

Representations of North and Winter

The methodological point of view of "nordicity" and "winterity"

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The Imaginary of North as Discourse

The imaginary of North, in the Western world of the imagination, refers to a series of figures, colours, elements and characteristics conveyed by narratives, novels, poems, films, paintings and advertising which—from the myth of Thule to contemporary representations in popular culture—have forged a rich, complex network of symbolic meanings. The “North” poses the problem of the relationship between geographic realities and the world of the imagination, since those who have written and read about it in Europe and America, have, for the most part, never been there. Representations of “North” are discovered like layers of discourse, laid down by different cultures, and picked up on and shaped by different aesthetic movements.

As contemporary analyses produced in Europe, Scandinavia, English Canada and, more recently, Québec have shown, “North” is first and foremost a discursive system, whose components, preferred forms, figures, characters, narrative schemata, colours and resonances can be traced historically. It is variable in nature, depending on the position of the speaker,¹ and has common “circumpolar” characteristics, as shown methodologically by Louis-Edmond Hamelin through the fertile concepts of “nordicity” and “winterity.” Ultimately, we should speak of “North” as the “idea of North.”² Beyond the theme of winter, ice and frost, beyond the descriptions contained in realistic

¹ Jean-Marc Moura and Monique Dubar [ed.], *Le Nord, latitudes imaginaires*, Villeneuve-d'Ascq, Presses de l'Université Charles-de-Gaulle-Lille 3, coll. «UL3 travaux et recherches», 2000.

² Sherrill E. Grace, *Canada and the Idea of North*, Montréal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002, 341 p.

novels, the imaginary of North opens a vast critical terrain—a terrain that not only poses problems related to the specificity of the genres and forms in which it appears, but also creates the opportunity for reflection on the links between a territory and the imaginary and among different cultural works produced by the Nordic world, and for reflection on the formal components of the works that enable us to evoke, speak of and reinterpret this world of the imagination.

The “Denorthernization” of “North”

Present-day interest in the North and in representations of North is due to a combination of various environmental, political and cultural factors. It is also fuelled by the evolution of human geography and research carried out on the pluridisciplinary links between territory, landscape, and the cultural, pictorial and literary representations of North. From a historic point of view, the concept of “North,” as both geographic space and discourse, has varied as a result of two movements, influenced by climate change over time.³ The first movement is the gradual “denorthernization” of North since the 17th century, which has become more pronounced since the beginning of the 20th century: as Louis-Edmond Hamelin remarks, “demographic and economic development as well as climate change have meant a general decrease in the severity of conditions in the North”;⁴ at the same time, expeditions to the North, the settlement of people and the deployment of infrastructures have mitigated the characteristics usually associated with cold, inaccessibility and uniformity. The second movement is the “receding of the North.” As territories have become known and developed, and the desire to know and develop them has grown, the boundaries of the ecumene, which mark the borders of the North in discourse, have been pushed back. In both the world of physical geography and that of the

³ « Ainsi, des années 400 à 700 jusqu'à 1300 à 1500 environ, le climat moyen de l'ensemble de la zone nordique apparaît moins froid que celui de la période antérieure de même que celui de la période postérieure (refroidissement jusqu'à vers 1875). Vers l'an 1000, l'occidentalisation des Vikings coïncide avec la décélération de la froidure polaire. » (Louis-Edmond Hamelin, *Discours du Nord*, Québec, Université Laval, GÉTIC, coll. « Recherche », 2002, p. 21.)

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 22-23.

imagination, the limits of the North have continually receded over time—contracting in scope and becoming concentrated around the North Pole—gradually revealing the inflexibility of the conception of North, which is at the root its inevitable disappearance. In the case of the territories known as the “historic North,” which are the settled boreal forests, this process is portrayed in a succession of representations, from wild desert to tourist site. For example, in the case of the “North” of Montréal—the Laurentians—the territory was first defined as a “desert,” then as a Utopian “agricultural and forested area,” later as a “frontier” of development, and finally, today, as a recreational and tourist area,⁵ adjoining the urban metropolis of Montréal.

