Women and Contemporary Arctic Narrative

Introduction

Arctic or, to use the broader term, polar narratives, continue to enjoy high popularity, whether fictional or non-fictional. While explorer narratives date back to the great age of Polar exploration (Franklin, Nansen, Scott, Shackleton et al.), polar fiction has become particularly prominent on bookshelves recently – from Beryl Bainbridge’s fictional account of Scott’s expedition to the South Pole in *The Birthday Boys* (1991), Elizabeth Arthur’s *Antarctic Navigation* (1994) and Sten Nadolny’s *Die Entdeckung der Langsamkeit* (1983) to Philip Pullman’s *Golden Compass* (1995), or recently Ilija Trojanow’s *Eistau* (2011), to cite but a few select examples of this international trend. Along with their non-fictional counterparts, these texts contribute to, further circulate, and negotiate popular conceptions and knowledge of Arctic/Polar space as a topography which in turn serves as a projection ground, a mental space of the literary imagination.

Indebted to the Enlightenment discourse on wilderness, Polar/Arctic narratives traditionally paint scenarios of a masculine subjection of nature while aestheticising (Ant-)Arctic space (Müller 2009, 56). As such, they operate in analogy to mountaineering culture – after all, Mt Everest used to be called the ”third pole.” The various travel accounts and fictions testify to their link to imperialism and the concomitant belief in human supremacy over nature. More recently in the age of mass tourism to both the Poles and the ‘top of the world,’ they reflect the paradoxical quest for nature (seemingly) still inaccessible, untamed, sublime. As Thomas Kastura pointedly remarks:

> The unpredictable natural forces, which in pre-individual times might have posed a threat to us, have been tamed by now. Nowadays, we can only encounter them in the Polar regions, in the desert, and in similar natural reserves that provide the appropriate backdrop for the extreme conditions narrated by adventure fiction. (Kastura 2000, 34; my translation)

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3 I am referring to Dorrit Müller's notion of popular knowledge of the Arctic space. "Popular knowledge circulates in generally accessible social spaces as a result of a communication that seeks to reach a wide, and therefore unspecified, audience.” Such knowledge is the ”result and starting point of a multiple-dimensional process of transformation and reorganisation of knowledge” (Müller 2009, 36; my translation). Taking Greenland as an example, Müller has demonstrated how the production of popular knowledge of the Arctic was generated. One specific finding, relating to polar narratives in the first decades of the 20th century, is the conflation of a rhetoric of discovery and a particular aestheticising of space based on anthropomorphising, emotional density, or pathetic fallacy, and metaphoricity (Müller 2009, 56).
Polar and high altitude trips still promise a technically secured version of the sublime, usually commented upon critically in cases of misadventure. At the same time, alpinists like Maria Coffey (*Fragile Edge* 1989) or polar travel writer Sara Wheeler (*Terra Incognita: Travels in Antarctica* 1996; *The Magnetic North: Notes from the Arctic Circle* 2009) demonstrate that the traditionally masculine practices and discourses of mountaineering and Arctic exploration have become less gender-exclusive. More simply put: as more women have entered serious mountaineering or Arctic travelling, they have gained a noticeable textual presence both as authors and participants, often with a sense of breaking into a traditionally masculine domain.

Speaking about a "feminization" of contemporary Arctic narrative, however, would raise a number of potential methodological and theoretical objections, or qualifications at least, among them the suspicion of a renaissance of gynocriticism or even *écriture féminine* – a specific female mode of writing or female subject matter. My article will assume neither; nor will it attempt to group contemporary women authors and their writings according to additional criteria of difference. Rather, I shall investigate the strategies by which women prose writers appropriate such a traditionally highly gendered male genre as explorers’ and peripatetic (itinerant) travel writing, specifically narratives of 'topographical quest' to the Arctic region. My focus will be on two especially striking 'Arctic' texts in particular: Stef Penney's highly acclaimed *The Tenderness of Wolves* (2006) is a novel that successfully combines arctic travel narrative, mystery, gothic, and historical fiction; in contrast, Joanna Kavenna's *The Ice Museum* (2005) parades as a – distinctly self-conscious – autobiographical travel narrative, playing with its generic 'fathers' and playfully transcending its textual predecessors as well as topographical and generic boundaries.

