Water, snow, and ice revisited: inspiring creative writing

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Water, as the main theme for Lila 2024, opened the path to several reflections and implications strictly connected to my ongoing doctoral research, expanding it to an unexpected extent. From the very beginning, informed by Félix Guattari's and Gilles Deleuze's theories of matter (1987), I focused on the potential of artistic and writing-based research by considering and including water as an intelligent matter in a broader ecocritical and posthumanist discourse. Inspired by new materialist insights of wider ecologies, I thus argue that the concepts related to a "blank space" in a peculiar landscape – such as the half-frozen surface of the dam in Vuotso – might also take on peculiarities from both cultural and natural forces. Indeed, despite the increasing number of scholars interested in material ecocriticism (Iovino and Oppermann 2014), the potential of cognitive mapping and ice-related narrations have been so far little examined. The reason for this lack of engagement probably lies in the dynamic and mobile nature of ice as predominant in the representation of the Arctic landscape. The primary challenge in dealing with cultural works involving Arctic issues is that its geography is not uniform:

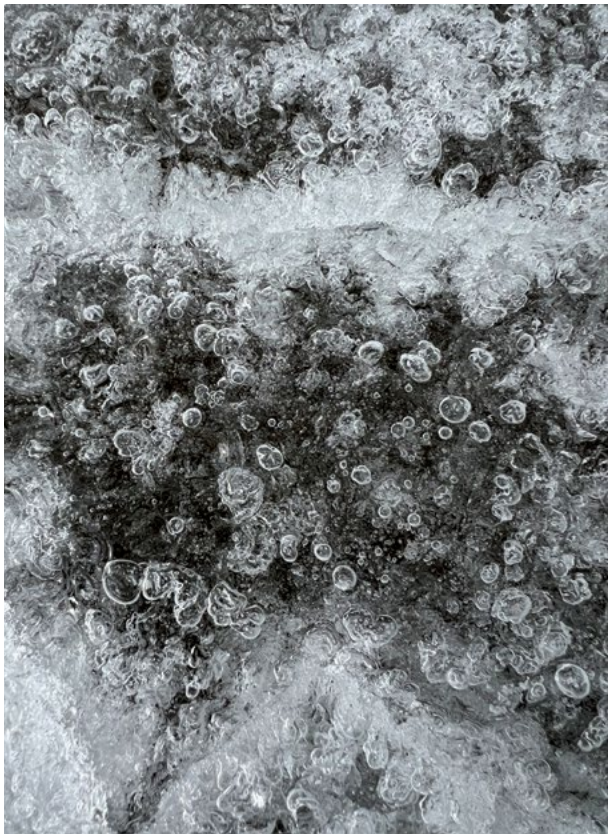

Figure 1. Breathing ice: bubbles. Image: Bordignon, 2024

elements like snow and ice, rivers, coastlands, wetlands, and urban spaces, all coexist in this unique and vast ecosystem, to the extent that we shall rather refer to it in plural terms, such as Arctic 'ecosystems' and 'ecologies'. In this sense, creative writing may become an efficient practice to highlight environmental concerns strictly entangled with the peculiarity of the material elements of the Arctic landscapes, with a positive impact in shaping more sustainable (cultural and artistic) approaches.

Multisensory embodiment leading to creative writing

Our conceptions have often, and primarily, featured binary imaginaries of snow and ice: on the one hand, in the context of polar expeditions, the Arctic landscape has been imagined as exotic and sublime; on the other hand, the same territories have been seen as in line with a biased ideology of an empty space devoid of life. Recently, scholars have started to reverse this trend (Hansson and Norberg 2009; Watt-Cloutier 2018), presenting snow and ice as life sustaining elements; moreover, further attention has been given to indigenous descriptions of ice as a multisensory space full of life, where multiple smells, sounds and sights are invested with several cultural meanings (Krupnik et al. 2010). In The Imagined Arctic in Speculative Fiction, Maria Lindgren Leavenworth states that "how the Arctic is imagined serves to illuminate wider lines of inquiry informing the way we envision the world and humanity's place and purpose in it" (2024: 9). Thus, the importance of ice and snow as generators and protectors of life and liveliness is even more highlighted through commonalities to life forms and real places – such as Vuotso – in our actual world, creating associations to places and people, throughout time and temporality (Ingold 1993).

