

## CONCEPTUALIZING THE NORTH

**Kate Maxwell, Lilli Mittner, and Hanne Hammer Stien**  
(UiT The Arctic University of Norway)

*'It matters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what knowledges know knowledges. It matters what relations relate relations. It matters what worlds world worlds. It matters what stories tell stories.'* (Haraway 2016, 35)

Enquiring into and simultaneously challenging our perceptions of and relations with the north is at the heart of this special issue of *Nordlit*. It seeks to unite, rather than divide, scholarly and artistic approaches that simultaneously conceptualize and analyse the north. Thus, beyond any notion of either/or, this volume seeks to unfold a spectrum of possible understandings of the north by looking at, reading through, hearing, experiencing, and sensing the north. Even if it were possible to define the north geographically, to delineate the north has never been our intention. While the contributions gathered here relate to specific geographies or discursive definitions of the north, our objective as editors has been to keep the north open-ended, since we understand the north as something that is always becoming through the ongoing and overlapping performative relationships of humans and non-humans, physical matter, and the imaginary. As Dolly Jørgensen and Virginia Langum have put it, 'Rather than one thing, North is a space imagined by people, part of an identity, or state of mind, held not just by individuals but also by institutions, organizations and society' (2018, 4).

What all the contributions have in common is not just the analytical and creative lenses through which the north is represented, experienced, sensed, and hence conceptualized, but also a sense of the increasing recognition that the north is now something different from what it used to be. Whereas the north both in Western European premodern writing and contemporary scholarly work tends to be conceptualized as a mythical as well as geographical frontier, Jørgensen and Langum remind us that the north has never been a singular direction or conception (2018, 2). According to them, the north as a concept 'evokes both frisson and friction, particularly as deployed to draw borders around ideologies, traditions, and peoples, in some part due to its complex history' (2018, 9), and it must be positioned in reference to particular texts and contexts. With climate change, the melting ice, the fight for natural resources, the expansion of tourism, and the interest in indigenous methodologies (or knowledges), the north has become a new geopolitical centre (Hedin and Gremaud 2018, 3). It is not just mining companies, the fishing industry, politicians, military organizations, bureaucrats, tourists, and scientists that are fighting to define and get hold of the north. In addition, artists and art workers are paying attention to and reacting to the changing geopolitical situation (Stien 2020, 120; Hedin and Gremaud 2018, 7–8).

While the north was earlier defined primarily by visiting outsiders who othered the north in relation to the south (Jørgensen and Langum 2018, 4–5; Jørgensen and Sörlin 2013, 1) – what Ryall, Schimanski and Wærp refer to as 'Arctism' with reference to Said's concept of Orientalism (2010, x) – many views of the north still come from the

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so-called West in late Capitalism, from the hunt for resources, conquest, and escape, to the enduring geopolitics in the aftermath of the Cold War that still profoundly affect the region (Bruun and Medby 2014). Nevertheless, ethno-political movements from the 1970s onwards (Körber and Volquardsen 2020; Bjørklund 2000; Eidheim 1997) have made the indigenous peoples of the circumpolar north more seen and heard than in earlier times. Even though this does not mean that images of the natural or indigenous other are no longer reproduced and naturalized through representation (Ryall, Schimanski and Wærp 2010, x), contesting images of the north are appearing more than ever (Stien 2020). The north is now part of a globalized world that embraces, and responds to, industry, tourism, infrastructure, neoliberalism, border- and geo-politics, and all the signature and backstage moments of Western civilization that historically were missing from it. The world is changing and hence the north is changing: it is once again being re-imagined, re-created, and re-worlded: 'It matters what worlds world worlds.' (Haraway 2016, 35)

In all its complexity the north presents itself as a place of being and of belonging (Jørgensen and Sörlin, 2013, 10); it does not simply represent a border zone between the exotic and the familiar (Ryall, Schimanski and Wærp 2010, xii). The art project *Pile o'Sápmi* by the Sámi artist Máret Anne Sara (b. 1984) is an example of this. The project was displayed for the first time outside the Indre Finnmark District Court in the municipality of Tana in northern Norway in 2016, in connection with Sara's brother's public proceedings against the Norwegian state to challenge the obligatory reduction of his reindeer herd following the 2007 Norwegian Reindeer Herding Act. In Tana the installation consisted of a cone-shaped pile of 200 raw reindeer heads with a Norwegian flag at the top. Hanna Horsberg Hansen (2019) has shown how the several shifting displays of the project – first in Sápmi, following the legal case, and later at an international art exhibition in Germany in 2018, before it was acquired by the Norwegian National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design in Oslo – express different relations between art and politics:

Through several translations in different contexts and in the flow of time, *Pile o'Sápmi* has connected to politics in different ways: as art activism connected to Jovsset Ánde Sara's legal case defending the Sámi culture and way of life, as a medium fulfilling the curator's aims and political agenda at Documenta and finally as part of the Norwegian canon. (Hansen 2019, 93)

The shifting contexts of *Pile o'Sápmi* and the resulting changes in the relationship between its artistic and political impact remind us that art is never entirely politically neutral, and thus 'it matters what relations relate relations.' (Haraway 2016, 35)

Understanding the north performatively and relationally, as a moment that comes into being when human and non-human actors become entangled, may help to destabilize take-for-granted definitions of the north. In those very moments of becoming the north unfolds, but as fast as it appears it may disappear again. Hence, it is not only those inhabiting the north, but the relations between those within, outside, and in between that create and transform meaning in an ongoing process of encounters. Such encounters –

described as occurring at the connection between people, animals, things, nature, technologies, arts and more – result in vibrant matters (Bennett 2010), and in these we hear voices that say, ‘the north is cold’, ‘the north is endangered’, ‘the north is full of daylight’, ‘the north is music’, ‘the north is inspiration’, ‘the north is here’, ‘the north is at stake’. Even though it might seem in such resonating moments that the north essentially exists, the north is continually ‘becoming-with’ all of its partners (be they dwellers, visitors, or kin). As Donna Haraway puts it, ‘Natures, cultures, subjects, and objects do not preexist in their intertwined worldings’ (Haraway 2016, 13). The concept of the north is mutable, and so are we who live it, read it, sing it, hear it, paint it, touch it, see it, build it. If we as researchers and/or artists are entangled in this moment of becoming-with, the question arises as to whether there is something that we want the north to become-with (or not to become-with). Can we, to a certain extent, influence what (when, how) the north becomes-with? ‘It matters what thoughts think thoughts.’ (Haraway 2016, 35)

A central premise for our issue of *Nordlit* is to acknowledge and unite scholarly as well as artistic approaches to the notion of conceptualizing the north.<sup>1</sup> Instead of delimiting the different perspectives, we decided to emphasize the kinship between academic research and artistic research that, according to Henk Borgdorff (2009, 7), becomes evident through the motives that underlie the research and the issues that inspire it. He continues:

Cutting-edge scientific and artistic research moves the frontier onto previously unexplored territory, by discovering new paths and outlooks, by enabling new observations and experiences. We may therefore understand artistic research as a careful investigation, exploration and testing of unbroken ground in [the] function of developing the discipline and broadening perspectives as well as nurturing talent. Both scientific research and artistic research are capable of constituting worlds and disclosing worlds; therein lies their performative strength – in generating and revealing new ideas, understandings, perceptions and experiences. (Borgdorff 2009, 8)

What Borgdorff sees at the root of all research is the desire for fundamental understanding and to develop new work(s), hence ‘to broaden our horizons and to enrich our world’. With his subtitle of ‘Kinship?’ (7), Borgdorff in a sense foreshadows

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<sup>1</sup> We write from a Norwegian academic context, in which ‘art’ and ‘science’ have long been segregated. This can be seen, for example, in the fact that the Research Council of Norway does not fund research that is primarily ‘artistic’ – artistic research has its own funding body, the Norwegian Artistic Research Programme. It was also only in 2018 that it became possible to be awarded a PhD in artistic research in Norway (until then, PhD-level artistic research was not entitled to the title of PhD or doctorate). Similarly, publications or outputs that are deemed primarily ‘artistic’ are rated as level 0 on the Norwegian research scale (which has three levels: 0 – non academic; 1 – ordinary; and 2 – international prestige). They are therefore not eligible to be counted for ‘research points’, the national reward scheme for publications and, often, merit (e.g. promotion). This has the additional impact that, when institutions or policymakers gather statistics on academic publication or international collaborations, artistic research, with its blanket labelling at level 0, is simply disregarded.

