

At the Wildcat: Café Culture in a Canadian Frontier Town

Ben Ladouceur, M.A. Candidate, Carleton University
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Introduction¹

The Canadian Museum of Civilizations concludes its Canada Hall exhibit with a faithful replica of Yellowknife's *Wildcat Café* circa 1979. The *Wildcat Café* was considered a "good symbol for the frontier mining town" at the time of the exhibit's erection.² By ending its tour with the *Wildcat Café*, the museum implies several notions about Canadian identity: how small, informal businesses are emblematic of Canada's collective personality; how the north is our last remaining frontier; how northern settlements are physically different, but socially and emotionally similar, to Canadian communities at large. By virtue of being such an accurate simulacrum, the exhibit illustrates, in equal measure, the eccentricities and the familiarities of life up north.

This paper shall analyze the effects of the northern environment and its peculiarities (isolation, extreme temperatures, natural dangers) on its settled population by examining the real *Wildcat Café* as a physical space, an embodied space, and an economy, within the context of "café culture." The paper shall examine the *Wildcat Café*'s actual physicality, and the interpersonal and monetary transactions of its inhabitants, to demonstrate that the institution maintains the integral aspects of a typically Western café. An analysis of the *Wildcat Café* within the spectrum of "café culture" shall illustrate that social communities are not only constructed in spite of the difficulties of their physical and spatial environments; these difficulties actually strengthen

their communities, by fostering a sense of unity in the act of perseverance.

Yellowknife, Northwest Territories

At the end of the nineteenth century, the incredible demand for minerals had driven prospectors into the "forbidding"³ natural world of the Northwest Territories, in search of copper and gold that, as it turned out, were plentiful there. For this stalwart group of prospectors, the riches of minerals trumped the discomforts of the northern environment. Over the next half-century, the population grew steadily, due to further migration and the establishment of families. The 1940's saw an influx of businesses and governmental bodies that arrived in response to the location's growing population, and fostered Yellowknife into a permanent community. In the prologue to *Yellowknife*, a book about the town's history commissioned for Canada's centennial, author Ray Price opines that "the silence of the wilderness is being shattered by the rapid expansion of a modern town... the silent years of the north have gone forever."⁴ In 1967, such an observation would have been largely agreed upon by the residents of Yellowknife, the oldest of whom might have been able to recall the town in its infancy, before the population boom of the 1940's.

The founders of the *Wildcat Café*, building their institution in 1934, must have anticipated this boom. It was the same year that saw the formation of "a new company, Yellowknife Gold Mines... a subsidiary of Bear Exploration and Radium."⁵ A hotel called the Corona Inn was established one year later in 1935, as businessman Gordon Latham hoped to take advantage of the town's growth.⁶ As these small

¹ This paper was first published in *Capstone Seminar Series*, vol. 1, no. 1, Spring 2011, "Capital Issues: Missing Narratives from Canada's National Capital." <http://capstoneseminarseries.wordpress.com>.

² "Canada Hall: *The Wildcat Café*." The Canadian Museum of Civilizations. 100 Laurier St, Gatineau, PQ, K1A 0M8. February 2011.

³ Price, Ray. *Yellowknife*. Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1967, 2.

⁴ Price, 1.

⁵ Price, 44.

⁶ Price, 93.

businesses, each the first of its kind, cropped up throughout Yellowknife, the town's quick development towards something resembling a typical Southern Canadian community became noticeable: "things were very different in Yellowknife. Everything seemed to be on the move."⁷ Yellowknife received nation-wide publicity on several occasions, notably the summer of 1938, when a "sensational new strike of gold" was made outside of town.⁸ The land continued to supply a remarkable, unfathomable manna of copper and gold to its miners. This period of prosperity and upward trajectory did not maintain its intensity, but it did forge a strong town with a moderate permanent population that continues to increase today. The *Wildcat Café* barely predates this surge of commerce and national attention, and thrived throughout its whole arc, as did most entrepreneurial projects of the same time span.

