

Reflections

An overview of Inuit perspectives on Franklin's lost expedition (1845–1846): a few avenues for discussion and future research – commentary to Pawliw, Berthold and Lasserre

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This reflection deals with the role Inuit knowledges and oral history played in the discovery of Franklin expedition's shipwreck at the turn of the 2010s and, more specifically, with the process through which those knowledges were finally taken into account by Canadian political and scientific institutions as well as medias and public opinion. I aim to highlight the fundamental ambivalence of this process and to address the questions whether and how it finds its place in the global context of Canadian Reconciliation process, and why it contributes to "recomplexify" the Canadian and Western representation of Arctic.

Keywords: Pawliw, Franklin, Canadian sovereignty, indigenous, goodness

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Introduction

The present paper comes as a result of a fruitful and inspiring peer-review process focusing on Kim Pawliw's, Étienne Berthold's and Frédéric Lasserre's paper (2021) entitled "The role of cultural heritage in the geopolitics of the Arctic: the example of *Franklin's lost expedition*". The latter analysis supports the hypothesis that Franklin's lost Arctic expedition (1845–1846) is instrumental in Harper's intent to build a new Canadian northern identity which would be separate from the American identity and which would bring together Anglophones, Francophones, First Nations and Inuit communities in a new foundation myth, in the specific context of the growing importance of the geopolitics of the Arctic. The authors display a comparison between Stephen Harper's (2006–2015) and Justin Trudeau's (2015–present) official discourses concerning Franklin's lost expedition and show how the same discourse – specifically the role of Inuit Arctic knowledges and the collaboration between Canadian searchers and Inuit inhabitants of the region – can be interpreted in various ways to suit various political agendas. As it is, discourse analysis is a key tool when it comes to deconstructing the genesis of a foundation myth and its political and ideological motives.

This paper aims to give an overview of the increasing importance being given to the Inuit perspectives on Franklin's lost expedition as a Canadian Arctic myth. The starting point of this

reflection is the co-occurrence of two consequences of the celebration of this early interaction and collaboration between Inuit communities and European explorers: the glorification of Canada as an Arctic nation and the reappropriation of the history of Franklin's lost expedition by Inuit communities. It is not intended to be an exhaustive or comprehensive survey of this question, since I am not writing from a specialist's point of view; the issue here is rather to suggest avenues for a reflection on what indeed this reappropriation of the Franklin myth could mean for Canada as well as for Inuit communities. This paper aims to offer a basis for discussion and exchange. It develops the following hypothesis: the Canadian Arctic myth of the Franklin's lost expedition such as expressed by Harper is the reflection of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission period (2008–2015) and of its ambivalence as well; nevertheless, this myth as well as the discovery of *HMS Erebus* (2014) and of *HMS Terror* (2016) set the occasion to "recomplexify" (Chartier 2018) the North and the Arctic through the integration of Inuit discourses and knowledges in the representation of the Franklin myth.

The Canadian patrimonialization of the Franklin expedition: a (re)conciliation myth?

As Pawliw, Berthold and Lasserre (2021) show, the celebration of the diversity of Canada through the acknowledgement of the collaboration between Canadian technology and Inuit oral history when searching for Franklin's wrecks was shared by both Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Leona Aglukkaq, the Minister of Environment responsible for Parks Canada (2013–2015) and an Inuk woman from Nunavut. Both politicians made from these searches and, therefore, from Franklin's lost expedition, a symbol for Canadian diversity and national unity, in the specific context of Canadian Arctic sovereignty. Inuit land claims are part of a Canadian Northern strategy, and Inuit communities gradually gain their autonomy from federal government while supporting Canadian sovereignty over the Northwest Passage (Pawliw *et al.* 2021). This exchange of services has been thoroughly analysed, as well as its fundamental ambiguity and misunderstandings (Quinn Duffy 1988; Fenge 2007; Zellen 2008, 2009; Parks 2010; Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami 2013; Dobbins 2019).

