

# Challenging the Imagined North in Sheila Watt-Cloutier's *The Right to Be Cold*

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**Abstract:** The aim of the chapter is to discuss Sheila Watt-Cloutier's memoir *The Right to Be Cold* vis-a-vis Daniel Chartier's essay *What is the Imagined North? Ethical Principles*. A close reading of the activist's autobiography gives the impression of her addressing directly the concerns expressed by the scholar – both texts debunking preconceptions about the North, too often reduced to the idea of a vast icebound landscape. Drawing on her lived experience of the Native inhabitant of the circumpolar region, Watt-Cloutier challenges the misconceptions of the Arctic as “uninhabited and uninhabitable” and she defies “the silencing of cultural and human aspects of cold territories”, both notions central to Chartier's essay. Not only does she give a human face to the climate emergency, for which she has been universally credited, she humanizes the Canadian north – significantly in the context of this chapter. The discussion focuses on issues such as Indigenous colonialism and its aftermath, traditional knowledge and culture, as well as the climate emergency that has changed the face of the Arctic region.

**Key words:** North – Arctic – Circumpolar – Inuit – climate change – ethics – Daniel Chartier

The image of “the Arctic as an empty world of pristine white”<sup>1</sup> has already been questioned by many writers and scholars since the nineteen nineties<sup>2</sup>. Barry Lopez's *Arctic Dreams* (1986) is one of the early representations of the North that precedes the increased interest in the circumpolar region and testifies to its environmental, cultural and economic complexity. In a slightly different manner, Shelley Wright's *Our Ice Is Vanishing* (2014) also “recomplexifies”<sup>3</sup> the North by foregrounding its human and cultural dimensions through both historical and contemporary perspectives. Although both books are well-researched and successfully transgress the concept of “the Imagined

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1 S. Wright, *Our Ice Is Vanishing/Sikuvut Nungulitqutq*, Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014, p. 7.

2 L.R. Bjørst, “The tip of the iceberg: Ice as a non-human actor in the climate change debate”, *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 34: 1 2010, p. 133–150.

3 D. Chartier, *What is the “Imagined North”? Ethical Principles*, Montréal and Harstad (Norway), Imaginaire Nord and Arctic Arts Summit, 2018, p. 17, <https://inuit.uqam.ca/en/documents/what-imagined-north-ethical-principles>, accessed on June 30, 2023.

North”, these accounts nonetheless offer an outsiders’ perspective. In *What is the Imagined North? Ethical Principles*, Daniel Chartier emphasizes the importance of Indigenous voices that provide “true knowledge of the cold world”, that speak about the “needs and aspirations of those who live there”<sup>4</sup> and he urges their inclusion in the research devoted to the North. One of the most vibrant Indigenous voices of today undoubtedly belongs to Sheila Watt-Cloutier, whose ethical stance permeates her autobiography *The Right to Be Cold*, published in 2015. The aim of this chapter is to discuss her memoir vis-a-vis Daniel Chartier’s theoretical essay on the Imagined North. The close reading of the activist’s autobiography gives the impression of addressing directly the concerns expressed by the scholar, both texts aiming to demystify preconceived ideas about the North, too often reduced to a vast icebound landscape. Drawing on her lived experience of the Native inhabitant of the circumpolar region, Watt-Cloutier challenges misconceptions of “an uninhabited and uninhabitable Arctic”<sup>5</sup> and defies “the silencing of cultural and human aspects of cold territories”<sup>6</sup>. Not only does she give a human face to climate emergency, for which she has been universally credited, she humanizes the Canadian north – significantly in the context of this chapter. The discussion focuses on issues such as Indigenous colonialism<sup>7</sup> and its aftermath, traditional knowledge and culture, as well as the global warming that has changed the face of the Arctic region.

The special value of Watt-Cloutier’s memoir in correcting preconceptions about the Arctic is two-fold: firstly, it stems from the Indigenous status of its author offering an insider’s story and, secondly, it is connected with the author’s gender. As the International Laboratory for the Comparative Multidisciplinary Research Study of Representations of the North reports, only 20 per cent of the texts in the corpus on the imagined North were written by women<sup>8</sup>. Predictably, the dominant discourses on the Arctic are steeped in a masculine perspective, especially that of past missionaries, explorers and seafarers. Hence, *The Right to Be Cold* that is told in a contemporary Indigenous female voice constitutes an intriguing counter-history, an alternative to the male-authored narratives of Arctic conquest or exploration. Indeed, the writer herself is acutely aware of the particularity of her own position. In the introduction to her book, she states: “As an Inuk woman, a mother, and a grandmother who feels blessed to have been born into this remarkable culture, I want to offer a human story from this unique vantage point”<sup>9</sup>.

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4 Ibid., p. 16.

5 Ibid., p. 10.

6 Ibid., p. 11.

7 I use the term “Indigenous colonialism” after Chartier (*What is the Imagined North?*, op. cit., p. 11) to refer collectively to historical and contemporary colonizing practices aimed at Indigenous peoples.

8 D. Chartier, “The Gender of Ice and Snow”, *Journal of Northern Studies*, 2 2008, p. 30.

9 S. Watt-Cloutier, *The Right to Be Cold: One Woman’s Fight to Protect the Arctic and Save the Planet from Climate Change*, Minneapolis, The University of Minnesota Press, 2018, p. xxiv.