The architect Stephen Fancott enlisted the help of several town residents to build the café in 1934, including Willy Wylie, who would become its first proprietor. Over the following 30 years, the café would take several forms, including a restaurant, a parlour with an ice cream cart up front, and then as a Chinese restaurant, with a wok where the cart had been.⁹ In the 1970's, the café fell into disrepair, and remained untouched until the threat of demolition inspired a handful of locals to organize a reparation project. Evidently, the town was attached to the café as an inhabitable token of mid-century northern settlement. Its actual success as a business was only a tertiary aspect of its relevance. The café has been successful ever since this revitalization, and is now operated by different proprietors annually, who are determined via application and lottery.¹⁰

Because of Yellowknife's varied history, and because of the café's own revolving door of proprietors, the

Wildcat could now take many forms in nostalgic retrospect: the small café of an intimate community; a great, booming success story of a business; the victim of declines in economic prosperity, to which mining towns are unfortunately prone; and, after its falling into disrepair and subsequent re-establishment, an artefactual tribute to any of these previous forms.

Café as a Physical Space

In my analysis of the café within the spectrum of Western cafés, I shall focus on the café as it was in 1979, the *Wildcat* that the Canadian Museum of Civilization chose to recreate.¹¹ In this institutional simulacrum, certain sensory aspects of the original café are offered to patrons largely intact (visual, textural); others are imitated as best as they can be (tangible, and with the use of hidden speakers, auditory); and others yet cannot possibly be represented (olfactory, gustatory). Each of these senses play substantial roles in one's experience of a café. Over the past thirty years, cafés throughout the West have "evolved as social meeting places with a distinctive ambience"¹² that is formed by these senses. By fostering these distinctive ambiances, cafés throughout the Western world aim to become "third places for meeting away from home and work... a place to relax, discuss, socialize and study"¹³ (my emphasis). A café's success in becoming a patron's *third place* could relate drastically to its ambience, which may be intensely fabricated to accommodate to certain cultural demands, particularly to coffee's modern reputation as "hip"¹⁴ or "the drink of the present."¹⁵ Conversely,

⁷ Price, 99.

⁸ Price, 141.

⁹ "Canada Hall."

¹⁰ "Wildcat Café to close in 2011 for renovations." CBC.ca News. Nov 6 2010. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/story/2010/11/26/yknife-wildcat-cafe-renos.html?ref=rss>

¹¹ "Canada Hall."

¹² Jolliffe, Lee. "Common Grounds of Coffee and Tourism." In Lee Jolliffe (ed.) *Coffee Culture, Destinations and Tourism* (pp. 3-21). Leeds: Short Run Press, 2010, 8.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Thorn, J. *The Coffee Companion: A Connoisseur's Guide*. London: Quintet Publishing, 2006, 8.

¹⁵ Walker, J. *Introduction to Hospitality Management*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004.

a café's success in becoming a *third place* could simply relate to a lack of alternative options, as is the case at the *Wildcat Café*. With "no shortage of people in need of food" in its earliest days, the *Wildcat Café* never had to pander to its patrons; the food and the warmth would attract them.¹⁶ Yellowknife's isolation, small population and general inaccessibility resulted in a shortage of competition. This prevented its proprietors from having to cultivate a certain ambience. The ambience that results from this lack of competition is, in turn, sincere rather than calculated; the physical space of the café is an undecorated projection of life and livelihood in a northern town.

The Wildcat Café is a log cabin with a large hand-painted sign spanning over its front entrance. Within, there are six long, wooden tables, each accompanied by backless benches of the same lumber and length. There are windows by each table, with apples-and-leaves-print curtains that are presumably drawn during the day and shut during the night. The tables are pressed against the walls, so that a walking path is formed from the front entrance to the back-room door, behind which the food is prepared. Next to the back-room entrance, the cash register sits on a cabinet which contains plates, glasses, Styrofoam cups, Carnation Coffee and Red Rose Teabags. The walls are covered in an assortment of decorations, all of which share the common theme of local culture: a painting of a dogsled; a photograph of the café exterior; a commemorative poster for a "Dog Derby" that took place March 28, 1959; a Northwest Territories license plate, shaped like a bear. Above the cash register, there is a liquor license, a business license, a Fire Marshall Inspection certificate and a license "to deal in the meat of game."¹⁷

At the museum simulacrum, the hidden speakers broadcast the clinking of dishes and cutlery in a basin, the murmured conversations between those who take orders and those who prepare food, and the occasional snowmobile revving by outside. To that list of ambient noises that the actual café would feature, one could presumably add: the sound of other

patrons eating, drinking and conversing; the front and back doors opening and closing, momentarily letting in stray sounds from without; the *ka-ching* of the cash register; cars outside; and animals outside, such as birds and dogs. In terms of temperature, the café would be much warmer than the outdoors during the winter months, providing its patrons with necessary shelter. The warm air would carry the smells that much more easily, which would include, but are not limited to: the warm, rustic smell characteristic of log cabins; the smells of various items being cooked and served hot, the most peculiar of which would likely be the various game meats; the salty human musk that results from so many people, in so many winter coats, in such a small enclosure. All together, these sensory aspects indicate a café that does nothing to adorn or modify the traits with which its environment and nature provide it.

