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# The Shape of Authenticity in Elliott Merrick's *Northern Nurse*

ELIZABETH A. HUMBER

OUTWARDLY, *NORTHERN NURSE* relays the non-fictional experiences of Kate Austen, an adventurous Australian nurse working in Labrador with the Grenfell Mission in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The story is told in her voice using the first person perspective, but it was actually written by her husband. As an author, Elliott Merrick is known for such works as *True North* and *The Long Crossing and other Labrador Stories*. As these texts indicate, Merrick's literary predisposition unequivocally involves the reshaping and idealization of northern-based adventures into captivating stories. Despite this tendency, however, he claims that *Northern Nurse* is the "true picture" (Merrick xvii) of his wife's work in Labrador and "contains no fiction or fictionalizing" (Blake 83). However, internal elements indicate that Merrick has indeed veered from his stated intention of providing a strictly factual representation of his wife's work in Labrador, and has actually created an idealization of not only Austen and her place within northern culture, but also the northern nursing experience.

*Northern Nurse* details Kate's arrival in a land that differs drastically from all that she has ever known. Ever adaptable and capable, however, Kate immediately begins to tackle the many challenges with which she is faced. When the Mission doctor, Dr. Harry Paddon, is stricken with an ailment that prevents him from returning to Labrador, Kate is left for nearly a year to assume all the medical responsibilities. She travels to the remote interior when necessary, treats diseases and injuries with minimal supplies, and documents her procedures and the progress of all her patients. Thus, the book proceeds in an episodic manner, with each emergency taken in turn. It is these various encounters on which Merrick focuses, and, because of their basis in fact, the reader's attention rarely veers from the details unfolding on the page.

Despite the reader's comfortable captivation, *Northern Nurse* demonstrates the importance of critically engaging with a text to achieve true interpretive satisfaction. While reader response theorist Stanley Fish would have us utilize the various "interpretive communities" to which we individually belong to assist in this endeavour, the strategy contributes little when applied to a book such as *Northern Nurse*. The text's setting and subject matter extend beyond the typical reader's immediate experiences. As well, the text's affiliation to "life writing" and the personal nature of the depicted events render interpretive communities ineffective. Wolfgang Iser, however, offers an alternative. He asserts that the reader is an equally important component in the overall structure of the text, existing alongside the plot, characters, and narrator. Interpretations, Iser claims, arise as a result of this interaction. He states, "What is said only appears to take on significance as a reference to what is not said; it is the implications and not the statements that give shape and weight to the meaning" (1676). This interpretative perspective invites the reader not only to engage with the text, but also to arrive at conclusions derived from the implied meaning as opposed to the stated intent. This is particularly relevant in *Northern Nurse* since the language within the text challenges and counters the author's claim that the text contains no fictionalization.

Ironically, Merrick's literary style and the manner in which he presents nursing in the North alert and hinder the reader from willingly accepting Kate's exemplary integration into the remote Labrador culture. His "Nurse Kate" defies convention and expectation — the idealized rendering of the "northern nurse." Heroically and resolutely (and quite unrealistically), Kate handles each situation with grace and confidence, despite her lack of experience and the scarcity of resources. Merrick's narrative voice, diction, and imagery create an attractive representation of the northern nurse, but not a realistic one. In fact, his approach is more in keeping with adventure and quest literature than biography. Accounts of northern nursing experiences provided by women who have personally endured the physical hardships and cultural isolation associated with their jobs reveal that Merrick's depictions of Kate's experiences have more in common with this kind of fiction than fact.

Because Merrick asserts that he is relaying "the story of [his] wife when she was Nurse Kate Austen," a story that they together feel is "a true picture of one nurse's work, thought and adventure," the reader is cued to accept the text as a pure representation of fact (Merrick xvii). However, life-writing critics would advocate a more judicious approach. *Northern Nurse*, despite the difficulty in categorizing it specifically as autobiography, biography, or memoir, clearly belongs within the broad category of life writing. The primary obstacle in defining it generically is that someone other than the subject relays it from a first-person perspective. As well, Merrick, the person conveying this "true picture," did not witness many of the events — another complication that prevents a precise determination of genre. On the surface, Merrick's appropriation of Austen's voice masks his authorial influence, detaching him from the text. The manner in which he uses language, however,

compels the reader to examine the extent to which he is imposing his own interpretation onto the events Austen experienced.

