

'A Living, Breathing, Pulsing Web': *Being Caribou* as Canadian Ecological Pilgrimage

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This paper examines how ecologist and environmental activist Karsten Heuer employs a Western conception of the pilgrimage as a metaphor in *Being Caribou* (2006) in order to create a new perspective and understanding of the plight of caribou now threatened by man's encroachments. The author places her analysis in a broad literary-historical overview of Canadian pilgrimage literature to show how Heuer has expanded existing anthropocentric definitions of pilgrimage as well as the Canadian canon itself.

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In 2003, Canadian wildlife-biologist and writer Karsten Heuer embarked on a 5-month odyssey in northern Yukon and Alaska in an attempt to follow and join 123,000 porcupine caribou in their yearly migration to the contested Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and calving grounds. While there is a long history of debates surrounding the preservation or development of this area, Heuer adds a crucial and heretofore missing component to the discussion. Heuer attempts to tell the story of the caribou. The record of Karsten Heuer and his wife Leanne Allison's pilgrimage, and the story of the caribou, was published to wide acclaim in 2006. *Being Caribou* went on to garner the Banff Mountain Festival Grand Prize and the National Outdoor Book of the Year Award for best outdoor literature and continues to raise interest and awareness about the plight of the caribou. Since then, Karsten Heuer has travelled numerous times across North America speaking to packed auditoriums about his journey and urging preservation. Although the journey allowed Heuer and his wife a few minutes to speak with policy makers in Washington, the plight of the caribou still hangs in the fragile and deteriorating balance of the "protected" Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. But more importantly, as Heuer notes, the caribou are a symbol for all that is wild and beautiful on the planet and in each of us that is under constant threat and can be reclaimed only through what David Suzuki notes as "courage, stamina, and stubbornness."

The reading of *Being Caribou* that I offer, argues that the ancient and archetypal patterns of sacred movement known as pilgrimage have been adopted and transformed by ecologist and environmental activist Karsten Heuer to include the movements of non-human animals — namely the porcupine caribou. By thus extending the pilgrimage paradigm beyond limiting anthropocentric definitions to

include the ancient and instinctual movements of non-human animals, Heuer challenges the centrality and supremacy of the human to the classical pilgrimage definition(s). This being said, the pilgrim, and the story teller, is Karsten Heuer the author of *Being Caribou*. However, the pilgrimage story Heuer is attempting to articulate is that of the porcupine caribou. The pilgrimage route and the pilgrimage that Karsten Heuer is enacting is that of the non-human pilgrim, the caribou, and Heuer intends, by being like and with the caribou, to learn the ancient wisdom they possess. Thus in telling the story of the caribou's ancient pilgrimage and in attempting to follow their ancient pathways, Heuer articulates a development in the pilgrimage paradigm that embraces the possibility of non-human pilgrimage, and of the human in fact being transformed by the experience of the story he is telling of that pilgrimage. And more importantly to Heuer, his pilgrimage as caribou and with the caribou and his telling of the pilgrimage story is a political act whose aim is the preservation of habitat and species. Further, his communication of the story is not just for the policy makers and the oil giants, but is aimed at individual awareness and transformation by living lives dedicated to preservation of all species.

Heuer's ecological and activist journey thus becomes a development on the existing western anthropologic and anthropocentric definitions of pilgrimage. Likewise, by situating Heuer's caribou pilgrimage as the most recent emergent in the Canadian literary-historical pilgrimage paradigm, Heuer's journey functions as a hopeful transformation of contemporary pilgrimage that allows for not only the rebirth of the human spirit but also for a system of ecological partnership with non-human animals in protecting the ancient wisdom of all forms of life.

First, then, I would like to give a brief definition of Western pilgrimage, followed by a literary-historical overview of Canadian pilgrimage literature, and finally by engaging in an in-depth exploration of Karsten Heuer's *Being Caribou* show how his work is both a part of the Canadian literary-historical canon of pilgrimage literature, and how his work in fact expands and explodes the existing definitions of pilgrimage proposed by Western pilgrimage scholars.

Pilgrimage Scholarship

The following survey of the existing pilgrimage scholarship aims in part to communicate the complexity and fluidity of the pilgrimage definition that in fact allows for many and competing definitions of what constitutes a pilgrimage journey. Pilgrimage is a part of every world religion, and the various forms of pilgrimage evidenced in Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Judeo-Christian religions share many of the same characteristics. Some further comparisons could be drawn between the foundational pilgrimage narratives of various world religions and the rituals practiced by

indigenous peoples in such journeys as the dream quest or even more diversely in the seasonal movements of nomadic peoples.