**Stef Penney's *The Tenderness of Wolves* (2006)**

Set somewhere in the Northern Territory in 1867, Penney's bestselling and critically acclaimed debut novel (Costa Award winner of 2006) tells the story of a rather unconventional middle-aged Scottish woman, who, along with her husband, left her native country twelve years previously to begin a new life in the Canadian wilderness. The frontier narrative in itself appears somewhat unusual as it draws the portrait of a woman with a psychiatric past – following unspecified symptoms of hysteria, the protagonist spent part of her young adulthood in a "mental asylum" (*The Tenderness of Wolves*, 89).

The narrative opens with a murder scene. On visiting his cabin, Mrs Ross finds her neighbour, an unmarried and somewhat mysterious voyageur, brutally slashed and soon fears that her errant adoptive son, last seen at the victim’s house, will be accused of the murder. A few days later, she decides to pursue her son’s tracks, guided by a 'half-breed' Native Canadian trapper, who also needs to prove his innocence. They set out on a peripatetic journey leading north towards the forest and the tundra beyond, pursued by a search party. Once her son is found recuperating from an injury in a Norwegian Lutheran community half way through the narrative, Mrs Ross and her guide Mr Parker progress further to successfully prove her son’s innocence of the

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murder. While the law – apart from the local ineffective magistrate – is represented only by members of the Hudson Bay Company, it turns out that it is the greed and corruption of some of its members that lies at the heart of the murder. Her son’s involvement with the victim is revealed as a homosexual relationship, which his mother has been blind to while her husband had noticed it and secretly condemned his son, thus causing the silent misery and alienation of their family and marriage.

On her journey, the reticent protagonist and her taciturn guide develop a quiet rapport. Of all the male characters it is Parker who acknowledges her for her fears and for overcoming them, stating: "You are a brave woman. [...] You came all this way for your son. Hating it" (323). Their journey culminates in a final encounter with the killer and in the protagonist’s admission to herself of her love for her alien guide that cannot be:

I force myself to feel the Sickness of Long Thinking.
And then Parker turns back to the dogs and the sled, and keeps walking, and so do I.
For what else can any of us do? (450)

Neither does the narrative allow the alternative burgeoning love to be realised – the young company employee Donald dies from a shot-wound before he can propose to his beloved, leaving his unlived future to the realm of counterfactual scenes at the moment of death:

A tunnel of years.
He looks on with astonishment: through the tunnel he sees the life he would have had with Maria: their marriage, their children. [...] The moving to the city. The touch of her flesh.
The way he would smooth out the little crease in her forehead [...]. He can see himself when old, and Maria [...]. It doesn’t look like a bad life. (446-447)

In the end, as this young man full of hope lies dead, the protagonist returns to her half-failed marriage, while her guide vanishes into the forest.

Narrative closure, then, comes in the form of death and a clear-sighted denouncement of alternatives to duty and convention. Clad in polar mystery and romance, Penney’s historical fiction illuminates the far reach of Victorian ‘womanhood,’ yet allows her unconventional protagonist a high degree of unorthodoxy, self-reflexivity and self-conscious ambivalence, oscillating between a deep sense of duty as moral commitment and freedom. In other words: it is both entrapment and a conscious, free embrace of commitment and moral sense that her protagonist embodies. While at the outset of the story, this unconventional woman, who seems to have failed as wife and mother and also fails to be charming and complacent with her neighbours, is portrayed as a resilient yet deeply solitary and unhappy figure half excluded from her community, her trajectory through Polar space permits her to paradoxically fashion herself afresh.

