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Environmental Imaginaries of the Arctic in the 21st Century Travel Writing

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary travel accounts engage with the ecocritical agenda, examining the global environmental crisis caused by human actions. In contrast to earlier narratives that presented the Arctic as a territory to be “claimed,” today’s travelers predominantly view it as a territory to be preserved. Amid the dialectic of destruction and preservation, new environmental imaginaries emphasize the interconnectedness of nature and human history, employing literary techniques to convey this interdependence. William E. Glassley in his book *A Wilder Time: Notes From a Geologist at the Edge of the Greenland Ice* (2018) adopts a “trans-scalar” perspective for narrating his Arctic journeys, seamlessly shifting between microscopic and macroscopic views of the planet, its elements and inhabitants. Glassley’s imaginary of the Arctic as an “indivisible whole” draws from geological and biological sciences. As a geologist, he underscores the unity of Earth’s substances, highlighting the entanglement of geo- and lifecycles. The Arctic, devoid of history during travelers’ presence, reveals its story through geological analysis of collected specimens. Ice, as an archive of planetary history, surpasses human records. Travel literature thus contributes to crafting an environmental imaginary rooted in substantial temporal interconnectedness, addressing the Anthropocene’s challenges.

KEYWORDS

travel writing, Arctic imaginaries, environmental imaginaries, Anthropocene

Received 25 September 2023

Accepted 6 December 2023

Published online 27 December 2023

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Introduction

In 2020, the polar ice caps receded second worst after the beginning of the regular measurements (Global warming, 2020). Climatologists have little doubt that these processes are the consequences of human activities and that many of these effects, such as more frequent droughts, typhoons, fires, and the increasing water acidity, bode ill for the humankind's habitation on the planet. The geological agency or the capacity to affect changes of the planetary scale that the humankind has recently acquired led to the damage to the food chains and to the mass extinction of species, which predated humankind by millennia. As Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) argues in his seminal *The Climate of History: Four Theses*, “anthropogenic explanations of climate change spell the collapse of the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history” (p. 201). In literary studies, the ecocritical approach stems from the recognition that “the environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination” and that some alternatives to organizing our human and natural history are needed for humanity to survive imminent environmental transformation (Buell, 1995, p. 2).

Reflecting on the challenges of climate change one cannot disregard the fact that trust in the potential of politics to offer any solutions is waning. In their analysis of the recent political attempts to set a joint global policy on emissions reduction, Mota and Wagner (2019) show to what extent present arrangements reproduce former power asymmetries. As the authors argue, “societies that had been confined to the ‘not yet’ during colonization and the hegemony of modernization discourse are now condemned to a ‘never.’ If so, in this respect, historical injustice could no longer be remedied in the future” (Mota & Wagner, 2019, p. 14). Whichever bargain might be struck by the politicians, past histories make any today's political solutions ultimately unjust to one or the other member of the global community. Ironically, trust in the entrepreneurial genius of capitalism, which will find technological solutions and through private initiative will save the day, may be shared only in the Global North. The Global South will have to pay for the ingenuity. Capitalism commodifies all initiatives: “fair trade”, “organic food” and “eco-” real estate are sold to the wealthy, while eco-activism is marketed through the profiteering media and eco-“merch.” Ecotourism is “promoted as a form of travel that brings only benefits to the host societies, because ecotourists are thought to be culturally aware ‘ethical travelers’ who are keen to reduce negative impacts on the environment” (Duffy, 2016, p. ix). But in Kenya, for example, tens of thousands of Maasai people have been dispossessed of their homes through the allocation of game reserves for tourists and others are “compelled to commoditize their local culture for tourist consumption” (Duffy, 2002, p. 2). The logic of capitalism and the progress of modernity cannot be undone. However, the study of alternative imaginaries might give us an opportunity to reshape current conceptual asymmetries in our relation to our environment.

Chakrabarty (2009) lamented that “geological time and the chronology of human histories remained unrelated” and that this gap is a fatal flaw in our theoretical reasoning about and practical approach to human relation to nature (p. 208). It is, however, utterly untrue with respect to a vast array of narratives outside the academic

domain and unfair with respect to recent studies of what might be called “elemental imaginaries” such as *What is Water? The History of a Modern Abstraction* (2010) by Jamie Linton who distinguishes various ways of imagining water: in hydro-engineering, in economic geography, etc.