The Contribution of Louis-Edmond Hamelin

When it comes to a general interpretation of “North,” the work initiated by geographer and linguist Louis-Edmond Hamelin⁶ in the 1960s is considered very innovative, bringing together, as it does, university disciplines to conceive of, comprehend and interpret this territory and the discourse stemming from it. Hamelin has also played an important social role by creating an awareness of the Nordic nature of Canada and Québec: his work has had a decisive influence on the conception of both North and identity. Although he has taken culture and literature into account in his work, Hamelin is a geographer and his contribution to the interpretation of representations of North is based primarily on

⁵ About those time periods: Louis-Edmond Hamelin, *Nordicité canadienne*, Montréal, Hurtubise HMH, coll. « Cahiers du Québec. Géographie », 1975, p. 40-41.

⁶ Born in 1923 in Saint-Didace, Québec, Louis-Edmond Hamelin devoted his career to showing that the Nordic dimension is an integral part of Québec and Canada and that it must influence their politics and ways of thinking, particularly when it comes to taking Aboriginal peoples into account. He obtained a Master's degree in economics from Laval University in 1948, a Ph.D. in geography from the Université de Paris in 1975 and, at age 66, an M.A. in linguistics from Université Laval (1989). A professor at Laval University from 1951 to 1978 and the founder of the Nordic Studies Centre in 1961, he has garnered numerous awards, including the Grand officier de l'Ordre national du Québec in 1998. His works include *Le Québec nordique* (1968), *Le Nord canadien comme espace* (1971), *Nordicité canadienne* (1975; translated under *Canadian Nordicity*, 1979—Governor General's Award), *Echo des pays froids* (1996), *Discours du Nord* (2002), *Le Québec par les mots. L'hiver et le Nord* (2002) et *L'âme de la terre. Parcours d'un géographe* (2006).

general assumption and a conceptional framework. From this point of view, his contribution can be distilled into four main points, which are as follows: 1) “North” must be considered a circumpolar entity; 2) a study of “North” requires the creation of specific vocabulary; 3) the boundaries of “North” are variable; and 4) the territory of “North” must be understood as the sum of its physical, social and cultural parts.

Circumpolar Entity

While the links between the different cultures located in the circumpolar area are commonly contemplated today, this type of consideration is relatively recent. Xavier Marmier, a French traveller, writer and translator who lived in the 19th century, was a forerunner in this respect: he established links between works produced by different parts of the world that experience winter, thus comparing Scandinavia, Poland, Finland, Russia and French Canada.⁷ When Hamelin began his work in the 1940s, he noticed two parts of the Nordic picture that were missing: Canada—which, at the time, overlooked its Nordic character and focused in an introverted way on the populated strip to the south, along the United States border⁸—and winter. He thus proposed a “geographic nordicity” through identification with real spaces,⁹ including Finland, Scandinavia, Russia, Canada, Alaska and Greenland as well as all places that experience winter-like

⁷ Among the numerous works written or translated by Xavier Marmier : *Lettres sur le Nord. Danemark, Suède, Norvège, Laponie et Spitzberg*, Paris, Delloye, coll. « Bibliothèque choisie », 1840; *Lettres sur l'Amérique. Canada, États-Unis, Havane, Rio de la Plata*, Paris, Bertrand, 1851; *Lettres sur la Russie, la Finlande et la Pologne*, Paris, Garnier frères, 1851; *En Amérique et en Europe*, Paris, Hachette, 1860, and *Contes populaires de différents pays*, Paris, Hachette, 1888.