The generic models and intertexts at work (apart from the frontier narrative) are obvious: firstly, Victorian mystery and romance with its own share of gender subversion (e.g. Wilkie Collins’s Woman in White, 1860), and secondly, neo-Victorian historical fiction, which negotiates the "difficult trajectory between history

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8 "I haven’t cried much in my life, considering. Any life has its share of hardship – if one gets to the age I am now and has crossed an ocean and lost parents and child – but I feel it is uncontroverisal to state that mine has held more than most. And yet I have always felt that crying was pointless" (173).
and romance⁹ by staging and rewriting the confines of Victorian gender roles (seminal: John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* 1969),¹⁰ or engaging in queer gender politics (such as Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* 1998 and *Fingersmith* 2002).¹¹ Like Fowles (in turn copying George Eliot), Penney entwines various plotlines not only in order to construct a complex narrative of multiple pursuit, but also to exhibit alternative modes of existence and gender identities: as such, the protagonist's neighbours, in particular the magistrate's daughters, represent alternative models of un-orthodoxy as opposed to conventionality, while her son (along with the victim) embodies queer love/sexuality. And again like Fowles and others, Penney links Victorian female gender identity, unorthodoxy or deviation, and madness. Madness – as defined by Victorians – indeed determined the protagonist's life before migration: “I was troubled by what were termed 'difficulties' […]. Doctors took my pulse and stared into my eyes before saying that whatever it was, it would probably disappear with the onset of adulthood (by which I think they meant marriage)” (89).¹² Typically, marriage is portrayed as a patriarchal institution leading to disappointment and loneliness; yet it also, at least initially, offers the experience of intersubjective recognition:

I used to think, when I was a girl, and even later when I was in the asylum, that when people married they never felt alone again. At the time I doubted I ever would; I assumed I was destined to be an outcast from society, or worse, a spinster. […] My husband gave me something I never expected: a feeling of legitimacy. And the feeling that there was someone I did not have to hide anything from. I didn't have to pretend. I suppose what I'm saying is, I loved him. I know that he loved me, I'm just not sure when that stopped being true. (141)

In a way, her journey through arctic space echoes both her earlier departure for America and her entry into marriage:

I remember a time once, when I set out on a long journey, and I suppose it has stayed in my mind so vividly because it marked the end of one period of my life and the beginning of another. I am sure the same is true of a great many people in the New World, but I am not referring to the voyage across the Atlantic […]. My journey was from the gates of the public asylum in Edinburgh to a great crumbling house in the Western Highlands. I was accompanied by the man who was to become my husband […]. I had no idea of the significance of the journey, but once begun, my whole life began to change absolutely and forever. And I wondered, how often are we aware of irreversible forces at work while they are in operation? […] wondering if I was mad (so to speak) to have left the asylum and its relative comforts. Of course I was not [mad, H.S.]. And conversely, I suppose, how often do we imagine that something is of great significance, only for it to evaporate like mist, leaving no trace? (427)

In either case, the quest for significance has been one for self-projection towards love as companionship and as recognition – the remnants of popular fiction are only

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¹⁰ Providing the reader with alternative endings, Fowles, of course, denies narrative closure in accordance with both his historiographic self-consciousness and his existentialist philosophy.
¹² Initially subjected to cruel cold water shock treatments, the protagonist later becomes the subject of sexual abuse at the hands of a lunatic asylum's progressive head doctor. Addicted to laudanum like her mother before her, she only finds a way back into 'normal life' when her future husband cuts off her supply.
too visible in Penney's fiction. In any case, the experience is limited – temporally as in the case of her marriage, and spatially, as in the case of her travel companionship with Parker. Visuality and space are linked to her perception of the latter, merging Romantic imagery of topography, visuality and eroticism: "And yet, whenever we stop, I cannot take my eyes from his face. The prospect of leaving him is like the prospect of losing my eyesight. I think of all the things he has been to me: stranger, fugitive, guide" (449).

