

Wilfrid Laurier University

Scholars Commons @ Laurier

---

English and Film Studies Faculty Publications

English and Film Studies

---

10-6-2015

## Caribou, Petroleum, and the Limits of Locality in the Canada–US Borderlands

Jenny Kerber

*Wilfrid Laurier University*, [jkerber@wlu.ca](mailto:jkerber@wlu.ca)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholars.wlu.ca/engl\\_faculty](https://scholars.wlu.ca/engl_faculty)



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), and the [Indigenous Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Jenny Kerber (2015) Caribou, Petroleum, and the Limits of Locality in the Canada–US Borderlands, *American Review of Canadian Studies*, 45:3, 332-345, DOI: 10.1080/02722011.2015.1063522

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English and Film Studies at Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in English and Film Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact [scholarscommons@wlu.ca](mailto:scholarscommons@wlu.ca).

## “Caribou, Petroleum, and the Limits of Locality in the Canada-US Borderlands”

Jenny Kerber

Abstract:

This article discusses Karsten Heuer’s 2006 book *Being Caribou* in light of debates in ecocriticism and border studies about how to define the local in the context of environmental problems of vast range and uncertain temporality. It explores how Heuer’s book about following the Porcupine Caribou herd’s migration engages in multiple forms of boundary crossing—between countries, between hemispheric localities, and between species—and shows how insights from Indigenous storytelling complicate the book’s appeal to environmentalist readers by asserting a prior, transnational Indigenous presence in the transboundary landscapes of present-day Alaska and the Yukon.

Keywords: ecocriticism; border studies; Canadian literature; caribou; Indigenous knowledge

Inuit and First Nations peoples of the Western Arctic have long recognized the importance of caribou as teachers. In the epic story cycle of the Inuit hero Qayaq, there is an episode in which Qayaq expresses his desire to cross the human–animal divide and “become caribou.” To embody the beauty and fleet-footedness of the caribou seems to Qayaq a wonderful thing, and he longs to be a part of their community. In Lila Kiana Oman’s Inupiat version of this story, Qayaq approaches the caribou and asks to be initiated into their herd: “If I may, I would like to become one of you and go wherever you go,” Qayaq says. “I do not care what happens to me” (Oman 68). The lead caribou grants Qayaq’s wish, but before he is transformed, he is also given a warning: “When we are aware of strangers, we run as fast as we can. Be always ready to run for your life. [...] When you start, you must always keep your eyes on the distant horizon. If you do not, you will not keep up with us. You will be stumbling on everything in your path. This you must never forget” (Oman 68).

Qayaq joins the herd, and it is not long before he comes to understand that the life of the caribou is not to be idealized. The precarity of their existence first comes home to him when he stumbles because he's not looking far enough ahead, and narrowly escapes being caught by a wolf. Soon after, he is nearly speared by a human hunter, experiencing once again the terror of a brush with death (Oman 71). Eventually, Qayaq becomes a human being again, but not before he gains a new respect for those fellow creatures that provide humans with clothing, shelter and food.

When I first heard this episode of the epic as related by the Anishnabe writer and critic Armand Garnet Ruffo a couple of years ago, Ruffo made the point that *story* is the mechanism by which the people who hear it get to run in the hoofprints of the caribou, learning respect and empathy for those animals that give them life.<sup>1</sup> How different might our world be, he asked, if *we* could run with the caribou? How might our relations with the plants, animals, and places that give us life be different if we could imagine ourselves in their places, if only for a short while? One might say that the story of Qayaq is just that, a "story." But Ruffo suggests that we ask a different question: "is it a story *for me*?" What does it mean for those of us living in the south to come to a better understanding of the wonder and precarity of the lives of these seemingly remote Northern animals, as Qayaq does?

I begin with the story of Qayaq because it helps to shed light on a more recent attempt to bridge the distance between the worlds of humans and other animals in the far North—one undertaken by the Alberta biologist Karsten Heuer and his partner, filmmaker Leanne Allison, and documented in Heuer's 2006 book *Being Caribou*. In their attempt to follow the Porcupine Caribou herd on its spring migration from the Yukon and Northwest Territories to its calving grounds in Alaska, Heuer and Allison not

only traverse the political boundaries dividing nations and the ecological boundaries of different biomes and seasons, but they also struggle with the question of whether it is possible to walk (or ski) in the hoofprints of another species. Part of their motivation is political, for the place where the herd calves every summer is in the middle of the 1002 lands, an ecologically sensitive area within Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge that some advocates of US energy security want to open to oil drilling. Although the caribou are protected in Canada by two national parks that abut the Canada-US border, long-term protection for the caribou in their sensitive calving grounds is less certain (it depends on the annual renewal of a Congressional moratorium in Washington, DC). The herd currently consists of more than 100,000 animals, but drilling in the calving grounds would likely result in a precipitous drop in population.

To "be caribou" in this story is to wrestle with boundary questions at a number of levels. The fact that the Porcupine Caribou traversed landscapes of the Western Arctic for thousands of years before the territorial boundary between Canada and the United States was surveyed in 1911 would seem to support claims for a bioregional understanding of the region's ecology and history. Building on Dan Flores' early advocacy of a bioregional approach to North American history in the 1990s, as well as the work of thinkers like the American poet and deep ecologist Gary Snyder and Canadian scholar Laurie Ricou, arguments for studying North American culture according to ecological contours such as watersheds or species distributions have presented important counterpoints to the tendency to privilege often arbitrary political boundaries over ecological ones.<sup>2</sup> Over the past few decades, bioregional arguments have significantly shaped boundary discourse in a number of fields, including geography, political ecology, and literary studies.<sup>3</sup> As Ricou points out in his book *Salal*, thinking about a native plant or animal as *text* invites new

ways of thinking about how to read places and place-based identities across political boundaries (12–13). Such an approach has drawn greater attention to lines of cultural continuity between humans living on either side of the Canada–US border, and it has also illustrated some of the profound and persistent consequences that natural features have had on human development.

