

Nuna: Dispossession & Reclamation in Inuit Nunangat

by Sandra Inuitiq

Amid the ongoing conflict between Western and Indigenous philosophies of relating to and with the land, the reflections here engage with Yellowhead's Red Paper and offer an Inuk perspective on the challenges and hope of "Land Back" in Inuit Nunangat.

THE EARTH IS OUR BODY, *anirniqarniq* (air) our breath, *sila* the weather and seasonal force our mind. Being full of *sila* or *silatuniq* is wisdom or one with perspective of the universe. Streams and rivers are our veins, rushing through our bodies. Inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale, centering within to the rhythm of our heart, our life. At times our mind is in a fury with storms, cleansing with grief, grey and lethargic, other times in the complete calm of contentment. How beautifully simple yet complicated it all is.

But we have been taught Western laws and perspectives, which are much different, to see earth as something to own and ready to exploit. This is a foundational value. It is so prevalent that Western perspectives even require an explicit exception to exploitation—conservation or protection—as if they are rare and exceptional, out of the ordinary practice. From our worldview, interrupting the natural equilibrium and integrity of earth, means harm; to earth but also ourselves, as we are one entity.

Our humanity is connected to nature and our relationship is one of reciprocity: it gives what it receives, we receive what we give.

A PLACE OF FISH: THE INUIT ENVIRONMENT

Inuit knowledge and belief system was and is informed by transmission of experiential knowledge, cultural norms, laws, practices, storytelling, and all wrapped up in land names. A place can be called "many fish" like *Iqaluit*, checked and validated through human relationships, regular land activities, and observation of the natural cycle of seasons and wildlife.

From the start of sea ice formation in the late fall, there is a word that exists for every phase from the shore icing up, the slush formation, thin ice plates to when polar bears can spread their weight to walk on ice, different types of sea ice, to ice break up and melting.

The knowledge and language around ice and snow is extensive, as this is the Inuit world.

A place name like *Iqaluit*, or "many fish", is significant; it is a place that has provided for Inuit since millenia. Providing hunted or harvested food that in turn binds families

and communities together. Every catch is celebrated and relished by loved ones of the hunter. The gratitude of the physical and spiritual nourishment abounds knowing the hunter, the effort and skill that has transcended through time.

Inuit ways of welcoming people is to share food. Food is central to *inuukatigiinni* (community kinship). A person's first catch is to be shared, so as to invite future successful hunts, to show the animal spirit it is welcomed and appreciated. While all hunted food is meant to be shared, some now choose to sell their catch(es) to support the rising cost of continuing to hunt.

Before settlement life, the epicenter of Inuit productivity was around hunting and harvesting. Believing one should never stay idle too long, and always be on the move on the land and sea, tending to their home, family or crafting tools or clothing. Idleness can be interpreted as being egotistical, that one is too skilled already to prepare and hone skills.

The advanced nature of Inuit knowledge and the relationship to their environment not only helped Inuit thrive in what is described as an 'inhospitable environment', it also helped the first European visitors achieve their goals in exploring, whaling, trading, and settling.

Those that did not seek the guidance of Inuit tended to simply vanish.

"WE WERE TOLD TO GO TO SCHOOL, TO GET JOBS": IMPOSING WESTERN VALUES

Yet, over time, the visitors found ways to adapt the landscape to suit their needs and desires—as opposed to adapting to the landscape. This included the attempted destruction of earth, and our body and spirit.

Canada's claims to legitimacy in the North requires the erasure of Inuit agency, and presence. Fabricated tales of primitive savages have denied people the right to lands and self-reliance, whether that means obtaining food from the land, or clothing and tools. It was only a generation ago the Migratory Birds Act forbade Inuit to hunt a significant seasonal food source, and whaling and big game hunting has also been heavily regulated by "Canada". Only forty years ago it was normal for wildlife officers to visit spring and summer camps to monitor wildlife catches. As a result of these assimilation policies and the economic means to hunt becoming less and less accessible, hunting and the skills that go with it continue to decline.

How many go hunting now, or spring camping compared to 20, 30 or 40 years ago? The change in Inuit society and relationships to the land in such a short period of time is staggering.

A key disruption, and something we rarely discuss, is the religious indoctrination, and contradiction in values between Christianity and Inuit worldviews. This is especially true when it comes to the land. Christian notions that God gave humans dominion over the land and animals, and viewing humans as agents and heirs of God's kingdom with a duty to 'subdue' and rule, is not in the Inuit vocabulary. But since Inuit (and Indigenous people generally) were not "ruling" and using the natural resources in the manner European Christians expected, this justified 'acquisition' of the lands and waters and plans for civilizing the Native by these Europeans.

The resulting dispossession of lands and a way of life has led to destruction of our *ilagiinni* (extended family unity), deterioration of our environment and the foundation of pre-contact economy which allows for pride to exist in being able to provide (*atuutiqarniq*) and be a productive part of *ilagiittut* (extended family) in taking care of the community. The root word for *Ilagiit* is *ila*, meaning being part of; speaking to the importance of the connection of family. The effect for so many is catastrophic.

Today our education system directs our children to enter the workforce with values that are intuitively alien: individualistic, self centered, with a pursuit of

employment in a wage economy, where, ironically, few jobs exist.

As the Cape Dorset Itulu Etidlui sings in one of his songs, “We were told to go to school so we can have jobs. As it turns out there are no jobs to be had.”

The result for individuals and communities is a feeling of being alone, lacking in skills or belonging in either the Inuit world or qallunaq world. Instead, floating in a netherworld where nothing can be done correctly.

Inuit are demoralized by an introduced spiritual belief system that serves to sever the relationship with the environment and serve the wealth of a dominion and colonial cause, not of our making.

THERE ARE NO FRONTIERS

The Arctic is often referred to as ‘the last frontier’, with descriptions such as ‘wasteland’, or ‘middle of nowhere.’ Iqaluit even has a “Road to Nowhere”! Such hangovers of overt colonialism maintain ideas that the Arctic is devoid of people, still undeveloped and yet to be exploited. When, in reality, it is speckled at every turn with Inuit land names illuminating the abundance of life, showing the history of Inuit, traversing and living on it. Just the mention of *Qairuliktuuq* (meaning a place with many harp seals) evokes an image of dozens of harp seals gracefully propelling through the waters together, taking turns popping their heads up for breath and splashing as they go back down as if they are synchromatic. How beautiful the sight in the mind’s eye just hearing the place name.

While our connection to our sense of self has been compromised and we live with so much chaos, destruction and violence, we can still reclaim ourselves.

Hear and feel your heart beating, the pulse of life.

That is generations of wisdom, skill, determination and love that got you here, beating in the love of kin, love of land. Self-determination is so much more than a land claim agreement or a treaty: it is cultural socio-economic spiritual well-being. The destruction of our environment comes from the same constituent element that is destroying our people. If the destruction is to be abated, we have to shed paternalism and ego that the ‘dominion’ ideals foster. Imagine a future where young Inuit are surrounded by a thriving and healthy environment, and have the opportunity to succeed and build careers that keep them rooted in who they are, in their homeland. We need to reconnect with *nuna*, earth, reconnect with ourselves!