ACROSS
Journal of Interdisciplinary Cross-Border Studies
Vol 10, No.6, 2026
The Sensitive Dimension of Canadian Time and Space

Affective Cartographies of the Canadian North: Trauma, Embodiment, and Survival in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and Netflix's *Keep Breathing*

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Abstract
This article explores how Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) and the Netflix limited series *Keep Breathing* (2022) reimagine the Canadian North as an affective geography. Moving beyond representations of wilderness as a fixed geographical setting or a symbol of national identity, it argues that both narratives construct the North through embodied encounters with memory, trauma, and sensory experience. Drawing on spatial theory, phenomenology, affect studies, ecofeminism, and trauma theory, the article proposes the concept of affective cartographies of the North to describe landscapes that are continuously produced through the interaction of body, place, and emotion. While *Surfacing* imagines psychological transformation through descent, immersion, and the gradual resurfacing of memory, *Keep Breathing* reconfigures survival through movement, breath, and the search for home. Read together, the two works reveal complementary philosophies of survival articulated across different historical moments and media. By placing a canonical Canadian novel in dialogue with a contemporary streaming series, the article demonstrates how literature and audiovisual storytelling construct wilderness as an active participant in the formation, fragmentation, and reimagining of female subjectivity.

Keywords: Canadian North, affective cartographies, embodiment, trauma, memory, wilderness, Margaret Atwood, *Keep Breathing*, intermediality, phenomenology

1. Imagining the North: Wilderness, Subjectivity, and the Affective Landscape

Before comparing Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) and the 2002 Netflix series *Keep Breathing*, it is necessary to return to the text that has profoundly shaped the literary imagination of the Canadian North.

Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* occupies a pivotal place within Canadian literature not only because it redefines wilderness as a space of psychological and ecological transformation, but also because it challenges inherited national myths that imagine the North as an empty frontier awaiting exploration. Rather than treating landscape as a passive setting, the novel gradually reveals it as an active force that shapes memory, embodiment, and identity. It is here that the notion of affective cartography first takes shape, making *Surfacing* the natural point of departure for the present discussion.

Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* does not simply take its protagonist into the Canadian North; it gradually reveals the North itself as one of the novel's central protagonists. What initially appears to be a physical journey through the wilderness slowly unfolds into a journey across layers of memory, history, trauma, and identity, where geographical space can no longer be separated from psychological experience. The farther the narrator travels from the urban world, the more unstable conventional spatial coordinates become, giving way to an affective cartography of the North - a landscape shaped not only by lakes, forests, and roads but also by memory, absence, embodiment, and cultural imagination. In *Surfacing*, the North is never simply represented; it is progressively experienced, inhabited, and emotionally negotiated, becoming the very medium through which the narrator's fragmented self begins to resurface.

Even the title announces the novel's central movement. *Surfacing* refers not simply to emerging from the depths of a lake but to the gradual return of everything that has remained submerged: memories, trauma, ecological awareness, and fragmented identity. Throughout the novel, the act of surfacing acquires multiple meanings, transforming a physical movement into a psychological, ethical, and ecological one. As the narrative unfolds, the protagonist does not merely travel north; she progressively surfaces into a different understanding of herself and of the landscape she inhabits. The title therefore encapsulates the novel's larger argument: before the self can be reconstructed, what has been buried beneath memory, language, and national mythology must first be brought to the surface.

Long before the narrator reaches the island, Atwood begins dismantling the cultural myths through which the Canadian North has traditionally been imagined. The road north initially appears to promise orientation, marked by a succession of towns proudly announcing themselves as the "Gateway to the North" (Atwood 1972, 4). Yet Atwood immediately unsettles this reassuring geography by exposing the competing narratives attached to northern space. The optimistic political slogan proclaiming that "The future is in the North" (Atwood 4) is sharply undercut by the narrator's father's observation that there was "nothing in the North but the past and not much of that either" (Atwood 4).

The contrast is far more than ironic. Instead, it exposes the North as a space suspended between national mythology and historical amnesia, between promises of progress and the persistence of unresolved histories. Rather than an empty frontier awaiting discovery, the North emerges as a landscape already burdened with memory, where every kilometre travelled uncovers another layer of cultural, ecological, and political complexity.

Atwood also transforms familiarity into estrangement. Although the narrator is returning to the landscape of her childhood, she repeatedly experiences it as a place of estrangement. Her description of the North as simultaneously her "home ground" (Atwood 6) and "foreign territory" (Atwood 6) captures the paradox at the heart of the novel: homecoming does not restore belonging but exposes its fragility. This fracture is intensified by language. Surrounded by words that "go into my ears meaning nothing" (Atwood 6), the narrator discovers that geographical return does not guarantee cultural or emotional recognition. The North therefore resists nostalgic reconstruction. Instead, it becomes a liminal space where identity must be renegotiated through uncertainty rather than recovered through memory.

The landscape itself begins to remember. Bullet-ridden road signs, their metal "rusting red around the edges" (Atwood 6) appear less like isolated traces of vandalism than symptoms of a violence that has become embedded within the landscape itself. Their repeated

destruction transforms the North into an archive where political conflict and historical tensions remain visible, refusing to disappear beneath the surface. These political scars extend into the ecological fabric of the North. Altered water levels, abandoned logging sites, dams, and manipulated rivers reveal a wilderness already transformed by human intervention. Far from celebrating an untouched northern paradise, Atwood presents a landscape where environmental exploitation and cultural memory become inseparable, reminding readers that wilderness is never entirely outside history.

The disappearance of the narrator's father gives this landscape an even deeper symbolic resonance. What begins as a search for a missing person gradually becomes a search for what has been forgotten, repressed, or erased. The father's absence echoes throughout the novel as an absence of memory, of ecological knowledge, and of alternative ways of inhabiting the land. His disappearance acquires a significance that extends well beyond the personal, transforming *Surfacing* into an excavation of buried histories that challenge both individual identity and the cultural narratives through which the Canadian North has traditionally been imagined.

The wilderness is altered in another way as well. Summer cottages "spreading like measles" (Atwood 11) and newly paved roads do more than alter the physical landscape; they signal the steady domestication of a space that once resisted easy accessibility. The North becomes increasingly exposed to the logic of consumption, tourism, and ownership, suggesting that even the most remote landscapes are vulnerable to processes of cultural and ecological homogenization. What is threatened is not simply wilderness itself, but the possibility of experiencing it outside the structures imposed by modern society.