The phenomenon of 'cognitive mapping' as a mental and embodied activity is peculiar in this context. Marie-Laure Ryan argues that a cognitive map is "a mental model of spatial relations" (2003: 215) that can represent individual experiences of factually existent landscapes. Moreover, Ryan avers that cognitive mapping is essential for the depiction and perception of space in narratives, thus reconnecting a 'sensing-the-place' experience leading also to creative writing and art-based research. This mental mapping of space, especially in relation to the representation of a specific place, is also an object of inquiry in New Materialist studies. In general, the cognitive mapping of a peculiar place may function

Figure 2. Ice melting in my hand. Image: Bordignon, 2024

as a geographical stimulus for mental, emotional, moral, and physical transformations.

In Storytelling and the Science of Mind, David Herman refers to a cognitive approach based on the concept of 'embodiment' (2007: 317). According to Herman, the mind is always and inalienably embodied, and the mind should be viewed as the nexus of the brain, body, and environment. This approach suggests not only that what can be seen, what is known about the world, alters with the spatial coordinates of the embodied self that is doing the reading and writing, it also suggests that a self is in part constituted by what it reads and writes, with narrative being the mean for tracing this perceptual flux (2007: 318). As this last remark suggests, embodied minds are temporally as well as spatially situated. This can be of relevance for the contextualization of the real-Arctic settings during the creative and immersive experience: everything occurs in the mind, towards a 'sensing-the-place' process and during the recreation of a cognitive map; that is, a mental representation of the landscape itself.

Figure 3. Ice field at the dam. Image: Bordignon, 2024

Figure 4. Diffraction. Image: Bordignon, 2024

Figure 5. Spring Geometries. Image: Bordignon, 2024

Life and liveliness of an (in)animate matter

Set against the backdrop of the half-frozen landscape, the dam in Vuotso creates for the participants of Lila fieldwork an idea of the harshness of the land. Yet, the fact that no encounters with other life forms occurred reinforces the image of a vanishing landscape, where water and ice positioned as an indicator of the effects of climate change. In fact, they are both seen as elements which humans need to get used to for their own survival in the far North but, at the same time, they represent something rare to preserve. Personally, after feeling safe and relaxed despite the environmental challenges to face, I felt my own interior awakening. My senses became alive out there, in the vastness of this new landscape, leading to my own creative writing and practice. The sensorial and cognitive mapping of the place was also accompanied by the scientific explanation of certain natural phenomena, but also by traditional indigenous knowledge. In this sense, Vuotso conveys environmental and ecological information, and specific cultural notions, perceptions and impli-

cations about ice and its materiality. Through the act of shifting its shape, ice holds in itself a multifaceted form that persuades the recognition of a 'living' substance. Its liveliness is highlighted, once again, through the acts of experiencing and sensing.

Ice appears then in various forms: frozen snow glow reflecting back the shades of lights, swirls of frost on the surface, then opening up to flowing water. Not only scientific information, but also local and cultural interpretations of the same natural phenomena were provided, which further emphasize ice movements, seasonal rhythms, and sensitivities of the snow- and ice-covered tundra soil life, freezing and thawing again.

Conclusion

This personal experience can thus be considered as a link between new materialist openings and art-based research practices. Moving from Deleuze's definition of matter, ice fits perfectly in this context, being prone to powerful expansion or retraction, and in constant movement as shapeshifter in assuming different states. Indeed, ice is also a matter equipped with the capacity for self-organization, being alive, and "intelligent" (Deleuze 1997: 512). A new materialist white ecology, applied to the field of environmental humanities and ecocriticism, might be of relevance in a posthumanist perspective. I consider ice as pertaining to the range of 'intelligent matter' the philosopher refers to, focusing on the richness and force of this material. Ice is indeed a substance that does not need form to become alive, yet informed by the surrounding environment, thus being a detector of climate disruptions. This concept finds a confirmation in the perception of the landscape at the dam in Vuotso, where the whiteness of the frozen ice-field expands visibly as well as mentally, opening towards multiple interpretations and multisensorial perceptions, full of possibilities.

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