The Arctic in literature and the popular imagination

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The Walt Disney animated short film *Polar Trappers* from 1938 offers one of the best misrepresentations of the Polar Regions in popular culture. It is notable for being the first cartoon in which Disney’s characters Donald Duck and Goofy appear without Mickey Mouse, and the two are shown in a frozen world living in an igloo and running the Donald and Goofy Trapping Co. But is this the Arctic or the Antarctic? One cannot be entirely sure. The assumption though is that it is the Arctic (the snow house – or igloo – is perhaps the clue), but objects, images and animals are mixed and jumbled. Along with the igloo – considered the quintessential Arctic dwelling in which Inuit supposedly live – there are references to walrus and a cast of penguins appear. The opening frame shows an icebound shipwreck, hinting at the fate of many expeditions of polar exploration in general and the Franklin expedition in particular. The next segment shows Goofy setting up a trap for walrus, suggesting how the Arctic has been exploited for its natural resources as well as emphasising its status as a natural, as opposed to a civilised world. At the same time, Goofy’s song “We don’t know why we catch them but we bring them back alive” draws attention to the arbitrary causes for Arctic exploitation. The cartoon then moves to Donald Duck, heating up beans in the igloo that serves as their home. The segment succinctly captures the absent presence of the indigenous population in many popular representations of the Arctic by referencing iconic markers, but completely leaving out – in this case – the Inuit. Unhappy with the constant diet of beans, Donald looks out the window and sees a penguin that transforms in his mind to a grilled chicken (this possibly references the scene in the 1925 Charlie Chaplin film *The Gold Rush*, when a hungry Big Jim imagines the tramp as a chicken) and sets out to catch the bird.

Polar signposting in general is both stereotypical and uncertain, with the Arctic and the Antarctic conflated and understood in terms of a generic geography and fauna. The mistaken metonymy of the penguin is not unusual in popular representations.1 In Disney’s cartoon, the penguin is depicted as a young girl, and Donald first courts her to get close enough to her for the kill. The story then unfolds with Donald as the pied piper attempting to catch the entire penguin colony, but in typical Donald Duck plot resolution he ends up trapped, together with Goofy, in their own cage. The short cartoon contains almost every image of the Arctic in popular culture. Although partly undercut by the constant failure of Donald Duck’s pursuits, the region is imagined as the last frontier, a space of alternative livelihoods and opportunities where
people can remake themselves. It is the site for heroic quest and exploitation, with the iced-over
ship a reminder of the price for heroism. It is gendered in a complex manner as a feminine space
available for conquest but a landscape that fights back, emasculating its conqueror. Finally, it is
an ultimately futile goal.

The Arctic as site for heroic endeavour

At the beginning of September 1909, the sensational world news was that the American doc-
tor Frederick Albert Cook and his two Greenland Inuit companions Ahwela and Etukishook
had reached the geographical North Pole a little more than a year earlier, on 21 April 1908.\(^2\)
Only a few days later, the news communication was that Commander Robert Edwin Peary and

![Figure 3.1](image_url)  

**Figure 3.1** ‘An Undisputed Claim’. A satirical cartoon published in *Punch*, obliquely commenting
on the controversy between Frederick Albert Cook and his Inuit companions Ahwela
and Etukishook on the one hand and Commander Robert Edwin Peary and Matthew
Henson on the other as to which party was the first to discover the North Pole in
1909. Reproduced with permission of Punch Ltd., www.punch.co.uk.
Matthew Henson had discovered the Pole on 6 April 1909 and that there had been no signs of previous human presence at the location (Figure 3.1). Cook’s claims were dismissed fairly soon, but towards the end of the twentieth century there were also doubts over whether Peary and Henson were indeed the true discoverers. In the last few decades there have been reservations as to whether any of the early explorers actually arrived at 90°N and growing consensus that the first confirmed trip to the North Pole on foot, and without mechanised transport, was undertaken by Sir Walter William Herbert as late as 1969.

