

Writing Beyond the North?

Experiencing the Arctic in Rudy Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers*

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I need wisdom . . . to understand why Canadians have so little comprehension of our own nordicity . . . that, until we grasp imaginatively and realize imaginatively in word, song, image and consciousness that North is both the true nature of our world and also our graspable destiny we will always be . . . wishing ourselves something we aren't.

(Rudy Wiebe, *Playing Dead* 119)

The Canadian north, like the multifarious world of the quotidian Canadian south, is heterogeneous, the result of a “fundamental premise” that Canadians “are constantly imagining and constructing Canada-as-North” (Grace xii). The idea of nordicity embodies a geographically determinist value-system underlying the imagined community of the Canadian nation while Canadians are considered unique as a national culture because of their relationship with the north (Collis 155). Records of the northern experience in Canada can be traced back to all the encounters of most First Nations peoples, the Inuit, the explorers, traders, and settler groups who have shaped the country before and since Confederation. However, only in the last decades of the twentieth century was a growing number of public and productive academic projects bound up in the northern study: Barry Lopez's *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in Northern Landscape* (1986), Margaret Atwood's *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (1995), John Moss's edited collection *Echoing Silence: Essays on Arctic Narrative* (1997), Renée Hulan's *Northern*

Experience and the Myths of Canadian Culture (2002), and Sherrill Grace's *Canada and the Idea of North* (2002) have made the notion of North available to yet further studies. Critics consciously use "north," a cartographically indetermined term, in their analyses: "The north produced by Canadian culture is not a physical place, though it is articulated to the stones and coasts and islands of the Arctic; rather, the north is a cultural product" (Collis 156).

In his seminal work on Canadian literary criticism, *The Bush Garden* (1971), Northrop Frye has described the geographical determinism to express a literary critic's continued interest in the north. A mental landscape of wilderness in Canadian literature is associated with the north while Frye has given rise to descriptions of a collective mythology which leads to the environment as reflected by the individual writer's sensibility (Hulan 10). A sense of "double vision" which Frye calls should be responsible for the cultural and literary construction of the Canadian north as a deadly bush-garden trope: "The imaginative Canadian stance . . . facing east and west, has on one side one of the most powerful nations in the world; on the other there is the vast hinterland of the north, with its sense of mystery and fear of the unknown" (iii). Interest in the figure of Captain Sir John Franklin (1786-1847) is one of the examples which have spilled into Canadian writing to present the northern environment as a likely setting for stories of the hostile and assuaging north. Testifying to the long affiliation of the north with Canadian literature, Margaret Atwood in *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (1995), based on four Clarendon lectures given to an Oxford University audience, remarks on the cultural configuration of the Canadian north and manifests a critical reading of the Arctic expeditions of John Franklin in a chapter entitled "Concerning Franklin and His Gallant Crew." She writes: "For Americans . . . the word *Franklin* means Benjamin, or else a stove. But for Canadians it means a disaster. Canadians are fond of a good disaster, especially if

it has ice, water, or snow in it. You thought the national flag was about a leaf, didn't you? Look harder. It's where someone got axed in the snow" (11-12). Atwood's menacing and fatal vision of the Canadian North provides important explanations for grounding representation in some prior work and for intimate expression of the southern experience, which is also a way of making meaning out of complex landscape by a combination of history and narrative.

Many treatments may exist outside the Canadian literary tradition, but Franklin and his last voyage are still appropriated by Atwood as one of the exemplars for a heroic Canadian vision of the north (Skidmore 253). Franklin's expeditions set the stage for those narratives that are "handed down and reworked, and story-tellers come back to them time and time again, approaching them from various angles and discovering new and different meanings each time the story, or a part of it, is given a fresh incarnation" (Atwood 11). Being one of the books published during the decade that led to the creation of Nunavut in April 1999, *Strange Things*, following in Frye's footsteps, charted the importation of European views of nature into Canada and uncovered "patterns in which the Arctic or the North are often metaphors for 'nature' or 'the wilderness'" (Hulan 10). The landscape that explorers and settlers tended to possess featured geometric and Cartesian attitudes towards the natural environment that resulted in its being regarded as a "sinister and menacing" monster (Frye 142).