At the same time, it is worth remembering that this relationship is not one-way, for human boundaries also have consequences on the physical environment. In some cases, such boundaries can even *become* ecological over time, leading to the creation of different vegetation patterns, animal communities, and conservation practices on either side of political lines.<sup>4</sup> To complicate matters further, the boundaries of bioregions often reveal themselves to be more porous than restrictive, open to mixtures of species and generative of hybrid, dynamic landscapes that blend the influences of both culture and nature.<sup>5</sup> In other words, there are many contingent, overlapping, and contextual factors at play in the relationship between natural phenomena and political boundaries. Sometimes political boundaries do not greatly affect the flows of nature, while at other times they make all the difference. The impact of political boundaries on the interpretation and management of nonhuman nature can, in some cases, *remake* nature and its attendant meanings according to directives issuing from places—such as national capitals—that are geographically remote from the border space in question.<sup>6</sup>

When it comes to the transboundary region of Alaska and the Yukon, an area that has been relatively under-studied compared to North American border regions such as the Pacific Northwest and the desert Southwest, environmental storytelling also involves paying attention to different national narratives about nature. For instance, the cultural mythology promoting Alaska as “America’s Last Frontier,” a place of untapped resource

potential or therapeutic wilderness, carries a somewhat different resonance than longstanding Canadian depictions of the North as a harsh and unforgiving landscape.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, sitting between these two narratives are those of the Indigenous peoples who have lived in this region for thousands of years. In their claims for the protection of the Porcupine Caribou herd's migration paths and calving grounds, the Inupiat, Inuvialuit, and Gwich'in tribes of Yukon and Alaska assert other forms of territoriality and sovereignty, making claims that are strongly linked to the past even as they forge strategic alliances with environmental discourses more familiar to audiences in southern regions.<sup>8</sup>

In the development-versus-conservation battles that raged over the transboundary Western Arctic, and especially the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) in the wake of September 11, 2001, Heuer says that what was missing for him was the "story of the caribou herd itself" (9). In order to tell the story of the Porcupine Caribou herd in *Being Caribou*, Heuer and Allison must undergo a personal transformation: being caribou, they soon discover, demands giving up the attachment to fixed goals or predictions, and giving oneself over to the contingencies of ever-changing Arctic conditions (11–12). It also demands a metamorphosis of the human body; as Heuer and Allison struggle to keep up with the often relentless pace of the migration, their bodies (and minds) must adjust to erratic sleep schedules, to walking for hours carrying heavy packs, and later, to constant physical touch with one another as they stay in their tent for days during the calving so as not to disturb the expectant mothers. At other times, their movements, and those of the caribou, are shaped by larger geophysical processes, such as wind, storms, and the emergence of insects.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to the limits of human physiology, the seeming inscrutability of the animal world also often frustrates Heuer's ability to track and describe the caribou's movements using conventional scientific frameworks.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, he discovers that scientists who have preceded him have sometimes turned to figurative language in order to describe the migration of the herd. For instance, one report reads as follows:

*The migrating herd can be imagined as a giant amoeba gradually shifting its mass northward by a process that entails the rapid streaming of cytoplasm (caribou) in some sections, while elsewhere the cytoplasm is hardly moving at all or is slowly flowing in different directions. Yet the overall effect is one of a coordinated reorganization that eventually transfers the cell (Porcupine herd) to a position along the coastal regions of the Yukon and northeast Alaska. Each spring this shift occurs in a unique combination of cytoplasmic withdrawals and amalgamations but always produces a similar distribution by early June. (68)*

What is notable here is the way that the author of this report employs metaphor to bring together radically different scales, using imagery borrowed from microbiology to describe the macroscopic movements of the herd. Despite being composed of over 100,000 animals, the herd moves as an autopoietic organism, its contours definable even as its contact with the environment results in a shape that is never fixed.

I want to suggest that this authorial strategy of trafficking between micro- and macro-scales is one that Heuer often uses to draw connections between the local world of the caribou, on the one hand, and the politics of nation states and global appetites for petroleum, on the other. At times, the nation-state plays a paradoxical role in these relations, for while it greatly influences the kinds of jurisdictions through which the herd has to pass, its immediate significance to Heuer and Allison's experiences of the Arctic landscape is minimal. As Heuer writes: "No markers, no flags, and no guards greeted us at the Alaska-Yukon boundary [...]. All we saw was a line of caribou tracking across the

border without altering their step. It was cold and misty, but we stopped to film anyway, reminding an imaginary audience about the importance of this invisible line” (96).

The fact that Heuer and Allison stop to record their border crossing for an *absent* human audience points to the importance of decisions made in remote places for the lives and livelihoods of northern residents. This moment in the book also speaks to the fact that they see their audience as largely located elsewhere, composed of readers and viewers who will in turn pressure their political representatives to make sure that the moratorium on drilling in ANWR continues. Indeed, the “nature” that they produce through word and image via the aid of tools like GPS, satellite phones, and paper maps, is one designed primarily for consumption by southern audiences. As geographer Joy Parr points out in her book *Sensing Changes*, “no place is merely local” (3). This idea is especially applicable to the stories of those migratory species that arrive on the coastal plain of Alaska every summer, since for them this place is not “a world apart,” but one deeply connected to other places and actions. The caribou of the transboundary Western Arctic thus invite readers to think about how concepts like “eco-cosmopolitanism” or a “transnational ethics of place” might include the rights of nonhuman species as well as geographically disperse human groups who are disproportionately affected by things like pollution, resource extraction, and climate change.<sup>11</sup> One of the limits of a more traditional bioregionalist perspective, Rob Nixon has argued, is that it can result in a kind of “spatial amnesia” whereby the “specificity and moral imperative of the local typically opens out not into the specificities of the transnational but into transcendental abstraction” (238). Such abstraction can also have temporal implications, for environmental problems with delayed or gradual cumulative effects often fail to generate the kinds of media attention devoted to more immediate and spectacular ecological disasters.