Regardless of who really was first to reach it, the North Pole has been depicted as a desirable goal throughout Western history and members of the numerous expeditions attempting that goal have been portrayed as heroes. As the last frontier, the Arctic is where boys become men, pioneers are separated from imitators, and leaders distinguished from the rank and file. In Anglophone popular culture, the scientific gains take second place to the elements of competition and national honour. The very same day that Peary’s claims were published, the English writer Frank Hubert Shaw, or Captain Frank H. Shaw as his name usually appears, received a request from his publishers for an adventure story to dramatise the event. He wrote First at the Pole in a week, and the book was available in bookstores on 1 November, less than two months after Peary’s announcement (Richards 1992: 83). The American writer Edward Stratemeyer, or perhaps the Stratemeyer syndicate that was founded in 1905, likewise packaged the discovery for juvenile consumption in First at the North Pole; or Two Boys in the Arctic Circle, with a foreword dated 15 November 1909. As stated in the preface, Stratemeyer’s purpose was “to show what pure grit and determination can do under the most trying of circumstances”, to give “an insight into Esquimaux life” and to “relate what great explorers like Franklin, Kane, Hall, DeLong, Nansen, Cook, and Peary have done to open up this weird and mysterious portion of our globe” (Stratemeyer 1909: vii), in a sum of the components of the heroic discourse.

Both Stratemeyer’s and Shaw’s books were aimed at boys and are typical examples of their time and genre. The message is that the final triumph can only be reached through determination under duress and unselfish sacrifice:

They crept forward, footstep by footstep, their feet aching, blood frozen in their shoes. They suffered agonising tortures, for the slightest wound became a ghastly horror in a few hours; and the pain weakened them. Added to this was the lack of sufficient food; and yet not a single dissentient voice was raised. The Pole must be reached, no matter what happened afterwards.

(Shaw 1909: 272)

In Shaw’s story, the expedition is brought about because of the terms of a will. The first man to reach the Pole is to inherit a great deal of money, but the main character is motivated primarily by the opportunity to do something for his country: “I’m going mainly because I want an Englishman to be first to reach the Pole. That’s why – our countrymen have tried hard for the prize – and – we deserve to win” (ibid.: 9). Books chronicling Arctic adventures were considered particularly suitable as school and Sunday school prizes at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century, because of their emphasis on endurance, patriotism and moral, upright manliness (David 2000: 197). Praiseworthy characteristics were to be able to think and act fast in situations of crisis, place honour and the ultimate goal of discovery above personal safety, to be able to issue or occasionally follow orders, and to be a good loser as well as a generous winner. The protagonists normally came from the well-educated upper or upper middle classes, while indigenous Arctic people, whalers and sea captains filled the roles of helpers, or provided negative contrasts or comic relief. An Arctic explorer was an officer and a
gentleman and, at least in the case of Frank H. Shaw, an important purpose was to foster a new generation of soldiers and empire builders with the help of thrilling and inspiring adventure stories (Richards 1992: 81, 106). Cultural expressions like dandyism, decadence, aestheticism, political movements such as the struggle for female suffrage and a general increase in the standard of living, led to a widespread fear of degeneration and emasculation around the turn of the twentieth century. The Arctic stories being published at the time served to counter such fears, and their glorification of manly strength and courage had a morally rousing function not least in connection with the First World War when the stoic, self-sacrificing hero was needed as an ideal. The polar hero was evidence that the danger of degeneration was considerably overstated.

A common image of polar exploration in Anglophone popular culture is thus masculinist and imperialist in nature, although the imperial narrative develops unevenly. Analysing the anonymous 1825 children’s book *Northern Regions*, Erika Behrisch Elce argues that the story advocates a cultural relativity rarely expressed in the exploration narratives it is based on (Elce 2015: 326). Alongside the idea of the Arctic as a testing place for men, there are representations where the symbolic meaning of the North Pole is changed, and its status as a desirable goal is undermined. The Cook–Peary controversy in 1909 gave rise to a great deal of humorous and satirical commentary in genres from cartoons in comic periodicals to music hall and silent film, but an anti-heroic discourse in dialogue with the dominant paradigm can be traced back at least to the early nineteenth century and probably much further back. The main terms of this alternative Arctic discourse were the fundamental meaninglessness of polar discovery, the description of the eventual arrival at the North Pole as only a matter of happenstance and a general debunking of the Arctic hero-myth.

