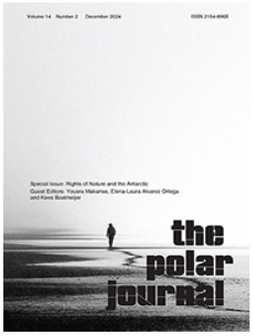

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Climate conflict in Clive and Dirk Cussler's action thriller *Arctic Drift*

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a close reading of Clive and Dirk Cussler's *Arctic Drift* (2008) with a focus on the novel's engagement with human exploration and exploitation of the Arctic and its resources. To study climate and conflict in the novel, we draw upon the Arctic's potential as a geopolitical arena where territorial claims, resource competition, and environmental challenges give rise to both confrontation and collaboration. We also show how the novel rehistoricises the final Franklin expedition to the Northwest Passage (1845 onwards) and examine the techniques that the authors employ to raise scepticism towards a number of historical and scientific metanarratives with their revisionist narrative. Building on this, the paper investigates how the novel critiques the persistence of colonial ideologies in Arctic discourse, depicting corporate and governmental interests as extensions of historical imperialism. Further, the paper demonstrates how the ecological narrative of the novel draws upon the constantly shifting and mutating ecosystems of the Canadian Arctic and negotiates the significance of sustainability in the endangered circumpolar North.

KEYWORDS

Climate fiction; *Arctic Drift*; Clive Cussler; Dirk Cussler; Franklin expedition; global warming

Introduction

Climate change is having a profound impact not only on the globe's polar regions but also on the interconnected state of the Atlantic and the world's oceans. The Arctic has transformed from a previously marginal area to a strategic one and is thus central to global geopolitics.[1] Crucial to this transformed role is how 'environment, security, and geopolitical narratives intersect within maritime regions in the North American Arctic'.[2] Perhaps, thanks to the global ramifications of climate change and the overexploitation of natural resources on vulnerable Arctic ecosystems, the last two decades have seen the emergence of several Arctic-inspired climate fiction (cli-fi) texts. These works span the full spectrum from popular genre novels to literary fiction, encompassing a diverse range of styles, themes, and narrative approaches. For example, Patrick Cave's *Sharp North* (2004), Susannah Waters's *Cold Comfort* (2006), Rivka Galchen's *Atmospheric*

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[1]Nicol and Zellen, "Emerging Trends," 128.

[2]Ibid.

Disturbances (2008), Marcel Theroux's *Far North* (2009), John Minichillo's *The Snow Whale* (2011), Tanya Tagaq's *Split Tooth* (2018), and Greer Macallister's *The Arctic Fury* (2021) all depict Arctic geographies. Some of these climate fictions provide insight into the current state of the Arctic and raise concerns about predominantly destructive human attitudes towards the region. While addressing the exploitation of Arctic natural resources in their works, these writers articulate concerns essential to comprehending climate change. Through their apocalyptic framing and proleptic narratives, some of these authors imagine a post-Arctic era and warn readers of the ecological, political, and social risks to the Arctic.

Clive and Dirk Cussler's *Arctic Drift* (2008) fits within this growing body of Arctic-inspired fiction. It highlights the impact of climate change on the delicate ecosystems of the Arctic and weaves environmental concerns into a high-stakes action narrative, driven by scientific discovery, corporate greed, and political superiority. The novel reimagines the Arctic not only as a vulnerable ecological and geopolitical zone but also as a contested space where history, scientific progress, and economic ambition intersect. The Cusslers engage with the theme of geopolitics and power struggles between nations (mainly Canada and the United States) and private corporations (the deceptively titled Terra Green led by villain-tycoon Mitchell Goyette), all staking their claim at the Arctic region and its resources. In one of the very few critical readings of *Arctic Drift* thus far, Adam Trexler notes that 'Cussler's novel offers a sophisticated account of some of the technological and political difficulties of mitigating climate change, as well as a series of conflicts likely to emerge between the United States and Canada'.[3] These conflicts emerge particularly through the novel's engagement with the materiality of both the Arctic environment and the various machines and other things outsiders bring there, which Trexler highlights as the most poignant feature of the narrative.[4] Importantly, *Arctic Drift* is an example of a rapidly growing number of climate fiction texts which, as Trexler posits, are breaking down assumed barriers between genres and even 'chang[ing] the parameters of storytelling'.[5] The novel shows the geopolitical struggle over the Arctic region intensifying in an international conflict over the increasingly accessible Northwest Passage. The shifting dynamics in the Arctic provoke strategic responses from countries and corporations with vested interests in maintaining control over the circumpolar North.

