

Introduction: Northern Nature

Werner Bigell
University of Tromsø, Norway



When I take the coastal steamer, *Hurtigrute*, down south along the Norwegian coast, I sometimes overhear the tourists' conversations. Whereas some consider themselves to be in some northern Shangri-La, envying the simple lives of locals in their wooden houses, set between fjords and mountains, others wonder how anyone can live in such desolation. Although the landscape the tourists see is the same, and their cultural background may not be different, they reach divergent evaluations. The reason for this phenomenon is that a culture produces a variety of sometimes contradictory projections onto the land. With its low population density, low number of tourists (in comparison with the charter flight destinations in warmer regions), challenging infrastructure, and inhospitable climate, it is no surprise that the North is a region marked more by projection than by experience. The North is not alone in being a screen for cultural projection; the Palestinian author Raja Shehadeh has described the thicket of projections that make his homeland invisible:

Palestine has been one of the countries most visited by pilgrims and travellers over the ages. The accounts I have read do not describe a land familiar to me but rather a land of these travellers' imaginations. Palestine has been constantly re-invented, with devastating consequences to its original inhabitants. Whether it was the cartographer preparing maps or travellers describing the landscape in the extensive travel literature, what mattered was not the land and its inhabitants as they actually were but the confirmation of the viewer or reader's religious or political beliefs. (Shehadeh xii)

The North too is a cultural projection screen, perceived as the last frontier, a space for adventurous explorers, a pure land never touched by industrialization, a treasure chest of resources, a setting of naturalistic tales, and an empty land. While both the North and the Holy Land are heavily invested with meaning, it might appear as if there is less contestation of projections in the North. This, however, is not the case, but the agents involved are less visible. It is the task of criticism to bring them into view, but how? For a critic there are two ways of looking at the North. One is to scrutinize the cultural projections, the cultural, political, and historical conditions under which they emerged, and what they mean for the people and ecosystems of the targets of projection. The other way is to investigate the culture and landscapes of the North directly by observation or indirectly (for example by reading literature written in or about the North), to turn the screen into a place. Both approaches are equally valuable and can be combined. The essays in this selection investigate the cultural origins of the projections as well as the clashes and interactions between outside and inside perspectives.

What is the North? In a wide sense the term includes North America, the Asian part of northern Russia, and northern Europe, but in the context of this selection it refers to the seascape of the Arctic Ocean and its surrounding landscapes of northern Scandinavia, northern Russia, northern Canada, Alaska, Greenland, and Iceland. When one looks at the map from a national perspective, the North appears to be a marginal region, far from the centers, inhabited by natives, settled by rough oil towns, and a place of exile and imprisonment (as in the gulags). However, when one looks at it from the vantage point of the North Pole, it becomes clear that the various marginal regions are connected, forming a ring around the Arctic Ocean. This is different in the South, where an uninhabited continent is approached by the southern tips of disconnected continents. This means that the histories and stories of the North are much more interwoven than appears from a national perspective, and there are many common features, also geographical ones. In this light, the phrase “No man can travel alone in the Klondike after fifty below” from Jack London’s short story “To Build a Fire” can be seen not so much as a depiction of a struggling individual in a hostile environment but as a call for company, to see the connection between individuals, peoples, and their environments.

The cold climate means that agriculture only plays a marginal role in the North, and typical landscapes are the taiga (which in Russian is poetically called “the endless green sea of the forest”) and the treeless tundra. In all countries, except Iceland, there are native populations who live off hunting, fishing, or reindeer herding. Because of the absence of agriculture, there has never been the type of mass migration of the American Frontier that led to the extermination of the native population, and consequently various forms of cohabitation between native and European populations are seen. The North also has a history of trading; the Russian Pomors, for example, traded along the coast from Norway to Alaska. Today there are common challenges for all northern regions such as climate change (whose effects for example on the permafrost, on the pack ice, and on flora and fauna differ from those in other regions), the vulnerability of the slowly regenerating ecosystems, the opening of the North-West and North-East passages for container ships, due to climate change, and the exploitation of resources made possible by new technology. The historical, economic, and climatic changes do not affect single nations but the entire region. So far the politics of the North have been those of national hinterlands. However, this is now changing, as there are new multinational regions such as the Barents region, political bodies such as the Arctic Council, and examples of educational cooperation such as the University of the Arctic, stressing the interconnectedness of the region.

