

Cold City Space. Representations of Montreal in Pierre Szalowski's *Le froid modifie la trajectoire des poissons* and Alix Ohlin's *Inside*

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Abstract – Representations of cold are investigated in two Montreal novels, Alix Ohlin's *Inside* (2012) and *Le froid modifie la trajectoire des poissons* by Pierre Szalowski (2007). The concept of seasonal nordicity provides the context for considering Montreal, a major urban agglomeration in southern Canada, as a location of "North". Ohlin's novel depicts cold as multifaceted, at times perpetuating and contesting received interpretations of cold as negative and associated with death. Szalowski's cheerful portrayal of the 1998 Ice Storm in Montreal celebrates cold's power to unite a community. The effect of cold on the spatiality of the narratives, in particular Foucault's concept of heterotopias, is examined.

This paper investigates representations of cold in twenty-first century Montreal fiction through the lens of Alix Ohlin's *Inside* (2012) and *Le froid modifie la trajectoire des poissons* by Pierre Szalowski (2007). Montreal novels written in French and English are compared to determine if the cold is depicted differently in current anglophone and francophone urban fiction.² Which spaces in the city are figured and how does cold affect the spatiality of the

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² I use the term "urban fiction" following Caroline Rosenthal, who argues persuasively that the genre of "city fiction" should be "restricted to a decisively limited corpus of modernist texts, because it is closely connected to modernist perceptions of the city, to modernist understandings of identity and space, and to modernist modes of representation." Caroline Rosenthal, *New York and Toronto Novels After Postmodernism. Explorations of the Urban*, Rochester, Camden House, 2011, p. 1-2.

narratives?³ To answer these questions, I will first briefly lay a foundation for the study of Montreal as a location of “North” based on Hamelin’s concept of seasonal nordicity and how this reception of northern urban space has differed among scholars of English Canadian and Québécois⁴ literature. Next, conceptions of the discourse of cold will be outlined. I will then turn to the two Montreal novels to investigate the implications of cold on the characters and an analysis of cold urban space.

Seasonal Nordicity: Winter in the City

When considering how to define or delimit the North in Canada, one must take into account the foundational work of eminent Québécois geographer and linguist Louis-Edmond Hamelin, who coined the term *nordicité* in 1965. The neologism was rapidly adopted by researchers and then the general public. Hamelin’s nordicity index is a quantitative system used to measure the northerliness of any place using ten variables to represent a combination of human and physical facets of the North, including population, economic activity, isolation and types of ice.⁵ Nordicity is not static, however. The nordicity rating of a town or city can change over time based on factors such as fluctuation in temperature, population size, economic development, and access to transportation. For Hamelin, the southern boundary of the North is flexible, and thus moves when any of the variables in a place changes significantly. Nordicity can also be seasonal, meaning that during winter the polar units allotted to a place can be greatly increased depending on the local climate and accessibility. This concept, known as seasonal nordicity, thus means that Montreal, as well as other southern Canadian cities, can be considered part of the North during winter, despite their steamy summer temperatures. Nordicity is not merely a geographic term for measuring the North, but “refers to the state, degree, awareness and *representation*

³ My understanding of spatiality follows many other literary and cultural critics in understanding space as not inherently given but rather as produced by social practices, based on the seminal works of Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Malden, Blackwell, 2009, and Michel Foucault, “Of other spaces: Utopias and heterotopias”, *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité*, october 1984, p. 46-49.

⁴ I use the spelling “Québécois” to indicate that I am referring to French-speaking literature from Quebec, and to signify the political and cultural context in which it is found.

⁵ Louis-Edmond Hamelin, *Canadian Nordicity. It’s Your North, Too*, Montreal, Harvest House, 1978, p. 17-27.

of cold territoriality in the northern hemisphere”.⁶ Hamelin’s concept of nordicity has been foundational in shaping current discourse in literary and cultural studies of the North, encouraging scholars to take into account social and cultural factors in addition to climate and geography. For our purposes here, Hamelin’s concept of seasonal nordicity is the starting point for considering Montreal as a northern urban space, and thus analysing its portrayal in contemporary fiction.

