

“Indigenizing” the Bush Pilot in CBC’s *Arctic Air*

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Abstract

When the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) cut original programming in 2014, it cancelled the drama that had earned the network’s highest ratings in over a decade. *Arctic Air*, based on Omni Films’ reality TV show *Buffalo Air*, created a diverse cast of characters around a Dene bush pilot and airline co-owner played by Adam Beach. Despite its cancellation, episodes can still be viewed on the CBC website, and the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN) has continued broadcasting the popular show. Through a content analysis of *Arctic Air* and its associated paratext, read in relation to the stock Canadian literary figure of the heroic bush pilot, this article argues that when viewed on the CBC, the program visually “Indigenizes” the bush pilot character, but suggests only one way forward for Indigenous people. On the “national broadcaster,” the imagined urban, multicultural North of *Arctic Air*—in which Indigenous people are one cultural group among others participating in commercial ventures—serves to normalize resource development and extraction. Broadcast on APTN, however, where the show appears in the context of programming that represents Indigenous people in a wide range of roles, genres, and scenarios, *Arctic Air* takes on new meaning.

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In 2013, the CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) lost the broadcast rights to *Hockey Night in Canada*, a contract that the private broadcaster Rogers Media secured for \$5.2 billion. A few months later, in March 2014, the CBC announced it would cancel some of its original programming, including the show that had achieved the highest ratings for a CBC drama in more than fifteen years. According to the network, the debut of *Arctic Air* on January 10, 2012 was watched by “1.2 million viewers,” and the rest of the first season attracted an average 965,000 viewers per episode (Szklański). When it was cancelled, the show’s many fans expressed their frustration and disappointment on Facebook and went to the CBC website to voice their criticisms of CBC management. The success of *Arctic Air*, reflected in the fans’ response, seemed to overcome the usual reticence towards homegrown television, Canadian drama in particular. Writing for the *Toronto Star*, Raju Mudhar offered five reasons why the show could serve as “a blueprint for continued Canadian drama success,” including its regional setting and recognizable star, in this case Adam Beach, as well as attention to audience share, effective marketing on social media, and scheduling against reality programming (Mudhar A28). In an interview with the *Globe and Mail*, actor Adam Beach summarized the show: “*Arctic Air* brings the inheritance of the landscape, the connection to the Dene language and people, but it also incorporates a community and an enterprise that integrates the multicultural diversity of Canadianness” (Stinson). With its combination of adventure and soap opera, *Arctic Air* also stood out from the crime dramas saturating prime time, yet despite the almost unprecedented success of its formula, it could not survive the CBC cuts (Szklański).¹

Although the CBC cancelled *Arctic Air* from its own television lineup, it continued to receive grants from the Canadian Media Fund to support broadcasting *Arctic Air* on the CBC website (www.cmf-fmc.ca). It had also licensed the show to APTN (Aboriginal Peoples’ Television Network), which began to run thirteen episodes in the fall of 2013 (www.aptn.ca). While the broadcast history of *Arctic Air* can serve to trace the effects of media convergence and technological innovation on the production of culture, the following discussion seeks instead to contribute to an “emerging trend” in Canadian television criticism towards content analysis of individual programs (Druick and Kotsopoulos 1; Czach 174).² These studies regard television shows as artifacts reflecting the “symbolic lifeworld of the society” (Beaty and Sullivan 22), not simply the residue left by the capitalist motives of a globalized media industry acting on a

passive culture. By offering a content analysis of *Arctic Air* that reads the show and its associated paratext in relation to the stock Canadian literary figure of the heroic bush pilot, this essay argues that the CBC show presented a multicultural North in which the Dene appear as one cultural group among many, and that despite the characterization of the hero as Dene, *Arctic Air* was only "Indigenized" once the show was broadcast by APTN.

Making Arctic Images

Like the Arctic itself, the televisual representation of the Arctic is a site where the interests of global power are played out, underscoring the crucial role the Arctic continues to play in generating Modernity. As Russell Potter shows in *Arctic Spectacles*, the representation of Arctic landscapes developed alongside new media in the nineteenth century, and "it was principally through the technologies of *vision* that the Arctic was most keenly and energetically sought" (Potter 4). Arctic exploration and exploitation advanced both the technological and conceptual innovations of Modernity, from the rudimentary camera that went down with the Franklin expedition to the Arctic panoramas of the Victorian age and early moving pictures. Through the 1920s, 30s, and 40s, photography and the new medium of film were enlisted in the Canadian government's administration of northern regions as Peter Geller explains in *Northern Exposures*. In these views of Arctic landscape, which were typically taken from patrol ships or from a high point of land: "The all-seeing eye of the motion picture camera, floating through Arctic waters as it captures images of people and place, is a vivid metaphor for the perceived extension of government control in the Canadian north" (Geller 49). With aerial photography, the Arctic landscape could be represented, not as distance to be traversed with hidden obstacles to challenge the traveller, but as a remote surface for the colonial gaze to glide over. As Marionne Cronin notes, while it seemed to many that aviation put an end to heroic exploration by making Arctic travel safer, flying in the Arctic brought its own perils and possibilities (Cronin 100). The aerial perspective and the feeling of transcendence and danger became the stuff of adventure in literature and visual art, giving rise to a new modern hero, the bush pilot.