Lawrence Millman warns the reader in his foreword that the text is “somewhat slippery” (xiii). While he is referring to the merging of voices, Kate’s with Merrick’s (which is “everywhere in the book” [xiii]), the text is also “slippery” in that it merges history with narration. Despite Merrick’s assurances that the text is factual, his self-professed “improving, re-arranging, weaving in background for the stranger-reader, and providing continuity and sometimes a chapter-end twist for reader satisfaction” suggest a fictionalizing strategy that, in all likelihood, detracts from our understanding of Austen’s actual experiences and reflections (Merrick quoted in Blake 68). Indisputably, narrative elements are effective organizing tools when recalling and presenting events retrospectively. However, as Dale Blake points out, “a husband may take liberties with his wife’s story that another would not.... When a story is filtered through someone else’s pen, alterations may occur, and that author’s biases may intrude” (69).

Critics and theorists of life writing are cognizant of this tendency. Marcus Billson, in his discussion of memoir as a literary genre, maintains that despite “the memorialists’ stated intentions for their works,” the “artful memorialist can never be a reporter, or a mere chronicler of fact” (263). As a genre, “the memoir narrates the author’s personal act of witnessing the past” (282). Billson reasons, “it is not the memorialist’s desire to present men and events as they were (although he invariably thinks he is doing so), but rather to represent them as they appeared to him, as he experienced them, and as he remembered them” (264). This seems the closest to what Merrick achieves in *Northern Nurse*; but since he is not writing about himself or about events that directly involve him, the book cannot definitively be considered a memoir.

From the reader’s perspective, the use of Kate’s voice from the first-person point of view signals the text as being autobiographical. Strictly speaking, of course, an autobiography, like a memoir, is a representation of the life of the author. In a vein similar to Billson, Jeremy D. Popkin, in *History, Historians, and Autobiography* (2005), specifies that authors of autobiography “are entitled to rely on their own memories, even if these cannot be easily verified” (41). In his discussion of Hayden White, Popkin concludes that even though White “has not explicitly addressed the status of autobiography in his theoretical writings,” it seems clear that “the arguments he has developed about the narrative character of history and its similarity to fiction apply equally to autobiography” (35). White’s tendency, Popkin continues, “to subsume all forms of narrative under the category of fiction has been attractive to many of the literary theorists of autobiography, who have used it to justify their assimilation of autobiography to fiction” (35). In *Time and Narrative* (1988), philosopher Paul Ricoeur also acknowledges the relationship between history and fiction that exists within an autobiographical work: the historical component of a narrative about oneself draws this narrative toward the side of a chronicle

submitted to the same documentary verifications as any other historical narrative, while the fictional component draws it toward those imaginative variations that destabilize narrative identity (3:248). The reader is encouraged to view the ultimate product with some reservation because “this process of expressing an identity through a constantly evolving narrative does not lead to a stable result” (Popkin 44).

Laura Marcus tends to agree. In *Auto/biographical Discourses* (1994), she asserts, “autobiography is itself a major source of concern because of its very instability in terms of the postulated opposites between self and world, literature and history, fact and fiction, subject and object” (7). Elizabeth Bruss, an autobiographical critic and author of *Autobiographical Acts* (1976), responds to this sense of instability, stating that a reader of autobiography “has the right to try to fit the text to his expectations or to complain when he finds something that seems pragmatically unintelligible” (11). However unintentionally, Merrick confirms that instabilities do exist within works based on the recollection and representation of “real” events. While Iser invites the reader to actively engage with texts to achieve interpretive satisfaction, life-writing critics encourage the reader to proceed cautiously and to question the extent to which time and retrospection transform fact into fiction.

This sense of reader awareness is stimulated early in the reading of *Northern Nurse*. Kate Austen emerges in the opening paragraph as a heroic and mythic character rather than an authentic individual. The statements “when I was little I knew I’d go somewhere” and “someday I’m going where there’s more of this” prepare the reader for the claim that Merrick makes in the second paragraph: nursing is “the finest job an adventurous girl can have if she must wander” (1). The narrator creates a fairytale quality through such words as “somewhere,” “someday,” “wander,” and “adventure,” and the reader is alerted immediately to the possibility that the events about to be relayed may, perhaps, be more akin to quest literature than life writing. By the end of the first chapter, Kate asks, “Is it real there?” (referring to Labrador), and the response from her friend is, “The realest place you ever saw” (1). The repetitious use of the word “real” suggests that Merrick is prompting his reader to unconditionally accept all that he is about to present. Ironically however, the actual effect of this language idealizes, rather than authenticates, his subject matter.

