

## Enduring Themes?: John Moss, the Arctic, and the Crisis in Representation

Joanne Saul

Volume 24, Number 1, 1999

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl24\\_1art06](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl24_1art06)

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Saul, J. (1999). Enduring Themes?: John Moss, the Arctic, and the Crisis in Representation. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 24(1), 93–108.

Article abstract

Informed by the crisis of representation, John Moss discovers in *Enduring Dreams: An Exploration of Arctic Landscape* that he cannot write a book about the north without considering the long history of Arctic narrative and the textualization of Arctic space. Ostensibly a book about the Arctic, *Enduring Dreams* is actually a text about texts. Moss is drawn to the mythic nature of the north and its place in a Canadian consciousness; yet he recognizes that it is a space already textually overdetermined. His crossing of generic borders, his emphasis on the physicality of reading and writing, and his vast range of intertexts all serve to foreground his postmodern reflexive project. By insisting on the impossibility of narrating a "true" or "real" Arctic landscape, by refusing to historicize or contextualize within a material reality, and by resorting instead to the act of confession, Moss's text actually helps to strengthen the mythic nature of the north rather than challenge it. Like that of the explorers, adventurers, ethnographers, and artists he draws on, Moss's white, male, southern perspective creates a web of mystery around the north that effectively silences the land and people.

# Enduring Themes?: John Moss, the Arctic, and the Crisis in Representation

JOANNE SAUL

THE ARCTIC AND ITS IMAGINING have played a major role in Canada's narrative of nation. In *Enduring Dreams: An Exploration of Arctic Landscape* John Moss, a critic who has been preoccupied with envisioning a national character for many years, attempts to tease out some of the narrative threads that have contributed to the potency of the "idea of north." Informed by the crisis in representation,<sup>1</sup> Moss discovers he cannot write a book about the north without considering the long history of Arctic narrative and the textualization of Arctic space. Therefore, there is a dual impulse evident in Moss's book. Ostensibly a book about "Arctic landscape," *Enduring Dreams* is actually a text about texts. As such, it is a fascinating case study of issues of postmodern representation within a literary context.<sup>2</sup> Moss is drawn to the mythic nature of the north and its place in a Canadian consciousness, and yet he recognizes that it is a space that is already textually overdetermined. The text that emerges from this tension exemplifies this postmodern paradox.

"What I'm concerned about," says Moss in an interview in *Studies in Canadian Literature*, "is the way all writing distorts the Arctic. I'm concerned about the way *all* writing distorts" (Hamelin 161). Moss's project throughout *Enduring Dreams* is to foreground the disjunction between experience and text. He situates his text as one of the many in the palimpsest of texts that has helped to create the mythic overtones of the "true north strong and free." By continually evoking this vast network of texts and by interrogating their mixed agendas, he draws attention to the constructedness of this particularly potent narrative of nation. His crossing of generic borders, his emphasis on the physicality of reading and writing, and his use of a vast range of intertexts all serve to foreground his postmodern reflexive project. He makes clear that we can only access the Arctic through various people's lenses, and he makes it his task to problematize these lenses by foregrounding the agency behind them.

Yet Moss's text demonstrates the ambivalence implicit in a post-

modern approach. Paradoxically, he interrogates the “hyper-textualization” of the Arctic by writing his own text; the imperative of his project is, at least in part, to foreground the imperatives of other projects before his. Finally, by insisting throughout on the impossibility of narrating a “true” or “real” Arctic landscape, by refusing to historicize or contextualize within a material reality, and by resorting instead to the act of confession, Moss’s text ultimately helps to strengthen the mythic nature of the north rather than challenge it. Like that of the explorers, adventurers, ethnographers, and artists he draws on, Moss’s white, male, southern perspective creates a web of mystery around the north that effectively silences the land and the communities of peoples in the north. Ironically, it is his insistence on self-referentiality that ultimately leads to a meditation on self at the expense of broader issues.

### “The Idea of North”

Moss’s book takes for granted a continuing fascination with what Glenn Gould called “the idea of north,”<sup>3</sup> and in particular with how it relates to a distinctly Canadian identity. The interrogation of national identity seems to be obsessively “Canadian.” How do we define Canada’s national character? How do we get at what it means to be Canadian? Does it make any sense to want to try? The “Oh! Canada Project,” which was on exhibit at the Art Gallery of Ontario in the spring of 1996, proved that, for many, the question of identity is still as important today as it was seventy-five years ago when the Group of Seven first made their bold nationalist statements by linking an idea of Canada with its landscape and underscoring the relationship between nature and nation. For the Group of Seven, the search for identity was rooted, at least in part, in the idea of Canada as a northern nation. Although the “Oh! Canada Project” encouraged public responses to this definition of Canada and included a number of perspectives that interrogated the Group’s vision of Canada, the linking of nation and nature continues to have reverberations in the Canadian cultural consciousness. Consider, for example, the fascination with the mysterious fate of the Franklin expedition and its various rewritings which include (among others) Margaret Atwood’s story “The Age of Lead,” Gwendolyn MacEwen’s verse play *Terror and Erebus*, Mordecai Richler’s *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, the late Stan Rogers’s song “Northwest Passage,” Al Purdy’s autobiography *Reaching for the Beaufort Sea*, and Geoff Kavanagh’s play “Ditch.”