Historically, the heroism of Arctic aviation has served overlapping national, commercial, and artistic interests in Canada as the material conditions created by Modernity came to bear on the shifting discourses in Canadian culture.³ In 1956, the Defence Research Board's publication *Arctic Canada from the Air* identified four phases of Canadian exploration

of the Arctic: the search for the Northwest Passage, the search for Franklin, the quest for the North Pole and, finally, “exploration for its own sake, or what may be called scientific exploration” (Dunbar and Greenaway 4). By yoking exploration to scientific endeavours, the board revealed that, in fact, exploration truly “for its own sake” was almost unthinkable in Canada, at least from the government’s point of view—heroism must have a practical, and increasingly a commercial, value in the nation’s interest: “The northern frontier represented vast untapped potential; uninhabited (the First Nations peoples were irrelevant, except as contrast to the ultramodernity of the airplane), unexplored and uncatalogued, it had to be conquered and forced to give up its riches” (Vance 153). Shortly after the military conducted an Arctic air-supported deployment called Exercise Muskox, the future Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson enthused: “The northern skies are humming with activity, smoke is coming from northern chimneys; adventurous settlers are moving in” (Pearson 645). As the Canadian press celebrated the role aircraft were playing in the mining boom in places like Red Lake and Rouyn, a “discourse of imperialism” infused attitudes towards the North (Vance 149-150). “From the very beginning,” observes Cronin, “geography, economics, and politics conspired to create a form of aviation specially suited to Canada: bush flying” (Cronin 62). The bush plane became an icon of northern expansion, gracing the cover of *Canadian Surveyor* in 1936 (Cronin 303).

Arctic Air’s visual and literary antecedents are found in the tales of flying aces and bush pilots that filled the pages of periodicals and newspapers in the early twentieth century as Canadian readers “devoured stories of bush pilots traversing the northland, taming Canada’s wilderness and turning it to good advantage” (Vance 151). These narratives of a triumphant Modernity cast technological change as a natural progression, and any impact on the North or the Indigenous peoples in it was regarded as positive. In magazines and newspapers, where images of airplanes juxtaposed with older modes of transport like dogsleds, the “meaning of progress was clearest in the contrast between the new North and the old” (Vance 154). Although working bush pilots expressed frustration with the sensational depiction of their profession and stressed how safe flying actually was, bush pilots were celebrated and fictionalized in popular history and media with some also appearing as characters in literary fiction (Vance 124–125). In the novel *The Mad Trapper*, for example, Rudy Wiebe’s fictional account of the hunt for the fugitive known as Albert Johnson, the bush pilot Captain “Wop” May embodies the rugged individualism of the Far North. The no-nonsense, straight-talking World War I flying ace is a

loner, a maverick, a daring risk taker who declares: "I fly anywhere there's air" (Wiebe 148).⁴

The tension between myth and reality was the theme explored in the National Film Board's 1980 documentary *Bush Pilot: Reflections on a Canadian Myth*. A visual depiction of the bush pilot figure, like *Arctic Air*, the film follows a former Royal Bank employee who left his job to fly for Northway Aviation Ltd., thus embodying the romance of flying in the North. In contrast, the son of the company's founder and owner, Jim Johnson, a man said to have been "brought up in the world of the bush flyer," is less romantic, explaining that the bush pilot is either a taxi driver or a bus driver, depending on whether the flights they make are regularly scheduled or not. The film's premise is that the bush pilot is a modern-day voyageur, travelling into the deep wilderness and trading with Indigenous people as in days gone by. *Bush Pilot: Reflections on a Canadian Myth* unwittingly acknowledges the drive of Modernity to "destroy old ways of social and moral and political life and build up new ones" (Scott 117). As the film voice-over tells us, "the bush pilot is history itself." After the pilot is shown flying into a community on Lake Winnipeg to bring supplies to Indigenous communities, the voice says this is the "traditional role" of the bush pilot: "the go-between, the representative of southern society who must meet the North on its own terms and persuade it to give up its wealth." In this case, it is the wild rice gathered by the Saulteaux people of Pauingassi that southern buyers want. Jim Johnson is shown weighing the wild rice and negotiating a price on behalf of his clients in Chicago. Large wads of cash are produced. It is a "timeless scene," the narration continues, that is becoming a thing of the past as Inco Ltd. and others come North looking for nickel, zinc, and gold. In the mining town of Thompson, we are told, "the North of the bush pilot, the fur trader, and the Indian has simply been eliminated." Ignoring his own involvement in Canada's colonization of northern peoples, Johnson expresses regret at the changes that are coming to the North with the building of roads. Unlike the float plane, which can come and go leaving only a momentary sound and ripple, roads and highways, he says, are reshaping the land.

In *Arctic Air*, the twenty-first century pilot's life is still full of adventure, and disasters to be averted. Episode after episode, viewers watch as Bobby Martin, a Dene venture capitalist and pilot recently returned to Yellowknife, leads a company of pilots from around the world who face danger in the skies over the Arctic and Subarctic regions of the Northwest Territories. In the advance publicity leading up to the show's premiere, the *Toronto Star* observed that the new "air epic" was "not so loosely based

on *Ice Pilots NWT*," a reality show featuring Yellowknife's Buffalo Air and produced for History Television by Omni Films, which also made *Arctic Air*:

The real life Ice Pilots are led by "Buffalo" Joe McBryan, the cantankerous owner and bush pilot boss of Yellowknife's Buffalo Air. For 40 years, McBryan has trained new recruits to fly his patched-together collection of DC3s, DC4s, and other vintage aircraft, some dating to World War II, throughout the territories. (Brioux Jan E1)

