

# Colours, Lights, Emptiness and other Discursive Elements

## The Colour White, a Sign of the North<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

Considering the “idea of North” as a discursive system, applied by convention to a given territory, we can identify some of the forms, figures and narratives that constitute the “grammar” of its cultural representations. This article focuses on the colours of the “North”, and on the simplification that underlies them. In literary and artistic works, we notice the strong symbolism of white, which obliterates points of reference. The notion of “whiteness” refers to a screen for an imaginary world and mask that covers the ugliness, which also has an ethical and aesthetic value that simplifies the world while accentuating anguish and extremeness. Thus, the colour “white” can be seen a one of the most powerful sign of the discursive system of the North, and as a tool to simplify the complexity of the northern territories.

**Keywords:** cultural representations, North, imaginary, colours, literature, arts, white.

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*He'll tell us what he sees and we'll want to  
hear about the whiteness and silence.  
(Gobeil, 1993, p. 25)*

## **A “grammar of the North”**

In cultural studies, the “imagined North” is defined as a series of figures, colours, elements and characteristics conveyed by narratives, novels, poems, films, paintings and promotional material, which—from the myth of Thule to contemporary popular representations—have produced a rich and complex web of symbolic meanings. Through geographic convention, which locates the North and its point of convergence, the North pole, in the inaccessible, ice-covered and partially unexplored territory at the top of the globe, the North is universal; for the study of the imaginary, it provides a unique terrain made up of different historical and discursive layers, depictions, portrayals by different aesthetic movements, environmental and scientific concerns and post-colonial questioning—a terrain nurtured by powerful and popular representations by explorers, missionaries and scientists. This territory, more often imagined than visited, has given rise to the crystallization of a “grammar of the North,” which governs the modes of semiotic representation and is never devoid of all reference to the real (the cold, the remoteness, the people who live there). Representatives of the “North” are found in layers of discourse, produced by different cultures, sometimes simultaneously—Greek and Latin, Viking and Scandinavian, European, American and Aboriginal—and picked up on and shaped by different movements and trends, such as Romanticism, popular and media discourse, Symbolism and post-colonialism.

On the basis of contemporary analyses produced in Europe, Scandinavia, English Canada and more recently, Québec, the “North” is first and foremost a discursive system whose components, preferred forms, figures, characters, narra-

tive schemata, colours and sounds can be traced historically. It varies depending on the position of the speaker (as observed by Jean-Marc Moura and Monique Dubar, 2000) and has common “circumpolar” characteristics, as methodologically shown by geographer and linguist Louis-Edmond Hamelin through his productive concepts of “nordicity” and “wintricity.” Ultimately, the “North” can be referred to as the “idea of North,” to borrow the title of an essay by Sherrill E. Grace, *Canada and the Idea of North* (2002), itself based on the title of a 1967 radio essay by Canadian musician Glenn Gould, *The Idea of North*.

## **The North as a discursive system**

Thus posited, the North is a discursive system, applied by convention to a given territory, whose forms, figures and history can be defined—a system shared by a number of cultures as well as literary and artistic traditions, all of which can claim it as their own (see the definitions proposed by Chartier, 2004). In literature, a number of figures, components, comparisons and narrative schemata that recur in fiction on the “North” and that define it have been identified through the reading and analysis of hundreds of works as part of a collective project conducted in Montréal on the imagined North.<sup>2</sup> Figures such as the Inuit, settler, Scandinavian, Viking, Amerindian, gold digger, merchant, missionary and explorer have been found in these works and are used to “nordify” the narrative. Authors like Gabrielle Roy and Maurice Constantin-Weyer, for example, include a Scandinavian character in their novels to emphasize the nordic character of their work. Elements—such as icebergs, polar bears, the cold, the Northern lights, the absence of land-

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<sup>2</sup> A project carried out by the International Laboratory for the Comparative Multidisciplinary Study of Representations of the North at the Université du Québec à Montréal. For more information, visit: [www.imaginairedunord.uqam.ca](http://www.imaginairedunord.uqam.ca)

marks, desolation, solitude remote places, nomadism, refuge, the insistence on the colours blue and white, snow and the absence of trees—are used in these works to create a Nordic setting. These elements are often accompanied by comparisons with the desert, the sea or the Biblical world. Narrative schemata—such as the inevitability of taking action, the journey that changes as a result of climatic phenomena, and physical exploration that becomes a spiritual quest—come up again and again.