Linton (2010) argues that certain “ways of imagining, representing, and materializing water might be considered hegemonic when alternative kinds of water are made out to be less real or less legitimate, or when they become so overshadowed that they are made invisible” (p. 11). The practices of modern science, industrial modernization, and state-building were premised on the idea of human emancipation through the domination of nature, but, Linton shows, perception of water depended on the ability to “dominate.” Consequently, advances in hydro-engineering and state economic planning resulted in “modern water ... that ... is not complicated by ecological, cultural, or social factors” (Linton, 2010, p. 8). Water as an abstract calculable resource for energy supply, water supply, and irrigation was

a remarkable accomplishment, one that can be traced through the history of relations between water and people, including the myriad uses to which water has been put, the attachment of various meanings to water, the social differences and conflicts that have been mediated by water, and the ways that water has been made known to (and by) philosophers and scientists. (Linton, 2010, p. 8)

Thus, in Linton’s account, water is “de-naturalised”; in the plurality of its cultural significations, water’s interconnectedness with human history is recovered.

Recent transdisciplinary approaches to elemental imaginaries¹ advance environmental cultural history that aims at “reading not just the dependence of human society on geography and climate, but the ways in which human identities are intimately and creatively interdependent with natural forces that are also key agents of transformation” (Costlow & Rosenholm, 2017, p. 2).

Travel writing, to take further example, provides a diverse and rich repository of narratives, in which our relations to nature are spelled out in a more nuanced and interdependent way. The Arctic’s exceptional position as the “last terra incognita on Earth” (Laruelle, 2014) feeds the imagination of fiction and non-fiction writers, but unlike elemental imaginaries, imaginaries of the Arctic have to bind all the elements together.

Imaginaries of the Arctic in Travel Literature

There have been several major shifts in the way the Arctic was imagined: starting from the legendary Ultima Thule, “a place lying between the worlds of gods and men” (Kavenna, 2005), to “an empty space to which outsiders are entitled” (Hanrahan, 2017), a frontier, wilderness, wasteland, a “spot on the world’s fringes,” which made a perfect

¹ See, for example, *Arctic Ice in Arctic Archives: Ice, Memory and Entropy* (Frank & Jakobsen, 2019) or *Meanings and Values of Water in Russian Culture* (Costlow & Rosenholm, 2017).

background for hunting and whaling stories (Jonsson, 2016) where a “white Englishman in a white space” (Hill, 2008) struggled with the elements. The representations of the Arctic were constructed in contrast with the Orient, on the one hand, and the “dark continents”, on the other, the former being but an empty, unpeopled and “pure” space or, as Jen Hill puts it, “a blank space on which to map white deeds” (Hill, 2008, p. 9). Traditional “Arctic Imaginary removed the people and reduced the place to a passive space upon which the white, male hero could act upon” (Brode-Roger, 2021, p. 507). There is also considerable ambiguity regarding the question of what territories the Arctic exactly encompasses, depending on the country and the region (for more on this, see Steinberg et al., 2015).

The twentieth century gave rise to new, post-colonial visions of the Arctic, although there is a view that the prevailing way of imagining the Arctic even today remains colonial (Jonsson, 2016). An important development was that more regard started to be given to the indigenous perspective that is the vision of the Arctic as a homeland. Interestingly, as Barry Scott Zellen (2009) argues, due to the impacts of global warming and in particular the shrinking Arctic Sea ice, the old view of the Arctic as “cold and forbidding” is now gradually giving way to that of “a greening Arctic,” “industrial Arctic,” and “a new and accessible Arctic.”