Writing for Postmedia, Alex Strachan was more pointed, calling *Arctic Air* "a throwback to adventure series of yesteryear" and "a bid to mine the drama and high-stakes, seat-of-the-pants romantic adventure of the devil-may-care pilots depicted in History Television's white-knuckle documentary series, *Ice Pilots NWT*" (4 Jan 2012); indeed, the Buffalo Air hangars served as one of the show's sets. If *Ice Pilots NWT* can be described as a "throwback" to romantic adventure, the book based on it ("as seen on TV") by Michael Vlessides relishes the form: "Here, on the Earth's last frontier, mavericks are still free to set their own course and dictate their own fate. It's a perfect milieu for someone like Buffalo Joe, who runs his business according to a simple mantra that rings true throughout northern Canada: *get 'er done*" (Vlessides 54). Like other television shows in what Misha Kavka calls the "virile format" of reality TV featuring "displays of masculinity [that] are explicitly tied to the reality of harsh conditions" such as the very similar *Ice Road Truckers* or *The Deadliest Catch* (Kavka 66), *Ice Pilots NWT* pits the men against a dangerous environment to test and affirm their manliness: "[m]en are real in these conditions ... because Nature cannot be stage-managed; the reality of Nature in turn confirms the virility of men" (Kavka 67). Although reality TV makes much of its use of "real" people and experiences, these scenarios follow a long line of literature representing the Canadian North as a man's world and northerners as "a special breed of people" (Alia 163).⁵

The creators of *Arctic Air* succeeded in innovating the virile format of *Ice Pilots* by creating a diverse cast of characters that is balanced in terms of gender and race. In the drama, the pilots collectively represent a multicultural, urban North.⁶ Sauteaux actor Adam Beach's portrayal of Bobby Martin brought both an Indigenous lead character and star to mainstream Canadian television at a time when there were no other leading Indigenous men in CBC dramatic series. At the show's launch,

Beach told reporters that, when he read the script, he was drawn to the character of Bobby Martin who he saw as “somebody who could be a role model for his own community” (Brioux E1). After many years performing in Canada and the United States with starring roles in Hollywood movies such as *Windtalkers* and *Cowboys & Aliens* and television shows such as *North of 60* and *Law and Order: SVU*, Beach was drawn to the character Ian Weir created with him in mind: “It was one of the best scripts I’ve ever come across. I do a lot of inspirational talks for kids, to motivate them to change their lives and give them hope. And I found that this character that I play shares a lot of those qualities ... I felt that this character would reach out to them, and really connect” (Strachan).⁷ Asked how American and Canadian television differs, Beach replied that “Canadian shows try to touch on the Canadian experience” and “feel a responsibility to show Canada’s diversity, the multicultural side of what it means to be Canadian” (Strachan).

While Beach was drawn to the potential to reach an Indigenous audience and used both the role and being on location to reach out to youth in the North, the show itself depicted Indigenous people as one group within the cultural mosaic. The counterpart to Buffalo Joe is the crusty, irascible Mel Ivarson (played by Kevin McNulty), but his lovely, devoted daughter, Krista (played by Pascale Hutton), is also a pilot (and potential love interest for the hero). The other pilots in the first season include an American, Shontal Hicks (Kandyse McClure), who is the granddaughter of a Tuskegee airman and has two tours of Iraq behind her, and Astrid Poulsen (Emilie Ullerup), an intensely competitive and glamorous Swedish pilot. The inclusion of women as characters both imagines the gender equity that has yet to be attained in commercial aviation and creates the dramatic possibilities and tensions required for nighttime soap opera. Both Indigenous and white characters fulfill supporting roles throughout the series. Among the main characters, the ingénue is played by a male character, Dev (Stephen Lobo), a pilot who has come from Delhi for the chance to fly the DC-3.⁸ The cast is anchored by Beach’s character, a Dene protagonist who visually Indigenizes the figure of the bush pilot while maintaining many of its characteristics. The narrative complications in the first season surround this prodigal’s return and reintegration in a “New North,” an imaginary setting evoked in the opening credits. The upbeat theme written by Tim McCauley, the award-winning composer of the music for *North of 60*, and performed by Tanya Tagaq, accompanies a montage of northern images: the melting edge of a snowdrift, then a spectacularly antlered caribou, precede individual shots

of the show's stars alternating with gorgeous aerial views of Yellowknife and the wilderness surrounding it.

Season 1: Out of the Clear Blue Sky

The first episode, "Out of a Clear Blue Sky," written by the show's creator Ian Weir, begins with a shot of an Arctic Air DC-3 flying towards Great Slave Lake on its way home to Yellowknife, an aerial view of tundra dotted with lakes. The scene quickly cuts to the cockpit where Krista and Dev discuss his recent arrival in the North. Like the tough-talking Wop May in Wiebe's novel, bush pilot Krista quips that the old plane is "part of the fossil record," while Dev talks about flying in the same plane that flew in World War II and proclaims enthusiastically that "The DC-3 is a marvel of engineering ... I came all the way from India to fly these planes!" ("Out of the Blue") At that moment, one engine begins to fail and the other catches on fire. Undaunted, Krista displays the practical knowledge of the bush pilot and disaster is averted.