When it comes to the caribou, Heuer keeps the specificities of the transnational in the foreground, focusing on decisions about drilling made in the United States as the chief factor affecting local experience in the coastal plain. However, given that climate change may ultimately prove the greater threat to the animals' existence over the long term, I would argue that he might have equally focused on Canada and its environmental policies, especially given the expansion of the Alberta oil sands and the nation's gradual withdrawal from international treaties on climate action. As climate change accelerates, it is the shifting boundaries of things like ecozones, ice formations, and phenological patterns that may present the most acute threats to Arctic species.<sup>12</sup> For instance, changing precipitation patterns and melting glaciers could affect how and where the caribou cross great Northern rivers on their migration routes, and this in turn might have ripple effects on the wolves that follow the herds and take advantage of their hesitancy at water crossings.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, changes in snow conditions can affect caribou travel and access to low-growing plants in the winter, and an earlier arrival of spring might put the emergence of nutrient-packed sedge flowers out of synchronization with the arrival of pregnant females on the coastal plain.<sup>14</sup> Thus, while the possibility of oil drilling in ANWR presents a visceral and immediate threat to the caribou's ability to reproduce, it is the aggregation of a billion or more daily activities and choices made in places remote from the Yukon and Alaska that might end up posing the gravest threat to the herd's survival. For the environmental writer and artist, the challenge that climate change presents to aesthetic representation is in fact similar to the challenge facing those who seek to document the Porcupine caribou in word and image: he or she must toggle between a focus on the individual, which offers a concrete means of empathetic

identification, and an awareness that it is the herd (or the human species) that possesses the capacity to inscribe its presence on the earth in lasting ways.<sup>15</sup>

Although its connection to these issues might not seem immediately obvious, I want to argue that the story of Qayaq actually presents a good means of thinking through Parr's observation that "no place is merely local." Although Indigenous stories are often approached as articulations of very local knowledge, in fact the Qayaq epic offers a good example of transnationalism at work, for versions of it are part of the traditions of Inuit groups in Canada, the US, and Greenland. In each case, the telling of such a story becomes a means of thinking through what it means to be Inuit, a sense of peoplehood that spans historical, geographical, and linguistic difference even as it acknowledges specific regional designations (for instance, such as Inuvialuit or Inupiat).<sup>16</sup> Instead of thinking about Indigenous people and the species they hunt exclusively as local 'victims' of transnational decisions, the epic of Qayaq points to some of the ways that Indigenous people themselves might be thought of as transnational actors, and their stories may offer insight into how to better fit together ecological consciousness with transnational existence.

In some ways it is unfortunate that Heuer does not attend to the story of Qayaq in his book, for it enacts precisely the kind of bridging of scales and social milieus that he insists are necessary to developing greater ecological awareness. For all of the ways that Heuer's book succeeds in stretching readers' imaginations to think beyond the local, or even the bioregional, to the global scale of biotic life, the way his narrative participates in a predominantly white tradition of wilderness adventure writing at times risks overshadowing Indigenous understandings of the human relationship to caribou. In Heuer's book, encounters with caribou are framed as a choice rather than a necessity, and

nature is often regarded as something that needs to be cordoned off from human interference. In contrast, Indigenous people like the Inupiat, Inuvialuit, and Gwich'in understand predation as part of a common and necessary struggle to preserve life.<sup>17</sup>

At the beginning of the book, Heuer recounts meeting several Gwich'in elders in the Yukon village of Old Crow before he and Allison set out on their journey. One of them recounts how his ancestors followed the caribou on snowshoes and foot—not because they'd *wanted* to, but because it was what they had to in order to survive. ““Back then people could talk to caribou, and caribou could talk to people,”” he says (Heuer 17). Heuer does not elaborate on these comments, but the elder's point about following the caribou out of necessity marks an important distinction between Indigenous understandings of these animals, and the motivations that inform Heuer and Allison's pursuit of them. Heuer's text appeals strongly to a discourse of wilderness adventure that plays well with southern audiences, but as Robert Wishart explains, Gwich'in ideas of what it means to be 'wild' are in fact quite different from Heuer's expressed hope at the end of the book that the caribou will remain “wild and free” (233). The Tetlin Gwich'in, for example, have historically tended to discourage observing caribou for aesthetic pleasure; indeed, Wishart says that Gwich'in people almost never talk about going out to “look at things,” because they see it as a possible intrusion into the caribou's country that might “bother” them and cause them to *become wild* (Wishart 86), meaning that they will no longer present themselves to humans to be hunted.<sup>18</sup> Whereas wilderness discourse usually presumes some freedom from human intrusion for animals and other species and spaces, for the Gwich'in, landscape is “not glossed by the opposition between people and nature; but rather it is catalogued through stories of interactions between people and the land” (Wishart 85–86).<sup>19</sup> When the Gwich'in are living in what they define as an

“appropriate” manner, they refrain from trailing the caribou outside of specific hunting times, and as a result, the caribou continue to come back to them (Wishart 87).