⁸ « Le Canada est-il à ce point orienté vers le Sud et lié aux États-Unis qu'il tourne inconsciemment le dos à sa principale dimension, celle du Nord? » (Louis-Edmond Hamelin, *Nordicité canadienne*, Montréal, Hurtubise HMH, coll. « Cahiers du Québec. Géographie », 1975, p. 81.) This political dimension also contributes to fuelling the reflections of Sherill E. Grace (*Canada and the Idea of North*, 2002).

⁹ He defines it as : « a) l'espace finno-scandinave (ou euronordique); b) l'hivernie (espace de la saison d'hiver) de l'Europe occidentale; c) au Canada, l'espace autochtone avant l'arrivée des Européens; d) l'espace hivernal des premiers colonisateurs [nord-américains]; e) l'espace circumnordique. » (Louis-Edmond Hamelin, *Discours du Nord*, Québec, Université Laval, GÉTIC, coll. « Recherche », 2002, p. 39.)

conditions. Using variable nordicity indices, he calculated that Québec, which he used as a laboratory,¹⁰ is not geographically an arctic area (Montréal has the same latitude as Marseille on the Mediterranean), but is in fact the place where “arctic influences extend the furthest south”¹¹ in the world. Hamelin’s calculation was subsequently used to redraw the boundaries of the circumnordic world, which is not round and defined by the Arctic Circle as was originally thought, but is “oval in form due, in particular, to the circulation of currents, oceanicity, continentality and settlement.”¹² Ultimately, geographic-based work has paved the way for a new and different view of “North,” providing for pluridisciplinary factors that can be used to draw parallels between comparable phenomena: the circumpolar cultures of Europe and America, and winter cultures.

Specific Vocabulary: “Nordicity”

The lack of North American identification with the North has resulted in a dearth of vocabulary to reveal the reality of it: according to Hamelin, the French and English languages simply do not have the words to reflect the phenomena related to the cold, winter and the Arctic. Thus the need to create new words to grasp the North in all its complexity. Although neologisms are perceived as designating “additional knowledge,” in fact, they increase our awareness: as Hamelin says, “the vocabulary specific to a field is not an additional phenomenon; it is an integral part of its richness.”¹³

The term “nordicité,” coined and used by Hamelin in 1965, quickly entered the vocabulary of researchers, then that of the public at large. It opens the door to considerable research on its definition, which covers a number of fields: “nordicité” (or

¹⁰ « Le cadre de la nordicité est circumterrestre. [...] Le Québec sert de laboratoire. » (Louis-Edmond Hamelin, 2002, p. 7.)

¹¹ Louis-Edmond Hamelin, *Réalités canadiennes. Le Nord canadien et ses référents conceptuels. About Canada. The Canadian North and its Conceptual Referents*, Ottawa, Ministère des Approvisionnement et Services Canada, 1988, p. 22. He also writes : « [...] le Québec constitue la province la plus nordique du Canada. » (« À la rencontre du Nord et du Sud », *Cap-aux-Diamants*, n° 56, « Au nord du Nord », hiver 1999, p. 19-20.)

¹² Louis-Edmond Hamelin, 2002, p. 27.

¹³ Louis-Edmond Hamelin, 2002, p. 8.

“nordicity” in English) refers to “the state, degree, awareness and representation of cold territoriality in the northern hemisphere.”¹⁴ The comprehensive nature of the term is what makes it new: it encompasses the “state of North” in all its complexity: As Hamelin says, “comprehensive nordicity refers to systems of thought, knowledge, vocabularies, intercultural know-how, arts and humanities sensibilities, expressions of opinion, application in territorial, political and economic fields; in short, nordicity denotes the state of a northern country.”¹⁵

Hamelin has developed a complete glossary around the term, which includes compounds such as “nordicité saisonnière” and “nordicité culturelle” (“seasonal nordicity” and “cultural nordicity” in English); derivatives such as “nordicitude” (“nordicitude”), and other terms referring to cold-related phenomena, such as “hivernité” (“winterness” or “winterity”), “montagnité” (“altitudinality”) and “glissité” (“slidicity”). “To date,” writes Hamelin, “the derivation of “nordicity” alone has given rise to a term family exceeding 200 entries.”¹⁶ Hamelin divides the North into four areas—the Near North, the Middle North,¹⁷ the Far North¹⁸ and the Extreme North¹⁹—which he

¹⁴ Louis-Edmond Hamelin, 2002, p. 4.