By setting the scene in the cockpit of the vintage plane, the series inhabits two time periods simultaneously: the exciting era of the DC-3 and early Arctic aviation, and the present in the new North. References to the technology of the past allow the show to fully exploit the heroic narrative, showing superior human ingenuity over technological failure. In order to achieve this, the script employs a strategy used in accounts of early Arctic flights by locating the struggle to survive the Arctic adventure within the airplane. As Marianne Cronin has shown, accounts of Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen's ordeal turned the inside of the airship into "a polar landscape in which the hero [could] undergo the trials necessary to demonstrate his heroism" (Cronin 116). Similarly, *Arctic Air* centres much of the action inside the plane, usually in the cockpit. This substitution had practical advantages for the television series. With the plane's interior thus constructed as a dramatic setting, the crew could shoot fewer scenes on location and more on the sound stage in Vancouver. The interior scenes also offer more close-up shots of the beautiful actors. With more interior scenes and more aerial footage than scenes filmed outdoors on location, the producers reached for authenticity by including a number of short videos of the crew working on location in the Northwest Territories on the program's website. On the show's website, Jordan Wheeler, who served as consulting producer on most episodes, explains that he considered it vital that the audience see the settings in the Northwest Territories despite the harsh conditions faced by the crew: the absence of infrastructure meant people (up to eighty-three in total) and equipment had to be shipped in;

filming was hampered by the shorter hours of daylight; and the equipment kept freezing up. Despite the relatively few scenes shot on location, those attending the premiere in Yellowknife were excited to see their community, and in some cases themselves, on screen as the *Northern News Service* reported: "In addition to the beautiful shots of Yellowknife landscape, viewers were blown away by the 'Spectacular NWT' commercials during the program" (Garbutt). At the launch, Beach had praised shows set in the North for depicting "the beauty of the nature in a way you can't find in an urban environment" (Strachan). Similarly, the APTN website promotes the show as a depiction of the beautiful northern land.

The first episode shifts from Krista and Dev to the Yellowknife airport where Bobby Martin is meeting Ronnie Dearman (Brian Markinson), his partner in a diamond deal. Leading Dearman to the exit, a confident and smiling Bobby says, "Let's make some money" In the parking lot lit with summer sunshine, a local man named Doc Hossa (Michael Hogan) accosts them, ready to settle an old score. After punching Bobby in the jaw, Hossa stalks off, but Ronnie is not interested in Bobby's explanation as he gazes out at the skyline of Yellowknife: "This is the future," he says. "Resource boom is just beginning. In twenty years Yellowknife is going to be Calgary." Dearman's prediction is reflected in fleeting aerial shots of Yellowknife in which the city already seems larger than it is. Dressed in his Stetson, blue jeans, and suit jacket, Ronnie looks the part of the Western entrepreneur, and it is tempting to conclude with Michael K. Johnson that the show "invokes Western genre tropes in order to invert them" (Johnson 126). The cowboy capitalist may be the "bad guy" and the "Indian" entrepreneur the show's good guy hero, but the "cowboy and Indian" references in the first episode give way to a more subtle recuperation of the newcomer-native conflict in the series. Bobby eventually foils Ronnie's attempt to cheat the prospector in the deal, turning Ronnie into an enemy, and decides not to return to Vancouver but to stay to help rebuild Arctic Air, the company his father, one of those legendary bush pilots, helped to build.

Arctic Air plays with aspects of the Hollywood western by working within myths and stereotypes of the North as a frontier and drawing on images found in television. Even though North American culture remains saturated with these images, the stereotype of the "Indian" changed with the arrival of television which, as Michael Ray FitzGerald shows, emerged as a medium in the postwar period when Hollywood was making fewer westerns. Alongside the countless "howling" or "bloodthirsty Indians" succumbing to the violent conquest of white America in these movies,

television shows translated the enemy Indian into the stereotype of the “Good Indian” who is “astute enough to recognize the white man’s superiority and acquiesces to his control” (FitzGerald xiii), a male figure to complement Hollywood’s “Pocahontas perplex” (see Green). Like the “totem transfer” Margery Fee observes in Canadian literature, where the exchange of an object symbolizes the Indigenous people’s willing surrender of the land, these fictional characters consent to their own dispossession by accepting white domination. From *The Lone Ranger* to *Walker, Texas Ranger*, this figure of the moral example or law enforcer, who can be a Native American companion or helper (Tonto), or an “Indianized” white man (Walker), is distinguished by unwavering devotion to the American way of life (FitzGerald xvii). By playing this part in upholding the status quo, the Good Indian comforts and reassures the television audience (FitzGerald 184-185) that Native Americans are the willing “conscripts of Modernity” (Scott).

Bobby Martin’s good-guy character shares much in common with the Good Indian. For one thing, his faith in the business world is a defining feature of who he is. Indeed, the series as a whole reinforces Bobby’s good-guy role by representing willing participation in the resource economy as the one way forward, albeit with a slight nod to his concern for the environment. In this respect, *Arctic Air* differs from *North of 60*, the CBC’s long-running northern drama set in the fictional Dene community of Lynx River, which followed the ongoing struggle to balance economic development and cultural autonomy. *North of 60* often illustrated John Mohawk’s argument that sovereignty is necessary for Indigenous communities to achieve economic self-reliance (Mohawk 89). Mary Jane Miller, who devotes several chapters of *Outside Looking In* to analyzing *North of 60*, emphasizes the role of insider cultural knowledge in the show’s success and cites the interview the show’s star Tina Keeper gave to *Midday* on 2 March 1995 (Miller 240) in which she quoted her father’s remark that *North of 60* depicted “Indians as people, not people as Indians” (qtd in Miller 241). According to Miller: “By using Dene advisors for every script, a Métis story editor, and a Métis director, by using a few (too few) scripts by First Nations writers, and by referring frequently to specific aspects of the culture represented, *North of 60*—despite its limitations—changed the history of the representation of First Nations peoples in Canada” (Miller 225). The show benefited from the participation of cultural consultants; writing by Indigenous authors including Thomas King, Drew Hayden Taylor, and Jordan Wheeler; and the casting of Indigenous actors, including two of Canada’s greatest