Not only geography presents a common frame for the North: also in the projections onto the North there are common features. In Norwegian there is a term, *syden*, literally meaning “the South.” It is used indiscriminately by tourists who are not so much interested in a specific country as in what the South has to offer: sun, beach, wine, sex, and so forth. The perception of the North is less influenced by this kind of hedonistic tourist imagination, but it is not necessarily less reductive. The North is cold and white. Both qualities resonate in Thomas Kastura’s reading of Nietzsche: “Nature becomes an abstract space for testing, where there are no irritations: no comfort

through religious promises of salvation, no declarations of meaning through Enlightenment's epistemologies, no humiliations through emotions such as pity or bourgeois humanist morality" (Kastura 38, my translation). Kastura describes how some travelers to the polar regions seek to abandon the difficult, ungrateful, and unfinishable project of the Enlightenment, and rather experience something that needs no explanation (Kastura, 83). For the painter Wassily Kandinsky the color white has the connotation of openness: "White, therefore, has this harmony of silence, which works upon us negatively... It is not a dead silence, but one pregnant with possibilities. White has the appeal of the nothingness that is before birth, of the world in the ice age" (Kandinsky, qtd. in Facco). This Northern imaginary of white emptiness is seen in painting, photography, literature, in the polar journeys and explorations, and also in tourism marketing.

The role of the researcher is to color the whiteness, to show the complex stories contradicting the imagination of simplicity, to investigate the economic, historical, and ecosystemic interactions. Like in the case of the Holy Land, this implies seeing through the manifold projections and identifying the different framings of the North. This is what the articles in this collection do.

In "Der nordische Naturraum und das Erhabene—Eine Fallstudie," Sophie Dietrich analyzes such an external projection, the representation of Northern forests in the work of the German painter Caspar David Friedrich. Using the philosophers Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke, she shows how the idea of the sublime has shaped the perception of the North. She looks at the mechanisms and landscape features that make Northern landscapes correspond to the idea of the sublime.

Nicole M. Merola, in her essay "for terror of the deadness beyond': Arctic Environments and Inhuman Ecologies in Michelle Paver's *Dark Matter*" looks at the conflicting symbolic frames of the North, showing how gothic and horror elements undermine the pastoral mindset. This conceptual ambivalence is then seen in an economic context of whale, walrus, and seal hunting. Merola finds that the violent hunting of marine animals is not just an economic enterprise but spills over, in the form of a *gengångner*, "one who walks again" haunting the modern imagination and resonating with ecological sensibilities. The story can also be read as an allegory of modern resource exploitation, which, in many ways is a continuation of the *gengångner* theme.

Also Allison K. Athens, in "Saviors, Sealies, and Seals: Strategies for Self-Representation in Contemporary Inuit Films" investigates animals in an economic context. She discusses the role of the animal rights movement in the West, linking it to the evolution of ethical considerations and a criticism of exploitative capitalism. However, she also shows the cultural limitation of this Western understanding, presenting animal rights from an indigenous perspective. The Inuit see animals differently, and their seal hunting is part of a different cultural configuration, reflecting back on unstated assumptions and false universals of the Western animal rights activist. In her essay she switches between Western and native perspectives, negotiating their conflicting conceptualizations of animals.

Julia Feuer-Cotter's essay "The Unreliability of Place Construction in Contemporary Alaskan Regional Writing" investigates the relation between geographical isolation and myth creation. Outside and inside perspectives are engaged in a struggle over spatial meaning. Feuer-Cotter uses the regional authors Velma Wallis and Sheila Nickerson to highlight the unreliability of representation and to debate the role of Alaska as part of US-American national identity.

In "Barry Lopez' Relational Arctic," Sigfrid Kjeldaas discusses Barry Lopez' representation of the North American Arctic. Lopez challenges the grand narratives and aims at a particularized understanding of the land, implying also going beyond a quantitative and scientific understanding. The now almost 30 year old text also examines the effects of resource extraction and therefore is as up-to-date as ever. Kjeldaas shows how Lopez makes visible the various frames with which the Arctic is usually perceived and demonstrates their inherent limitations, aiming at a more comprehensive ecological understanding of the region.

The association of the North with the color white could literally be seen as a representation of a Northern winter landscape. However, if referring to cultural imagination, it is the product, to use a photographic metaphor, of an over-exposure. There are countless, often negative, projections onto the North in the sense that the North is what the civilized world is not. The North has been described as pure and empty, but the absence of civilization is a double-edged myth. The authors of this collection do not, of course, attempt to fill in all missing frames, but they show the way for criticism: the North is not empty but filled with peoples, stories, animals, and ecosystems. It is not simple but highly complex; the authors show this complexity both on the conceptual level in terms of cultural projections, of different framings of the natural world, which leads to different understandings of the human interaction with their environment. The articles also show the material and narrative interaction with the world south of it. Too often the North is perceived in what Kenneth Olwig calls a spatial perspective, a view from a singular perspective from the outside, focusing on the static visual elements. The authors here evoke what Olwig calls a platial perspective, seeing the North and its complicated interactions from the inside, from the perspective of the people living there as well as seeing people as part of ecosystems. In their systemic perspective the authors show also how the different frames interact and engage in a geographical imagination beyond the myth of whiteness. As the Holy Land, the North is more material than holy, and a complex story, not a simple narrative.

Works Cited

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