Jean Dalby Clift and Wallace B. Clift in *The Archetype of Pilgrimage: Outer Action with Inner Meaning*, describe pilgrimage as “a journey, a ritual, a commemoration, a search for something” (1996, p. 9), but scholars Simon Coleman and John Elsner in *Pilgrimage: Past and Present in the World Religions* claim that “[p]ilgrimage is not just a journey” but that the pilgrim must have a “confrontation with rituals, holy objects and sacred architecture” and must make the return journey (1995, p. 6). Luigi Tomasi proposes a similar definition in *From Medieval Pilgrimage to Religious Tourism: The Social and Cultural Economics of Piety* but then goes on to suggest that “[p]ilgrimage has also been validly described as ‘an individual, but frequently collective, journey toward and ‘elsewhere’ sometimes more desired than known” (2002, p. 3). Other pilgrimage scholars, such as John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow, respond to the more deterministic and structuralist definition of pilgrimage proposed by Victor Turner and Edith Turner by suggesting that the pilgrimage itself is a space for conflict between discourses of the sacred and the secular and for contestation of the “official” and political discourses of the particular historical moment (1991, p. 2). Thus, it seems that while the scholars quibble over whether the pilgrimage is a journey or not merely a journey, or whether the pilgrimage itself is a ritual or must include confrontations with ritual, or whether or not it is a collective or individual journey, the pilgrimage space itself is a politicized space. It seems appropriate then that from within the nation of Canada, a country known as a peacekeeper, contemporary ecological politics emerges in the fluid and in fact liminal space of the contested pilgrimage site. With the many competing and already historically politicized definitions of pilgrimage circulating among pilgrimage scholars, I have chosen to focus on the particular characteristics of the pilgrimage journey that are most illuminating to the particularly Canadian and eventually ecologically-centered pilgrimage paradigm.

Defining Canadian Literary Pilgrimage

Pilgrimage, and particularly Canadian literary pilgrimage, is a journey undertaken with a particular call. The pilgrim generally makes a vow with regards to the intent of their journey. It is important that the pilgrim follows the charter pilgrimage of the founder, in other words, that the trail has been laid by a sacred figure or figures, and that the pilgrim is repeating or re-enacting the journey of these figure(s). The pilgrim must seek and expect transformation as a result of the journey. Some of the other important characteristics of the journey include the physical and spiritual difficulty of the journey, temptations along the way, encounters with supernatural beings, miracles, rituals, sacred architecture,

songs, poetry, and stories along the way, the journey home, and recounting the pilgrimage or telling the story.

The History of Canadian Literary Pilgrimage

I begin the literary history of Canadian pilgrimage with early colonial literary activity on the continent and not with confederation, as this extends the paradigm necessarily beyond the triumphant political moment of British colonial naming. As such, the letters of the Jesuit priests in their mission to the New World in *The Jesuit Relations* (1632-1673) are the earliest documents that give evidence of pilgrimage activity and are, thus, founding narratives or charter Canadian pilgrimages. I would suggest that the arduous journey of Jean de Brébeuf is particularly important as a founding narrative or charter pilgrimage. The commemorative site of his martyrdom in Midland, Ontario continues to be a sacred site within the Catholic community and within literary Canadian culture the re-writings and hence repetitions of Brébeuf’s journey are manifold. These include: E.J. Pratt’s *Brébeuf and His Brethren* (1940), James W. Nichol’s dramatic work, *Saint-Marie Among the Hurons* (1980), Brian Moore’s novel *Black Robe* (1985) and the later film version likewise entitled *Black Robe*, to name just a few.

There are, of course, various missionary journeys and Canadian sacred sites that could likewise be evaluated in terms of early Canadian pilgrimage. The next historical period includes fictional literary and historical immigrant journeys. These pilgrimages, then, are the early settlement in Upper and Lower Canada. One such example would be the journey of pilgrims from the Anglo-Irish Oliver Goldsmith’s Auburn of *The Deserted Village* to “sweet Oswego” in the new-world Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Rising Village* (1825) and perhaps other early settlement documents or poems recounting this — including Alexander McLachlan’s *The Emigrant* (1861) or, perhaps, the writings of the Strickland sisters (Susanna Moodie’s *Roughing it in the Bush; Or, Life in Canada* (1852) and Catherine Parr Traill’s *Canadian Crusoes* (1852) — exhibit many of the characteristics of a pilgrimage journey including a particular calling followed by a vow, an arduous journey towards a sacred goal (in this case of settlement and material progress), the company of pilgrims (or other settlers), the telling of stories, rituals, and eventual transformation.