The “idea” or rather “ideas of North” portrayed in literature become increasingly numerous with the period and perspective. If we take all the works of fiction, analyzed in the project, that coincide with the concepts of “nordicity” or “wintricity” put forward by Hamelin, we are able to build a historical framework that picks up on literary aesthetics and genres, but distinguishes each corpus in its intensive use of the imagined North. These works include narratives by explorers and missionaries, the aesthetic and symbolic use of the North in poetry, the psychological use of the North in fiction, narratives about colonization that express the magnetism of the North, novels by migrant and immigrant writers, as well as representations by Natives peoples.

### **The concept of “nordicity”**

The pivotal works of Louis-Edmond Hamelin, published in the late 1960s and early 1970s, provide a theoretical basis for thinking about the geographic and cultural implications of the “idea of North.” In his early essays, *Le Québec nordique* (1968), *Le Nord canadien comme espace* (1971), and especially *Nordicité canadienne* (1975), Hamelin developed the concept of “nordicity,” which he had introduced in 1965 and defined in a pluridisciplinary manner in reference to the entire circumpolar region. According to Hamelin, the different “Norths” are not defined exclusively within national borders but, at the same time, main-

tain a certain specificity. In Hamelin's thinking, the "polar value" of a place refers not only to temperature-related phenomena, but encompasses mentalities as well as cultural and identity-based works: "nordicity" (which includes "wintricity", i.e., seasonal nordicity) therefore refers to the state or degree of "North," real or perceived, that applies to the Nordic world in general, to each of its parts, as well as to people and things (Hamelin, 1988). The work of Hamelin, which culminated in an essay titled *Écho des pays froids* (1996), has given rise to a many studies that have furthered the theory and used the practical applications.

By developing the concepts of "nordicity" and "wintricity," we can consider the "North" and its components as a semiotic code, or a discursive system; this has the advantage of relieving the "idea of North" of geographical constraints so that it can be studied in terms of representation as well as cultural, literary and symbolic discourse. "Nordicity" and "wintricity" define the boundaries of the corpus, which includes various works—ranging from accounts of expeditions, narratives by missionaries, adventure novels, stories for young people, films, advertising, company names, poetry, visual arts and photography—yet finds its coherence in the set of figures, comparative elements, narrative schemata, sounds, colours and lights that transcend the different literary and cultural forms. When we isolate the literary works in this corpus and examine the light-related phenomena—the northern lights, the lack or overabundance of sunlight, snow blindness, eternal night, the midnight sun, the North Star—and the colours they include, we quickly see that the "idea of North" is shaped by a simplification of colour, setting and landscape, a focus on a few colours—pastels, blue and orange, which signifies the presence of man—but, most importantly, on the strong symbolism of white, which obliterates points of reference and threatens to absorb everything around it into the nothingness it represents.

## The colours of "North"

In his novel *Je m'en vais*, Jean Echenoz ironically summarizes the simplification, or lack of differentiation, of Arctic landscapes in three words when his Parisian character returns from nature and says, in a nonchalant and disinterested way, "to give you an idea of the place, it's very far, very white and very cold" (Echenoz, 1999, p. 68). A number of the animals and figures that define the North also reflect this simplifying fascination with white, such as the snowy owl, polar bear, whitecoat, white belugas, Hans Christian Andersen's white "snow queen," (Andersen, 1977, pp. 20-21) who all live in what narratives and novels describe as the white "vastness," "hell" or "desert." Explorers, writers and the heroes in novels show a fascination for the purity, emptiness and dizziness caused by this space, which is free of elements and has the effect of a drug. The following passage from the popular novel, *Drame dans la toundra*, is indicative of what is portrayed in many works:

De Long was fascinated by the Arctic. Like many before him, he fell victim to a powerful fascination—beyond reason—due to the freezing brilliance of blue icebergs protruding above the sea, the silent whiteness of endless snowfields and the cold light of the northern seas. It had entered his blood like an intoxicating drug and had forever filled his heart with an insatiable desire. (Lütgen, 1972, pp. 12-13)