The act of idealizing anything, by definition, initiates a retreat from reality. In the second chapter, Merrick confirms his own tendency to step outside the realm of reality in his descriptions of the natural environment. Kate regards Battle Harbour as being “more like a story than real life” (13). The frequent references to literary works such as Conrad’s *Youth*, Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner*, and Hugo’s *Toilers of the Sea* assist in the suggestion that her experiences have more in common with fiction than real life. The “good pinch” that she gives herself as she travels toward her destination creates a dream-like image, again alluding more to the imaginative domain than reality (18). In reference to the steamer *Kyle*, Kate remarks, “Such a beautiful taste of civilization she was; she brought us half the things we wanted, and

the rest we forgave her because of the civilized ills she left behind" (54). This comment subtly suggests that she is approaching a utopia of sorts — the "Eden of the North" (78, 286). The scene with Sir Wilfred Grenfell conducting Sunday service on the beach with "his white hair blowing in the wind," the "fishermen listening so silently," the "sea splashing on the rocks," and his encouraging them to "help one another" also conjures idyllic, biblical images of perfection (63).

Intimations, triggered by Merrick's diction, that Kate's encounters and experiences are too good to be true — "this seemed so enchanting I was afraid my heart would burst" (91), "blue and green and dreamy" (262), "picture-like perfection" (94), "dog-team tripping was the nearest thing to fairyland" (125) — detract from Merrick's stated intent of non-fictionalization because it inevitably sends the message that they probably are not true. Lawrence Millman's comments in the foreword do not reinforce the reliability of such images: more than any other point of the compass, the North likes to fill its literature with heroic mythology. Intrepid explorers, life-or-death situations, unimaginably awful weather — mix them together, simmer and serve. If you want a flavour slightly less rough about the edges, you might add a nurse to the ingredients (ix).

Merrick, Millman asserts, adds just the right amount of "nurse." Therefore, Merrick's idyllic images and Millman's opening remarks warn the reader to proceed cautiously, questioning the adventurous, alluring depiction of northern nursing and Kate's smooth integration into northern culture despite her Australian background.

In *Imagined Communities* (1983), Benedict Anderson discusses how authors often represent, and how readers perceive, the world. While his interests pertain primarily to national identity, his idea of the solitary hero moving "through a sociological landscape of a fixity that fuses the world inside the novel with the world outside" is relevant to *Northern Nurse* since the Labrador of the text is a world infused with outside influences (30). The world portrayed is, as Millman states, designed "to give [the reader] some idea of *what Labrador was like* when the only roads were waterways and trails of a person's own making" (xvi). Again, this is the image that Merrick creates and offers, but one must question how inclusive it is. Millman's statement suggests that the other "worlds," those that exist outside Merrick's depiction, those that may, for instance, include and represent the world of the Indian or the trapper, are actually included as part of the world depicted within the text. Again, the naive reader may passively accept this representation as accurate since his or her limited field of experience does not support, encourage, or otherwise initiate a critical interrogation of the printed word.

If, as Rob Shields proposes in *Places on the Margin* (1991), the North "remains a zone of Otherness" and "is the complete antithesis of the urban civilization of the southern metropolises," then it seems inevitable that the writer who is conveying images and depictions pertaining to the North will inadvertently foster a desired representation as opposed to a truly accurate one (4). Likewise, the reader will

likely respond with awe rather than reservation. In this regard, it is important to remember that Merrick's intended audience consists of people who, in all likelihood, have not been subjected to similar experiences. This presumed readership is supported by the numerous references to novels and authors throughout *Northern Nurse* and the assumptions regarding the medical knowledge that the reader supposedly possesses: "Hernia, as most people know, occurs because ..." (289); "I hurried to wrap the tiny foot and leg immediately in hot cloths, for, as most people know, contact with the cool air ..." (264). While it is obvious that a single text or author cannot incorporate all aspects of a given place in any one representation, it nevertheless remains the responsibility of the reader to acknowledge the infinite representational possibilities and to avoid an acceptance of one version as being the authoritative version.