And yet, although the power of northern landscape and the myster-

ies of the Arctic still seem to have a hold on some aspects of Canada's cultural imagination, recent theorizing has shown how this imagination can no longer be identified as unified or homogeneous.<sup>4</sup> Moss, however, has been concerned with defining the national character for many years. In his 1974 book *Patterns of Isolation* he argues that "Canadian fiction reflects a geophysical imagination" and "the progress of a Canadian imagination toward a positive identity" (7). Along with D.G. Jones's *Butterfly on Rock* (1970) and Margaret Atwood's *Survival* (1972), *Patterns of Isolation* contributed to a criticism centred on thematics and rooted in Canadian nationalism. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s Canada's narrative of nation was explored primarily by thematic critics whose critical frameworks relied on a number of assumptions, which included viewing English Canada as a monolithic nation, reading literature, in part, as a body of sociological indicators, and considering language to be more or less unproblematically referential. The major goal (and outcome) of this criticism was the positing of a unified national identity.<sup>5</sup>

Twenty years after *Patterns of Isolation* Moss is still attempting to articulate a vision of Canada. He says that his book is "about Canada" (Hamelin 164). In *Enduring Dreams* he suggests that "the Canadian soul might reside in the possibilities of natural chaos, the creative evasion of order revealed to us by Arctic landscape" (150), and he links the Arctic to "the shaping mind of Canada" (135). And yet this is a very different text from his previous books of criticism. Although Moss continues to be drawn to the idea of a "Canadian soul" and the relationship between nature and nation, he can no longer consider that relationship without problematizing it. His interest has shifted from the study of fiction as reflection, imitation, or representation (*Patterns* 7), to the study of representation in and of itself. His focus is on the pragmatics of representation, or what David J. Herman refers to as "the interminable analysis of representation itself" (183).<sup>6</sup>

In *Enduring Dreams* Moss is concerned specifically with the way in which the Canadian north has come to be textually overdetermined, and his aim is to de-doxify<sup>7</sup> the north — to show the political importance behind the huge body of cultural representations. A number of cultural theorists and historians have documented the many ways that the "idea of north" has taken hold in the Canadian imaginary. The notion of a "true north strong and free," like any narrative of nation, has been used as an ideological tool to cement Canada as a nation by reconciling regional viewpoints (Shields 8). Rob Shields argues that

the North is less a real region signified by a name and more a name,

a signifier, with a historically variable, socially-defined content. An 'official', social mythology appears to overlie the palimpsest of personal images and experiences: subscription to this social mythology will be seen to define central Canadian identity. (165)

In *Canadian North*, Bruce Hodgins suggests that the idea of the north is exactly the quality that makes Canada unique and gives root to Canadian patriotism (1). Cole Harris also argues that the "sense of being a northern people, a consciousness of the Shield and of the rest of the empty north" are important ingredients of Canadian nationalism (40). In her article "Myths of the North in the Canadian Ethos," Shelagh Grant defines a myth as "any story, image or notion which explains something" (15), and, like Hodgins and Harris, she links the "myth of the north" directly to the notion of a collective, shared Canadian identity: "just as myths the world over have provided explanations to direct the conscience and understanding of society, so have the myths of the north impacted on the Canadian ethos" (16).<sup>8</sup> Grant's article emphasizes the constructed, rather than the natural or universal character of myth. She insists, "it is often the collectivity of similar attitudes that gives a myth credence and strength" (16). To mythologize the north is, in effect, to assemble all northern experience into one and to ignore any parallel or alternate histories. To interrogate the "myth of the north" and all its re/presentations is, in effect, to interrogate the notion of a single, unified, Canadian identity.

What is at stake in this kind of interrogation? What kind of Canada do these narratives of nation inscribe? Whose version of north is accepted as "True North"? In *Places on the Margin*, Shields describes the "True North" as a "masculine-gendered, liminal zone of recreative freedom and escape" (162). Shields cites W.L. Morton as an important figure in the propagation of this particular vision of Canada's north. According to Morton, the north is defined by wilderness — the terrain of "(male) fur traders, lumberjacks, prospectors, and miners" (Shields 182); it is the antithesis of "home base" and the domain of women and families. This version of the north is obviously dependent on an essentialized notion of the "civilizing" feminine that relegates women to the domestic sphere. If the north is defined as an "unconquerable wilderness," it is defined in opposition to centres of habitation and the so-called "civilizing" forces of everyday life, marriage, and the workplace. The north is thus represented as the zone of the male individual, having escaped from the constraints of domestic responsibilities. Shields suggests that, if the north is to be encroached upon at all, "it should be 'temporary' in the form of 'men-only' style work-camps: it is as if it was a zone which was hostile to domestic order" (194).