Both in the novel and the world, the development of transportation systems in the Arctic is a visible reminder of the changes occurring in its ecosystems. For example, the loss of ice opens up the Northwest Passage for year-round access via water, drawing attention 'from terrestrial issues towards marine issues'.[6] Nicole Waller observes that 'the changing Arctic, characterised by melting ice and increased accessibility, must be understood both as a space transit that connects Atlantic and Pacific worlds in unprecedented ways, and as an oceanic world and contact zone in its own right'[7] and remarks that this phenomenon results in 'the emergence of a "new ocean" in the Arctic region',[8] which remaps our oceanic worlds and links the Atlantic and the Pacific.[9] The receding ice in the

[3]Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions*, 147.
[4]Trexler, "Novel Climes," 302–6.
[5]Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions*, 14.
[6]Lehtimäki et al., "Northern Waters," vii.
[7]Waller, "Connecting Atlantic and Pacific," 256.
[8]Ibid., 257.
[9]Ibid., 258.

Northwest Passage creates new possibilities for navigation and commercial activities in the novel, making the Passage particularly susceptible to new exploitative measures.

Arctic Drift also negotiates the ecological instability of the Arctic through its depiction of constantly shifting ice formations and melting permafrost. This makes the novel apt for probing climate change in the Arctic as central to global environmentalism, geopolitics, and security agendas. As climate change reshapes Arctic ecosystems, the novel portrays the region as both an opportunity and a warning: a site of economic potential and an impending environmental disaster. The portrayal of the Northwest Passage as a transformative route linking the Atlantic, the Pacific, and Arctic waters mirrors real-world concerns about how its opening due to climate change alters trade routes, economic power dynamics, and military strategies. The Cusslers' ecothriller thus aligns with broader cultural and political anxieties about the future of the Arctic, reflecting on both its vulnerabilities and its increasing centrality in global affairs.

As is typical of the action genre, most characters in *Arctic Drift* are framed as heroes or villains and the plot often puts them in fast-paced, risky situations which could be easily reproduced in other settings. The narrative involves outlandish turns of events such as saving the United States and Canada from engaging in armed conflict over a misunderstanding machinated by an evil tycoon on a quest for world domination or fending off villains with nineteenth-century muskets acquired from the lost Franklin expedition ship. Yet as we show below, moments of generic high action are counterpointed by others that reflect the specific vulnerability of the Arctic environment, which makes the narrative at times firmly seated in historiographic detail and scientific knowledge of the Arctic and its environment. One of the novel's most compelling aspects is its rehistoricisation of the Franklin expedition and its integration of this expedition into a contemporary thriller. By revisiting the ill-fated nineteenth-century voyage, *Arctic Drift* draws attention to the long history of Arctic exploration and the enduring human drive to conquer, exploit, and extract from these remote landscapes. The novel employs a revisionist approach to challenge dominant historical and scientific metanarratives, raising scepticism about the assumed objectivity of knowledge production. The story also 'work[s] to fold human experiences from the past into the present and prompt a new imaginary for the future'[10] not only to critique past imperial endeavours but also to reflect on how similar patterns of exploitation persist in modern Arctic geopolitics.

This article analyses climate conflict in *Arctic Drift* and explores the Arctic as a geopolitical region where territorial claims, resource competition, and environmental challenges may give rise to climate conflict with global ramifications. We demonstrate how the authors rehistoricise the Franklin expedition to provide readers with an opportunity to critically approach the history of the Arctic and its explorers. The paper also investigates how the novel critiques the persistence of colonial ideologies in Arctic discourse, depicting corporate and governmental interests as extensions of historical imperialism, even while its own representation of Indigenous people is problematic. Our reading of this Arctic novel shows the ways in which the authors challenge dominant historical and scientific narratives of the Arctic through their revisionist narrative. The Cusslers challenge scientific objectivity and determinism while addressing the ecological challenges in the Arctic and embrace relativism to speculate about the current and future

[10]Whyte and Goodbody, "Pandaemonium," 47.

states of the endangered region. The representations of the Arctic in their novel are not fixed and static, and the Arctic is in a constant process of transformation.[11]

Rehistoricising the Franklin expedition

The Cusslers' action thriller implies a dystopian future for the whole planet, should we continue our misconduct towards the Arctic. In parallel to showing Franklin's men as past explorers and colonisers who perished, the novel represents investors, industrialists, and profiteers as present and future conquerors of the Arctic. The story begins with a Prologue looking back to April 1848 in the Victoria Strait of the Arctic Ocean, today part of Canada, where the Franklin expedition becomes stranded. This era of Arctic exploration was marked by Europeans' determination to conquer the unknown, eager to assert their dominance and claim new territories beyond and above the Atlantic and the Pacific. After the Prologue, the story switches to April 2011 when a team of divers from the National Underwater and Marine Agency (NUMA)[12] attempts to find the wrecks of the *Erebus* and the *Terror*. In reality, the bodies of Franklin and most of his men have never been found, and Canada only discovered the sunken hulls of the ships in the Arctic Ocean in 2014 and 2016, respectively. Inuit oral history suggests that the Indigenous peoples of the Arctic always remembered encounters with the Franklin expedition and roughly knew where the lost ships may lie, but that knowledge was not recognised by the Canadian public and most political actors until very recent decades.[13]