actors, Gordon Tootoosis and Tantoo Cardinal. Indeed, a young Adam Beach, on the cusp of Hollywood stardom, made a guest appearance on the show. After the series ended, Indigenous people were once again completely absent from Canadian television drama as periodicals such as *Windspeaker* noted (Petten 14). *North of 60* ran for six seasons (3 December 1992–18 December 1997) and has been and continues to be rerun by the CBC, Showtime, and APTN. During its original run, it was broadcast in 60 countries and a total of 122 countries bought the series (Miller 233). As Miller acknowledges, the show's limitations were outlined by one of its writers, Drew Hayden Taylor, in a piece originally published in the *Toronto Star*. As the title advertises, "North of 60, South of Accurate," Taylor criticizes the show's authenticity, notably its overrepresentation of dysfunction, lack of humour, and reliance on white characters, while acknowledging that it had "acquainted the television audience with the multi-faceted lives of Aboriginal people in Canada" (Taylor 89; 91). Miller's study of the show's content, as well as the paratext created by marketing, including the reviews, interviews, trailers, teasers, contests, and press releases that shape the "the production of meaning" (Gray 114), reveals how *North of 60* was received.

One of the main achievements of *North of 60*, especially in seasons made after Taylor's review, was its ability to use televisual means to convey cultural meaning—as Miller shows in her close analysis of episodes such as Michelle's journey in search of her missing daughter—whereas in *Arctic Air*, cultural difference is limited to characterization. The visual effects produced by lighting, camera angles and length of shots, and special effects used in *North of 60* to represent the community's way of life, are used in *Arctic Air* to create dramatic action scenes and to heighten the adventure. It is not clear what role cultural advisors had in *Arctic Air*, though in an interview with the CBC, the show's consulting producer Jordan Wheeler describes how the writers benefited from "discussions with experts." With the exception of Wheeler (who Miller refers to as "Métis" but who describes his background as Cree, Ojibway, Assiniboine, Irish, and Scottish), *Arctic Air* did not employ Indigenous authors or writers working in genres other than television; instead, the scripts for *Arctic Air* were often written by up to four veteran television writers of CBC shows such as *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, *Mr. D*, and *Murdoch Mysteries*, none of which highlight Indigenous characters or the North. The script and the direction lack the aesthetic originality and expression found in Indigenous visual culture.⁹ This may account in part for why Indigenous culture remains part of the background in the series, limited to

the music of the opening credits and the use of Dene subtitled in English or French. While these scenes present the characters as fluent in Dene, the actual dialogue sometimes amounts to a “thank you” or “goodbye” even when Indigenous identity and culture is central to the plot as in the episodes discussed here: “Out of the Clear Blue Sky,” “New North” and “Bombs Away.”

Season 1: New North

In addition to its relative lack of Dene cultural content, the show was limited in the range of characterization. Bobby is a son, a brother, and a father, but he is, above all, an entrepreneur. In the first season, his character is framed in relation to commercial interests as he attempts to prove himself both as a pilot and a business man, a worthy partner in Arctic Air and heir to his father’s legacy. As the vengeful Ronnie Dearman uses his influence with its customers, Arctic Air loses business. Desperate for clients, Bobby promises to fly an investor to a fishing lodge even though he has not flown a plane in a long time. Like other fictional bush pilots before him, Bobby manages a dangerous and rough landing, but as Bobby’s skills are tested, the client knows he has been tricked. With cash flow stopped, Bobby stakes his partner’s plane in a poker game and loses it, though he manages to get a contract with the client in the end. When his old university buddy Gavin praises him for following his heart rather than money, Bobby replies apologetically that “the North is booming” and soon tries to convince Gavin, a player in every sense, to buy into Arctic Air. In this episode, Bobby is once again the go-getting entrepreneur: against his partner’s wishes, he expands into helicopter service, insisting that the company must modernize their fleet; he pushes Krista to schmooze potential clients at a party; and he seeks a silent partner to invest in the company.

In “New North,” the ninth episode from the first season, written by R.B. Carney, James Phillips, Ian Weir, and Jordan Wheeler, Ronnie Dearman continues to seek support from Dene leaders for his uranium mine. In the lobby of the hotel, he meets the local chief, Simon Moise (Kevin Loring). The Deh Cho, Moise reminds him, will be threatened if the uranium mine is reopened at Annabel Lake. He adds, significantly, that he is running for re-election, thus upping the ante in their private negotiations. This depiction of the chief as an obstacle to mining development mollified with the promise of jobs reflects the historical exclusion of First Nations in northern development and downplays the nature and history of First Nations negotiation and resistance (Kelm 78). As the chief walks away,

Bobby looks on, shaking his head, and accuses Dearman of destroying a way of life. Bobby is sincere, but such moments are overwhelmed by his pursuit of business, and while he expresses concern for the Deh Cho, the environmental impact of Arctic Air itself is not addressed. Instead, expansion of its carbon producing venture is the goal, justified by the company's role as a "lifeline" to northern communities, the classic "go-between" evoked in the NFB (National Film Board) documentary. If the material conditions created by Modernity, represented in the resource boom, lead to technological change as well as environmental destruction that impacts most on peoples living in the Arctic, this lasting impact is subordinated to the more immediate concern for the crew's jobs.