Yet despite these transformations, the novel repeatedly offers moments in which the North escapes human control and reasserts its elemental presence. The silence of the lake, the absence of mechanical noise, the stillness of the surrounding forest, and the tactile immediacy of water all contribute to a mode of perception grounded in the body rather than in rational observation. Through these sensory encounters, the narrator gradually abandons the conceptual frameworks inherited from urban life and enters a different relationship with the environment. The landscape ceases to function as an object of contemplation and instead becomes an active participant in her psychological transformation. Seeing gradually gives way to sensing; representation yields to embodiment.

By this point, the North can no longer be read as a neutral geographical setting or as a simple emblem of Canadian identity. It has gradually become an affective cartography in which memory, trauma, embodiment, and ecological consciousness continually reshape one another. Geography is no longer separate from affect, just as movement through landscape is no longer separate from movement through the self. What begins as a search for the father ultimately becomes something far more profound: a journey towards a different way of inhabiting both memory and place.

2. Space, Affect, and Embodied Wilderness

The Canadian North has long resisted purely geographical definitions. More than a physical region, it has functioned as a cultural imaginary, a political construct, and a symbolic landscape through which questions of identity, belonging, and memory have continuously been negotiated. As Sherrill Grace observes, the North is not simply a place on the map but

an evolving cultural idea whose meanings have been repeatedly reshaped by history, literature, politics, and national imagination (Grace 2002). It is precisely this instability of meaning that makes the North such a productive space for literary inquiry. In *Surfacing* and *Keep Breathing*, wilderness is never reduced to scenery or physical environment: it is experienced, remembered, inhabited, and felt. Rather than approaching these narratives through conventional geography, this article understands the Canadian North as an affective cartography: a landscape produced through the continuous interaction of embodiment, trauma, memory, and sensory perception.

A useful point of departure for such an understanding is Henri Lefebvre's proposition that space is socially produced rather than naturally given (Lefebvre 1991). Places acquire meaning through the practices, relationships, and cultural narratives that unfold within them; they are never neutral containers in which stories simply happen. Read through Lefebvre, the lakes, forests, rivers, and islands of Atwood's novel, as well as the mountains and waterways of *Keep Breathing*, become more than physical locations. They emerge as lived environments where personal memory intersects with collective imagination and where geography itself becomes inseparable from human experience. The Canadian North is therefore not merely represented; it is continually produced through the ways in which it is inhabited, remembered, and narrated.

Yet space is not only produced - it is also lived. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology shifts attention from landscape as object to landscape as experience, arguing that the body is not situated within the world as an external observer but constitutes the very condition through which the world becomes meaningful (Merleau-Ponty 1962). Before landscape is interpreted intellectually, it is encountered sensorially: through cold, silence, water, fatigue, pain, movement, and touch. This phenomenological perspective is central to both narratives as either protagonist simply moves through the wilderness; instead, the wilderness gradually reshapes perception itself, dissolving the apparent boundary between external environment and internal consciousness. Space becomes embodied long before it becomes symbolic.

Once landscape is understood as embodied experience, affect becomes impossible to ignore. Sara Ahmed reminds us that emotions do not reside solely within individuals but emerge through encounters between bodies, places, and objects, creating affective atmospheres that orient perception and action (Ahmed 2004). Fear, grief, vulnerability, and hope are therefore not psychological states transported into the wilderness; they are continually generated through the protagonists' interaction with it. The North becomes an affective environment in which silence, distance, water, darkness, and isolation are not passive elements of scenery but active participants in the emotional life of the narrative. Memory itself is activated through these encounters, resurfacing not as chronological recollection but as embodied experience.

Although these theoretical traditions emerge from different intellectual contexts, they converge around a common insight: landscape can never be separated from the body that inhabits it. Ecofeminist scholarship extends this argument by challenging the dualisms that have historically separated culture from nature, reason from the body, and humanity from the more-than-human world. Thinkers such as Val Plumwood and Greta Gaard have demonstrated how these oppositions have simultaneously justified the domination of women and the exploitation of nature (Plumwood 1993; Gaard 2015). Both *Surfacing* and *Keep Breathing* resist these inherited hierarchies as wilderness is never presented as an object to

be mastered or conquered. Instead, it becomes a living presence that gradually dismantles the illusion of human control, inviting both protagonists to discover forms of knowledge grounded in vulnerability, interdependence, and ecological relationality.

Landscape and embodiment, however, cannot be fully understood without considering trauma. Cathy Caruth argues that traumatic experience resists immediate comprehension, returning belatedly through sensory fragments, involuntary repetitions, and disrupted temporalities (Caruth 1996). Dominick LaCapra likewise emphasizes that trauma unsettles chronological time, allowing past and present to coexist within the same experiential moment (LaCapra 2001). Both *Surfacing* and *Keep Breathing* translate this recursive temporality into spatial experience. Wilderness becomes the place where memory acquires material presence, where repressed experiences resurface, and where movement through landscape simultaneously becomes movement through layers of the self. The Canadian North is not simply remembered; it remembers.

Read together, these theoretical perspectives reveal a common understanding of landscape as lived, embodied, and affective rather than merely geographical. It is at the intersection of spatial theory, phenomenology, affect studies, ecofeminism, and trauma theory that the concept of affective cartographies of the North takes shape. Rather than privileging geography over experience or landscape over subjectivity, this concept seeks to account for the ways in which place is continuously produced through memory, embodiment, perception, and emotion. From this perspective, *Surfacing* and *Keep Breathing* are not simply narratives set in the Canadian wilderness. They become explorations of how wilderness itself participates in the formation, fragmentation, and reconstruction of the self.

3. The North and the Unmaking of the Self in *Surfacing*

Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* begins with an absence - a missing father - but unfolds through a succession of emergences. Memories surface, fragments of identity return, ecological awareness takes shape, and truths long buried beneath silence gradually become visible. The title evokes far more than a literal movement from depth to surface. It becomes the novel's governing metaphor, tracing a continuous movement from repression toward recognition, from emotional numbness toward embodied awareness, and from a fractured sense of self toward a more difficult, unstable, yet increasingly conscious relation to both memory and place.