¹⁵ Louis-Edmond Hamelin, 2002, p. 5.

¹⁶ Louis-Edmond Hamelin, 2002, p. 13.

¹⁷ « *Le Moyen Nord* — Limitée par les isonords 200 vapos (au sud) et 500 (au nord), la zone est climatiquement subarctique; elle s'étire du Labrador au Yukon et comprend des lacs boisés (The Green North) ainsi qu'un archipel intrigant de tourbières réticulées. Économiquement, après avoir été le royaume des fourrures, le Moyen Nord accueille les poussées développementales venues du Sud (hydro-électricité à Churchill en "Terre-Neuve et Labrador" ainsi que l'exploitation des matières premières au Grand lac des Esclaves). Le Moyen Nord regroupe environ 90% des habitants de tout le Nord canadien. » (Louis-Edmond Hamelin, 2002, p. 32.)

¹⁸ « *Le Grand Nord* — L'indice nordique s'y établit de 500 à 800 vapos. Des facteurs comme la limitation de la chaleur estivale, la dénudation du paysage, la présence inuite et la rareté des grandes exploitations — la plus éloignée étant Polaris — montrent une situation zonale originale par rapport à la précédente. Biogéographiquement, le Grand Nord est arctique. » (Louis-Edmond Hamelin, 2002, p. 32.)

¹⁹ « *L'Extrême Nord* — Cette région hypernordique, couvrant moins de 10% des terres du Nord possède une nordicité de 800\900+ vapos. Les glaces sur mer (glaciel), en profondeur (pergélisol) et sur terre (glacier) le caractérisent. Cette

defines according to climatic, social and cultural criteria. He defines “winter”—the state of which is referred to as “winterity” or “seasonal nordicity”—as a “cold, snow- and ice-producing phenomenon of the water-land-atmosphere interface, which varies with the weather, place, day and year, and is influenced by the world of the imagination, the health of individuals, seasonal technology, sports, public services and social pressure.”²⁰ He observes that high altitude can produce geographic, human and cultural effects similar to the North, with which it must be compared to: “altitudinality” (“montagnité”), or the state of a high-altitude place, “leads to distortions in zonal nordicity by creating areas of local nordicity with variable climatic severity.”²¹ Nordicity thus increases with altitude and Nordic zones may be found in areas of high altitude: these zones may be described according to the degree of coldness, but also according to vegetation, sports, culture and, from our perspective, the type of narratives and the representations that stem from them.

Although the abundance of words coined by Hamelin goes beyond what is necessary, even for research, some of the terms quickly entered the general language and dictionaries, which is not easy in the case of the French language. “Nord” in French referred to Europe alone until the 1960s; today the word designates the entire circumpolar region. The French neologisms “nordicité,” “hivernité,” “glaciel” and “glissité” are now commonly used. The English equivalent, “nordicity,” is considered a Canadianism, but its use is quickly extending to other Nordic cultures. Swedish and Norwegian equivalents for these terms could be proposed—equivalents that could be useful in the northology studies presently under way. Today, these terms are found in literature as well as poetry;²² last spring, a widely-circulated magazine asked its readers

étendue est quasi inhabitée, sauf dans quelques postes dont le lointain Alert avec ses 878 vapos. » (Louis-Edmond Hamelin, 2002, p. 32.)

²⁰ Louis-Edmond Hamelin, 2002, p. 43.

²¹ Louis-Edmond Hamelin, 2002, p. 32.

