anna, has she an island or a bay, an inlet? Is there an Anna Karenina Cape in Russia? Don't ask how many Tolstoy inlets there must be.

Axel Heiberg Island. Who was he? Some Norwegian consul who probably never even saw it, relied on (his friend? acquaintance? emissary?) Otto Sverdrup to immortalize him, in 1899). (88)

To a Norwegian, Van Herk's point becomes even more poignant in view of the fact that Axel Heiberg was the head of the Ringnes brewery that sponsored Sverdrup's second Fram-expedition, and that Norway's claim on the Sverdrup islands west of Ellesmere (Ellef Ringnes Island, Amund Ringnes Island, and Axel Heiberg's Island) was abandoned in 1930 – to Sverdrup's great disappointment, who died the same year. Naming by way of proper nouns is a particularly forceful way of appropriating the landscape, and may at the same time be seen as symptomatic of the way in which

language in general quite often functioned to translate what was foreign in the Arctic into one's own (usually masculine) terms.

When it comes to the issues of race and ethnicity in past discourses of the Arctic, the problem is not so much that the Inuit remain undescribed in narratives of the peopled parts of the polar regions, but that indigenous voices are rarely directly quoted and heard; their habitats and cultures are deflected rather than reflected in the Euro-western gaze. A quite trivial but in my opinion nonetheless illustrative example of the outsider's perspective can be found in Nansen's comment on the Siberian landscape on the evening of August 6, 1893, the day before the *Fram* is finally launched into the Kara Sea, leaving the Russian coast and human beings behind: "Our view was blocked by a wall of fog whichever way we turned. There were plenty of reindeer tracks, but of course they were only those of the Samoyedes' tame reindeer. This is the land of the Samoyedes – and oh but it is desolate and mournful!" (64).² It is highly unlikely that the Samoyedes themselves felt desolation and mournfulness to be the most appropriate descriptive terms for their own land. In this manner, the Western symbolic appropriation of arctic places becomes a doubly suspect process: When explorers filled what they regarded as the silent Arctic with their own discourse, the environment itself and its indigenous groups lost their status as subjects. Knud Rasmussen, himself part Inuit and fluent in Greenlandic, often takes far more care to provide of an inside as well as an (inevitably) outside view of the sentiments of Inuit he meets on his Fifth Thule Expedition, for instance when he talks about the Caribou Eskimos in the Barren Grounds: "This, roughly, is the ordinary everyday life of the inland Eskimos, probably the hardest people in the world. Their country is such as to offer but a bare existence under the hardest possible conditions, and yet they think it the best that could be found" (79). But there are striking "silences" even in Rasmussen's Fifth Thule adventure; the voices of the two Greenlanders Miteq and Arnarulúnguaq who accompanied him across northernmost America are for instance hardly ever heard in his extensive narrative of their one-and-a-half year dog-sledding trip. In arctic literature such absences are glaring, although Rasmussen is certainly not the main culprit here; he was able to perceive Inuit culture from the inside to an extent unparalleled by most explorers and commentators, then and now (a present-day acknowledgement, in principle, of indigenous minorities as subjects is of course not necessarily synonymous with knowing them).

It ought to be noted, however, that Nansen in his portrayal of the Greenlanders in his book *Eskimo Life* (1893) and even Roald Amundsen in his narrative of the journey with the *Gjøa* through the Northwest Passage deal fairly extensively and sympathetically with indigenous Inuit life, their own ethnocentric prejudices notwithstanding. The difference between the discourses of Nansen and Amundsen on the one hand and those of Lopez's *Arctic Dreams* and Moss' *Enduring Dreams* on the other is in my opinion first and foremost found in their cultural gaze. Nansen's *Eskimo Life* is an example of empathetic description that for the most part is nonetheless pervaded by the outside observer's perspective. Despite Nansen's admiration of the Inuit's expertise in techniques of arctic survival, "their ingenious

² The Samoyedes and their land are more fully described in the first part of Nansen's *Through Siberia* (1914), but here, too, Nansen's perspective is consistently that of the ethnocentric Western European.

