JOURNAL OF NORTHERN STUDIES Vol. 9 • No. 1 • 2015, pp. 7–11

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Nations, Natures, and Networks

The New Environments of Northern Studies

Change is a prominent, even ubiquitous theme of early twenty-first century discussions about the North. The rapid decrease of sea ice in the last decade has placed northern ecosystems under multiple kinds of stress. It has simultaneously prompted visions of newly traversable shipping lanes, newly accessible deposits of minerals, and newly possible connections to markets and consumers far to the south of the Arctic Circle. This description of the "New North" or "New Arctic" (Stuhl 2013; Doel, Wråkberg & Zeller 2014) is now familiar, even bordering on clichéd. That this is the case speaks to the startling rapidity with which scholarly perspectives on this region have changed. Not so long ago, as Dolly Jørgensen and Sverker Sörlin (2013) remind us in their introduction to *Northscapes*, historians in more temperate climes imagined the North as a place without history and a place outside of time—a static, cold, and isolated space of little relevance to grand narratives of human affairs.

Contemporary academic understandings of the region have done much to thaw this North, frozen in both time and space. Scholars working at the confluence of history, geography, and environmental science have begun to re-emphasize a point that the French-Canadian geographer Louis-Edmond Hamelin made decades ago: that "there are so many Norths within the North" (Hamelin 1978: 7). There is no single Northern environment or idea of North, but rather multiple spaces and places that have shaped and been shaped by different constellations of physical, political, economic, and cultural factors. Newer Northern schol-

arship also lays to rest any lingering notions of regional isolation by highlighting the longstanding connections between the North and other places. This "networked North" is one in which people, animals, information, raw materials, and commodities animate particular routes and trajectories, casting a shifting web of movement over the planet (F.A. Jørgensen 2013).

The newfound sensitivity of Northern scholars to global historical networks arises in part from their increasing participation in more-than-national forums today. Political organizations such as the Arctic Council and the Inuit Circumpolar Council are established fixtures, but so too are academic forums such as the International Congress of Arctic Social Sciences. The flurry of scholarly activity associated with the most recent International Polar Year (IPY) of 2007–2008 created a raft of new multidisciplinary and multinational initiatives, in which humanists and social scientists were more prominent than ever before. It is perhaps no coincidence that environmental historians and historians of science have figured prominently in the "new northern history," a strand of scholarship central to this forum. Motivated principally by thematic questions and literatures, and unafraid to cross disciplinary borders in search of new tools and methods, these historians seem less concerned than others to confine themselves to national(ist) traditions and frameworks of inquiry. They have instead pursued research across national historiographical boundaries. In crossing borders so readily, they also reflect and refresh perspectives native to the field of northern studies, which has been both interdisciplinary and multinational from its inception in the mid-twentieth century.

As Jørgensen and Sörlin (2013) note, this new networked history of northern science and environment is still emerging. We (the forum's editors) came of scholarly age during the most recent IPY, and international networks have shaped our careers in fruitful ways. We took our doctoral degrees in England (Cambridge) and the United States (Stanford), but were able to spend time in other countries talking to Northern scholars with different perspectives. Inspired to give others at a formative stage of their careers an opportunity to develop similar cross-border connections, we invited junior and senior scholars with Northern interests, principally from Canada and Scandinavia, to Stockholm to discuss different national and transnational approaches to northern environmental history at a meeting held in late 2013. We heard not only from environmental historians, but also from geographers, anthropologists, and scholars of comparative literature, media and cultural studies, and science and technology studies. While many of these scholars pursued the foundational question of environmental history—that of the past relationships between humans and environments—very few identified themselves directly with the thematic sub-discipline

of environmental history. The essays in this special forum, all written by early-career scholars who attended this meeting, demonstrate that the field of Northern studies has much to contribute to emerging transboundary histories of northern science and environments.