### Overview of Indigenous colonialism in the North

Born in 1953 in Old Fort Chimo, situated in today's Nunavik, for a decade the author had a fairly traditional way of life soon, however, to be interrupted by the intrusion of the residential school system. The first chapters of the book, which predictably recount the childhood and adolescence of the author, spin a parallel narrative of historical traumas that affected and shaped the world of Sheila but also of her community and the Inuit at large. Watt-Cloutier's autobiography deliberately populates the presumably empty Arctic space with the peoples that have dwelt there for centuries, challenging the perspective of white settlers and Arctic explorers who all too often failed to acknowledge the North as *ecumene*. Barry Lopez elaborates on this dynamic in *Arctic Dreams*:

a culture's most cherished places are not necessarily visible to the eye – spots on the land one can point to. They are made visible in drama – in narrative, song, and performance. It is precisely what is *invisible* in the land, however, that makes what is merely empty space to one person a *place* to another. The feeling that a particular place is suffused with memories, the specific focus of sacred and profane stories, and that the whole landscape is a congeries of such places, is what is meant by a local sense of the land. The observation that it is merely space which requires definition before it has meaning – political demarcation, an assignment of its ownership, or industrial development – betrays a colonial sensibility<sup>10</sup>.

Providing a succinct historical overview of the South's interventions in the Northern territories in the opening chapters of her memoir, Watt-Cloutier defies the North's status of a "space" and symbolically reclaims its status of a "place" for as Yi-Fu Tuan observed "when space feels thoroughly familiar to us, it has become place"<sup>11</sup>. The portrayal of the Arctic as an empty space devoid of human history is all the more astounding given that human occupation of the North American Arctic dates back approximately 7,000 years<sup>12</sup>. Watt-Cloutier's first-hand experience of the Arctic as a place with a distinct anthropogenic history counterbalances those representations of the North whose "insistence on its characteristics linked to emptiness, immensity, and whiteness led to the development of a system of representations that sometimes overlooks the human experience of the territory"<sup>13</sup>. The history of Indigenous colonialism in the Arctic has been underpinned by religious, economic and political motivations. As Claudia Miller succinctly observes, "[t]he primary source of colonial interference in the Inuit ways of being can be traced back to the triumvirate of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC), the Royal

10 B. Lopez, *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape*, New York, Open Road Integrated Media, 2013, p. 316.

11 Y.-F. Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Minneapolis, The University of Minnesota Press, 1977, p. 73.

12 S. Wright, *Our Ice Is Vanishing ...*, op. cit., p. 25.

13 D. Chartier, *What is the Imagined North?*, op. cit., p. 15.

Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and Christian missionaries”<sup>14</sup>. All these interventions slowly but steadily contributed to the disruption of the traditional Inuit lifestyle.

Watt-Cloutier’s concise historical perspective of her region begins with the advent of Hudson’s Bay Company in 1912, which irreversibly changed the northern communities’ dynamics within a single generation. From the traditional hunters for food they had been for centuries, Inuit transformed into trappers and relocated with their families to be in the proximity of trading posts. From the very beginning of this cooperation, however, they relied on the HBC not only to trade their furs but also to obtain southern food as well as guns and ammunition. So the money they made partially went back into the pockets of the trading company. Paradoxically, full-time trapping did not bring them meat on the table for “hunters needed to use what animals they did harvest from the land to feed their dog teams”<sup>15</sup>. As a result, wholesome country food was slowly superseded by the southern diet that was detrimental to Inuit unaccustomed to processed food, wheat and sugar, which in turn contributed to a general health decline among the local Indigenous population. The economic situation of the local people was exacerbated by the collapse in the price of Arctic fox fur during the Depression and the Second World War. These events left many a trapper jobless and reliant on government assistance programs in the late 1940s. To be able to collect the welfare and family allowances on a regular basis, Inuit living in outpost camps were forced to abandon their mobile dwellings and transfer to permanent settlements. Furthermore, “[t]he Family Allowances Act contained a provision that required mandatory school attendance for children”<sup>16</sup>, so the families that refused to send their offspring to the newly built schools were coerced into doing so by the threat of the government’s withdrawal of family allowances. Deprived of any other source of income, many families complied and by 1965 most Inuit dwelt in settlements. At this point of her narrative, Watt-Cloutier also mentions the forced relocation of Inuit families from Arctic Quebec to the High Arctic, a trauma shared by “the now-adult children who experienced these moves – and by subsequent generations”<sup>17</sup>. Despite the government’s assurances of pure motives behind these resettlements – to improve the quality of life for Inuit – the commonly assumed reason for these relocations was Canada’s attempt to claim territorial rights in the High Arctic.

The 1950s and 1960s was a time “when the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) virtually governed the North, making often devastating decisions such as the cull of huskies”<sup>18</sup>. The supposedly selective slaughter of dogs infected with canine distemper turned into an erratic extermination of dog teams across the Baffin Region. “The animals were not inspected for illness, no questions were posed about their health or be-

14 C. Miller, “Inuit Sentinels: Examining the Efficacy of (Life) Writing Climate Change in Sheila Watt-Cloutier’s *The Right to Be Cold*”, *Canada and Beyond*, 11 2022, p. 80.