As a native trapper and as her guide, Parker obviously inhabits the Arctic. At the same time, he evokes another pertinent intertext in this novel: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). At their first encounter, Mrs Ross first perceives Parker in terms of Shelley's ugly, monstrous, less than human creature:

I feel a cold tremor down my spine. He is tall for an Indian, strongly built. [...] But it is his face that makes me think of the story of the artificial man. He has a low, broad forehead, high cheekbones, and a nose and mouth that turn downwards like a raptor's beak and give a powerful impression of wildness and cruelty. [...] I have never seen anyone quite so ugly in my life – a face that could have been hacked out of wood with a blunt axe. If Miss Shelley had needed a pattern for her terrifying monster, this man would have been perfect inspiration. (90-91)

In Penney's Arctic version, the Shelleyan creature explicitly reflects the settlers' racism, of which the protagonist partakes: Parker is immediately and wrongly blamed for the murder and ill-treated in custody, he is perceived as an alien other, as a monster; in fact, racism is ubiquitous in the small community, even among the liberal and educated.13 Ironically, it is not so much Parker, who is capable of recognizing her for what she is, but the protagonist herself who yearns for sociability and love and at the end of her journey comes to perceive his full humanity: "His eyes do have a light in them after all" (450). The novel's subplot of abduction – two young girls had disappeared in the forest in the past, leaving the settlers to speculate about wolves or natives snatching them – enhances the discourse of racism with its isotopy of monstrous animalism and lurking violent sexuality against the backdrop of a hostile nature, ultimately revealed as a projection of the white settlers.

From Shelley's gothic novel, Penney also takes the narrative design of diegetic levels, alternating autodiegetic simultaneous narrative (analepses incorporated) and a heterodiegetic narration that focalises various other major characters – except Parker, who remains the object of focalisation. While Shelley allows her monstrous creature a first-person narrative voice, Penney limits the privilege of voice to her protagonist (and that of subjective focalisation to principal white characters). However, she inverts *Frankenstein*'s polar scenario: it is Parker who is in command of the Arctic pursuit.

Placing her story in this small Arctic settlers' community in the 1860s, Penney appropriates the genres of gothic fiction and the historical novel in a way that would seem to be in accordance with recent trends in Scottish fiction: in the wake of devolution, which to a certain extent freed fiction from the need of nation-building, authors have increasingly sought to move beyond the geographical and cultural confines of Scotland and/or to rewrite Scottish history, acknowledging, for instance, its involve-

13 "Knox has insisted that the man is not a prisoner and must be treated well. [...] there is something about the stranger's face that evokes dark and terrifying thoughts. It reminds him of faces in engravings of the Indian wars: painted faces, twisted in fury, blasphemous, alien" (93).
ment in imperial and colonial politics rather than imaging Scotland as victim of the Empire.\footnote{14 A particularly successful example is James Robertson's \textit{Joseph Knight} (2003). For a critical discussion, cf. Morris (2008).} This is also what \textit{The Tenderness of Wolves} engages in, displaying the Scots' history in Canada and their role in the Hudson Bay Trading Company (70; 72).

Arctic topography enters the picture both via the post-colonial setting and, with different overtones, via the reference to gothic fiction. The effect is a novel which is extremely "visual," rendering a "profound sense of space" (cf. Penney 2007, n.p). Indeed, it has been judged by reviewers to come across as highly authentic: "Penney's evocation of the frozen lands of northern Canada couldn't ring truer if she'd spent months wandering through the land with nothing but a pack of huskies and a native tracker for company," and she "artfully recreates a time and place she has never inhabited" (Lezard 2007, 18).

Apart from its strong visual impact, the novel is based on a semantics of space that is highly historically charged and ambivalent, unsettling the Romantic sublime. The wild, desolate Northern landscape is linked to fear of disorientation, of hostility. It threatens our sense of self-preservation:

I never thought I could stray out into the wilderness without fear. What I always hated about the forest, although I never told anyone this, is its sameness. There are so few varieties of trees, especially now, when the snow makes them all cloaked, sombre shapes and the forest a dim, twilit place. In our early years in Dove River I used to have a nightmare: I am in the middle of a forest, and turning round to look back the way I came, I find that every direction looks exactly alike. I panic, disorientated. I know that I am lost, that I will never get out. (180)

It is not only for the protagonist that the country does not hold its promise, for Donald, struck by the bitter cold of the Canadian winter, also realises that "this is not what he had expected before he left Scotland – the great lone land had seemed like a promise of purity, where the harsh climate and simple life would hone a man's courage and scour off petty faults. But it isn't like that at all [...]" (68).