This movement cannot be separated from the Canadian North. The narrator does not simply travel north; she enters a landscape that gradually resists every attempt to be reduced to geography alone; she enters a space whose meanings deepen as her own certainties begin to dissolve. Geography becomes porous, allowing personal memory, national mythology, environmental history, and bodily experience to overlap. The farther she moves from the urban world, the less stable the distinctions between external landscape and interior experience become. The North is gradually peeled open, layer after layer, until geography gives way to memory and landscape begins to function as a form of psychological knowledge.

The journey north is therefore far more than a return to childhood or a search for the missing father. It is also an encounter with the narratives through which the North has been imagined, appropriated, damaged, and remembered. What appears at first as a geographical destination

gradually reveals itself as an affective cartography in which national myths, linguistic estrangement, ecological wounds, and personal loss are mapped onto one another. Only once the landscape ceases to be read as geography can it begin to be experienced as memory.

3.1. Mapping the North: From National Myth to Affective Cartography

The North in *Surfacing* is never simply entered. Even before the narrator reaches the island, Atwood exposes the cultural scripts that precede and attempt to define it. The journey is punctuated by towns announcing themselves as the "GATEWAY TO THE NORTH" (Atwood 4) as though the North could be contained by a sign, reduced to a threshold, or transformed into a promise of national expansion. The political slogan "The future is in the North" (Atwood 4) reinforces this rhetoric of development, movement, and possibility. Yet the narrator's father immediately unsettles its optimism by claiming that "there was nothing in the North but the past and not much of that either" (Atwood 4). This apparent contradiction lies at the heart of the novel. The North is imagined as future and past at once: a frontier onto which progress is projected, but also a landscape marked by forgetting, abandonment, and historical erasure.

Atwood does not present this opposition merely as an ironic disagreement between political rhetoric and private scepticism. Instead, it exposes the North as a contested cultural construct whose meaning depends on who maps it and for what purpose. The language of gateways and futures transforms the wilderness into territory available for development, ownership, and national self-definition. The father's reply, however, exposes what such narratives leave behind. Beneath the mythology of expansion lies a landscape already burdened by histories that have been neglected, overwritten, or deliberately emptied of meaning. The road north therefore appears to promise orientation. It delivers uncertainty instead.

This uncertainty becomes deeply personal when the narrator recognizes the region as both familiar and estranged: "Now we're on my home ground, foreign territory" (Atwood 6). The phrase captures one of the novel's defining paradoxes. The North is the landscape of childhood memory, yet it no longer offers the security of return. Home has become foreign, while familiarity has acquired the texture of displacement. Language intensifies this fracture. The narrator remembers discovering that words could enter her ears while meaning nothing, an experience that transforms speech from a vehicle of connection into a reminder of cultural distance. In Francophone Quebec, the Anglo narrator is neither entirely at home nor simply an outsider. She inhabits an unstable position between recognition and incomprehension, and the landscape itself begins to reflect this divided sense of belonging.

The North, then, resists nostalgic recovery. The narrator cannot return to an untouched childhood landscape because neither the place nor the self who once inhabited it remains intact. Memory does not restore continuity; it exposes rupture. The familiar road, the altered villages, the changing language, and the disappearing landmarks all reveal that return is never a simple reversal of departure. What she encounters is not the past preserved, but the visible evidence of its transformation.

The landscape appears to remember even when people do not. Road signs are pierced by bullet holes, "rusting red around the edges", and their wounds repeatedly return despite attempts to replace them. Atwood describes them as though they were organic growths - "mould or boils" - making violence appear less like an external act than something absorbed

into the surface of the North itself (Atwood 6). The signs no longer merely indicate direction. They become scars, registering unresolved political tensions and revealing the extent to which cultural conflict has entered the landscape.

These scars make it impossible to sustain the romantic image of the North as untouched wilderness. The North bears wounds that are physical, political, and symbolic, and Atwood repeatedly draws attention to the ways in which human violence has become part of the scenery. The landscape is not silent because nothing has happened there. It is silent because its histories have not been adequately spoken.

Environmental damage deepens this sense of a wounded geography. Floodgates, raised water levels, abandoned logging practices, and altered rapids reveal a landscape shaped by extraction and technological intervention. The waters are "froth-coloured and brown" (Atwood 10) while the lake itself carries the consequences of decisions made decades earlier. Atwood presents this intervention as both forceful and strangely temporary. Industries arrive, exploit, alter, and retreat, leaving behind damaged ecosystems and fragments of abandoned purpose.

The North therefore becomes a geography of exploitation followed by neglect. Its resources are drawn into economic systems, but the landscape itself is left to absorb the consequences. Atwood's wilderness is neither pristine nor entirely recoverable. It is a palimpsest on which competing forms of ownership, intervention, and abandonment have been written, partially erased, and written again.

The disappearance of the narrator's father gathers these larger absences into the intimate centre of the novel. His vanishing initially gives the journey its practical purpose, but it soon acquires a significance that cannot be contained by the logic of a missing-person search. "My father has simply disappeared then, vanished into nothing" (Atwood 23) the narrator observes, yet she remains convinced that official searches have missed something and that looking for herself will produce a different truth. The father's absence becomes inseparable from the landscape that has absorbed him. To search for him is also to search through the layers of the North - for memory, for ecological knowledge, for traces of a life that resisted the values of ownership and progress.

The search is therefore less an investigation than an excavation. The father's disappearance echoes other forms of disappearance within the novel: the mother's death, the loss of childhood, the suppression of trauma, the destruction of the natural world, and the erasure of histories that do not fit national mythology. What has vanished has not necessarily ceased to exist. It may remain beneath the surface, waiting to be recognized in altered form.

At the same time, modernity continues to advance into the wilderness. Summer cottages begin to "sprout" and "spread like measles," while paved roads bring accessibility, tourism, and consumption into spaces once defined by remoteness (Atwood 11). The simile is unmistakably hostile. Development does not simply arrive; it infects. The language of organic growth is turned against itself, describing artificial structures as a disease spreading across the landscape.

