

Melting Imaginaries of the Arctic

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Imagining the North

Over the past number of years, the ways in which the Arctic is imagined and represented has been changing dramatically. For many south of the Arctic Circle, the northernmost region of the planet has historically been imagined as cold, desolate, and remote: an icy wilderness at the end of the earth. It has been imagined as a space that is outside of politics, culture, and human history. But an increased awareness of climate change, new territorial claims, and stronger Indigenous voices are situating the region in a complex field of social, political, and cultural representations that are redefining how we imagine the Arctic. These varying 'Arctic imaginaries' are created by complex aesthetic articulations of social and political space and have a profound impact upon how non-Arctic peoples interact with both the environment and Indigenous people of the region. The Arctic is then at once an "ambiguous materiality, a global warming ground zero, an indigenous homeland, a potential indigenous state, a nascent global governance regime, a coveted wildlife park, an oil bonanza frontier, and a throwback to colonial land-grabbing all in one" (Steinberg, Tasch and Gerhardt 2015: 17).

Yet despite the multiplicity of imaginaries about it, the Arctic is still an exceptional space in the mind of the outsider – particularly the European and North American. Even as new imaginaries of the region have developed and there is greater appreciation of the region as multifaceted, historied, cultured, and peopled, the idea of wilderness looms large in imaginaries of the Arctic. This situates the region in a relationship of alterity with the metropolitan centers of the planet, locking it into the dichotomy of civilization/wilderness, an exclusionary binary that "elide[s] the complexities of the region's representational and cultural history" (Westerståhl Stenport and MacKenzie 2015: 2). The idea of wilderness, so often deployed in a colonial context, draws on the image of a terra nullius, or empty space, that has not been 'used' or cultivated by original inhabitants. It is an idea that situates a space outside of the territory of civilization, demarcating the fence that divides the civilized human regions and the wild uncivilized places. This binary is central in defining what the state is, for without its opposite the state is amorphous and undefined. As Körber et al note, "questions of territory and sovereignty so central to the concept of modernity also lie at the heart of the contested modes of politics and representation in the Arctic" (Körber, MacKenzie, Westerståhl Stenport 2017: 10). And it is within these representations that we find a complex interplay of wilderness and civilization.

As states become more engaged and entwined with the culture and politics of the Arctic, the outsider's aesthetic interpretations of the region are becoming less fixed, more liminal and shifting, complicating imaginaries of a frozen and remote landscape dominated by a sublime nature. There is a confusion over the far North, where states are both trying to capture the area as sovereign territory, but also trying to maintain imaginaries of wilderness, which are helpful for explaining why the area is exceptional and that it must now be 'modernized'. These seemingly contradictory imaginaries do not only confuse what the Arctic is and can be, but perhaps also confuse and challenge what the sovereign state is. As states try to capture the Arctic within sovereign discourse, they try to tame the wild character of traditional Western imaginaries of the region, making it part of their national discourse. As Hans Peter Duerr has said in a different

context: “Strangeness is alienated and resettled at home and thus neutralized. Things are understood as soon as [...] they are arranged within what we consider the province of our culture” (Duerr 1985: 126). And so states alter imaginaries of the Arctic, making it part of their own culture, pulling the complex idea of the Arctic into their own southern/national/globalist identity. They tame the region, making it tangible and coherent, cloaking it in sovereign flags. But the idea of the Arctic may still be too wild in global imaginaries, so it may disperse, become too manifold, and question the notion of state fixity and the geopolitical boundaries of sovereignty. Such a weave of imaginaries is confusing and is deployed for political reasons, seriously limiting how we think about and interact with the environment and people of the Arctic.

The Arctic as Wilderness

While the idea of wilderness is generally synonymous with uninhabited and natural places in which humans – through neglect or inability – have not yet made their mark on the land, it is in fact no more natural than the modern city. As William Cronon has suggested, “far from being the one place on earth that stands apart from humanity, [wilderness] is quite profoundly a human creation” (Cronon 1995: 69). That is to say, that through a process of alterity, wilderness is a social construction derived from the experience of modernity and civilisation. Rather than a space that is outside of human history and time, it is an essential constituent of how the post-paleolithic mind has constructed the human world (c.f. Oelschlaeger 1991) and shaped the dominant anthropocentric ontologies at the root of Western society. It is a complex idea that aided the European Enlightenment to both industrialize nature in an unprecedented way and justify the violence and racism of colonialism. The idea of wilderness is locked into a way of thinking about the world that places white men at the very center.

The Arctic has historically been imagined by outsiders in such ways. Since the earliest European engagement with the region, it has been imagined as a space beyond the pale of human history and culture. For the outsider, it has held “a longstanding significance as a critical and exceptional space of modernity [...] utilized and imagined as a location where the past, present, and future of the planet’s environmental and geopolitical systems are played out” (Körber, MacKenzie, Westerståhl Stenport 2017: 1). Political discourse and artistic performances/representations have frequently served to naturalize and exoticize notions of ‘wilderness’ in outsider imaginaries of the Arctic. And yet, as Susan Kollin has argued, far northern frontiers are not marginal spaces at all, but spaces which are deeply constitutive to ideas of territory, nation and identity (Kollin 2001). The Arctic has featured so heavily in the imaginations of non-Arctic people precisely because it has been the alter of civilization, a strange mirror that shows the hidden half of civilization’s face.