15 S. Watt-Cloutier, *The Right to Be Cold...*, op. cit., p. 65.

16 Ibid., p. 66.

17 Ibid., p. 67.

18 R. Hulan, “Negotiating Sovereignty: Sheila Watt-Cloutier’s *The Right to Be Cold*”, in: R. Hulan, *Climate Change and Writing the Canadian Arctic*, Cham, Palgrave Pivot, 2018, p. 58.

havior. Certainly no permission was asked of the owners. The dogs were simply shot”<sup>19</sup>. Needless to say, these events constitute a collective trauma that was silenced not only by the RCMP but by Inuit themselves who felt “a sense of shame about what happened and about [their] community’s failure to stop the systematic slaughter of their dogs”<sup>20</sup>. The annihilation of over twelve hundred dogs left the Inuit community not only wounded and traumatized but, once more, financially vulnerable. Those hunters who could not afford a snowmobile were forced to relocate from outpost camps to settlements. Many now suspect this may have been the hidden agenda behind this cull<sup>21</sup>.

Although delivered in “exact and measured language”<sup>22</sup>, *The Right to Be Cold* enumerates a number of ways in which the Canadian state failed Inuit and Indigenous peoples of Canada. It “trace[s] the incursion of the Canadian government into Inuit lives beginning with movement of Inuit off the land into settlements”<sup>23</sup>. Watt-Cloutier’s position is that of an Inuk woman rather than a Canadian, something characteristic for Inuit writing:

Unlike writing about the north by southern Canadians, which situates the north and its inhabitants neatly within the Canadian nation, Inuit writing refuses to invoke a national position; nor does it celebrate its own “Canadianness” or “nordicity.” [...] While Inuit leaders do not reject Canada, they have also maintained the clear sense of separate, ethnic nationalism that led to the creation of Nunavut in 1999<sup>24</sup>.

Renée Hulan suggests that the book “can be read in the context of a distinct form of Inuit storytelling tradition: Inuit autobiography written in English” which “reveals a collective voice that teaches and preserves Indigenous knowledge and that Indigenous knowledge informs all aspects of Inuit life”<sup>25</sup>. So *The Right to Be Cold* is a memoir whose dynamics relies on “the double act of recalling and recording”<sup>26</sup> where “to record means literally to call to mind, to call up from the heart [but also] to set down in writing, to make official”<sup>27</sup>. Watt-Cloutier recalls and chronicles Indigenous colonialism for the young generation of Inuit so that they can comprehend the intergenerational character of colonial experience and recognize that “much of [their] fear originates from the traumas of [their] forefathers”<sup>28</sup>. She also emphasizes that “not taking this received trauma solely as personal is vital to healing”<sup>29</sup> and argues that the preservation of Inuit knowl-

19 S. Watt-Cloutier, *The Right to Be Cold*..., op. cit., p. 70.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 R. Hulan, “Negotiating Sovereignty...”, op. cit., p. 65.

23 Ibid., p. 62.

24 R. Hulan, *Northern Experience and the Myths of Canadian Culture*, Montreal, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002, p. 75–76.

25 R. Hulan, “Negotiating Sovereignty...”, op. cit., p. 55.

26 S. Smith and J. Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, Minneapolis, The University of Minnesota Press, 2001, p. 198.

27 Ibid.

28 S. Watt-Cloutier, *The Right to Be Cold*..., op. cit., p. xxiv.

29 Ibid.

edge, the revitalization of Inuktitut as well as the right to continue traditional customs and the Inuit way of life are the pillars of the healing process of her community, all of which will be elaborated on in the next section.

### Eco-colonialism

Referred to as “eco-colonialism”<sup>30</sup> or “cultural colonization”<sup>31</sup>, the anti-sealing campaigns and subsequent bans have had pernicious effects on the Inuit communities, who incurred an initial financial blow in the 1960s following a vigorous wave of protests against commercial harp seal hunting in Newfoundland. In the aftermath, many hunters were deprived of an additional source of income (selling by-products of a subsistence hunt)<sup>32</sup>. The anti-sealing campaign gained momentum once more in the 1970s leading to a European Economic Community ban on the sale of whitecoat harp seal pup skin in 1982. The lobbying for the restriction was primarily motivated by species endangerment and failed to draw “any clear line between Inuit harvesting of ringed seals and the southern commercial harp seal pup hunt”<sup>33</sup>. Although the newly implemented law did not forbid Inuit from seal hunting (as harp seal is not the species they hunt), the global market succumbed to the environmentalist pressures and the demand for sealskin products plummeted. The direst consequence of the collapse of the sealskin global market was the steep rise in suicide rates among Inuit seal hunters who had lost their livelihoods overnight<sup>34</sup>. In 2009 the European Union passed a law “shutting down the EU market for seal products stemming from commercial seal hunts”<sup>35</sup> for reasons of animal welfare. As Nikolas Sellheim notes, “the mindset of animal rights organizations has found its way into the policy-shaping processes” and “has led to a distorted and biased picture of the hunt and the hunters”<sup>36</sup>. His observations resonate with Sheila Watt-Cloutier’s reminiscences of Paul McCartney’s 2006 high-profile visit to the Gulf of St. Lawrence, where the celebrity and his spouse were photographed petting baby seals as part of an anti-sealing campaign. The following day the couple appeared on *Larry King Live* show during which they urged Newfoundland premier Danny Williams to ban commercial

30 Government of Greenland: Department of Fisheries, Hunting & Agriculture, “Management and utilization of seals in Greenland”, 2012, p. 34, <https://repository.oceanbestpractices.org/bitstream/handle/11329/1821/greenland-hvidbog-om-sler-april2012-eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>, accessed on June 30, 2023.