Traditionally Canadian history and literature have also taught us that the Canadian north is the land of explorers and mad trappers, the battleground for the struggle of man against nature.<sup>9</sup> Lisa Bloom refers specifically to the gendered nature of Arctic exploration in her book *Gender on Ice*, “as all-male activities, the explorations symbolically enacted the men’s own battle to become men. The difficulty of life in desolate and freezing regions provided the ideal mythic site where men could show themselves as heroes capable of superhuman feats” (6). Bloom argues that while narratives of polar explorations played a role in the social construction of masculinity, they also legitimized women’s exclusion from this discourse (6). Within the context of narratives of exploration, mad trappers, and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), the Canadian north has necessarily been portrayed as the land of masculine hardiness, strength, and self-reliance. If, as the Canadian geographer Louis-Edmond Hamelin suggests, current perceptions of the north are made up of a wide range of tableaux, including images of Franklin, the Northwest Passage, polar expeditions, the RCMP, and the Klondike (3), all of which are constructed within a similar framework of the male individual in a struggle to survive against nature.

All of these images of the north are socially constructed. All are from a perspective that is southern/central, white, and urban. If, as Sherrill Grace has noted, “the human being that ventures North does so as traveller, visitor, or quester” (254), then the version of north represented is always as other, as different, foreign. Aron Senkpiel argues that

the literature of the northern frontier is largely a southern one. It has been written largely outside the area of study.... At best, writers working within this tradition have made occasional forays into the North, usually returning south to turn their field notes into finished productions destined for a largely southern readership. (139)

Although (or because) Moss is very much aware that this is the context out of which he is writing, in many ways his own text mirrors some of the tropes of the tradition. His is clearly a type of quest or journey narrative. He, too, battles the cold and engages in seemingly brutal and punishing physical activity. He often presents himself as a solitary figure in the landscape and he constantly invokes the explorers of the past, their expeditions, and their written accounts. Like present day ethnographers, the explorers of Canada were “assiduous writers” (Warkentin ix). The man in the field tried to keep a daily record of his observations. Moss explicitly refers to his own “field notes” throughout his text, which he writes in the solitariness of his tent or by the light of the camp stove. However, for Moss, it is his

self-consciousness about the written text that distinguishes his own account from past accounts.

## Moss and the North

Because he is both a creative and an academic writer, Moss's book is engaged with a wide range of theoretical issues including the interrogation of the transparency of language. Part ethnography, autobiography, travel writing, history, fiction and poetry, *Enduring Dreams* crosses a number of disciplinary and generic borders. Its style evokes Rudy Wiebe's *Playing Dead*, Aritha van Herk's *Places Far From Ellesmere*, and Elizabeth Hay's *The Only Snow in Havana*. All are attempts (to varying degrees) self-consciously to write the Arctic into book. Each book acknowledges and speaks to the power of the Arctic in the Canadian consciousness; each is concerned with the writing process and "ways of seeing"; each crosses borders and boundaries; and each is remarkably and deeply personal. All of these texts reject a so-called realist approach to their subject matter. Moss describes his intended audience for *Enduring Dreams*:

I want a different kind of reader: a careful reader, not one who's going to read for the transparency of language, to get right into the narrative itself. I want the marathon readers. I want people to work at it.... I want you to become involved in what's happening with language. Farley [Mowat] wants you to utterly forget his language and get on with the story. (Hamelin 165)

Self-conscious references to language recur throughout his text: "It's hard not to get lost in words" (6); "language is the problem" (13); "language is preemptive" (83); "how many languages converge in every word?" (14); "I am thinking of words, the Arctic of words" (30).

The writing process is also emphasized throughout the book, and the very physicality of reading and writing serves to foreground the idea of textual mediation and the power of language. Both Moss and his then wife Virginia read and write throughout the text. Moss writes in the margins of the books he reads. Virginia's journal consists of intertext and collage. She prepares her book "with pasted fragments from other journals, information about the terrain, maps, and empty spaces" (110). Moss includes some of his poems from his Katannilik Journals which, because of their physical appearance on the page, "more honestly admit the text as mediator between experience of the world and the world itself" (110).