Following the settlement period and post 1867 confederation much of the literary output was involved in encouraging tourist activity. The Confederation poets Charles G.D. Roberts and William Wilfred Campbell and poets such as Charles Sangster in *The St. Lawrence and the Saguenay* write touristic pieces that also contain characteristics of a pilgrimage narrative. During the twentieth century and particularly towards the mid-twentieth century, many of the stories of men and women in Canada involve the protagonist leaving a small town and journeying out into the world and

then returning home changed and with many stories to tell. Robertson Davies' *Fifth Business* (1970), Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* (1974), Hugh MacLennan's *The Watch that Ends the Night* (1959) and many other Canadian authors repeat this journey. Likewise, a number of contemporary authors such as Jane Urquhart in *The Stone Carvers* (2001) tell pilgrimage stories set in the historical past.

However, I would argue that while much of this earlier writing explicitly bares the symbols of Christian pilgrimage and sacred iconography, there is a definite and secular shift that follows in the wake of the holocaust. The writer who seems most important to the discussion of what follows the holocaust is Timothy Findley. *The Butterfly Plague* (1969) links the persecution and annihilation of animal species with the holocaust. His dire predictions of total destruction or possible post-apocalyptic altered life give little hope for positive transformation as a result of the pilgrimage journey. Likewise, the pilgrimage journey, while containing all of the characteristics of pilgrimage, contains none of the sacred mystery of spiritual transformation that theologians and believers would associate with a religious journey. In fact, the transformation is almost entirely negative: plant and animal life are destroyed; human greed has devoured every possible hope of reversing specie destruction; and the individual who bares witness to the human-wrought apocalypse is certainly facing annihilation.

The symbols of pilgrimage ordinarily associated with hope and transformation become symbols of plague, violence, and destruction. The bleak vision of ecological destruction is further explored in Findley's *The Headhunter* (1993), which can also be discussed as exhibiting the characteristics of pilgrimage. Other writers such as Ronald Wright in *A Scientific Romance* (1997) and Margaret Atwood in *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and more recently in *The Year of the Flood* (2009) prophesy even further ecological destruction but seem to revive the pilgrimage paradigm in the post-apocalyptic world. However, Findley, Wright, and Atwood seem to share a similarly dire forecast for the future of the planet and particularly for the future of the human species. And while in this brief literary history it is impossible to outline the different ways in which each text allows for a pilgrimage reading and bares the characteristics of pilgrimage, these are the literary forebears of Canadian historical and literary pilgrimage out of which Karsten Heuer's *Being Caribou* emerges.

The Call to Pilgrimage

In the prologue to *Being Caribou*, Karsten Heuer explains the ecological threat posed by oil drilling to the calving sites of the porcupine caribou and the origin of his public mission and personal "yearning" to follow the caribou on their mass migration and attempt with his story to give

voice to their plight. Heuer writes that the "seed of the idea to follow the caribou was planted" when on his first patrol down the Firth River as a seasonal warden in Ivvavik National Park he witnessed 10,000 cows, calves, and bulls cross the river. He describes the "silence that followed them [as] almost unbearable" and that "no matter how fleeting the migration was, its energy had passed right through [him] and in its wake was a space, a loneliness, a yearning where none had existed before" (p. 4). The writer acknowledges an almost mystical connection and the "almost unbearable" feeling of emptiness that had followed the energy and belonging that came with the herd. He also describes the opening of a "space" and a "yearning" much like those described by pilgrimage supplicants when they first commit to making a pilgrimage in an attempt to connect with a higher power and fill the emptiness or space and answer the "yearning" that has been awakened in their souls. On his return from the wilderness park, he "felt that [he] had crossed a line somewhere, a boundary that separates the busyness of human enterprise from the rhythms of the natural world. The best [he] could do to straddle that border was to read as much as [he] could about the animals that had so entranced [him] just days earlier" (p. 5).

Within the pilgrimage paradigm, there is a crossing over that must take place from the ordinary and everyday life of the world into the liminal and becoming space of the pilgrimage journey where transformation is possible. Heuer may, in fact, be entering this liminal stage as he begins his journey by studying the research on the Porcupine caribou and attempting to learn more about the caribou. Heuer goes on to give detailed information about the Porcupine Caribou and the uncertain future that became a burden strong enough to keep him awake at night. Not only were the porcupine herd's numbers dwindling, but politicians and oil companies were also fighting for the rights to open the refuge and the calving grounds of the caribou to drilling. While Heuer is able to find a great deal of information on conservation, oil, politics, and science, he does not "find the story of the caribou herd itself" (pp. 8-9). What Heuer calls the "surge of life and death" (p. 10) is what has been missing in all this debate, and, accordingly, the story is in the "effort and risk the caribou took to get there and back from their wintering grounds each year.