31 L. A. Kreusel, “‘Angry Inuk’ Challenges Stereotypes of the Inuit”, The Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington, September 7, 2017, <https://jsis.washington.edu/news/angry-inuk-challenges-stereotypes-inuit/>, accessed on June 30, 2023.

32 G. W. Wenzel, “Marooned in a Blizzard of Contradictions: Inuit and the Anti-Sealing Movement”, *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 9: 1 1985, p. 81.

33 Ibid., p. 82.

34 A. Pope, “An ‘Angry Inuk’ defends the seal hunt, again”, *Canadian Geographic*, January 5, 2018, <https://canadiangeographic.ca/articles/an-angry-inuk-defends-the-seal-hunt-again/>, accessed on June 30, 2023.

35 N. Sellheim, “The Neglected Tradition? – The Genesis of the EU Seal Products Trade Ban and Commercial Sealing”, *The Yearbook of Polar Law* V, 2013, p. 417–418.

36 Ibid., p. 418.

seal harvesting. What they failed to comprehend is the traditional value of Inuit seal hunting and its sustainability, plus, as Watt-Cloutier observes, “lying down on the sea ice and playing with seals is, frankly, silly, and it’s also disrespectful to wildlife. Seals may look cute, but they are not pets – they are animals that live in the wild”<sup>37</sup>. She also bitterly reflects that “[t]he McCartney media blitz was a good reminder to me that the Arctic is better known for its wildlife than its people”<sup>38</sup> – providing ammunition for Chartier and his observation that “fruits of principally the German, French, English, and then US-American imaginary, seldom distinguish the different cultural spaces of the territory and focus their attention up towards the Arctic and the poles, with little consideration for the cultures (Inuit, Sami, Cree, Innu, Scandinavian, etc.) that originate in these territories”<sup>39</sup>.

The disastrous implications of the ban placed on sealskin produce also took its toll on traditional handicraft production and negatively affected the previously flourishing women’s communal activities as well as the reception of Inuit art and fashion design which also heavily rely on sealskin. Due to the scarcity of hunted pelts, Inuit women started to devote less time to sewing groups, which had played an enormous role in the communities not only as an apprenticeship for young sewers but also as a source of peer and elder counselling<sup>40</sup>. Unfortunately, climate change, a direct threat to Arctic wildlife including seals, may aggravate this disruption to the intergenerational transmission of traditional knowledge of handicraft and hunt.

Referencing the research conducted by Greenlandic Inuk, Finn Lynge, the author of *The Right to Be Cold* delineates four values that are central to the Inuit way of life and, not coincidentally, all four are rooted in hunting traditions:

*Nunamut ataqqinninneq* relates to a sense of pride and respect in a strong familiarity with and knowledge of the land and sea, including its animals. *Akisussaassuseq* is the responsibility that people have to the land and to everything that inhabits it. *Tukkususeq* relates to the importance of generosity and hospitality to extended family, as embodied by the cultural sharing of our hunt. *Inuk nammineq* emphasizes individual autonomy and strength, particularly the wisdom to discern appropriate choices on the land and in one’s life<sup>41</sup>.

In a 2016 movie *Angry Inuk*, its Inuit director Alethea Arnaquq-Baril also addresses the significance and indispensability of hunting tradition for Inuit and portrays the aftermath of the ban with its pernicious consequences for their communities today, calling anti-seal campaigns “the new colonialism”<sup>42</sup>. The misapprehension of Inuit hunting

37 S. Watt-Cloutier, *The Right to Be Cold* ..., op. cit., p. 246.

38 Ibid., 247.

39 D. Chartier, *What is the Imagined North?*, op. cit., p. 10.

40 M. Dowsley, S. Gearheard, N. Johnson and J. Inksetter, “Should we turn the tent? Inuit women and climate change”, *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 34: 1 2010, p. 158.

41 S. Watt-Cloutier, *The Right to Be Cold* ..., op. cit., p. 292.

42 E. Commanda, “Angry Inuk: why is the seal skin ban wrong?”, *Muskkrat Magazine*, May 4, 2016, <http://muskkratmagazine.com/angry-inuk-why-is-the-seal-skin-ban-wrong/>, accessed on

tradition as barbaric or threatening wildlife is characteristic of “the general tendency of the governance of ‘the North’, dominated by the capitals or the powers of the South who administrate according to their knowledge (seldom based on experience) and their needs – with the gaps that this can create”<sup>43</sup>.