Moss finishes his Arctic book in Bellrock, Ontario, far removed from the north. He writes of the north in Mexico also: "I am writing this in Mexico on the shore of Lake Chapala. The flowers here are foreign, even the ones I'm familiar with. Poinsettias are the size of trees. ...I am thinking of the Arctic" (28). This contrast (between north and south, cold and hot)<sup>10</sup> emphasizes the distancing involved in any report or written version of the north and the potency of the north as a "landscape of the mind" (28).

The tension between Moss's roles as author/critic and explorer/quester is evident in the slippage throughout the text between the word and world. Although Moss does refer to an "authentic Arctic text" (89), it is somehow separate from his experience. This disjunction between the real and the text is central to Moss's project. In *SC L*, Moss says that his book is

about me being aware, going to the Arctic and seeing that my own experience and what I read were parallel realities that didn't intersect. I developed a fascination for the connection between the landscape and the written word, and narrative procedures. (Hamelin 162)

Similarly, in *Enduring Dreams* he writes,

the textual world is real enough, yet it seems to exist in parallel and not to intersect with our experience on the Deh Cho. Somehow in being here, we have reached beyond words; through the rhythm of exhausted muscles, we have become part of northern landscape in ways no text, apparently, can apprehend. (42-43)

In the very process of writing his book, Moss discovers the impossibility of articulating Arctic space. His heightened self-consciousness about narrative is best illustrated by his distinction between landscape and geography — a distinction that lies at the heart of his text. Moss defines landscape as "the natural world without benefit of human consciousness, although not excluding human presence" (5). He says "you may enter landscape, but in humility; if truly there, you cannot tell yourself apart from it" (5). In contrast, Moss suggests that geography represents "the whole structure of knowledge, of society" (Hamelin 162), and these structures are the focus of critique in *Enduring Dreams*. He says, "we search the landscape for geography, to evade geography. To become part of the landscape" (7).

Moss does manage to have moments of almost sublime connection with the landscape, but the moments where Moss enters Arctic landscape are rare. Connection tends to occur at the point of intense physical exertion like the Iron Man competition in Hawaii (81), or the moments on



the Deh Cho river. He describes the sensations of running in Arctic landscape: “and as you move through Arctic landscape, if you are a runner running memory and anticipation merge with every falling step; sky and earth become each other, and you inseparable from what you see” (26). He presents these moments as somehow “pre” or un-textual. By arguing for a reversal of the explorer-type field notes, he suggests that these are the moments that writers need somehow to capture: “it has fallen on literary writers — or been the challenge taken up by literary writers — to mediate between the Arctic and outside, to transform themselves into Arctic landscape, and not the other way around” (129). The paradoxical challenge faced by writers like Moss who embark on postmodern projects is to “un-textualize” the Arctic, rather than write it into words.

By de-contextualizing a wide range of Arctic representations Moss shows their constructedness. He employs a staggering number of intertexts for his postmodern project of foregrounding and interrogating issues of authority and originality. The whole canon of Arctic narrative comes under investigation in Moss’s book. A number of different “ways of seeing” — like the paintings of the Group of Seven and other conventional lenses — are interrogated as informing structures that mediate the Arctic for readers and viewers. Paradoxically, the narratives of the Arctic are both reinscribed and critiqued. His use of intertextual echoes and fragments of exploration, adventurer, and artistic narratives serves both to remind Moss’s reader of the preeminence and power of northern landscape and to constantly undermine this power by reinforcing the Arctic’s status as empty or false signifier. Moss reminds us that Atwood’s “True North” is “as close to the Tropic of Cancer, twenty-three and a half degrees above the Equator, as to the Arctic Circle” (13). Because most Canadians rely on second-hand reports of the Arctic, it has become a series of images presented and re-presented by predominantly non-northern writers and artists, all of whom impose their own “structures of knowledge” — including their own geographies. Moss makes clear that, when we consider the Arctic, “we see through others’ eyes; eyes of the dead” (12).

The “Arctic of words” is continually evoked in Moss’s text. In a section called “On the Historiographics of Desire” Moss writes: “When you enter Arctic narrative, you enter every narrative of the Arctic ever written. When you enter the Arctic in person, you become part of the extended text” (105). He argues that this “Arctic of words” necessarily mediates between the reader and actual experience in the same way that images of the Arctic do. He asks, “What would I have seen, had Seurat or had Monet, with his field of broken colours never been? Had Gauguin or Van Gogh

never painted flowers, painted light? Or Lawren Harris never travelled north?" (11). By linking Doris McCarthy, Toni Onley, and Lawren Harris to Picasso and Matisse and others, he maps out a vast visual "extended text." Texts draw on other texts so that meaning is produced from text to text rather than between text and world. For Moss, this idea of a palimpsest allows him to "connect with [his] whole culture" and to "bring [his] whole culture into focus" (Hamelin 163). Moss's view of intertextuality closely echoes the view of photographer Sherrie Levine, who suggests that this kind of intertextuality is an integral component of postmodernism:

Every word, every image, is leased and mortgaged. We know that a picture is but a space in which a variety of images, none of them original, blend and clash. A picture is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centers of culture.... The viewer is the tablet on which all the quotations that make up a painting are inscribed without any of them being lost. (qtd. in Hutcheon, "Politics" 228)

Once the idea of the author as originator or guarantor of meaning is undermined, intertextuality can only have resonance in "the dialogue between the reader and his/her memory of other texts, as provoked by the work in question" (Hutcheon, "Literary" 231).