In the novel, the two NUMA investigators, Pitt and his colleague Al Giordino, who search for lost ships of historic significance, call the perishing of Franklin and his 134 men 'the worst tragedy in Arctic exploration'.[14] However, they do not approach the Franklin expedition as a service to humans. Rather, they consider 'Franklin's exploits in the Arctic, a largely forgotten historical footnote to modern generations' (345). The NUMA investigators find not only the *Erebus* and the *Terror* but also Franklin's logbook, which reveals a connection between his expedition and the mysterious silvery mineral, known as 'ruthenium'. Based on Franklin's logbook, the ruthenium, which includes high quantities of mercury, had negatively affected the health of the Inuit and made them think of ruthenium as 'a dark curse, something about bad spirits and the source being tainted by death and insanity, or similar mumbo jumbo' (150). However, Franklin, who in the novel is stated to have been fully aware of the great value of ruthenium, persuades the Inuit to hand the 'unwished-for mineral' known as Black Kobluna over to him. So, the novel's Inuit had mined for ruthenium, but both historically and in the novel's present, the mineral only has value in the hands of white men. The Inuits' role in the narrative is reduced to what Banerjee calls an 'econative', an Indigenous agent who may once have known or done something of value, but who is now fully absent. Or, if they still linger on the stage, their knowledge requires white action to become meaningful.[15]

[11]See Ghasemi, "Nice Ice," 348.
[12]This agency frequently appears in Clive Cussler's earlier novels, and a real-life version of it was founded by Clive Cussler himself in 1979 to preserve maritime environments.
[13]See Mossé, "Inuit Perspectives."
[14]Cussler and Cussler, *Arctic Drift*, 174. All further references to the Cusslers' novel will be given in the text.
[15]Banerjee, "The Myth of the EcoNative."

Travel writing critic Tim Youngs associates voyages such as Franklin's 'with the forces of imperialism and colonialism, capitalism and patriarchy'[16] and calls into question the good intentions and motivations behind expeditions to unexplored territories. In colonialist lore, 'explorers are brave, they are heroes',[17] a perspective that echoes the novel's portrayal of Franklin's imagined majestic funeral in London in the present day. The Cusslers, however, dismiss the trope of the explorer-as-hero and undermine Franklin's heroism, believing that at the core of the Franklin expedition was its leader's wish to increase his wealth and improve his image as a hero – motivations shared by the novel's twenty-first-century tycoon-villain, Mitchell Goyette, who functions as a modern-day Franklin.

Goyette becomes known for environmental activism, but behind that façade lies his real endeavour of corporate profit, which, like Franklin's expedition, existed largely for mercantile purposes. Dirk Pitt notes that '[Goyette] doesn't live the self-deprived life of a true greenie. He's become a billionaire off the environmental movement, yet nobody holds it against him. Some people say that he doesn't even believe in the movement, that it's just a means for him to make money' (39). Dirk's colleague, Al Giordino, also believes that 'If Goyette is shipping gas and oil from the Arctic, his environmental posturing is certainly fraudulent' (211). Goyette's true nature is further revealed in the novel, as his ploy to make deals with China and extort the United States and Canada with his machinations becomes clear. As Goyette's henchman, Clay Zak, ironically retorts, 'Goyette, the environmentalist, can become the savior of the planet and pocket a few bucks along the way' (162). The prominent figure known in the public eye as a pro-environmentalist is actually an economically motivated anti-environmentalist, who treats the Arctic environment and the planet as a potential business field. In some ways, the voyage once commenced by Franklin is continued by Goyette, the more sinister version of Franklin. Franklin's baton of exploration and exploitation has been seized in the Arctic relay race by Goyette, who has been provided with an opportunity to carry it further with his scientific and technological tools. The way the *Erebus* and the *Terror* have developed into the helicopters, modern ships, and tankers used by Goyette and his teams for the exploitation of the Arctic emphasises the importance of material things in the narrative.

Literature on the North American Arctic and specifically on the Franklin expeditions often projects ideas of the difficulty or impossibility of knowing the Arctic. The prominent Western Canadian author Rudy Wiebe writes that the Arctic has 'Secrets; secrets everywhere'.[18] Accordingly, his novel *A Discovery of Strangers* (1994), based on the first Franklin expedition to the Arctic in 1819–22, represents a crew that enters the Arctic assuming that they know what they will find, only to discover that all their knowledge of space, waterways and even themselves falls apart in encounters with Arctic space.[19] Even the fast-paced action narrative in *Arctic Drift* reflects this idea of the Arctic as something alluring and unknowable: the novel incorporates indeterminacies about the Franklin expedition and the true intentions behind his discovery plans and shows the long history of Western desire for the Arctic. The authors attempt to unravel mysteries regarding the Franklin expedition through the potential of history and fiction to fill in some of the gaps.

[16]Youngs, "The Conquest," 132.
[17]Schimanski and Spring, "A Black Rectangle," 31.
[18]Wiebe, *Playing Dead*, 44.
[19]Korkka, *Ethical Encounters*, 207, 208.

For example, the narrative depicts the inner minds of the men who lost their lives in the Arctic, particularly Captain James Fitzjames as the leader since Franklin's death a year earlier, which creates new mysteries for readers and adds to the existing mysteries of the historical event. Such rehistoricisation of the Franklin expedition represents alternative versions of his exploration and intention and creates a dynamic view of history.