Other colours—browns, blues, blacks and pastels—are used in these works to paint the Nordic literary setting (as opposed to orange, which indicates the presence of man), but all the symbolism is concentrated in white, which often tends to be "bluish white." (Désy, 1993, p. 81) In *Rêves arctiques*, Barry Lopez writes, "at first sight, it would seem that there are no colours in the Arctic apart from a few weeks in the fall" (Lopez, 1987, pp. 208-209) or that "bright colours are often only dots in a given season, not strokes, and that the paler overall environment absorbs them (Lopez, 1987, pp. 208-209). White's absorption of not

only colours, but also points of reference, cities and characters, constitutes one of the original features of the discursive and representational system of “North”; there is, however, one exception, and that is the sky “where the most surprising colours are found.” (Lopez, 1987, pp. 208-209)

This symbolism can also be seen in the discursive use of Arctic and winter white. In works set in urban centres in winter, for example, the cities are covered in white, creating the impression of lost purity. The narrator in Francis Bossus’ novel *La forteresse* describes the effect of a storm, saying: “Everything was burred: the buildings, steeples, trees and the horizon. The city was wrapped in an opaque mist, sounds muted, colours faded, streets and boulevards covered” in white. The earth and the sky were one and the same.” (Bossus, 1971, pp. 21-22) Is this symbolic system, such a state of grace cannot last, because the presence of man threatens the purity of spaces at all times: “It won’t stay white for long,” says one of Jasmine Dubé’s characters. “People dirty everything. They don’t know how to live.” (Dubé, 2002, p. 65) Although white—covering the city and Arctic ice plains—can depict lostness, emptiness and dizziness, it initially gives the characters in these novels a feeling of peace and calm. “In winter,” writes Jean Désy in *Le coureur de froid*, “my mind is calm. White gives me strength.” (Désy, 2001, p. 21)

White can also represent enlightenment, prompting characters to realize the truth by curiously mirroring their conscience. “Whiteness corrodes appearances, exposes thoughts, reveals the soul. Men are laid bare. [...] No one lies in these immaculate expanses.” (Mélançon, 1974, p. 54) The absence of colour, or the alternate use of black and white, also simplifies the landscape and reduces it to a few elements, reflecting how the characters see themselves: the heroine in *Voyageurs malgré eux* observes that the “black and white winter landscape, simplified to the basics [...] reduced her, as well, to her essence.” (Vonarburg, 1994, p. 34)

## Reduction and simplification

This reduction of colour obliterates the usual signs that enable man to find his way: he feels lost, his points of reference disappear, and he has the impression that he is being swallowed by nothingness. The vastness of the landscape, “white and flat: a league of chalk, a desert of snow” (Hamsun, 1979, p. 197) is like a geographic void<sup>3</sup> that cannot be deciphered by the uninitiated – those incapable of distinguishing between different shades of white, textures of snow, thicknesses of ice. The storm in *Un dieu chasseur* conceals all points of reference: “Nothing but white, ahead, behind, to the left, to the right, on the ground and in the air. [...] [This gives] the impression of moving in nothingness, with nothing to focus the eye on.” (Soucy, 1997, p. 112) This inability to decipher the landscape affects the sense of sight first, then threatens all the other senses. The brilliant white virtually blinds man: “All objects merge together; the different planes fade, and outlines disappear.” (Lesbazeilles, 1881, pp. 284-285) The initial peace gives way to a feeling of obliteration and fear of being “swallowed” by the whiteness of the landscape. In *Dessins et cartes du territoire*, Pierre Gobeil writes: “The whiteness had swallowed everything. There was no more sky, no more road, no more relief. There were no more forests, animals or rivers.” (Gobeil, 1993, 114)

The pervasiveness of the colour white thus creates the anxiety-producing impression that the world is dissolving and disappearing. First material things are obliterated, then cries, voices, and finally “the wind is as if frozen” (Primeau, 1960, p. 113) as is time itself, in a transcendent movement that merges the subject with his surroundings in a glowing light that absorbs everything. Things “could dissolve,” writes André Major,

