

**Los climas de la memoria y del olvido:
Un informe sobre el cambio climático, el capitalismo y los derechos humanos en las
comunidades indígenas más norteñas de las Américas**

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Resumen:

Esta ponencia se trata de la intersección de la memoria y el espacio en el contexto de los derechos humanos, basándose en una reflexión sobre mis investigaciones in situ del pueblo indígena más norteña del mundo, los Inuit del Ártico canadiense. Los Inuit han vivido miles de años en uno de los entornos naturales más implacables de la planeta gracias a su tradición oral. En este contexto la trasmisión de la memoria social funciona como agente de supervivencia. Para los Inuit el tiempo y el espacio tienen una relación sincrónica, y la memoria funciona como forma de percepción encarnada e inseparable de las prácticas tradicionales de subsistencia (la caza y la pesca como modo de producción). De esta manera una percepción activa del medio ambiente constituye un acto de memoria.

Recientemente las comunidades Inuit llegaron a ser sitios de la hiper-modernización, donde el cambio cultural, social y política se está ocurriendo con una velocidad no conocida en ningún otro parte del mundo. Y al mismo tiempo los cambios climáticos también ocurren de manera más extrema de la planeta. Con el cambio del medio ambiente viene el cambio de las condiciones para la supervivencia. Fue en este contexto que, el 7 de diciembre de 2005, los Inuit presentaron una petición a la Comisión Inter-Americana de los Derechos Humanos, con la perspectiva de que el cambio climático es una violación de los derechos humanos: “Seeking relief from violations of the human rights of Inuit peoples resulting from global warming caused by greenhouse gas emissions from the United States of America.”

Como resultado de las emisiones de carbono producidas por el mundo industrializado, los sitios y prácticas de memoria – por los cuales se trasmite conocimiento de la cultura y del entorno natural (técnicas complejas de caza y de navegación, por ejemplo) – se desintegran, se vuelven más inexactos y amenazan la aculturación del pueblo Inuit.

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Introduction: Perspective

“J’estime mieux que autrement, que c’est la terre
que Dieu donna à Cayn.”

— Jacques Cartier, French explorer (1534)

“The arctic has secured its place as the world’s
climate change barometer, and we Inuit are the
mercury in that barometer. Our hunters are the
sentinels of climate change for the rest of the plant.”

— Sheila Watt-Cloutier, Inuit activist (2007)

Today I would like to speak to you about the intersection between memory and space in the context of human rights by drawing our attention to one of the most remote regions on the planet and the people who have inhabited it since time immemorial. Twelve years ago I made my first trip to the Canadian Arctic where I studied the language of the Inuit, observed and participated in many traditional and non-traditional activities. In addition I carried out interviews with elders, hunters, carvers and government workers. I returned 5 years later in 2004, and again in 2005 to continue the research that I had begun earlier, which I came to see had barely scratched the surface of the larger issues that I began to recognize were at the basis for my earlier investigations. Since the last installment of my fieldwork, I have observed the arctic from what you would refer to as the “North” (Canada) but what the Inuit refer to as the “South.” From these relatively lower latitudes of Canada, I have followed the social and political changes in the region by means of Inuit-run newspapers, books as well as other publications and, by staying in touch with the people I had originally met in 1999 – occasionally meeting them when they travel south to the mainland of the Americas. (For example, just a few months ago I met one elder, who I believe is now the oldest member of the community, Elisapee Ishulutaq and her daughter in Toronto at the Art Gallery of Ontario for a conference called “Inuit Modern” which accompanied a new exhibition of works by Inuit artists. This conference was the first of its kind, bringing together Inuit artists from the arctic regions of Canada to discuss their work with one another. The nature and identity of Inuit art became one of the central problematics under discussion.)

My work in the arctic is a series of studies of the tensions between “The North” and “The South” in the context of the arctic region and its indigenous peoples, the place where the distinction –what could be called the “traditional” distinction of the South (i.e. the European and subsequent settler traditions in the Americas)—between these two

topological poles is turned topsy-turvy in an upside down world. [See Arctic-Centric Map]

In order to explain the way in which climate change constitutes a violation of human rights for the Inuit in the Canadian Arctic, a tripartite explanation is necessary. To this end, I have broken down this presentation into three sections that give cultural, historical and linguistic context to our discussion: 1) Inuit and Land Use: Tradition in an Age of Hypermodernization; 2) Inuit and Space: Practices of Memory; and 3) Climate Change and Human Rights. I will then conclude this paper by gesturing toward what I consider to be a few significant discussion points.

