Commentary

You are (not) here: On the ambiguity of flag planting and finger pointing in the Arctic

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The idea of North

In her book Canada and the Idea of North, literary scholar Sherrill Grace (2001) analyzes an image from the Canadian children's book Zoom Away (Wynne-Jones, 1991) as emblematic of Canada's attitude toward its Arctic frontier (Fig. 1). Like Klaus Dodds' photo of Norwegian Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre, the illustration from Zoom Away features a lone figure pointing northward, incorporating the Arctic within the national imaginary.

Of course, the Zoom Away and Støre images appeared in very different contexts, a children's book as opposed to a Foreign Ministry news release, and hence the Zoom Away image cannot be analyzed as a direct statement of government policy or state ideology. And yet children's books play an important role in reproducing and contesting state ideologies (Dittmer, 2007; Mickenberg, 2005). This would be so especially for books like those in the Zoom series, which have explicitly Canadian themes, are published by an independent Canadian publisher that receives Canadian government funding, and have received numerous Canadian literary awards. Thus a comparison of the two images can help to reveal the variety of ways in which "The North" is imagined as a space of national pride, belonging, and exploration: a space that is alternately normalized as a fundamental extension of state territory and exoticized as a distant wilderness to be conquered.

Turning first to the image reproduced by Dodds, Foreign Minister Støre is pointing to a representation of the seabed beneath a point in the ocean, the surface of which is depicted on a piece of paper hanging on a wall in Oslo. Thus, he is pointing to an imagined, unexperienced place. By pointing to an official state map that is hanging in a government office, and releasing the image with an official news release, Støre is placing this referenced (but unexperienced) point on the seabed within a discourse of state power. The referenced point is imagined as space that, like other state territory, is amenable to possession, control, stabilization, and development.

Maria, the figure in the Zoom Away image, also expresses national ideals as she points northward, claiming cartographic knowledge of a distant frontier. However, the implications of her gesture, and indeed the underlying imagination of the North, are significantly different from those of Støre. In Zoom Away, Maria is pointing northward to guide Zoom, the cat in the lower corner, on the search that he is about to undertake for his missing uncle, an Arctic explorer who has been lost in the Canadian North. Possession of the North is neither necessary, nor desirable, nor probably even achievable for Maria and Zoom. Rather, they hope that through the exercise of cartographic knowledge the North can be tamed for navigation. For them, "conquest" of the North will be achieved when it becomes a space that one can pass through, not a space that can be possessed.

The different messages of the two images are paralleled by differences in the underlying maps. With its bathymetry, territorial boundary lines, and detailed legend in the upper right corner, Støre's map bears the trappings of scientific objectivity and accuracy. The Zoom Away map, by contrast, is explicitly fantastical. As Grace notes,

It certainly looks like a traditional map, with lines of latitude and longitude clearly marked, but this flattened section of the globe defies any rational effort at representation or location; it matches no known map of the high Arctic, despite its emphatic claim to mark the North Pole (Grace, 2001: p. 80).
In short, Støre's North is a normal and proximate space to be possessed, and this is demonstrated by its representation on a resolutely “normal” map, where certainty and permanence are illustrated by fixed state boundary lines. Maria’s North is a distant, exotic, and dangerous space to be approached guardedly and which, at best, can be tamed only enough to allow for safe transit. Thus it is depicted on a map that illuminates difference and a lack of knowledge. In this sense it is “the perfect example of mapping [Canada’s] northern imaginary” (Grace, 2001: p. 80).