These physical attributes combine to form the café's distinct ambience. The ambience of the *Wildcat* is difficult to compare to those of a typical Southern Canadian café, once the issue of fabrication is considered. A *Starbucks* or *Tim Hortons* location will typically spend much time and money on the cultivation of its own ambience, which is often independent of its surroundings. Starbucks, and other cafés that were directly inspired by Starbucks (*Second Cup*, *Caffè Nero*, *Costa Coffee*, etc), will frequently design their locations with urbane sophistication in mind, in hopes of imitating Seattle or Seattle-esque metropolitans. The "progressive and stylish city" of Seattle has proven to be a phenomenally popular inspiration for cafés within Western culture.¹⁸ For Seattle-style cafés, the world outside the café could be a city street, a suburb, or another, larger institution that serves a separate function, such as an airport, a library, a business park or a shopping mall. These worlds are intentionally eschewed by the cafés themselves, so that the cafés become the worlds of their patrons. This is accomplished with the use of non-intrusive music (frequently jazz-inspired urban music), an abundance

¹⁶ Price, 93.

¹⁷ "Canada Hall."

¹⁸ Lyons, James. "Thing Seattle, Act Globally: specialty coffee, commodity biographies and the promotion of place." *Cultural Studies*, 19, 1 (2005) 14-34, 16.

of odorous coffee beans placed throughout the store, decor and furnishing that evoke cosmopolitan Seattle, and an artificial terminology that is endemic to the café interiors, and that is embellished by the signature method of calling out drink orders repetitively, i.e., “venti” for “large,” “con leche” for “with milk,” “macchiato” for “with foam,” etc.¹⁹ The ambience of the *Wildcat Café* and those of metropolitan cafés can only be compared succinctly if the conflicting degrees of fabrication are acknowledged.

The *Wildcat Café* makes no effort to mask its own locality, or to resemble communities other than Yellowknife. Even the photographs and pictures on the wall depict local landmarks. The sincere, unassuming nature of its ambience demonstrates that the northern culture itself is a desirable atmosphere for its residents. That sense of sincerity comes across during an analysis of the *Wildcat* as an embodied space, or a space in which people interact with their surroundings and with each other.

Café as an Embodied Space

Cafés are definitively places of human interaction, and the ambience particular to cafés is catered to social facilitation.²⁰ The proximity of the patrons’ bodies to each other, as determined by the café’s layout and seating customs, indicates much about the prioritization of comfort within the community. The six tables in the *Wildcat Café* could each seat about ten patrons. These seats are hard, backless and un-cushioned. Since there are often more than six parties at the café, strangers are often seated at the same table.²¹ In doing so, the institution denies, or overcomes, the awkwardness that exists between strangers. If table layout has a “very significant effect on the café experience as it serve[s] to enable or

disable social interaction,”²² then this particular table layout proves conducive to social exchanges, and not necessarily within already-established friendships. Similarly, privacy is usually a valuable commodity in the café environment. However, at the *Wildcat Café*, with very little space between the tables and no sound produced specifically to obscure individual conversations, a private conversation mandatorily becomes a public conversation, adding foundation to the sense of unity that is already fostered by the hodgepodge seating arrangements. Patrons interact with the staff informally, to place and pay for their orders. There is no discernible barrier of professionalism between the patrons and the staff.²³ Any persons embodying the *Wildcat*, be they customers or proprietors, are first and foremost residents of the town, and any interaction between these classifications does not carry the impersonal formality of a monetary transaction.