1) Inuit and Land Use: Tradition in an Age of Hypermodernization

A consideration of the relationship between Inuit and the land should perhaps begin with a consideration of terms. In Inuktitut, the language the Inuit, the word *Inuit* means “the people.” *Nuna* means the land, hence the meaning of the northern territory of Nunavut – literally “our land”—which covers the entirety of the eastern and central parts of the most northern regions of Canada.

Memory connects Inuit to their ancestors through space, place and use of the land. Today, decades after Inuit were forced off the land and into settlements by the Canadian Governments’ use of economic pressure and old-fashioned force, Inuit continue their traditions of hunting and gathering. Setting off from their settlement communities (as opposed to moving in nomadic patterns across the land, largely in accordance with the migrations of herds and other forms of seasonal variation) Inuit continue to practice their traditional form of subsistence economy by gathering berries and herbs from the land and hunting animals such as caribou, seal and walrus.

How is it possible for Inuit to continue to live a traditional lifestyle in the midst of modernization, that is, while living in houses and in presence of satellite television, gaming consoles and the internet? Clearly the key term in question is “tradition,” so we should begin by asking what is meant by “tradition” or “traditional lifestyle” in the context of indigenous peoples. The term “traditional” has indeed become a problematic term, particularly when the term is deployed by people who are outside the cultures and activities to which they are applying the term. For my purposes today I would follow the work of Peter Kulchyski (2006) and suggest that the term be understood in a material-cultural sense, that is to say, in the sense to which it relates to forms of production and consumption within a culture or, more specifically, a community. Such perspective would then focus on the economic practices of a people. In this way, the use of snowmobiles and motorized boats for traveling across the land while hunting helps Inuit to engage in “traditional” subsistence economy which has been the material productive and reproductive force for Inuit since time immemorial. In this way, one can understand how modern technology can be appropriated and put to traditional uses.

The continuation of these material, economic practices further impacts on the question of experience and the acquisition, possession and transmission of knowledge within a given culture. At this point, however, I would like to emphasize that, within the context of this paper, the terms “tradition” and “traditional” are used in their more limited senses insofar as they refer to an economic mode of activity central to any form of culture.

Inuktitut is a language which is constituted in and through an incredible vocabulary of increasingly exacting spatial words and expressions, the likes of which are completely unknown in Occidental languages. But a crisis of knowledge and memory are occurring today. Grandparents have traditionally played a primary role in the education of their young grandchildren. Today the last generation of Inuit to have grown up living “on the land” in the way their ancestors did before them are elderly—indeed, they are the oldest members of the communities—and they speak only Inuktitut; at the same time, their grandchildren, the first generation to grow up with satellite television and the internet, speak only English. Hence there exists a contradiction in the context the transmission of history, culture and values (each of which resists a simple definition) from one generation to another.

2) Inuit and Space: Memory

Once called “Eskimos” by outsiders, Inuit have lived for millennia in one of the most unforgiving environments on the planet by relying on an oral tradition of practical, environmental knowledge in which the transmission of social memory acts as an agent of survival. Because space and time have a synchronic relation for Inuit, memory functions as a form of embodied perception within the spatial register of a living landscape that is at once pregnant with the material past and inseparable from traditional practices of subsistence (i.e. gathering and hunting as modes of production). In this way, an active and engaged perception of the environment forms an act of remembrance.

In the context of the arctic and Inuit culture, it is important to note that ‘the land’ does not signify only stable portions of earth as it does for most people living in the south, but also includes water and ice. Thus, following the “Circumpolar Inuit Declaration on Arctic Sovereignty” (put forward in April 2009 on behalf of Inuit in Canada, Greenland, Alaska and Chukotka), the *Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami*, an organization which acts as “the national voice” of Inuit living throughout the Canadian Arctic, adopted the expression “*Inuit Nunangat*,” which includes land water and ice, to refer to their homeland.