Contemporary travel literature deploys complex narrative constructions, reinterpreting some of the old tropes (e.g., the Arctic as an empty, pure, and ever-silent no-man’s land) and introducing new ones (e.g., from the Arctic as a frozen cornucopia of exploitable resources to the Arctic as the last refuge from the corruption of modernity). The Arctic is “a prominent scene of identity negotiations” (Gremaud, 2017, p. 98), “an arena of connections” (Steinberg et al., 2015, p. 7) and conflicting discourses. In fact, there have been identified several significant kinds of imaginaries of the Arctic co-existing in the public sphere such as “a resource frontier ... for states, corporations, and individuals”; “terra nullius, an unclaimed but potentially claimable space”; “a unique space of new and different opportunities”; indigenous imaginaries; and environmentalist imaginaries (Steinberg et al., 2015). The Arctic has also come to play a crucial role in the global geo-political and environmental agenda. As a popular quote from travel writer Sara Wheeler goes, it has become “the lead player in the drama of climate change”, with polar bears as its “poster boys” (Wheeler, 2010, Chapter 1).

Although the history of polar exploration occupies a significant place in recent travelogues, the authors, while giving their due to the explorers such as Dezhnev, Bering, and Franklin at the same time admit the meaninglessness of much of the polar discovery, which Wheeler aptly describes as “a prolonged orgy of shoe-eating and death” (Wheeler, 2010, Chapter 8) and Bill Streever as “one long accident report mixed with one long obituary” (Streever, 2009, pp. 3–28). Norwegian travel writer Erika Fatland (2020) ironically observes, “the atlas is full of the surnames of courageous European men who set sail in small, unsafe vessels to discover what had already been discovered long ago” (Chapter 1). On the other hand, the dangers and hardships of polar travels in the past are contrasted with the ease it can be done nowadays:

These days, if you have the money, you can go on a cruise to the North Pole, eat caviar, drink champagne and take selfies in the frozen wilderness before getting back on the icebreaker and treating yourself to a drink at the bar to celebrate your accomplishment. (Fatland, 2020, Chapter 1)

The inadequacy of Western travelers' language, its inability to communicate the scale, dimensions, and, above all, the totality of the Arctic world renders this world profoundly unintelligible: "Out there was another world that perhaps required another language" (Keenan, 2004, Chapter 13). Brian Keenan, in his account of the travel across Alaska, compares the Arctic to a haiku to emphasize its ability to defy cognition: its essence can only be grasped in a kind of spiritual epiphany: "a colossal haiku, obscure yet profoundly coherent ... transcendent with a kind of power that elevates all of life" (Keenan, 2004, Chapter 24). The usual ways of comprehending the natural world (e.g., maps) are shown as lacking or inadequate. Rationalized human divisions and constructs are opposed to the boundlessness and fluidity of the natural world:

Lines on maps suggest boundaries, and boundaries shape expectations and provide limits; they simplify and categorize, making it easier to react without thought. The natural world, though, is flow and process, not limits. What we place on a map is an approximation, at best, a way of saying that things here differ from things over there. If we were truly to understand the place we wandered through, sampling and measuring and recording, we needed to respect the implication that boundaries are simply another form of illusion. (Glassley, 2018, Impressions I: Mirage)

The only way to gain at least some semblance of understanding is to get immersed in this landscape ("boundaries ... dissolve into opportunities" [Glassley, 2018, Introduction]), discover it on its own terms, experience it, and sense it rather than try to observe it from the outside or rationally analyze it. Any attempts to dissect nature following the "human, city-bound logic" (Keenan, 2004) are rendered futile by the Arctic's incessant variability and changeability.

Environmental Imaginary of Interconnectedness

Buell (1995) introduces the notion of environmental imagination to highlight the perceptual shift in regard with nature in contemporary literature. On the one hand, the natural world features as a presence rather than as a frame in the narratives Buell studied. On the other hand, this perceptual shift reflects various entanglements of the human and natural worlds such as ethical commitment to environment, historicity of non-human realm, and, in fact, shared stories of human and non-human beings (Buell, 1995). We prefer the more commonly accepted concept of the "imaginary" to the term "imagination." We will further focus primarily on William E. Glassley's travelogue *A Wilder Time: Notes From a Geologist at the Edge of the*

Greenland Ice (2018), which challenges the “hegemonic” imaginaries of the Arctic as either a space to conquer or an ecosystem to protect.