Although equipped with all markers of the sublime, the vast, empty, monotonous Arctic landscape affords no aesthetic delight – or hardly ever. What it inspires instead in the protagonist is the feeling of agoraphobia and suffocation:

Unlike some people, I have never felt free in the wilderness. The emptiness suffocates me. I recognise the symptoms of incipient hysteria and try to fend them off. I make myself think of the dark night, and relief from this blinding visibility. I make myself think of how tiny and unimportant I am [...] I have always found it comforting rather than otherwise to contemplate my own insignificance, for if I am negligible, why should anyone persecute me? (193)

The Arctic terrain initially offers no protection from visibility – until Parker erects a makeshift tent that teaches his companion that survival is possible within this hostile environment, that even wolves will only watch her without attacking – obviously, Penney's novel is hardly free from popular gender clichés. Leaving the crude gendering of the Arctic explorer's narrative re-enacted in these parts of the plot aside, a different Romantic echo in the construction of space is likewise noticeable. It is through the peripatetic experience of the landscape that the first-person narrator comes to
experience its sublimity as an aesthetic quality that allows a new sense of self;\(^{15}\) in other words: walking affords a poetic sense of Arctic topography, and its peripatetic traverse offers space for ambivalent transgression and self-projection that re-imagines the contours of Victorian women's mental spaces.

**Joanna Kavenna’s *The Ice Museum: In Search of the Lost Land of Thule* (2005)**

Kavenna's non-fictional book undertakes to explore the "endless indeterminacy of a myth: the land of Thule – the most northerly place in the ancient world," a "mystery land, standing by a cold sea," “at the edge of the maps” (*The Ice Museum*, 2), alternatively "an island, shrouded in a mist, standing on the edge of a frozen ocean," according to Virgil "the shadowy last country of the northern world“ (3). Drawn by various writers as "a distant land, place of dreams, but disconcerting and somehow strange," Thule came to feature as a "potent symbol of empty lands and silence" (11). In the footsteps of this literary tradition, Kavenna's own journey is inspired by her question "what had happened […] to the idea of remoteness, the sense of magisterial nature embodied in the word Thule” (11).

*The Ice Museum* principally operates along the generic lines of travelogue as (polar) quest; refusing chronological order, however, it combines travel narrative, historical essay, and autobiography. Consistent with the latter, Kavenna locates the origins of her fascination with polar travel in a particular earlier episode of her life, adding to her strands of cultural and political history a Romantic line: there are Wordsworthian overtones to her subjective starting point, to her dream of a vast, empty polar landscape as opposed to her feverish, crowded city life. Just as Wordsworth remembers, on revisiting Tintern Abbey, how its memory used to serve him as soothing compensation for the "fever of the world" (Wordsworth 2006, l. 55) and "mid the din / Of towns and cities" (ll. 26-27), Kavenna revives her childhood memory of Thule when the London "crowds were grinding [her] down," when she "was tired of standing in an endless sea of people." Her urban longing for "empty serenity" and for the "thump of my feet on the rock"s (*The Ice Museum*, 6) takes her back to an even earlier fascination. "It was around that time that I regained an earlier obsession with polar exploration. It was an old interest of mine; I had always enjoyed an Arctic saga […]” (7). Ever since her childhood the author had been interested in and travelled (along with her parents) in the Northern regions. A childhood pursuit is thus reawakened, giving “a sense of purpose” to her life, "something I had lost in my dislocated progress round the city.” While the relevant passage begins with a conflation of urban and nature imagery ("endless sea of people"), it quickly progresses to position them in opposition to one another: "I thought of plains of ice, snow caps and glaciers shining under a pale sun," and "as the crowds swelled into the underground, I thought of emptiness, barren rocks washed by a clear blue sea, the long shanks of ancient mountains” (7).