What is threatened is not simply the physical isolation of the North. It imposes urban modes of ownership and perception upon the North, transforming wilderness into property, scenery, and leisure. The cottage offers an illusion of intimacy with nature while reproducing the same structures of possession from which the narrator is trying to escape. The North is

increasingly made available, but in becoming accessible it risks losing the very resistance that gives it transformative power.

Yet the landscape never becomes entirely absorbed into these systems. Atwood repeatedly creates moments in which the North withdraws from human noise and reasserts its elemental presence. The lake appears "flat, silver-white" (Atwood 47) and, for the first time in years, the narrator finds herself beyond the reach of motors. The silence is not emptiness. It is another way in which the landscape becomes present.

In this moment, the landscape ceases to be a distant object arranged for observation. It is encountered through stillness, sound, light, and bodily sensation. The absence of mechanical noise makes other forms of perception possible, allowing the narrator to experience space without immediately translating it into utility or possession. Seeing begins to give way to sensing. The North is no longer merely mapped by roads, signs, and political slogans; it is lived through silence, water, distance, and memory.

Only at this point does the geographical North fully reveal itself as an affective cartography. Its coordinates are not only spatial but emotional, historical, and corporeal. The bullet-ridden signs, altered waters, vanished father, proliferating cottages, unfamiliar language, and motorless lake do not form separate thematic details. Together, they create a landscape in which national mythology, personal memory, cultural estrangement, ecological damage, and sensory experience continuously overlap.

The narrator's movement northward therefore produces no stable map. Each attempt at orientation reveals another form of displacement, and each apparent boundary between landscape and self becomes increasingly difficult to maintain. The North is not simply where the narrator goes. It becomes the medium through which she begins to confront what has been lost, silenced, and buried within both the land and herself. Only then can the novel begin its deeper work: dismantling the self in order to imagine it anew.

3.2. Surfacing the Self: Trauma, Memory, and the Unmaking of Identity

Once the North ceases to function as geography alone, it begins to transform the narrator's sense of self. The journey north is therefore not simply a search for the missing father but an increasingly difficult encounter with everything the narrator has struggled to suppress. What has remained buried beneath memory slowly resurfaces, revealing that the true object of the search has never been the father alone but the fragmented self that disappeared alongside him.

Like the landscape it names, the title itself resists a single meaning. *Surfacing* simultaneously evokes the return of memory, the recovery of identity, the re-emergence of ecological consciousness, and the gradual liberation from silence that has shaped the narrator's emotional life. Rather than describing one decisive revelation, the novel stages a succession of emergences. Memories surface. Trauma surfaces. The body surfaces. Even the landscape itself appears to recover histories that had long remained hidden beneath the reassuring myths of progress and national belonging. The movement toward the surface is therefore neither linear nor complete. It unfolds through hesitation, repetition, and fragmentation, making surfacing less an arrival than a difficult process of becoming.

At first, the narrator experiences this process almost imperceptibly. Fragments of childhood, disconnected images, and seemingly insignificant details interrupt the present without immediately revealing their meaning. The North does not restore memory in an orderly sequence; rather, it disturbs the carefully maintained distance between past and present. Time ceases to unfold chronologically and begins to circle back upon itself. Moments separated by decades suddenly coexist, while suppressed experiences acquire an unexpected sensory immediacy. Wilderness does not merely contain memory; it activates it.

The recursive nature of this process becomes clearer when read through trauma theory. Cathy Caruth argues that trauma resists immediate comprehension because the original event cannot be fully assimilated at the moment of its occurrence. Instead, it returns belatedly through fragmented recollections, involuntary repetitions, and sensory intrusions (Caruth 1996). Dominick LaCapra similarly emphasizes that trauma disrupts chronological time, producing recursive experiences in which past and present continually collapse into one another (LaCapra 2001). Atwood translates this temporal dislocation into spatial experience. The narrator does not simply remember while moving through the wilderness; rather, the wilderness itself becomes the medium through which memory acquires material presence. Landscape and memory begin to speak the same language.

Everything gradually converges toward the recognition of the abortion. What initially appears as an incomplete and distorted recollection slowly crystallizes into an unbearable certainty. The narrator's confession - "That's what I have to face… the fact that I killed him" (Atwood 128) - marks the point at which repression can no longer sustain itself. Yet Atwood deliberately complicates this moment by refusing to present memory as transparent truth. The resurfacing of trauma does not produce immediate healing. On the contrary, it dismantles the fragile identity the narrator has constructed in order to survive. Recognition becomes inseparable from disintegration.

The collapse does not stop with memory. It reaches language itself. As the narrator moves deeper into the wilderness, words progressively lose their authority. Concepts that once organized experience no longer seem capable of containing it. Her admission that "I can't use the word love" (Atwood 91) signals more than emotional withdrawal; it reveals the collapse of a linguistic system that has become incapable of expressing lived experience. Language, once assumed to mediate reality, now appears detached from it. Meaning no longer resides in words but in bodily encounters with water, silence, cold, darkness, and the rhythms of the natural world.

As language begins to fail, the body gradually takes over. Rather than interpreting the landscape from a detached position, the narrator increasingly inhabits it through physical sensation. Seeing gives way to sensing; explanation yields to experience. This movement closely echoes Maurice Merleau-Ponty's understanding of perception as fundamentally embodied, where the body is not simply situated within space but constitutes the very condition through which the world becomes meaningful (Merleau-Ponty 1962). The wilderness is therefore not observed from a distance. It is lived through exhaustion, touch, immersion, and vulnerability. Identity ceases to function as an abstract psychological category and becomes inseparable from bodily existence.

This transformation culminates in one of the novel's most powerful declarations: "This above all, to refuse to be a victim" (Atwood 191). Frequently read as a feminist statement, the sentence also represents the final stage in the narrator's process of unmaking. Refusing

victimhood does not mean denying suffering or reclaiming mastery over experience. Rather, it signals the rejection of the narratives - patriarchal, social, and psychological - that had previously defined her existence. The narrator does not recover the identity she possessed before trauma. She abandons that identity altogether, opening the possibility for a different relationship with herself, with memory, and with the living world that surrounds her.

The self that finally emerges is neither restored nor repaired. It is different. The North has not merely witnessed this transformation; it has made it possible. What first appeared to be a journey across the Canadian wilderness has gradually become a descent into memory, embodiment, and loss. By the end of the novel, neither the landscape nor the narrator can return to an original state. Both have been irrevocably altered. To surface, Atwood ultimately suggests, is not to recover what once existed but to learn how to inhabit its absence differently.