The Arctic as futile goal

An early example of Arctic satire is the anonymous *Munchausen at the Pole* (1819) which parodies John Ross’s 1818 expedition in pursuit of the Northwest Passage. In some measure it is also a general response to what Janice Cavell (2008: 24) has termed the “onslaught” of information about Arctic exploits in the early nineteenth century:

I am given to understand that some other discoverers have returned (previous to my arrival in England) unsuccessful, from an attempt in which my exertions have been crowned with such glorious success, and that they are preparing for publication a ponderous account of their disappointments. I beg the public to take notice that this work has no concern with theirs, which I have never seen, or wish to see, and know not anything of whatever.

(Munchausen 1819: 6)

Unlike the protagonist of Frank H. Shaw’s boys’ story, Munchausen is entirely motivated by money: “The spark of ambition which was nearly extinguished, revived afresh, and at the mention of £20,000 reward, burst into an unquenchable flame” (ibid.: 5). Science is reduced to a random collection of items for a curiosities cabinet, including a “cable – made from the hairs of an East Greenlander’s beard” and four bottles of different-coloured snow (n. p.), and the North Pole itself turns out to be a sprout from “the Axletree of the World” (ibid.: 91). Going beyond the Pole, Munchausen finds a passage to India, where his extravagant romp through history and myth continues. While he raises the British flag on the top of the Pole and proclaims George III “Monarch of the Polar Regions” (ibid.: 94), this act is followed closely by his comment on arrival in Ceylon that “the governor of this island was occupied in the interior, suppressing a rebellion, that is, in plain English, an attempt of a native prince to recover his hereditary possessions”
Alongside the enumeration of useless discoveries and artefacts, such colonialist critique is a common component of exploration satire and comedy.

Most Arctic expeditions, at least from the nineteenth century onwards, were thus transformed into media events, sometimes from the very moment of setting out. In comic-satirical and indeed most popular discourse, clichés stand in for real knowledge, giving undue attention to polar bears and icebergs but ignoring the existence of an Arctic summer. Linguistic and domestic frames of reference also influence what is selected as Arctic metonymies. In German-language reception, the seal looms large, as Johan Schimanski and Ulrike Spring explain, since the German word “Seehund”, sea-dog, provides opportunities for satirical drawings where seals are depicted with dogs’ heads, on leashes and domesticated (Schimanski and Spring 2010: 28). In English-language culture, wordplay on geographical Poles, political polls and literal poles is standard fare, sometimes adopted by the explorers themselves as in the first telegram from Robert Peary to his wife, Josephine Diebitsch-Peary, which ran “I have the D. O. P.”, that is “the darned old pole”, according to the New York Times (“I have the D. O. P.”, 3). The light-hearted tone gives the impression of a modesty otherwise rarely discernible in either Peary or his country when it comes to the Arctic enterprise. In his book about the expedition, Peary copies one of the notes he deposited at the site after the discovery:

I have to-day hoisted the national ensign of the United States of America at this place, which my observations indicate to be the North Polar axis of the earth, and have formally taken possession of the entire region, and adjacent, for and in the name of the President of the United States of America.

(Peary 1910: 297)

The discovery is framed as a national triumph. In the English comic periodical Punch, or the London Charivari, such imperialist overtones are frequently the butt of the jokes, and Peary’s flag-raising is held up as the opposite of national humility:

Judge Woodward, of New York, holds the opinion that, while American people many years ago were probably over boastful, the pendulum has now swung the other way, and the average American is too modest in asserting the glories of his native land. But this was said before the Stars and Stripes had been run up at the North Pole.

(“Charivaria” 8 September 1909: 163)

A cartoon by Bernard Partridge in the following week’s issue of the periodical develops the theme, depicting a cigar-smoking American eagle proudly poised at the top of the Pole-pole with the flag between its claws (Partridge 1909: 191). But the scene is a desolate snow-desert, inviting the question of the value of an uninhabitable wasteland far from civilisation.