This analysis leads to a question, which might require a long and complicated answer: is the necessity to reaffirm national unity in the context of Arctic sovereignty the only factor which could have led Harper to such a celebration of the role of Inuit communities and First Nations in the wrecks search? One cannot actually help noticing that the appropriation of Franklin's lost expedition as a Canadian cultural heritage and the integration of the Inuit testimonies and oral history in this cultural heritage took place at a very specific period, which extended from 2008 to 2015: the operation of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which aimed to address the aftermath of colonialism and which focused on the Indian residential schools (Government of Canada 2020). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission faced strong criticism from Glen Coulthard because it focused on the very specific problem of residential schools without questioning the colonialism as a system (Querengesser 2013), which would allow Harper to apologize in 2008 for the residential system (Government of Canada 2008, 2010; Querengesser 2013) while still negating the history of colonialism in Canada (Querengesser 2013) and omitting a part of the residential school victims, the Inuit of Labrador (James 2008; Michelin 2015). Nevertheless, this context of reconciliation also led John Duncan, Harper's Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, Federal Interlocutor for Métis and Non-Status Indians, to offer his full apology on behalf of Canada for another traumatic event of Canadian colonialism, which was potentially linked to the question of Canadian Arctic sovereignty: the Inuit High Arctic Relocation in the 1950s (La Presse canadienne 2010; Weber 2010), leading Inuit people from Port Harrison/Inukjuak (in today's Nunavik) and Pond Inlet/Mittimatalik (in today's Nunavut) to endure hardships on the High Arctic islands (Marcus 1992, 1995; Tester & Kulchyski 1994; McGrath 2006). A collection of testimonies about this traumatic event for Inuit communities has been gathered and displayed on the Iqqaumavara website, recorded through both films and transcripts. Politician and founder of Nunavut, John Amagoalik and novelist, Markoosie Patsauq, as well as social worker and politician Charlie Nowkawalk and carver and storyteller Lazarussie Epoo, took part to this collection (Iqqaumavara 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d).

One could therefore ask oneself if the upgrading of the role of Inuit knowledge and oral history through the search and discovery of Franklin's shipwrecks could be part of the reconciliation context,

particularly since the valorisation of the Franklin myth by Harper seems to be as ambivalent as this context (James 2008). Actually, the Franklin myth such as represented and used by Harper is ambiguous: on one hand, the official discourse on the search and discovery of the wrecks might set Canadian scientists and archaeologists and Inuit elders and oral historians on equal terms but, on the other hand, the narration of the scientific endeavour of the 2000s and 2010s brings with itself the memory of the Franklin expedition. Could the focus on the contemporary scientific endeavour offer the Canadian Government an acceptable pretext to praise an imperialist and colonialist expedition in the context of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission? One cannot help noticing the similarities between the old-established representation of Franklin's lost expedition, which Harper took on board, and the stereotypical myth of the *terra incognita* and the vanishing explorers which prevail in every manifestation of Victorian imperialism (van Eeden 2004; Youngs 2014; Lewis 2018): heroism, individual accomplishment, comparison with the explorers Martin Frobisher or John Davis (Pawliw *et al.* 2021), who were still models for 19th century British Arctic explorers – their travel narratives were reedited by the Hakluyt Society (McGhee 2005; Lynam 2010). Could therefore the colonial gaze (Fanon 2007; Bhabha 1994) on the North and its inhabitants find a way to obliquely perpetrate itself?

The integration of the Inuit perspective: a tool to “recomplexify” the Arctic?

The second part of this paper is a remark rather than a question. Notwithstanding the fundamental ambivalence of the use of the Franklin mystery as a cultural heritage and of the archaeological endeavour as a symbol for unification and collaboration between Qallunaat (“White people” in Inuktitut) and Inuit communities, and whatever the point was of this discourse for Harper's government, the real effect of this event on Inuit communities is worth analysis. As recorded in paper by Pawliw, Berthold and Lasserre (2021), an important mutation took place through the searches of Franklin's shipwreck from the 1980s to the 2010s: Inuit oral history and its guardians were taken into account.

Before the searches and the discovery of Franklin's shipwrecks in the 2010s, Inuit discourses about the mystery of this lost expedition were surely not much of a novelty for scholars and specialists writing on this subject, but they were less known to a broader audience. After the localisation of the sailors' graves in Nunavut by Owen Beattie and James Savelle in 1985 (Woodman 1991; Atwood 1995; Eber 2008), Woodman (1991, 2016) gathered traces of those testimonies through both published and unpublished sources, such as travel narratives and expedition accounts of Sir John Ross, John Rae, Knud Rasmussen or Roald Amundsen and at the end of the 2000s, Eber (2008) then displayed the oral traditions of Inuit elders from Cambridge Bay/Iqaluktuuttiaq (Nunavut) which were to help in locating Franklin's wrecked ships. Before the 1980s, one of the few Inuit testimonies eventually known to Canadian readers was Qaqortingneq's, one of the major informants of Knud Rasmussen during his expedition through the territory of the Netsilikmiut (Pelly Bay/Arvilikjuaq) (Petroni 1988). It was displayed in Rasmussen's travel narrative *Across Arctic America* (1927) (Petroni 1988) and it was then notably popularised by Gwendolyn MacEwen's verse drama *Terror and Erebus* (1963) (Atwood 1995, 2014) as a counterpoint to Charles Dickens' diatribe (1854) against Inuit narratives about the wreckage and the possible cannibalism of lost Englishmen (Sandler 2006; Beattie & Geiger 2014; Watson 2017). The valuable help which was brought to American explorer Charles Francis Hall by Inuit storytellers and his guides Taqilituq and Ipirvik on the search for Franklin's expedition in the 1860s was long forgotten (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami 2018). Both Woodman and Eber thus redressed a long-lost balance regarding the representation of this expedition: the Inuit discourse had actually been silenced and had vanished from any public record linked to the Victorian celebration of the Arctic since they did not fit the heroic imagery of Great Britain – and Canada – as a conquering nation (Volmers 2018). There was little trace of Inuit presence in the Franklin mystery for a Canadian reader.