When it comes to Heuer and Allison’s mission to bring awareness to the threats to the Porcupine Caribou herd, the idea of “appropriateness” presents readers with some intriguing tensions. On one hand, they would seem to be behaving “inappropriately” by Gwich’in standards, since so much of their account is focused on seeking out the caribou in order to document them with cameras, sound equipment, and notepads; on the other hand, however, the way in which their book and film end up resonating with a wider circle of southern audiences also suggests that that their acts of observation constitute a politically astute means of bringing attention to the effects of consumption on the lives of Northern “persons” (and here, the idea of “persons” includes both Indigenous humans and nonhumans like caribou, since for the Gwich’in and Inuit people there is no hard and fast distinction between animals and humans—the actions in one sphere bear a direct message for the other) (Anderson 13).<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps one of the main challenges here involves walking the line between cultural and ecological “appropriateness,” being careful not to confuse what might seem to be politically “appropriate” measures for saving the caribou (at least from an environmental standpoint) with the appropriation and absorption of Indigenous ways of knowing into frameworks that turn those ways of knowing into mere “data” few Gwich’in or Inuit elders would recognize as representative of their world views. Mark Nuttall notes that an alignment with the discourses of international environmentalist groups has sometimes proven useful to Aboriginal peoples, especially when it comes to focusing political attention on issues in the North. However, the translation of Indigenous ways of knowing into a contemporary environmentalist register can also sometimes

override the diversity of views on things like petro-development among and within Aboriginal groups (67, 87).<sup>21</sup> To Heuer's credit, his narrative of the caribou does make room for the expression of Indigenous views that might be at odds with a wilderness ethic, especially in its portrayal of the Gwich'in woodsman James Itsi, who takes Heuer and Allison out on a caribou hunt. In his conversation with Heuer, Itsi laments a lack of employment for educated young people in his homeland, and wonders why the Gwich'in should not share in the proceeds of resource extraction:

“Why shouldn't we have everything that everyone else does?” he asked.

“Nice things from the store. You know what I'm talking about. [...] Freight is expensive. Things aren't cheap. [...] I've worked in those camps,” he said, hesitating. “On the drill rigs. They're warm, comfortable, have good food. Life is easy. That's why I'm so fit now; why, at sixty-two, I'm still a strong man.” (28)

Itsi's words do not elicit an immediate response from Heuer, but they do prompt some reflection on the uneasy fit between what southern environmentalists sometimes *want* Northern Indigenous people to represent (for instance, a staged portrayal of “sustainability” tailored to southern views), and the internal complexities of Indigenous lives and their ever-changing understandings of nonhuman nature. Heuer remarks, “Who was I to say that he and his daughters and his grandson shouldn't have everything everyone else did at the expense of nature? Who was I to talk about what was right and wrong, what was comfortable or not, with my new Gore-Tex pants and jacket and my camera and lenses slung around my hip?” (28).

In this reflection Heuer expresses discomfort with his own consumption of nature, yet the economic vocabulary he employs also points to the difficulty of smoothly

translating the ideas of one culture into another. In this case, the idea that satisfying human needs and desires necessarily comes at the “expense of nature” denies the kind of intense *intra-activity* between human bodies and their environments that tend to inform Indigenous ethics of kinship.<sup>22</sup> The environment, in the view of the Gwich’in and the Inuit, is not a static or external store of resources to be drawn upon (and depleted) at will, nor is the Arctic a site of freedom in which the rugged individual might find liberation from attachments. Rather, their understanding of the environment is underpinned by an emphasis on social relatedness among people, animals, plants, geology, weather, and the spirit forces that are inherent in them. The environment is also understood as a place of risk (compared with the idea of being *at risk*), and elaborate systems of belief and moral codes related via myth and story are then constantly tested in the context of daily survival.<sup>23</sup> To translate this system of understanding into an economic language of credits and debits does not quite capture the meaning of the extensive sharing traditions that have defined the dynamic interrelations between culture and nature in the Arctic for centuries.

As Julie Cruikshank observes, encounters between humans and nature may generate insight on all sides, but encounters do not guarantee understanding (*Do Glaciers* 10). Indeed, she points out that one of the problems with things like TEK (traditional ecological knowledge) is that the processes by which it is gathered risk reifying the meanings of abstract concepts rooted in local knowledge. This is why we need to attend to those stories Indigenous people tell that *do not* fit easily into non-Indigenous bureaucratic, economic, or scientific vocabularies, or that fit uneasily within the emotional registers of North American environmentalism. She rightly worries about the expectation that “indigenous traditions should provide answers to problems created by modern states in terms convenient to modern states” (“Uses” 22). Whereas taxonomic

schemes like TEK can “stagnate and drain the content from their categories” (27) fragmenting human experience into bite-sized parcels, Cruikshank argues that stories have the capacity to surprise, and to complicate universalizing, commonsense expectations about what we mean by knowledge (“Uses” 32). They also provide a key means by which people understand and express their environmental connections, and inform their development of new ecological relationships and actions.<sup>24</sup>

Drawing on Cruikshank’s observation about the capacity of stories to complicate expectations about what we mean by environmental knowledge, I now want to turn to another set of stories about fence-making and ecology that have received little sustained attention in environmental discussions of the Porcupine Caribou herd and their protection across different political jurisdictions. This set of stories arises from the creation of caribou fences built by the Gwich’in to channel small portions of the migrating herd into pocket corrals where they could be trapped and killed using snares, spears, and bows and arrows. The fences, known as *Tthal* in the Gwich’in language, were constructed of timber and babiche, and were strategically situated at different points across the Western Arctic landscape. They were widely used until the introduction of repeating firearms by white traders in the late nineteenth century.<sup>25</sup> Today, the remaining traces of these fences in Alaska and the Yukon, some of them originally many miles long, is evidence of a high degree of social coordination, knowledge of animal movements and different seasonal conditions on the part of those who used them. The fences also illustrate a sense of property among the Gwich’in, for both mid-nineteenth century expeditionary accounts and Gwich’in oral history suggest that the fences were hereditary possessions of the families by whom they were constructed (Vuntut 89). Such fences, which required groups of fifteen to forty-five people to operate and maintain them, suggest that Indigenous

peoples were cooperatively engaged in drawing lines on the land well before colonial arrival, and that the boundaries they made were flexible technologies designed to serve an immediate, local purpose: that of providing meat for large groups of people by capitalizing on cumulative knowledge about the seasonal movements and habits of a keystone species.