While giving due regard to both of these imaginaries, exploitation and protection, Glassley builds his own imaginary of the Arctic. Firstly, Glassley re-weaves temporal and spatial dimensions in our perception of the environment by underlining the unity of substance behind transmutations—of liquid and solid aggregate states—of ice and water, rock and lava in the Arctic. Secondly, Glassley introduces a “trans-scalar” perspective by highlighting the entanglement of geocycles and lifecycles stretching from the microlevel to planetary level.

In the way characteristic of the contemporary genre of travel writing, Glassley fuses different literary forms: travel account, fieldwork report, autobiographical ruminations, philosophical reflection, and poetic intervention. In contrast to most narratives about the Arctic, however, Glassley succeeds in producing a trans-scalar perspective which enables the readers to “move cognitively across spatial and temporal scales: for instance, from small to large, from the individual to the collective, and from the present to the future” (Slovic, 2017, p. 11). Analyzing modern abstractions of water, Linton (2010) highlights that our “knowing of water” hinges on fixations “like the identity of water as a resource for producing hydroelectricity” (p. 13). These fixations are the products of both material practices, social relations, discursive formations, and representations. The perceptual shifts between different scales of space and time that are instrumental in Glassley’s “trans-scalar thinking” are possible because of his perspective of a geologist who collects samples of minerals. Mineral samples are indicators of geological layers and periods, of other times and places. Different stories of cosmic spaces and past eras are then rewoven into the narrative of discovery and human history.

Arctic’s Greenland, in Glassley’s account, often features “as an object of southern gaze” (Jørgensen & Langum, 2018, p. 6). At the beginning of his travel, Glassley describes how hot water boiling in the pot stirs his memories of the civilized world—coffeeshops in Copenhagen—and contrasts its “normalcy” with the exceptionality of the Arctic’s “wilderness.” He then, however, goes on to point out the blurring of the boundaries between his former perception of normalcy and the new perception of normalcy of living in the Arctic. This experience is described as the dissolution of the boundaries “between what is external and what is internal to the soul”: “Now, isolated from the rest of the world, removed from everything a ‘normal’ day would bring, the meaning of normal became ambiguous” (Glassley, 2018, Impressions I: Silence); “the noise of cities receded into dim memories, and self became a part of the landscape” (Glassley, 2018, Preface).

Dolly Jørgensen and Virginia Langum (2018) emphasize that the relativity of the North and the South and the relative boundary between them do not hinder the clustering of notions, in which the North is defined as remote, cold, uncivilized, and wild.² The trope of wilderness, which has long dominated the discourse on the

² “For Defoe, the north of Yorkshire was a wild but fruitful landscape; Scotland as north in contrast was a barren and sparse wilderness. Authors mapped these geographies onto people so that northern English were described as happy in spite of strange and quaint customs, whereas Scots were depicted as poor, lazy, and spiritually deficient” (Jørgensen & Langum, 2018, p. 8).

Nordic regions (Körber et al., 2017, p. 11), is among the many tropes that Glassley reproduces and interprets. The trope of wilderness is briefly summed up by William Cronon as “a place of freedom in which we can recover the true selves we have lost to the corrupting influences of our artificial lives”, “the ultimate landscape of authenticity” (Cronon, 1995, p. 11). In travel literature, as was mentioned, the Arctic is frequently described as an empty and alien territory: for example, Keenan writes about the Alaskan wilderness as “just another desert, and like the desert it is an environment of extremes. In substance and in form it is alien and austere, inimical to human presence” (Keenan, 2004, Chapter 2). For Glassley, the Arctic landscape

was a panorama that defied comprehension. There was nothing familiar there. The absence of trees, of houses or streets, of cars or people, the lack of movement of any kind—all contributed to a sense that I was walking alone in an alien world, not of Earth, but of some planet where forces and processes played out their dramas according to different rules. (Glassley, 2018, Impressions I: Silence)

The encounter of the opposites is epitomized in the “burning cold” of the narrator’s direct, sensory contact with the cold waters:

Taking a deep breath, I quickly undressed and plunged in. To say that it took my breath away is an understatement—the gasp that escaped my lips was probably heard back at camp. A sharp, stinging wave of intensely burning cold exploded from every inch of skin as I shuddered and writhed. (Glassley, 2018, Impressions II: Ptarmigan)

