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Out Land: An Arctic Life

Johnny Issaluk & Kelly Bushnell

“My last memory before I died is lying in the bottom of the canoe looking at Victor Sammurtok’s feet. I can taste the white foam and the blood in my mouth.”

Thus begins *Out Land: An Arctic Life* (in Inuktitut: ᐅᐅᐅ). The reader meets Johnny at six years old. He has been shot while hunting ptarmigan with his brother, and his parents are told via VHF radio that it is too expensive to send a helicopter if Johnny is going to die anyway. They are instructed to bring his small body back to Igluligaarjuk three hours by boat then by *qamutik* (sled) over the partially frozen sea.

In the first of multiple such experiences, Johnny fights for his life against the forces of nature and of men and survives. He will later come face to face with death in the form of polar bears, shifting sea ice, and extreme exposure; however, it is the trauma of colonialism and its cleaving of his people from the land which most haunts him and so many Inuit his age. Forced away from their parents’ traditional nomadic way of life “out land,” Johnny and his generation must navigate not only a *physically* shifting landscape altered by climate change but a *cultural* landscape for which they are not prepared and their elders cannot guide them. *Ecological* upheavals such as the 1983 E.U. Sealskin Ban, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police’s massacre of Inuit sled dogs, and the forced exile of Inuit to the High Arctic, yielded *cultural* intergenerational trauma in the form of violence, abuse, addiction, and suicide.

Even serious readers likely cannot name a single Inuk author, but this too is changing. Sheila Watt-Cloutier’s 2015 *The Right to Be Cold* first mixed Arctic bildungsroman with environmental activism, and more recently famed Inuk throat singer Tanya Tagaq’s 2018 semi-fictional memoir *Split Tooth* received wide acclaim throughout Canada and beyond. Wider audiences are ready to hear what Inuit have to say about the relationship between environment and society, and our particular collaborative methodology of bringing academic and practical land-based approaches to environmental study is particularly well-suited to this challenge.

From an academic perspective, this work is theoretically grounded in ecocriticism, specifically ecomaterialist and ecofeminist frameworks as well as postcolonial theory, influenced by material ecocriticism’s call to read the world’s material phenomena as “knots in a vast network of agencies” to be “interpreted as forming narratives” (Serenella Iovino and Serpil Opperman, *Material Ecocriticism*).

In *Out Land*, the environment is not purely a repository of human experience any more than its creatures are only allegory. The ice and snow of the Arctic are “storied matter” (to borrow Iovino and Opperman’s term), and its creatures—and humans—have agency which has heretofore not be ascribed them in mainstream literature. Thus, we aim to establish Arctic space, place, and time not just as textual abstraction or colonial trope but as storied matter which is conscientious of the porousness of the material world. Tending to these interstices, we believe, is where literature can truly save the planet.

We are, however, cautious that existing critical theory is not fully equipped (nor always appropriate) for considering indigenous methods of narrative, as Keavey Martin and Daniel Heath Justice have argued (in *Stories in a New Skin* and *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, respectively). We seek not only to more fully establish a canon of Inuit environmental literature, but to reshape the generic constraints of literary nonfiction, which has heretofore been bound by Eurocentric concerns of genre and theory. Martin writes that “in order for the academy to truly decolonize, it must radically shift its understanding about the nature and location of knowledge.” Thus, *Out Land* is an act of personal and collective decolonization, a declaration of independence, and a story of personal, collective, and environmental resilience— of “out land” as a space of Inuit cultural revitalization.