The Cook-Peary controversy concerning who had been first to reach the Pole was obviously irresistible material for comedy and satire. Both expeditions were downgraded to tourist trips in Punch: “The tourist season opened early this year, our first visitor arriving on April 6. It will be remembered that last year the rush for the Pole commenced on April 21” (“Arctic Items”, p. 185). The New York Times had contributed to financing Peary’s expedition and obviously supported the Pearyites, but the notice “The News from Peary” grudgingly accepted the possible validity of Cook’s claim in the concluding remark that whatever the outcome, it was at least certain that the Pole had been discovered by an American (“The News from Peary” p. 8). Popular culture was quick to catch on, as in the popular song A Yankee Always Gets There First (1909) where Scottish Sandy, English John and Irish Pat make a bet as to who will be the first
to reach the North Pole, only to be met on their arrival by an American sliding down the Pole and taking the jackpot (Bateman and Hyde 1909). In a similar, although slightly more serious vein, *Punch* published some verses where the then editor Owen Seaman expresses his relief that no Englishman had taken part in the race since the result would then have been Arctic war:

Meanwhile at home we well may thank  
Our stars that it did not occur  
To one of you to be a Yank  
And one by birth a Britisher;  
U.S. would now be arming for  
A long and bloody Polar war.  

*(Seaman 1909: 182)*

The corresponding occurrence in Frank H. Shaw’s novel is represented as a moral example of honourable behaviour under adversity, with the losing English and the winning US expedition leaders shaking hands across the Pole (ibid.: 293). There is nothing gentlemanly about either Cook or Peary – or Spook and Query as they are named in the music hall number *How I Climbed the Pole* (Wells 1909) – as they are depicted in popular culture. They are even mentioned as examples of fraud and deceit in school plays, as in the children’s operetta *Arcticana* (Willard and Eldridge 1916) where Prince Polar and Queen Aurora reject both their claims:

Reporter.  
Are you sure, that in your book  
You haven’t somewhere, the name of Cook?  
Prince.  
Cook! Cook! for goodness sake!  
We thought you knew he was only a fake.  
Reporter.  
But there is yet another claim,  
Peary, I believe is the fellow’s name –  
Prince.  
I’ve heard it said that he was here,  
But his report is somewhat queer –  
No one knows of his advent,  
When he came, nor when he went.  

*(p. 11)*

The punchline in many of the verses, songs and commentaries is that neither Cook nor Peary can prove their success because the Pole-pole has already been removed, by a lower-class character as in A. A. Milne’s “An Unconvincing Narrative” (1909: 188), by a rogue as in the silent film *How I Cook-ed Peary’s Record* (Booth 1909) where Baron Munchhausen collaborates with a polar bear to take down the pole and bring it to civilisation, or completely by coincidence. The dominant paradigm throughout the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century is that the Arctic is open for conquest by national, polar heroes, but alongside this there is an alternative tradition where the North Pole as the ultimate Arctic symbol is represented as an anti-climax and the explorer as an anti-hero. In some measure, these comic and satirical representations can be understood as reactions to societies in flux, when it comes to the struggle for national supremacy as well as in gender terms.
The Arctic as gendered space

As is typical of the nineteenth-century geographical imagination, the Arctic is frequently represented as a woman, silently awaiting her lover-conqueror. A characteristic example are the verses published in *Punch* on the departure of the British Arctic Expedition of 1875–1876, led by George Strong Nares and Henry Stephenson, where the goal is described as an expectant bride:

At her feet the Frozen Ocean, round her head the Auroral lights,
Through cycles, chill and changeless, of six month-days and nights,
In her bride-veil, fringed with icicles, and of the snowdrift spun,
Sits the White Ladye of the Pole, still waiting to be won.

("Waiting to be Won" p. 248).

The British captains are conceived as active seducers and the Arctic as a passive virgin, in line with the prevalent, although increasingly unstable gender ideology. A more ambiguous example of feminisation occurs in a later *Punch* cartoon, “The Sleeping Beauty of the North” from 1896, which depicts Fridtjof Nansen in some kind of Sámi costume peeping in at a scantily dressed woman who reclines on a bed of ice with a polar bear at her back (Figure 3.2). Here, the North Pole has become a boudoir, in a move that domesticates the Arctic but also feminises Nansen. Unlike the British explorers whose masculine superiority is not in doubt, Nansen’s achievement is doubly questioned, first because the idea of the North as a courtesan reduces his achievement, and second, because of the association with the indigenous Sámi who, like other distant or colonised people, were generally understood in feminine terms at the time.