In simple terms, seasonal nordicity is the state of winter occurring in a place that does not have cold or snow all year round. Hamelin argues that the state of North, both natural and mental, also affects southern latitudes referred to by geographers as temperate zones, “*ainsi s’arriment des mots jadis complètement opposés, ceux d’urbanité et de nordicité*”.⁷ All of the territory of Quebec is considered to be part of “the North”,⁸ not least because in climatic and geographic terms, Quebec is the place where the North descends furthest south in the world.

Montreal, whose latitude is more in line with cities in southern France like Marseille than Scandinavian capitals like Oslo, has harsh winters and is located at the southernmost limit of the polar region. Paradoxically, the continental climate and the cold current from Labrador, which runs down the gulf and estuary of the St. Lawrence, make Quebec the only place where the Arctic reaches such low latitudes. Thus, Quebec is the place where the North extends the farthest south.⁹

In Quebec, seasonal nordicity is a significant part of the national consciousness, and Montreal in particular is an accepted location of North during the winter, both in the popular cultural imagination and

⁶ Daniel Chartier, “Representations of North and winter. The methodological point of view of ‘nordicity’ and ‘winterity’”, Enrique del Acebo Ibanez and Helgi Gunnlaugsson (eds), *La circumpolaridad como fenomeno sociocultural. Pasado, presente, futuro*, Buenos Aires, Universidad de Buenos Aires, 2010, p. 31-32.

⁷ Louis-Edmond Hamelin, *Écho des pays froids*, Québec, Les Presses de l’Université Laval, 1996, p. 253.

⁸ Danielle Dumontet, “Entre le Nord rêvé et le Nord réel. La confrontation des écrivains du Sud avec la réalité du Nord”, Daniel Chartier (ed), *Le(s) Nord(s) imaginaire(s)*, Montréal, Imaginaire Nord, 2008, p. 255.

⁹ Daniel Chartier, “The North and the great expanse. Representations of the North and narrative forms in French-Canadian literature”, *British Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 19, n° 1, 2006, p. 35. See also Sherrill Grace, *Canada and The Idea of North*, Montreal, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001, p. 52.

in literature. Despite hot, humid summers, Montreal's frigid winters are notorious and the city receives more snowfall than some Arctic locales. The concept of the North descending into large urban centers in southern Canada as a result of seasonal nordicity has not yet been acknowledged in English Canadian literary criticism,¹⁰ where "the North" has tended to be limited to the wilderness, the remote village setting, or the Arctic, to the exclusion of the urban, whereas in Quebec the city in winter is unquestionably a part of the North. English Canadian scholars on the North such as Sherrill Grace, Margaret Atwood, and Rob Shields, as well as proponents of urban fiction Douglas Ivison and Justin D. Edwards all position nordicity in diametric opposition to the city.¹¹ The city has never truly been considered to be part of the North by literary critics of English Canadian literature, even though the figuring of the city as North *can* be found in anglophone urban fiction. The definition of North relevant for this study is not a precise geographic location, but rather the idea of North, or *imaginaire du nord*, in Montreal fiction. The North referred to here is a discursive system of representation comprised of characters, settings, symbols, themes, and colors.

Cold as Discourse

One important aspect of the North or winter is, of course, the cold, which is the focus of this study. When looking at the subcategories of the definition of cold in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it becomes clear that cold is commonly understood to be a negative state or attribute: "(of a person) feeling uncomfortably cold;" "feeling or characterized by fear or horror: 'a cold shiver of fear'" and "dead: 'lying cold and stiff in a coffin'". *The second categorical definition of cold is:* "lacking affection or warmth of

¹⁰ I previously introduced this idea in Christina Kannenberg, "The North in English Canada and Quebec", Reingard M. Nischik (ed), *The Palgrave Handbook of Comparative North American Literature*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 219-236.