4. Breathing the North: Trauma, Survival, and Embodied Space in *Keep Breathing*

If Atwood's North repeatedly draws its protagonist downward, *Keep Breathing* imagines survival through the simple refusal to stop moving. Although separated by fifty years and belonging to different narrative media, both works position female protagonists within the wilderness at moments of profound psychological crisis. Yet the direction of their journeys differs significantly. Atwood's narrator moves inward, descending through layers of memory until trauma resurfaces from beneath consciousness. Liv, by contrast, is compelled to remain relentlessly present. Survival leaves almost no space for introspection. Every decision concerns the immediate future: finding water, building shelter, treating wounds, and, above all, continuing to breathe. The North no longer invites immersion; it demands persistence.

The series opens with a violent rupture. A plane crash abruptly removes Liv from the structures that have defined her existence as a successful New York lawyer and places her within an environment where professional identity, social status, and rational planning lose much of their value. The wilderness strips away these certainties almost immediately. Hunger, injury, cold, dehydration, and exhaustion become the primary coordinates through which both body and landscape are experienced. The landscape quickly ceases to function as scenery. It becomes another participant in Liv's psychological transformation.

The rupture, however, begins even before the plane leaves the ground. Waiting in the airport, Liv insists that she "just [has] to get out of town for a couple of days," (Episode 1, *Arrivals*) while later admitting, in one of the series' revealing flashbacks, that "work is me" (Episode 2, *Fire and Water*). These seemingly ordinary statements define the identity she carries into the wilderness: professionally successful, emotionally self-contained, and convinced that work has become the only stable version of herself. The crash therefore does more than isolate her geographically. It functions almost as a second birth, violently severing Liv from the identity she has built around work, efficiency, and emotional control. Stripped of professional status, routine, and certainty, she is left with the only reality the wilderness recognizes: the vulnerable body struggling to remain alive.

Where *Surfacing* privileges interior monologue, *Keep Breathing* constructs trauma through the visual and acoustic language of hallucination. Flashbacks, imagined conversations, shifting soundscapes, and abrupt temporal dislocations repeatedly interrupt the present,

creating the recursive temporality described by Cathy Caruth, in which trauma returns belatedly and resists chronological narration (Caruth 1996). Liv does not consciously choose to revisit her past; it repeatedly intrudes upon the present whenever physical vulnerability weakens the psychological armour she has spent years constructing. Her own admission that she "had to work at it" in order to become emotionally detached, together with the recurring hallucination in which Sam tells her that "there's nobody coming for you because nobody cares about you," reveals how survival in the wilderness gradually dismantles the defensive narratives that once made ordinary life possible (Episode 2, *Fire and Water*). The hallucinations expose a history marked by abandonment, emotional neglect, and unresolved maternal relationships, demonstrating that the wilderness is far more than the backdrop against which memory resurfaces. It becomes the very condition that makes remembrance unavoidable. As dehydration, hunger, and exhaustion intensify, physical exposure generates emotional exposure, dissolving the boundaries between external landscape and internal consciousness. Landscape is no longer experienced as an objective geographical setting but as a lived, embodied space where memory acquires material presence and trauma is encountered not as recollection but as immediate experience. The possibility of healing is articulated most explicitly through the Hebrew concept of *mekhila*, described as learning to "dance with your past" (Episode 4, *Departures*) rather than attempting to erase it. Instead of promising closure, the series imagines recovery as an ongoing negotiation with memory, remarkably close to Caruth's understanding of trauma as something that cannot simply be overcome but must instead be continually reinhabited. The Hebrew concept of *mekhila* therefore shifts the emphasis from forgetting to coexistence.

Unlike *Surfacing*, where silence gradually absorbs language, *Keep Breathing* constructs its affective landscape through an ever-shifting soundscape of breathing, rushing water, wind, crackling branches, and remembered voices. Trauma is not only seen; it is heard. Sound repeatedly dissolves the boundary between present survival and remembered experience, allowing the wilderness to function as an acoustic as well as an emotional landscape. The North therefore speaks not through dialogue but through breath, silence, and the elemental rhythms of the environment itself. If Atwood privileges silence as the condition through which memory resurfaces, *Keep Breathing* transforms sound into the primary sensory register of survival.

The body occupies the centre of the narrative. Every movement across the landscape is registered through bleeding feet, injured limbs, shortness of breath, hunger, cold, and fatigue, repeatedly reminding viewers that survival is never abstract but fundamentally corporeal. If Atwood gradually shifts perception away from language toward embodied awareness, *Keep Breathing* begins with the body itself. Through cinematography that alternates between expansive aerial shots and intimate close-ups, the series constantly juxtaposes the immensity of the wilderness with the vulnerability of the individual body struggling to inhabit it. The wilderness is therefore experienced less as symbol than as physical condition.

Water assumes a similarly central role, yet its symbolic function differs subtly from that in *Surfacing*. Atwood's lake repeatedly draws the narrator downward, inviting immersion, memory, and confrontation with what has remained submerged. In *Keep Breathing*, rivers and rainfall emphasize movement rather than depth. Water becomes unpredictable, carrying danger as often as renewal, yet it also sustains life and repeatedly offers the possibility of continuation. The distinction is significant. While *Surfacing* associates survival with descent beneath the surface, *Keep Breathing* imagines survival as the capacity to remain in motion

despite overwhelming uncertainty. In *Surfacing*, diving becomes the necessary gesture through which memory can be recovered. Depth makes recognition possible. In *Keep Breathing*, however, floating repeatedly replaces diving. Survival no longer depends on returning beneath the surface but on remaining in motion despite uncertainty. The distinction is subtle but fundamental. One narrative imagines healing through immersion; the other through continuation.

Running parallel to the motif of breath is another image that quietly structures the entire series: the search for home. Introduced during Liv's childhood through the Girl Scout lesson - "If you're ever lost, this is how you'll find your way home" (Episode 5, *Awake and Dreaming)* - the idea gradually exceeds its literal meaning as the narrative unfolds. Throughout the wilderness journey, Liv repeatedly attempts to orient herself not only geographically but emotionally, reminding herself, "I can find my way home" (Episode 4, *Departures).* Home no longer names a place to which Liv hopes to return. It gradually becomes the self she has to recover, free from the abandonment that has shaped both her childhood and her adult relationships. Finding the way home therefore means finding a self no longer governed by fear.

