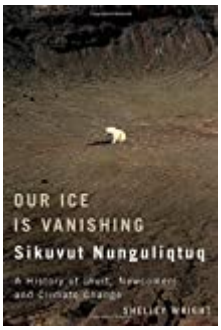
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Shelley Wright. *Our Ice Is Vanishing/Sikuvut Nunguliqtuq: A History of Inuit, Newcomers, and Climate Change.* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014. 420 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7735-4462-8.

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Commissioned by David T. Benac (Western Michigan University)

In 2005, Inuit leaders from Canada and Alaska made a novel, compelling argument to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights: that climate change threatened their "right to be cold."[1] Linking the health of northern peoples to that of northern environments, they asserted that physical decline in sea ice and permafrost would harm Inuit cultures and livelihoods. These women and men lamented the social and economic injustice of their position. Having had little, if any control over the economic and technological decisions leading to this impasse, they nevertheless found themselves "*silaup aalaruqpalianigata tusaqtittijiit*âwitnesses and messengers of climate change," among the planet's first (p. xix).

Departing from the intersection of âclimate culture change,â in Timothy Leducâs phrase,[2] *Our Ice Is Vanishing* explores the historical and contemporary relationships between the Inuit of the eastern Canadian Arctic and Greenland and the land- and seascapes around them. It is partly a synthesis of recent scientific, social scientific, and humanistic scholarship about the region, and partly a memoir of the authorâs experiences living and traveling there in the early twenty-first century. Wright aims to situate current discussions of Arctic climate change, sovereignty, and resource development within a cultural and historical context. She also wants to foreground the demands that colonial and capitalist regimes have made, and continue to make upon Inuit lands and peoples, including their deleterious costs. She succeeds in both tasks, making this a useful introduction to human-environment relations in the eastern North American Arctic.

The first three chapters give a selective overview of Inuit history to the early twentieth century. Drawing from archaeological and oral historical evidence as well as written records, Wright explains how Inuit gained environmental expertise in Arctic conditions over generations of firsthand observation and extensive travel. She emphasizes that Inuit expertise was vital to survival, there being "no second chances in the Arctic" (p. 80). Yet most European explorers were reluctant to believe in this expertise. Wright not only makes good use of Inuit oral histories in her retelling of exploratory history. She also devotes an entire, delightful chapter to Qitdlarssuaq, an Inuk leader, shaman, and explorer who made a lengthy journey from Baffin Island to Greenland in the mid-nineteenth century. For Wright, Qitdlarssuaq exemplifies how Inuit knowledge of marine and terrestrial conditions enabled them to succeed where other travelers failed.

Wright turns next to twentieth-century relations between Inuit and the Canadian state, focusing upon the haphazard process by which the latter asserted sovereignty in the High North. Members of the Royal North-West Mounted (later the Royal Canadian Mounted) Police established posts throughout the Arctic mainland and islands, pressing Inuit to comply with *qallunaat* (Euro-Canadian) laws. A series of forced relocations in the 1950s saw impoverished and elderly Inuit planted in remote, unlivable areas as "human flagpoles," or tangible markers of Canadian sovereignty. Southerners failed to understand that Inuit environmental expertise is grounded in particular locales, and that not all Arctic environments are appropriate for permanent settlement. This led to immense physical and emotional suffering among Inuit families and communities, including deaths through starvation and exposure. For those unfamiliar with these events, the sixth chapter will likely be the bookâs most powerful, and the most difficult to read.

These heavy-handed manipulations failed to clinch Canadaâs sovereignty in the Arctic, especially over maritime spaces like the Northwest Passage. Wright suggests an alternative, though not original approach to securing sovereignty, predicated upon a recognition of historic Inuit engagement with Arctic land- and seascapes. While Europeans and North Americans regard marine and terrestrial spaces as distinct entities subject to separate legal regimes, Inuit have traditionally viewed these as one continuous planeâat least in the winter, when frozen land naturally gives way to frozen water. Wright urges the Canadian government to incorporate Inuit oral histories of travel, which clearly indicate regular seasonal occupation of sea ice, into its sovereign claims.