The informal atmosphere transforms the café into a social hub, where residents of Yellowknife can eat, relax and converse. Since well before 1979, the year that is depicted in the museum simulacrum, they could also drink. The introduction of a liquor license bolstered the café into an even more desirable location, and lubricated the processes of relaxation and conversation. Price sites the advent of liquor as a key step in Yellowknife’s ascent to civilization.²⁴ He also relates the importance of music in Yellowknife. He makes light of the fact that the selection of songs is very limited, because records are expensive to import, and generally do not travel well. Even the record player’s needle eventually broke, so that the sound quality was severely compromised. According to Price, this “bothered no one,”²⁵ and patrons danced as joyfully as they would have to new records that did not skip. In a typical café environment, such difficulties in the music might aggravate patrons. Here, the patrons are unaccustomed to anything better, and the idea of anything better becomes a superfluous luxury; the patrons make do.

¹⁹ Lyons, 18.

²⁰ Weaver, Adam. “Cafe Culture and Conversation: Tourism and Urban(e) Experiences in Wellington, New Zealand.” In Lee Jolliffe (ed.) *Coffee Culture, Destinations and Tourism* (pp. 41-52). Leeds: Short Run Press, 2010, 47.

²¹ “Canada Hall.”

²² Weaver, 47.

²³ Price, 153.

²⁴ Price, 131.

²⁵ Price, 106.

Price also depicts a conversation between a prominent lawyer (Ted Williams), a well-known outdoorsman (Alex Loutitt) and an unnamed prospector, in which they fret about the community's future in the wake of World War II.²⁶ It is an integral conversation between three men of influence, concerning a pressing global issue and its impact on the Yellowknife community. Like much of Price's book, this dialogue is, to an unknown degree, an estimation of a real event. With realism and dramatic intrigue in mind, Price makes the *Wildcat Café* the setting for this scene, accentuating the conversation's communal relevance, and placing the anxieties and uncertainties of WWII in the emotional heart of the town. Fortunately, the war's impact on the northern economy was generally overestimated, and the Wildcat benefitted from "increased consumption of convenience foods and eating out, features of post-War prosperity."²⁷

Evidently, the Wildcat was considered a social capital, one in which monetary transactions were present, but had little impact on the informal sense of community. Despite the café's material shortcomings (uncomfortable seats, broken records), its patrons were as comfortable and as amiable as the patrons of any given Western café. Their sense of community was even bolstered by these shortcomings, as a lack of physical property scraped away the spatial pretence between strangers and created union.

Café as an Economy

The Wildcat might be a social hub in which transactions are unnoticed aspects of the experience, but these transactions are still fundamental to the café's sustainability. If "the commercial nature of cafés is undeniable,"²⁸ then the *Wildcat Café* cannot

allow its role as a social facilitator to effect its profitability. Fortunately, the volatile environment serves to keep economic competition at bay. According to Shaw, this lack of competition derives from the fact that hard-to-reach locations are unattractive to corporations such as *Tim Hortons* and *Starbucks*, because of "perceived dangers [and the] difficulty of getting around."²⁹ As such, small businesses are likelier to thrive in the world's "last frontiers."³⁰ Yellowknife's apparent immunity to corporatization allows the *Wildcat* to develop certain peculiarities, without the concern that a *Starbucks* will be built next door and offer the population a more usual café experience.

Changes to the café's essence have been met historically with disregard by residents of Yellowknife. In 2007, for instance, the café's temporary proprietor changed the sign outside from "The Wildcat Café" to "Le Wildcat Café," in an effort to "reflect [his own] francophone culture." Locals regarded this modification with frustration. In the words of city heritage committee member Yvonne Quick, "If you look at old pictures, it has 'The Wildcat' on it... That's the way we want it to stay because it is a heritage value."³¹ The café's peculiarities are endemic to the northern environment, and valued by locals for that reason. They allow the café to represent the community of a northern settlement with sincerity.

Many communities throughout the Western world place an emphasis on the trained professionalism of baristas, whether corporately or independently owned. Frost et al. examine cafés in Melbourne, Australia in an attempt to account for the coffee industry's sudden success. Of small, independently

²⁶ Price, 166.

²⁷ Frost, Warwick, Jennifer Laing, Fiona Wheeler and Keir Reeves. "Coffee Culture, Heritage and Destination Image: Melbourne and the Italian Model." In Lee Jolliffe (ed.) *Coffee Culture, Destinations and Tourism* (pp. 99-110). Leeds: Short Run Press, 2010, 102.

²⁸ Weaver, 47.