### The importance of Inuktitut

One of the most conspicuous and poignant rifts created by the South was the foundation and maintenance of Indian residential schools. Set up by “good-intentioned peoples and groups, churches, and governments wearing the robe of patriarchal authority but blind to the very people they hope to advance”<sup>44</sup>, these schools aimed to “assimilate, civilize, and Christianize”<sup>45</sup> Indigenous children and youth and transform them into uniform Canadian citizens. However, due to economic factors, the Canadian government’s Aboriginal policy differed across the country, focusing on those areas which were either abundant in resources or attractive to non-Aboriginal settlers – and neglecting those with little economic prospect. So residential schooling in Canada’s North has a distinct history from other provinces as there were only two residential schools operating north of the sixtieth parallel in 1900, that number increasing to six plus one hostel by 1950<sup>46</sup>. Despite her appreciation of the education and skills gained in Churchill Vocational Centre in Manitoba, which ultimately turned out to be the birthplace of many future Indigenous leaders<sup>47</sup>, the author of *The Right to Be Cold* corroborates the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s observation that “[w]hile the northern experience was unique in some ways, the broader themes remain constant. Children were taken from their parents, often with little in the way of consultation or consent. They were educated in an alien language and setting”<sup>48</sup>. It is the impoverishment or near loss of her language that Watt-Cloutier mourned the most upon returning to her community at the age of eighteen after eight years of separation. Luckily, because Inuktitut is a vibrant language with the majority of local people speaking it more than English, she soon regained her mother tongue<sup>49</sup>.

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June 30, 2023. For an informed discussion of Inuit media response to anti-sealing campaign and the phenomenon of “a sealfie” see K. Rodgers and W. Scobie, “Sealfies, seals and celebs: expressions of Inuit resilience in the Twitter era”, *Interface: a journal for and about social movements*, 7: 1 2015, p. 70–97.

43 D. Chartier, *What is the Imagined North?*, op. cit., p. 11.

44 J. Igloliorte, “Foreword: A Long Journey as a Healing and Commemoration Legacy Component”, in: A. Procter, *A Long Journey: Residential Schools in Labrador and Newfoundland*, Andrea Procter, St. John’s, ISER Books, p. xi.

45 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. *Canada’s Residential Schools: The Inuit and Northern Experience: The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*. Vol. 2, Montreal, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015, p. 3.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid., p. 148.

48 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Canada’s Residential Schools: The Inuit and Northern Experience...*, op. cit., p. 4.

49 S. Watt-Cloutier, *The Right to Be Cold...*, op. cit., p. 56.



The importance of sustaining Indigenous languages and their inclusion in the circumpolar research is literally underlined by Chartier, who argues that it is “necessary to presume a multilingual dimension in all research projects on the North and the Arctic and recognize that monolingualism and even bilingualism lead to a biased or incomplete vision of the North”<sup>50</sup>. In her memoir, Watt-Cloutier first introduces and then consistently uses a multitude of Inuktitut words, acting as an interpreter between her peoples and non-Inuit audiences. Already in the introduction, she uses the word *qamutiik*, the dogsled in English, drawing the reader’s attention to the birthplace of this vehicle – the Arctic. Another Inuit word, *anaanatsiaq* (grandmother), is incorporated into the introductory part of her narrative when foregrounding her own matriarchal status. This is not only deeply entrenched in Inuit tradition but is also something the author is adamant about sustaining – the intergenerational transmission of values, not captured with the English equivalent “grandmother”. The third important word introduced in the opening section is *silatuniq* (wisdom), which, as the author accentuates, “is taught through the experiential observation of the hunt”<sup>51</sup>. A separate group of Inuktitut words are geographical names which play two separate functions in the memoir. The first type of toponyms are those whose etymology is usually explained by the author with reference to specific characteristics of the landscape such as *Kuujuuaq*, meaning “great river”<sup>52</sup>. The second group, however, are the toponyms which have either been historically substituted by English names and which Watt-Cloutier symbolically decolonizes by retrieving their Aboriginal antecedents, or those which indigenize the colonized space anew by giving it an Inuktitut name, as is the case with Frobisher Bay – now known as Iqaluit. Her repetitive use of words such as *qamutiik* (sleds), *illuvigait* (igloos), *qimutsiit* (dog teams), *ulu* (woman’s traditional multipurpose knife), or *muttaq* (whale skin with a layer of blubber below) gives the impression of an Inuktitut language lesson, most likely building on the notion of linguistic relativity, according to which language determines thought – how a speaker’s language influences their worldview and cognition<sup>53</sup>. The author’s desire to offer a fuller understanding of Inuit world to a non-Inuit audience is even more apparent in another genus of Inuktitut words, those denoting the bonds between community members formed on the basis of long-standing Inuit tradition, for which English would not even have relevant equivalents. For instance, “the person who cuts a baby’s umbilical cord plays a special role in the life of that baby. That person is forever known as the *sana-jik* of the baby when it’s a girl, or the *arnaqutik* when it’s a boy”<sup>54</sup>. One way of honouring one’s *sanajik* or *arnaqutik* is through the offering of one’s first handicraft or first hunt, respectively – a form of rite of passage.

One of the words Watt-Cloutier gives particular prominence to is *ilira* which encompasses “the mix of apprehension and fear that causes a suppression of opinion and voice”

50 D. Chartier, *What is the Imagined North?*, op. cit., p. 25–26, underlined in original.

51 S. Watt-Cloutier, *The Right to Be Cold ...*, op. cit., p. xix.

52 Ibid., p. 1.

53 P. Kay, and W. Kempton, “What Is the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis?”, *American Anthropologist*, 86 1984, p. 66, <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1984.86.1.02a00050>.

