

Slow Violence Fast-Forwarded: Inuit Knowledge and Climate Change

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With his concept of “slow violence,” Rob Nixon has accurately described the delayed effects of transnational environmental injustices, which mainly affect marginalized people and ecosystems.¹ Nixon clearly highlights the utter failure of those not directly affected by the ongoing affliction to acknowledge these injustices because they are not accompanied by conventional spectacles of violence. However, while very insightful, Nixon’s work fails to address the calamities of the current climate crisis in the Arctic, which can no longer be denied; nor can the plight of the Inuit people, who are the victims of this “slow violence,” continue to be ignored.

Given that “slow violence” is more or less invisible and that it is impossible to understand issues and ideas that cannot be imagined, it is palpable that the most significant predicament of slow violence lies in the inopportune fact that it may not be acknowledged at all, or may not be recognized as violence, *per se*.

While slow violence has claimed, and continues to claim many lives and traditional ways of living, the fact that it wreaks havoc unnoticed causes many people and policymakers whose lives have not been directly affected by it to consider it nonexistent or harmless at worst, or regard it as something that could have a negative impact in the distant future, at best. This apparently universal inability to acknowledge the countless human and ecological casualties of slow violence clearly illustrates the degree of its

underrepresentation in crisis management and human memory alike.

Aldo Leopold once accurately asserted that we can only be ethical towards the things we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in.² His words emphasize the utter importance of exposing the ongoing injustices of slow violence in a way that not only describes their effects in detail but also – and more importantly – enhances public awareness thereof.

Qapirangajuq: Inuit Knowledge and Climate Change (QIKCC),³ the world’s first Inuktitut documentary on climate change, by Zacharias Kunuk and Ian Mauro, effectively realizes both of these objectives by means of vividly conveying the manifold ways the shared, traditional lifestyle of several Inuit communities has been harmed by the dire consequences of the ongoing climate crisis.

The film makes it possible for viewers all over the world to imaginatively set foot on Nunavut land and learn about storied Inuit knowledge of the past and present – knowledge that ultimately enables the global audience to intellectually and emotionally follow the indigenous inhabitants of Nunavut as they juxtapose their collective storied knowledge and traditional lifestyle with the harsh reality of the warming Arctic. By matter-of-factly juxtaposing stories and images of their traditional lifestyle of the past with that of the present, the Inuit of Nunavut succeed at ascribing place, time and humanity to the awful, albeit unnoticed violence. Consequently, as the

documentary not only makes the unseen come into clear view, but also brings humanity into the equation, it can be seen as a direct answer to Rob Nixon's recurring question of how one can effectively turn the catastrophic calamities of slow violence into stories powerful enough to stimulate public sentiment and assure political action.

Hence, the documentary *QIKCC* has made a significant contribution to the humanization of issues concerning Arctic climate change, which – until quite recently – was falsely perceived as a faceless form of global environmental change, devoid of personal testimonies and human imagery.

Instead of following the common, albeit partial path of scientific knowledge – which usually favors documented data over personal experience – the joint work of Kunuk and Mauro acts as an authentic medium for the Inuit to clearly communicate their climate-related cultural concerns to viewers all over the world, by asking those who must directly face the fact that their traditional way of life and belonging are endangered, to speak for themselves, rather than attempting to speak for them.

By listening to the Arctic residents' firsthand accounts regarding their intricate relationship to – and understanding of – their environment and wildlife, viewers will ultimately infer that the Inuit elders are experts of their collective environment, despite the fact that their estimations occasionally clash with widespread scientific assumptions.⁴ Moreover, the respective testimonies of climate crisis-induced cultural destitution will indisputably establish that both the indigenous senses of self and significance of the Inuit people are endangered because the in-

tricate interconnection between place, identity and connotation has been disrupted.