Glassley (2018) delves into the etymology of the word *wilderness* (“the place where only wild animals live” in the Old English), pointing out that in its original meaning, this word signifies “the place where humans may be prey” (Preface), which is also evocative of the experience described by Val Plumwood in her seminal essay *Human Vulnerability and the Experience of Being Prey* (1995). The wilderness in Glassley’s narrative challenges what Plumwood refers to as the “dualistic vision of human mastery in which we humans manipulate nature from the outside, as predators but never prey” and the human “illusion of invulnerability” (Plumwood, 1995). At the same time, Glassley (2018) adds, wilderness is “an ambience for wandering humanity from the time of our origins” (Preface), the original context of human existence. The arrival of the Anthropocene, therefore, signifies the imminent “retreat” and disappearance of wilderness and thus the loss of “the primordial heart of what we conceive of as souls,” “a version of home,” “the only reference point we have for the significance of mind in the universe” (Glassley, 2018, Preface). In the beginning of Glassley’s narrative, the Arctic engenders the recognition of the gap between the natural and human worlds:

Time fractures, languishing in some backwater of perception. Viewing ice, somnambulant fjord waters, rocky defiles, and tundra plains becomes a repeated experience of confronting the incomprehensible, each thing expressing a subtle essence of existence that can be known only by being present. The gulf that exists between the prejudiced expectations derived from urban life and the bedrock purity of that wild landscape is nearly unbridgeable. (Glassley, 2018, Preface)

But there is an underlying unity in the Arctic because the Arctic itself is water in its different aggregate states, fresh and salt waters,³ incising the coastlines and bedrocks, liquid cold waters, waters solidified in ice and frozen in snow: “Greenland ... is a place defined by water. As one becomes sensitive to that reality, unexpected perspectives present themselves. The extent to which water and rock are consanguineous must be addressed” (Glassley, 2018, Impressions II: Clear Water). In Glassley’s narrative, the Arctic presents itself as the eternal dialectic of solid and liquid, sky and sea, composition and decomposition. And water in its various states is at the core of this dialectic:

Water encourages unities and pairings; it facilitates the necessity of elements to become molecules, and molecules to form the most complex construct the moment might allow. But water, too, is the catalyst for decay and dissolution. Water decomposes rock just as surely as it encourages reconstruction. It is that process of relentless reconstruction that made us. (Glassley, 2018, Impressions II)

A geologist’s perspective that Glassley chooses for his narrative allows him to step beyond the “south-centric” and binary perception of the Arctic because his trans-scalar description showcases the underlying similarity of water, ice, and rock. This similarity is based on two fundamental characteristics: *transmutability* of aggregate states and *interconnectedness* in the cycles of natural history.

The first—transmutability—refers to the laws of thermodynamics: hot temperatures make everything liquid; cold temperatures freeze and crystallize. The deeper we go inside the planet, the more liquid its rock will be: “That rock can flow always astonishes, but revealed in those outcrops are patterns that imagination could never conjure, proving beyond doubt that the continental heart is barely less fluid than water” (Glassley, 2018, Preface). The cold, in contrast, consolidates substances, it fixates movements and flows. Therefore, Glassley likens the cold waters of the Arctic

³ “The bay was the outlet of a small stream that ran behind our camp. Water babbled over stones and wended through grassy stretches, soaking up what warmth it could from the sun and land surface. The water of the bay was icy cold. When the stream entered the sea, it floated as a freshwater tongue on the cool density of salt water. The result was a layer of fresh water several inches deep flowing across the bay on the back of the sea. The interface between the fresh water and the salt water was a boundary of contrasting densities, mixing in small gyres and tiny internal waves. The difference in temperatures and compositions of the fluid masses bent the light reflected from the bottom, distorting the patterns, twisting the colours” (Glassley, 2018, Impressions II: Clear Water).

to the glass. Cold waters are “glistening,” “translucent,” “frigid,” “crystalline,” and “mirror-like”: “the water like glass under an overcast sky” (Glassley, 2018, Impressions I: Silence). The mirror glass of cold waters reflects the northern skies. Reciprocal reflections of waters and skies create a labyrinth of mirrors where an unaccustomed traveler can easily slide into a daydreaming and fall prey to mirages. These seeming motionlessness and solidity, however, are contrasted with the fluidity of the underwater world, “a world of shimmering kinematic magic”: “everything there—the seaweed-encrusted stones, fish, shellfish, and cobbled seafloor—shimmered and flowed, causing a feeling of vertigo”; “a collection of hundreds [small comb jellies], moving in a slow ballet with the gentle current” (Glassley, 2018, Impressions II: Clear water).