The virginal Ice Maiden, however, had her counterpart in the idea of a formidable Ice Queen with the power to defeat the explorers daring to enter her realm. In *Munchausen at the Pole* she appears as “the spirit of the Pole, who presides over and protects the sacred magnet”, able to expel the intruder “by terror from her dominions” (p. 21, italics in original). She reappears as the evil *Snow Queen* in H.C. Andersen’s tale of that title, and is resurrected as the White Witch in C. S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950) and the evil mother Mrs Coulter in Philip Pullman’s *The Golden Compass* (1995), among others. An iconic image is the large woodcut “A Cold Reception”, published in *Punch* in November 1876 after the failure and return of the British Arctic Expedition. The regal Ice Queen still appears in diaphanous veils, but towers over the explorers, weapon-like spire in her hand, as the ultimate cause of their suffering in the treacherous snow-fields. Unlike in the Nansen cartoon, this idea of the feminine Arctic does not feminise the explorers. Instead, her hostile nature emphasises their fortitude and reinforces a model of heroic masculinity. In some measure, the Ice Queen hints at the possibility of a reversed gender order, but as a figure of femininity, she is exceptional, and like the powerless Ice Maiden she ultimately supports a conventional gender ideology. Imaginative experiments with alternative social organisations are instead conducted in utopian fictions set in worlds accessed through the Arctic.

The Arctic as otherworld

Many seventeenth-century European maps show the water of the oceans emptied out of the world at the North Pole which creates a vortex where ships are sucked down. The subgenre of hollow-earth utopias connects to this tradition, and Munchausen’s passage via the Pole to the Indian Ocean (p. 98) has its counterparts in a flurry of lost or secret world romances set in a lush otherworld beyond the Arctic. In this tradition, the Arctic is a transitional space, crucially important as the place of disorientation that readies the protagonist for an alien
experience. The extreme natural conditions expose the visitor to an environment where familiar ways of interacting with the surrounding world are challenged both physically and mentally. Society is left behind when the power relations between nature and culture are reversed, which leads to a loss of self. Finally, as one of the last unknown places on the earth the Arctic strips away the visitor's cultural constraints and certainties in preparation for cognitive reorientation.

A common feature in utopian fiction is that the alternative world is found through an accident, frequently caused by the loss or malfunction of equipment. The geographical North Pole is north of the magnetic North Pole which means that the northern point of the compass will point south at the geographical Pole and the compass will be unpredictable at the magnetic Pole. Foreshadowing the process of reorientation that is to take place, the malfunctioning object is therefore often the compass, as the most obvious metaphor for our ability to orient ourselves in the world. Thus, the fictional manuscript of The Third World: A Tale of Love and Strange Adventure (1895) by Henry Clay Fairman is found in the Arctic grave of the last survivor of John Franklin's tragic fourth expedition, together with a "broken mariner's compass inscribed 'The Terror'" (p. 6). Shipwreck leads to finding the new world in possibly the first example of the genre, a prose work with the title The Description of a New World Called the Blazing-World by Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, published in 1666. Vera Zarovitch who is the
The protagonist of Mary E. Bradley’s *Mizora: A Prophecy* (1890) actually has two shipwrecks, whereas one suffices in William George Emerson’s, *The Smoky God* (1890) and William R. Bradshaw’s, *The Goddess of Atvatabar* (1892). The crash of a hot-air balloon occasions the discovery in William Shaw Jenkins’s *Under the Auroras* (1888) and Robert Ames Bennet’s *Thyra, A Romance of the Polar Pit* (1901). “Had I started out with a resolve to discover the North Pole, I should never have succeeded” is a typical comment (Lane 1890: 8). The accidental and ultimately meaningless North Pole arrival parallels the bumbling polar discoveries of the comical tradition.