Haraway's notion of staying with the trouble. When she proposes to 'Make Kin Not Babies!' (2016, 102), she talks about recognizing kin as the most urgent part of making kin. For her that means 'to unravel ties of both genealogy and kin, and kin and species' (102). Transferred to the field of research, this calls for relations that are not built on disciplines and canons, but rather relations that seek the unfamiliar, that care, and that in the end contribute to broadening the imagination and changing the story. Haraway's expanded notion of kin is therefore one of the central premises for this special issue.

'It matters what knowledges know knowledges.' (Haraway 2016, 35) Since all generated knowledge is situated, we must take into account the considerable literature on and artistic responses to the north that have influenced us when writing and editing this volume. At the same time as the north has gained geopolitical interest, there has been a growing attention from humanities scholars with an interest in colonialism, imperialism, environmental change, and indigenous methodologies (Jørgensen and Langum 2018, 3). We, the editors of this volume and the authors of this introduction, all work at UiT The Arctic University of Norway. With its very name, particularly the elision of the 'Tromsø' to 'T' to reflect the multi-campus fusions that have taken place in recent years, our institution raises its flag across the whole of the Norwegian Arctic.<sup>2</sup> UiT's strategic motto, 'drivkraft i nord' (a driving force in the north), likewise stakes a claim to both location and purpose, and is central to its mission to 'help promote economic, cultural and social development in the north through building knowledge and human capital' (UiT 2018). *Nordlit*, the journal housing this volume, is also based at UiT, and as a recognized open access academic journal it conforms to the requirements and rigours of peer review, publishing, copyright, editing, and referencing. As authors and editors our sphere of knowledge is both limited and shaped by our own experiences and backgrounds. All three of us are interdisciplinary researchers and (co-)creative practitioners, we are non-indigenous, white, and Western European (only one is Norwegian), and we all live within the Arctic circle, in Tromsø.

Tromsø is the largest urban centre of the county currently known as Troms og Finnmark. This county, which is the northernmost county in Norway, was created through an unpopular and forced fusion of the former counties of Troms and its northern neighbour Finnmark that took place on 1st January 2020 at the behest of the Norwegian government, and is still under debate at both the local and national levels. We are thus dwelling in and living through a pertinent example of the fluidity of names, places, and boundaries in the north (a fluidity also explored in some of the articles in this volume), and of the reactions such territory staking can provoke. A pertinent example of artistic activism in the current Norwegian Arctic discourse is Nordting, which could literally translate as 'Parliament of the North'. Through performative art projects, using irony as a tool and method, Nordting takes a stand to promote northern and indigenous issues. A recent stunt in response to the forced union of Troms and Finnmark was to update the road signs on the borders of the region. By the summer solstice, which since its

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<sup>2</sup> Readers outside of Norway might be surprised to learn that there is also a university called, in English, 'Nord University', whose main campus is located in Bodø in Nordland, which is over 500 km south of Tromsø (yet still within the Arctic circle).

inception Nordting has proclaimed as ‘Nordting dag’, the new county ensign had still not been decided and the signs had still not been updated. As well as a symbolic date for artistic activism in the north, the summer solstice has meaning for other countries in the circumpolar north: it is National Indigenous Day in Canada, and the national day of Greenland. Thus, on 21st June 2020 Nordting updated the Troms og Finnmark border signs with its own ensign: a red shield sporting a gold fist with a raised middle finger shaped into an arrow pointing up (images and reports can be found at Nordting 2020). As late capitalism is in play, it is of course also possible to purchase merchandise with the Nordting ensign through the Nordting website.