²² Camille Laverdière writes in 1971 in *Québec Nord/américain*, Montréal, Éditions du Nouveau-Québec, 1971, p. 66 : « terre à la glace de mer à la morsure pénétrante / engouffreuse dans sa bouillie glacielle ». In 1998, Jean Désy writes : « Je danse sur le glacielle et soudain c'est Iqaluit, Pangnirtung, la Sibérie, tous les détroits amalgamés » (*Ô Nord, mon amour*, Québec, Le loup de gouttière, 1998, p. 41).

to choose 101 words to describe Québec: “nordicité” was among the top three.

Variable Boundaries of “North”

In order to take the variable nature of “North” into account, Hamelin developed a nordicity index in the 1960s, based on work conducted in the Soviet Union at the time. The index takes into consideration various human and natural characteristics, which change over time. “While a compass indicates that North is a fixed point,” wrote Hamelin in 1975, “a geographic perspective shows that the North is a living, continually changing entity that, for the past century, has been evolving toward differential denorthification. [...] It is this shifting reality, this variable nordicity, that must be grasped.”²³ We know, from representations of North, that the North has been depicted in various forms over time that simplify and reduce the elements that comprise it. This decomplexification has made it possible to consider the North in a set, stable manner, and to separate representations of it from the reality of it, while distorting the reality of those who live there. The study of contemporary works, including those of Norwegian artist Patrick Huse,²⁴ has identified a will to render the North in all its complexity and to take its discursive layers into account.

In the index designed by Hamelin, nordicity is calculated according to criteria. The variable nature of the index accommodates the complexity of the territory. The nordicity of any given place at any given time can be calculated and can take into account factors as varied as colonial history, political treaties, hydroelectric power generation, mine development, winter experiences, sports activities, cultural representations, etc. Thus the nordicity index of localities can rise and fall over time. Another example of the flexibility of the index is that a snow storm in an

²³ Louis-Edmond Hamelin, *Nordicité canadienne*, Montréal, Hurtubise HMH, coll. « Cahiers du Québec. Géographie », 1975, p. 121.

²⁴ Daniel Chartier, « L’art contre la synthèse. L’œuvre de l’artiste norvégien Patrick Huse et l’écologie de l’imaginaire », *Realidad. Revista del Cono Sur de Psicología Social y Política* (Argentine) University J. F. Kennedy, n° 6, 2007; « Simplification / Complexity of the Arctic : the work of Norwegian artist Patrick Huse », *Proceedings of the Images of the North Conference*, Reykjavik, ReykjavikurAkademian, to be published in 2007.

urban area can temporarily “northify” a location by increasing its nordicity index. Degrees of “winterity” and “altitudinality” can also be determined using the same model. Such an index clearly holds considerable potential from the perspective of cultural studies. By replacing geographic variables with the figures, colours, elements and narrative schemata that make up cultural representations of North, the degree of a work’s “literary nordicity” or “discursive nordicity” could be established. A dialectic process would then make it possible to identify the figures and elements of the discursive North and, in an ongoing interpretive dynamic, to effectively comprehend what constitutes the imaginary of North.

“North”—A Transdisciplinary Study

In the work of Louis-Edmond Hamelin, concern is expressed about the inadequacy of geography to take into account the complexity and variability of the North. Since the boreal area is “one of the least known metaregions in the world,”²⁵ it has “fuelled imaginative creation.” As Hamelin wrote in 1974, “what we think of the North may stem more from the imagination than from measurable reality.”²⁶ “Based on tangible reality and the fruit of the imagination,”²⁷ cold worlds were first known “as cultural facts,”²⁸ which indicates the need for a pluridisciplinary approach²⁹ to grasp them. As we have seen, the creation of vocabulary can compensate, in part, for the gap; but the ground to be covered is vast and while a geographer can attempt to take stock of the manifestations of nordicity and winterity, he or she cannot replace other subject specialists. From the perspective of literary and cultural studies, the opening created by geography onto the pluridisciplinarity provides an opportunity to grasp the links between literature, discourse and culture on the one hand and

²⁵ Louis-Edmond Hamelin, « Aspects d’une conception du Nord dans une Commission internationale d’éducation, résultat d’un test », *Revue de géographie de Montréal*, vol. 28, n° 2, 1974, p. 188.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ Louis-Edmond Hamelin, 1974, p. 190-191.