implements” and “their masterly skills” (*Eskimo Life*, viii-ix), the indigenous peoples of the Arctic remain for Nansen objects of study rather than subjects, and are portrayed (as in most scientific treatises of the time) as primitive and “hardy children of nature” (viii). Nansen becomes deeply engaged in the Eskimos’ present-day plight, admires their culture of hospitality, their “socialism carried into practice” (119), accentuates their highly developed sense of morality, deplores and documents in great detail the transgressions of Western culture and missionaries against the traditional life of the Eskimos, and is constantly critical of what he sees as the negative influence from a degenerate European civilization, but his gaze nonetheless remains that of the Euro-westerner whose cultural pessimism on behalf of the Greenlanders makes him ultimately doubt that “the race yet may be saved” (348). On the one hand is the first-person, Western “we” and on the other the third-person “them” – the Self versus the Other: “Thus we find this lovable people inevitably destined either to pass utterly away or to decline into the shadow of what it once was. But the Greenlander bears up cheerfully, and is perhaps happier than we are apt to be; he does not realize his own ruin, and does not hate us, but gives us a friendly welcome when we come to him” (349).

The experience of the Inuit themselves is given far more authority in the contemporary texts such as those by Lopez and Moss. As Lopez points out in *Arctic Dreams*, the Western presence in the Arctic, largely exploitative, is a brief one compared to the age-old indigenous experience: “We have no alternative, long-lived narrative to theirs, no story of human relationships with that landscape independent of Western science [...]” (9). Lopez presents Inuit perceptions and narratives of the land as supplements and alternatives to his own extensive elucidation of the present-day multidisciplinary, scientific knowledge of the Arctic. Moss’ *Enduring Dreams* repeatedly criticizes Western attitudes to the northern indigenous peoples and/or to the land that he finds in the journals, diaries, and narratives of Arctic explorers (for instance Martin Frobisher, Samuel Hearne, Alexander Mackenzie, John Franklin, Charles Francis Hall, Charles R. Tuttle, Fridtjof Nansen, Robert Peary, Vilhjalmur Stefansson, and Helge Ingstad). Moss’ narrative also makes allusions to contemporary Canadian and American writers (for instance Rudy Wiebe, Margaret Atwood, Al Purdy, Robert Kroetsch, Farley Mowat, and Barry Lopez), which are interspersed between Moss’s own landscape perceptions and his citations of indigenous voices (by for instance Felix Nuyviak, Pauloosie, and the Igloodik shaman Uvavnuak); the latter are perhaps unexpectedly few given Moss’ professed concern with the perspective of the indigenous peoples of the North-American Arctic. However, both Lopez’ and Moss’ narratives are, to use Mikhail Bakhtin’s terms, highly polyphonic (of many voices) and heteroglossic (of different tongues); thus the narrator’s own discourse, instead of being monologic, becomes one of several voices in the text.

5. The Legitimation of the Sensuous Life-world of the Arctic Itself

Lopez’, van Herk’s, and Moss’ books about the Arctic also attempt to give voice to the natural environment itself that they find to have been misrepresented in a great many former narratives. This is precisely Lopez’ point when he insists on the importance of trying to avoid imposing our ethnocentric and anthropocentric

preconceptions upon the northern landscape and be more open to perceive its intrinsic characteristics:

As I moved through the Arctic I thought often about a rhythm indigenous to this land, not one imposed on it. The imposed view, however innocent, always obscures. [...] The indigenous rhythm, or rhythms, of arctic life is important to discern for more than merely academic reasons. To understand why a region is different, to show an initial deference to its mysteries, is to guard against a kind of provincialism that vitiates the imagination, that stifles the capacity to envision what is different. (158).

Lopez suggests that a respectful attitude to the Arctic landscapes is a prerequisite for an authentic description of them: “These are not solely arenas for human invention. To have no elevated conversation with the land, no sense of reciprocity with it, to rein it in or to disparage conditions not to our liking, shows a certain lack of courage, too strong a preference for human devising” (369). To fully comprehend the Arctic depends in Lopez’ opinion on one’s readiness to integrate, in one’s mind, what he another place calls the “external landscape” and the “internal landscape” (confer Lopez’ essay “Landscape and Narrative ”), which is to say one’s willingness to be open to, and mediate between, one’s physical sensation of the many-faceted phenomena in the environment itself and one’s preconceptions of the land that stem from one’s own experience and one’s moral, intellectual and spiritual worldview. It is precisely Lopez’ insistence on *listening* and *conversing* with the land’s indigenous character that sparks his critique of previous polar expedition narratives and inspires his own alternative, ecological vision of the North-American Arctic: “And nowhere is the land empty or undeveloped. It cannot be improved upon with technological assistance. The land, an animal that contains all other animals, is vigorous and alive” (369).