*The Blazing-World* is an odd mixture of adventure story, romance, philosophical tract, scientific study and autobiography. It is too much to call it a proto-feminist work, but it could be said to begin a tradition of imagining the Arctic as the entrance to a place of female rule. As with the incarnations of the Ice Queen, the radical potential of these fantasies varies considerably. The gender order is frequently dissolved or reversed, but class structures, essentialised gender definitions and nineteenth-century bourgeois ideals often remain intact. Thus, in the Christmas story *The Finding of the Ice Queen* (1879) by Frank Barrett, feminist separatism is rejected as an aberration. The feminist and socialist utopia in Lane’s *Mizora* is undeniably racist and the goddess cult and strong feminine role models in *The Goddess of Atvatabar* (1892) are off-set by the conventional marriage plot. The genre is occasionally used parodically, as in Mrs. J. Wood’s [probably William Mill Butler], *Pantaletta: A Romance of Sheheland* (1882), a cross-dressing fantasy where the women, called shehes, rule and the men, or the heshes, are slaves. The story ends with General Gullible’s escape from marriage to the president of Petticota, and his heartfelt wish, at a time when feminism is beginning to have influence in American society, that conventional gender relationships might prevail:

O, my native land [. . .] May thy sons and daughters still be sons and daughters, and thy men and women, men and women. And may the day never dawn when amateur world-builders, or vainglorious demagogues, shall, out of thy matchless civilization, shape abortions like the shehes and heshes of Sheheland!

*p. 239*

Using the Arctic as a setting for utopia relies on the same thought patterns as when the region is thought of as available for exploitation: it is a blank space, open and ready for inscription. Therefore it meets the necessary conditions for imagining, critiquing and tolerating something that is entirely new, whether it is social, spiritual or actual.

A recent development is so-called cli-fi, or climate fiction, usually dystopian stories about the effects of and attempts to halt global warming. Instalments range from realistic fiction like Ian McEwan’s *Solar* (2008), referencing modern history and science and partly set in Svalbard, to the Siberian western of Marcel Theroux’s *Far North* (2009) and the mass market eco-thriller *Arctic Drift* (2008) by Clive Cussler and Dirk Cussler, where finding the lost Franklin expedition is the clue to saving the world from ecological disaster. Unlike the utopian novels of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, cli-fi employs the Arctic as a setting, not only the transition to an alternative world. With few exceptions, however, the underlying preservation ideal perpetuates the representation of the Arctic as pristine nature under threat. It is only rarely that the region is depicted in social terms, as a site of modernity and future possibility.

**New Arctic, new fiction**

Writing about the farthest North is almost exclusively a matter of writing for the outsider which requires much more of an attachment to agreed-upon narrative paradigms. The conventional format for Arctic fiction is “human-against-nature”, followed by the plot pattern...
“human-against-human” in frontier stories. So far, plots based on “human-against-society” or even “human-in-society” have been largely absent, since the Arctic has rarely been acknowledged as a social environment. Crime fiction is however a genre that makes no sense without the various legal and moral systems that govern a society, which means that the emergence of Arctic detective stories is gradually changing both the genre of crime writing and the character of Arctic literature. The Arctic setting introduces nature as a major factor, but now the Arctic is populated with characters who are not only representatives of different indigenous or settler communities, but complex individuals driven by personal motives.

Crime fiction is a genre of the present, with plots and characters that reflect current fears and anxieties and investigation techniques that respond to the most recent social, scientific and technological developments. At the same time, the history of the detective novel is not linear or unidirectional, but multi-layered, which means that older varieties of the genre co-exist with new forms. One of the early examples of Arctic crime fiction is Dana Stabenow’s mystery series about the Aleut investigator Kate Shugak, set in an Alaskan national park. The books borrow from the cosy detective genre, with characters reappearing from book to book, producing the sense that the stories describe a community populated with familiar figures rather than a wilderness devoid of human presence. But the criminal threat is neither from within, as in Golden Age crime writing of the 1930s and 1940s, nor from without, as in the sexually-motivated serial crimes of present-day noir, but often the result of outside exploitation and greed. Environmental issues are addressed and environmental crimes are condemned, and the fate and circumstances of indigenous populations is a common sub-theme. At the same time, Shugak’s detective abilities are near over-shadowed by her outdoor survival skills, and the final defeat of the criminal is frequently the result of his or her failure to adapt to Alaskan conditions.