The four essays present historical and historiographical analyses framed with an eye toward current events and issues. Several undertake new variations on a principal research theme that Klaus Dodds and Richard Powell identify: how Arctic environments can be enrolled in the work of "imagining and positioning various resource-led futures" (Dodds & Powell 2013: 4). Both textual and visual representations played a key role in formulating and realizing such visions. Janina Priebe considers how an early twentieth-century consortium of Danish businessmen and scientists constructed a narrative of Greenland as a place ripe for economic development. Claiming the superiority of free-market ideology to the colonial monopoly of the Danish state over Greenlandic commerce, the consortium argued that the "rational," capitalistic exploitation of natural resources would further Denmark's economic growth and aid the local Greenlandic population. The "scramble for the Arctic"—a phrase that evokes nineteenth-century Great Power colonialism in Africa—has been reappropriated to serve twenty-first-century debates about the North (see also Craciun 2009). Moreover, as Priebe shows, the characterization of Northern spaces as ripe for development is hardly new. Foregrounding the process by which particular modes of economic activity are rendered logical, even "natural," is crucial if we are to understand how descriptions of northern environments intertwine with arguments concerning the kinds of activities that "ought" to take place within them.

Rafico Ruiz's essay centres on a seemingly quintessential polar object: the iceberg. He reveals how scientists and engineers in the second half of the twentieth century sought to convert icebergs into quantifiable commodities, a quest that continues even today. As in Priebe's essay, the commodification of Northern phenomena went hand in hand with an image of the North as a space for future development. The iceberg becomes a "wasted" source of fresh water awaiting rational exploitation. Drawing upon insights from media studies and science and technology studies, Ruiz demonstrates how icebergs were rendered controllable and predictable objects through specific strategies of visualization, calculation, and forecasting. By historicizing the desire to represent and control icebergs in the service of economic gain, Ruiz draws attention to the complex ancestry of the computer-generated figures produced by present-day advocates of iceberg harvesting. His essay reminds us that even the most iconic components of Northern environments are mediated by southern values and technologies so as to facilitate their control.

Both Priebe's and Ruiz's essays recall an important argument that An-

drew Stuhl (2013) has recently made: that future-oriented visions of abundant northern resources are often veiled expressions of power. Analyzing the "New North" narratives that surfaced periodically throughout the twentieth century, Stuhl reveals that these stories not only described change, but also attempted to structure and direct the very nature of that change. In this spirit, Janet Martin-Nielsen surveys recent academic and popular "reconceptualizations" of the North. After comparing their agendas and placing them in historical context, she concludes that most of these twenty-first-century reconceptualizations are not as new as they first appear. In an era of proliferating human and environmental connections between northern and southern places, who truly "belongs" in the twenty-first-century North? What do future projections of the North reveal about the anxieties of the present? And how can humanistic and social scientific critiques of these reconceptualizations inform political interventions—if indeed they should? Just as Stuhl warns that "only by erasing or defacing history could the Arctic be deemed new" (2013: 114), Martin-Nielsen concludes that scholars can bring informed historical perspectives to public dialogues, and can thereby challenge deterministic visions of the future North.

Dagomar Degroot's essay brings the Little Ice Age into analyses of European exploration of the North through a close reading of the journals produced during Henry Hudson's voyages in the early seventeenth century. Degroot delineates a fine balance in which humans are able to determine their actions even within environmental constraints, and in which local northern conditions responded in complex, even counterintuitive ways to global cooling. He rightly critiques climate historians for writing declensionist narratives of the Little Ice Age's effects, but also points out that historians of Northern exploration and navigation have paid insufficient attention to the possibility of environmental change over time.

Degroot fears that the overwhelming global warming of recent years may leave less room for nuanced assessments of the influence of climate upon human affairs. We share this concern, but would take it even further. Visions of dramatic and inescapable change of any kind risk imposing deterministic narratives that render contingent events and actions inevitable, with very real consequences for how Northern people and places are treated. Historians have long debunked simplistic narratives about the southern conquest of Northern spaces. The assertion of authority over distant environments and their residents was hardly ever a straightforward process. Would-be colonizers and entrepreneurs have often met with resistance both from indigenous peoples and from the physical geographies of Northern spaces.[1] The North's past is more complicated than many of us realize, and, for better or worse, so is its present—and future.

NOTES

[1] Three of the four papers include the experiences of northern indigenous peoples, and Martin-Nielsen discusses the role of such people in contemporary debates at some length. We agree with Piper (2010) that historians who work on the North must continue to investigate the ways in which indigenous individuals and groups have shaped historical northern environments, especially given the predominance of southern and non-indigenous actors and perspectives in this literature to date.

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