In addition to these contemporary discourses which have surrounded our work on this special issue, we as authors and editors seek to acknowledge our debts and gratitude to our kin, to colleagues whose influence cannot be measured in metrics, as well as to acknowledge the limits of our knowledge(s) and perspectives. For us, two of the primary intellectual influences during the long journey that led to this volume were the books *Visions of North in Premodern Europe* (Jørgensen and Langum 2018), a book that examines how the north was envisioned by those living both inside and outside of northern spaces in the premodern era, and *Northscapes* (Jørgensen and Sörlin 2013), a book that is both an environmental and imaginary history of the north and its inhabitants (human and non-human) and technologies. Indeed, we are much indebted to the multifaceted work of Dolly Jørgensen that continues to be pertinent and relevant, and her current project on extinction as well as her consideration of animals and science fiction (e.g. Jørgensen 2019) is part of the foundation for our own engagement with posthumanism and ecofeminism from a northern perspective. Anka Ryall’s work, particularly the project *Arctic Modernities* with a conference at UiT in 2014 and a number of publications (notably Ryall and Kjeldaas 2015, and Hansson and Ryall 2017), was instrumental for our purposes by including the role of the arts in scholarship on the north. Prior to *Arctic Modernities*, Ryall’s research project together with Johan Schimanski and Henning Howlid Wærp, summed up in the anthology *Arctic Discourses* (2010), prepared the way for a broader field of increasingly multimodal and interdisciplinary research on the north from an Arctic literary studies perspective.

Even though literary studies still dominate humanities research on the north, anthologies such as *Films on Ice: Cinemas of the Arctic* (Mackenzie and Stenport, 2015), *Artistic Visions of the Anthropocene North: Climate Change and Nature in Art* (Hedin and Gremaud 2018), and *Arctic Archives: Ice, Memory and Entropy* (Frank and Jakobsen 2019) show that climate change and the Anthropocene, both as a geological epoch and as a framework to think with, are expanding the field of research. The interest in ice, as a specific matter, place of being, and metaphor, stimulates academic discussions and makes us aware not only of the north, but of the polar regions’ importance in the contemporary situation. Susi K. Frank and Kjetil A. Jakobsen (2019, 9) formulate it explicitly: ‘The polar regions are the knowledge archives of the planet, partly for climatic reasons, partly because human intervention has until recently had less impact than elsewhere.’ An older but still influential work is Lisa Bloom’s *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions* (1993). Through the analysis of mass media, and especially the use of photography, Bloom deals with ideologies of gender,

race, and class that were central to polar discovery and exploration narratives in the United States and elsewhere.

One central implication for future research on the north is the need for artistic and indigenous voices. These voices are out there, but they do not necessarily conceive of the academic field of northern studies as a fruitful discursive space in which to take part. How can we include indigenous voices in this field? Who can change this? One example could be the *Routledge Handbook of Indigenous Peoples in the Arctic* (Koivurova, Broderstad, Cambou, Dorough, and Stammler, forthcoming 2021). It promises to bring together the expertise of indigenous and non-indigenous scholars to offer a comprehensive overview of issues surrounding the well-being, self-determination, and sustainability of indigenous peoples in the Arctic. We would also argue that bolder interdisciplinary and community-based research on, in, and with the north can work to change the picture: ‘we must change the story; the story must change.’ (Haraway 2016, 40)

In addition to the growth in visual art projects dealing with or coming from the north that has occurred the last decades, scholars and curators have been increasingly researching and promoting not only visual art, but also visual culture. A new awareness of indigenous art has similarly taken place over the last five decades. At UiT, the Sámi Art Research Project (SARP) resulted in the book *Sámi Art and Aesthetics: Contemporary Perspectives* (Aamold, Haugdal, and Jørgensen, 2017). This discusses and highlights an increase in activity among artists identifying as Sámi, and the organization and institutionalization of art and duodji (traditional Sámi art and craft), not least by Sámi artists themselves. At stake are complex, changing concepts regarding both creative and political agencies. The question is not how indigeneity, identity, people, art, duodji, and aesthetics correspond to conventional Western ideas; rather it is how they interact with the Sámi people and their neighbouring cultures and societies.

Two of us writing here (Maxwell and Mittner) have travelled into the Arctic north from outside (though one grew up as a ‘northerner’, albeit not from the same north – for a fuller discussion of multiple perspectives of north in this volume see in particular the articles by Stanović and McCay). In so doing, we are part of a history of wanderers, of imaginers, who find our way here either by accident or design. We bring with us texts and knowledge from our personal before, or outside, such as *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory beyond Green* (Cohen 2013): an exploration of ecologies through the spectrum of colour, whose vivid multicoloured display is a stark contrast to the dominant blues and whites of the high north. Travel writing is a discipline, and it is no surprise that these same two authors and editors both chose to write about the same memoir of the Arctic in this volume. In so doing, we are not only part of the history of narrative travel writing, but also part of the multidisciplinary approach that analysis of this writing has taken in recent years (see Gaupseth, Federhofer, and Aspaas 2013.) ‘It matters what stories tell stories.’ (Haraway 2016, 35)