The success of Moss's intertextuality is dependent upon the mythical and mystical overtones that the Arctic has amongst English-speaking southern Canadians, and upon its role in the formation of a Canadian identity. Although the concept of the north as a singular, homogeneous ideal has been problematized, and although the north can be divided into a number of different layers (near, middle, far, extreme), the importance of the idea of north to a southern framework has, as we have already seen, been echoed and re-echoed. In "The Idea of North: An Introduction," Glenn Gould reflects on his use of the Arctic landscape:

I made a few tentative forays into the north and began to make use of it, metaphorically in my writing. There was a curious kind of literary fallout there, as a matter of fact.... I began to draw all sorts of metaphorical allusions based on what was really a very limited knowledge of the country and a very casual exposure to it. (391)

Similarly, Kroetsch writes,

This silence — this impulse towards the natural, the uncreated... is summed up by the north.... It remains a true wilderness, a continuing presence.... It presses southward into the Canadian consciousness. (54)

And, according to Margaret Atwood, “The north focuses our anxieties. Turning to face north, face the north, we enter our own unconscious. Always in retrospect, the journey north has the quality of dream” (“True North” 143).

What is it that makes the north subject to this kind of hyper-textualization? According to Moss it is because it has been and continues to be regarded as relatively uncharted territory — a kind of *tabula rasa* — on which to leave an imprint. He reinforces this notion by suggesting that “the Arctic landscape has stayed, for the most part, exactly as it was 100 years ago, even 5000 years ago. The landscape of any other place changes, but the Arctic landscape stays relatively constant” (Hamelin 161). The notion of Arctic timelessness is echoed by artists such as Toni Onley, who explains its impact on his watercolours:

To be creative I need these lonely places. I work best in isolation, particularly in this great solitude of Arctic landscape. In such a place, where we step back in time to the ice ages, it is hard not to recognize the spiritual resources in ourselves. (13)

Or consider Al Purdy’s poem “Tent Rings” in his collection of Arctic poetry *North of Summer*: “All over the Arctic / these tent rings / going back thousands of years / in the land where nothing changes” (88). In her “geografictione” *Places Far From Ellesmere*, Aritha van Herk calls Ellesmere a “*tabula rasa*,” an “absence,” and a “hesitation” (77) and dedicates her book to “Ellesmere, that it will stay, eternally, mysteriously, its own geografictione.” These representations of Arctic space as empty and silent add to the mythology of the north and to its status of empty signifier. Moss’s text is similar in that the Arctic landscape that he travels through seems to exist in this form for him (and his various family members). It is virtually uninhabited. Although the landscape in Moss’s text seems unpeopled, the acknowledgments section is filled with the names of individuals and families that he would like to thank for their generosity and “invaluable assistance.”

Moss’s line of interrogation necessarily introduces a question into the text about his own narrative. Is *Enduring Dreams* not one more distortion of the Arctic landscape? Moss would argue that, of course, it is. However, by acknowledging the problem of naming up front and by foregrounding his own processes of representation, he maintains that his distortion is different from previous distortions (Hamelin 161). And yet, the assumptions that his text relies on — the idea of a cultural continuity, the significance of north in a southern framework, and the north as silent and empty signifier — are ideologically loaded. Ultimately, even

though Moss questions the multiplicity of readings of the north, he never engages explicitly with his own agency, his own assumptions. By suggesting that “we write history; we make it what we want” (Hamelin 161), Moss denies the social and historical pressures that shape people. And although he is very careful to foreground the positioning of many of the authors he refers to, he does not really interrogate his own presuppositions and the audience that he is writing for. Moss is clearly writing out of a very male, white, western, and canonical tradition and for an audience that shares it.

Moss also distinguishes his text from previous texts by making it a “very personal expression” (Hamelin 166). One of the distinguishing features of his postmodern project is this valorization of personal truths as the only truths there are. Autobiographical confession is Moss’s way of interrogating the notion of received truths. This is the book he always intended to write, he says, even before he had been to the Arctic: “There are things I wanted to say; I had to work out my relationship with myself, with my family, with time, with my country” (Hamelin 164). In a text like Moss’s, which uses so many of the strengths of postmodern theory as a problematizing force, there is a risk that the focus of the text can become only the writer’s own mediating voice and the text itself an act of solipsistic self-discovery.<sup>11</sup> In the final section of his book, Moss writes:

It was necessary to invent myself from black and white — this is the closest I will ever come to confession — a creation of consciousness, a creature of language. Like Canada, I am slow to become who I am; although finally, within the landscape of my own particular Arctic, I become myself (155).