Arctic Drift also offers a quick review of other Arctic explorers who had been to the Arctic in the first half of the nineteenth century, which subverts Franklin's 'unique status as the "first and only"' explorer of the Arctic at his own time.[20] The narrative notes that 'The discovery of the Northwest Passage was perhaps the last great feat of the seaborne exploration left to conquer. Dozens had tried and failed, but this expedition was different. Armed with two Arctic-ready ships under the command of an enigmatic leader in Sir John Franklin, success had been all but guaranteed' (7). This process of revisiting and reconfiguring 'triumphalist master narratives'[21] effectively reshapes public perceptions of history,[22] and through rehistoricising the history of the Arctic expedition, the novel proffers alternative perspectives to help readers think more critically about received annals of history.

The drifting Arctic

Arctic Drift portrays the past and present state of the Arctic and maps the Arctic in both historical contexts and modern times through comparative representations of the region. All five parts of the novel, including the epilogue and prologue, commence with a map or an illustration of Arctic regions. As Adam Trexler remarks: 'Throughout the novel, geographical specificity is maintained with carefully described, real places and reproduced maps. This cartographic quality is particularly significant, because the majority of the novel's chases, escapes, and pursuits are determined by the terrain' or, importantly, the waterway in question.[23] The cartographic and pictorial features enable readers to envisage and identify with the multiplicity of the circumpolar geospheres represented in the story. To draw a comparison between two temporalities in the 1840s and the 2010s, the novel opens with an illustration of men dragging a sledge while abandoning their ships stuck in the frozen sea. The image in Part III, however, juxtaposes a map of the Royal Geographical Society Islands, a group of islands lying west of King William Island in Victoria Strait, in the 2010s and an old hand-drawn map of the same region in the 1840s. The former map identifies three small islands in the middle of an open sea, while the hand-drawn map shows a permafrost fully covered with ice and snow. By contrasting the two maps, readers can easily detect the receding of snow and ice as a result of global warming in the circumpolar latitudes. The maps may record 'nature as a process of unfolding and dynamic flow',[24] which is always in the process of transformation, but the general framework of the novel leaves little space for readers to consider this transformation 'natural' instead of anthropogenic.

[20]Eglinger, "Traces Against Time's Erosion," 4.
[21]Whyte and Goodbody, "Pandaemonium," 29.
[22]Goodbody, "Sense of Place," 59.
[23]Trexler, "Novel Climes," 303.
[24]Oppermann, "Theorizing Ecocriticism," 118.

For instance, the Prologue, which takes place in April 1848, describes the Arctic as 'Bound for months in darkness and unrelenting cold', (3) 'a blistering world of bone white' where '[h]owling winds hurled a trillion specks of crystalline ice at the men, peppering their bodies with the force of a hundred-degrees below zero windchill' (54). Accordingly, 'Surviving an Arctic winter aboard an icebound ship was a frightful challenge' (3). The novel frames exiting the *Erebus* as 'stepping through the gates of a frozen hell', and 'the blinding conditions made finding the next market post a deadly challenge' 'in the dizzying vortex of white' (5). Like many other narratives that engage with the North American Arctic, *Arctic Drift* recognises that at least historically, the land challenges newcomers as 'Neither water, land (or shapes suggesting land) nor light appear as they are expected to'.[25] The above description of the old Arctic climate serves as an effective reminder of the difficulty of knowing Arctic space as the experiences of Franklin's crew show a space where all points of navigation may instantly vanish in ice and snow, and human senses provide no useful data of the environment.

In the Prologue, humans are clearly weaker than the Arctic. Franklin's ships are locked in the frozen sea, and his men lose their lives: 'Across the ice, the *Erebus* silently sailed on, an ice-encrusted tomb. Like her crew, she would eventually fall victim to the harsh Arctic environment' (12). In this harsh climate, Franklin's vessels are coffins, and the whole Arctic is represented as a deadly site. Thus, the Prologue portrays an era when the Arctic was in the position of power and defeated explorers who dared to enter it as they only found what Robert Kroetsch calls 'a full emptiness, an unknown which baffled their very narrative of exploration/exploitation'.[26] The land may have seemed empty and open to conquest, but it proved powerful enough to frustrate explorers sent by the most powerful empires in the colonial era. However, right after Part I, the narrative depicts humans subjugating the Arctic and commercially exploiting its natural resources. They construct railways, highways, and airports to facilitate their transportation, exploration, and excavation, showing that the Arctic has been defeated.

The quick transition from the novel's Prologue to the story's present-day in 2011 also enables readers to see how fuels replace renewable energy. For instance, in the Prologue, two wooden sailing ships (albeit supplemented by fossil-based steam power) are shown taking Franklin and his team to the Arctic. However, from Part I onward, only motor vehicles, including different famous car brands, jets, cruise ships, Greyhound busses, helicopters, and tankers, are used by travellers, scientists, and visitors to the Arctic. The authors show that, as a result of using such vehicles, the Arctic is at stake, and it has become, as Renee Hulan states, the 'victim of the excesses of wasteful, industrial modern life'.[27] This excess of waste and emission in the Arctic is foregrounded in the novel to evoke concern about the sustainability of the Arctic and the safety of its biodiversity.