Much like Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which contends that there has been a constructed representation of the Orient that serves Western needs, there is a perception of the north that "serves southern needs and interests" (Gilbert paragraph 12), and Louis-Edmond Hamelin refers to this construct as "nordicity." Shields refers to this concept of the North as, archetypically, "an unconquerable wilderness devoid of 'places' in the sense of centres of habitation; the last reserve of a theological vision of Nature which must be preserved, not developed" (194). It is, according to Shields, a region "of the 'Other', it is the 'pole' in the Southern Canadian popular imagination to which everything that presents a contrast with 'civilization' and its values can be assimilated" (194). The "true" North is, ironically, "reality mediated by imagination" (195). This is seen on numerous occasions in *Northern Nurse*. For instance, the sled-dogs are associated with glory and adventure rather than ordinary life: "It was dogs like these that took Peary to the North Pole and Amundsen to the South" (126). As well, Nurse Kate's idyllic perception of dog-tripping contrasts with reality: "I had dressed for riding, for gallantly flying over the arctic tundra, the way they do in Siberia or somewhere in books" (135). Given Merrick's romanticized depiction of Labrador as a place, one may question whether he offers northern nursing as the female response to the seductive allure of the North. Merrick seems to be exemplifying the very argument put forth by Shields. Austen's desire for adventure, her love of the wilderness, and her "nurse extraordinaire" persona all support a mythologizing of events rather than an authentic representation.

Helen Gilbert, in her article "Great Adventures in Nursing: Colonial Discourse and Health Care Delivery in Canada's North," reports that "in the popular imagination ... northern nursing is not seen simply as a variant of general nursing for particular communities in specific geographical locations. Rather it has been discursively constructed as a very special kind of vocation reserved, in theory, for an extraordinary kind of nurse" (paragraph 5). Working within the "much mythologised Canadian north" (paragraph 5), the nurse, by association, becomes a figure of legendary status. Nurse Kate is awarded this status. She, in contrast to Molly O'Shea,



the “black-haired little girl” who nurses at the small mission hospital in Fishing Cove, does not faint at her first tooth extraction (20). The description of Molly as being a “little girl” rather than a professional woman (like Kate) is worth noting. Merrick establishes a juxtaposition of the two women, but weights it in Kate’s favour. This is unfair since, at this point in the text, Molly is the experienced northern nurse while Kate is a mere novice. Likewise, when Jeff James, the doctor-in-training, is confronted with a sick child, he “grew very pale, as well he might” (42). And, when he extracted a tooth for an agonized fisherman, “the color drained out of Jeff’s face and he began to sweat. [Kate] didn’t mind so much. [She] was used to things like this. [She] knew you must do what needs doing and get it over with” (44). Kate, therefore, is infused with courage, ability, and practical insight from the very beginning, effectively elevating her above other medical professionals.

Merrick, despite his claim of presenting a purely factual account of his wife’s experiences, complies with the “discourses that collectively construct outpost nursing as the stuff from which legends are made” (paragraph 6). The North, according to Gilbert, becomes a “transcendental signifier that gives outpost nursing immediate heroic dimensions,” and the image is further intensified because this space “has been mapped out as a quintessentially masculine domain” (paragraph 6). Kate Austen, undoubtedly, conforms to the Florence Nightingale legend described by Gilbert, combining “high adventure, womanly virtue, self-sacrifice, physical endurance, and patriotism, all played out in a hostile foreign environment” (paragraph 16). Despite the pleasing manner in which Labrador is presented in the text, it can, indeed, be regarded as a harsh region. Its climate, isolation, lack of services, and the poor health of many of its inhabitants all indicate a land where survival is never taken for granted. When Nurse Kate disregards the advice of her *komatik* driver and sets off into a storm with another, she admits that she “was a little afraid that [she] was doing a Florence Nightingale sister-of-mercy act, but that was better than sitting down and doing nothing” (215). This is a dismissive response given the situation at hand, and it causes the reader to question the extent to which she comprehends the severity of her environment. Her quick and nonchalant dismissal of the dangers associated with this foreign land effectively (and ironically for Merrick) detracts from a realistic portrayal of Nurse Kate, a woman who supposedly exhibits rational thought and sensible behaviour.