Certainly within the field of Arctic studies, which encompasses a wide range of disciplines from natural sciences to the humanities, scholars have generally drawn on theoretical positions that uphold the idea that the Arctic is a wilderness: profoundly different and exotic. It is a field broadly populated by realist/positivist research focusing on state-centric questions of sovereignty (Fairhall 2010; Sale and Potapov 2010), founded on what Roland Bleiker has called a ‘mimetic’ approach to politics, one that “equates knowledge with the mimetic recognition of external appearances” (Bleiker 2001: 511). In this kind of research scholars have constructed the region as a space of resources (Howard 2009), trade routes (Arctic Council 2009), and a fragile ecology (Banerjee 2012; WWF). The region is on the outside and humans enter it temporarily to extract natural resources, develop new shipping lanes, or study and conserve the environment.

These particular imaginaries are relatively new, and in many ways have developed in the context of knowledge about anthropogenic climate change. With growing popular awareness of the phenomenon during recent decades, we have seen a “[t]ransiting from a representation of terror and the sublime”, to imaginaries “emblematic of catastrophic climate change” (Westerståhl

and MacKenzie 2015: 20). With sea ice reaching less far than in recent history, states and corporations that are mining for oil, gas, and minerals are shaping new imaginaries of the Arctic. But in many ways these have their roots in older imaginaries of the frontier and a struggle against elements, a sense of “surviving and thriving in the Arctic [that] contributes to each nation’s sense of northern identity. This attitude is central to upholding the ‘resource frontier’ imaginary because extraction is not just about profits but includes the mythos of overcoming wild nature” (Steinberg, Tasch and Gerhardt 2015: 99). Even with the more recent knowledge of climate change we can perceive that certain outsider imaginaries are still formed around the wilderness/civilization dichotomy. Indeed the ‘resource frontier’ imaginary may have other, more specific ideas of wilderness embedded within it, concerned with what Carolyn Merchant has characterized as “the origin story of capitalism” (Merchant 1995: 136). This is the idea that Western culture has oriented itself around the idea of returning to Eden: “The Enlightenment idea of progress is rooted in the recovery of the garden lost in the Fall – the bringing of light to the dark world of inchoate nature. [...] The controlling image of Enlightenment is the transformation from desert wilderness to cultivated garden” (Merchant 1995: 137). The image of the harsh Arctic winter freezing the tundra; the oil rigs hugging thawed coastlines, and the mining settlements.

Within the field of cultural aesthetics, the Arctic has traditionally been imagined as a *terra nullius*, or empty space (c.f. Hill 2008), a lonely wilderness (Shelley 1818), and a space in which humans struggle for survival against nature (Flaherty 1922). Indeed it seems as if the Arctic draws out residual strains of Romanticism from the European and North American. As Jody Berland has noted, the tendency in (non-Indigenous) Canadian art has been to construct the landscape – not exclusively Arctic in this context – as utterly unpeopled: “In visual art, the Canadian subject is said to emerge with the collective invention of a landscape in which no one appears” (Berland 2009: 98). While these tropes are also frequently employed in the contemporary context (Fessenden 2006; Theroux 2009; Orłowski 2012), a stronger realization of Indigenous voices has been challenging these simplistic representations. Films such as *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (Kunuk 2001) and the videogame *Never Alone* (Upper One Games 2014) retell Indigenous stories that have passed down through oral tradition, challenging Western notions of the Arctic as an empty space with no history, and defining the region as both peopled and cultured. Importantly, these works were substantially created by Indigenous artists and so constitute a radical departure from Western ethnographic approaches epitomized by Robert Flaherty’s 1922 film *Nanook of the North*.



Figure 1: New media and new aesthetics of the Arctic. From the 2014 videogame *Never Alone*.

In the history of how outsiders imagine the Arctic, we can also make a connection to what Homi Bhabha calls the “liminal problem of colonial identity” that emerges from the “disturbing distance in-between” the colonialist ‘Self’ and colonized ‘Other’ (Bhabha 1994: 64). The wilderness/civilization dichotomy that is at the heart of many imaginaries of the Arctic is perhaps similar to the colonizer/colonized, or ‘Western’/‘Other’ dichotomy. This comparison of dichotomies can perhaps unearth certain racist tropes that have othered Indigenous Arctic people in political discourse and visual and literary culture, and help to develop an anti-colonial lens through which to better understand the aesthetics of the Arctic. Such a comparison can allow us to begin to comprehend the ontological connections between the ideas of wilderness/civilization (Cronon 1995; Kollin 2001; Oelschlaeger 1991) and colonizer/other (Bhabha 1994; Spivak 2012), uncovering a nexus centering around notions of objectivity and exteriorization of body and landscape. This can encourage aesthetic readings of texts, films, performances, and political discourse that reveal (neo-)colonial agendas of exploration and settlement, ultimately leading to an anti-colonial agenda of self-realization for Indigenous Arctic people. In seeking such agendas we can ask how Arctic research stations, oil rigs, and cruise ships are (re)inscribing colonial legacies onto the sea, land, and people of the region.