These old and new images largely circumvent the historical presence of the Indigenous peoples in the Arctic and instead reproduce the colonialist trope that the Arctic was once an undisturbed arena which few (Western) people took bold risks to visit, but now the region has lost its sublimity and turned into a touristy attraction. Because of industrial operations and natural resource extraction, it has lost its status as a region that has very

[25]Korkka, "Reflections in Water," 83.
[26]Kroetsch, *A Likely Story*, 98.
[27]Hulan, "The Poetry of the Aeroplane," 87.

few marks of anthropogenic pollution. In one case, the captain of a cruise ship notices a white cloud and informs the pilot of a US Coast Guard helicopter, who after some investigation confirms the presence of an LNG tanker at a floating terminal unlawfully discharging gas, and he immediately issues marine hazard warnings and advises ships to alter their course (210). This representation of the Arctic shows that the Arctic has drifted, since 'many parts of the Arctic are attracting increased interest as sites for extractive industries – oil, gas and mining projects – and cruise ship tourism is expanding and reaching into remote areas'.[28]

The modern-day characters' easy use of various modes of transportation in *Arctic Drift* means that the distance between explorers and Indigenous peoples has increased. This narrative choice reflects a broader reality in Arctic exploration today, where technological advancements in transportation have reduced direct contact between outsiders and locals. Henning Howlid Waerp comments that 'modern travellers do not meet the locals because of modern technologies of travel, like planes and helicopters'.[29] In the same vein, Hulan notes that 'in Canada, Arctic aviation developed as science and technology adapted to facilitate rapid expansion northward to pursue the resource extraction and development that was the raison d'être of Arctic exploration in Canada'.[30] As shown in the novel, past explorers such as Franklin and his crew even had business ties with the Inuit, and they received food such as hunted seals from them in exchange for knives and other instruments. However, the novel's protagonists and antagonists have no direct contact with the Inuit when roaming the Arctic. Modern explorers use technological inventions as circumnavigators, which give them the power to move in the Arctic even in conditions that killed Franklin and his men, should such conditions still occur. Technology also enables them to claim that they have enough knowledge to survive in the Arctic and do not need to contemplate finding sustainable ways to engage with Arctic space. They continue the processes of colonisation in which newcomers never ask the crucial question 'Should I be here?'[31] Such a question would highlight the impact that colonial and other incursions have on Arctic space and its Indigenous peoples, but there is hardly room in the thriller story for such nuances; the protagonists are too busy saving the world from an international conflict.

The villain of *Arctic Drift*, Goyette, welcomes global warming and climate change in the circumpolar geospheres: 'if global warming is reversed, or even halted, I could face extended ice issues that run counter to my entire business strategy' (162). He also adds, 'I can't afford to have the Northwest Passage revert to a solid chunk of ice. The recent melting is what has allowed me to gain control of the Melville Sound gas fields and monopolise transportation in the region' (163). The natural condition of the Arctic interferes with his projects, such as the construction and operation of the Northwest Passage and the expansion of gas fields.

In the novel, the NUMA report on ocean temperatures confirms that 'the seas are warming much faster than previously predicted, while rising at the same pace. There seems to be no stopping the melting of the polar ice caps. The rise in sea level is going to create a global upheaval that we can't even imagine' (23). After reading the report, the US

[28]Nuttall, Christensen, and Siegert, "Introduction: Locating Polar Regions," 3.
[29]Waerp, "Fridtjof Hansen," 56.
[30]Hulan, "The Poetry of the Aeroplane," 98,99.
[31]Kamboureli, "Introduction I: Literary Solidarities."

Vice President blames the 'Prior administrations [that] spent their time propping up the oil companies while throwing peanuts at renewable-energy research' (24). He then accuses the 'Congress [that] was too busy protecting the coal industry to see that they were setting the planet up for destruction' (24). His statements show that instead of taking prompt and proper action, he only rebukes his political ancestors and rivals and does not look at the threat with a sense of foreboding.

Political short-term gains are once again highlighted in the novel when the US President addresses the American anti-coal protesters in a nationally televised speech: 'My fellow Americans [. . .], [o]ur daily lives are imperiled by a crisis of energy while our very future existence is threatened by a crisis of the environment' (54). Here, the President touches upon the crisis of energy and crisis of environment, and while he admits that the battle against global warming is all but lost, he makes the grandiose promise that 'the United States achieve a national goal of carbon neutrality by the year 2020' (54), nine years on from that moment in the narrative. While repeating the main concern of the environmental activists about the future of our planet, he emphasises the energy crisis at the present time but postpones the implementation of carbon neutrality projects until after his potential second term. So, his only policy is to buy time for a short-term win, which would temporarily pacify the protesters with his promises so that their boycotts do not weaken his campaign.