Season 2: Bombs Away

After the first season, the storylines produce ever more dangerous scenarios. Life and death rescues and flights that go "dangerously wrong" become the stock plots, and disaster becomes a weekly, if not daily, occurrence in the fictional Yellowknife. The second season's "Bombs Away," written by Jordan Wheeler, offers one of the sustained treatments of the Indigenous community in the series. Having lost the election for chief to Simon, Bobby's sister Deanna organizes the community to protest Dearman's plan to reopen the uranium mine. Deanna provides the contact with the Dene, few of whom are individuated but appear in the background in scenes depicting the protest and meetings to organize it. When Bobby gets involved, it is not from political conviction or solidarity, but out of concern for his sister. At first, he encourages her to "lie low" and to let the chiefs do the talking. After the rally, there is a brief scene of drumming and celebration before an argument erupts between members of the community in favour and those who are opposed to the mine. Bobby steps in to break up the pushing and shoving that ensues and later pleads with his sister to pull back as the police arrive to arrest her for blowing up Dearman's office. From this point, the show follows a typical detective narrative with Bobby in the role of investigator working to free his sister. Bobby solves the crime, discovers that there is another bomb planted on the DC-3 that Krista is flying to the mine site, and saves the day.

As in *North of 60*, the Indigenous characters like Bobby play a variety of roles other than the "noble" or "howling savage" stereotypes pervading literary and visual history. With his MBA and Vancouver condo, Bobby represents Dene who succeed by embracing the modern economy without relinquishing their identity, language, and culture. While the protesters offer the resistance expected by viewers and scripted by the underlying

dichotomy of tradition and Modernity, Bobby's character is seen to reconcile these tensions. In business, he also provides a contrast with those who do not play by the rules, a "Good Indian" among the bad. One of the first season's continuing storylines involves another local business, Ward Trucking, which is connected to a gang of southern bikers who smuggle drugs into remote, many of them dry, northern communities. The Dene owner, Zach Ward (Lorne Cardinal) and his nephew Bruce (Nathaniel Arcand), who often use their identity to gain the trust of other Dene characters, are villainous foils to Bobby's "Good Indian" entrepreneur. "We take care of our own," Zach proclaims with equal parts charm and menace delivered flawlessly by Cardinal. At the same time, he takes ten thousand dollars from Dearman to arrange a meeting with an influential chief, and he intimidates Nelson (Jaren Brandt Bartlett), a young Dene employee of Arctic Air who helps him smuggle drugs onto the planes but later becomes an informer for the RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police). Realizing he is in over his head with both Zach and a professional hitman after him, Nelson tries to leave Yellowknife one night. When Bobby's partner Mel goes to Ward Trucking to intervene on Nelson's behalf, Zach pulls a gun on him in the darkness of the parking lot. The two men stand in the spotlight created by a single light over the office door, snow swirling around them, when a shot seems to come from nowhere, killing Zach and saving Mel. Later, the hit man is also found dead from a rifle shot. On the flight taking Nelson home to his community, Mel slowly seems to realize that Nelson, a young man more at home hunting than loading planes, could have made those shots. "Nelson, is there something you want to tell me?" he asks. "Is there something you want to hear?" is Nelson's reply.

In the finale of season two, "Ts'inada," written by R. B. Carney, Sara Snow, and Jordan Wheeler, the final confrontation with the bikers occurs at the place named in the title. In this episode, which concludes with a link inviting viewers to the interactive portion of the show online, the kidnapping of Nelson's sister Caitlin (Tanaya Beatty) provides the occasion for a self-conscious but fleeting reference to the pressing issue of murdered and missing Indigenous women in Canada. Ironically, it is the character behind the kidnap and murder plot, Bruce Ward, who makes this connection while he pretends to help with the investigation. Like the uncle he seeks to avenge, Bruce feigns political solidarity as a cover for his criminal activities.

Arctic Panoramas

As panorama, *Arctic Air* was innovative for its depiction of the North as a place where people live. It achieved this effect by interspersing fleeting aerial views of the vast Subarctic with long segments of interaction inside the planes. *Arctic Air* was also rare for featuring Indigenous people as characters *at all*, a sad comment on Canadian television generally. With the exception of APTN, Canadian television drama still offers very little Indigenous content, and when *Arctic Air* was cancelled, it left a noticeable gap. Yet, *Arctic Air* depicted a very specific interpretation of Indigenous identity, one constrained by conditions imposed by Canada's history in the North. The Dene, the series seems to suggest, willingly participate in northern development; indeed, most of the Dene characters are those we see flying planes, running businesses, and enjoying urban life. Those living on reserve or on the land are rarely seen, and the daily challenges that face Dene living on reserve, like access to health care, housing, and clean water, are likewise unseen. Unlike *North of 60*, which depicted decision making in the community, *Arctic Air* naturalizes Indigenous participation in the resource economy. Drawing on David Scott's insight, there is no other option because Modernity is not a choice, but the condition of choice (19; 115–119).