Gilbert’s reference to the medical emergency as being “a literary trope” for heroic tales of adventure (paragraph 24) is also evident within Merrick’s work. The anecdotal framework of *Northern Nurse* demonstrates the power and interest surrounding the nurse-saves-the-day motif. Accounts of her arduous journeys and medical interventions carry the reader through the text more than any other device. The process of Kate getting to her various destinations is described as thoroughly as the duties that she performs once she arrives. In terms of “plot advancement,”<sup>1</sup> Merrick underutilizes such literary techniques as suspense, foreshadowing, and character development, even in instances when they would undoubtedly increase



“reader satisfaction” (Merrick quoted in Blake 68). For example, we never learn the name of the mysterious drug that almost kills Jeff, although we are teased into thinking that we may eventually be granted this satisfaction: “Jeff was convinced, as I was, that the patent stuff was some super-powerful cocaine compound. He carefully labelled it ‘POISON,’ and wrapped it up to take home so he could have it analyzed when he got to New York” (74). Once Kate saves the day, however, it seemingly is no longer important. By combining the adventure of the quest motif with the intensity of the medical emergency, Merrick’s Kate emerges as a character of heroic dimension, effectively obliterating a realistic rendering of her being.

This image of the nurse repeatedly and selflessly responding to emergencies of every magnitude does not comply with accounts given by actual nurses who have worked in the North, providing further evidence that Merrick’s narrative compromises fact in the interest of fiction and entertainment. Mary Crnkovich’s collection of essays written by women who have experienced the north, *“GOSSIP”: A Spoken History of Women in the North*, is meant to celebrate the significance of women recording their own ideas in their own words since “these experiences and viewpoints have [often] been re-created through the interpretations of male historians and anthropologists” (xvi). Brenda Canitz, in her essay “Nursing in the North: Challenge and Isolation,” outlines five key elements that northern nurses report as having affected their experiences most critically: stress, power and control, isolation, gender, and cross-cultural identification. The knowledge that such stresses exist and are specifically associated with nurses working in the North comes as a shock to Merrick’s reader since he alludes to them infrequently, if at all. Canitz, for example, explains that a “serious issue for women in the north is the reality of violence. Most nursing stations do not have a comprehensive security system, and the constant threat of intrusion or violence leaves each and every nurse feeling isolated” (205). Harry Paddon, the doctor under whom Kate Austen worked, concurs: Paddon wrote to his family of “Labrador’s social problems ... Labrador’s lawlessness and need of a prison and reformatory” (Paddon quoted in Rompkey XXV). The Labrador of Merrick’s book shows no indication of such serious social ills. On the contrary, it is a land that exhibits cooperative social harmony and mutual respect.

Merrick’s Nurse Kate does comply with Canitz’s portrait of the northern nurse in that she does not escape the extensive workday or exercise control over her hours or tasks. Austen, however, rarely shows the frustration and sense of powerlessness that these difficult expectations foster. She describes her responsibilities in Chapter XII: “I was housekeeper at the hospital, where most of them lived. I managed all food stores, requisitions for the next year, shortages for this, all bookkeeping, and was in charge of the clothing store” (109). She must also “give out all supplies, plan the actual hospital meals, and figure out how [they] were going to make [their] food do until spring” (140). In addition to this, further roles are casually mentioned throughout the text — seamstress, baker, preacher, veterinarian, voice coach. Her

only comment regarding her endless list of responsibilities suggests acceptance and contentment: “There was no end to the strange things I found myself doing” (132).

This multitude of tasks, combined with her nursing responsibilities, is overwhelming, yet she rarely displays moments of frustration. Rather, she is enthusiastic about these multiple responsibilities. At a moment’s notice and with great zeal, she will travel over ice and snow in raging blizzards so that she may offer her assistance. During one of these occasions, Kate reflects, “how seldom a person feels the way she’s supposed to” (262). This statement is interesting in that it implies an awareness on her part that she, in embracing these hardships, is actually defying reality. When a reprieve is forthcoming, she is thankful; but when it is withheld, as is the case when she arrives home from her stint with Mrs. Michelin only to see the reception area “full of people waiting to see [her]” (243), she immediately, without resentment or disgruntlement, begins the process of triage.