Kavenna's version of the opposition of "the country and the city"\(^{16}\) thus evokes the modern function of the polar regions as a site of anti-modernity, a space of projection which affords a refuge of vastness, emptiness, and slowness in contrast to modern

\(^{15}\) On the link between walking and Romantic poetics cf., e.g., Wallace (1993).

\(^{16}\) Cf. Raymond Williams's seminal study *The Country and the City* (1973).
civilisation and its feverish velocity, a Nadolnian site of *Langsamkeit*. Only further into her narrative, in the subsequent autobiographical analepsis, is this binary opposition turned into a triangular configuration, as the English pastoral countryside of her childhood is evoked as opposite to the city on the one hand, and to the icy regions of the Arctic on the other. Despite the fact that her "village was hardly a rustic idyll," a commuter town merely "feign[ing] pastoral autonomy," she "saw only the winding lanes and the green bank of trees, the yellow ripeness of the corn, the blueness of the sky against the vivid fields," walking with her "grandmother around the village, as she pointed out the flowers in the hedgerows, and made [her] listen to the different songs of birds" (47). Her infantile perception was one of an almost Laurie Leeian, or Romantic, idyllic enclosed space where she experienced freedom, "a secret garden," "the languid place of the evenings, the slow rising of the sun across the fields" (50), changing with the seasons. There she had "pored over the explorers' diaries" (34) (preferring them to fairy tales) and engaged in imaginary polar adventures, playing with her brother.

At the point of imagining a polar topography as compensation for city life, Kavenna begins to take notes on Thule, which in her narrative feature as introduction and brief interwoven sketches of its history from ancient topos via its appropriations by National Socialism and the American military and finally beyond to the advent of mass travel, the commercialisation of "the sublime experience of northern wilderness" (10).

While historical and autobiographical narrative alternate, autobiographical recollections, travel narrative and reminiscences of literary predecessors are also entwined, foregrounding the author/narrator's sense of intertextual mediatedness of her Arctic journey. Thus, recounting her annual visits to the Lake District, she locates herself beyond the English village in a distinctly Romantic English topography:

> As we returned each year to the Lakes, the landscape came to act as an *aide mémoire*, each mountain and lake conjuring memories of former years, and I wondered what would happen in a landscape stripped of personal associations. […] I wanted to be struck by a sense of a vast transcendent force, something overwhelming. I wanted to understand the sensation that seemed to have gripped most of the writers I enjoyed at the time: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake and Clare. […] I wondered what would happen if I stood alone in empty space, looking at the vastness of the rocks. (117)

Following Wordsworth, Kavenna evokes a landscape consisting of layers of memory. Following Blake, she connects her search for a culturally empty space to her adolescent search for freedom: "Emptiness and silence were freedom because they were devoid of the clamour of other voices telling you how to behave, what not to do, what to be" (119). As to her own place as a writer, Kavenna's self-conscious musings on both her earlier visits to the paradigmatic Romantic Northern landscape, the Lake District, and on her adolescent Romantic readings position her on the side of Blakeian experience rather than innocence.

Denoting such experience, a complex intertextual stratum extending to the level of story, text and narrative overwrites the Romantic quest. For instance, the imperial overtones of the great age of Arctic exploration are underlined by her dialogic representation of the meeting between Nansen, "a man dyed black with oil and soot," and

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"the well-dressed Englishman" (27) Frederick Jackson on Franz Josef Island, explicitly echoing, of course, Livingstone’s famous encounter with Stanley in colonial Africa: "Aren’t you Nansen?" he asked. / And Nansen answered, ‘Yes, I am’ (28).