While the urban setting provides a counterpart to what Marilyn Dumont first identified as "the pervasive images of natives as rural (*North of 60*), traditional (*Dances with Wolves*) and living a predominately subsistence economy," it also stops short of portraying the "multiplicity of experiences" she describes (48–49). Like others in *Yellowknife*, Dene characters grapple with the challenges particular to urban life from family breakdown to drug and gang violence, but unlike the urban settings in television shows created by Indigenous artists, such as *Moccasin Flats*, it is not the kind of gritty, difficult setting that critics have praised for revealing the resilience of the characters (Ramsay 115). In prosperous, booming *Yellowknife*, identity and culture serve as background to the action. The characters seem as removed from both oral tradition and the written history outlined in Kerry Abel's *Drum Songs* as they are from places where there is land to protect and land claims to negotiate; instead, their daily lives are occupied with other matters. While being seen to be urban and "contemporary" is a departure from stereotyped media imagery (see Jaimes-Guerrero 198), Dene characters seem no different than the characters from Canada, the US, India, Scandinavia, and elsewhere who have come to *Yellowknife* to work for *Arctic Air*. The number of characters also takes the focus off the Indigenous community by emulating a soap

opera with character-driven subplots for each character, including various family or romantic relationships. When these plots concern Bobby, Dene culture is part of the context, but many storylines revolve around the other members of the multicultural cast. In some ways, Bobby's character is perhaps more an *Indianized* than *Indigenized* bush pilot; that is, a bush pilot given an Indigenous identity that does not fundamentally alter the bush pilot as a figure, just as the female characters do not "feminize" it but take on the same qualities as their male counterparts. The iconic bush pilot is never culturally Indigenized; rather, the figure is the agent of Modernity, enabling a range of activities from mining exploration to ecotourism.

Although not widely used by Indigenous artists themselves, the term "Indigenize"¹⁰ has come to describe the intellectual work of learning and incorporating Indigenous knowledge within institutions and in all fields. Elina Hill and others have defined it as a revision of existing narratives and practices based on the expertise derived from Indigenous knowledge by creating a dialogue with Indigenous scholars, citing Andrea Bear-Nicholas, Taiaiake Alfred, and Leanne Simpson. One way "to Indigenize" is by reading Indigenous literature and by learning from Indigenous scholars. For television, it might mean creating a visual image by employing Indigenous actors or it might mean the more complex work of transforming the medium through collaboration with actors, writers, and consultants who possess Indigenous knowledge. These discussions demonstrate that "to Indigenize" is an outsider term that describes reforming colonial institutions, genres, and practices to reflect Indigenous knowledge distinct from the process of adopting new technologies to continue oral traditions that Catherine Martin, for example, describes in her story of how she became a filmmaker (see Martin) or that the active decomposition of "Indianness," performed by the artists in the virtual Crow Commons, achieves (see Waegner).

"Indigenizing" Arctic Air

While *Arctic Air* innovates by placing a rare visual image of modern Indigenous life in front of CBC viewers, it does not attempt to alter the television drama series or the form of individual episodes. As a result, it displays only one, albeit valid, dimension of contemporary Dene life: working to make ends meet. Through a variety of scenarios and plot lines, including the story of the main character, *Arctic Air* naturalizes commerce and the resource development on which it depends along with the technologies making it possible. The struggle of the Dene characters, and the rest of the multicultural crew, is to keep the ageing planes flying,

the clients buying, and the company in business. Cultural differences are generally overcome by this common interest. At times, an individual's skill and endurance triumphs over technological failures or dangerous circumstances; at others, the ability to work together as a team saves the day. Ultimately, as the title of one episode suggests, a "new North" emerges in which Arctic Air serves as a modern microcosm with the multicultural staff working together to face life and death situations as well as confronting the more mundane struggle to keep the company afloat. As the show's creator Ian Weir told the *Northern News Service*: "It's a series about all of us—about who we are and how we live—refracted through the unique dramatic prism of the North" (Allerston). As these remarks seem to confirm, "Indigenizing" was not an explicit goal of the CBC show even though it featured a heroic Indigenous bush pilot.

The broadcast of *Arctic Air* on APTN, however, can be seen to Indigenize the program by placing it in relation to other programs with Indigenous content. As Lorna Roth shows in her detailed and comprehensive history of APTN, "APTN has served Canadian constituency groups well insofar as it has Northernized and indigenized television programming" (217). APTN policy is based on the principle, articulated by Houston Wood and others, that it is "best to allow the community being represented to decide" what is "Indigenous" (Wood 37). APTN also serves as a platform that recontextualizes perspectives created by outsiders as Doris Baltruschat explains: "The possibility to document stories as they relate to peoples who share, in spite of geographic distance, cultural similarities, and historical backgrounds provides an opportunity for global stories to be told from critical perspectives" (Baltruschat 58). As APTN achieves this, however, Indigenous people and stories have remained noticeably absent from network television. In 2015, the CBC seemed to address this absence by acquiring *Blackstone*, a series described as "a searing look at modern-day life on a reserve rife with corruption and addiction" and a change from the "'fluffier' fare such as *North of 60* and *Arctic Air*" (Brioux). Although a full analysis of *Blackstone* is beyond the scope of this essay, it is another example of a show that stands as the lone "Aboriginal" offering in CBC drama, and though its co-creator Ron E. Scott claims not to "want to depict Native peoples as all screwed up and dysfunctional" (Brioux), the show not only fits the stereotype of the mismanaged reserve but its graphic depiction of sexualized violence is more damaging than empowering, in my opinion, in its objectification and victimization of Indigenous women.

While the fictional world of *Arctic Air* stood out as the only CBC drama featuring Indigenous people as main characters, it is only one series among many on APTN, which depicts Indigenous people in diverse settings and in formats from comedy to cooking shows. The inclusion of *Arctic Air* on the APTN schedule therefore helped to Indigenize a series whose original broadcast on CBC presented Indigeneity as a constituent of a diverse, multicultural Canada. In its new setting, the show fulfills APTN's acquisition criteria, which seek "Canadian and international programs that have Aboriginal content, deal with Aboriginal issues and feature actors, directors or producers who are of Aboriginal descent" and which state that "[a]n Aboriginal person is defined to include First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada and includes Indigenous people from around the globe" (aptn.ca/corporate2/producers/acquisition/criteria).