### **From new material feminist approach to co-creative peer review**

Our methodology for this volume can be described as a new material feminist approach in several ways. From the very beginning, we knew that there would not, could not, be

either a singular or a binary concept (subject/object; past/present; body/mind; culture/nature, science/art etc.) but that our conceptualization of the north would instead be multifaceted and oscillating *in between*. Telling stories around humans without becoming human-centred, reflecting on the arts without privileging the individual artist, interweaving the embeddedness of bodies, processes, materialities, and immaterialities without falling into the trap of distinguishing one above the other but uncovering their entanglements was our Arctic ‘drivkraft’. This driving force mattered at all creative levels during the production of the volume, from the call for papers to finalizing this introductory article.

For the peer-review process, which we applied to both the artistic and academic contributions, this meant that we constructed an ongoing dialogue between authors, submissions, and reviewers that became entangled in the final work. This tridirectional relationship affects *habits of mind* in the sense of the ‘imagination as reasonable connective agent toward fresh concepts’ (Bresler 2006, 58). Liora Bresler has described the emphatic relationship between artwork, oneself, and audience as a ‘*rhythm* of academic life. Connection and empathy have a pace of their own, which arises from the rhythm of building relationships, responsive to others’ (ibid., 60). We have elsewhere described this method of meaning production as a co-creative process (Maxwell, Mittner, and Stien 2020), drawing on research with people living with dementia that elaborates on the following definition of co-creativity:

[Co-creativity involves] a focus on shared process, shared ownership, inclusivity, reciprocity and relationality. [...] Co-creativity necessitates and creates openness, equality and imaginative space. Above all, it contrasts with restrictive notions of the lone creative ‘genius’ that have tended to dominate views of creativity. (Zeilig, West, and van der Byl Williams 2018, 138)

Without obscuring our authors and their works, and staying in line with international standards of peer review (COPE Council 2017), this approach allowed us to bring the peer-review process out of the dark and turn it into ‘a shared process in which the author is part of a dialogue, not a passive subject’ (Maxwell, Mittner, and Stien 2020). In effect, we asked our authors, as well as our peer reviewers, to stay with the trouble a little longer than is usual in research (particularly academic research). We do not pretend that this was an easy or quick task, and we owe a great debt of gratitude not only to the authors featured in the issue, but also to our fellow reviewers Silje Gaupseth, Anne Jänsch, Martin Siefkes, and Morten Wintervold. By consciously stepping away from the hero-narrative of scholarly review and instead being open to co-creative ‘thinking practices’ (Haraway 2016, 12) and becoming-with, we asked, with Haraway;

how do these concave hollowed-out things, these holes in Being, from the get-go generate richer, quirker, fuller, unfitting, ongoing stories, stories with room for the hunter but which weren’t and aren’t about him, the self-making human, the human-making machine of history? (Haraway 2016, 40)

Our answer is that a co-creative peer review process, in the sense of ‘working with each other in our thinking practices’ (Haraway 2017), fosters kinship and enabled us to build a sympoietic and multifaceted concept of the north that continuously oscillated in between and becoming-with.

### **Collective meaning-making in and of the north**

The seventeen contributions to this special issue together offer a multidisciplinary and creative anthology that conceptualizes the north from three complimentary and connected avenues of approach: travelling, dwelling, and expressing. These three categories are designed to suggest the movement towards the north, its inhabitation, and its (re-)construction.