54 S. Watt-Cloutier, *The Right to Be Cold ...*, op. cit., p. 58.

and is triggered by “people or things that have power over you and can neither be controlled nor predicted. People or things that make you feel vulnerable, and to which you *are vulnerable*”<sup>55</sup>. According to the author, it is the concept of *ilira* that made Inuit, who were generally restrained and inhibited in their contact with others, comply with the RCMP’s demands. It was why they failed to “protest the cold-hearted slaughter of the dogs that they not only depended on but also had a deep bond with”<sup>56</sup>. Understanding the dynamics of *ilira* is indispensable for any research on Inuit colonialism. However, the most frequently used Inuktitut word in the memoir is *qallunaat* (white people) that is “derived from *qallunaq*, which describes the bones on which the eyebrows sit, which protrude more on white people than on Inuit”<sup>57</sup>. Interestingly, the word to denote white people is not based on the whiteness of their skin, but a facial feature that may be more conspicuous during an initial snowbound encounter. Moreover, the continuous use of *qallunaat* redirects the readers’ attention from the distinction between Inuit and white people based on racial categorization towards the outsider or stranger’s status. This Inuktitut term allows non-Inuit readers to experience what it is liked to be the other, to be viewed by the peoples of North. It reverses the white gaze, which builds on the tradition established by Arctic explorers, seafarers, or colonial settlers.

The ignorance that *qallunaat* has repeatedly demonstrated with regard to Inuit way of life and Inuit *Quuijimajatuqangit*, that is, Inuit traditional knowledge, was conceded by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in his heartfelt apology delivered on behalf of the federal government in 2017 to the former boarding school students of Newfoundland and Labrador:

We are sorry for the lack of understanding of Indigenous societies and cultures that led to Indigenous children being sent away from their homes, families and communities and placed into residential schools. We are sorry for the misguided belief that Indigenous children could only be properly provided for, cared for, or educated if they were separated from the influence of their families, traditions and cultures<sup>58</sup>.

The apology was formally accepted by one of the most high-profile Inuit residential school survivors, Toby Obed<sup>59</sup>. He was instrumental in filing a collective lawsuit against the Canadian government that failed to acknowledge the trauma experienced by the students of Newfoundland and Labrador residential schools in former Prime Minister

55 Ibid., 72–73.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid., p. 4.

58 C. McIntyre, “Read Justin Trudeau’s apology to residential school survivors in Newfoundland”, *Maclean’s*, November 24, 2017, <https://macleans.ca/news/canada/read-justin-trudeaus-apology-to-residential-school-survivors-in-newfoundland/>, accessed on June 30, 2023.

59 Toby Obed’s life story and struggle for justice is the subject of an acclaimed 2019 book *27 śmierci Toby’ego Obeda* by a Polish journalist Joanna Gierak-Onoszko. To read about it in English see: M. Miłosz, “The Canadian Conversation: A Polish journalist’s perspective on residential schools”, *Literary Review of Canada*, December 2020, <https://reviewcanada.ca/magazine/2020/12/the-canadian-conversation/>, accessed on June 30, 2023.

Stephen Harper's 2008 apology. In response to Justin Trudeau's words, Obed stated: "Because I come from a patient and forgiving culture I think it is proper for us to accept an apology from the Government of Canada"<sup>60</sup>, thus emphasizing the traditional values held high by Inuit. In her memoir, Watt-Cloutier repeatedly insists on healing as the only solution to social problems of Inuit communities whose well-being has been severely blighted by manifold interferences from the South, leading to substance dependence, which in turn resulted in "domestic violence, rape, incest, suicide, low family income, and teenage delinquency"<sup>61</sup> with the young bearing the brunt of their parents' addictions and suffering from "anxiety, insecurity, confusion, impulsivity, relationship difficulties, and suicidal tendencies"<sup>62</sup>. This healing cannot occur but through building back life skills and restoring the intergenerational transmission of traditional Inuit knowledge. The moment Watt-Cloutier realized that "[t]raditional Inuit wisdom, the powerful teachings of the land and the hunt, and our country food were all vital to confronting the historical problems and the rapid changes that arrived with the modern world"<sup>63</sup>, she devoted all her efforts first to fighting against the pollutants from other parts of the world that were making their way to the Arctic and then to urging world's governments to take action in the face of the climate emergency that threatens the Arctic and Inuit way of life by extension<sup>64</sup>.

### Climate emergency and the changing face of the Arctic region

The stereotypical image of "the Arctic as an empty world of pristine white"<sup>65</sup> no longer holds true and for a couple of reasons. As evidenced in the previous subsections, the North is a home to a number of Northern peoples, among whom there are approximately 165,000 Inuit – so it is definitely not empty. Secondly, it is far from being pristine for it is severely affected by the global circulation of pollutants and greenhouse gas-emissions. The campaign that brought Sheila Watt-Cloutier worldwide recognition as an environmental activist was the 1990s fight against POPs, persistent organic pollutants, which are "largely synthetic chemicals used in pesticides, herbicides, industrial processes, and manufacturing" that "evaporate in warm air and condense easily in cold air" as well as "bioaccumulate and biomagnify in the environment"<sup>66</sup>. The most direct threat of these contaminants to Inuit community and wildlife lies in the fact that while their particles do not break down easily; they do dissolve in fat, amassing in the fat tissues of marine mammals. What is more, because they are persistent, these pollutants do not

60 The Canadian Press, "Trudeau apologizes to Newfoundland residential school survivors left out of 2008 apology, compensation", *Toronto Star*, November 24, 2017, <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2017/11/24/trudeau-to-apologize-to-newfoundland-residential-school-survivors-left-out-of-2008-apology-compensation.html?rf>, accessed on June 30, 2023.

