

# Arctic Futurisms

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The Arctic holds a significant role in the Canadian mythos and, to borrow a phrase from Glenn Gould, the idea of North has been central to the development of a so-called national identity. But what does the 'idea of North' actually mean, and more importantly to whom? In settler conceptions and representations, the Arctic is a pristine, sublime landscape devoid of life, an empty place needing to be discovered, claimed and conquered. In actuality, the Arctic is a vast, vibrant place, replete with culture and teeming with unique ecosystems. It is the current and ancestral homeland of diverse peoples in Inuvialuit, Nunavut, Nunavik and Nunatsiavut.

Film and visual arts lend themselves to storytelling and to the recording and transmitting of oral traditions. Even in the earliest days of the development of film, the Arctic was a focal point: films were shot in the Arctic as early as in 1902. Norman Cohn, one of the founders of Isuma Productions, states that, "[Inuit] storytelling as an oral form is most compatible in contemporary form with filmmaking or theatre" (qtd. in Soukup 242). The immediacy of film, and the relative ease of transmitting digital information, helps to retain and develop Indigenous stories, culture, and identity. It is through the oral histories and traditions that Indigenous culture, storytelling, naming, lived experiences (including how to live on the land), morals, legends, and myths are passed down. This awareness is crucial in order to begin to understand Inuit *Qaujimagatuqangit*: "the complex matrix of Inuit environmental knowledge, societal values, cosmology, worldviews and language" (Igloliorte 102).

The Arctic is a repository of natural resources, and geopolitical forces struggle proprietarily over accessing them. As such, Inuit are central to Canada's claim to the Arctic, which is indisputable due to Inuit traditional relationship to the land. In 2014 and 2016, the shipwrecks of the *Erebus* and *Terror* were found, 168 years after they froze and sank during Franklin's expedition to uncover a route through Tallurugik (the Northwest Passage). But Inuit had always known where the wrecks were. The name of the location where the *Erebus* was found is *Umiaqtalik*, meaning 'there is a boat here' or 'big ship place' in Inuktituk. It took over 150 years for southerners to listen.

Arctic futurism encompasses speculative imaginaries, in which media and technologies are re-envisioned as tools that develop *in relation* to the land not in opposition to it. Arctic futurism works against the settler urge to label, name and subsume. It critically engages with the destructiveness of colonialism. The world is currently experiencing the effects of the most obvious incarnation of the unbridled excesses of industrialization, colonialism and capitalism: climate change. Climate change is apparent in the Arctic and it serves as a bellwether to everyone on the planet. This photo essay contains work by artists, dramaturges, choreographers, DJs, researchers and filmmakers using hybrid techniques to contend with this nexus of ideas—embodied knowledge, storytelling, access to 'resources,' geopolitical claims on territory, colonialities, and digital technologies—in distinct and provocative ways.

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Kevin Schmidt, *A Sign in the Northwest Passage* (2010).



Photo courtesy the artist and Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver.

Kevin Schmidt's *A Sign in the Northwest Passage* (2010) is an enormous cedar billboard inscribed with hand-routed text from the Book of Revelations and installed on an ice flow north of Tuktoyaaqtuuq in the Inuvik region of the Northwest Territories. The sign was devised to float away as the seasonal ice melts, anchored upright by a raft and attached flotation device while declaring its message of apocalypse into the oblivion of the Pacific Ocean. Schmidt documents the process of journeying north of Tuktoyaaqtuuq and photographically recording the destination of the sign; though the work is initially documentary, its intended audience is the landscape itself.

The Book of Revelations is a prophetic story of the end of world. It predicts catastrophic famine, plagues, hailstorms, earthquakes, seas of blood, the moon and sun obscured, dead oceans, mass mourning, famine, and death. The message itself is problematic as Christianity is itself catastrophic: the Christian colonial hetero-patriarchy has taken it upon itself to obliterate Indigenous language, traditions, and culture for generations. While we should not accept Christianity's polemic on the end of the world, rather, let us take *A Sign in the Northwest Passage* as a metaphor for what is in fact, coming.

We are on track to surpass predictions of three degrees of global warming by 2100 (Lynas). Instead of absorbing CO<sup>2</sup>, vegetation, plants and soil will release it in massive quantities. A world three degrees hotter becomes 4.5 degrees hotter because of this phenomenon. A 4.5-degree hotter world is untenable. Those conditions will cause a decline of food production, a global food deficit, and structural famine, and will trigger massive flooding, unending droughts, extreme monsoons, cyclonic storms, climate refugees, and social collapse. Once the Arctic sea ice is gone, the thawed permafrost in the Arctic will release even more massive amounts of carbon, adding to the already extreme levels of warming. The sea levels will rise, and the human zone of habitability will be severely diminished. At five degrees of global warming, the world will be unrecognizable. This is the scenario we are barrelling towards. *A Sign in the Northwest Passage* therefore represents a thought experiment carried through to its nihilistic end.