Glassley’s Arctic is not monotonous, desolate or barren but diverse and brimming with life, both on land and in water. Among other things, he describes the “soft, undulating blanket of vegetation” (Glassley, 2018, Impressions I: Falcon), “pillowed banks of deep green mosses,” “moths, spiders and huge bumblebees” (Glassley, 2018, Impressions I: Silence), Arctic wrens protecting their nests, “thousands of sea urchins” (Glassley, 2018, Impressions II: Clear Water). While in popular imagination the Arctic is often associated with winter and snow and thus presents itself as chillingly white and frozen (Chartier, 2018; Mrozewicz, 2020), Glassley’s travelogue depicts the place as abundant in color:

Farther down the fjord, a thick horizontal blade of sharp turquoise blue cut across the land, as though a giant painter had saturated a brush and slashed the ground with it. The blue was brilliant and intense, a pure distillation of colour. It seemed to stretch hundreds of feet into the air and was painted across the land for miles. Within that absolutely horizontal turquoise stripe floated vertical columns of white, grey, tan, and green, looking for all the world like skyscrapers in a city mile away—a shimmering blue Oz resting on the frigid waters of the fjord. (Glassley, 2018, Impressions I: Mirage)

Another attribute of the Arctic which is commonly mentioned in travel writing is *the absence of sound* and Glassley’s account is no exception in this respect:

The gentlest breeze brushed my face, but there was nothing to hear. The distant rivers flowed, their shimmering surfaces vaguely vibrating with motion, but no sound emanated from them. I turned in every direction, listening for anything, but there was nothing. (Glassley, 2018, Impressions I: Silence)

As an epigraph to her travelogue about the Arctic, Sara Wheeler chose a quote from Fridtjof Nansen describing the “endless silence” of the polar regions and she herself mentions the silence that “hung heavily,” “unmoving silence,” and “crisp Arctic silence” (Wheeler, 2010). These descriptions are echoed in Keenan’s account: “Time, it seemed, had stood still. I could cope with the everlasting light but the silence was something different. Somehow it seemed to exaggerate the bigness of the place” (Keenan, 2004, Chapter 2). The silence of the Arctic may be perceived as oppressive

and disturbing by some but for Glassley, it reflects “the beauty of the wild world ... empty of affection” (Glassley, 2018, Impressions I: Silence). This magic territory where sky, ice, waters, and rock merge in serene silence and mingle in unearthly colors of the mirage, inspires a nearly ecstatic awe of the sublime:

For long moments, I lived in a fantasy that no other person existed, that the lone human soul in all the world stood on that ridge, mesmerized by the bewildering wildness of everything surrounding him. ... it was a quiet longing for things humanity has no words for, but with which wilderness settings overflow. (Glassley, 2018, Impressions I: Silence)

The travel narratives, marveling at the Arctic landscapes, “lands and seas governed by forces that could not be grasped by the human mind,” tend to reproduce the old trope of the Arctic as a “*theatre of the sublime*” (Brazzelli, 2014). Quite in line with the traditional tropes of the sublime in travel literature, Glassley’s experience of the incomprehensible brings about the revelation of the unity of the world:

For the first time in my life, I felt as though I understood, to the extent I was capable, how utterly incomprehensible that world was for me. Nothing existed separate from any other part of the whole, and the whole was the entirety of the universe, from its very beginning. And there, in the quiet of that Arctic valley, one manifestation of that unity resided. (Glassley, 2018, Impressions I: Cladonia Rangiferina)

This sensation of the world’s unity goes hand in hand with the revelation of timelessness. Subjective human time perceptions and conventional divisions no longer apply in this place:

Time did not exist. The only difference between past and future is the interceding mind, which contemplates and describes and details differences, identifying species, speaking as though they are fixed in time and separate, when, in fact, they are incessantly, furiously changing—temporary, creative, individually unique and yet part of an indivisible whole. (Glassley, 2018, Impressions I: Cladonia Rangiferina)