By showing the caricature of a politician concerned about re-election, the novel reveals what happens when the environment is only assigned instrumental value. Furthermore, the critical condition of Arctic biospheres is depicted through the eyes of Captain Weber on a Canadian Coast Guard ship in a thinly veiled educational segment, where he 'silently cursed' the conditions in which his ship sails:

> Scientists estimate that over forty thousand square miles of Arctic ice have receded in just the past thirty years. Much of the blame for the rapid melt off is due to the ice albedo-feedback effect. In its frozen state, Arctic ice will reflect up to ninety per cent of incoming solar radiation. When melted, the resulting seawater will conversely absorb an equal amount of radiation, reflecting only about ten percent. This warming loop has accounted for the fact that Arctic temperatures are climbing at double the global rate. (91)

This passage shows the destructive impact of global warming on the circumpolar North and the fast pace of ice receding and highlights the key role of the Arctic in reflecting solar radiation and controlling seawater levels. The novel explicitly tracks the changes in the Arctic to make the reader aware of the fragility of the ecosystem and the environment in the circumpolar North.

As a result of the rapid ice melt-off and the weakening ice albedo-feedback effect (the higher ability of ice to reflect sunlight than land or water surfaces), according to the novel, Arctic temperatures climb twice as fast as the average global temperature. As the statistics from *Arctic Drift* note, over 40,000 square miles of Arctic ice have receded in only three decades. It would be difficult to ascertain how realistic all the details of Arctic climate change described in the novel might be, so some of them may be pseudo-statistics; yet they certainly represent a real phenomenon. Hester Blum addresses the 'Atlantification' of circumpolar areas, stating that 'Atlantic water is warmer and saltier than Arctic water [. . .], and Atlantification drives sea ice loss and profoundly disrupts the

marine ecosystem'. On the one hand, Blum's point underscores the urgency of understanding Atlantification to mitigate its detrimental impacts on the Arctic environment. In the novel's portrayal, the melting of polar ice and subsequent Atlantification of the Arctic opens the area for international organised crime disguised as environmentalism, which then jeopardises global security. The ramifications of climate change ring far and wide, as the novel's thrilling set-up denotes.

Arctic profiteering

The Arctic as presented in *Arctic Drift* shares parallels with both the Pacific and the Atlantic oceanic spaces. Nicole Poppenhagen and Jens Temmen draw parallels between the two oceans based on 'discourses of discovery and exploration, colonialism and empire, migration and exploitation'.[32] In the Atlantic, this means the transatlantic slave trade, the colonisation of the Americas, and the establishment of vast empires. Similarly, the Pacific was marked by the exploration of Oceania, the colonisation of the islands, and the exploitation of the Indigenous populations. The Arctic, though less traversed, became a site of imperial competition in the quest for the Northwest Passage, as well as a target for resource expansion and extraction for profiteering. *Arctic Drift* revolves around a race to control valuable resources in the Arctic with both Atlantic and Pacific players. This highlights the strategic significance of the region, not only as a source of energy reserves but also as a potential flashpoint for international conflicts. The cli-fi novel portrays the way nations compete with one another over the Arctic and its resources: 'the Arctic is considered a mining candy land these days. Diamonds in the Northwest Territories, coal on Ellesmere Island, and of course oil and natural gas prospects all over the place' (157). Several countries strive to further benefit from the rich circumpolar resources, and their intense rivalries and frictions further jeopardise the environment. In particular, the novel portrays political conflicts between the United States and Canada and their excavation work to discover and extract oil, natural gas, and minerals from Arctic regions, efforts that continue in spite of environmental campaigns, public resistance, and even boycotts.

In addition to oil and gas exploration and extraction, the novel's Prime Minister of Canada allocates funds to build a fleet of military icebreakers, establish new Arctic bases and construct a passage at Nanisivik to facilitate the commute of commercial ships. According to the Prime Minister, Canada can receive a fee from all merchant ships in exchange for the service (92). Despite the disagreement of Russia, the United States, and Denmark, other 'developed nations gladly complied in the name of economics', since the passage 'connecting Europe with East Asia could trim thousands of miles off their shipping routes by avoiding the Panama Canal' (92). Construction of an Arctic passage would mean dramatic changes to the climate of the Arctic but also create more efficient routes, shorten travel time to other parts of the world, and minimise the consumption of fuels. Such benefits make it obvious why a year-round maritime passage would bring geopolitical and economic advantages to some stakeholders while working against others. The conundrum is made visible without a collective solution, which no one in the political realm of the novel seems to have.

[32]Poppenhagen and Temmen, "Across Currents," 154.

In addition to securing a source of income for his country, the Canadian Prime Minister thinks of logistic capabilities and energy supplies via the waterway as weapons in the hands of his government. In one case, when Goyette's barge disguised as an American navy warship batters a Canadian research ice camp, the Prime Minister 'denounce[s] the incident as a barbaric act of war', and declares that 'Canadian sovereignty will no longer be violated by foreign transgressions' (120). The Prime Minister's position is fortified by the angry Parliament that dispatches additional naval forces to the Arctic and threatens to close Canadian borders to its neighbour and shut off oil and gas exports. By depicting such reactions, the Cusslers show that transportation and energy services can be used against others as a lever of hegemonic power as well as political and economic domination. The Canadian authorities first and foremost think of their own power and profit, showing how nations can become easily manipulated at the hands of a skilful villain pushing the right buttons in an already vulnerable situation.