Nevertheless, as of 1981, a change in scientific landscape through the integration of Inuit students, guides and oral historians into the various archaeological research projects in Nunavut was a turning point in the available discourse about Franklin's lost expedition: Owen Beattie's expedition to Gjoa Haven (Kitikmeot area) included two Inuit students – Kovic Hiqiniq and Mike Aleekie – among its members (Beattie & Geiger 2014); Inuk oral historian Louie Kamookak was hired as a consultant for

Robert Grenier's and Ryan Harris' expeditions in 2008 and 2010, and he helped locating *HMS Erebus* (Palin 2018); Inuk guide Sammy Kogvik led the research team of Adrian Schimnovski's charitable Arctic Research Foundation to the location of *HMS Terror* in 2016 (Watson 2017). Inuit contributions to the research and findings of Franklin's shipwrecks were brought to light together with the news of successive discoveries, which were immediately shared, for instance, the news of the discovery of *HMS Erebus* displayed on *The Conversation* (Barr 2014). Louie Kamookak became known through Canadian media and press – *Global News* (The Canadian Press 2018), *National Post* (O'Connor 2018) – as well as on *Nunatsiaq News*, the newspaper of the Inuit of the Canadian Arctic based in Iqaluit (Nunavut) (Potter 2019). A *Nunatsiaq News* article published in 2019 notably highlighted this event of the discovery of *HMS Erebus* as a payback for the old-established disregard in which Inuit oral history was held (Potter 2019), an analysis shared by Eschner (2018) and Watson (2017, 182):

Dismissing Inuit testimony didn't require a lot of argument. Racial prejudice toward indigenous people made disregard for what they said and thought almost automatic for many Europeans certain of their superior moral fiber and intellect. They also regarded as suspect the Inuit tradition of recalling history through telling stories instead of books. For people who put great faith in the written word, indigenous people recalling the past from memory were only spinning legends, entertaining perhaps, but unworthy of an educated expert's time. Mistakes, misunderstandings, and contradictions, the unavoidable flaws of any account told and retold over years, even generations, made Inuit stories all the more suspect to listeners who either weren't willing, or didn't know how, to distill truth from the fog of memory or embellishment.

As of 2016, Inuit knowledges about Franklin's lost expedition were broadcast at both national and international levels through the exhibition "Death in the Ice" in Greenwich (England) in 2017 and Gatineau (Québec) in 2018 (Ryan 2017; Medby & Dittmer 2021). Sir Michael Palin, a comedian and traveller who published a book on *HMS Erebus* in 2018, paid a tribute to Louie Kamookak's work, which was a valuable source of knowledge for his book (Palin 2018). At an institutional level, Inuit communities were increasingly involved in both historiographical and didactical aspects of the transmission of the story of Franklin's lost expedition (THEN/HIER 2015; Know Indigenous History 2018) as well as in the conservation of *HMS Erebus* and *HMS Terror* artefacts (The Canadian Press 2019; Parks Canada 2019). As a result of a symposium held in 2015 by the History Education Network/History et éducation en réseau gathering teachers, historians, archaeologists and Inuit cultural advisors (THEN/HIER 2015), a website was launched (*The Franklin Mystery: Life and Death in the Arctic* 2015), helping to promote the story of this expedition from an Inuit point of view. In 2018, the Franklin Expedition Inuit Oral History Project brought together the Parks Canada Agency, the Nattilik Heritage Centre and the Hamlet of Gjoa Haven among other partners in order to display Inuit perspectives on this event (Know Indigenous History 2018), and Parks Canada and Inuit Heritage Trust agreed on keeping the shipwrecks' artifacts in Nunavut museums (The Canadian Press 2019; Parks Canada 2019).

