

NORTH, INTERRUPTED

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"North, Interrupted" discusses artists' use of both online data and data or research materials gathered from place to create works related to the Canadian North, indicating specific information related to climate change or human activity that impact the inhabitants and spaces of the North.



Figure 1. Polar Bear Space 1, Leslie Sharpe, 2009.



Figure 2. Proximities in Google Earth.



Figure 3. Oil, Caribou, Polar Bear layers in Google Earth.

North, Interrupted

I looked down at the lines from the window of a Twin Otter – etched onto the mountaintops cradling the Firth River I could see traces of caribou heading towards calving grounds – crisscrossing paths over places I could only see through a distant window.

I tried to find the lines later, on a close-up view in *Google Earth*. Longing to replicate the experience of flying between mountains where I could almost touch those paths, I hoped that I could zoom in closer, but I was lost in a mass of unmarked pixel-peaks, seemingly unexplored for those who wish to map it online.

In this view of *Google Earth*, Northern Yukon is a place dotted with minimal human experience and one can only imagine the existence of the animals and humans who move across that landscape. But those who build satellites seldom have the knowledge or needs of the North's inhabitants in mind, not unlike previous interlopers throughout history. (To wit: the 52 radar stations known as the 'DEW-line' built by the US Military during the Cold War in the Canadian Arctic were designed to protect Southerners from any Soviet missiles headed towards America, and then disassembled to leave only skeletons of unusable equipment and toxins for the locals to deal with.)

Any trace of animal or human existence and their northern experiences would have to be revealed by adding layers not evident in the satellite image, but added by the global web community (who may or may not be north).

I imported my own location – of my little tent in Ivavik National Park, and when I imported layers related to the surrounding area, I found the other evidence I sought, in lines of animals moving through the Arctic as they are tracked via telemetry, made by radio-collared animals such as Polar Bears tracked by *World Wildlife Foundation* on *Google Earth*, or the Porcupine Caribou, whose movements in Canada and Alaska are tracked as they unknowingly disregard human political borders.

Animal lines of movement created through telemetry reveal passage and habitat of animals, and along with other data, make clear why climate change and human development in the north have an impact on things we may not see or understand from the south. These lines are a form of data that bring direct experiences such as movement or weather data into systems and knowledge that can be folded into the multiple crisscrossing lines and ideas of 'north.'

Along with my own real experiences of the Canadian Arctic and SubArctic, I have been following these lines, such as the lines made by Polar Bear 3 or by several Porcupine Caribou, then interpreting and utilizing this animal movement data in various ways where one aim is to strip some of the romantic and colonizing views of north – views prolonged by both outsiders and insiders. These lines have found their way into my images and installations, as well as instruction works for choreographed performance which will take place when the snow hits northern Alberta this winter.

Fig. 1. Polar Bear Space 1, Leslie Sharpe, 2009.

In some images for this work, I try to assert the habitat of the animal as a geopolitical space – a nation of sorts – so that the range of a single polar bear is a force that might itself be a contender in the latest

battle for Arctic sovereignty. One can imagine Sarah Palin looking out her window and ‘seeing’ this as a foreign force to contend with.

I have encountered real caribou in real places (e.g., Victoria Island, NU/NWT, Fogo Island), but I have known ‘Iola’ and other caribou longer through following their movements online. I have been following ‘Iola’ along with Arnaq, Lucky, Bertha and other radio-collared caribou, as well as polar bears to create artworks from their tracked movements, and to understand how those movements are affected by changes in the arctic. Occasionally the line of movement of a tracked caribou stops when the collared animal has stopped transmitting. When a radio-collared caribou disappears in this tracking system, we don’t know whether the disappearance is evidence of battery breakdown – or evidence of their mortality. We only know they are no longer there as a virtual presence.

The mystery of their disappearance is fitting for the temporality, mutability, and disembodiment of online identities – the caribou is no longer transmitting, but she could reappear, and we begin to understand her as a series of dots, as movement, and her range as a data-line or subset of an intertwined virtual and real system of distanced awareness of North.