The power that the community perceives her as having because of this act of “decid[ing] who is ‘sick’ or is not” is really an illusion (Canitz 201). As Canitz points out, nurses are subservient to men in the health care system, and any power that they do have is “given” to them by (largely male) “physicians and institutional administrators” (201). While this is true of Kate, it is never an issue of contention for her. When she is informed, “You’re the doctor now,” she is also instructed, “Give us some tea, will you” (119). Thus, the adoption of the primary male role within the community does not free her from the domestic world of the female. In other words, she has gained all the responsibility of the doctor’s job without the benefit of having been released from her other “female” duties. When she considers supplying particular families with birth control, she is “given orders” not to teach such practices (158). She vows to work on “chang[ing] the law,” suggesting that she, indeed, possesses the qualities associated with nurses who seek work in the North (158). According to Gilbert, “institutionalised forms of servitude and self-negation — what in nursing parlance is called ‘Nightingalism’ — often expected in routine hospital work, may be precisely what drives some nurses to the North in search of autonomy, agency, and self-respect” (paragraph 22). Merrick’s depiction of Kate as someone who is willing to challenge authority when it counters her personal beliefs bolsters her image beyond that of the subservient nurse. In excluding any follow-up, however, he leaves his reader deflated. Like Jeff’s potentially lethal drug, this component of the text is never revisited or actualized, and the reader, consequently, is left unsatisfied. Furthermore, the omission of subsequent details pertaining to this situation implies that Nurse Kate did not successfully influence the legalization of birth control. In not explicitly revealing this, Merrick, it seems, is attempting to sustain an idealized as opposed to an authentic image of Kate. Once again, the underlying inferences within the text destabilize the intent that exists on the surface.

Nurse Kate’s abilities and attitudes directly counter those expressed in the accounts represented in Canitz’s study. Northern nurses, she reports, were frequently frustrated with language barriers. Kate, however, defies such generalizations, and

when she is faced with five “very sick” Natives (222), she explains that despite the exigency of the situation, she and the Native women “could understand one another quite well” (227) — quite a feat given that their speech is referred to as “gabble” elsewhere in the book. Kate’s ability to communicate with those of another language contrasts with the “nice linguistic problem” that faces Jeff when he tends to an Inuk woman recuperating from cataract surgery (58). Canitz outlines, as well, the impact of visitors and how they “place an amazing strain on station nurses” (202). She reports, “many of these visitors expect the nurse to cook and clean for them but, in return, do very little for their room and board” (202). In *Northern Nurse*, this is not the case: “Sometimes there were five or six fishermen bunking in the mission room waiting for some boat or other. They always pitched in to help us while they stayed. I soon became accustomed to it and thought it the best system that ever was” (32). An obvious discrepancy exists between the two accounts: Canitz seems to be encouraging her reader to perceive these details objectively and realistically, while Merrick seems to be propagating the very image that Canitz is trying to dispel.

Canitz’s essay also relays the impact of trappers and missionaries on Native culture. Because of their presence and influence, natives spent more time at trading posts, resulting in a loss of faith in their own knowledge and skills. As the Native cultures grew more dependent on these services, they increasingly “turned over [their] responsibilities to the ‘conquerors’” (195). This sense of surrender is absent in *Northern Nurse*, and Merrick portrays the natives as living independently (and contentedly) away from the other settlers and missionaries, yet as being welcome within the mission community. When the Natives arrive to spend two months in North West River “to trade their furs at the post,” they “entrust their two little hand sewing machines and the priceless gramophone” to Steve Burns and his wife, perhaps feeling an affinity to the Burns family because Steve can speak their language and “advised them and joked with them as if he were an Indian himself” (248). When a Native woman requires medical attention, Kate explains, “it had taken the hospital a long time to overcome the Indians’ suspicions, win their confidence and get them to accept treatment, that we now did everything possible to make them feel at home” (249). This claim of doing everything possible to make them feel at home is contradicted in numerous places throughout the text.

One such instance involves the plight of an ailing Native child. Kate, deciding that the girl was progressing favourably in the ward, “sent her pals away” (245), even though a “sick [Native] invariably needs the moral support of the entire family” (249). The tone emanating from “sent her pals away” is one of impatience rather than receptivity concerning their presence in the hospital. Likewise, the scene where the Native women are choosing clothes, which they intend to make into garments for their children, also demonstrates Kate’s intolerance: “When they were going out, Sarah Jane gave the customary ‘Good-bye for a little while, *meeami abashish*,’ and I couldn’t help asking her, ‘Why don’t you know how to say good-

bye forever?” (271). One senses that the Natives are aware of this prevailing attitude of indifference. When they are called upon to help unload supplies from the boat throughout the night in exchange for a meal of beans, they return home before the work is completed. They “said they didn’t feel like unloading any more, and paddled back across the river to their tents, calm, aristocratic, untouched by the fever of civilization” (305). The language used here suggests that even though they are aware of their status as Other, they are not willing to defer to the perceived authority of the mission. This exertion of autonomy, however, does not prevail. Kate’s undertones of impatience, the multiple references to the Natives’ speech as “gabble” (250), and the fact that they must manoeuvre themselves cautiously while within the confines of the hospital because “they weren’t used to stairs” (251) indicate their alienation within their own geographical territory. Despite outward appearances, Merrick’s text inadvertently places the Natives outside Labrador culture, presenting them as the intruders.