Four mountain ranges, hundreds of passes, dozens of rivers, countless grizzly bears, wolves, mosquitoes, and Arctic storms — those were the risks, that was the real story, and the time had come to try to get the story out" (p.10). By telling the story of the caribou, and the story of his own pilgrimage in following the caribou, Heuer hopes to raise public awareness about the importance of protecting this particular and sacred birthing site.

The Time and Place of Pilgrimage

Many of the most famous Judeo-Christian pilgrimages to sacred sites have definite paths that have been travelled by pilgrims for generations. The pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela is one such journey. Other sacred pilgrimage sites, such as the site of Brebeuf's martyrdom and sites of the pilgrimage in Marmora, Ontario, have the Stations of the Cross clearly marked, and the paths follow well trodden by the thousands of supplicants each year. However, other sacred sites have no such clearly marked trail. The sacred sites in the Holy City of Jerusalem, for example, a sacred site to Jews, Christians, and Moslems, have not only different routes and places of entry but also competing discourses surrounding the sacred. Likewise, in the pilgrimage of the Caribou, the path of journey varies from year to year (most likely influenced by the elements), but the destination of the calving site and the birthing itself is, in essence, what Heuer and the caribou are seeking and what Heuer is attempting to preserve. As such, it is not just the site itself that must be preserved but also a wilderness that allows the caribou to instinctually seek this site each year. According to Heuer:

There are some patterns in the way the caribou migrate, but they can't be predicted, much less mapped, from year to year. Being caribou means not having fixed goals, objectives, or destinations. Our task would be to follow them, move like them, act like them, perhaps even think like them, and see what we learned along the way. (pp. 11-12)

Heuer contends that the pilgrimage journey following the Caribou was an attempt to be like them, "without fixed goals, objectives, or destinations" (pp. 11-12). The caribou are, however, heading to the calving grounds. This is their necessary and yearly destination. While being "without fixed goals" in the human realm suggests a relinquishing of control and a zen-like being-in-the-moment and, as such, is a worthy aim, the objective is very much to follow the caribou. The pilgrim perhaps is suggesting following the instinctual path that is known but not understood on a conscious level, and a path that is always different and new; however, he/she always attempts to reach the sacred site of birthing. In this sense, following the Caribou is much like any other pilgrimage: it is an attempt to follow the path of the founder or charter pilgrim, and to be like them. As in every other pilgrimage, there is a desire to relinquish the control exerted in every day life and an attempt to learn from the journey.

The place and time to actually begin the physical journey was a somewhat complex decision. Although there were patterns to the migrations, they could not be predicted from year to year, and, further, it was difficult, in most cases, to discern between what can be called simply "milling" or the actual surge forward that constitutes the caribou "migrating" (pp. 30-2). Heuer writes:

The question of when to start following the caribou was one we'd agonized over all winter, and with good reason. More than any other decision, it would determine the success or failure of our trip. If the caribou were migrating and we didn't go now, there was little chance of ever catching up. And if they weren't migrating and we did go now, we would expend precious energy and food circling after them before they started the long trip to the Arctic Coast. (p. 31)

What finally convinced Karsten Heuer and his wife Leanne Allison to begin the journey was a dream. Heuer and Allison spent the night listening to the advice and stories of the Gwich'in community in Old Crow. Randal, in particular, told them about "ancestral spirits, dreams, visions, a deep instinct that resides in the land" and, as his final advice to them, told them to "pay attention to [their] dreams" (pp. 32-3). The Gwich'in people related that in the past "people could talk to caribou, and caribou could talk to people" (p. 17). Allison awoke from sleeping in a bed made of caribou skin with the message from her dream: "It was spring [...] The Porcupine River was breaking up. The ice was gone. A wide ribbon of green water rushed downstream" (p. 33). And heeding the dream, Randal, the wise old elder of the Gwich'in says, "You better get going" (p. 33). And in accordance with many other pilgrims before them, most notably the dream visions that led pilgrims to begin pilgrimages in the Middle Ages, the pilgrims set out on their journey as the result of a dream vision of spring — the classical time when pilgrims begin their journey.