Originally related to wilderness and to national identity, "North" had come to mean hereanness that which has been approved by literary or cultural scholars in Canada. Similarly, literary works such as narratives about Franklin and his search for the Northwest Passage maintain their "true north" through writers' continuous efficacy at creating a teleological relationship between literature and Canada. Beginning his *Enduring Dreams* with a thesis statement, which is made for long arguments through the relics of northern literature, John Moss writes: "Everything written on the

Canadian Arctic is, in effect, a northwest passage, the expression not only of the tradition but the geography and history of another world” (40). Geographical and historical absence makes the northern study a ghostly presence, and this notion of North may seem strange to the contemporary mind, especially when it relies on representations on the north for the validation of the Arctic. In other words, European immigrants to Canada between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries might view nature rationally or ego-centrally, and generally devoid of any divine presence or meaning. Now, according to Sherrill Grace, Canadian history and culture associated with the ideology and mythology for “the true North” are “as rich, complex, even contradictory, as are the physical locations deemed to be truly northern” (*Canada* 177). In response to the suggestion that one of the pressing concerns for Canadian writers is the literary construction of the North whether to write a national or a natural perspective, Grace believes, with reference to a result of at least a decade of scholarship “no matter who, when, or where we [Canadians] are, we are shaped by, haunted by ideas of North, and we are constantly imagining and constructing Canada-as-North, as much so when we resist our nordicity as when we embrace it” (*Canada* xii). With titles such as *Canada and the Idea of North* (2002) and “Articulating North” (1993, an essay collected in *Literary Responses to Arctic Canada*), Grace’s work bespeaks “a wide-ranging and purposefully interdisciplinary account of the role of nordicity in Canadian imaginations” and shows how Canadians have always used ideas of Canada-as-North to promote a distinct national identity and national unity (Powell 393).

Although the term North and its derivatives of the northern study are widely used in many contexts, in fact, their meaning is by no means stable in Canada, and it is difficult to define what is meant by Canadian nordicity while it has varied historically and continues to fluctuate. Richard Powell in a review essay on northern cultures

makes the point that the cultural spatial product of the Canadian north is best anatomized to include the climate, ecology and topology of northern Canada on which the habits of mind of the different cultures of the policy are erected (372). However, is North ever so absolute for Canadian literature? What do Canadian writers make of the Arctic? If writers who lack experience of the Arctic avoid the approaches to the landscape ethnographically, should they be interpreted as acts of resistance? Or does a writer's attempt such as Wiebe's willingness to undertake a form of historiography suggest an individual's "absorption" as James Clifford claims cultural contact to be portrayed as a dichotomizing event, "absorption by the other or resistance to the other" (344)? Accordingly, in a review essay on Renee Hulan's *Northern Experience and the Myths of Canadian Culture*, Christy Collin recognizing the importance of the role that experience of the Arctic plays in Canadian writing goes on to ask: "How do writers articulate their physical experiences in the Arctic to the constructed cultural space of the North? How is arctic experience used to legitimate southerners' textual norths" (157)?

For Hulan, the north, more specifically, the region of the Arctic situated geographically in northern Canada, provides a cultural construction, rather than a geographical reality, which allows for standard southern representations of the north to be repositioned as motivated myths (186). With a basis in ethnocritical viewpoint, her study establishes a distinction between the north and the Arctic and reveals a passionate insight into the northern landscape that the two spaces are far from synonymous. Thus Hulan suggests that a demythologized North will contribute to racial relations in Canada while the demythologization would free aboriginal peoples from their roles in much northern writing as stereotypes and repositioning them as separate cultures with their own versions of the north (28). The ethnographical overtones of Canadian writings had never been discussed, for a simple reason that

