

Nonnekes, Paul. *Northern Love: An Exploration of Canadian Masculinity*. Edmonton: AU Press, 2008. 138pp.

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Paul Nonnekes's *Northern Love: An Exploration of Canadian Masculinity* is an exhausting treaty on the relationship between the North, the unique concept of love and the Canadian masculinity. The book concentrates on two titles: Rudy Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers* (1994), a story of the journey made by the sailors of the first Franklin expedition and their encounter with Tsetsot'ine Indians, and Robert Kroetsch's *The Man from the Creeks* (1998) which is an expansion of Robert Service's poem "The Shooting of Dan McGrew." In analysing these novels Nonnekes probes the construction of "northern love" as set against theoretical debates in psychoanalysis and social theory.

The book is divided into two main parts. Section One deals with Wiebe's novel and consists of five sub-chapters, while Section Two deals with Kroetsch's book and consists of three subchapters (which shows the imbalance in the treatment to the two texts with *A Discovery of Strangers* receiving significantly more attention). Finally, the conclusion aims to clarify and once again ground some of the arguments.

Nonnekes undertakes the extremely complicated task of bringing together many psychoanalytical and social debates and manages to make them serve his overall argument of the North as featuring a unique kind of love, a gendered love of the mother and of the imaginary and oedipal father, which shapes masculinities of Canadian men in the context of their particular experience.

The book is clearly structured and laid out meticulously so that the reader does not get lost in the plethora of names and concepts. First, Nonnekes defines Canada as a northern nation (using Sherrill Grace's *Canada and the Idea of North*) and then goes on to present two essays by Wiebe and Kroetsch ("Exercising Reflection" and "Why I Went Up North") that confirm the idea of the centrality of the North for the Canadian experience, and lay ground and provide inspiration for their later novels.

The main argument in Nonnekes's analysis of Wiebe's novel is, in his own words, that "the encounter of the English sailors with the northern frontier, and the

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Aboriginal people living there, leads to a distinctive encounter with the presence of the father in both imaginary and oedipal forms, and that this encounter with two fathers occurs through a dramatic encounter with the love of the mother,” and that “one of the fundamental encounters in the North is the encounter of the English word with the Aboriginal image.” There are five theoretical issues which Nonnekes explores in the first section. The first is the relationship between naming and seeing, where he points out the English’s attempt to name everything which fails in the face of the Tsetsot’ine ability, crucial to their survival, to understand the images of the land. In his interpretation, Nonnekes employs Kaja Silverman’s psychoanalytic ideas on the relationship between the word and the ego.

The second part analyses the gradual reversal of the master-slave relationship where the members of the expedition, who see themselves initially as masters to the Indians, have to gradually accept the reverse in the face of their inability to survive by their own means. The methodology for this argument is provided by Judith Butler’s reading of the Hegelian master-slave relationship. The third part concentrates on the importance of the imaginary in the “Lacanian triad of imaginary/symbolic/real” and stresses the return to the real (with the background interpretation of the triad as provided by Žižek and Butler). The fourth part encompasses “the emergence of a strange gender” understood as “the unfolding of unstable and precarious gender identities [...] that rub against any normative understanding of masculine and feminine in our society,” where Nonnekes employs Butler’s ideas as explored in her *Antigone’s Claim*. The last theoretical issue in the first section concentrates on the relationship of love and trauma as Nonnekes challenges Žižek’s interpretation of the relationship between trauma and love and the traumatic encounter with the real, and proposes that the real occurs through the presence of the “imaginary father” as defined by Julia Kristeva.

The second section of the book concentrates on Kroetsch’s novel and the relationship between searching for gold and searching for words. In fact, Kroetsch himself claims that “to write is, in some metaphorical sense, to go North.” He also introduces the debate over a new concept of heroism, different from the American western frontier heroism and linked to the experience of silence. Nonnekes combines these ideas and argues that *The Man from the Creeks* features a “quest for gold as a quest for heroic masculinity” in the context of the quest for “intersubjective love.” The first subchapter in this section probes northern masculinities against the concept of recognition and the necessity of identification with others which, in turn, may generate a change (as argued by psychoanalytic feminist Jessica Benjamin). The second issue concerns the concept of intersubjectivity and the dialectic in the light of the interpretations of Hegel. Nonnekes claims that the dialectical struggles with otherness faced by Kroetsch’s heroes reveal an intersubjective ground for love. This section also incorporates

Žižek's Lacanian defence of Hegel. The last subchapter dwells on a Hegelian understanding of the contract. The claim made by Nonnekes is that in a contract which is established on intersubjective rather than individualistic ground, the contractors arrive at "an expression of communal love that gives [them] access to a living good and taste of universal life."

In the conclusion the author once again goes back to the concept of a strong oedipal father, or rather his "lack," and the impact that the absence of a masculine model to identify with has on the two main characters of the novels, that is Hood and Peek. *Northern Love* is an important book encompassing many fundamental ideas until now unexplored in the context of Canadian masculinity. It is a serious read that offers a completely new perspective on the understanding of Northern masculine identity thanks to the identification of the concept of "northern love".