During an artist’s residency in a remote area of the Canadian Yukon’s Ivvavik National Park, I happened upon a chilling site while following an old placer mining trail. The site was a spot in the woods where a large blanket of caribou fur coated the earth. There were no bones in sight. The physical evidence made clear that this was a ‘kill’ site, where one caribou met a frenzied demise in a pack of wolves. I wondered about my online caribou ‘friend’ ‘Lucky,’ the online caribou who may not have been so lucky, and her eerie telemetric disappearance when the collar stopped transmitting. I wondered whether the brutality evident in the broad scattering of fur was similar to her last moments, or whether her collar battery had just stopped working. I hope Lucky’s name was fitting. But through the discovery of that kill site in Ivvavik, Lucky and the other transmitting caribou were no longer merely avatars or samples of data for me. They were now linked my field data set— a real-world research system gathered through non-technological methods, such as gathering caribou hair, walking in their tracks, recording sounds, or casting animal scat.

While I was in Ivvavik, I also transmitted and recorded my own locations and movements, using a SPOT locator and GPS as part of an ongoing project to place my own lines of movement in the Canadian North within other human and animal lines of North. While flying out of Ivvavik, the trace of animal scat and paths beneath my feet grew distant until the lines and land below disappeared from my view.

Once I got home, I downloaded my SPOT transmissions and GPS locations, and fed them into *Google Earth*. I inserted myself in the virtual landscape that represents Ivvavik on *Google Earth*, re-imagining walking over their paths as my own lines crossed where animals have been. And then I tried to find routes of animals in that area as I *turned the on World Wildlife Foundation Polar Bear tracking layer*. (Fig. 1. Proximities)

I wanted to see where the animal lines of movement were while I was in Ivvavik. Information about caribou movements is no longer delivered live, to discourage the research from being used by hunters, and I knew that in summer the polar bears would not be inland as I had been, but along the coast. We really had not been so close to each other, yet in a zoomed-out view, their lines seem seem close to my solitary ‘tent’ marker in a seemingly barren landscape. But the North has a myriad of presences and relationships that are not always seen by those who are not there. I opened more layers to see what else

might be in my line of movement if I were to imagine my location on the map as a short stop in the migration of a caribou. *I turned on more layers.*

Fig. 2 Oil, Caribou, Polar Bear layers.

Immediately visible in the layers imported from the *Sierra Club's* data on oil development in the North Slope of Alaska is the amount of human presence that impedes upon movements of animals in the north. The large X areas represent caribou habitat area in this view, however the actual area according to the Porcupine Caribou Management Board is much wider. Numerous studies have shown that caribou movements are affected by human presence, so we can reason that caribou migration patterns towards calving grounds on the north slopes of Alaska and Yukon may shift as a result of increased oil and mining exploration. Not evident in the map are the other shifts that will impact the movements and habitats of animals in the north – shifts created by climate change, which along with human activity will alter the north as we have known it.

In my contribution to the book *Far Field: Digital Culture, Climate Change and the North*, I detail ways in which 'ideas of north' and our cultural representations must shift as a result of climate change and human activity (such as mineral exploration, increased shipping with more open water, and military activities as northern governments try to assert sovereignty).

In that essay, I mention maps of animal and human presence in Lancaster Sound in Nunavut that were created from traditional knowledge contributed by Inuit who live in that region. "In the 1970s this area was mapped out for animal and human use (Inuit hunting and ship traffic, as well as early oil and gas exploration in the region). Inuit from the region provided valuable information about animal presence and hunting, and recently their traditional knowledge in the form of archival recordings and hand-drawn maps were digitized to produce a map showing lines of traditional Inuit land-use in the area. This map showing historical use proved invaluable in the recent blocking of seismic mapping in Lancaster Sound and in the establishment of a new Canadian National Park whose borders are now being defined by these traditional lines." These maps have not only defined an area for protection from drilling rigs, (although not from commercial shipping), they have contributed to a new understanding of north that diverges from colonial maps – a view of north that reflects knowledge of insiders and recognizes the importance of their knowledge as data.