One is therefore allowed to think that those various events helped "recomplexify" both the Franklin myth and the Arctic. Chartier (2018, 9, 17), whose essay *What is the Imagined North?* shows how the Western representations of the North and the Arctic were set on the "silencing of cultural and human aspects of cold territories" and essentially took into account discourses from the outside and excluded the representations from the inside and Nordic culture. To "recomplexify" the Arctic means considering the indigenous cultures and discourses from the North. In a certain way, the revalorization of Inuit oral history and testimonies in the historiography of Franklin's lost expedition can be understood as an example of "recomplexification" of the North and of the Arctic. Craciun (2011, 2012) and McCorrstine (2013, 2018) opened avenues for reflections on that specific subject. For instance, Inuit oral history gives nuance to the representation of Franklin as an Arctic hero in two ways. Inuit discourse about Franklin kept alive for successive generations the memory of a man who brought unhappiness and destruction with him, placed in the Inuit mythological landscape as a malevolent creature. As Watson (2017, XXIX) writes:

The winters that finished off Franklin and his 128 men were so severe that they became part of Inuit legend. They would long lay blame on the qalunaaq, the white men, for unleashing malevolent spirits upon the island. When American Charles Francis Hall gave up small-town newspapering to go north and hunt for the Franklin Expedition in the 1860s, an Inuit mother told him two shamans,

or angakkuit, had cast a spell on the area where the ships were abandoned: “The Innuits wished to live near that place (where the ships were) but could not kill anything for their food. They (the Innuits) really believed that the presence of Koblunas (whites) in that part of the country was the cause of all their (the Innuits’) trouble.”

Inuit communities also remember a stubborn man who would not listen to the elders and who would totally underestimate the hardship of the Canadian Arctic. Still Watson (2017, 3, 180) notes that:

Like many Royal Navy men before them, Franklin and his crew assumed they could beat the Arctic on their own, eschewing Inuit as irrelevant, godless savages. Until it was too late.

Inuit have always known that the Arctic demands collaboration and respect, not only among people but also with the environment that sustains humans, and the spirit world that can destroy them. Few Franklin Expedition searchers heeded that lesson in the nineteenth century. Others repeated their mistakes into the twenty-first.

According to an Inuit perspective, would the Franklin myth be a kind of parable for the tragedy that awaits ones who “simplified” the Arctic – as Chartier (2018) points to – through not listening to the valuable knowledge of the indigenous community? We cannot help but notice that the Franklin myth was reappropriated by Inuit communities in 2019: Potter’s (2019) article in Nunatsiaq News joined together the memory of Franklin’s lost expedition through Inuit oral history and the celebration of the twentieth birthday of Nunavut, the newest Canadian province. This could be a new representation of Franklin myth, more suitable for the present time – according to Atwood, “every age has created a Franklin suitable to its needs” (Atwood 2014, 4; Eschner 2018) – and more suitable for the complexity of the Arctic and of those living there. The AMC television show *The Terror*, created by David Kajganich and Soo Hugh in 2018, is part of this global change in representations and discourses on the Franklin subject.

Conclusion

Harper’s use of the Franklin myth as a way to reaffirm the Arctic identity of Canada and to bring together all parts of Canadian society – Anglophones, Francophones, First Nations and Inuit – seems to coincide with the complexification of this myth. I suggested here that the ambivalence of the Franklin myth, endows Canada with a founding story which perpetuates the imperialist representation of perilous Arctic exploration and a “colonial gaze”, but also allows the national and international recognition of Inuit knowledges and representations of this event, as well as highlighting major intellectual figures such as Louie Kamookak. Questioning the peculiar context of the Reconciliation process in Canadian society around the 2000s and 2010s could cast an interesting light on this link and this issue would need to be researched further.

Another avenue for research would be to compare the “recomplexification” process of Arctic myths, through the integration of Inuit testimonies and knowledges in political discourses and in cultural, artistic and literary productions, in other Arctic or circumpolar countries. For instance, we can think of Greenlandic poet and politician Lyngé (2008), who offered a renewed representation of Knud Rasmussen’s Fifth Thule expedition (1921–1924) through his poems by highlighting a forgotten character of this expedition, Arnarulunnguaq, an Inuk woman who travelled with Rasmussen from Greenland to Alaska (Chartier *et al.* 2021). We can also think of *Utuqaq* (2021), a short film juxtaposing Radivojević’s images of a scientific expedition in Greenland with the verses of Greenlandic poet Aviaja Lyberth (Aeon 2021; Radivojević 2021) and thus drawing attention to the encounter between the Western representation of the Arctic and the Inuit discourse in a mesmerizing manner. The reappropriation of the scientific expedition in the High North, highlighting Inuit voices and memories, is an interesting research area for literary studies and cultural historians.

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