A regional setting creates market value and the most marketable asset is exoticism. Book titles and cover art of Arctic crime fiction suggests that at least the publisher wishes primarily to highlight the ethnic content and the exigencies of the climate. On the whole, this also appears to be what readers are looking for. As the reviewer Beth Jones notes about Melanie McGrath’s crime novel White Heat (2011), “the most addictive character – both hero and villain of the piece – is the Arctic itself” (Jones 2011). These expectations and marketing strategies create concerns regarding tokenism and raises fears of clichéd exoticisation, but the other side of the coin is continued narrative absence for Arctic people. McGrath’s stories about the investigator Edie Kiglatuk set in fictional Craig Island close to Ellesmere Island contain details that both sustain and question the exotic discourse. White Heat is liberally peppered with Inuktitut words and phrases and Edie is shown to be part of the land, performing an “Inuit search” for evidence by walking barefoot in circles over the crime scene, trusting her body over her eyes (pp. 140–142). On the other hand, it is the outsider Bill Fairfax who is wearing “traditional caribou mukluk boots, a sure sign of a man in the grip of Arctic nostalgia” (p. 69). Like the main character of Peter Høeg’s Miss Smilla’s Feeling for Snow (1992), Edie is a threshold figure, part Inuk and part qallunaaq, or white, and a central theme in the novel is how traditional skills and attitudes are disappearing as a result of alcoholism, suicide, the availability of junk food and an education inappropriate for Arctic life. McGrath is well aware of the tradition she is breaking, describing a series of Arctic prints “presenting the sanitized, picture-perfect, people-free Arctic fantasy beloved of southern photographers and artists” (p.339). Her Arctic, in contrast, is insistently populated, troubled, between tradition and modernity and in a losing battle against both the present and the past. The novel expands its genre by problematising the question of the victim as not only the people murdered, but the entire community where the crimes take place.
The history of the Arctic in the popular imagination runs an uneven course, from rampant hero worship in a terra nullius icescape, through satirical scepticism regarding the value of reaching a symbolic position on the map to imaginary social arrangements and present-day ecological concerns. Iconic images include Arctic polar bears as well as Antarctic penguins, underscoring both the continual circulation of the Arctic as a natural world and the lack of actual knowledge of its properties. The various representations form mediascapes shaped by their audiences, genres, geographical place of production and historical context. In the end, this means that they turn back on themselves and say as much about their cultures of origin as the Arctic.

Notes

1 On the IMDB website, the cartoon is described as set in Antarctica. This would be supported by the penguins’ presence but contradicted by the reference to caribou and walrus and the presence of the igloo. www.imdb.com/title/tt0030595/.


3 My discussion is concerned with outside representations of the Arctic, primarily in Anglophone culture. Indigenous representations are certainly different, not least because they proceed from a position where the Arctic is “home”.

4 The first-person narrator has taken the name Captain Munchausen because of his similarity to the fictional Baron Hieronymus Karl Friedrich von Münnchhausen, and is not intended to be the same character (Munchausen at the Pole: 6). Note the variant spelling of “Munchhausen”.

5 Note the variant spelling of “Munchhausen”. The main character of the film is supposed to be the fictional Baron von Münchhausen.

6 It should be noted, though, that later in the text, the “Spirit of the Pole” is imagined in masculine terms (Munchausen at the Pole: 94–95).

7 Some of the material in this section has previously appeared in different form in “Arctopias: The Arctic as No Place and New Place in Fiction”, The New Arctic, ed. Birgitta Evengård, Joan Nymand Larsen and Oyvind Paasche, Heidelberg, Germany: Springer, 2015, 69–78.

8 For a more extensive discussion of Stabenow’s detective novels, see Heidi Hansson, “Arctic Crime Discourse: Dana Stabenow’s Kate Shugak Series”, Arctic Discourses, ed. Anka Ryall, Johan Schimanski, and Henning Howlid Wærp, Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2010, 218–239.

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“A cold reception (Arctic Regions 1875)”, Punch, or the London Charivari 11 Nov. 1876: 203–204.