By invoking the idea of “[his] own particular Arctic” Moss again emphasizes the difficulty of any attempt to represent the Arctic as the “true” or “real.” But what are the implications of Moss’s “own particular Arctic”? Does his own version, based as it is on his own imperatives, differ significantly from other texts in his palimpsest? Although provocative and, at times, moving, *Enduring Dreams* is less an “exploration of Arctic landscape” than it is a book about Moss’s inner landscape and the impossibility of ever articulating the Arctic in words.

And yet, Moss’s text is, at least in part, a writing back to a history of monolithic Arctic narratives. And it is a very powerful one. He offers it as an alternative to books by a writer like Mowat who, according to Moss, “undertakes to speak for the land and its people” (31) instead of foregrounding his role as outsider and self-consciously declaring his own

agency. The result, says Moss, is that “at best he has engendered a widespread public interest in the Arctic. At worst he makes created facts seem true; his truths, the essence, for southerners of northern actuality” (31). Nonetheless, although Moss’s text exposes all types of over-confident assertions of “truth,” it is unclear what he proposes in their stead.

\* \* \*

If we read *Enduring Dreams* as one more set of lenses through which to view the Arctic, it is a revealing one in terms of its ability to problematize. However, one of the most disconcerting aspects of the book is the way in which the Arctic is dissolved into its written representations so that it ultimately vanishes. Although Moss allows himself some glimpses of Arctic landscape — like his moment on the Deh Cho — he tells us that these moments are somehow “beyond words.” What we are left with then is silence, and it is this kind of silence that has arguably allowed for the hyper-textualization of the north in the first place. Moss writes:

Perhaps the notion of Arctic narrative as a linear quest will self-destruct; and we, absolved from the structures of grammar and story, might find among words the power of silence; in the subversion of imminence, secular grace.... There might be in the glistening details a vision of silence, in stubborn particulars the pleasures of chaos, the pleasure through a shattered text of silvered estuaries, on Ellesmere, the pleasures of oblivion. Nothing I can say will make words of nothing. (136)

Herein lies the challenge that postmodern texts like Moss’s have yet to confront. *Enduring Dreams* destabilizes by deconstructing without offering any grounds from which to reconstruct. He interrogates the constructedness of Arctic space in the Canadian imaginary. But he does not ultimately question who or what makes up the Canadian imaginary. By evoking such a wide range of intertexts about the Arctic, Moss acknowledges the continuing fascination with the relationship between nature and nation and adds his text to the tradition. And by positing the Arctic as “beyond words,” he preempts any further consideration of the peoples and land and helps keep the mythic nature of north intact.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>In their book *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, Marcus and Fischer refer to the “crisis in representation” which arises from the uncertainty about adequate means of describing social reality. James Clifford identifies this crisis in ethnographic representation in *The Predicament of Culture* and in *Writing Culture* (co-edited by George Marcus). For a useful discussion of this crisis in literary criticism, see Linda Hutcheon’s *The Politics of Postmodernism* and *A Poetics of Postmodernism*.

<sup>2</sup>Highly self-conscious about the problematized relationship between the word and the world, writers such as Aritha van Herk, Kristjana Gunnars, Rudy Wiebe, and Elizabeth Hay also foreground the act of narrative/textualization as a way of demonstrating their own uncertainty about what constitutes an adequate depiction of social reality. All their works are, in a sense, forms of life-writing: mixtures of travel writing, autobiography, biography, journal, and self-portraiture. However, the autobiographical impulse in texts such as *Places Far From Ellesmere*, *The Prowler*, *Playing Dead*, and *The Only Snow in Havana* is balanced/challenged by the mixture of history, ethnography, fiction, and poetry. The result is an emphasis on the process involved in writing a life, the instability/shifting of the writing subject and an emphasis on the constructedness of narrative. For a reading of Moss, van Herk and Wiebe’s uses of postmodern ethnography, see Renée Hulan’s essay “Literary Field Notes: The Influence of Ethnography on Representations of the North.”

<sup>3</sup>Glenn Gould created a radio documentary for the CBC called “The Idea of North” (Gould 1992). It was the first in a series of what Gould called the “solitude trilogy” which consisted of two other parts: one about Newfoundland and the other about the Mennonite community in Canada. Gould’s piece has recently been the subject of much critical attention. See, in particular, the essays by Hjartarson, McNeilly, and Dickinson in the special issue of *Essays on Canadian Writing* entitled *Representing North*.