Ironically, Kate too is revealed as existing apart from the community. While Merrick presents her as having integrated seamlessly into northern culture, there are indications that suggest otherwise. Canitz informs her reader of the Inuit word *ilira*. It refers specifically to the perception that they have of nurses who work in the north, and it means “respect tinged with fear” (196). Kate, however, is presented as being “fast friends” with practically everyone she meets (102). Just as there is consistent language insisting that Kate is accepted by all, there are consistent inferences that imply that she does not enjoy the sense of community as fully as Merrick would have the reader believe. First of all, the unwillingness of the community members to call her by her first name indicates their positioning of her outside the familiar. They continue to call her “Miss” for three years, and it seems it was “a custom [she] couldn’t change” (102). This implies that the nurses before her (and presumably the nurses who arrive after) had not been completely accepted into the familial community. Canitz’s account seems to coincide with this interpretation: She felt lonely — that certain emptiness that seems to linger. Everyone had been friendly and helpful, but there was no one she could really talk to. There was no one who really knew her, or understood her well enough that she could let down her happy, knowledgeable façade. There was no one she could discuss the traumas and tribulations of her job with — everything was confidential, and news travelled fast in a small town. It was like she had left herself behind — she was always “the nurse,” never Brenda. She just wanted to be herself and not always explaining, helping, and caring. She wanted to talk about familiar things, hear and see familiar faces, go to a movie, eat in a restaurant, get a hug. That was not to be. She had left all that behind. She was here in the Arctic in a nursing station and that was that (203-204).<sup>2</sup>

The manner in which Merrick’s Nurse Austen perceives both her inclusion within the community and her relationships with other women suggests delusion more so than a façade. The language that Merrick uses seems to contradict the very

image he tries to present. For instance, Kate, at one point, refers to her relationship with Sarah Jane and Pearlie as being “closer than most sisters” (232). But only a few lines previous these women are catering to her as though she were their guest: “‘Some more coffee, Miss?’ said Sarah Jane. ‘Try some redberry jam?’ said Pearlie” (231). This is seen as well in Chapter XXVII, when twice she encounters people (whom she casually calls “old friends”) who do not “forget the obligations of hospitality” (278) and treat her as though she were “visiting royalty” (279). Likewise, in Chapter XVIII, Mrs. Pottle, during her visit to Kate while she is recuperating from her burn, struggles to find something to say. They exchange pleasantries, but it is clear that Mrs. Pottle, someone Kate sees on a daily basis, is uncomfortable and anxious to leave. After her departure, Kate reflects on the visit and wonders about Mrs. Pottle’s character: “What does it matter that she has no small talk?” (177). The reader is left to question not only the typicality of the awkwardness exhibited by Mrs. Pottle but also Kate’s apparent denial of it as having any connection to her. She does not regard herself in terms of how others perceive her, and this serves to give her an exclusivity that further alienates her from the other community members.

Perhaps the clearest instance of conflicting representations regarding her relationships within the community is seen with Hannah. The whole of Chapter XVI is devoted to Hannah’s relationship with Kate, and she is given the distinction of being “One of [Kate’s] great friends in the village” (151). She and Hannah go fishing and enjoy each other’s company, and the reader is happy to see Kate engage with another individual on a level that is purely recreational. However, once Hannah begins to have her “fits” and Kate must deal with her on a professional level, the friendship seems to dissolve. Eleven chapters later, Kate refers to Hannah as “[her] fishing companion of the fits” (270). While this relationship demonstrates the difficulties that inherently accompany a nurse working in an isolated northern location, Merrick never explicitly states that their friendship undergoes a strain and deteriorates substantially. It is evident, however, that this is the case. This complete denial or omission of reality is telling. Despite the words used in the text — “good friends” (245), “fast friends” (102), “old friends” (279) — it is “the implications,” as Iser warns us, “and not the statements that give shape and weight to the meaning” (1676). The resonating impression is that Kate, in all likelihood, did not enjoy the camaraderie that Merrick attempts to portray.