¹¹ See Sherrill Grace, *op. cit.*; Margaret Atwood, *Strange Things. The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995; Rob Shields, *Places on the Margin. Alternative Geographies of Modernity*, New York, Routledge, 1991, p. 4. Edwards and Ivison acknowledge that "the wilderness is no longer categorically placed 'outside' the city, nor is the city emphatically removed from the wilderness". However, they seem to still hold that a new focus on the urban in Canadian literature totally negates any emphasis on nordicity as fundamental to the Canadian experience, see Justin D. Edwards and Douglas Ivison, "Epilogue", Justin D. Edwards and Douglas Ivison (eds), *Downtown Canada. Writing Canadian Cities*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2005, p. 208.

feeling; unemotional”.¹² Heidi Hansson and Cathrine Norberg explain in their study *Cold Matters* that “for centuries, ‘cold’ as a cultural idea has been surrounded with negative connotations representing a denial of life and progress. Such understandings are not altogether innocent since they continue to govern the way people interpret and present the idea of cold”.¹³

Although kinder images of cold exist, such as childish snowmen, intricate snowflakes, or the usefulness of a refrigerator, in their investigation of cold in both literature and linguistics using the British National Corpus language database, “[t]he same fear-inspiring features are prototypically associated with snow, ice and cold”.¹⁴ Representations of cold have, then, been constructed culturally and reinforced over time by innumerable texts which manifest negative perceptions of cold. I will now examine the use of cold in two recent Montreal novels to determine if these common understandings of cold are perpetuated or contested.

Pierre Szalowski *Le froid modifie la trajectoire des poissons*

Pierre Szalowski’s 2007 novel *Le froid modifie la trajectoire des poissons* recounts a memorable period of Quebec’s history, the ice storm which held a swath of southern Quebec, eastern Ontario and the north-eastern United States in its grasp for several weeks in January, 1998. The title prominence of the word *froid* immediately draws our attention to the importance of cold in the novel. Cold is more often implied than actually described—in fact, many of the characters do not seem to feel cold at all, despite being in the midst of “the greatest natural disaster in Canadian history”.¹⁵ The cold is somewhat invisible, yet it profoundly changes all of the characters. The title refers to an aquarium belonging to a Russian immigrant named Boris whose water must be kept at exactly 32 °C for his PhD research. The presence of a Russian character in the novel is

¹² Oxford University Press, “Cold”, <<https://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/cold>>, consulted 12 January 2014.

¹³ Heidi Hansson and Cathrine Norberg, “Revisioning the value of cold”, Heidi Hansson and Cathrine Norberg (eds), *Cold Matters: Cultural Perceptions of Snow, Ice and Cold*, Umeå, Sweden, Umeå University and the Royal Skyttean Society, 2009, p. 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁵ Laura Neilson, “Ice Storm 1998”, <<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/en/article/ice-storm-1998/>>, consulted 22 November 2013.

a means of “northifying” the work by implying a connection between Montreal and another cold, winter culture. This invocation of the circumpolar North is a trope often present in English Canadian and Québécois literature, although Scandinavia is usually referenced to assert Canada or Quebec’s northernness.¹⁶ A love of the cold has often signified the successful integration of immigrant characters in Québécois fiction,¹⁷ thus Boris is already a perfect candidate as he comes “from the cold”.¹⁸

The swimming patterns of Boris’ fish parallel the activities of the human characters, all neighbours who lead individualistic, isolated lives. They have never met before the ice storm changes their routines. After his parents announce their impending divorce the heartbroken, nameless boy narrator pleads with the sky to help him. The Ice Storm begins, and over the ensuing days the homes on their street lose electricity one by one. The ice helps each of the neighbours to change for the better as they open their homes to one another, and are forced to overcome prejudices and socioeconomic class difference.