<sup>4</sup>There is, of course, a wide range of critical discourse about the problematizing of a unified national identity. Some of the more important theoretical works include: Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*; Homi K. Bhabha’s collection *Nation and Narration*; the collection *Nationalisms and Sexualities* edited by Andrew Parker, et al.; Lisa Lowe’s *Immigrant Acts*, in which she outlines how “the cultural productions emerging out of the contradictions of immigrant marginality displace the fiction of reconciliation, disrupt the myth of national identity by revealing its gaps and fissures, and intervene in the narrative of national development” (9). For a selection of recent essays on the problematizing of representations of north and its role in the Canadian imagination, see *Echoing Silence: Essays on Arctic Narrative* edited by John Moss and *Representing North*, a special issue of *Essays on Canadian Writing* edited by Sherrill Grace.

<sup>5</sup>There has also been much criticism devoted to the critique of this body of criticism, perhaps most notably Frank Davey’s essay “Surviving the Paraphrase,” Barry Cameron and Michael Dixon’s introduction to *Studies in Canadian Literature*, “Minus Canadian,” and Russell Brown’s essay “Critic, Culture, Text.”

<sup>6</sup>For a useful distinction between modern and postmodern approaches to representation, see Herman’s article “Modernism versus Postmodernism: Towards an Analytic Distinction” in which he contrasts Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* with Michael Herr’s *Dispatches*.

<sup>7</sup>Hutcheon uses this term in *The Politics of Postmodernism* to describe the effect of postmodern interrogation. She refers to it as a denaturalizing critique of all that is taken for granted (the doxa). According to Hutcheon, postmodernism helps to show how “legitimate knowledge” is actually socially constructed (3).

<sup>8</sup> Grant's article traces the history of the various reincarnations of the myth of the north including the romantic images of the north and the *coureurs de bois* in the eighteenth century, the sublime and picturesque images of north in the early nineteenth century, the mystery of the north and the Franklin expedition and the various explorations of the Arctic, the Canada First Movement of the 1870s, the resource myth, the conservation myth, the lure of the gold rush, the northern canoe trip. Grant argues that all are "variants of the 'core' myth, with an enduring quality that suggests the vast wilderness regions still impart a distinct character to the Canadian nation" (37).

<sup>9</sup> For versions of the "Mad Trapper" (Albert Johnson) story, see Frank Anderson's *The Death of Albert Johnson*, Dick North's *The Mad Trapper of Rat River* and *Trackdown: The Search for the Mad Trapper* and Rudy Wiebe's *The Mad Trapper*.

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly enough, Elizabeth Hay uses a similar contrast in her "biotext" about the Arctic, *The Only Snow in Havana*. She continuously weaves images of the Arctic with images of Mexico showing how, despite their obvious differences, the one can easily evoke the other in the mind.

<sup>11</sup> In *Tales of the Field*, John Van Maanen refers to the various strategies of writing ethnography, especially within the context of a "crisis of representation" in which fieldwork is acknowledged as an interpretive act rather than an observational or descriptive one. In his chapter on "Confessional Tales," Van Maanen stresses the need for a balance between introspection and objectification. What he calls "vanity ethnography" is a result of too much introspection in an ethnographic account so that the balance is tipped. In vanity ethnography, Van Maanen argues, only the private muses and demons of the fieldworker are of concern (93). This is also one of the dangers in a postmodern text such as Moss's.

## WORKS CITED

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983.
- Anderson, Frank. *The Death of Albert Johnson*. Calgary: Frontiers, 1968.
- Atwood, Margaret. *Survival*. Toronto: Anansi, 1972.
- . "True North." *Saturday Night* 141 (Jan. 1987): 141-48.
- . "The Age of Lead." *Wilderness Tips*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991. 157-75.
- Bhabha, Homi K., ed. *Nation and Narration*. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Bloom, Lisa. *Gender on Ice*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993.
- Brown, Russell. "Critic, Culture, Text: Beyond Thematics." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 11 (1978): 151-83.
- Cameron, Barry, and Michael Dixon. "Mandatory Subversive Manifesto: Canadian Criticism vs. Literary Criticism." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 2.2 (1977): 137-45.
- Clifford, James. *The Predicament of Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988.
- Clifford, James, and George E. Marcus, eds. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1986.
- Davey, Frank. *Surviving the Paraphrase*. Winnipeg: Turnstone, 1983.
- Dickinson, Peter. "Documenting 'North' in Canadian Poetry and Music." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 59 (1996): 105-122.
- Gould, Glenn. "The Idea of North: An Introduction." *The Glenn Gould Reader*. Ed. Jim Page. New York: Knopf, 1984. 391-94.
- . *Glenn Gould's Solitude Trilogy: Three Sound Documentaries*. CBC, PSCD 2003-3, 1992.