Recent scientific findings, such as those presented in the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA) in 2004, provide evidence that the reality of climate change has already manifested itself in the Arctic region. After five years of analysis that involved an international team of more than 300 hundred scientists and experts

in addition to numerous knowledgeable members of the indigenous communities, the synthesis volume – created for policymakers and laypeople – states that:

- Annual average Arctic temperature has increased at almost *twice the rate* as that of the rest of the world over the past few decades, with some variation across the region.

- Additional evidence of Arctic warming comes from widespread melting of glaciers and sea ice, and a shortening of the snow season.

- Increasing global concentrations of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases due to human activities, primarily fossil fuel burning, are projected to contribute to additional Arctic warming of about 4-7°C over the next 100 years.

- Increasing precipitation, shorter and warmer winters, and substantial decreases in snow cover and ice cover are among the projected changes that are very likely to persist for centuries.

While the ACIA's recent findings are, without a doubt, extremely significant, the effects of toxic chemicals are equally important. In her former roles as the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC) President of Canada and Vice-President

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of the pan-Arctic ICC, Inuit elder and activist Sheila Watt-Cloutier played a major role in the implementation of the *Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants*, which was sponsored by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and addressed the effects of toxic carbon-based contaminants – commonly called POPs – that are emitted as a result of industrial activities. These toxic chemicals travel to the Arctic region by means of air, wind and water currents, where they are trapped due to the cold temperatures of the Arctic. Precisely these facts – along with the attestations of the indigenous elders of *QIKCC*, Sheila Watt-Cloutier among them – not only verify that “the latest wave of southern oppression and interference in Arctic indigenous lands and ways of life,”⁵⁵ namely slow violence, is occurring but also – and more importantly – that this violence is occurring at a relatively fast pace.

In stark contrast to the European American sense of self, which celebrates individuality and believes itself to exist independently from its environment, the indigenous sense of self is closely connected to the landscape, people and stories of its respective culture. Hence, the indigenous sense of self can only thrive and survive when it is embedded within the intricately woven web of multifaceted landscapes that subsist within the natural and cultural realm and stories thereof. Given that the indigenous sense of self is linked to the land, it follows that a disruption of this connection will inflict intense injuries upon both the individual as well as the collective indigenous identity.

According to both recent scientific findings and the accounts of the Inuit elders in the documentary, the complex connection between the Inuit people and their land is already undergo-

ing calamitous changes. These dire changes are occurring twofold within the region of Nunavut. On the one hand, the Inuit of Nunavut are at risk of losing their land to erosion caused by the thawing of permafrost, while on the other hand the food they are consuming is being contaminated by northbound persistent organic pollutants.

In the documentary *QIKCC*, elders from various Nunavut communities voice their experience in regard to these twofold environmental threats. Accordingly, Pangnirtung elders Ron Mongeau, Steven Kunilusee, and Pangnirtung Mayor and elder Mosesie Qappik share an alarming Arctic experience with viewers, when they relate the “unprecedented event” of the flooding of the Duvall river, which caused two bridges to be washed away and parts of the riverbank to collapse on June 8, 2008, and made local inhabitants fear for their land and livelihood. Moreover, Pangnirtung

elder Livie Kullualik and Igloodik elder Paul Quassa voice their concerns regarding the contamination of their food, yet maintain that they “can’t just stop eating it,” as doing so would be contrary to their traditional lifestyle.

In the course of time, both the contamination of their food and the erosion of their land will undoubtedly lead to what Rob Nixon has termed “displacement without moving,” which occurs when one’s native place loses its life-sustaining attributes. Taking into consideration that place is utterly important to cultural identity, it is obvious that a disruption of this intricate alliance will cause problems within individual and collective notions of self.

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is brought about by the reality that one is no longer in one's native place, or home. In due course, the physical or cultural displacement of the Inuit is likely to result in a collective experience of exile that frequently results in the fragmentation of one's sense of self, due to the fact that one has been detached from one's cultural origin.