Conducting fieldwork among Inuit of Greenland Mark Nuttall has observed that “what is noticeable about the stories people told me about these areas...is how space and time become synchronized” (Nuttall, 2001: 63). Earlier Nuttall had made a significant conceptual contribution to our understanding of the relationship between spatial practices and memory by introducing the idea of landscape understood as an enduring form of what he calls a “memoryscape.” “A memoryscape,” he writes, “is constructed by

people's mental images of the environment, which a particular emphasis on locations as remembered places. When one relates to the landscape as a memoryscape it becomes alive, meaningful, and personal and embeds person, place and activities in the rivers of history [...] Memoryscape is often felt rather than verbalized" (Nuttall, 1992: 39). "Through the interplay of experience, memory and imagination the landscape becomes, the physical expression of community, giving a sense of locality and cultural continuity" (Nuttall, 1992: 59).

More recently, Béatrice Collingnon's work (2006) has also suggested that, for Inuit, place names are primarily used as territorial points or spatial signifiers through which history is anchored in the land. Murielle Nagy's work seems to echo these observations when she writes that, "in Inuit culture in general, narratives about places are numerous and history is intimately linked to toponymy" (Nagy, 2006: 76). Nagy's work suggests that, "the use of the narrative present also indicates that telling a story means to reenact particular experiences and to perform it" (Nagy, 2006: 75). When narrating stories, she found that Inuit of both genders, "talked about the past, they did not seem to go back into time but rather into places where events happened, and...once they mentioned a specific place, Inuvialuit women would then add information about chronology through information related to the birth or the age of their children. The use of numerous locative suffixes (which were largely lost in the English translations) demonstrates how important space is in Inuvialuktun. Thus a 'when' question was sometimes answered by a location rather than a time period" (Nagy, 2006: 75). Exemplifying the intimate relation between "the land and its temporal connotations" she cites the words of Inuit Mark Emerak: "I should send (that story) somewhere to the land where I first got my memory" (Nagy, 2006: 75-6).

3) Climate Change and Human Rights

Despite the very recent colonial history in the arctic, Inuit communities have become spaces of hyper-modernization, where social, political and cultural change in colonial context is occurring at a rate unknown anywhere else on earth. And today, as the arctic is likewise undergoing the most rapid and extreme climate changes of any region on earth, so too are the conditions for survival. It is in this context that, on December 7, 2005, Inuit submitted an historically unprecedented petition to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights connecting climate change to human rights violation, "seeking relief from violations of the human rights of Inuit peoples resulting from global warming caused by greenhouse gas emissions from the United States of America" ("Petition to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights Seeking Relief from Violations Resulting from Global Warming Caused by Acts and Omissions of the United States." Hereafter, "Watt-Cloutier et. al., 2005")

We can divide the argument submitted to the commission into three basic components: A) The increasing scarcity and disappearance of land and resources; B) The role of memory in traditional economic and cultural practices (Predicting Weather/Future); and C) The disappearance of traditional knowledge, either irrevocably

lost or falsified and made outdated by unprecedented changes in the environment since time immemorial. I will now outline these components with reference to the exact wording of the petition.

A) Increasing scarcity and disappearance of land and resources.

The petition states: “Like many indigenous peoples, the Inuit are the product of the physical environment in which they live [and] have fine-tuned tools, techniques and knowledge over thousands of years to adapt to the arctic environment... The culture, economy and identity of the Inuit as an indigenous people depend upon the ice and snow” (Watt-Cloutier et. al., 2005).

It is well known that there is no place on Earth that global warming has had a more severe impact than in the Arctic. “Because annual average arctic temperatures are increasing more than twice as fast as temperatures in the rest of the world, climate change has already caused severe impacts in the Arctic, including deterioration in ice conditions, a decrease in the quantity and quality of snow, changes in the weather and weather patterns, and a transfigured landscape as permafrost melts at an alarming rate, causing slumping, landslides, and severe erosion in some coastal areas” (Watt-Cloutier et. al., 2005).

The petition then goes on to explain the new dangers of traditional economic activity: “Commonly observed changes [by Inuit] include thinner ice, less ice, later freezes and earlier, more sudden thaws. Sea ice is a critical resource for the Inuit, who use it to travel to hunting and harvesting locations, and for communication between communities. Because of the loss in the thickness, extent and duration of the sea ice, these traditional practices have become more dangerous, more difficult or, at times, impossible. In many regions, traditional knowledge regarding the safety of the sea ice has become unreliable. As a result, more hunters and other travelers are falling through the sea ice into the frigid water below” (Watt-Cloutier et. al., 2005).