As Marian Bredin has shown, APTN has developed a complex vision of the audiences comprised of active, ideal, and actual viewers it seeks to reach. Those she interviewed at APTN raised the challenges posed by serving the heterogeneous population: "Almost everyone mentioned that they hoped APTN was reaching Aboriginal people everywhere, and that their ideal viewer was someone who wanted to know more about Aboriginal culture, who wanted to share their perspective and stories with members of other nations, and who took pride in APTN as a vehicle for Aboriginal self-reflection" (75). Michelle Raheja's term "visual sovereignty," whereby Indigenous people "revisit, contribute to, borrow from, critique, and reconfigure ethnographic film conventions, at the same time operating within and stretching the boundaries created by these conventions" (60), accurately describes APTN whose programs reflect a wide variety of television genres and products. On APTN, those who embrace and succeed in the resource based economy are not the only Indigenous people depicted. The channel's programming, including current affairs shows critiquing the extraction industries, serves as a broad paratext shaping the meaning of *Arctic Air*.

By depicting Yellowknife and its people, including the Dene, as modern, urban people living together in a multicultural city, the CBC's presentation of *Arctic Air* offered an alternative to the representation of Indigenous people as remnants of a pre-modern past, but it did so at the risk of portraying the Dene, and Indigenous peoples generally, as the same as everyone else with no particular claim to the land. The show's relative lack of attention to cultural content reinforced this presumed sameness. In its depiction of Arctic aviation, the technology that opened the North to rapid development, *Arctic Air* ended up

casting Indigenous peoples primarily as willing workers in an economy based on resource extraction. As I argue elsewhere, Canada's northern regions, including the Arctic, have long been imagined as territory to be claimed for the nation and as nature to be exploited, places with a symbolic value derived from material function ("Lieux" 65). The representation of Arctic and Subarctic settings as territory to be appropriated and exploited by commercial interests, points only one way for the Indigenous peoples who call it home. Fortunately, APTN's range of programming—from sharing Indigenous stories through documentary, comedy, drama, reality, and lifestyle shows to critical coverage of news and current events—offers many more.

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Notes

1. The CBC was responding to a market in which "networked individualism" has been replaced by free airwaves and commercial funding by user pay in an "era of converging media platforms and economies" that forge "valuable linkages between audiences and products" (Kavka 77). In this new environment, public broadcasters, like the CBC, can no longer claim to tell the whole story to a public constructed by representing itself back to itself in a supposed "public sphere" (Nightingale 186–188).
2. Liz Czach explains how an "overreliance on communication studies approaches" and "overinvestment in the analysis of public broadcasting" led to the contention by François Demers that "in the fragmented, post-network era, the prominent cultural sovereignty paradigm that had linked television programming to nation-building, identity, and citizenship was exhausted" (Czach 174), but this is being reversed by new studies such as *Outside Looking In* by Mary Jane Miller; *Programming Reality* edited by Zoë Druick and Aspa Kotsopoulos; and *Rain/Drizzle/Fog* edited by Darrell Varga.

3. The role of the North in Canadian culture has generated a large body of work including my own *Northern Experience and the Myths of Canadian Culture* and *Canada and the Idea of North* by Sherrill Grace. Also inspired by Glenn Gould's composition, Peter Davidson's *The Idea of North* is a sweeping global and cross-cultural study of the concept from the ancient Greeks to modern day.
4. For further examples of literary bush pilots, see *Polar Winds* by Danielle Metcalfe-Chenail, which provides a detailed history of the realistic accounts as well as the tall tales about the men and women who fly north of sixty.
5. See *Northern Experience and the Myths of Canadian Culture* for discussion of the dominance of the masculine hero in literature about the Canadian North.
6. All references to *Arctic Air* were viewed at www.cbc.ca.
7. In the *Globe and Mail*, Marsha Lederman followed up on Beach's remarks with a story of how Beach used the occasion of shooting a scene to visit the children in the local Dene community.
8. The opening scene establishes Dev as a comic figure with a naïve innocence and sunny temperament, a role that takes a troubling turn in "Man of the North" videos on the CBC website. In them, Dev is making a movie to send home to show his parents that he has become a "Man of the North," which is clearly meant to be an ironic treatment of the nineteenth-century racist speech by R. G. Haliburton advocating immigration of only hardy northern European peoples to Canada. While some of the vignettes highlight Dev's generous nature and disposition, the first video provides a less than desirable image of the immigrant's place in the social order. As he tries to interview Bobby and Kirby, Loreen announces that the men's toilet is overflowing. The others flee, and Dev is left to put down his camera and take the mop.
9. For an example, see Jerry White's analysis of Mosha Michael's work (54-56).
10. "To Indigenize" has had a specific, essentially programmatic, meaning in Canadian Studies since Len Findlay's seminal essay "Always Indigenize! The Radical Humanities in the Postcolonial Canadian University" aimed to "make space for making meaning and taking action" (Findlay 40). Like many others, I was in the audience when Findlay presented the conference paper that became this essay. It was an inspiring presentation, and I am pretty sure I stood up and cheered with everyone else. As Albert Braz correctly surmises his contrarian view of the article, it was at least partly motivated by "the desire to improve the disciplinary image" of the field written in the wake of restructuring at the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), the commercialization of research, and the perceived crisis in the humanities, and it has helped to generate a field of research into the institutional position of the humanities aimed at influencing public policy on university education. For example, see Daniel Coleman and Smaro Kamboureli's *Retooling the Humanities: The Culture of Research in Canadian Universities*.

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