It is tempting for those who live at a distance or visit only on occasion to see the north through the lenses that are accessible, especially online information like animal tracking data. And while accessing this and other information, such as sea-ice data or weather maps is helpful to understand threats to the North, we only show one aspect of north this way, a north represented through an outsider's remote access to knowledge of place. This kind of interpretation can be valuable, and when included with data or narratives from those who live there or through one's own direct experience of place, a new idea and representation of north may develop.

My travels and personal histories growing up in Northern Canada combined with my ongoing research online and in *University of Alberta's Circumpolar Institute*, have pushed me to create works in a range of media that attempt to temper or subvert my own romantic histories and experiences of north. I have been devising works that combine spectacular imagery I have taken up north of polar bear carcasses, sea-ice, fragile northern landscapes, and decaying toxic human mining or dew-line sites with information strips that are meant to add 'layers' of information that can help us read into other aspects of what

that imagery might be of. An image of sea-ice when exhibited is shown with information on what ecologies and animals are supported by the ice, such as the marine animals who breed and live on and under the ice, so that further sea-ice decline implies an impending doom also for what we do not see in the image. In *Far Field*, I describe it as follows:

“... data-sets of knowledge can form new ways of reading images that would otherwise function as spectacle through the knowing--lens of systems awareness. For instance, *we don't see the animals, but we know*: they are never far from ice. Walrus, seals, and polar bears use sea ice for courtship and mating, resting, giving birth and denning, and stalking and hunting for food. Below sea ice, narwhals also have a close relationship to it — using dense pack ice for wintering grounds, following ice, finding fish to eat, hiding from killer whales, and sometimes being trapped in fast ice.”

Other images are exhibited with related data such as presence of toxins at DEW-line sites, former mining sites, and melting glaciers, or historic data about human traffic on the Northwest passage. These images provide extraneous related data such as toxins that are present at DEW-line sites, former mining sites, and melting glaciers, or historic data about human presence along the Northwest passage. The photos were taken either on artists residencies or while traveling in the Arctic and could easily be replicated by many tourists passing through the north. In these images, data and indexing interrupts the spectacle or romanticism of the image and allows us to see the images in data-sets that are intended to interrupt neo-colonialist views of north that are repeatedly presented in even contemporary works that celebrate the sublime while sublime creatures and environments of the north are threatened.

Watching tracked animals continuously online and occasionally in real northern landscapes encountering them or their traces in paths, carcasses, or evidence like hair and fur has made me feel somewhat closer to animals of the north. How can I represent them in a way that also conveys the difficulties they face as we continue to impose on their habitats or as their habitats change due to climate change?

While I have been working on images and sculpture related to this, it has lacked the kind of physical and material experience I wish to translate data into. As a result, I have been devising several patterns and instruction pieces for choreographed movements – the first was used for installation works that implied shifting sea ice, but the new ones attempt an empathic understanding through replicating aspects of animal and human movement, and how those movements have been or could be hindered.

This work, titled “North, Interrupted” is a set of instructions for performative movements and activities through and across ice and snow that will be placed online this winter as part of a participatory performance work. Individuals in northern and southern climates will be invited to participate in a performance where we reproduce the lines of movement of several caribou and bears I have followed, with occasional interruptions that represent encounters with predators, extreme weather that reduces access to food or creates other impediments, and encounters with human-created interruptions such as seismic activity, oil spills, or pipelines. A second set of movements relates to human presence in the north, from early explorers to recent tourists, to those who live there.

This work intentionally is fed by both technological and non-technological systems of information and knowledge, and inspired by early conceptual practices, but even more by experiences of north, my own and others as a means of expressing space and place, and contemporary politics of north.

References and Notes:

1. Sharpe, Leslie. "Voices, Lines, Cracks, and Data-Sets: Formations of a new 'idea of the Canadian North" in *Far Field: Digital Culture, Climate Change and the Poles*, edited by Jane Marsching and Andrea Polli, Intellect Books, UK. 2011.
2. *ibid.*