The ice storm finally comes to the boy’s rescue by changing his parents as well. Being alone in the family’s chalet for two days at the beginning of the storm had “frozen” his father, shaking up his routine habits and reminding him why he loves his wife and his job. “*Deux jours dans le froid, ça avait transformé mon père. Je ne le reconnaissais plus. Il arrivait même à se moquer de lui. Ça devait être une des vertus de la congélation. Une fois remis à température, il n’y avait que de la joie*”.¹⁹ The night after they lose power, the boy awakens to see his parents sleeping in a tight embrace in front of the fireplace where they tried to keep warm. “*Ils avaient froid. Je n’ai pas remis de bûche dans le feu*”.²⁰ The cold thus saves their marriage and Boris’ research. The water in the fish tank has lowered to 19 degrees and the fish are now swimming in new patterns. “*Quand il fait froid, ils se rapprochent les uns des autres! [...] Et pis ils nagent deux*

¹⁶ As is pointed out, respectively, by Rob Shields, *op. cit.*, and Daniel Chartier, “Towards a grammar of the idea of North: nordicity, winterity”, *Nordlit: Arbeitstidsskriftlitteratur*, vol. 22, 2007, p. 35-47.

¹⁷ Daniel Chartier, “L’hivernité et la nordicité comme éléments d’identification identitaires dans les œuvres des écrivains émigrés du Québec”, Daniel Chartier (ed), *Le(s) Nord(s) imaginaire(s)*, Montréal, Imaginaire | Nord, 2008, p. 240.

¹⁸ Pierre Szalowski, *Le froid modifie la trajectoire des poissons*, Montréal, Hurtubise, 2007, p. 150.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

par deux, comme s'ils étaient des couples. Ce n'est plus seuls, en évitant les autres, qu'ils tracent leurs chemins. C'est ensemble qu'ils le font... Pis c'est depuis qu'ils ont froid qu'ils sont comme ça...".²¹

Cold is a positive force throughout the novel, causing both fish and humans to abandon their isolated daily patterns and enjoy life more by doing it together.

Le froid modifie la trajectoire des poissons takes place nowhere and everywhere in Montreal.²² Although Szalowski explicitly names the city at the outset, precise locations within the city remain purposefully vague to give the impression that this ice storm experience was common to all *Montréalais*. Szalowski's everyman story does not, however, include anglophone Montrealers as there are no English-speaking characters at all in the novel. Interestingly, the only specific references to identifiable places in Montreal are light-hearted jabs at anglophone Montrealers. This could be read as limiting anglophones to specific quadrants of the city, and claiming the generalized, larger city-space for francophones. The characters spend almost the entire novel in their unnamed street and their private homes, described as typical Montreal duplexes with outdoor stairs. This focus on microspaces within the city is in keeping with the trend observed by Ceri Morgan in francophone Montreal novels of the 21st century, which focus in on the personal and small, local places as a counter response to a globalized, hypermediated world.²³ The homes are a refuge for the characters in which, at the start of the novel, they isolate themselves from one another. When their electricity goes out, the cold slowly begins to encroach on each of them. The cold forces them to transgress the boundaries of urban isolation and actually speak to the people they see every day, crossing the thresholds of each other's homes. When all of the homes on their street lose heat there is nowhere else to go. Yet, this is not portrayed as a dire circumstance by Szalowski. The cold acts, rather, as the catalyst for positive change in each of the characters' lives.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 259; ellipses in original.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 1.

²³ Ceri Morgan, *Mindscapes of Montreal. Quebec's Urban Novel, 1960-2005*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2012, p. 121.