Van Herk also grants the phenomenal world of the arctic a particular legitimacy in *Places Far from Ellesmere*, not least because it is situated, as it were, beyond the borders of civilization, beyond its dominant cultural constructions of both women and land:

Walking this landscape, indifferent, beyond beauty, toward the remote seat of the glacier you want to reach, the Abbé Glacier and the Seven Sisters frozen into their own eternities, high and remote, without the need to insist on emancipation or escape, themselves escaped into nordic dreams of extremity that permit you to wander here, carelessly, for a short space. Ellesmere teaches pleasure, the pleasure of oblivion, pleasure endorsed, its doors thrown wide. In the tent at night/day, you wake, turn to stare up at the woven cloth above you, the ground under your thermarest below your sleeping bag as knotty and firm as all facts. (130)

The remoteness, openness, and indifference of the land leave her free to experience the sensuous reality of Ellesmere, its knotty ground “firm as all facts.” As she noted earlier: “From here it is impossible to read the world: the world exists only in some

enigmatic novel far beyond this sky, this dome of green, this stony ground, the glaciers you are trekking toward. In a never/read text, you lose the text of your usual fictions. Words speak a different weight” (121). Such passages may at first glance seem to affirm the myth of the Arctic as an uncharted, pristine, and unknown northern territory that in itself has some essential, non-gendered and environmental meaning independent of the viewer, but in my view this would be a misinterpretation. Van Herk’s point is more moderate, namely that the phenomenal world of Ellesmere helps shape her responses: A small herd of caribou, for instance, interferes with her thoughts about Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina, beating across “the unread tundra to remind you that you can un/read her, free her from her written self, read self, punished self” (119). The land, then, helps spark van Herk’s textual deconstructions. In this manner van Herk grants concrete experience an important function in her own construction of the Arctic and of Tolstoy’s novel; her readings of both result from the dialectical interplay between nature and culture, between external and internal landscapes.

In Moss’ *Enduring Dreams*, the process of writing is seen as a means by which we project structure and sense onto the world, a way in which we resist its formless and chaotic immediacy. Human beings are therefore said to long for “the quietude” of the Arctic where there is “an absence of language; there is apparently illimitable terrain”: “No wonder so many returned and return to the infinite silence of the Arctic experience, to chaos” (91). When camping the by Mackenzie River (Deh Cho), Moss and his wife read previous explorers’ journals about these regions and find that these textual worlds seem “not to intersect” with their own physical experience of the land: “Somehow, in being here, we have reached beyond words: through the rhythm of exhausted muscles, we have become part of the northern landscape in ways no text, apparently, can apprehend” (42). Directly sensory, phenomenal perception becomes a means of reconnecting with the surroundings of the far north, for instance by backpacking or long-distance running through the Arctic landscape when “memory and anticipation merge with every falling step; sky and earth become each other, and you inseparable from what you see” (26). A similar experience of becoming, as it were, embodied in nature is poetically evoked in a later passage:

[...] in the beauty of experience
 you become what you behold
 your life a complement
 to the world in contemplation
 your presence indivisible
 from what you see (89)

Paying meticulous attention to the actual, sensuous life-world of the Arctic itself consequently becomes a central strategy for resisting the fundamentally anthropocentric and ethnocentric orientation of previous Arctic writing.