²⁸ Louis-Edmond Hamelin, 2002, p. 34.

²⁹ « La notion même de région — un ensemble intégré et emboîté — de même que la présence de l’homme exigent une approche pluridisciplinaire. » (Louis-Edmond Hamelin, *Écho des pays froids*, Sainte-Foy, Presses de l’Université Laval, 1996, p. 211.)

territoriality or reality on the other hand. For example, when Hamelin defines all possible manifestations of winterity, the list includes many elements reflecting narratives and discursive forms. We can group these elements into a paradigm of “literary winterity,” add to the list from our perspective, and enrich it with the historic and discursive layers of the texts we study. Every element—from snow and sliding sports to Christmas festivities, carnivals, ice bridges, winter blues, log runs, frost and survival—points toward a type of discourse that shares with the other elements of winterity a specific vocabulary and grammar. The North, a living world interlinking natural and human characteristics, organized series of intellectual acts, bearing, within a circumscribed territory, reference to systems of thought, knowledge, vocabularies, intercultural grammars, representations in art and literature, the expression of opinions, economic, political and territorial applications as well as ways of being,³⁰ requires, if it is to be comprehended, a “holistic” approach based on what we call an “ecology of the imaginary,” in which each element determines the others in a diachronic and associative network.

A Laboratory for the Study of Representations of the North, Winter and the Arctic

On the basis of a collective effort involving the analysis of about a thousand literary texts and films, we have identified, in an ongoing project in Montréal, called the International Laboratory for the Multidisciplinary Study of Representations of the North, a number of figures, components, comparisons and recurring narrative schemata in works on the “North”, “Winter”, the “Arctic” and the “Antarctic“. We have found that the figures of the Inuit, settler, Scandinavian, Viking, Amerindian, scientific, artist, gold digger, trader, missionary and explorer, in particular, have been used to “northify” works. Gabrielle Roy, for example, includes a Scandinavian character (in *The Hidden Mountain*, 1961) to emphasize the Nordic aspects of her work. Elements such as icebergs, polar bears, the cold, the northern lights, the absence of reference points, desolation, solitude, remote places, nomadic way of life, refuge and the cabin, the predominance of the colours blue

³⁰ Louis-Edmond Hamelin, 2002, p. 45-46.

and white, the snow, and the absence of trees can all be used to create a Nordic setting. Comparisons with the desert, the sea or the biblical world often accompany these elements. Narrative schemata, such as the impossibility of inaction, the journey changed by climatic phenomenon or the physical exploration that becomes a spiritual quest, are regularly found in works on the North. These figures, elements, narrative schemata, and modes of representation and reception give rise to the many worlds of the “North” that are represented in works and that constitute both the overarching unity of the works and their specificity as to genre and perspective.

The approach we have used to identifying the figures, elements, colours, places, characteristics and discursive schemata that make up the “idea of North” is based on a collective, dialectic, transnational and transgeneric process. By analyzing and reinterpreting works of fiction that correspond, in one way or another, to the concepts of “Nordicity” and “winterity” put forward by Hamelin, we are building both a historic framework that takes into account the aesthetics and dominant genres of the works, and a series of manifestations that illustrates the ways in which “North” is comprehended, represented and interpreted. The reading of these works, as part of a project in which graduate students and various researchers are participating, has enabled us to establish a preliminary list of the localities, types of places, elements, characteristics and figures that are found in the works, and to come back and reinterpret the excerpts compiled in the data banks. Each new reading must, dialectically, influence the list of criteria that define the idea of North and enable us to modify the list so that it takes the growing diversity of the works into account. These criteria are not defined deductively, but rather inductively: as works corresponding to one of the criteria are amassed, a definition is proposed on the basis of excerpts from the works. This definition is then used in the reading of subsequent works. Thus, through this dynamic process—which may seem heavy, but that has the advantage of remaining open to diversity and sensitive to the new propositions included in it—an increasingly broad and complex picture is painted of what may be called a “grammar of the idea of North.”