literary representation of the north for critics of Canadian cultural studies was so pervasive that no one stopped to examine its assumptions. However, the novel element of Hulan's account is based on the importance of ethnography, and more specifically, her study seeks to dismantle the claim that all Canadians share a northern character articulated in the literary encounters with the north (Collis 157). In a review essay in discussing northern cultures, Powell stresses that both Grace and Hulan produce, in their different ways, counter-North cultural studies which challenge narrowly ethnocentric southern views of a mythicized North (374-75). For Hulan, however, North, which itself is an imagined community, has discernible links with the process of producing both the north and its space (183). As Collis argues, Hulan's reading ethnography of the Arctic ethnocritically, assessing its methods, subject positions, and generic characteristics, is retraced with the aid of literary criticism and aims to participate in the task of demythologizing the north (157).

This northern formula is so established that it can substantially shape even Canadian writing intended to transcend it. There is a general critical consensus that Hulan's major argument is based on the importance of ethnography for representations of the north, and by "an ethnographic impulse in Canadian literary criticism," Canadian literature is treated "as a body of texts that has something to say about Canadian people" (Hulan 14). The most interesting and novel element of Hulan's account is the assertion that experience is mobilized in ethnographic literature and results in the spatialization of difference between north and south in Canada: "this has led to the assumption that only real first-hand experience in the geographical north authorizes one to speak about the discursive or imagined north" (14). In this respect, she makes a criticism that this assumption allows *experience* of the north to become the chief support of epistemic privilege in the study of northern spaces because the practices of ethnography themselves have influenced future accounts of

interactions between indigenous peoples and southern Canadians by novelists, and especially by those who write about the north without ever having traveled there.

Rudy Wiebe's novel *A Discovery of Strangers*, which won a Governor General's Literary Award for Canadian fiction in English, is firmly grounded in a well-known history recounting the difficulties in the 1820-1821 portion of the first Franklin overland expedition. The Franklin expedition is a ready-made event for historical fiction and reveals Wiebe's desire to subvert the spatialization practices implicit in writing the north. In the summer of 1988, Rudy Wiebe joined a six-member canoe party intent on retracing a portion of John Franklin's first expedition to the Arctic (1818-1922). Traveling on the tundra by the Yellowknife River, Wiebe traveled to the Arctic and carried a pocket-sized edition of the English explorer John Franklin's journals. The novelist gained special insight by the experience of going north. Even if the experience is not held to be equivalent to that of inhabitants such as aboriginal peoples, Wiebe was then in competition for discursive space of Canadian nordicity. In this way, experiencing the Arctic as a general concept depends on the articulated experiences of cultural others. However, it is hardly conceivable that the writer who holds up the authority of first-hand experience consciously could ever usurp the experience of northern inhabitants as Richard Cavell points out (204). *A Discovery of Strangers* can be a landscape itself which mediates between racial and cultural differences in ways that promote greater autonomy for aboriginal peoples. However, it can also become aboriginal peoples' territoriality, "a land beyond words," where "geographical features such as eskers and erratics, river systems connecting with lakes, rapids and fords function both as orientation markers and constraints, giving to any displacement its necessary sequence of encampments, crossings and portages" (Omhovere 90).

In the Acknowledgements section of *A Discovery of Strangers*, Wiebe includes

the note he left in a cairn at the top of Dogrib Rock after he retraced the steps of the first Franklin expedition (1819-1822) to the mouth of the Coopermine River. The note lists the names of Wiebe's party and ends with the terse inscription, "A Land Beyond Words." The plot of the novel consists of events collected in the field notes, journals, personal testimonies, sketches and watercolors which streamed from the encounter of British explorers with "the unutterable north" (*Discovery* 237). Turning to a tradition that has emphatically presented the Arctic as unspeakable, the novel, Claire Omhovere asserts, inscribes a threshold where from the southern eye arrests the relentless expanse of the land into "sublime rapture," turning it into a land for aesthetic accomplishment (80). In this respect, *A Discovery of Strangers* reflects as much as it inflects the contradiction embedded in northern literature.