Like many other subsistence cultures, whose traditional way of life clashes with that of conventional modern society, the Inuit of Nunavut have – time and again – been devalued as a primitive population that exists at the margins of modern society and is therefore disregarded as being nothing more than an aggravating eyesore at the edge of the age of advancement. This depreciation is a horrid societal symptom of the Anthropocene age.

While it is an unquestionably problematic – if not an utterly xenophobic stance – indigenous people, such as the Inuit are often regarded as being part of nature⁶ by the fast-paced modern world, in stark contrast to the vigorously participating people of the Anthropocene, who ignorantly consider themselves to be entirely disconnected from – and independent of – their respective environment, a consideration that leads them to imprudently believe in the exclusive importance of their ever over-consuming, destructive lifestyles.

It is precisely this appalling, albeit enduring and prevalent perception that has paved the way for human beings to be disregarded and deemed dispensable. Like other marginalized people, the Inuit of Nunavut have been “discounted [by industrialized society]: discounted as long-term casualties of [...] ‘slow violence’, and discounted as cultures possessing environmental practices and concerns of their own,”⁷ which in turn has made the calamitous climate crisis that is currently threatening the traditional lifestyle of the Nunavut-based Inuit possible.

It is indisputable that industrial activities of modern-day humans, such as the burning of fossil fuel and dispersing of toxic carbon-based contaminants – which initially become trapped in the cold Arctic air, yet ultimately end up within the bodies of Arctic animals and those who

depend on them for subsistence – are destroying the land and lifestyle of the Inuit people. It is furthermore an unquestionable fact that the indigenous sense of both self and significance is deeply embedded within the land and its resources. These facts confirm the growing conviction⁸ that

current environmental practices are a contemporary form of cultural genocide; not only are people becoming ill from exposure to polluting chemicals but the contamination [and erosion] of land and [and melting of the Arctic ice] [...] [are] also harming traditional [subsistence] practices [...] that are central to their [...] Native [culture].⁹

In view of the fact that the contemporary environmental practices of the global world are resulting in the cultural genocide of the Inuit of Nunavut and various other indigenous populations, these practices – or more fittingly malpractices – must be seen as immediate infringements of human rights.

In the film *QIKCC*, Inuit elder and activist Sheila Watt-Cloutier speaks about these practices and the effects thereof, practices which led her and other Inuit to file an appeal with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in December 2005, which claims that the climate policy of the United States is violating fundamental human rights of the Inuit.¹⁰

A juxtaposition of the diverse environmentally triggered sociocultural impediments and the essential human rights which are outlined within the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man, a regional human rights document,¹¹ verifies that the appeal of the Inuit is undoubtedly justified. What is more, the appeal is utterly imperative, as the Inuit are being incessantly contaminated by northbound persistent organic pollutants, which they consume through their traditional hunting diet, in addition to the dire fact that the very land on which they live and in which their culture is embedded is literally crumbling beneath them.

It is indisputable that these atrocious aspects not only make the traditional means of existence and subsistence exceptionally difficult for the

Inuit, but also – and more importantly – deprive them of manifold essential human rights, such as

their right to enjoy the benefits of their culture, the right to use and enjoy lands they have traditionally occupied, their right to use and enjoy their personal property, the right to the preservation of health, the right to life, physical integrity and security, the right to their own means of subsistence, and their rights to residence and movement and inviolability of the home.¹²

By exposing the devastating impacts that contemporary civilization's oppressive actions have had on indigenous cultures who attempt to preserve and live according to their traditional lifestyles – the Inuit of Nunavut among them – the documentary establishes that the ongoing environmental procedures of the globalized world pose a direct threat to the life and lifestyle of the Inuit of Nunavut, in addition to violating many of their essential human rights, which may ultimately lead to their cultural obliteration.