This comparison of the two images suggests that pointing one’s finger at a map is a multifaceted exercise and that it is not the same thing as planting one’s feet on the referenced ground (or, in the case of the Støre image, the referenced seabed). As numerous cartographic theorists have demonstrated, a map is not simply a representation of an underlying “real” world; it also serves to construct that world (Harley, 2001; Pickles, 2003). The semiotics of cartographic representation are further complicated because, while a map purports to be a representation of a space, it also, at a certain level, presents itself as that space (even though, in fact, it never truly achieves becoming the referenced space) (Jacob, 2006). Therefore, when one looks at a point on a map that depicts one’s location, one recognizes that one is both “there” (the place represented by the point on the map) and “not there” (the actual point on the map). Conversely, when one points at a distant location where one would like to be (as in the case of the Zoom Away image) or where the state would like to extend its authority (as in the case of the Støre image), one is designating that space as “our territory” but also as a potential destination where we presently are not. “There” is designated as a distant “other” with an essentially different nature.

My point here is not simply to complicate Dodds’ reading of Støre’s finger pointing but also to propose that the very idea of North identified in the finger pointing episode is more complicated than Dodds suggests. To fully understand the role of “finger pointing” in constructions of the North one needs to simultaneously view both the Støre image and the Zoom Away image, because each map, in its specific way, displays a certain ambiguity about the Northern “other” and the position of that “other” within the state mythos. Turning first to Støre’s map of northern waters, it purports to be representational. However, on closer examination, the space that is depicted (the surface of the Arctic Ocean) is not the space over which Norway is claiming authority (the seabed beneath that surface). Conversely, the Zoom Away map appears to be solely oriented toward assisting the user in getting through a space. However, by standing in southern Canada and pointing to its northern extremes, Maria connects the idea of North with the imagination of southern Canadians. The map’s placement in a Canadian children’s book and its use in the illustration to signify a place to which the (Canadian) reader can travel on a flight of fancy locate it within the realm of Canadian nationalist discourse. Grace thus draws parallels between this map and the one in the opening shot of Nanook of the North (Flaherty, 1922), both of which, through their “extreme simplicity,” construct “the image of a primitive terra incognita transformed into the desired object of our bemused, curious, voyeurs’ gaze” (Grace, 2001: p. 83).

At several points in his article, Dodds makes this very point about the ways in which mappings summon meanings and references that often exceed the conceptual boundaries of the object being mapped. He notes, for instance, that a state’s submission to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf is as much a statement about its ability to engage in the seabed delimiting process as it is a specific statement about where one’s shelf ends. Likewise, he notes that a transit of the Northwest Passage is as much a statement that one knows a distinct place with distinct historic resonances as it is an accomplishment of navigational prowess. However, when Dodds turns to the raw performances of geopolitics — finger pointing and flag planting — he loses this respect for ambiguity. When one places Støre’s finger pointing in perspective by simultaneously looking at Maria’s finger pointing, it becomes apparent that the geopolitics of the Arctic are driven by contradictory tendencies toward internalization and externalization, as states (and other actors) variously suggest that the Arctic should be claimed as state territory, governed through multilateral accords, managed by international institutions, or organized through shared power between state and non-state entities. These different management schemes are buttressed by contradictory representations of the Arctic as near and far, territorializable and
beyond territorialization, dynamic and static, two-dimensional and three-dimensional, normal and aberrant. In this light, Dodds’ analysis of the foreign minister’s gesture at the map seems a bit facile. Popular cartography may contribute toward placing a region into one or another discursive frame (e.g. a barren wasteland, an intermediate space that connects regions, a space that is suitable for incorporation into the territorial state) (Schulten, 2002). However, such visual representations (or performances) of sovereignty over distant areas do not resolve the underlying contradictions in the conceptions of space that characterize these claims. Even a gesture of sovereignty that is seemingly as clear as a foreign minister pointing to a space on a map has multiple meanings, reflecting, perhaps, the actual unevenness of sovereignty as an institution.