Wiebe's earlier novels such as *The Temptation of Big Bear* (1970) and *The Scorched-Wood People* (1977) try to translate the land into the language of particular communities, while knowing that the land exists only in translation, and that a community talks back to the land. In an essay in discussing "translating the untranslatable" in Rudy Wiebe's work, Kenneth Hoepfner suggests that the untranslatability of the "Word" in *A Discovery of Strangers*, which is "not equivalent to unknowability or indeterminacy," is now considered as discovering "the communion to create the 'Word'" (146). In this essay I am interested in how the relation between North-as-Landscape and Arctic-as-Land is thought, not through commonality or positivist exchange, but through landscaping, or a structured mode of spatialization of the literary text. In Rudy Wiebe's novel *A Discovery of the Strangers*, the relation of the explorers to the animals and to the Tetsot'ine he comes to care for emerges as an ethical question about the response of the White Canada to this country's racist past. The first chapter of the novel, "The Animals in This Country," for example, depicts a Canadian future in which animality represents the failure of the

Tetsot'ine to mask the English explorers' fear of death. This chapter uses questions about animals to address the relation of the English explorers to their finitude, a relation often ignored in narratives of English and aboriginal likeness in Canada. In problematizing the relation of English Canada to its past and future through an address to the national and natural ends and beginnings, the first chapter provides a means for thinking through the central distinction between land and landscaping in the present study of the Canadian north. According to Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, the term "landscape" rests on the distinction maintained by "the philosophical tradition that separates 'objective world' from 'viewing subject'" (391). It is one of the reasons why W. H. New rejects the term "landscape" in favor of "land." Resonant with notions of ownership, physical and social attachment, the term "land" emphasizes the relation between the subject and the object of the gaze (New, *Land* 5-10). However, instead of distinguishing between beholding subject and beheld object, I argue, taking a phenomenological approach, landscaping is considered as a moment of immanence when world and consciousness interplay through sensation.

A Discovery of Strangers in chronological order is divided into 13 chapters to recount various episodes from Franklin's journey. Interwoven with these chapters are excerpts from diaries which are, as Wiebe writes in "Prefatory Note"—quoted (some with minor rearrangements) from the journals kept by Robert Hood (1797-1821) and John Richardson (1787-1865) during the first Franklin overland expedition (1819-1822) to the Arctic coast of what is today Canada. The novel is about two markedly different experiences—experiences *of* and experiences *as* a stranger. The novel is also about the linear way of representing the north versus the circular way of landscaping the Arctic. This dichotomy supports much of the tension from which the novel draws its essential argument. The first chapter illustrates this encounter of two dichotomous forces pointedly by way of a fable which is a typical Canadian animal

story in the tradition of Sir Charles G. D. Roberts (1860-1943) and Ernest Seton (1860-1946). According to Maria Frühwald, the widely recognized animal stories by Roberts and Seton are told from a viewpoint of the animal and express a belief in the Darwinian notion of the “survival of the fittest.” The outcome of the animals’ constant fight for survival is very often a matter of luck as much as a matter of fitness (138). The first chapter of the novel is entitled “The Animals in This Country,” apparently taken from a poem “The Animals in That Country” by Margaret Atwood. The corrective to Atwood’s title shows Wiebe’s awareness of the irony of the North as place (Cavell 204) and also refers to one of the topics discussed in Atwood’s early study *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), where she develops a comparative study on animal stories in different cultures (Frühwald 138-39).