Like a language system, this forever incomplete “grammar” functions according to a paradigmatic and associative pattern. All

the excerpts from the literary, cinematographic, pictorial and promotional works as well as theoretical texts that meet a criterion are included in a paradigm that illustrates the possible manifestations. For example, the criteria may be simple, such as “snow” and “silence,” or more complex, such as “elusive place,” “place as yet unnarrated,” “impossibility of inaction,” or “desolation,” but they all, in their multiplicity, take up a discursive, historic and interpretive layer. These criteria fit together in coded associations: one criterion alludes to another, but excludes certain others in a series that broadens into a network that makes sense. Let’s take a simple example—that of the gold digger. The representation of the gold digger alludes to a single place (the Yukon and Alaska); a time in history (the beginning of the 20th century); a type of narrative (the adventure story in literature, such as that of Jack London; the conquest gone array in film, such as *The Gold Rush* by Charlie Chaplin); types of places (those of escape, richness and utopia); certain elements of the North (alcohol, blizzard, physical challenge, inner trial, cold, solidarity, intercultural relations and refuge); and figures (brothel keeper, hotel operator and police officer). The gold digger is thus part of an associative network that includes and excludes certain characteristics of the grammar but that, like other representations, operates on two levels: that of a universal code related to the “idea of North” and that of the specificity of discourse in a context, place and narrative peculiar to it. Another example is the figure of explorer: the place is maritime, with tension toward the North Pole (or the Antarctic): here, the North is the end of the world, devoid of reference points, enveloped in mist and fog. The figure embarks on routes and paths that punctuate the work with intertextual references. The figure of explorer or captain is often linked with those of sailor, ship, ice and icebergs. One last example—that of missionary: the missionary is based on cold and suffering, inner trial and the absolute, but is associated with the figures of Amerindian, Inuit and trader. We could continue in this way for all figures, and repeat the exercise starting from elements and characteristics, or from places. In this analysis, we have studied the Nordic regions of Québec in order to show that each territory has led, in literature and discourse, to a type of narrative that is specific to it.

The open process that allows any new material analyzed to change the criteria — and by the same way, the elements which comprise the idea of “North” in discourse — make it possible to broaden the corpus at any time: for example, to integrate the works of the Inuit and Same people at the time they are published, and then to update the representation of the North with the new discourse that appears and changes the European and American views on this territory. In the end, our goal is to grasp the North in all its complexity, divergences and diversity.

Until now, this project led to the elaboration of a vast corpus of cultural representations in the form of network of databases which includes more than 30,000 digitalized works — in literature, visual arts, popular culture and medias — which are described and qualified according to the concept of “nordicity” and 300 different criteria linked to the imagination of the North, Winter and the Arctic. These databases constitute the largest documentation centre about the cultural representations of the North. It also forms a vast corpus which can be analyzed by students and researchers, and used by artists and writers to create new works. To support and disseminate this research, we also created three book series: one to republish historically important works; one to publish essays and finally an iconographical album series, always published in a trilingual format, using for each book a different set of languages used in the North.

Simple elements—such as ice and snow—in the representation of “North,” defined as discourse, go beyond the semantic layer they seem to cover. The universality of “North,” like the national, generic, historic, genre-related and geographic particularities it encompasses, leads us to question the relationship between not only geography and discourse, but also the real and the imaginary—a relationship in which the demands of the real are not excluded, but in which discourse is constructed like a changing whole that can be grasped only in its constant movement in the narrations, images and forms that underlie it.