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<sup>3</sup> In *L'Impératrice de l'Ungava*, Alexandre Huot writes: “the unexplored and mysterious Ungava shown on the map as a white expanse cut only by latitude and longitude.” (Huot, 1927, p. 47)



“in the inordinate whiteness.” (Major, 1981, p. 99) “All this white covered in white to an even whiter infinity. Blinding white on white, sunny, crystallized burning whiteness,” (Morisset, 2000, p. 67) writes Jean Morisset. The Arctic explorers aptly capture this excessive brightness and dissipation of elements into the whiteness of the ice and snow which – by dissolving all recognizable signs of the world – gradually cause man to lose his points of reference, his senses and finally himself. As Lesbazeilles writes:

All you can see is a single form, or rather the absence of any form, a single colour, which is a perpetual glare; you are faced with a single, solitary element, which has defeated and wiped out all others and which, if we stay in its realm and let the tête-à-tête continue, will absorb us and destroy us as well. (Lesbazeilles, 1881, pp. 7-8)

The uniform world of the Arctic, like that of the winter storm, described as a desert and hell, a “landscape of horrific beauty, a hell of whiteness and silence,” (Aquin, 1997, p. 189) is as disturbing as blackness and as frightening as emptiness. The comparison with night – in this case, white – is dizzying for the hero of Maurice Constantin-Weyer’s novel *Un homme se penche sur son passé*: “Darkness was whirling around my eyes, but it was *white darkness*. Yes, points of light danced until they made it dark. It was very dizzying.” (Constantin-Weyer, 1928, p. 91)

The cold and snow, which numb the senses<sup>4</sup> and slow down time,<sup>5</sup> form a white hallucinatory screen in the mind, a place of anguish and death, on which elements are personified, such as the blowing snow in Pierre Chatillon’s work, which becomes a white snake that “gets in under your clothes, sticks to your skin, slashes, tries to make your veins burst in its cold

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<sup>4</sup> “Winter is death, a white shroud that covers everything and the cold that numbs.” (Le Beau, 2002, p. 73)

<sup>5</sup> “The whiteness condenses space and the cold slows down time.” (Echenoz, 1999, p. 36)

clutch." (Chatillon, 1985, p. 164) In Knut Hamsun's work, as in science fiction and narratives by explorers and for young audiences, the extreme whiteness of landscapes hypnotizes and distresses the characters to the point where they hallucinate, perceive forms on the snow that are "translucent, too quick to be seen." (Vonarburg, 1994, p. 333) White, which has absorbed all colour, elements and points of reference, thus becomes a stage on which an imaged world emerges and ultimately the desire to see colour. "The brilliant, uniform whiteness," is such, according to Lesbazeilles, that "the eyes, weakened by continual tension, can no longer distinguish anything" and want to see the colours that have disappeared: "Sometimes, you imagine painting different colours on [...] what the men are wearing [...], so that they can rest their eyes on the multi-coloured backs of their friends." (Lesbazeilles, 1881, pp. 284-285)

### **The ethical and aesthetic value of "Whiteness"**

From hallucinations of changing forms on the overly uniform landscape, the agonizing whiteness of the land, sky and elements, and characters who are "blinded by the whiteness" (Assiniwi, 1976, p. 78) to missionaries whose "eyes burn from the glare of the snow," (Thérol, 1945, p. 127) children fascinated by the city appeased by a white shroud concealing the ugliness, in narratives and fiction on nordicity and wintricity, the very notion of "whiteness" refers to an entire symbolic system based on observation of the real, but determined by many discursive layers comprising a coherent whole, which transcends forms and constitutes the "idea of North" through its many elements, colours and figures. Here, "white," the screen for that imaginary world and mask that covers the ugliness, has an ethical and aesthetic value that simplifies the world while accentuating anguish and extremeness. White condenses the complexity and discursive depth of the imagined North into a sign of emptiness that dissolves any element corrupting its uniformity. Thus, it

can be seen a one of the most powerful sign of the discursive system of the North, and as a way to simplify the complexity of the northern territories.

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