6. The Subversion of the Authority of the Language of One’s Own Text

The poetic passage above suggests that Moss becomes one with the landscape, but this is of course at the same time a literary, linguistically constructed unity; these

lines have the strict formal and rhythmical organization of poetry. Although Moss and van Herk accentuate the primacy of physical encounters that reach beyond language, they are at the same time very much aware of the fact that their experiences are defined and communicated by way of text. Moss in particular constantly gives voice to the postmodern and postcolonial dilemma that, in his own writing, he cannot “enter” the arctic landscape except through a language that to a considerable extent is already constituted by previous texts about the Canadian north. Throughout his book Moss demonstrates his acute apprehension of the problematic relationship between sensation and language in the literature of the north:

When you encounter Arctic passages, it is difficult to sort your own familiarity with the landscape, shaped by memories or previous reading or by dreams or empirical experience, from shared assumptions looping through the language, gathering inchoate particulars of actual or imagined journeys into line. Conventions of the text precede, determining how the wilderness is read; limits of narrative become the boundaries of landscape, and grammar topography. Images of elsewhere define the terrain and make the alien appear accessible. The imagined Arctic, shaped by the imperatives of the culture into which it is written, is only a reminder of what’s real. (54).

To Moss, writing produces a sense of discrepancy between word and world, which consequently becomes a major obstacle to his own desire for presenting a revisionist narrative of the Arctic. Written language “has misplaced the world” (36); and it is, as Moss puts it “hard not to get lost in words” (6). In the same way that language and phenomenal perception tend to become inconsonant, the geography of Arctic explorations and the landscape itself are in Moss’ opinion repeatedly at odds with each other. In Moss’ definition, geography is “the imposition of knowledge on experience in a specified landscape”; it “articulates out solipsistic vision of the world as knowable” (1); it “is the instrument of our dissociation, when we fell from grace with the natural world” (2). Landscape is thus “the antithesis of geography”; it is “the natural world without benefit of human consciousness, although not excluding human presence” (5). There seems to be a phenomenological bent to Moss’ argument here: scientific abstractions of the lay of the land are seen to objectify it and ignore the ways in which ordinary human perception is embodied in the lived world. As Merleau-Ponty notes in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, “To return to things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always *speaks*, and in relation to which every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign-language, as is geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is” (ix). To Moss both geography with its mappings of landscapes and text with its linguistic projection of them are part of a hegemonic, symbolic discourse that have made us misapprehend the arctic environment.

Lopez’ prose contains similar assertions: In the preface to his book, he notes that the Arctic initially appears empty and barren to the untrained eye and seems to call for figurative language: “It is a region, like the desert, rich with metaphor, with adumbration” (xxvi). As Lopez later argues after discussing Frederic Edwin

Church's oil painting *The Icebergs* (1861), the problem with attempting to portray environments alien to our own is that "we bring our own worlds to bear in foreign landscapes in order to clarify them for ourselves. It is hard to imagine that we could do otherwise. The risk we take is of finding our final authority in the metaphors rather than in the land" (221).

In both Lopez' *Arctic Dreams*, van Herk's *Places Far from Ellesmere*, and Moss' *Enduring Dreams* the constructivist nature of language, which they attempt to restrain and mitigate, is regarded as unavoidable. Their postmodern awareness of this is an explicit concern in their writing. What makes these texts deviate from a great many traditional narratives of the Arctic is not least their problematization of their own discourse and their own narrative position. These three contemporary treatises about the Arctic, particularly those of Moss and van Herk, consistently undercut their own supremacy, as it were, by the use of a highly self-reflexive language. Moss' text is self-consciously tentative rather than declarative; it unfolds in terms of free-wheeling association rather than in terms of sequential narrative or discursive argumentation. By its own (dis)organization it tries in my view to counteract the discourse of traditional narrative whose imposed order, in Moss' words, "denies the necessary chaos of human consciousness" (32). In the case of van Herk, her trip to Ellesmere offers her the opportunity of proposing multiple readings of the north as a way of questioning both traditional arctic narratives and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. On Ellesmere, she notes, "You are free to un/read yourself, home, Anna, the rest of Canada, all possible text" (91). It is precisely this type of deconstructive self-awareness that prevents both van Herk and Moss from imposing some hegemonic ideology through their narratives. Their own self-reflexivity serves to shatter any illusion that their books attempt to present some final, logocentric truths about the Arctic.