(Mi)staking the North

The complex ways in which state authorities blend these tropes of nearness and distance, and sameness and difference, in their sovereignty claims can be seen in another sovereignty performance that Dodds discusses: the 2007 planting of Russia’s flag on the seabed beneath the North Pole. Dodds quotes Canada’s then foreign minister, Peter MacKay, as saying, “This isn’t the fifteenth century. You can’t go around the world and just plant flags and say, ‘We’re claiming this territory.’” However, Dodds fails to note that in interviews and statements in the days immediately after the flag planting Foreign Minister MacKay paired his “This isn’t the fifteenth century” comment with statements such as “[Russia] is posturing. This is the true north strong and free [a line from the Canadian national anthem], and they’re fooling themselves if they think dropping a flag on the ocean floor is going to change anything” (Reynolds, 2007); “We established a long time ago that these are Canadian waters and this is Canadian property” (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2007); and “The question of sovereignty of the Arctic is not a question. It’s clear. It’s our country. It’s our property. It’s our water…The Arctic is Canadian” (CanWest, 2007).

MacKay’s mixed references to the Arctic as a distant terra nullius immune from appropriation and as an intrinsic component of the territory of the Canadian state were echoed by his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov. In a press conference immediately after the flag planting, Lavrov associated the flag planting exercise with Russia’s effort to demonstrate that the Lomonosov Ridge (and hence the seabed beneath the North Pole) was contiguous with Russian territory and thus a natural extension of Russian state space. However, in the same press conference, he also declared that the action was akin to the brave conquest of a distant and different land, equating the journey to the seabed beneath the North Pole with a journey to the moon (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2007; see CNN, 2007). Each of Lavrov’s narratives, in turn, is complicated by the fact that the expedition was conceived not by the Russian state but by an Australian-American group of deep sea exploration enthusiasts who obtained funding from Swedish pharmaceutical magnate Frederik Paulsen, and who sought Russian participation not to make a political statement but because Russia controlled two of the five submersibles capable of fulfilling the mission (McDowell & Batson, 2007).

Thus we see that “flag planting,” like “finger pointing,” is an ambiguous activity, and this ambiguity is heightened by the complex nature of the authority claimed by the planter of the flag. If sovereignty is partial and uneven, then sovereignty rights (the authority given to coastal states over areas of the seabed adjacent to their territorial waters) are even more partial, and hence even more difficult to represent through the crude signifiers of planted flags and pointed fingers. Furthermore, this ambiguity is heightened by the fact that the Arctic (and certainly its seabed) is experienced by very few of the individuals who claim to know or possess it. State authorities claiming Arctic space may be headed there on a fool’s mission, seduced by the lure of an environment that they think they know and that they imagine they can successfully possess, while, in fact, they are guided by a map that, like the map in Zoom Away, has no reference point beyond the imagination (see Powell, 2008).

The ambiguity of sovereignty

Missing from all this discussion of finger pointing and flag planting are the opinions and contributions of people who actually live in the Arctic and who need neither to point fingers at their location on a map nor plant their flag on their own land to know where and who they are. As Dodds notes, Arctic peoples are active participants in the dialogue about the future of the North. Indeed, they are using their status to argue for alternative constructions of sovereignty, in which rights to self determination are nested within (and overlap) the division of the Arctic into territorial states (see Shadian, in press).

In the process, all parties participate in postcolonial negotiations wherein they express ambivalent attitudes toward their own power and the relative power (or powerlessness) of others (Bhabha, 1994). Thus, as Dodds notes, Canada’s Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, uses the term nunavut — an Inuktitut word meaning “our land” that historically has been used to assert Inuit self determination vis-à-vis Canada — to proclaim that the Arctic is “our” Canadian land. Conversely, on a street sign in Nunavut’s capital, Iqaluit, a degree of Inuit sovereignty is performed through the mandatory use of bilingual text on official signage. But, simultaneously, sovereignty is surrendered as the people of Iqaluit memorialize their allegiance to a “colonial” power even higher than that of the government of Canada: the Queen of England (Fig. 2).

Dodds concludes by calling the Arctic a “lively space,” geopolitically as well as geophysically. It is a space where new actors are producing new institutions, but in a struggle that echoes historic conflicts and wills to power. The study of this “lively space” therefore requires a “lively geopolitics” that respects the ambiguity, as well as the power, of geopolitical performances.

References