Such imperial and post-colonial implications pervade Kavenna’s representation of the Arctic, or of her journey there. However, just as she ultimately sees Nansen’s Arctic exploration "as an epic quest for knowledge" (17) rather than an imperial act of usurpation, the author’s own narrative quest is dedicated to search out the field of semantic ambiguity pertaining to Thule; conquering unpossessed/unwritten terrain is not Kavenna’s objective. Nowhere does she fall into a naïve search for a mythological country or a sublime wilderness; rather, she retraces its precarious history along with her own trips to the various suspected locations of Thule. Accordingly, she combines historical and literary recapitulations with an account of her own actual topographical quest, taking her from Shetland and Iceland to the far North of Norway, to Munich (the prime location of Nazi appropriation of Thule) and finally to Estonia, where, according to an alternative version, Thule is also believed to have been located. And the farther her research takes her in geographical terms, the more do the various histories of Thule come in. They are incorporated by way of alternating narrative strands, with the present tense of autobiographical travel narrative repeatedly giving way to historical insertions.

In particular, Thule’s Nazi implications are recapitulated. By way of trips to Munich and Norway, Kavenna pursues the link between Aryan ideology and the myth of Thule. While Nansen’s patriotism, according to her assessment, was "of a robust sort," he was "never blindly partisan" (187), yet by the 1920s, he was linked (through Norse mythology) to the Fatherland League, "a folksy domestic party" (187). Certainly from this point onwards, fascism creeps into the landscape – via Nansen’s former associate Quisling’s belief in a pure Nordic race and Hamsun’s nationalism, Thule becomes entangled with German National Socialism. It is this dark history of Quisling and Hamsun’s nationalism that pushes her narrative forward from Tromsø, "the last substantial settlement, before the North Pole" (107). As she travels further from there, heading for the North Cape and ultimately the Russian border, she does take note of the presence, or rather of the relics, of Polar exploration; however, she dedicates more narrative time to recollecting the presence of German troops, the occupation and policy of torched land as they retreated, and finally also, as she speaks to a krigsbarn woman about her painful post-war memories, to Lebensborn homes and the social oblivion regarding such children in Norway.

It is on the margins of this episode – her visit to the daughter of a Norwegian mother and a Wehrmacht soldier – that Kavenna’s narrative most strikingly weaves her intricate web of travel narrative, autobiography and history in order to foreclose any illusion of immediate, authentic experience of the Arctic topography she is visiting. Crossing the Arctic Circle does not come as a sublime moment, "there is no fanfare, no signal from the shore," the "landscape stay[ing] the same" (182). As she sees the first hamlet ahead, she immediately shifts (by way of merging past tense and deictics) into the imagination of Nansen’s past arrival: "I imagine Nansen muttering to himself, as he saw these sun-drenched rocks" (183). The present tense then gives way to the historical past, i.e. Nansen’s arrival – imagined by the empathetic narrator –, in order to revert again to the narrative present ("It’s a hot afternoon; the sun is shining onto the waves," 183). Five lines of cursory description of the small Arctic outpost of
Bodø, however, propel the narrative back into the past: "[t]here is a shopping centre in the state of destruction, with wire fences everywhere. The area was ruined at the end of the Second World War, when the Germans retreated from the Russian forces […]" (184). The sight of the war memorial outside Bodø Cathedral links the present travel to history, with the history of exploration included:

Cast adrift in Nansen's Thule, startled by the sun, I dive into the regional museum, and find a sketchy collection of junk and fishing tackle, distributed randomly across a couple of rooms. There is a large photograph of the town in 1939, before the destruction […]. And there's a shot of the town after the war – piled-up ash and debris, silence and thick smoke. (184)

Capturing the presence of history, the narrative emerges from its descriptive pause to continue in the autobiographical past tense: "We passed slowly through a stretching shambles of islets and inlets […]", the "shambles" of topography echoing the "debris" of war. And as the Arctic topography (as observed from the boat) continues to be rendered in the past tense, the presence of Nansen's writing lingers in the background ("After Thule, as Nansen had defined it" (184)), to come to the fore in the following paragraph, which – via Nansen and his writing on the myth of the Hyperboreans – gradually leads into his associate Quisling's move towards National Socialism (184-188).