The series therefore charts a gradual movement from identity to embodiment: from defining the self through work and control to rediscovering it through breath, memory, and the body itself.

The recurring motif of breath finally gathers all these strands into a single sensory experience. In the closing meditation sequence, Liv is invited to "feel the landscape moving through you," to recognize that she is "only your body" and "only your breath," before the repeated affirmation "You are home" brings the series to its emotional resolution (Episode 6, *You are Home*). The meditation deliberately reverses the expected relationship between body and environment. Liv is not asked to move through the landscape; she is invited to feel the landscape moving through her. The wilderness is therefore no longer external to the self but becomes part of the body's own perceptual experience. Survival is no longer conceived as mastery over nature but as the acceptance of belonging within it. Breath becomes more than a physiological necessity; it becomes the medium through which body, landscape, memory, and identity are finally reconciled. The sequence recalls Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, according to which perception emerges not from detached observation but from the lived body itself. The closing affirmation, "You are home" (Episode 6, *You are Home*), no longer refers to a geographical destination. Home has become an embodied state of being.

By the conclusion of the series, Liv has not conquered the wilderness any more than Atwood's narrator has mastered it. Both protagonists emerge profoundly altered, yet neither returns to the identities with which they entered wilderness. Liv's declaration - "I'm nothing like you... because I don't give up" (Episode 5, Awake and Dreaming) - offers perhaps the clearest expression of the series' philosophy of survival. Read alongside Atwood's assertion, "This above all, to refuse to be a victim" (Atwood 191), the two statements reveal remarkably similar ethical positions despite their different narrative trajectories. Rather than allowing trauma to determine their identities, both protagonists redefine survival as an active process of becoming. If Surfacing *imagines transformation through immersion,* Keep Breathing *imagines it through endurance.*

One narrative teaches its protagonist how to descend into memory; the other how to remain alive within it.

5. Comparative Cartographies of Survival: Wilderness, Memory, and Female Subjectivity

Placed in dialogue, *Surfacing* and *Keep Breathing* reveal that the Canadian North has remained remarkably stable as a cultural imaginary while continually transforming the ways in which survival is imagined. Separated by five decades and by different narrative media, the two works nevertheless construct remarkably similar affective cartographies of the North. Yet these cartographies are neither identical nor interchangeable. They organize trauma, survival, and subjectivity according to distinct spatial logics, reflecting changing understandings of both wilderness and the self.

In *Surfacing*, every movement north also becomes a movement inward. The wilderness repeatedly invites immersion, descent, and confrontation with what has remained hidden beneath consciousness. The lake becomes a repository of memory, while silence allows forgotten experiences gradually to emerge. Survival is therefore achieved not by escaping the landscape but by surrendering to it. The narrator's transformation depends upon her willingness to abandon inherited identities and descend into the psychological depths where trauma, ecological awareness, and embodied perception converge.

Yet the movement initiated in *Surfacing* does not end with the act of surfacing itself. The narrator's descent into memory is ultimately triggered by the disappearance of her father, whose absence gradually expands beyond the personal to become a search for memory, belonging, and alternative ways of inhabiting the land. *Keep Breathing* begins from a remarkably similar absence, although it is configured differently. Liv's journey is equally shaped by the emotional void left by an absent parent, yet the series repeatedly reframes this absence through another recurring image: the search for home. Rather than asking what lies beneath the surface, *Keep Breathing* continually asks how one finds one's way back to oneself. The movement therefore shifts from recovering what has been buried to rediscovering where - and who - home ultimately is.

Liv moves through an altogether different North: she is not invited to descend into memory; she is compelled to move forward despite physical exhaustion, emotional fragmentation, and environmental hostility. The Canadian wilderness confronts her with immediate bodily vulnerability, demanding adaptation instead of withdrawal. Rivers replace the stillness of Atwood's lake, while breathing itself becomes the organising metaphor of the series. If *Surfacing* repeatedly asks what must emerge from beneath the surface, *Keep Breathing* asks what allows the body to continue despite the weight of unresolved trauma.

The opposition between diving and breathing becomes the central metaphor through which the two narratives imagine survival. In Atwood's novel, diving represents a return - to memory, to the body, to ecological interconnectedness, and to forms of knowledge suppressed by modern rationality. Only by descending beneath the surface can the narrator begin to recover what has been lost. In *Keep Breathing*, however, survival depends less upon return than upon continuation. Breathing keeps the narrative oriented toward the future. Every breath becomes another refusal to surrender. The contrast becomes even more striking when viewed through the central metaphors that organise the two narratives. In *Surfacing*,

the governing movement is encapsulated by the very title: to surface is to recover memory, identity, and ecological consciousness by descending beneath appearances. In *Keep Breathing*, however, breathing is only part of a larger movement. The series repeatedly returns to the language of orientation and homecoming, suggesting that survival depends not only on continuing to breathe but on learning to find one's way home - to a body, a memory, and ultimately a self that can finally be inhabited. Where one narrative privileges immersion, the other privileges endurance.

For all these differences, both works fundamentally challenge traditional representations of the Canadian wilderness as a space awaiting conquest or mastery. Earlier national imaginaries frequently celebrated the North as a frontier through which masculine heroism, exploration, and territorial expansion could be performed. Atwood and *Keep Breathing* propose a markedly different relationship with wilderness. Their protagonists do not conquer the landscape, nor do they seek to dominate it. Instead, the wilderness gradually dismantles the identities they bring into it, exposing the fragility of cultural certainties while opening new forms of relationality grounded in vulnerability rather than control.

This transformation is inseparable from gender. In both narratives, female subjectivity is constructed not through mastery over nature but through embodied negotiation with it. The protagonists encounter wilderness not as passive observers but as vulnerable bodies whose perception is reshaped by cold, hunger, silence, pain, exhaustion, water, and isolation. The body becomes the place where wilderness is finally experienced. Identity is not recovered through intellectual reflection alone but through corporeal engagement with an environment that continually exceeds human control.