In a 1977 interview translated and transcribed in the collaborative oral history *People of the Lakes* (2009), Vuntut Gwich'in elder Moses Tizya describes the different kinds of fences that were used in winter and summer on either side of what later became the Canada–US boundary:

They used nothing but bow and arrows and snares. Just bow and arrows in those days. What they did was in the wintertime, they made fences with trees, brush, things like that, and then they set lots of snares. [They made the fences by] Old Crow, anywhere, any place in the country, not only in one place. [They drove] a big bunch of caribou in those snares.

But the other caribou fences [summer] were different altogether. There are lots of them over there now, they say [north of Old Crow in the hills surrounding Crow Flats, west into Alaska and east to the Northwest Territories]. If you go to Crow Flats with Dr. Irwin, you're going to see lots of them, old things. They're a different thing again, that's Native poles or something [made from cut poles]. They're still there. (Vuntut 90)

In Tizya's comments on decision making about how and where to create fence lines, one can see the formation of knowledge that troubles the divide between what might conventionally be understood as "scientific" versus "non-scientific" knowledge. After explaining how the fences were used and the caribou's patterns of movement, Tizya remarks that "[It's a] story; I haven't seen it" (90). Some readers might encounter Tizya's remarks and proceed to question the legitimacy of his account. However, the material remnants of the fences and the collective, place-specific nature of oral history together suggest that a great deal of care goes into passing on knowledge about how Gwich'in people have interacted with their environment over time. The creation and

communication of such knowledge is not “scientific” in the Western sense, yet within the Gwich’in context it communicates valuable information about human relationships to caribou. Though it is beyond the immediate scope of this essay, such knowledge might be taken up as a case example for exploring what scholars in science and technology studies call “boundary work,” a term used to refer to the social processes by which knowledge claims become legitimized with the status of “science” (Gieryn 781–95; Pritchard 13–14). In Heuer’s book, we see a struggle to integrate the understandings, vocabularies, and practices of Indigenous people with the discourses of wildlife biology that compose the bulk of Heuer’s formal training. I would suggest that the caribou fences and their accompanying knowledge might lend another dimension to this struggle, for acknowledging the presence and legitimacy of pre-colonial cultural lines on the landscape might defuse some of the wilderness claims upon which Heuer bases his defense of the caribou, even as they could bolster scientific assertions about herd movement and distribution.

By the late 1990s, when Old Crow elders and community members formally gathered to discuss how their oral history should be collected, their first priority was to collect information about how they lived on the land and how the land should be looked after because in their view “there are hard times coming” for the next generation (Vuntut xxxiii).<sup>26</sup> In particular, several expressed worry that without preserving a few of the remaining caribou fences and embedding the stories of their use within collective memory, the deteriorating structures might soon vanish, thereby leaving their young people without a storied connection to the landscape and a grounded ethic of how to live within it. Some of the elders’ stories about caribou fences also offer added insights into how colonial influences destabilized pre-contact family structures and hunting practices.

For instance, Elder Moses Tizya comments that after the arrival of guns in Gwich'in territory the use of caribou fences declined. He then adds, almost offhandedly, "then by that time, people were all finished, all died off anyway" (Vuntut 90). Elder Myra Kay similarly notes that at one time the great leader "*Ch'eeghwalti* had a [caribou] fence around there ["there" being *Chiitsii vihtr'ih tthal*, or a place near the headwaters of the Driftwood River] but they all left. There used to be a lot of people there but they all died from starvation" (Vuntut 92–93). The arrival of guns and disease thus had profound effects on the Gwich'in and their relationship to game such as the caribou. The drawing of the international boundary line in 1911 in turn further hindered the remaining Gwich'in's ability to draw a livelihood from the land, for the crafting of different land claims agreements and travel restrictions made it difficult to travel across the boundary in search of animals (Vuntut 153, 243).

Despite colonial history's tendency to privilege its own heroic narratives of boundary making, the traces of caribou fences in the Western Arctic serve as reminders both of Indigenous presence and the effects of ecological imperialism on Northern residents in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Were it not for the persistence of oral history and its attachment to specific places, those rotting wooden fences might become what Rob Nixon refers to as ghost habitats, "ecological shadows of a once powerful presence in the landscape, traces from which one can reconstruct what might otherwise appear to have vanished entirely" (250). Yet while the fences and their accompanying stories recall the harm done to those families who once used and maintained them, today the ongoing presence of the Gwich'in, their stories, and their relationship with caribou in the transboundary region also continue to frustrate the wishes of neocolonial interests that these troublesome Natives might vanish entirely. As long as

the memory of caribou fences and their uses remains in the land, and as long as the Gwich'in continue their relationship with caribou through story and the hunt, the idea of places like Old Crow, Yukon Flats, or ANWR as the "last uncharted wilderness" remain open to challenge.

Towards the end of *Being Caribou*, Karsten Heuer briefly acknowledges that one of the most important stories that the Gwich'in elders earlier shared with him is the story about how in the time of the ancestors, "people could talk to caribou, and caribou could talk to people" (17). This story presents a mode of understanding that also informs the story of Qayaq with which I began. In the end, I'd suggest that Indigenous stories like that of Qayaq or the oral history of the caribou fences *do* turn out to be stories for Heuer, and stories for us, in that they prompt their hearers to cultivate greater respect for the complexities of how people of the North understand animals—that is, not as anthropomorphized or "wild" figures, nor as a natural resource, but as part of a cycle of birth, consumption, and death that *includes* human beings (Anderson 14). As the example of the caribou fences shows, this cycle has also included forms of boundary making for a very long time, thus challenging the idea that the act of drawing lines on the land belongs exclusively to colonial authorities. Indeed, the caribou themselves might also be understood as authors who write their own lines on the land, leaving migratory trails etched by hoofs that have traversed certain crossings thousands of times. The fact that caribou calves seem to have to *learn* to migrate from their larger herd further suggests a sophisticated animal culture at work, one that relies on communal memory and that asserts a collective claim to place at least as strong as those of the Indigenous and settler humans who traverse it.<sup>27</sup>