This experience of the universal whole and of timelessness, which is called ecstatic experience in religious idiom, culminates in the renewed sense of harmony and beauty of the Arctic landscape:

And yet, in that great loneliness, the world was saturated by the beautiful. What surrounded me was stunning in its newness and harmony. Colour, texture, form, and pattern flowed from one expression to another without incongruity. There was nothing familiar except the grossest of concepts (rock, water, air, cold). (Glassley, 2018, Impressions I: Cladonia Rangiferina)

Unlike mystical and poetic epiphanies of universal unity, however, Glassley's "indivisible whole" is informed by geological and biological sciences. The Arctic's silence and immobility in his narrative turn out to be not something that this land is intrinsically lacking but an indication of what the humans are lacking: their own inability to hear the sound of the Arctic or to see its unending flow of life. Silence of the Arctic's "Crystal Palace" turns out to be, in fact, the noise of time, only of an unimaginably long time:

The silence of wilderness is not just the absence of sound. It is a storm of voices we cannot hear because we lack the organs to hear them. In the vastness of that space rests the clatter of unfulfilled possibilities, living and not, animate and still—the echo of the dinosaurs, the mumbling of trilobites, the whoosh of pterodactyls on the wing. (Glassley, 2018, Impressions III: Tide)

Things immovable and solid, if seen from the geological temporal scale, become fluid processes, they become water whose molecules are captured in the crystals:⁴

The bedrock, backbone to the landscape, shapes impressions and guides the winds. Tidal flow is constrained by it; the ice rests on it. It is impenetrable. We break off samples with ringing hammers and nothing flows out, but in that crystalline scaffolding, water resides. The water is inherited from the time the rocks were little more than mud sludge on the ocean floor. Slowly buried and recrystallized, the atomic lattices of evolving new minerals capture the water molecules in systematic arrangements, preserving them for future considerations. (Glassley, 2018, Impressions II: Clear water)

Thus, the unity of substance, which changes its appearance in consolidation and liquification,⁵ is at the same time the universal involvement in the cycles of planetary life, of natural history:

Within the water upon which we ride, atoms that had once been part of the rock enclosing the sea were scraped from surfaces by pounding boulders, thereby released to float freely with the tides. In a dialogue framed by simple thermodynamics, they mingle with other atoms whose origins were wind-blown dust, interstellar particles, dissolving dead animals, and decaying plants. (Glassley, 2018, Impressions III: Tide)

⁴ See also: "Brilliant blue tourmalines decorate thick white lenses of once-molten rock, attesting to the presence of boron and other elements from ancient ocean water trapped in crystals formed during the collision of tectonic plates" (Glassley, 2018, Impressions III: Ice).

⁵ See also: "Now, after slowly migrating a few inches per year, the frozen ice was exposed in the cliff in front of me, sunlight once again shining on the molecules of water that would soon be freed to flow in rivers to the sea and repeat the cycle. The booming, snapping, and popping was the voice of that frozen water as it scraped over the land, internally cracking into crevasses and fissures, preparing to be released" (Glassley, 2018, Impressions III: Ice).

Finally, to drive his point home, Glassley emphasizes that we, human beings, are part of the same unity and of the same processes: “We are the result of water insinuating itself into the latticework of crystalline forms, of its persuasive discourse with the elements that reside there to run to the sea” (Glassley, 2018, Impressions II). Thus, in Glassley’s narrative of connecting the geo- and bio-cycles, water is filtered down, in the end, to represent the basic element of planetary substance inherent in all fundamental processes of planetary life.