The special issue starts with an invitation to a journey, with Brent Wetters’s *Saturn and Jupiter* that traces the Winnipeg–Churchill line featured in Glenn Gould’s radio documentary ‘The Idea of North’. Wetters’s composition, accessible from the article, allows the listener (and reader) to travel the line, to hear the noises at the work’s stations, and to make their own way into the north. His composition and reflections on his methods thus form a fitting opening for our volume. The next article keeps to the theme of sound, this time having arrived in the north with the Austrian painter Christiane Ritter. Kate Maxwell offers a close reading of *Eine Frau erlebt die Polarnacht* (*A Woman in the Polar Night*), Ritter’s memoir (first published 1938) of her year on the north coast of Spitsbergen, that focuses on the noises and natural music of the Arctic. The northern lights are a well-known feature of the north, and in their reflection on their artwork *Aurora – Connecting Senses* Signe Kjær Jensen and Cristina Pop-Tiron explore the possibilities created by their interactive and multimodal sound and light installation. We return to Svalbard and Christiane Ritter’s book in Lilli Mittner and Gabi Wagner’s contribution, in which the authors in their respective roles as cultural studies researcher and biologist enter into a dialogue with Ritter and her contemporary Ågot Gjems Selmer about their fascination, meaning, and transformation of, with, and in the north. Our next port of call is Finland, where Ralf Kauranen and Olli Löytti use three comics on migration to Finland and the symbols of coffee, milk, snow, and a bear to analyse the relationships between place and movement. Finally in this section, Tobias Hämmerle investigates the changes in the visual and textual representation of ‘northerners’ and ‘Sweden’ in early mass media, from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The section entitled ‘Dwelling’ opens with Lena Gudd and Antonin Pons Braley’s narrative, poetic, and pictorial depiction of the Canadian mining town Fermont. Their contribution offers a multimodal experience both of inhabiting, and being inhabited by, the north. We stay in the Canadian north with David Beard and John Moffat’s analysis of the comics of Jeff Lemire that explore the problematics of colonialization and representation of indigenous places, people, and powers. With Adam Stanović’s contribution we change norths, moving to post-industrial northern England and the role of sound and composition in constructing identities in Sheffield. Jennifer McCay takes us to Northern Ireland and Eire with her analysis of Kevin O’Connell’s composition *North* in the light of the influence of Jean Sibelius and Seamus Heaney. The section

concludes in Sápmi, with Hanna Horsberg Hansen's history of Sámi art and practices, and how these fit somewhat uncomfortably into the Western ideals imposed on them by the Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum in Tromsø through the 2017 museum performance and exhibition project *There is no*.

Our final section, 'Expressing', opens with Torbjörn Ömalm's rhythmical poem that repeatedly points toward the sound of everyday experiences, creating his personal account of the complexity of being in and of the north. We step back in time with Solveig Wang's article on the portrayal of the Sámi people and in particular their relations with Norse peoples as presented in places, landscape, and phenomena in medieval sagas. In Alexander Gagatsis' article, we hear and are invited to question our impressions of the 'Nordic tone' in jazz in the light of notions of northerness, nationalism, and folklore. Morten Bartnæs analyses the relations between Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Snow Queen' and the film *Frozen* in the light of genealogical discourses and tales of origin in northern settings. With Jon Mikkel Broch Ålvik we listen to the use of language to shape identity and gender discourses in Norwegian popular music. Our volume ends in Iceland and Japan, with Daryl Jamieson's reflections on his work *utamakura 2: Arnadalar* and the *Fóstbræðra saga*, in which he explores the potential of art to mould perceptions of space, time, and physical locations.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this special issue is to explore understandings and conceptualizations of the north both artistically and theoretically. We explicitly invited a broad range of disciplines and approaches, and encouraged underrepresented voices to contribute to the conceptualization of the north. Within a non-representational theoretical framework we encouraged artistic, arts-based, and arts-related research to become co-creative and multimodal across any kind of borders in order to broaden and transform common understandings, meaning, and matter of the north. This, we believe, is co-creative research 'in the urgent times called the Anthropocene, when the arts for living on a damaged planet demand sympoietic thinking and action' (Haraway 2016, 67). In this sense, the special issue became our laboratory to produce new perspectives on the north and simultaneously reflect on being able to produce this kind of knowledge.

The sum of all contributions indicates that an additive assemblage encourages a change in our thinking practices from either/or towards as well as. The issue diffracts common conceptualizations of the north based on an artistic apparatus. Sound- and music-based enquiries of the north hold a special place and open a new territory in the field of northern studies that should be explored further. Our theoretical approach allows us to present a variety of empiric materials that seldom meet across academic disciplines, and it is in this diffractive space that we hope new avenues of approaches can open up to the reader. 'Think we must; we must think. That means, simply, we must change the story; the story must change.' (Haraway 2016, 40)

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