61 S. Watt-Cloutier, *The Right to Be Cold*..., op. cit., p. 99.

62 Ibid., p. 100.

63 Ibid., p. 141.

64 Ibid., p. 132–184, 218–259.

65 S. Wright, *Our Ice Is Vanishing*..., op. cit., p. 7.

66 S. Watt-Cloutier, *The Right to Be Cold*..., op. cit., p. 133, 134.

disappear but stay put in the organism throughout its life. So by consuming the meat of narwhal, beluga, walrus, or seals, Inuit absorb these substances themselves. Various studies have also manifested that “[c]ontaminants are transferred by women to their babies across the placental barrier and through breast-feeding”<sup>67</sup>. Thus, as Watt-Cloutier notes, “marine mammals, the core of our country food, food we have relied on for millennia, act like global conveyor belts funneling high concentrations of toxins into our Inuit populations”<sup>68</sup>. The very thought of the loss of country food that is central to Inuit cultural identity – the loss the author experienced for eight years having been sent to southern boarding schools – “struck [her] at a deeply visceral, emotional level”<sup>69</sup> for this diet “nourished [her] not only physically but spiritually as well. The animals that are [Inuit] country food connect [them] to the water and the land, to the ‘source’ of [their] life, to God”<sup>70</sup>. From this place of vulnerability, Watt-Cloutier got politically engaged in reducing the circulation of persistent organic pollutants. Since eighty per cent of POPs that make their way into and remain in the Canadian Arctic are from outside the country, the campaign required an international approach and cooperation.

The campaign against POPs turned out to be a harrowing experience, requiring a lot of patience. On one side of the conflict there were vulnerable Northern communities whose lives were literally threatened by the contaminants while on the other side of the barricade there were the financial interests of global market players and industry-backed researchers. So the struggle was eerily reminiscent of the colonial past. The author recalls her exasperation:

At an Arctic Council meeting in Oslo in 1996, I became so frustrated that I told the attendees I felt history was repeating itself. Missionaries, fur traders, and governments had fought over the Arctic for decades to further their own self-interest: converting us to their religion, pressuring us to build their trade, or using us to establish their sovereignty. In the process, our well-being and our way of life were sacrificed. Here again, scientists, consultants, and lawyers were busy pushing forward their own agendas while we suffered<sup>71</sup>.

The only way to win this international fight, Watt-Cloutier realized, was “to put a human face on POPs debate” and “to have those in power react to these issues with their hearts and not just their intellects”<sup>72</sup>. This privileging of *heartspace* over *headspace* has become the activist’s signature approach along with her insistence on personal transformation as the only effective tool in thwarting climate change<sup>73</sup>. After a decade of campaigning, on May 23, 2001, the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants that

67 J. Kafarowski, “Gendered dimensions of environmental health, contaminants and global change in Nunavik, Canada”, *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 30: 1 2006, p. 33.

68 S. Watt-Cloutier, *The Right to Be Cold...*, op. cit., p. 135.

69 Ibid., p. 137.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid., p. 151.

72 Ibid., p. 152.

73 “Sheila Watt-Cloutier in Conversation”, YouTube: *The British Library*, January 18 2022, approx-

banned nine of the twelve identified POPs was adopted, and ultimately ratified in 2004. Successful though it was, the struggle against persistent organic pollutants was in fact a preparatory exercise for a much more daunting task – combating climate change and halting the melting of the Arctic.

In the chapter entitled “The voices of the hunters”, the activist makes it clear that the climate warming and its consequences were already discernible for the peoples of the North as early as the 1970s. Yet little attention was paid to them by global actors, whose interests were not yet directly affected. Unlike many environmentalists and researchers who prioritize the survival of flora and fauna in the face of a climate emergency – specifically polar bears and seals in the case of the Arctic – Watt-Cloutier once more focuses her efforts on showing the human face of climate change and the potential loss of the Inuit way of life which, as the title of her memoir suggests, relies on “the right to be cold”. The ongoing melting of sea ice and permafrost has disastrous implications for Inuit communities as their houses are either washed away by the sea waves or collapse due to the thawing of the solid frozen ground on which they were erected. Hunters of long-standing can no longer accurately assess the endurance of ice whose thinning is undeniable yet erratic. In consequence, the number of hunting accidents has reached unprecedented numbers<sup>74</sup>. The climate warming has also had an impact on Arctic wildlife as mammals that depend on the ice, such as seals, walrus, or polar bears have moved farther in search of the sea ice, forcing Inuit to travel longer distances than before, frequently endangering their lives. The change in the quality of the snow – softer and stickier, having lost its crispiness – poses a challenge to many a hunter who often cannot build the most iconic of Inuit structures, that is, an igloo<sup>75</sup>. The image of the North deprived of *illuwigait* does fill one with ecological mourning, yet instead of grieving environmental loss, Watt-Cloutier proposed a course of action that linked climate emergency with human rights, among which there is the Inuit right to be cold. On December 7, 2005, a petition entitled “Seeking Relief from Violations Resulting from Global Warming Caused by Acts and Omissions of the United States” was submitted to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights – unfortunately, to no avail<sup>76</sup>. Nevertheless, her relentless campaigning to decrease greenhouse gas-emissions and keep the Arctic cold has made her one of the most vibrant voices of environmental advocacy and has earned her a nomination for 2007 Nobel Peace Prize.