On March 1, 2007, Inuit activist and former president and international chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Council Sheila Watt-Cloutier—who, at the time was a standing nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize—addressed the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, offering testimony spelling out the dangers caused by climate change to traditional economic and cultural practices. “The ice is not only our ‘road’ but also our ‘supermarket.’ Deteriorating ice conditions imperil Inuit in many ways. As the ice is melting from below, hunters can no longer be certain of its thickness and how safe it is to travel upon. Many hunters have been killed or seriously injured after falling through the ice that was traditionally known to be safe” (Watt-Cloutier, 2007).

The petition has asserted: “The Inuit’s fundamental right to use and enjoy their traditional lands is violated as a result of the impacts of climate change because large

tracks of Inuit traditional lands are fundamentally changing, and still other areas are becoming inaccessible. Summer sea ice, a critical extension of traditional Inuit land, is literally ceasing to exist.” From this the petition concludes that: “The inability to travel to lands traditionally used for subsistence and the reduced hares have diminished the value of the Inuit’s right of access to these lands” (Watt-Cloutier et. al., 2005).

B) The role of memory in traditional economic and cultural practices including its relevance for understanding future by means of weather prediction.

- “The weather has become increasingly unpredictable. In the past, Inuit elders could accurately predict the weather for coming days based on cloud formations and wind patters, allowing the Inuit to schedule safe travel” (Watt-Cloutier et. al., 2005).
- “Noting the particular impact these changes will have on the Inuit, the ACIA [Arctic Climate Impact Assessment] states; ‘For Inuit, warming is likely to disrupt or even destroy their hunting and food sharing culture as reduced sea ice causes the animals on which they depend on to decline, become less accessible and possibly become extinct” (Watt-Cloutier et. al., 2005).

C) The disappearance of traditional knowledge, either irrevocably lost or falsified and made outdated by unprecedented changes in the environment since time immemorial.

- “Traditional Inuit knowledge, passed from Inuit elders in their role as keepers of Inuit culture, is also becoming outdated because of the rapidly changing environment” (Watt-Cloutier et. al., 2005).
- “These changes have also contributed to the loss of traditional igloo building knowledge, an important component of Inuit culture” (Watt-Cloutier et. al., 2005).
- “Because Inuit culture is inseparable from the condition of their physical surroundings, the widespread environmental upheaval resulting from climate change violates the Inuit’s right to practice and enjoy the benefits of their culture. The subsistence culture central to Inuit cultural identity has been damaged by climate change, and my cease to exist if action is not taken by the United States in concert with the community of nations” (Watt-Cloutier et. al., 2005).

Two years after submitting the petition on behalf of herself and 62 other individuals, all Inuit of the arctic regions, testimony was finally heard by the commission. In her address to the commission, Watt-Cloutier made clear that the grave issues linking global warming to the cultural survival was not only an issue for Inuit of the Arctic, but for indigenous peoples throughout the Americas. “Climate change,” she asserted, “brings into question the basic survival of indigenous people and indigenous cultures throughout the Americas. [...] These impacts are destroying our rights to life, health, property and means of substance. States that do not recognize these impacts and take action violate our human rights.” Watt-Cloutier concluded her testimony with the following words: “I encourage the Commission to continue its work in protecting human rights. In so doing, you will protect the sentinels of climate change -- the indigenous people. By protecting

the rights of those living sustainably in the Amazon Basin or the rights of the Inuit hunter on the snow and ice, this commission will also be preserving the world's environmental early-warning system” (Watt-Cloutier, 2007).

As a result of carbon emissions produced by the industrialized world, spaces and practices of memory—through which knowledge of the symbiotic relation of Inuit culture to its environment are transmitted (complex hunting and navigation techniques, for example)—are breaking down, becoming increasingly inaccurate and threatening the acculturation of Inuit peoples.

Points for Further Discussion

- In light of Karl Marx’s famous statement – “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past” – how might we understand the cultural transformation provoked by global warming? How do we come to understand that the “circumstances existing already” are circumstances of industrial production and pollution from *elsewhere*, and not the material practices of the North? The question of global changes in the environment and its relation to local economic practices here comes to the fore. Is this another instantiation of the colonial project upon indigenous peoples, albeit an oblique one, that fractures the cultures of the North?
- How might the situation faced by the Inuit and expressed in part in the above cited petition be further illuminated by Jean-Paul Sartre’s famous statement “On Genocide” from the Russell Commission?

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