However, the experience of a traveler who observed the choreography of “water on water” in an expanse of crystalline Arctic wilderness is continued when a scientist back home begins to analyze the collected samples. The trans-scalar thinking in Glassley’s story takes us from a travel account to a scientific report and brings us from the vastness of the cold waters and icebergs to the atoms. The samples taken from the ice and rock of the Arctic preserved the history of tectonic uprisings and collisions, of oceanic ebbs and flows, of hot and cold ages of the planet. The wilderness of the Arctic had no history while travelers were there, it was glassy blank, silent, immense; but once its pieces were brought home and studied, its history, along with the history of the planet, was reconstructed. Ice, in fact, is a better archive of the planetary history than the human records:

While stone receives only very old layers, ice and earth preserve younger layers giving information not only about geological, but also about historical facts. The storage medium ice allows an extremely precise dating and it preserves in a protective way. ... ice can preserve life almost in the form it had during its lifetime. (Frank & Jakobsen, 2019, pp. 9–10)

The Arctic is no longer an object of human action, but its witness, its archivist. It preserves histories of the geological process and the evolution of life, including humankind, on the planet.

Conclusion

Contemporary travelogues challenge the more conventional imaginaries of the cold and the Arctic, where cold was surrounded with “negative connotations representing a denial of life and progress” and where snow was perceived as an enemy and the accomplishments of the polar explorers, as a “moral triumph over the snows” (Hansson & Norberg, 2009, p.7). The environmental threats that loom over the Arctic come to the fore in contemporary travel literature—the climate change (warming sea temperature, ice melting, etc.); the destructive effects of industrial activities (e.g., mining, oil extraction), and the effects of POPs (persistent organic pollutants) on wildlife and indigenous communities. Some of the travel narratives mention the environmental problems as part of the “paradise lost or, to be more precise, paradise-all-but-lost” discourse or the apocalyptic discourse: the Arctic, which is the bearer of some quintessential “truth” about the humanity and the whole living world, the “site of experiential authenticity” (Huggan, 2016), will soon be lost forever. It, therefore, needs

to be protected from short- and long-term effects of human activities as well as from humans themselves: like a sacred temple, it should remain intact and off-limits to humanity (with the only possible exception of indigenous peoples or maybe individual travelers and scientists).

Yet another way of raising the reader's awareness of the urgency of the threat is to present the Arctic as a harbinger of doom, in other words, to point out that what awaits the Arctic in fact awaits the whole of Earth. As Rune Graulund puts it, as a liminal place, "the Arctic is particularly well suited as an indicator region of the broader, planetary trend of the Anthropocene" (Graulund, 2016, p. 3). The Arctic lays bare the deficiencies of the mankind and the Global North in particular:

Just as the Arctic shows what we are good at—individual endurance, initiative, and dogged demonstration as demonstrated by Watkins, Courtauld, Dibb, and the others—it also reveals what we are bad at, which is collective, preventative action. I do not think one could stay long in the Arctic without concluding that the present way of the world is unsustainable and that many chickens will race home to roost in the lifetime of our children, if not in our own. Like the Viking chieftains, we in the developed world might find that we have merely bought ourselves the luxury of being the last to starve. (Wheeler, 2010, Chapter 5)

In other words, the Arctic seen through the contemporary travelers' eyes is no longer a territory to be "claimed" as in the 19th and 20th-century travelogues but the territory to be preserved and protected. Thus, travel narratives basically go the same way as climate change narratives, which aim to show how "the waning ice links excesses of modern consumer society and industrialism to disastrous impacts on the innocent original populations" (Sörlin, 2015, p. 327). In the twenty-first century, from something to be explored and conquered, ice has largely turned into "something to be preserved" (Hansson & Ryall, 2017, p. 3).

The melting of the polar ice has come to become the main sign of global climate change. Our mastery over nature that the exploration and conquest of the Arctic were supposed to prove has resulted in the ecological crisis that undermines our confidence in the safety and stability of our natural environment globally. Thus, the change of the role that the polar ice caps played in our imaginaries, highlights the fact that nature can no longer be regarded as immutable, hierarchical, with humanity at its top and, therefore, providing a secure backdrop for human activities. Nature is dynamic, its history is entwined with human history, and human action causes transformations of the natural environment on the global scale.

As Glassley (2018) observes, "the gentle fall of interstellar particles, the collisions of comets and meteors and frozen water, gave rise to our planet in a rush of cosmic artistry just over four-and-a-half billion years ago" (Epilogue). This trans-scalar thinking that shifts between microscopic and macroscopic view of our planet and foregrounds the unity of substance of all its elements and inhabitants can help bridge the "unbridgeable" divide between human and natural histories.

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