In a way, then, Kavenna's topographical quest seems to perform a deeply Romantic shift towards self-consciousness: culminating in its cynical appropriation as a Greenland American airbase, Thule's long history appears to the author as "a neat decline from ideal to disaster, from innocence to experience" (218). However, she refuses to let her journey close at this point and opts to pursue another post-war trail to Estonia instead. Ultimately, she insists on the continuing lure of Thule, pondering why "Thule still meant northern wilderness" (219).

Kavenna's text never attempts to offer a picture of Thule that would not include its problematic history. Her project of exploration therefore needs to be emphatically historical and (con-)textual. Along with contextualising its topography, the narrative de-subjectivises its author and traveller. The constant switches between past and present and between herself as subject of focalisation and historical subjects underline this logic, which in a certain way is an ecological one. In this respect, too, Kavenna moves in Nansen's footsteps: ecology enters by way of empathy with her prime subject through his writings (esp. 29). "Nansen's idea was to work with, not against, nature," Kavenna states; he defied "the rallying cries against the insensible force and random cruelty of nature" of J.S. Mill and others. "Nansen saw nature as a perfect system. Instead of making significance and order of chaos and emptiness, Nansen accepted the internal rules of the space around the Pole. […] Nansen would not set himself apart from the limitless expanse before him, he would seek to become inherent to it" (24).

Seeing herself as embedded in a multi-layered environment rather than as authorial master of her topography defines Kavenna's own project. In its wake, the text certainly furthers the de-masculinization of Arctic narratives. To a certain extent and argued along somewhat schematic lines, her textual strategies of self-withdrawal and self-contextualisation also seem reminiscent of the 'alternative' contextual ecology of Dorothy Wordsworth's Romanticism: what they share, perhaps, is the rhetorical and emotional (partial) withdrawal as authorial/autobiographical subject in
favour of a more open, 'contextual self' as a significant feature. Yet unlike the Romantic (proto) 'eco-feminist' engagement with the natural environment, Kavenna's writing, devoid of Romantic anthropomorphising imagery, highlights the ideological and historical determination of Arctic topography.

**Conclusion**

In Penney's novel, the emptiness of Arctic topography as it is traversed in the peripatetic mode constitutes a projection ground, a neo-Victorian scenario of self-conscious re-invention that transgresses, for a limited period, the borderlines of gender roles. In a way, by choosing a historical setting prior to the heyday of Arctic exploration, Penney attempts to construct a space that is the site of (post-)colonial exploitation, yet at the same time appears to be relatively uncodified, or rather: whose literary codification is determined by its very unspecificity as location of the other, in order to provide the open stage for imagining the geographical and mental margins of Victorian women's lives.

Kavenna's travelogue, in contrast, seeks to capture the complex literary and historical codifications of Arctic topography. In terms of Henri Lefèbvre's triadic conception of space, Kavenna's Arctic topography reveals the intricate interplay of Arctic landscape as perceived, conceived and lived; her narrative is located, perhaps, in what Lefèbvre calls "the interstices between representations of space and representational spaces" (2005, 43). Engaging with and stepping beyond her manifold literary predecessors, she searches out the lure of Thule as mythic Arctic space within its literary and political history. As she investigates its complexities, both echoing and denouncing Romantic Northern topography, she recedes as subject and author of her travel narrative into the topographical environment, locating her movements within Thule's various intertexts and contexts.

**Works Cited**


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18 See my argument in Schwalm (2010).
19 Henri Lefèbvre's "perceived-conceived-lived triad" signifies the natural, mental, and social dimensions of space, termed "spatial practice", "representations of space," and "representational spaces." Spatial practice "embraces production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each formation," whereas the representations of space ("conceptualized space") "are tied to the relations of production and to the 'order' which those relations impose, and hence to knowledge, to signs, to codes, and to 'frontal' relations." Finally, representational spaces embody "complex symbol-isms, sometimes codes, sometimes not, linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life, as also to art" (Lefebvre 2005, 33; 38-40). It is the latter as "space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols" which pertains to art, or artists, and which "is the dominated – and passively experienced – space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate" (39). Their "only products," as Lefebvre elaborates, are "symbolic works" (42).