Alix Ohlin *Inside*

Montreal-born author Alix Ohlin's 2012 novel *Inside* is replete with references to nordicity and cold in the city.²⁴ *Inside* is told in a non-linear fashion, cutting between three narrative strands, two of which take place in Montreal. Grace, a psychologist, is cross-country skiing on Mount Royal in January 1996 when she crashes into the body of a man who has tried to hang himself from a tree. Accompanying the man, an anglophone named Tug, to the hospital, Grace becomes entangled in his life. Grace has always loved the cold and snow. They make her feel at peace,²⁵ think clearly and get fresh ideas.²⁶ Tug and Grace become romantically involved and ski in various parks in the city over the ensuing months. Tug seems immune to the cold, never wearing a hat outside. At one point, Tug waits for her for hours outside her office and when Grace twice comments that he looks cold he is too preoccupied to notice. Tug contains an inner heat ("his mind was at a simmering boil, his muscles clenched with its heat"²⁷). The cold cannot touch him. He finally reveals that his experience as an aid worker in Rwanda during the 1994 genocide drove him to attempt suicide. Tug "took to walking for hours after he got off work, letting the cold air pinch his nose and ears".²⁸ A sort of anti-flâneur, Tug walks the city not to consciously observe it or take part in its life, as a Baudelairian flâneur does. Tug rather walks the city to forget what he has seen: "He was most comfortable tiring himself out by walking around the city, appreciating the wide-open streets, the uncrowded avenues, the scentless air".²⁹ Montreal serves as a counterbalance to the vivid smells, heat, and chaos Tug encountered in Rwanda.

²⁴ The question arises where to situate Ohlin's novel in light of the fraught nomenclature "anglo-québécois literature." Ohlin, who grew up in Montreal, studied and currently lives in the United States, rejects assigning herself a national label. Perpetuating the debate surrounding "anglo-québécois literature" goes beyond the scope of the current study. I refer to both of the novels in my study as Montreal fiction, as the city is more than just the setting but actively influences the narratives. Helpful discussions of the term's detractors, proponents and implications, can be found in Catherine Leclerc and Sherry Simon, "Zones de contact: nouveaux regards sur la littérature anglo-québécoise", *Voix et Images*, vol. 30, n° 3, 2005, p. 15-29; Lianne Moyes, "Conflict in contiguity: An update", *Québec Studies*, vol. 44, Winter 2007/Spring 2008, p. 1-20; Gregory J. Reid, "Is there an Anglo-Québécois literature?", *Essays on Canadian Writing*, vol. 84, Fall 2009, p. 58-86.

²⁵ Alix Ohlin, *Inside*, London, Quercus, 2013, p. 1.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

Significantly, much of *Inside* takes place in winter, a “stormy and breezy” fall³⁰ or a “cold spring”.³¹ Vivid descriptions of the weather and seasons are markers that orient the reader in the complex cast of characters and three interwoven time periods. The parts of the novel that take place outside Canada are almost exclusively set in summer. Montreal in both the 1996 and 2006 narrative strands exists entirely in the cold. Even though the 2006 section covers a whole calendar year, Ohlin evades summer in the city by having Mitch, Grace’s ex-husband, spend June through August in Iqaluit, Nunavut. Only two weeks after Mitch returns to Montreal, in early September, fall is coming on strong;³² the “frigid air” causes the characters to don scarves.³³ On the following morning, the pale light is already described as “winter sun”³⁴ although it is still September. Ohlin both prolongs cold spring in the 1996 narrative and accelerates winter’s onslaught rapidly in the fall of 2006. *Inside* asserts the total nordicity of Montreal. During Mitch’s summer in Iqaluit, the narrative is interrupted with repeated analepses to winter scenes in Montreal, thus juxtaposing the Arctic summer with an icy, cold winter in the city. This contrast connotes Montreal as colder than the Arctic. In their study of literature about the far North, Hansson and Norberg note that “[w]inter is overrepresented in the narratives and the summer season seems almost not to exist,” and this is notably a feature of Ohlin’s Montreal novel.³⁵

In 2006, years after divorcing Grace, Mitch has a complicated relationship with Martine, a francophone lawyer, and Mathieu, her son with Asperger Syndrome.³⁶ Mathieu, like Tug, is impervious to the cold: “Mathieu loved the snow and playing in the park and never seemed to feel the cold, even when his lips were turning blue and his teeth were chattering. When Martine told him it was time to come in, he would tremble with rage, as if she were robbing him of his most precious possession”.³⁷ Due to Asperger’s, Mathieu does not register the sensation of intense cold as easily as a neurotypical person and may be sensory seeking just to feel