Although the consequences of the current climate circumstances are certainly calamitous, the fact that the Inuit elders of Nunavut are able to articulate their own individual and collective experience of the ongoing climate crisis within the scope of Kunuk's and Mauro's documentary grants them the power to draw attention to the climate-related atrocities that are putting their traditional way of life at risk, and consequently violating their fundamental human rights.

Coming from various communities within the Nunavut region, the elders voice their environmental encounters in several Inuktitut dialects. This must be seen as a noteworthy sense of empowerment, as they are speaking for themselves twofold, namely as an indigenous people addressing both an indigenous and a global audience, as well as an indigenous people asserting their right to speak for themselves. With the exception of Pangnirtung elder Ron Mongeau, who shares his experience in English, the entire documentary is in Inuktitut with English subtitles.

Consequently, instead of merely being the objects of scientific studies, the Inuit of Nunavut have succeeded at becoming representatives and spokespeople of the ongoing climate crisis within which they exist. By means of sharing their environmental knowledge and first-hand experiences of the afflicted Arctic environment with the documentary's international audience, the Inuit elders are able to win the attention of the general public and therefore actively fight against what Alberto Saldamando, General Counsel of the International Indian Treaty Council, refers to as the seemingly never-ending "racial discrimination and cultural denigration," which seems to be "engraved in the mentality of mainstream people and continues to perpetuate the rationale for racial discrimination against indigenous peoples."¹³

In other words, by weaving accounts of their horrible environmental experiences – that have been brought about by the incessant ignorance of dominant others – into the continuous fabric of their own storied culture, modern native media – like the documentary *QIKCC* – act as a medium of cultural recovery that confers those afflicted with a sense of cultural empowerment.

Despite the fact that the indigenous documentary *QIKCC* can neither turn back the clock of time nor mend the damage that has started to occur within the realms of the traditional lifestyle and inhabited space of the Inuit of Nunavut, the individual, indigenous accounts of the elders participating in the documentary operate as a vehicle to convey the human aspect of climate change in the Arctic. By providing the appalling, albeit ongoing tragic story of Arctic climate change with human protagonists and their narratives, Kunuk and Mauro's documentary succeeds at "[giving] imaginative definition [and human perspective] to the issues at stake while enhancing the public visibility of the cause."¹⁴ As a result, the film opens the eyes of the global audience and paves the way for manifold divergent discourses that – however turbulent they may be – will call attention to the indigenous understanding of and affliction with the consequences of Arctic climate change, as one noteworthy, albeit previously disregarded

discourse that must immediately be included within the scope of the demanding dialogues concerning the divergent human facets of the ongoing Arctic climate crisis. •

References

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4. Whereas the scientific community considers polar bears to be an endangered species that must be tagged and studied, the Inuit in the film are convinced that precisely these scientific studies are the only phenomena harming the thriving bears, as they inhibit their natural senses as well as their ability to hunt.
5. Martello, Marybeth L. "Arctic Indigenous Peoples as Representations and Representatives of Climate Change" *Social Studies of Science* 38.3 (2008): 351-376. *JSTOR*. Web. 01 Feb. 2014. Quote from p. 366.
6. While their understanding of and deep connection to the natural world undoubtedly mirrors their interconnectedness to the ecosystem – or biocentric worldview – indigenous people should not merely be associated with nature, as this correlation echoes the old, one-sided opposing hierarchical-binary system nature versus culture, within which modern civilization equals culture and traditional societies equal nature. To simply associate indigenous societies with nature is to metaphorically rob them of their culture and humanity.
7. Nixon, 2011. P. 2.
8. See Alberto Saldamando's statement in the Politics: Testimonies section of Adamson and Evans, and Stein's *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics & Pedagogy* for more information on the mutual opinion of indigenous people and United Nations experts

concerning the devaluation of indigenous peoples and their lands and lifestyles.

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10. For more information see Hari M. Osofsky's "The Inuit Petition as a Bridge? Beyond Dialectics of Climate Change and Indigenous Peoples' Rights."
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14. Nixon, 2011, p 6.

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