The Dangers of Pilgrimage

The archetypal pilgrimage trails originating in the Judeo-Christian tradition with the Israelites pilgrimage from Egypt to the Promised Land to the Medieval Pilgrimage routes to the Holy Land were fraught with danger. Danger was posed by the sheer length of the journey, the landscape and elements, wild animals, and bandits along the way. Similarly, in the pilgrimages in Canada, Brébeuf and the later settler pilgrims of Goldsmith's village faced the threats posed by nature — cold, snow, ice, wild animals, and starvation to name a few. In a like manner, dangers were posed for the caribou and Heuer and Allison in following the caribou through the northern landscape to their calving grounds. Early in the spring migration, the threat of wolves is given some detail (pp. 45, 54), and the pain and danger of the river crossings change with the seasons (p. 74). The danger posed by bears waking from their long migration is perhaps the threat that comes the closest to tempting the pilgrims to end their journey. In the first description of an encounter with bears Heuer writes:

To be approached by any wild animal is unnerving; to be approached by a grizzly bear is even more unsettling; but to be approached by a starving grizzly that's stalking you is pure terror. With each step it took toward us, I saw more reasons for the bear's brazen behaviour: pus-filled eyes, broken claws, a dull coat hanging off a rack of protruding hips, shoulders, and ribs. Playing dead was no option; if it didn't stop soon, we would have to fight back. (pp. 90-1)

Allison fully realizes the situation when she laments, "Karst, [...] this is crazy. We're following the caribou to the calving grounds with a bunch of hungry grizzly bears!" (p. 93). Later in the season, when the rushing waters and the hungry bears and wolves pose less of a threat, the bugs become a particularly horrible enemy to the caribou. For Heuer and Allison, there was some limited protection, but for the animals the bugs could burrow into their skin and nostrils and eventually cause death:

The cow lifted her head and a stream of thick, brown mucus oozed from her snout. Nose bot flies were swarming her, laying larvae that would join the legions already wreaking havoc deep inside her head. Attacking the nasal passages of their hosts, they are more bothersome than mosquitoes (which sometimes suck as much as a pint of blood from an animal in a week) or warble flies (whose larvae burrow through the caribou's hide and mature under its skin). As we were seeing, the wasp-like, housefly-size bots were capable of the sort of harm one normally attributes to wolves. (pp. 180-1)

Heuer describes the bugs as merely a constant annoyance and difficulty to himself and Allison: "we were dealing with a problem that would plague us on every calm, sunny day for the rest of our trip: inside, it was too hot to sleep, and outside was too busy with bugs" (p. 163). And while the heat and bugs contribute to the difficulty of the journey, they pose nothing of the threat to their lives that they see the caribou combating in their constant movement to avoid the bugs.

The Temptations of Pilgrimage

The Judeo-Christian pilgrims of the Old Testament or even Chaucer's pilgrims confront mostly temptations of disobedience to God or giving in to the desires of the flesh. The temptation shared by the pilgrims of old and the caribou pilgrims would be perhaps a lack of trust or belief, but the ongoing temptation described by Heuer is the one posed by technology. Perhaps technology is, in fact, the temptation that keeps people from authentic pilgrimage and as a result real

change or cleansing. It is common now on pilgrimage trails that used to be only completed on foot to see people on bicycles, motorcycles, cars, buses, and even being flown in to the sacred site. The challenges of the journey that lead to change and renewal when overcome with the help of modern technology assist the pilgrim in the moment but lead to greater suffering and detachment from the lessons to be learned through perseverance. The first temptation for the caribou pilgrims comes when they lose site of the caribou and are forced to make the decision about utilizing technology:

The contradiction of using modern technology in our effort to 'be' caribou wasn't lost on either of us, which is why, after two days in the cabin, we were debating whether to make the call. Our commitment from the beginning was to be guided by what we saw and felt on the ground, not by outside information, but a week of not seeing a single caribou softened the resolve. (p. 84)

The further temptation was likewise posed by technology and necessity. Of necessity, Heuer and his partner relied on food drops every couple of weeks, but while they could not survive the journey without the food being flown in, the temptation associated with the possibilities posed by technology is one to which they succumbed. After weeks of hardship Heuer is finally becoming connected to the caribou and the land, and it is at this point that he is given the option of comfort, warmth, and unlimited food. Heuer meditates:

[M]uch of the mental clutter — the crummy songs and old phone numbers, forgotten birthdays and other useless facts that had surfaced earlier — was gone. I thought back on the old stalking bear, the storm at the Below River, the fifty days of skiing — and then I thought of the thrumming. It was all connected: the scares had unseated old patterns of naming and studying and understanding, the distance had led to new ways of knowing, but it had taken many kilometers and several weeks for it to happen. (p. 101)

But in the end Heuer and his partner are "seduced by images of warm showers, a comfortable bed, and an unlimited supply of food" (p. 101). It seems particularly apt that Heuer should choose to use the pilgrimage associated word of "seduced" — seduced here not by a Chaucerian pilgrim such as the Wife of Bath, but by the comforts associated with "civilization." In the end, they fly into the community of Kaktovik. After being yanked out of the continual being that had been learned from the caribou and with the caribou, in the town they realize the gravity of their mistake in leaving. In spite of showers and greasy diner food, the conclusion of the

time in Kaktovik is that “the overall experience left us feeling tainted and empty” (p. 114).