To include ourselves in this more-than-human community, whether we live close to the caribou or thousands of miles away, is also to rethink the meaning of security in an era of climate change and accelerated fossil fuel consumption. For the Gwich'in, security lies in sharing the meat of the hunt with everybody, and in properly acknowledging the spirits of the animals and the land that gives them life. For Heuer and Allison, security comes to mean giving up the individual impulse to control one's environment, and attempting to live with a greater awareness of the "widening circles" beyond one's immediate local ecosystem, considering how one's pursuit of a comfortable middle-class life in a place like Calgary might affect the capacity of seemingly remote Northern animals to flourish (Heuer 200).<sup>28</sup> Ultimately, the ability to take a wider view—whether by considering disparate geographies linked by the fossil fuel economy, or by reading the traces of indigenous infrastructure that continue to haunt Western myths of progress and *terra nullius*—works against the tendency towards spatial and temporal amnesia that perpetuates injustice, whereby boundaries are drawn and argued over as though local inhabitants don't exist.<sup>29</sup> Where Heuer's book does important ecocritical work in two key areas—destabilizing the boundaries that separate humans from animals, and prompting southern readers to reflect on how their choices affect the lives of Arctic residents—the caribou fences in turn serve as powerful 'postcolonial' reminders of the often incommensurable, place-based character of local knowledges. If the root of the "colonial" (Latin *colere*) means both to cultivate and to dwell, then as Laurie Ricou points out, "[t]he *post*-colonial will ask how the colony ecologizes" ("Botany" 355)—in other words, how it constructs a home in place. The story of Qayaq, who stumbles when he focuses only on short-term concerns, and the Gwich'in stories of caribou fences along the more northerly portions of the 141<sup>st</sup> meridian are two such acts of homemaking; together, they

generate some much-needed new forms of *decolonizing* talk across the permeable boundaries of people, animals, and landscapes in the Western Arctic.<sup>30</sup>

**Works Cited:**

- Alexander, Chief Dacho, Marilyn Savage, and Matthew Gilbert. "We'll Fight to Protect the Gwich'in Homeland and Our Way of Life: Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge." *Arctic Voices: Resistance at the Tipping Point*. Ed. Subhankar Banerjee. New York: Seven Stories, 2012. 468–85. Print.
- Anderson, David G. "Reindeer, Caribou and 'Fairy Stories' of State Power." *Cultivating Arctic Landscapes: Knowing and Managing Animals in the Circumpolar North*. Eds. David G. Anderson and Mark Nuttall. New York: Berghahn Books, 2004. 1–16. Print.
- Banerjee, Subhankar, ed. *Arctic Voices: Resistance at the Tipping Point*. New York: Seven Stories, 2012. Print.
- Banting, Pamela. "The Ontology and Epistemology of Walking: Animality in Karsten Heuer's *Being Caribou: Five Months on Foot with an Arctic Herd*." *Greening the Maple: Canadian Ecocriticism in Context*. Eds. Ella Soper and Nicholas Bradley. Calgary: U of Calgary P, 2013. 407–35. Print.
- Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2007.
- . "Posthumanist Performativity: How Matter Comes to Matter." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28.3 (2003): 801–31. Print.
- Binnema, Theodore. *Common and Contested Ground: A Human and Environmental History of the Northwest Plains*. 2001. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2004. Print.
- Brunn, Stanley D., et al. "Towards a Geopolitics of Life and Living: Where Boundaries Still Matter." *Holding the Line: Borders in a Global World*. Eds. Heather N. Nicol and Ian Townsend-Gault. Vancouver: U British Columbia P, 2005. 381-99. Print.
- Bukowczyk, John J., ed. *Permeable Border: The Great Lakes Basin as Transnational Region, 1650–1990*. Calgary: U of Calgary P, 2005. Print.
- Calef, George. *Caribou and the Barren-Lands*. Canadian Arctic Resources Committee. 1981. Willowdale, ON: Firefly Books, 1995. Print.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change." *New Literary History* 43.1 (2012): 1-18. Print.
- Chisholm, Dianne. "The Becoming-Animal of *Being Caribou*: Art, Ethics, Politics." *Rhizomes* 24 (2012). <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue24/chisholm.html>. Accessed September 1, 2014. Web.
- Cruikshank, Julie. *Do Glaciers Listen?: Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters, and Social Imagination*. Vancouver: U British Columbia P, 2005. Print.
- . "Uses and Abuses of 'Traditional Knowledge': Perspectives from the Yukon Territory." *Cultivating Arctic Landscapes: Knowing and Managing Animals in the Circumpolar North*. Eds. David G. Anderson and Mark Nuttall. New York: Berghahn Books, 2004. 17–32. Print.
- Dunaway, Finis. "Subhankar Banerjee and the Visual Politics of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge." *A Keener Perception: Ecocritical Studies in American Art History*. Eds. Alan C. Braddock and Christoph Irmscher. Tuscaloosa: U Alabama P, 2009. 254–74. Print.
- Evenden, Matthew. *Fish Versus Power: An Environmental History of the Fraser River*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2004. Print.
- Evenden, Matthew, and Graham Wynn. "54, 40 or Fight: Writing Within and Across Borders in North American Environmental History." *Nature's End: History and the*