At the same time, however, they do not claim that their relationship to the northern environment can merely be reduced to text. Van Herk suggests that the indigenous arctic landscape of Ellesmere also helps shape her own writing. And Moss insists that phenomenal experience may indeed serve to check a purely constructivist discourse: "If all the world's a text, then everything we know and do is intertextual. Not only is life a metaphor but living it is plagiarism. But only if. There are ways out; there are ways back again" (41). As I have argued, the "ways out" and "back again" in my three contemporary books are projected by their dialogic orientation, particularly by their incorporation of feminine and indigenous voices into their texts, and by their paying close attention to the living world of the Arctic itself. But the authority of their own texts is not only undermined through the use of alternative discourses; it is also subverted from *within*, as it were, through these authors' use of particular stylistic techniques, in particular those of paradox and contradiction.

7. The use of a style of paradox and contradiction

The issue that Lopez, van Herk, and Moss confront in their arctic writing is, as I have tried to show, ultimately that of representation: How may one's narrative manage to break free, intermittently at least, from the intertextual constrictions of previous arctic writing? How can that which hitherto has remained silent or alien engrave itself on one's tongue, authentically inscribe itself into one's own narrative? In the

essay entitled “Landscape and Narrative,” Lopez suggests one possibility, namely that truth “reveals itself most fully not in dogma but in the paradox, irony, and contradictions that distinguish compelling narratives” (71). This is a characterization that, not surprisingly, is quite applicable to Lopez’ own book as well, in which he argues that “One must live in the middle of contradiction because if all contradiction were eliminated at once life would collapse” (370). His *Arctic Dreams* subverts previous Eurocentric dogmas precisely through its contrapuntal alternations between phenomenological landscape descriptions and cultural interpretation, its antithetical shifts between Eurocentric and indigenous ways of viewing the world. And particularly in the texts by van Herk and Moss – or so it seems to me – paradox and contradiction become a continuously self-conscious, *stylistic* endeavor. The use of paradox – the use of what seems conventionally self-contradictory but which is nonetheless true on a deeper level – is their predominant method for letting whatever is silent, silenced, and/or alien enter and undermine hegemonic discourse.

To van Herk, the remoteness and relatively unspoiled character of Ellesmere (“a floating polar desert [78]; “a languid body below you” [87]; “this floating woman/island”[121]) make it an appropriate setting for trying to subvert predominant constructions both of the north and of women: “These un/read islands, these Annas all. Inexplicable, these northerns belong to no nation, no configurations of [wo]man. They are Annas, impossible to possess, determined to enact their own vitality” (125). The sense that Anna Karenina and the landscape of Ellesmere make is here expressed in terms of pure paradox. By describing both Anna and Ellesmere as “un/read,” Van Herk makes them non-textual and textual at one and the same time since, by being “Annas,” they are also already literary constructions, objects of writing and reading. In this manner van Herk has her semiotic cake and eats it to, in an antithetical fashion: The pristine physical character of these regions seems to suggest that they are “unread” as she simultaneously “un/reads” them, that is, reads them in an alternative, deconstructive fashion. Although I agree with Marlene Goldman’s criticism of van Herk’s book that it seems to portray Ellesmere as a cultural tabula rasa and thus ignores its Inuit as well as expeditionary history, Goldman misses the point, I think, when she suggests that van Herk merely invests her arctic blank space with “utopian attributes drawn from traditional European narratives” about the silence and mystery of the north (158). Some untouched, mysterious character of both Ellesmere and Anna Karenina, innate or projected, is instead asserted and undermined at one and the same time. This is an alternative linguistic strategy to both essentialism on the one hand and constructivism on the other, a contradictory and constantly transformative language very different from a monologic naming of the land in/on one’s own terms.

Van Herk chooses the term “geografictione” to describe the genre of her writing, suggesting that her representation of Ellesmere represents a combination of geography and fiction, irreducible to either, a style of writing that functions as a form of textual non-appropriation. The most striking strategy of van Herk’s “geografictional” style is that of seemingly contradictory word-play, for instance when Ellesmere is described as “this un/written northern novel, this desert un/kingdom” (112). Paradox is her main means of attempting to wriggle free from, or at least resist, the enormous accumulation of a masculine, Eurocentric discourse

about the Arctic. Van Herk's use of a paradoxical style culminates in her physical evocation of the landscape and animals of Ellesmere and the vivid sensation of hiking among them:

This is pleasure: escape, water, wind, air, rocks, the lake still frozen in the distance behind you, the potential of glacial ice and snow, of always reading an eternal book, of Anna reading this book you are in, this book of the north, un/read because mysterious, this female desert island and its secret reasons and desires. (130)