If outsiders studying the Arctic move away from thinking in the wilderness/civilization dichotomy, from the ontology of the sovereign state, then we can begin to find new theories and ontologies for thinking about the Arctic in ways that are more emancipatory for Indigenous people. Indeed the burgeoning field of posthuman studies may hold a major key for how we Think, talk, and act about the Arctic in an ecologically sustainable and anti-colonial way.

The Arctic in the Anthropocene

Non-Indigenous people such as myself, who will always be profoundly on the outside when studying the Arctic, must develop new ways of thinking about the region that eschew the dichotomy of wilderness/civilization, which seems to lead inextricably to the othering of the peoples and environments of the Arctic. Vibrant theories and methodologies that center the

experience, knowledge, and imaginations of Indigenous people are absolutely essential if we are to avoid scholarship, policy-making, and artistic work that at best reifies pre-existing outsider imaginaries of the region and at worst totally excludes Indigenous voices from a position of knowledge creation. As well as looking to the field of postcolonialism and scholars such as Bhabha and Spivak, another burgeoning area of research that certainly breaks from the wilderness mindset is posthuman studies. At its core it is an area of research that seeks to disestablish the centrality of the human subject from how we view the world, promoting a more ecological way of thinking, situating the scholar as one of many lifeforms in the complexities of the anthropocene.



Figure 2: The possibilities and problems of posthumanism in Arctic studies. Two stills from Jan Troell's 1982 *The Flight of the Eagle*.

Drawing on Timothy Morton's research, I would suggest that we can view the Arctic as a 'hyperobject', or something that is "massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (Morton 2013: 1). Similar to Morton's example of climate change as a hyperobject, the Arctic is a huge-scale, confusing, massively distributed social, cultural and political space that is imagined as a single entity. In reality it is a jumble of legal frameworks, state territories, Indigenous homelands, ecologies, visual representations, ice, water, land, and many other things that confound the simplicity of the term 'the Arctic' and which "involve profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones we are used to" (Morton 2013: 1). Ultimately the field of posthuman studies grants new ways of conceiving of the Arctic which seek to overcome the limitations of an ontology that is human-centric and, along with this, refute the notion of the Arctic as strange, exotic, other and 'outside'. Such posthuman perspectives that emphatically refute a singular modernist perspective can totally reposition scholarship and art away from the limiting dichotomy of wilderness/civilization, because wilderness is entirely a human construction.

In thinking about the Arctic from a posthuman perspective, we are also met with some of the central symbols and signs that have come to define the idea of the anthropocene in popular media. Anthropogenic climate change is a central part of this narrative of a fragile and damaged planet that humans have ruined through their own actions. In the imagery of emaciated polar bears and melting ice we are struck with a fear of environmental apocalypse, of a total annihilation of the Earth. This apocalyptic, perhaps even millenarian, vision stems from the modern, agricultural mind, in which the conversion of nature into resource through human agency and science is the aim. Not a cycle of nature, but a linear production line of input and output. This leads directly to an end, insofar as nature is processed and rendered into something dead, which provides fuel for humans. In the eco-apocalypse imaginaries of the Arctic, we see the extraction and burning of fossil fuels as part of this process, with the resultant slow death of the planet.

Posthumanism allows us to think differently about nature and necessitates a reevaluation of the notion of wilderness. If human beings are not at the center of things, if our viewpoint is accepted to not be the only one, then the notion of wilderness will disappear. The idea of wilderness contends there is an inherent division between humans and all the rest of nature. But this idea stems entirely from the assumption that humans are somehow unique and different, perhaps the only truly sentient beings on the planet. Posthumanism elides this positionality, suggesting that we begin trying to find ways of thinking from non-human perspectives. Therefore posthumanism can grant us a powerful new way of thinking about the Arctic in a properly ecological sense, not solely from a human perspective. Of course, we still need this human perspective too – we arguably can never escape it – particularly in understanding neo-colonial practices occurring in the Arctic. But posthumanism does not block the human perspective, it simply opens our perspectives and accepts a multiplicity of things.

Images

Figure 1: Screenshot from *Never Alone* (Upper One Games, 2014). Publisher: E-Line Media
Captured from PlayStation 4 operating system.

Figure 2: Two stills from '*Ingenjör Andreées luftärd*' (*The Flight of the Eagle*) (Sweden, 1982; Restored 2017) Director: Jan Troell Distributor: Swedish Film Institute

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