- Environment*. Eds. Sverker Sörlin and Paul Warde. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 215–46. Print.
- Flores, Dan. “Place: An Argument for Bioregional History.” *Environmental History Review* 18.4 (1994): 1–18. Print.
- Fraser, Marian Botsford. *Walking the Line*. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1989. Print.
- Gieryn, Thomas F. “Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science: Strains and Interests in Professional Ideologies of Scientists.” *American Sociological Review* 48 (1983): 781–95. Print.
- Grace, Sherrill E. *Canada and the Idea of North*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s UP, 2001. Print.
- Heise, Ursula. *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. New York: Oxford UP, 2008. Print.
- Heuer, Karsten. *Being Caribou: Five Months on Foot with an Arctic Herd*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2006. Print.
- Jones, Karen. “From Big Bad Wolf to Ecological Hero: *Canis Lupus* and the Culture(s) of Nature in the American-Canadian West.” *American Review of Canadian Studies* 40.3 (2010): 338–50. Print.
- Kerber, Jenny. “Nature Trafficking: Writing and Environment in the Western Canada-US Borderlands.” *Greening the Maple: Canadian Ecocriticism in Context*. Eds. Ella Soper and Nicholas Bradley. Calgary: U of Calgary P, 2013. 199–225. Print.
- LaDow, Beth. *The Medicine Line: Life and Death on a North American Borderland*. New York: Routledge, 2001. Print.
- Lejano, Raul, Mrill Ingram, and Helen Ingram. *The Power of Narrative in Environmental Networks*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2013. Print.
- Martin, Keavy. *Stories in a New Skin: Approaches to Inuit Literature*. Winnipeg: U of Manitoba P, 2012. Print.
- Monani, Salma. “Wilderness Discourse in Adventure-Nature Films: The Potentials and Limitations of Being Caribou.” *ISLE* 19.1 (Winter 2012): 101-22. Print.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2011. Print.
- Nuttall, Mark. *Protecting the Arctic: Indigenous Peoples and Cultural Survival*. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic, 1998. Print.
- O’Brien, Susie. “Nature’s Nation, National Natures? Reading Ecocriticism in a Canadian Context.” *Canadian Poetry* 42 (1998): 17–41. Print.
- Oman, Lela Kiana. *The Epic of Qayaq: The Longest Story Ever Told By My People*. Eds. Priscilla Tyler and Maree Brooks. Ottawa: Carleton UP, 1995. Print.
- Parr, Joy. *Sensing Changes: Technologies, Environments, and the Everyday, 1953–2003*. Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 2010. Print.
- Poitras, Jacques. *Imaginary Line: Life on an Unfinished Border*. Fredericton: Goose Lane, 2011. Print.
- Pritchard, Sara B. “Joining Environmental History with Science and Technology Studies: Promises, Challenges, and Contributions.” *New Natures: Joining Environmental History with Science and Technology Studies*. Eds. Dolly Jørgensen, Finn Arne Jørgensen, and Sara B. Pritchard. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2013. 1–17. Print.
- Ricou, Laurie. *The Arbutus / Madrone Files: Reading the Pacific Northwest*. Edmonton: NeWest, 2002. Print.

- . “The Botany of the Liar.” *Tropes and Territories: Short Fiction, Postcolonial Readings, Canadian Writings in Context*. Eds. Marta Dvorak and W.H. New. Montreal and Ithaca: McGill-Queen’s UP, 2007. 346–56. Print.
- . *Salal: Listening for the Northwest Understory*. Edmonton: NeWest, 2007. Print.
- Rossiter, David. “Leave the Lemons at Home: Towards a Political Ecology of Border Space.” *Geopolitics* 16.1 (2011): 107–20. Print.
- Ruffo, Armand Garnet. Keynote Address. *Greenwords: Greenworlds: Environmental Literatures and Politics in Canada*. Conference hosted by the Sustainable Writing Lab at York University. Toronto, ON. October 2011.
- Snyder, Gary. “Coming Into the Watershed.” *A Place in Space*. Washington: Counterpoint, 1995.
- Stunden Bower, Shannon. *Wet Prairie: People, Land, and Water in Agricultural Manitoba*. Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 2011. Print.
- Taylor, Joseph E., III. “Boundary Terminology.” *Environmental History* 13.3 (2008): 454–81. Print.
- Thacker, Robert. “Erasing the Forty-ninth Parallel: Nationalism, Prairie Criticism, and the Case of Wallace Stegner.” *Essays on Canadian Writing* 61 (1997): 179–202. Print.
- . *The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination*. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1989. Print.
- Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation, and Shirleen Smith. *People of the Lakes: Stories of Our Van Tat Gwich’in Elders / Googwandak Nakhwach’anjòò Van Tat Gwich’in*. Edmonton: University of Alberta P, 2009. Print.
- Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation. “Caribou Fences Interactive.” Accessed May 30 2014. <[www.vgfn.ca/heritage/](http://www.vgfn.ca/heritage/)>. Web.
- Wishart, Robert P. “A Story about a Muskox: Some Implications of Tetlit Gwich’in Human–Animal Relationships.” *Cultivating Arctic Landscapes: Knowing and Managing Animals in the Circumpolar North*. Eds. David G. Anderson and Mark Nuttall. New York: Berghahn Books, 2004. 79-92. Print.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ruffo related this story at the *Greenwords/Greenworlds: Environmental Literatures and Politics* conference in Toronto in October 2011.

<sup>2</sup> See Flores 1–18; Snyder 219–235; and Ricou, *Arbutus* 6. For early arguments advocating the study of North American regional literatures that traverse the Canada–US boundary, see Thacker, as well as the Borderlands Project, which published a series of books and articles under the editorship of Lauren McKinsey and Victor Conrad in the early 1990s.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, the work of Laurie Ricou on the Pacific Northwest in literary studies, Beth LaDow and Ted Binnema on Prairie–Plains history, John J. Bukowskyk *et al* on the Great Lakes region, and Jacques Poitras on New Brunswick and Maine.

<sup>4</sup> On this point, see Brunn 383; Jones 348; and Kerber 210.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Stunden Bower 15; Ricou’s reading of species like salmon and salal in his works *The Arbutus/Madrone Files* and *Salal*; and Evenden and Wynn 237–8.