Strengthening state control over the Arctic would bolster the capacity of Inuit for self-determination through better protecting their homeland's resources, which they can then use and develop according to their needs and desires. Wright engages with a key debate relevant not just in northern Canada, but across the circumpolar world today. In an era of decolonization, is self-determination best achieved through resource development, or through fidelity to Inuit cultural values and environmental knowledge? Wright advocates caution, stressing again that "you have to get it right the first time. The land and sea will not be forgiving if too much damage is done" (p. 207). Climate change makes such calculations particularly difficult, as its precise effects upon physical and cultural encounters between northern peoples and landscapes cannot be forecast.

Following the lead of Inuit leaders like Sheila Watt-Cloutier, Wright stresses that climate change is a human issue as well as a scientific, political, and economic one. In chapters on *silaup aulaninga* (climate change) and *nanuq* (polar bears), Wright ably outlines Indigenous perspectives on contemporary Arctic environments. She details the changes in weather observed by Inuit hunters and elders, including the controversial but verifiable claim that the sun now rises in a different location, first aired in the 2010 film *Qapirangajuk: Inuit Knowledge and Climate Change.* Her penultimate chapter presents a range of Inuit views on *nanuq*, none of which mirror what she terms the aestheticized or sentimentalized reactions to these animals common to lower latitudes. Wright gently castigates those whose key question about climate change remains, is the Arctic safe for polar bears? Better to ask if the Arctic is safe for Inuit, she says. If not, then "it is not safe for seals or polar bears either. Nor is it safe for us" (p. 280). Climate change is affecting Inuit (and South Pacific islanders) most precipitously now, but it shall arrive on all our doorsteps in the end.

While the problem of climate change did not arise in the Arctic, Wright believes we might find some solutions there. In Inuktitut, the term *sila* means both "environment" and "wisdom," reflecting a worldview that eschews the Western nature-culture divide and privileges careful observation and stewardship of the nonhuman world. Wright asks her readers to learn from Inuit, both about their Arctic homeland and about a way of life that regards humans and nonhuman beings and landscapes as interdependent. She urges the Canadian state to pursue northern sovereignty through investing in the regionâs surest and longest avatars of occupation: "Sovereignty begins at home; it starts with healthy people in healthy communities" (p. 294). This is not a new cry, but the more often it is repeated, the more likely it is, one hopes, to penetrate the skulls of parliamentarians.

While not an environmental history per se, *Our Ice Is Vanishing* complements the relevant regional literature nicelyâand this despite not citing any of it. To be fair, environmental historians and historical geographers of Canadaâs North have written little about climate change. They have also focused more upon the Subarctic than the Arctic to date. As well, the activities and perspectives of southerners still tend to the fore in their narratives, although this is beginning to change. Wright, by contrast, privileges Inuit historical and cultural perspectives, with which she demonstrates an intimate familiarity gained through extensive reading and many discus-

sions with Inuit and non-Indigenous northerners. This is one of the bookâs great strengths. Wrightâs humility and honesty about her northern experiences and the limits of her expertise is also refreshing. She presents herself as a typical southern Canadian, ignorant of northern realities until she moved to Baffin Island. Her "Arctic education," by turns painful and illuminating, clarifies the profound mental shifts required for most Canadians (and Americans) to become circumpolar citizens in truth as well as wish.

My main criticisms concern the bookâs organization and presentation. I have distilled its content according to the tastes of H-Environment readers. In full, it is sprawling, meandering, and occasionally repetitive. Regular oscillations between personal anecdotes, landscape set-pieces, and learned discussions made it challenging at times to locate the argumentative throughlines. Trimming and summarizing the scholarly material would have produced a smoother, tighter narrative. Contemporary environmental data on the Arctic quickly goes stale, so I was glad to note an ancillary website (www.sikuvut.ca) with promised content updates. Unhappily, as of July 4, 2015, it is inactive.

These caveats aside, I cannot think of a book that better sketches out the cultural and historical context necessary to understand the ramifications of the "big thaw" for Arctic peoples.[3] I recommend *Our Ice Is Vanishing* to H-Environment readers ready and willing to undergo an armchair Arctic education.

Notes

[1]. Sheila Watt-Cloutier, *The Right to Be Cold: One Womanâs Story of Protecting Her Culture, the Arctic and the Whole Planet* (Toronto: Allen Lane, 2015).

[2]. Timothy B. Leduc, *Climate Culture Change: Inuit and Western Dialogues with a Warming North* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2010).

[3]. Ed Struzik, *The Big Thaw: Travels in the Melting North* (Mississauga, ON: John Wiley & Sons Canada, Ltd., 2009).

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