In “The Animals in That Country,” animals in English fables are tame, and they resemble human beings. As Atwood observes, English animal stories have “invariable happy endings” while Canadian animal stories “are almost invariably failure stories . . . *told from the point of view of the animal*. That’s the key: English animal stories are about ‘social relations’ . . . Canadian ones are about the animals being killed, as felt emotionally from inside the fur and feathers” (*Survival* 73-74). “The Animals in This Country” is a Canadian animal story told “emotionally from inside the fur and feathers,” but W. H. New’s comments on Seton are also notable for reading Wiebe’s animal story: “While they are not turned into pets, the wild animals are in this way rhetorically tamed, made accessible. Thus in his Darwinian, non-judgmental, value-free, survival-of-the-fittest world, there remain parallels with the human world which are not value-free” (New, *History* 115). “The Animals in This Country” is told entirely from the perspective of an animal, a pregnant caribou cow with her calf in a cruel fight for life against a pack of wolves. In the end, the calf is killed by one of the wolves though the pregnant cow survives after fatally wounding

one of the wolves. Taking New's viewpoint on the connection between humanity and animality, Frühwald argues that the first chapter sets an ironic tone for the whole novel, and it also introduces the inevitable Darwinian theme (139).

For Frühwald, when the animals fight for their own survival and live harmoniously with aboriginal peoples, their encounter with the white man means the survival of Canada and its native peoples in face of European colonial aggression (139). However, Wiebe also writes, “[a]nd the animals understood then that such brutal hiss and clangour must bring on a winter even colder than usual” (*Discovery 2*). This understanding suggests that the animal's discontinuous occupation of space is here indexing a social and political absence. While the intervention of a foreign power provides the structures to map out the land which the explorers fail to understand, the animals address the complexities of Arctic topology. This chapter may foreshadow the imminent invasion of the white man, and it may explicitly point out some of the major themes of the novel, according to Frühwald, such as the destruction of the land by the white man and the white man's sometimes fatal underestimation of the powers of nature (139). However, Wiebe's move to preserve Franklin's agency is masked by a displacement to the animal realm, so that any address to the question of land factors, natural or national, disappears. Instead of the expected experience of aboriginal peoples, the use of animality displaces the exploration from a geographical plane, a land, onto a discursive formation of the Arctic landscape. The neat series of binary clauses reinforce how Western representations of the North may have been systematically substituted for “the thickest trees,” “growing ice,” or “an erratic cracking open” (*Discovery 2*), but the animal landscape sends back to the beholders their own vision of the Arctic.

From Wiebe's remarks, which I quote in the very beginning of this presentation, his seeking for experience in the north can be understood as a desire for authenticity.

Hulan points out, as long as Canadians remain unconscious of their “true nature” (16), a writer like Wiebe will “always be wishing ourselves something we aren’t” (119). In this respect, what Wiebe looks for is Canadian identity, a matter of appreciating who he really is by knowing who he really is not. In this case, although the English explorers compulsively jot down daily measurements and observations in their journals, their “starving notebooks” (*Discovery* 15) and Wiebe’s work indicate that the texts which have represented the Western mind will not link North with Canada. In this novel, however, the Tetsot’ine, being the first and foremost hunters, follow the animals and wander at random across the land—“traveling it into existence” (*Discovery* 78). Their walks and stories which empty the Canadian North and fill in the Arctic landscape give a drastic reorientation while the idea of a “true north” confronts the dilemma of longing for authenticity.

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1. The split-footed caribou. [image:] Then, suddenly as always, the caribou appeared like the wandering wind they were upon the shores of the lake beyond the Tetsotâ€™ine camp, and in the sky between stones along the high ridges. When all the hunters went to them, quickly and with great care, they were welcomed by so many bodies steaming open in the darkening winter that everyone knew they could eat for at least four days, and sleep full-gutted for another four. And they sang The North Pole was not a concern for these early explorers, but their work laid the foundation for a polar obsession to come. Around this time, German explorers also began seeking the North Pole after prominent geographer August Petermann called for them to get involved in the quest. Between 1868 and 1870, two German expeditions set out and plotted their routes based on the theories of Petermann. He built a ship named Fram (â€œforwardâ€) with a new keel design, capable of holding fast against the ice in Arctic waters. The ship would be allowed to become embedded in ice, and Nansen believed the current would then carry it to the pole. He set out in 1893 with a small crew of 12.