To van Herk, then, the island of Ellesmere and *Anna Karenina* are both texts. Not only is Aritha van Herk reading the character of Anna Karenina in Tolstoy's book through the lenses of her Ellesmere hike, but van Herk also envisions the prospect of Anna reading the book of Ellesmere with Aritha as the character backpacking in it. Once this intertextual possibility is suggested, it becomes part of the geografictions of van Herk's own book. Through van Herk's paradoxical style, what has been silent or silenced about Ellesmere or Anna (their mysteries, their "secret reasons and desires") is invited to inscribe itself into the text of an arctic Ellesmere full of natural life. Un/written and un/read, the text allows the phenomenal Ellesmere or Anna enter a contradictory discourse which frees them to become their own subjects; their symbolic conquest by Euro-western male language is deconstructed: "Ellesmere is no one's mistress. Every day you slide your legs out of your sleeping bag, unzip the tent and look up at the sky, privileged to be reading its story for a while, the pages of wind and glacier, of arctic silence, Ellesmere's book unpossessible. You will have to abandon it here when you leave, for the hares and caribou" (138). The sensory evocation of the actual body of the physical Ellesmere here "of wind and glacier, of arctic silence" is nonetheless expressed in terms of pure paradox as she or we read "its story," the "pages" of an unpossessible "book."

Moss' writes in *Enduring Dreams* that writers such as Aritha van Herk and "a handful of others" write in a fashion similar to Rudy Wiebe who "envisions the Arctic as a sprawling metaphor, a mirror of southern realities and dreams," but who at the same time "allows it a separate integrity, implicitly acknowledging its existence prior to and apart from it" (49). Moss' strategy of writing may indeed be argued to be quite similar to that of van Herk; he too uses language in a paradoxical fashion in order to assert the reciprocal and tenuous relationship between world and human subject, between phenomenal perception and language. As Moss puts it, "Words separate us all from paradise, and bind us to it" (31). This may sound like an irreversible textual fall from grace and an eternal separation from nature, but not quite: Words also *bind* us to the environment of the Arctic. The relationship between the two is reciprocal and dialectical.

A recurrent theme of Moss' book, weaving its way through the text in a great many variations like the musical motifs in a symphony, is that of silence versus language, inevitably wedded to one another, the first belonging to nature and the latter to culture. To Moss, nature is a silent paradise filled with "the splendours of chaos" (31): "There might be in the glistening details a vision of silence, in stubborn particulars the pleasures of chaos, the pleasure through a shattered text of silvered

estuaries, on Ellesmere, the pleasures of oblivion. Nothing I can say / will make words of nothing” (136). Moss evokes the dream of becoming immersed in an unmitigated Arctic landscape only to acknowledge in the next sentence that his sensuous embodiment in nature is at the same time embedded in language, in words whose origin is in some way tied up with physical reality – a variation of the kind of paradox that William Carlos Williams evokes in his well-known poem “A Sort of a Song”: “(No ideas / but in things) Invent!” (1195).

In what Moss regards as the best of Arctic writing, “our estrangement from the natural world yields to atavistic convolutions of the text that connect us, as outsiders, directly to the land – words evoke nostalgia for a world remembered by its absence” (60). Most importantly, this kind of paradoxical nature writing is self-consciously aware of its own constructivist character, thus avoiding the trap, on the one hand, of asserting the primacy of some essentialist arctic nature and, on the other hand, of investing Eurocentric cultural belief with some “natural” authority. Moss’ self-reflexive style of writing may thus be said to resemble that of Al Purdy’s poetry; according to Moss, Purdy’s words “admit, with humility and pride, the alien perspective of his written passages and, implicitly, the illimitable distance between his own realities and the world he writes about” (50). It is precisely through the self-conscious revelations of such illimitable gaps that a counter-discourse is possible. Echoing Pablo Neruda as well as Whitman’s famous ending in “Song of Myself” – “I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,/If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles” (2241) – the ending of Moss’ own book reiterates the paradoxical, contradictory relationship between speech and silence, writing and experience, word and world:

Look for me among words. When I am no longer alive, look here. Between the river and shore, stones and the ocean, in echoes of a poem by Pablo Neruda rounding the devotional rhetoric of Rudy Wiebe. Look here, among words. Swirling Arctic snow sweeps over unseen promontories, eddies in the lee of phantom contours, streams peculiar parallels across the tundra. In winter you can see the wind; the river is an absence, shape of the land’s memory, while flowers in their causes sleep. Look for me here, in the silencing of words; look here, I am tremulous with language, between wind and the land. (158)

In this manner, Moss’ conclusion roots his book in the Arctic “swirling snow” and in language at one and the same time.