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 173.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

anything at all. After Mitch has been seeing Martine for two years, to escape the cold the three of them visit the Biodome, Montreal's warm, indoor tropical rainforest. Mathieu throws a tantrum, and while trying to calm him, Mitch accidentally dislocates the boy's shoulder and causes Martine to sprain her ankle. Significantly, the incident that ends their relationship occurs in the warmth of the Biodome, an uncanny place unnatural to the city. The Biodome is perfectly ordered in contrast to Montreal's natural cold climate and the chaos often caused by snow, ice and *déneigement*. The Biodome can be seen as a sort of heterotopia, defined by Michel Foucault as a counter-site in which other spaces in society "are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted".³⁸ With Martine and Mathieu, Mitch had also visited museums and movie theatres on the weekends, also typical examples of Foucauldian heterotopias. These sites are spaces of illusion, subverting Montreal's cold winter space by providing a heated place to imagine one is somewhere else for a few hours.³⁹ Contrary to what one would expect they are not pleasant places but sites of injury and pain. The heterotopias in Ohlin's novel are associated negatively throughout with warmth. Unlike Szalowski, Ohlin locates her novel firmly in Montreal's lived spaces, constantly naming streets, neighbourhoods and other landmarks. *Inside* focuses on its characters' inner lives and intimate relationships in which the cold spatiality of the city plays an important role.

Cold City Space

Like other post-postmodern novels, these two examples of Montreal fiction concentrate on human relationships and the emotional forces that make urban space, instead of showing a technocratic, commercialized, indifferent city.⁴⁰ Both novels feature a unilingual group of main characters and the relationships among them, rather than a single protagonist. Despite the cold, the characters in both novels spend a considerable amount of time outside talking on the street, skiing, or walking

³⁸ Michel Foucault, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

³⁹ Other public places in the novel are the hospitals where Mitch works and the Faubourg Ste-Catherine shopping mall where Annie, the protagonist of the second narrative strand, is raped as a teenager. At the end of the novel, Mitch takes Grace and her daughter Sarah Christmas shopping at the mall Promenades Cathédrale in the underground city, which is hot, crowded, and stressful.

⁴⁰ Caroline Rosenthal, *op. cit.*; Ceri Morgan, *op. cit.*

the city. The cold thus does not completely isolate them nor restrict their movements. In fact, the cold—specifically the lack of heat and light when the electricity fails—is what brings the characters of *Le froid modifie la trajectoire des poissons* together. They do not really notice the cold even as it is working to change them for the better. As to *Inside*, it is also outdoors in the cold that Grace first meets Tug and Mitch Martine. The representation of cold here subverts received notions of cold as always being negative and associated with death. Grace loves the cold while Tug and Mathieu are immune to it. Contrary to the separation of the city and “the North” inferred by the English Canadian literary critics mentioned above, Montreal is figured as a perpetually cold, northern space in Ohlin’s novel. The heated, heterotopic spaces in Ohlin’s Montreal are negatively associated with violence and pain. Yet *Inside* also perpetuates the cold-equals-death equation by connecting it to several deaths in the Iqaluit section of the novel.⁴¹

The dark subject matter of Ohlin’s novel—numerous deaths, suicides, abortions, divorces and the Rwandan genocide—stands out in stark contrast to Szalowski’s heart-warming take on a natural disaster. Szalowski refers to the objectification of women in the sex industry, prejudices against Jews, gays, and immigrants in Quebec and the pain of divorce in a tongue-in-cheek manner. The novel never mentions the 45 people who lost their lives as a result of the ice storm of 1998, the billions of dollars of damage nor the loss of livelihood for farmers. Szalowski’s novel is cheerful and points out the positive effects of the cold by making people rely on each other and thus building a sense of community within a hyperlocal pocket of the city. *Le froid modifie la trajectoire des poissons* is an example of Québécois fiction depicting winter, ice, and cold as beautiful, full of bright light, and a force for positive change.

⁴¹ Two abortions also take place in winter, and when Mitch recalls his mother’s death he associates it with the cold: “It was winter” (Alix Ohlin, *op. cit.*, p. 211).