Both narratives also suggest how trauma resists chronological narration and instead unfolds spatially. Memories are not simply recalled; they are encountered within specific environments that reactivate bodily experience. The Canadian North becomes a mnemonic landscape where time folds back upon itself, allowing past and present to coexist within the same physical space. Wilderness therefore functions not only as geographical setting but also as temporal architecture, organizing the protagonists' movement through memory as much as through landscape.

The two works also differ in the ways they ask us to experience the North. *Surfacing* relies on interior monologue and linguistic ambiguity to represent the slow disintegration of consciousness, inviting readers to inhabit the narrator's fragmented perception from within. *Keep Breathing*, by contrast, externalizes trauma through the visual language of contemporary television. Hallucinations, disrupted soundscapes, shifting perspectives, and the rhythm of editing transform psychological fragmentation into audiovisual experience. Despite these formal differences, both narratives ultimately produce remarkably similar affective engagements with wilderness, demonstrating that the Canadian North continues to function as a powerful cultural space through which embodiment, memory, and identity are negotiated.

Finally, the Canadian North that emerges from these two narratives is no longer the distant frontier celebrated by earlier national mythologies. It becomes an affective geography where landscape is remembered as much as it is inhabited, where the body becomes the measure of space, and where survival is defined not by conquest but by transformation. Brought together, the two narratives therefore organise the Canadian North around two complementary verbs. Surfacing *imagines healing as the difficult act of surfacing from the*

depths of memory, while Keep Breathing *imagines it as the gradual rediscovery of home through breath, movement, and embodied resilience. One narrative asks how we recover what has been submerged; the other how we continue once it has been found. The North is no longer simply a destination. It becomes the place where memory resurfaces, where home is reimagined, and where survival is measured not by conquest but by the difficult work of becoming.*

6. Intermedial Landscapes: Representing Wilderness Across Literary and Visual Media

The Canadian North changes not only across historical moments but also across media. Although both narratives construct the Canadian North as an affective geography where memory, embodiment, and trauma intersect, each medium invites us to experience that geography differently. In Atwood's novel, wilderness unfolds from within consciousness. The reader encounters the North through the narrator's fragmented perceptions, hesitations, and shifting memories, making landscape inseparable from interiority. The novel rarely offers objective descriptions of place. Forests, lakes, and abandoned settlements are filtered through an unstable consciousness in which observation and recollection continually overlap. The Canadian North gradually becomes less a visible environment than a psychological one, constructed through rhythm, silence, repetition, and the gradual erosion of narrative certainty. Language gradually begins to imitate this instability. As the narrator moves deeper into the wilderness, sentences become increasingly associative, distinctions between present and past begin to dissolve, and perception replaces explanation. The landscape is therefore not simply described; it is written from within.

Keep Breathing experiences the same wilderness through an altogether different sensory register. Words give way to images, sound, rhythm, and the expressive capacity of the body. Expansive aerial shots repeatedly emphasize the overwhelming scale of the Canadian landscape, while intimate close-ups register the physical consequences of survival through trembling hands, bruised skin, exhausted breathing, and facial expression. Sound assumes an equally important narrative function. Moments of near silence alternate with intensified breathing, rushing water, and fragmented voices emerging through hallucination, allowing viewers to experience trauma not only as memory but also as an acoustic environment. The wilderness is heard as much as it is seen. This multisensory experience culminates in the closing meditation sequence, where viewers are invited to "feel the landscape moving through you" (Episode 6, *You are Home).* Rather than representing wilderness as an external environment, the series imagines it as something that enters perception through breath, movement, and bodily awareness. Image, sound, and embodiment therefore converge to transform landscape into lived experience.

The two media therefore ask us to inhabit wilderness differently. The novel encourages readers to inhabit the narrator's consciousness gradually, inviting interpretation through language and symbolic association. The series, by contrast, confronts viewers with the immediacy of embodied survival. Trauma is not only narrated but performed. Hallucinations play a crucial role in this process. Rather than functioning simply as flashbacks, they blur the distinction between memory and perception, allowing viewers to experience trauma visually and acoustically rather than merely understand it intellectually. Environmental exposure becomes visible through the body itself, while cinematic techniques transform

physical vulnerability into an affective experience shared by the audience. Rather than replacing literary interiority, audiovisual storytelling externalizes it, translating psychological processes into images, sounds, rhythm, and movement.

Water perhaps reveals this intermedial difference most clearly. In *Surfacing*, the lake functions primarily as a symbolic and phenomenological space whose meanings unfold through reflection, memory, and immersion. Its stillness allows hidden layers of consciousness gradually to emerge, making descent synonymous with psychological excavation. In *Keep Breathing*, rivers, waterfalls, and rainfall acquire a more kinetic quality. Water is constantly moving, threatening, carrying, obstructing, or sustaining life. While Atwood's lake repeatedly invites contemplation and return, the series privileges movement, urgency, and adaptation. The symbolism remains remarkably similar, yet each medium asks water to perform a different narrative task.

For all their formal differences, both narratives ultimately construct remarkably similar affective relationships between body and landscape. Neither medium presents wilderness as a neutral setting or picturesque background. Instead, landscape functions as an active participant in narrative meaning, continually reshaping perception, memory, and identity. Whether articulated through language or through moving images, the Canadian North remains inseparable from embodied experience.

This intermedial dialogue also demonstrates the remarkable adaptability of northern imaginaries within contemporary Canadian culture. Atwood's novel and *Keep Breathing* belong to different historical moments, address different audiences, and employ different narrative conventions, yet both retain the capacity to transform geography into affective experience. The North continues to operate as a cultural space where psychological fragmentation, ecological awareness, and female subjectivity converge, even as the narrative technologies through which these experiences are represented evolve.

Neither medium ultimately proves more capable of representing the Canadian North. Each simply reveals dimensions that remain less visible in the other. Surfacing *invites readers to inhabit wilderness from within consciousness, while* Keep Breathing *renders that same wilderness tangible through image, sound, rhythm, and the vulnerable body. Together, they demonstrate that the North is never experienced through geography alone. It is encountered through language, through the senses, and through the body that moves across it.*

If geography remains constant, perception does not. Literature and audiovisual storytelling do not simply represent the Canadian North differently; they ask us to inhabit it differently. One unfolds wilderness through language and consciousness, the other through image, sound, rhythm, and the breathing body. Together, they reveal that the North is never experienced through geography alone but through the sensory and affective forms that each medium makes possible.