Enduring Dreams, suspended between silence and language, thus constantly employs a discourse of paradox to prevent its own representations from becoming categorical and imperious. Phenomenal experience, however qualified by language, is nonetheless an important element of the dialogics of *Enduring Dreams*, just as it was in *Places Far from Ellesmere*. As Aron Senkpiel observes about both Rudy Wiebe, van Herk, and Moss, “There is, in all three, the living attention to the interesting, engaging detail that comes from leisurely walking and looking about in a spare landscape” (132). When it comes to the issue of the landscape’s spareness, however, Wiebe’s final sentence in his book *Playing Dead: A Contemplation*

Concerning the Arctic, could in fact have been Moss' and Van Herk's conclusions as well: "Surely by now we are ready to understand that the nakedness of our country lies most purely in the uninformed eye of the beholder" (142).

In my view, writers such as Rudy Wiebe, Aritha van Herk and John Moss are trying to implement precisely what Robert Kroetsch in his essay "Disunity as Unity: A Canadian Strategy" (included in an essay collection with the apposite title *The Lovely Treachery of Words*) sees as a basic element of Canadian literature and cultural identity: "The margin, the periphery, the edge, now, is the exciting and dangerous boundary where silence and sound meet. It is where the action is. [...] This willingness to refuse privilege to a restricted or restrictive cluster of meta-narratives becomes a Canadian strategy for survival" (23). It also becomes a strategy for allowing the Arctic – its natural environment as well as its indigenous cultures – to become a subject in itself, and not merely the object of the gaze of outsiders.

Lopez' *Arctic Dreams*, van Herk's *Places Far from Ellesmere*, and Moss' *Enduring Dreams* are prominent attempts at creating an Arctic counter-discourse. The counter-discourse of these texts becomes persuasive not merely because they include feminine and/or indigenous perspectives and evoke the arctic environment itself in phenomenological terms, but also because they at the same time employ a manner of writing which serves to undermine the authority of the author's own narrative position and voice. In the discursive cracks opened by their style of self-contradiction and paradox, alternative significations of the Arctic as subject slip through.

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Summary

The Arctic has often been regarded (its various indigenous groups notwithstanding) as a desolate and silent void to be explored and defined by Euro-westerners, usually in terms of a masculine competitive ethos and an ethnocentric rhetoric of Western Enlightenment and progress. Surprisingly, even many Norwegian arctic expeditions of our own time tend to embody similar narratives of conquest and athletic prowess. Among contemporary North-American writers, however, this kind of discourse is profoundly questioned, particularly by focusing on the problematic function of language itself in our constructions of the Arctic. This article focuses on three North-American books in which the issue of the Euro-western linguistic appropriation of the Arctic, its natural environment as well as its peoples, is a major concern; they are all reflections on the issues of writing and silence with reference to the far north. The three books are: Barry Lopez' *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape* (1987), Aritha van Herk's *Places Far from Ellesmere* (1990), and John Moss' *Enduring Dreams: An Exploration of Arctic Landscape* (1996). Central in all of them is the following issue: how to make the wordless landscape or the alien culture speak from under, as it were, the enormous compilation of centuries of Euro-western text. The article discusses four major strategies by which these three books attempt to counteract and subvert earlier Euro-western ethnocentric and monologic narratives of the Arctic: by the inclusion of feminine and indigenous voices; by the legitimation of the sensuous life-world of the Arctic itself; by the self-reflexive subversion of the authority of the language of their own texts; and by the use of a style of paradox and contradiction. By way of such techniques, the books above try to create more open, dialogic and pluralistic readings of the Arctic.

Keywords

The North-American Arctic; arctic environmentalism; arctic exploration; arctic literature; Canadian literature; Barry Lopez; Aritha van Herk; John Moss.