In *The Right to Be Cold*, the past and present plight of Inuit communities is inextricably intertwined with their environment, the former suffering from the blows dealt to the latter through global warming and pollution. Since Watt-Cloutier’s memoir “interweave[s] the story of a protagonist with the story of the fortunes, conditions, geography, and ecology of a region, and reflect[s] on their connection [...] as a significant feature

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imately at 29<sup>th</sup> min., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XJUcn3WtD7w>, accessed on June 30, 2023.

74 S. Watt-Cloutier, *The Right to Be Cold*..., op. cit., p. 186.

75 Ibid., p. 189.

76 Ibid., p. 242.

of the writing”<sup>77</sup>, it can be classified as ecobiography<sup>78</sup>. The author emphasizes that her “own personal journey of struggle and loss mirrors that of many people in [...] Inuit communities, as well as in other Indigenous and vulnerable communities around the world”<sup>79</sup> whose lives have been marked by colonization, exploitation and climate change. Through the sharing of a very intimate personal life story, steeped in the inter-generational experience of her predecessors, the writer draws a multifaceted portrayal of Inuit communities. Consistent with the genre of an ecobiography, *The Right to Be Cold* is “a site of manifesto, a textual place from which to call for an ethic of care for the environment”<sup>80</sup>, an extension of Watt-Cloutier’s activism. It is an “act of naming the often disenfranchised and marginalized forms of grief arising from environmental loss”<sup>81</sup> in order to consolidate environmental advocacy.

### Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to manifest how Sheila Watt-Cloutier’s autobiographical book functions in a dialectic relationship with Daniel Chartier’s propositions contained in *What Is the Imagined North?* The discussion focused on the ways in which the Inuit activist challenges and corrects preconceived notions of the Arctic as uninhabited and pristine white, foregrounding Inuit presence and culture as well as pointing to the fraught history of Indigenous colonialism. The writer also accentuates the contingency of the iconic Arctic, snowbound landscape in the face of a climate emergency. To borrow Chartier’s words, *The Right to Be Cold* offers “true knowledge of the cold world”<sup>82</sup> that contradicts the ubiquitous vision of the Arctic as empty white space, arguing for its status as a place that is “a complex human composition, made of experiences, discourse, materiality, cultural forms, and memory”<sup>83</sup>. Because, as Chartier observes, ignorance of “the cultural and human aspects of the North” has historically led “to the establishment of policies that are maladapted to the territory”<sup>84</sup>, in order not to repeat the same mistakes, the Indigenous perspective is essential in tackling the climate emergency in a way that will be conducive to the peoples of the North. As Kyle Powys Whyte points out, “Indigenous voices are among the most audible in the global climate justice social movement”<sup>85</sup> as they view “climate injustice [as] a recent episode of a cyclical history of colonialism inflicting anthropogenic (human-caused) environmental change on Indig-

77 S. Smith, and J. Watson, *Reading Autobiography...*, op. cit., p. 194.

78 C. Miller, “Inuit Sentinels...”, op. cit., p. 83.

79 Ibid.

80 S. Smith, and J. Watson, *Reading Autobiography...*, op. cit., p. 161.

81 S. Craps, “Ecological Mourning: Living with Loss in the Anthropocene”, in: *Critical Memory Studies: New Approaches*, London, ed. B. A. Kaplan, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2023, p. 69, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350233164.ch-5>.

82 D. Chartier, *What is the Imagined North?*, op. cit., p. 16.

83 Ibid., p. 14.

84 Ibid., p. 19.

85 K. P. Whyte, “Is It Colonial Deja Vu? Indigenous Peoples and Climate Injustice.”, in: *Humanities for the Environment: Integrating Knowledge, Forging New Constellations of Practice*, ed. by Joni Adamson and Michael Davis, New York, Routledge, 2017, p. 94.

enous peoples”<sup>86</sup>. For Aboriginal peoples “the apocalypse has already happened”<sup>87</sup> and from their vantage point “the apocalyptic [...] narrative of the Anthropocene is not only a future anticipation of the ‘end of nature’ but also a remembrance of a violent historical past with ongoing repercussions for the present”<sup>88</sup>. So the non-Aboriginal world should learn from their experience and *survivance*<sup>89</sup>. Unsurprisingly then, the underlying message of Watt-Cloutier’s memoir and her advice to the global world is that “cultures are medicine, and I believe strongly that Indigenous wisdom is the medicine the world seeks in addressing [the] issues of sustainability”<sup>90</sup>.

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>87</sup> E. M. DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene*, Durham, Duke UP, 2019, p. 7.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> *Survivance* is the concept developed by an Indigenous scholar Gerald Vizenor. In a nutshell, it refers to “a sense of native presence over absence, nihility, and victimry”. G. Vizenor, ed., *Survivance: Narratives of native Presence*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska, 2008, p. 1.

<sup>90</sup> S. Watt-Cloutier, “7 quotes from Sheila Watt-Cloutier to open your mind”, *RTOERO*, <https://rtoero.ca/7-quotes-from-sheila-watt-cloutier-to-open-your-mind/>, accessed on June 1, 2023.



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