7. Settler Landscapes: Indigenous Absence and the Limits of Northern Imaginaries

The affective cartographies traced throughout these narratives also reveal one important absence. Although *Surfacing* and *Keep Breathing* challenge many of the traditional assumptions associated with wilderness - particularly those centred on conquest, mastery, and masculine heroism - they nevertheless remain narratives largely constructed from settler perspectives. Their protagonists encounter the Canadian North primarily as a space of

personal transformation, psychological recovery, and ecological awareness, while the histories and epistemologies of the Indigenous peoples for whom these territories have long constituted lived homelands remain largely absent or only indirectly acknowledged.

This absence matters because it exposes one of the enduring paradoxes of Canadian representations of the North. As Sherrill Grace observes, the North has never been merely a geographical region but a powerful cultural idea continually reimagined through national mythologies, literary narratives, and political discourse (Grace 2002). Yet many of these imaginaries have historically privileged the perspective of the settler subject, presenting wilderness as remote, empty, or awaiting discovery. In doing so, they often overlook the fact that these landscapes have long been inhabited, interpreted, and cared for through Indigenous systems of knowledge that understand land not as territory to be possessed but as a network of reciprocal relationships.

To be fair, neither *Surfacing* nor *Keep Breathing* reproduces the rhetoric of heroic conquest that characterized earlier northern narratives. On the contrary, both works undermine fantasies of mastery by foregrounding vulnerability, dependence, and embodied exposure. Wilderness repeatedly resists human control, forcing both protagonists to abandon the illusion that survival can be achieved through domination alone. In this respect, the two narratives move away from colonial models of exploration toward more relational understandings of landscape. Yet the North remains primarily a catalyst for individual psychological transformation rather than a culturally inhabited space shaped by Indigenous histories and ongoing relationships to the land.

This limitation becomes particularly visible when viewed alongside Indigenous scholarship that emphasizes relationality as the foundation of land-based knowledge. Writers such as Leanne Betasamosake Simpson argue that land cannot be reduced to physical environment or symbolic backdrop because it constitutes a living network of reciprocal responsibilities, memory, and community. Seen from this lens, wilderness is never empty, silent, or available for individual self-discovery; it is already inhabited through complex cultural, historical, and ethical relationships that exceed the experience of any single subject.

Acknowledging this absence does not diminish the ecological or feminist insights offered by either *Surfacing* or *Keep Breathing*. Rather, it situates them within the broader history of settler imaginaries through which the Canadian North has frequently been represented. The affective cartographies traced by the two protagonists remain compelling precisely because they illuminate how landscape shapes memory, embodiment, and trauma. Yet they also reveal the limits of a perspective centred primarily on individual experience. The North that emerges from these narratives is undeniably affective, yet it remains only one among many possible Norths. Other cartographies - grounded in Indigenous epistemologies, collective memory, and long-standing relationships to place - remain beyond the scope of these works.

This is perhaps where the conversation should continue. Bringing settler narratives such as *Surfacing* and *Keep Breathing* into dialogue with Indigenous literary and audiovisual representations of the North would not simply diversify the corpus; it would fundamentally expand the very notion of affective cartography proposed in this article. The Canadian North has never been inhabited through a single imagination. Its meanings continue to emerge through multiple memories, multiple histories, and multiple ways of belonging to the land.

8. Conclusion: Reimagining the North as Affective Geography

Read side by side, *Surfacing* and *Keep Breathing* invite a different way of imagining the Canadian North. No longer conceived primarily as a geographical frontier or a symbol of national identity, the North emerges instead as an affective cartography continuously produced through memory, embodiment, trauma, and sensory perception. Wilderness ceases to function as the passive setting of psychological transformation; it becomes one of its very conditions.

Reading a canonical Canadian novel alongside a contemporary streaming series also shifts the terms of comparison. What ultimately connects these works is not simply their shared concern with wilderness or female survival, but their understanding of landscape as lived experience. Space is not merely crossed but inhabited, remembered, and embodied. The North acquires meaning not because of its remoteness but because it continually reshapes the relationship between body, memory, and place.

The comparison also reveals that the two narratives organise survival around different yet complementary movements. *Surfacing* imagines healing through the difficult act of surfacing: descending beneath appearances in order to recover memory, ecological awareness, and a fractured self. *Keep Breathing*, by contrast, imagines healing as the gradual rediscovery of home. If Atwood's protagonist must learn to surface, Liv must learn to find her way home - not simply to a place, but to herself. One narrative teaches its protagonist how to descend into memory; the other how to remain alive within it. Together, they propose two philosophies of survival that redefine the Canadian wilderness as a space of becoming rather than conquest.

These differences also reveal the remarkable adaptability of northern imaginaries. Although separated by fifty years and mediated through different narrative forms, both works demonstrate that the meanings of wilderness continue to evolve. The North is no longer imagined as an empty frontier awaiting exploration but as a lived environment where ecological awareness, embodied perception, and traumatic memory intersect. In this sense, affective cartographies do not replace earlier understandings of the Canadian North; they uncover dimensions that remain invisible when landscape is approached solely through political, geographical, or national frameworks.

At the same time, both narratives remain situated largely within settler imaginaries and foreground individual psychological transformation more than Indigenous relationships to land. Recognising this limitation does not diminish their significance; rather, it points towards an important direction for future research. Bringing settler and Indigenous narratives into dialogue would not only diversify the corpus but also expand the very notion of affective cartography proposed here, revealing the plurality of epistemologies through which the Canadian North continues to be imagined and inhabited.

Ultimately, the Canadian North that emerges from these narratives is neither simply a place nor merely an idea. It is a way of experiencing the world. Geography becomes memory, perception becomes embodiment, and survival becomes inseparable from the landscapes through which it is lived. Atwood's imperative to "refuse to be a victim" (Atwood 191) finds an unexpected echo in Liv's determination to keep breathing and, finally, to recognise that "you are home" (Episode 6, *You are home*). Read together, *Surfacing* and *Keep Breathing*

suggest that the North is never encountered only on the map. It is encountered in the body, in memory, and in the difficult work of becoming.

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