- Grace, Sherrill. "Comparing Mythologies: Ideas of West and North." *Borderlands: Essays in Canadian-American Relations*. Ed. Robert Lecker. ECW, 1991. 243-62.
- , ed. *Representing North*. Spec. issue of *Essays on Canadian Writing* 59 (1996).
- Grant, Shelagh. "Myths of the North in the Canadian Ethos." *The Northern Review* 3/4 (1989): 15-41.
- Gunnars, Kristjana. *The Prowler*. Red Deer: Red Deer College P, 1989.
- Hamelin, Christine. "John Moss: Consciousness as Context" [interview]. *Studies in Canadian Literature* 20.1 (1995): 161-69.
- Hamelin, Louis-Edmond. *Canadian Nordicity: It's Your North, Too*. Montreal: Harvest House, 1978.
- Harris, Cole. "The Myth of the Land in Canadian Nationalism." *Nationalism in Canada*. Ed. Peter Russell. Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1966. 27-43.
- Hay, Elizabeth. *The Only Snow in Havana*. Dunvegan: Comorant, 1992.
- Herman, David. "Modernism versus Postmodernism: Towards an Analytic Distinction." *A Postmodern Reader*. Ed. Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon. Albany: State U of New York P, 1993: 157-92.
- Hjartarson, Paul. "Of Inward Journeys and Interior Landscapes: Glenn Gould, Lawren Harris, and 'The Idea of North'." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 59 (1996): 65-86.
- Hodgins, Bruce. *Canadian North: Source of Wealth or Vanishing Heritage?* Scarborough: Prentice-Hall, 1977.
- Hulan, Renée. "Literary Field Notes: The Influence of Ethnography on Representations of the North." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 59 (1996): 147-63.
- Hutcheon, Linda. "Literary Borrowing...And Stealing: Plagiarism, Sources, Influences, and Intertexts." *English Studies in Canada* 12.1 (1986): 228-39.
- . *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1988.
- . *The Politics of Postmodernism*. New York: Routledge, 1989.
- . "The Politics of Postmodern Parody." *Intertextuality*. Ed. Heinrich Plett. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991. 225-36.
- Jones, D.G. *Butterfly on Rock*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1970.
- Kavanagh, Geoff. "Ditch." *Staging the North: Twelve Canadian Plays*. Ed. S. Grace, E. D'Aeth, L. Chalykoff. Toronto: Playwrights Canada P, 1999. 135-85.
- Kroetsch, Robert. *The Lovely Treachery of Words: Essays Selected and New*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1989.
- Lowe, Lisa. *Immigrant Acts: On Asian-American Cultural Politics*. Durham: Duke UP, 1996.
- MacEwen, Gwendolyn. "Terror and Erebus." *Afterworlds*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1987. 41-57.
- Marcus, George and Michael Fischer. *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986.
- McNeilly, Kevin. "Listening, Nordicity, Community: Glenn Gould's 'The Idea of North'." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 59 (1996): 87-104.
- Moss, John. *Patterns of Isolation*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1974.
- . *Enduring Dreams: An Exploration of Arctic Landscape*. Toronto: Anansi, 1994.
- , ed. *Echoing Silence: Essays on Arctic Narrative*. Ottawa: U of Ottawa P, 1997.
- North, Dick. *The Mad Trapper of Rat River*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1972.
- . *Trackdown*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1989.
- Onley, Toni. *Onley's Arctic: Diaries and Paintings of the High Arctic*. Vancouver: Douglas and MacIntyre, 1989.
- Parker, Andrew, et al., eds. *Nationalisms and Sexualities*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Purdy, Al. *North of Summer*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1967.
- . *The Collected Poems of Al Purdy*. Ed. Russell Brown. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1986.



- . *Reaching for the Beaufort Sea: An Autobiography*. Madeira Park: Harbour, 1993.
- Richler, Mordecai. *Solomon Gursky Was Here*. Markham: Viking, 1989.
- Senkpiel, Aron. "From the Wild West to the Far North — Literary Representations of North America's Last Frontier." *Desert, Garden, Margin: Range Literature on the American Frontier*. Ed. Eric Heyne. New York: Twayne, 1992. 133-42.
- Shields, Rob. *Places on the Margin*. London: Routledge, 1991.
- van Herk, Aritha. *Places Far From Ellesmere*. Red Deer: Red Deer College P, 1990.
- Van Maanen, John. *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988.
- Warkentin, Germaine, ed. *Canadian Exploration Literature: An Anthology*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1993.
- Wiebe, Rudy. *The Mad Trapper*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1980.
- . *Playing Dead: A Contemplation Concerning the Arctic*. Edmonton: NeWest, 1989.