²⁹ Shaw, Wendy S. "Serendipitous Coffee Experiences in Papua New Guinea." In Lee Jolliffe (ed.) *Coffee Culture, Destinations and Tourism* (pp. 134-157). Leeds: Short Run Press, 2010, 142.

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ "Yellowknife decrees Wildcat Café stays 'Le'-less." CBC.ca News. May 6 2009. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/story/2009/05/06/wildcat-name.html>

owned cafés in Melbourne, they write: “Individual cafés are characterised by quirky decor and design, many striving for an ambience variously perceived as alternative, funky, grungy or bohemian.... Coffees are generally made by professionally trained baristas... Cups and glasses are used in preference to paper cups. Servings are small.”³² A comparison between these cafés and the *Wildcat Café*, on the other side of the world, feels like an exercise in extremity. The ambience of the *Wildcat Café* might be described, especially by an outsider, as alternative or bohemian, but that ambience is not a manufactured business tactic. There is no indication that the *Wildcat* trains its staff beyond the rudiments of coffee-making. Paper cups are used instead of cups and glasses, and servings are enormous, to the point that their size becomes an anecdotal aspect of a tourist’s experience. The reason for these differences in appearance stems from the competitiveness that exists between the many cafés in Melbourne, a city where a small stretch of urban streets often contains more than a dozen cafés.³³ The *Wildcat’s* isolation affects not only its ambience, but its economy.

The Museum of Civilization’s replica of the café certainly contributes to its status as a northern tourist destination. This post-replica influx of tourism can be accounted for as easily as that, but the frontier town of Yellowknife intrigued southern North Americans before the erection of that exhibit. For tourists of Melbourne (or, for that matter, Seattle, Vancouver, Vienna, Florence, Brighton and many other coffee-capitals, some of which have Seattle to thank for the sudden popularity of the metropolitan coffee experience), the well-reputed coffee is often a major aspect of their choice of vacation city.³⁴ Before the exhibit, the *Wildcat Café* would have been best known, if at all, for its membership in the legacy of gold-mining. The quality of its food, let alone its coffee, was beside the point. The peculiarity of the food, however, was a substantial aspect of the café experience. In such a tourist experience, quality is not expected, and not a source of enticement for potential

visitors. Authenticity, on the other hand, is a major aspect of the vacation experience. Visitors want to experience an intact version of the frontier town, the sort of community that Canadians as a whole consider intrinsic to their own identities, complete with dirty dishes, overcooked meat and sub-par service. Eftychiou’s observations on perceptions of Cypriot coffee culture are comparable to perceptions of Northern coffee culture: “for Cypriot masses -- urban and rural -- the coffee house was viewed as a point of contact with ‘the outside world;’ a world that was perceived as more novel, more interesting and wider than the narrow confines of Cypriot community traditional life.”³⁵ For tourists, an intrinsically northern café would be an adequate point of accessibility, from which to compare and contrast the Southern Canadian experience with that of the frontier town.

Conclusion

The tourist’s attempt to access a frontier culture from a familiar vantage point, such as a café, speaks of this article’s purpose. This analysis of the *Wildcat Café* as a member of the “café culture” genre has been an attempt to scrutinize the Canadian fascination of the North as an aspect of the nation’s identity. The *Wildcat Café’s* geographic location, its surrounding climate and the story behind its genesis each contribute to its identity as a distilled representation of life in northern settlements. Without calculation or pretence, its physicality demonstrates the peculiarities of life and business in a frontier town, while maintaining familiarities that are vital to the technical definition of a café. The informality of the café’s monetary and interpersonal transactions further proves the café’s ambience was naturally developed, rather than doctored. Ultimately, the *Wildcat* was, and is, a *third place* for the residents of Yellowknife, for reasons that are intriguingly particular to the area. The café exists today as a testament to that town’s

³² Frost et al., 103.

³³ Frost et al., 104.

³⁴ Frost et al., 106.

³⁵ Eftychiou, Evi and Nicos Philippou. “Coffee-house Culture and Tourism in Cyprus: A Traditionalized Experience.” In Lee Jolliffe (ed.) *Coffee Culture, Destinations and Tourism* (pp. 66-86). Leeds: Short Run Press, 2010, 67.

history as an intimate community, and remains appreciated and frequented by locals and tourists alike.

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