These embedded inconsistencies are not limited to Merrick’s portrayal of Kate and her social connectedness. It occurs as well in relation to her affiliation with the land and the culture in general. When Pearlie gives birth out of wedlock, for instance, Kate claims, “the affair is considered understandable and unfortunate, but not a crime. Nobody looks down his nose and nobody has heard of a ‘delinquent girl’” (257). Here, Kate is generalizing about other people’s attitudes and beliefs that, apparently, are inaccurate. This is clear given Steve Burns’s response to the untimely pregnancy. He, Pearlie’s father, “was put out with her and wouldn’t have her live at

home with her child” (258). Kate, it appears, presents herself as an authority on the matter, but she is almost immediately undermined by reality. Even the idealized Kate cannot idealize this situation.

Perhaps the most striking example of Kate demonstrating disparities in terms of her connection with the land comes near the end of the book. The scene where her flowers are destroyed by the dogs illustrates where her true affiliations lie. Here, her flowers are described as “[her] only pleasure, [her] only joy” (274). This is surprising to the reader since there are innumerable references to the northern landscape and its people as being exquisitely fulfilling to Kate. She describes Labrador as being “more like paradise than earth” (233). It is “a great highway of dreams” (233), a place where she “never enjoyed [her] life so much” (212). Now, however, the flowers, which represent that which is not connected to Labrador — the “seeds had come from Sutton’s in England” (267) — have become the focus of her affection and attention: “My flowers, my flowers, for whom I carried manure from the barn and water from the river in the nights when other people slept” (274). After the dogs invade the garden and destroy the flowers, the land is described as “some pock-marked no man’s land” (274). This image completely contradicts what has been conveyed up to this point. Her frustration is evident: “My grief turned to rage. Nobody cared about the garden but me. Nobody ever closed the gate except me. Other people, lacking the intelligence of the stupidest peasant on a whole continent, left them wide open” (274). She goes on to threaten Jim, warning him that if he does not keep his dogs out of her flowers, she will shoot them “through the head” (274).

More than any other instance, these harsh statements place Kate outside the northern culture. She is correct in saying that nobody cared about the flowers. Aesthetic stimulation does not equate survival, and survival is central to these people’s lives. It could be argued that she is merely expressing her pent-up frustrations; however, when considered in relation to the rest of the text, the emotions associated with this event remain vivid and do not dissipate with time. Her inability to understand why the flowers are not important to the others and her willingness to kill even one of Jim’s dogs (who are needed for survival) in retaliation is ludicrous and demonstrates that she has not assimilated to the extent that Merrick portrays. The scene juxtaposes the cultural values of Kate, who, at this point, epitomizes the concept of outsider with those of the people who genuinely accept this land as their home.

The reader of Merrick’s *Northern Nurse*, while confronted with overt images and stated intentions, is able to recognize the underlying inferences that exist within the text. As Iser’s interactive theory suggests, the reader “is drawn into the events” and stimulated “into filling the blanks with projections” (1676). Likewise, the text confirms the influence that narration has on the representation of factual events. Despite the presumed intent of the author, retrospection and the desire to tell a good story can interfere with emotions and perceptions and, therefore, hinder accurate portrayals. The reader must avoid a submissive acceptance of all that is conveyed.

Using Iser's interpretive strategies, the modern reader will likely not regard the text in the same manner as Katherine Woods, who reviewed *Northern Nurse* for *The New York Times Book Review* in 1942. It appears that she passively accepts Merrick's representations as authentic: "the story is entirely factual, but [Merrick's] ability as a novelist has brought out the human drama and natural scene of his material without sentimentality or over emphasis" (Woods 4). An active engagement with the text, however, one that "questions, negates, and revises the expectations that the text establishes," points to the fact that Merrick does, indeed, sentimentalize and idealize Kate Austen and her experiences (Leitch 1671). The manner in which he constructs Kate's identity, the mythologizing of northern nursing, and the inconsistencies surrounding her social interactions clearly indicate that the reader is justified in submitting to the underlying conditions associated with life writing: be cautious, alert, and somewhat forgiving.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> While "plot" suggests a purely fictional work, Merrick's claim (in his interview with Dale Blake) of "improving, re-arranging, weaving in background for the stranger-reader, and providing continuity and sometimes a chapter-end twist for reader satisfaction" points to a deliberate unfolding of events, comparable to the function and definition of "plot" (68).

<sup>2</sup> This anecdote is taken from diary entries pertaining to personal experiences at the nursing station in the Northwest Territories.

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