The novel portrays a dystopian world in which the commercial interests of individuals such as Goyette determine the fate of nations. After receiving bribes from Goyette, the Canadian Minister of Natural Resources terminates the licence given to the Mid-America Mining Company and grants it to Goyette's company for extracting ruthenium. To justify revoking their licence, the Minister suggests heating up a political crisis with the United States, and Goyette asks his mercenaries to capture the Americans in the Canadian Arctic zone. To him, the captives can provide 'the opportunity to ignite the flames of contention between Canada and the U.S'. (232). To monopolise vast chunks of Arctic resources, Goyette causes military escalation between two allies, and the Minister, who should be committed to the national interests of his homeland, becomes an accomplice to an eco-villain. Consequently, the tensions growing between the United States and Canada turn the Arctic into a militaristic hotspot merely for the economic ambitions of one person.

By portraying Goyette as a personification of the environmental profiteer, the novel critiques those who exploit green initiatives for personal gain while contributing to larger environmental issues. Goyette's henchman Zak calls him 'the unrepentant capitalist, who can recognise a profit opportunity blindfolded and will stop at nothing to keep his financial empire expanding' (162). He is willing to eliminate anyone who wishes to halt or hinder his plans. In one case, he orders Zak to assassinate scientist Lisa Lane and blast her lab, where she conducts her 'blue sky research' (82) aimed at reducing global warming by developing artificial photosynthesis using ruthenium as a catalyst to counteract carbon emissions. Goyette readily jumps from greenwashing and corporate spin to sabotage and slowing down technological breakthroughs in clean energy.

As can be expected from a fast-paced action novel, much of the narrative revolves around the confrontation between heroes and villains. The main eco-villain, Goyette, is eventually killed by a man revenging his brother's death caused by Goyette's carbon dioxide dumping in the waters of British Columbia. Despite the novel's retribution, as more is discovered about Goyette's strategies and plots of dominating natural resources in the Arctic, more shades of grey emerge in the battle between good and evil. The Prime Minister of Canada and several cabinet members who had been involved in Goyette's corrupt schemes resign. Ironically, the person most entangled in those schemes, the Natural Resources Minister, is 'called upon to teach a popular course in ethics' in a private college in Ontario (343). This irony raises questions about accountability,

ethical responsibility, and consequences faced by individuals embroiled in corrupt practices, but also lends credibility to the narrative; this is no fairy tale where all villains get their karmic retribution.

At the same time, *Arctic Drift* shows how different parties – ostensibly working towards environmental progress – are often engaged in fierce competition, using any means necessary to outmanoeuvre their rivals. This dynamic is not limited to high-level corruption; even in scientific research, suspicions and conflicts arise. For example, when thinking of who might have blown up Lisa Lane's lab, the lab staff point their fingers at their competitors. Otherwise, as they believe, 'who could possibly be hurt by a reduction in greenhouse gases?' (137). However, as the novel later reveals, Lane's lab assistant, Bob Hamilton, sells out the information to Goyette for over two hundred thousand dollars. Characters who are usually positively presented in the public eye, such as the 'scientist' Hamilton and the 'environmentalist' Goyette, in the narrative can act as enemies of the environment. To explore natural resources in the Arctic, Goyette hires top geologists, and they use their knowledge and expertise to speed up the extraction of minerals and fuels that catalyse the destruction of those natural sites. This suggests that, like the corrupted Canadian authorities, such scientists support the anti-environmentalist projects, which result in nature destruction and degradation.

Trexler believes that 'hypocrisy [is] a painful reflection of contemporary society' and 'individual hypocrisy matters in the face of climate change'.[33] This is evident in *Arctic Drift*: the name of Goyette's company, 'Terra Green', is a good cover for hiding the activities of his holdings. As Pitt ironically notes, 'Terra Green is apparently not all that green', and his NUMA colleague Yaeger replies, 'It's worse than that' (167). By presenting himself as a green entrepreneur while concealing significant investments in dirty energy, Goyette epitomises the concept of greenwashing: creating a misleading perception of environmental responsibility. His actions are an extreme version of the concerns Guy Pearse raises in *Greenwash: Big Brands and Carbon Scams*: 'are the world's biggest and greenest-looking brands actually reducing the carbon footprint of their products? Or is the proliferation of climate-friendly advertising mostly "greenwash", a torrent of corporate spin that sounds impressive but conceals mostly business as usual?'[34] The operations of companies that pretend to be environmentally friendly create trust issues for customers, and greenwashing damages green marketing by raising consumer mistrust towards companies that genuinely work towards green sustainability. Hence, the novel casts scepticism over the intents of some scientists, explorers, politicians, and environmentalists and generates subversive portrayals of them to show the turmoil the Arctic faces in the fierce competition over its resources.