The Stories of Pilgrimage

However, one aspect of the time in Kaktovik that is positive is the stories they are told. Telling stories and listening to stories form the basis of pilgrimage literature from the *Canterbury Tales* onward. Contemporary pilgrimage stories from the Santiago de Compostela Camino include various stories told and heard along the journey. The Gwi'chin predict that the caribou will speak to Heuer and Allison and tell them stories on the journey. Before Heuer and Allison depart on their pilgrimage the Gwi'chin tell their stories of speaking with the caribou. However, the stories told by Roger in Kaktovik are the stories that the reader of *Being Caribou* (and Karsten Heuer and Leanne Allison at this point in their journey) can most readily understand. Considered the unofficial Arctic National Wildlife Refuge's chief historian, Roger is able to tell the stories of the historical fight for protection of the calving grounds. According to Roger, while in the fifties “the issue was more about values than ecology” (p. 108) the caribou factored into the campaign, but only really as a symbol. The stories are exchanged between the pilgrims and the final destination of the calving grounds is discussed. If oil drilling takes place Roger can only conclude that “the intent of the refuge would be violated. It was meant to be the ultimate symbol of human restraint. [...] Something sacred would be desecrated. [...] It would be like building a video arcade in the Sistine Chapel” (p. 108). It seems particularly important that the comparison drawn is between the sanctity of the calving grounds and the sacred architecture of a pilgrimage cathedral.

The Rituals of Pilgrimage

While the daily rituals and the feeling of being cleansed was somewhat interrupted by the interlude in Kaktovik, it seems that the pilgrims quickly fell back into the characteristic rituals of the pilgrimage. The rituals in this case involve mostly the daily trudging of the trail and the morning and evening activities of setting up and breaking camp. According to Heuer, a few days into the journey the rituals had already become part of daily life:

The blisters had gone down, soft muscles had hardened, and the camping, cooking, and packing that had consumed so much effort at the start of the trip became nothing more than a comfortable routine at the beginning and end of each rhythmical day. We weren't moving *with* caribou, but we were moving *like* caribou: simply, efficiently, and fast, defaulting to the path of least resistance even when it was a curving, indirect line. But the contentment never stayed long, and

no sooner had we found ease in movement than new worries and discomforts crowded in. (p. 74)

The rituals of pilgrimage are usually those associated with the sacredness of the journey — the prayers and mantras at the various chapels along the way. However, often overlooked in the analysis of pilgrimage are the daily and, as Heuer suggests, cleansing rituals associated with the journey itself. The rhythm of the journey and the journey itself become to the pilgrim the long prayer of being — in this case, being caribou.

The Miracles and Dreams of Pilgrimage

As well as the daily telling and listening to stories told by each other and by the caribou, and the rhythmical rituals of the daily journey, the journey is punctuated at key moments by the miraculous. According to the pilgrims of old, and the contemporary pilgrims along the Santiago de Compostela Camino, it is at the moments when the pilgrim feels the most lost and depressed, the most desperate or in danger, and often as an answer to an unspoken prayer that the miraculous occurs. Perhaps even part of the miracle is the miracle of faith and perseverance which is made real by the journey. Dreams also seem to play a major role in the miraculous. Dreams sometimes seem to part the veil between the tangible and intangible worlds. Heuer describes a moment in their journey when they are “[t]ired and confused, [...] beyond nagging hunger, beyond the blunt edge of exhaustion, beyond the limit of the day before. [...] We no longer knew where we were or where we were going; caribou became our existence. [...] Disoriented, we found that old boundaries began to blur, and the caribou that had dominated one realm of consciousness slipped into another, occupying our dreams” (p. 160). In this tired state of confusion, a dream, perhaps even a miraculous dream, occurs. The dream gives the pilgrims strength and encouragement at exactly the moment in the journey when their own strength has ebbed away. Heuer says, “I dreamt we saw our first bull” (p. 160-1) and goes on to describe the scene of his dream. Then Heuer goes on to describe how, opening up the tent, he looks out on the exact scene of his dream. The skeptical and critical modern mind is tempted and often succumbs to explaining away any miraculous encounter by any means available. However, at this point in the journey, it seems that Heuer has moved beyond the doubt of the world he had known before, when he was skeptical of what the Gwi'chin elders told him about the ways of the caribou, and is able to believe in the miraculous and so be strengthened by the experience. In his journal Heuer writes:

There is no explaining this, no room for the old skepticism and doubt. And although a part of me

still wants to question — to know exactly how and why — it is smaller than before, a voice that's scarcely audible amid the overwhelming urge to surrender and accept. It is the act of moving that has brought me here; the work of being caribou: the miles, the weather, the bears, and the uncertainty, hammering every extraneous thought, action, question, phone number, and song from our previously crowded minds. Cleansed, we are on the edge of something, some other realm of knowing, being pushed and pulled through the same physical world but in a different dimension of space and time. (p. 161).

Heuer concludes the following in his journal towards the end of the journey: *"There have been too many coincidences over the last four months, too many signs appearing at just the right moment, to attribute everything to luck. [...] They seem to wait when we've fallen behind, stop, even circle when we're delayed by weather, always appearing to guide us as though there's something they don't want us to miss"* (p. 203). It seems that Heuer is suggesting what in pilgrimage terms would be considered the miraculous intervention of the herd. Heuer acknowledges that there have been "signs" and that just when they have fallen behind the caribou appear to guide them. Further, he suggests that the caribou are guiding him and Allison towards something that *"they don't want us to miss"* (p. 203). This is at once a mystical suggestion and a statement of faiths: there is something that the caribou can teach and that humans can learn from being caribou.

One of the most mystical and, in many ways, miraculous encounters of the caribou pilgrims was with the vibrations of the herd. The title of this paper is, in fact, taken from one of the observations from this belonging in the "living, breathing, pulsing web" (p. 98). Heuer writes: "It was there, immersed in the history and energy of multiple migrations, that I clearly heard what had registered as only a subtle rumbling before (p. 98). The pilgrim goes on to recount:

The land was vibrating underneath me, as though the ground itself was alive. [...] A trained scientist, I was vexed by its formlessness: neither loud nor subtle, it was a strong beckoning I could hardly hear. [...] Was the sound because of the convergence of all the animals, or was the convergence prompted by the sound? Did it come and go, or was it me who was changing, hearing something that had always existed, only noticing it for the first time? [...] We were part of something larger, a communal push that was closing in on the mysterious place that had beckoned all of us for so long. (p. 99)

This miraculous "feeling" and connection with the ancient rhythms and beats of the herd and the land were something only hinted at by the Gwich'in elders, something that could only be felt after following the herd, the paths and the dangers faced by the caribou.

Transformation by Pilgrimage

Importantly, transformation takes place on the pilgrimage journey. While there is a fixed goal of reaching the sacred site — the journey itself participates in the process of transforming the pilgrim. In the recent pilgrimage narrative of Guy Thatcher, a regular pilgrim on the Camino de Santiago, Thatcher intersperses his journey with the realizations that come to him along the walk. However, he also sums up in what he terms "[r]elearning [l]ife's [l]essons" in the epilogue (p. 191). Heuer instinctively and in a similar fashion interlaces the story of his pilgrimage to the calving grounds with the realizations, progressive cleansing, and transformations as they take place. After crossing the Alaska-Yukon boundary, Heuer reflects that "Ours was just one path" [...] "One of many journeys" [...] "I suddenly realized that we had followed just one thread of one migration, among many that, after collectively traveling millions of miles, were now converging onto Alaska's endangered coastal plain" (p. 98).

Upon arriving at the calving grounds, Heuer and Allison are forced to remain in their tent for days and days as the slightest movement could disturb the birthing of the calves. Looking at the calving grounds on the ground level, Heuer contemplates how they had been described as the "Garden of Eden," the "Sistine Chapel" and by the Gwich'in's as the "Sacred Place Where Life Begins" (p. 136). It is here that Heuer says he "stumbled onto the rich reward of staying still" (p. 125) and entered a reality that was marked by "timelessness" (p. 127), later realizing that "even in their stillness they guide us" (p. 190). This immersion in stillness at the sacred site of what the Gwich'in call the "Sacred Place Where Life Begins" transforms the pilgrims in a way that allows for an encounter with the sacred and for beginning to "uncover" what Heuer calls the "forgotten wisdom" or, in other terms, to begin to unlearn some of the achievement and time-oriented ways of being of Western culture. Heuer writes:

Still immersed in the caribou and still beyond the scrutiny of others who might judge me, I wanted to seize this rare chance to develop other, instinctual ways of knowing that the animals had stirred up in me. I felt that I was on the cusp of something, on the edge of uncovering an innate but forgotten wisdom. After years of only applying a rational and scientific approach, I was beginning to see and hear directly, rather than filter every feeling through my mind. The question now was how to do this. How could I access that hidden realm of

consciousness when all I knew was the strive-and-achieve method that had been drilled into me since kindergarten? (p. 192-3)

Towards the conclusion of the pilgrimage, Heuer remarks that the transformations are not merely mental but that “[his] body held the marks of the migration as well. [...] Everything else had been shed — my false sense of security, my hubris, my mental clutter” (p. 194).

In concluding his pilgrimage narrative, Heuer sums up some of the learning and transformations that have taken place as a result of the journey. Heuer incorporates both the practical lessons and the results in terms of the goals of the journey, but attempts to also communicate the sacred elements of the pilgrimage. All signs of “hubris” and the Western “security” that Heuer brought to the journey have been cleansed by the suffering and changed by the timelessness of his encounter with the sacred and he can only conclude:

I didn't have any more answers or solutions now than I had back then, but I did have intimate knowledge of what was at stake. We had discovered a richness on the tundra that couldn't compare to money, a wealth that had nothing to do with material goods or high wages. While we'd been caught up in the swirl of blizzards, bears, and migrating animals, the only economy and freedom that had meant anything were the economy of movement and freedom of thought. Guided by intuition and forces we'd never known existed, we had stumbled into a dimension that neither university education, religious teachings, nor anything else in our Western upbringing had prepared us for. It had taken a while, but for a few brief weeks we'd become caribou: content in our suffering, secure in our insecurity, fully exercising the wildness that had been buried within us all along. (p. 220)

And finally he comments that the cells of his body and spirit have been transformed but that he is trapped in the sameness of the old body that began the journey. Heuer writes, “It was as though every cell inside our bodies had been repolarized, and yet we were still trapped in the same skin” (p. 222).

Conclusions

I think in concluding this exploration of *Being Caribou* as pilgrimage and sacred literature it is important to say something about my own encounter with Karsten Heuer and likewise why I believe it is important to look at this work as a pilgrimage account. I was one of many bored academics at

the end of a long day in a darkened auditorium waiting perhaps for the flourishes of intelligence and the showmanship that so often accompanies a particular way with knowledge. I knew nothing of Karsten Heuer's journeys or writing. The man that emerged on the stage was humble and able to move the entire room to a kind of awakening. He had encountered the sacred. I am an atheist. I am interested in pilgrimage because I am curious what faith means — a faith I do not share. The distant encounter with Karsten Heuer, the man and his writing, is a communication and transmission, like the prophets, perhaps, of old, of the sacred. But God or gods are never named. The sacred called forth is from the land and from the shaking off of the shackles of capitalist and material greed and a call back to an ancient and sacred way of being and knowing that had no name.

What is the importance, then, of looking at *Being Caribou* as a pilgrimage narrative? I think that in my searches through Canadian literature I have found a growing vacuum for what has traditionally been named as sacred literature. Even the explicit accounts of “pilgrimage” on the Camino de Santiago do not include faith, the miraculous, or the conveyance of a message or experience that has the power to transform. And the purpose of telling the pilgrimage story upon the pilgrim's return is, in fact, to transmit the transformation to those who have not participated in the journey. Karsten Heuer is a man clearly transformed and willing to share this experience of being and letting go of artifice with all those who are open to hearing his story — and this is a true pilgrimage — that is, a purposeful journey towards a sacred goal, marked by various encounters with the sacred, rituals, stories, and dangers along the way, that participates in changing and transforming the pilgrim, who is then able to transform others through the pilgrimage story.

The fact that this pilgrimage story is an ecological pilgrimage and bares some different markers and messages than the pilgrimages of the medieval pilgrim makes it all the more powerful. What has been shed from this pilgrimage is all of the abuses that the Reformers had so railed against when they condemned pilgrimage. The pilgrim experiences timelessness, but there is no promise of eternity, no selling of indulgences, none of the tourist markers (albeit, there are some hunters and adventurers who take similar journeys and most likely fall into this latter and abused type of pilgrimage), but, rather, the pilgrimage itself has been transformed and cleansed of the false piety and materialism that has so often changed pilgrimages into more of a tourist journey, often stripped of the sacred. Through going into the wilderness and following the sacred patterns of the porcupine caribou, Heuer rediscovers the timelessness and transformation ideally promised by pilgrimage.

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