<sup>6</sup> See the arguments of Rossiter 109, 118; and Evenden’s *Fish Versus Power*.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Sherrill Grace notes a longstanding association between the North and a sense of danger in Canadian culture that stretches back through the works of Northrop Frye, Gaile McGregor, and Margaret Atwood (4, 32–33), while Finis Dunaway notes

---

how Alaska is often framed in the American imagination as either a frontier of untrammelled nature or economic possibility (255–57). The latter views of Alaska are especially evident in the political rhetoric surrounding ANWR and petroleum development. On the broader differences between American and Canadian understandings of natural history and its mediation, see O’Brien 24, 30–31, 34.

<sup>8</sup> See Joseph Taylor III’s assertion that “[t]he state is rarely the only locus of sovereignty, and an array of actors from individuals and aboriginal societies to environmental nongovernmental organizations (ENGOS) and multinational corporations (MNCs) have challenged state authority from within and without” (466).

<sup>9</sup> For more on ideas of being and becoming caribou via the activity of walking and submission to larger geological, meteorological, and biological factors, see Banting and Chisholm.

<sup>10</sup> I say “seeming” inscrutability here, because for the Indigenous people who live in this environment year round, the caribou are often easier to track. As the Gwich’in elder Charlie Thomas says, “When we trap for fur we see the caribou tracks: that’s how we know where to find them” (in Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation and Shirleen Smith 260).

<sup>11</sup> On “eco-cosmopolitanism,” see Heise; Rob Nixon explores the possibility of developing a “transnational ethics of place” in his book *Slow Violence* (243).

<sup>12</sup> See Marian Botsford Fraser’s prescient warning in 1989 that environmental changes that alter “the chemical balance of the landscape” in Canada–US border regions exercise a geophysical reach that the old border language of boundary markers, flags, and peace parks may no longer be able to fully articulate (205).

<sup>13</sup> For more on caribou behavior at river crossings, see Calef 95ff.

<sup>14</sup> See Calef 95, 153, 67.

<sup>15</sup> For more on the way contemporary climate science draws attention to the agency of ‘humanity’ (at the level of *species*) as a geophysical force, see Chakrabarty 11. For a good example of visual storytelling that blends discourses of distance and proximity in its portrayal of the Porcupine caribou, see Banerjee.

<sup>16</sup> On the idea of the Inuit as possessing a sense of a unified “peoplehood” that stretches far back in time, see Martin 15–19.

<sup>17</sup> For more on this point in relation to the film *Being Caribou* as an example of the adventure–nature genre, see Monani 103.

<sup>18</sup> This may account for at least one early reaction to Heuer and Allison’s project. The Inuvialuit Game Council, for example, responded to Heuer’s proposal to follow the caribou with the comment, “Unfortunately we don’t have the authority to stop you” (Heuer 13).

<sup>19</sup> See also Cruikshank’s observation that concepts of personhood and accompanying behavioral expectations surrounding kinship extend implicitly to animals on whom humans depend for survival. This is a common principle held across circumpolar regions (*Do Glaciers* 68, 268n44).

<sup>20</sup> Along similar lines, see Cruikshank’s discussion of northern Athapaskan and Tlingit peoples’ stories about glaciers that figure them as living, sentient beings (*Do Glaciers* 68–69).

<sup>21</sup> See also Alexander *et al* for a discussion of internal divisions among Gwich’in people about whether to allow oil and gas development on Indigenous-owned lands next to the Yukon Flats Wildlife Refuge in Alaska, an area that provides habitat for the Porcupine Caribou herd (468–85). There have also been some differences of opinion between the

---

Gwich'in and Alaskan Inupiat about how to approach petro-development in their homelands.

<sup>22</sup> On the concept of *intra-activity*, whereby matter in the world emerges out of, and indeed do not exist prior to, the tangle of intra-actions between different forms of agency, see the work of Karen Barad. To my mind there is considerable potential for fruitful dialogue between Indigenous environmental understandings and new materialist approaches in STS and feminist studies, but that is the subject of a whole other book.

<sup>23</sup> For more on Indigenous ways of knowing and acting in relation to the Arctic environment, see Nuttall 81-94; and Cruikshank's *Do Glaciers Listen?* On Gwich'in understandings of their relationship to the caribou, see Alexander *et al* 480; and the remarks of Van Tat Gwich'in elders in *People of the Lakes* xxviii–xxix, 61, 68–9, 72–8, 91.

<sup>24</sup> On this point, see also Lejano *et al* 1–3.

<sup>25</sup> For maps and photos that document the location of these fences in Gwich'in territory on either side of the Canada–US boundary, see Vuntut xxvii, lviii, 273; see also the Vuntut Gwich'in First Nation's interactive website: <http://www.vgfn.ca/heritage/>.

<sup>26</sup> There is of course a great deal that is lost in the editorial reworking of oral speech into written English, including the sense of embodied experience in particular places that often accompanies hearing oral stories. However, the Preface to *People of the Lakes* notes that “the speakers' identities still emerge in reading the excerpted transcripts,” and what was of overriding importance to the elders involved in the Van Tat Gwich'in oral history project was that their stories be accessible to the young people of their communities (xvii).

<sup>27</sup> On the need for young caribou to learn to migrate (rather than it being a purely “instinctual” drive) see Calef 41.

<sup>28</sup> The phrase “I live my life in widening circles / that reach out across the world” is one that Heuer borrows from the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke as an epigraph to the final chapter of *Being Caribou*.

<sup>29</sup> In this regard, the oral histories recorded in *People of the Lakes* join texts by other Indigenous writers including Thomas King, whose work troubles the colonial presumptions of the Canada–US boundary dividing southern Alberta from northern Montana, and Mohawk poets Peter Blue Cloud and Maurice Kenny, who question the impact of political boundary making along the St. Lawrence River.

<sup>30</sup> I wish to thank the two anonymous reviewers of this article for their helpful comments and suggestions, and to acknowledge the research support of a SSHRC Insight Development Grant to fund this work.