The novel also shows how the setting of 'human-against-nature', as typified in the Franklin sections, brings about a 'human-against-human'[35] dynamic in the politically sensitive and rapidly changing Arctic. As noted above, the Indigenous peoples of the Arctic have a very limited role in *Arctic Drift*; their historical presence and intricate knowledge are largely circumvented by technology which enables even the novel's 'good guys', the present-day explorers, to not engage with the people most directly impacted by

[33]Trexler, "T. C. Boyle's," 102.
[34]Pearse, *Greenwash*, 7,8.
[35]Hansson, "The Arctic in Literature," 53.

the change in the Arctic environment. The same applies to other species native to the Arctic: their brief appearances might seem to render them as little more than stage props, and the animals' habitat disturbance as only one of the by-products of inter-human conflict. However, as Trexler's argument on the powerful materiality of *Arctic Drift* shows,[36] even fleeting appearances of actors outside the hero-villain conflict or outside the human machinations more generally can be among the most intriguing moments in the narrative. For example, the operations conducted in the Arctic disturb the regular lives of local animals: 'a polar bear stuck his head over a ridge and observed the operations. The same bear that Giordino had nearly awakened stood and stared at the icebreaker with annoyed disturbance, then turned and padded across the ice in search of a meal' (329). The disturbance of the polar bear's existence adds yet another element of thrill to the story, but the bear is not just a plot twist; it stands as a material symbol of the Arctic, showing how the lives of polar animals have been endangered by exploration and operations in their realm conducted by those who seek to circumvent and silence them, just as they seek to ignore Indigenous peoples. Even if many characters in *Arctic Drift* fail to do so, readers may interpret the narrative as a prompt to reflect on their role as caretakers of the environment and advocate for a more sustainable and harmonious relationship between humans and nature.

In parallel to showing the human contest and conquest, the authors represent the potential of the Arctic as a locus for collaboration. Until the very end of the novel, the Arctic is an arena of confrontation between different parties and nations, but the very end of the story turns into an arena of cooperation between all stakeholders, perhaps paving the way to a more democratic future.[37] For example, the Americans sign an agreement with China as the largest emitters of greenhouse gases for the latter to build 75 artificial-photosynthesis conversion plants to fight global warming. The novel also shows the collaboration between different scientists who examine the functionality of different approaches to control global warming. However, their different approaches as well as their trials and errors, which manifest the uncertainty of scientific knowledge, show that there is not one single way to fight the climate crisis. The authors refuse to see science as a 'stable' method but as an ongoing process of developing human practices of knowledge production. Despite their differences, at the very end of the novel, the scientific and exploration teams see how collaboration opens more sustainable ways of being in the Arctic.

Conclusion

Arctic Drift portrays the Arctic in two different time frames, enabling readers to track changes that happened in the Arctic from the 1840s onwards. The novel depicts in fictional form how the Arctic continues to be a site of global contact and conflict because of climate change and geopolitical rivalry. Through representing the Arctic as a fragile ecosystem facing imminent threats, the popular thriller prompts readers to re-evaluate

[36]Trexler, "Novel Climes," 302–6.

[37]Such ongoing efforts are reflected in, for example, the Nunavut Lands and Resources Devolution Agreement co-signed by the Federal Government of Canada, the Government of Nunavut and Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated in early 2024, which transfers significant political power from the Federal Government to Nunavummiut, the people residing in Nunavut (see Government of Canada 2024).

their understanding of the Arctic and reconsider the urgency of addressing the vulnerable ecosystems of the region and their impact on global oceans. The novel serves as a reminder that the Arctic is not a remote and disconnected part of the world but a crucial region that affects global climate patterns, biodiversity, and geopolitical dynamics. Hence, the authors aim to raise awareness about the consequences of human activities on the planet and the urgent need for environmental preservation.

To track the changes that have happened to the Arctic, the writers rehistoricise the long history of Arctic exploitation and illustrate how the process started by Franklin has been continued and sped up by contemporary corrupted and hypocritical figures. Thus, modern versions of Franklin, ready to take any risk to increase their power and wealth, continue to complete the mission he once started. The authors contest the intentions of some explorers, scientists, environmentalists, and politicians and show how various interest groups and the general voting public, unaware of the aims of such actors, might be deceived by them and endorse them to achieve their goals with little understanding of these goals. In other words, the novel challenges some of the dominant historical, scientific, and political narratives through their revisionist storytelling. The narrative envisages the Arctic as a potential zone of confrontation between nations while showing how it has been commodified and contested by several corporations and countries. *Arctic Drift* shows how a rush for resource dominance might exacerbate geopolitical tensions among nations, potentially leading to power struggles and conflicts over territorial claims. Lastly, while the Arctic is a region where economic motives and political rivalries are a reality with global effects, the Cusslers' novel depicts how the current threat in the circumpolar North might turn into an opportunity for international collaboration between Arctic and non-Arctic states and regions.

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